

Visual Research and the Problem of the Visual Object

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Abstract—Visual studies and a complex of their special methods are used in many social and human sciences (sociology, anthropology, ethnography, semiotics, media studies, etc.). There are newish research areas: visual studies, visual research, visual culture, which study only visually. These scientific areas want a clear subject demarcation and therefore the problem of the special nature of visual objects is important for them. Despite the discussions that have already taken place on this topic, modern scientists are expanding the range of these objects in real research, usually without discussing their nature. Therefore, there is an interest in how the objects of study are chosen and what they are. The purpose of this article is to identify the types of “visual objects” studied by scientists in these disciplines. In this regard, the analysis was conducted of the content of articles published in well-known thematic scientific journals with the subsequent reconstruction of the objects of their research. This allowed us to identify three of their main types, as well as to discuss some of their features within each type and their popularity for the research. The suggestion was made about the “measure of visuality” of these objects, which again raised the question of understanding the nature of visual objects.

Keywords—visual studies, visual objects, types of visual objects, visual quality of objects

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the proclamation of the “pictorial turn,” [1] visual research has been an important direction in many socio-humanitarian sciences. Currently, such studies are conducted most intensively in the framework of visual anthropology, visual sociology, as well as relatively new disciplinary areas: visual studies, visual research, visual culture. All these sciences are united by the use of visual research methods, but there is still the problem of defining clear boundaries of their subject areas.

This problem is connected with the understanding of the essence (nature) of the studied objects as “visual objects”. It appears whenever questions are raised like: what is studied in visual studies? What are they and how do they stand out? Are there special visual objects?

At one time, it was W.J.T. Mitchell who widely understood of the object of visual research within the discipline of visual culture: “Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to every day practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated.” [2]

Mitchell generally understands visual culture as the study of all social practices of human visuality. However, he recognized

that visual studies is not merely an indiscipline or dangerous supplement to the traditional vision-oriented disciplines, but an interdiscipline that draws on their resources and those of other disciplines to construct a new and distinctive object of research. [2]

Later, Mike Bal raised the topic of impossibility to recognize visual studies (visual studies, visual culture) as a full-fledged discipline, because, in her opinion, they do not have their own object of study. She recognizes the lack of accuracy in limiting this subject area, leaving open the question. The author opposes the recognition of the visual purity of images, the purity of autonomous visuality, which she calls visual essentialism. [3]

This article generated a discussion in which major researchers of visual culture participated. For example, Michael Ann Holly does not see a clear difference between what is visual and what is not: ‘no pure cut between what is visual and what is not’, although it is difficult to imagine objects differently than those that I see. [4]

Nicholas Mirzoeff does not propose to define the visual *per se*. [5] Indirectly, Norman Bryson agrees with the same attitude to the definition of the visual, believing that in our own, everyday experience, the presence and circulation of imagery has intensified and enlarged itself, and cultural analysis itself needs to reshape itself in order to recognize and understand this change and expansion. [6] This seems to involve new objects in the field of research interest.

Thus, in essence, the idea of a visual object *per se* was not developed at that time, only the visual was recognized - potentially and actually visible in the object as its visuality.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

In the time that has passed since that discussion, the question about the status of visual objects remains relevant, as the number of visual studies increased, new visual media appeared, shifting the lives of contemporaries into visual content. The visual is not only an object of study, but also an object of perception and production. Many diverse new visual objects become the object of science.

Therefore, now you can also ask, what do researchers of visuality study? What visual objects interest them? This could be an approach to answering the key question: do visual objects exist *per se*? Note that we call visual objects (for reasons of convenience) only “objects with visual characteristics” (for terminological caution reasons).

To answer the question, it is proposed to conduct an empirical study of publications in various subject areas that are most often referred to a visual research (with the first word visual), without making distinctions between disciplines, as many authors emphasize the interdisciplinary and universality of visual methods.

For example, we expect readers to come from across the academic spectrum: sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication, media studies, education, cultural studies, journalism, health, nursing, women's studies, ethnic studies, global studies, cultural geography, art and design, etc. [7]

In addition, there is the interdisciplinary Visual Communication Journal, which publishes research in the field of anthropology, communication studies, discourse studies and semiotics, media and cultural studies, sociology, disciplines dealing with history, theory and practice of visual design. [8]

The purpose of the study is to identify the types of "visual objects" - visual objects studied by scientists.

The empirical (source) material of this study is the latest publications in the top rated issues Journal of Visual Culture (2018), Visual Communication (2019) and Visual Studies (2018).

The most important thing is not the research interest itself to certain visual objects, but rather that the choice of these objects implicitly indicates recognition of their belonging to the world of the visual without reflection on their nature.

The method that is used is the analysis of the content of the source and the author's reconstruction of the objects of study. Only relevant articles of these journals were considered. This study did not include texts on methods, reviews, etc.

Results: three groups of objects were discovered by using the analysis: "scope" objects, empirical objects and referents (real objects): they have a different essence.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to better understand the characteristics of these objects, let us consider the studies of them in the visual research works that most closely approached to differentiation of these objects.

A. *Scope of the study*

In the literature, this list is rarely discussed, because it coincides with the subjects of study of sciences. So, Wagner distinguishes based on Visual representations. "Yet a fourth visual study approach directs research attention to the content, form, production, and reception of visual representations themselves- studies of optical technologies, visual signs, and symbol systems, visual media and communication, the relationship of images to text and touch." [9] Such targets of research can be found in any field of visual research.

B. *Empirical objects*

The first approach to the description of empirical objects is their simple enumeration (for different sciences). J. Wagner points out (with links to the authors of which we omit here) to

empirical objects within the framework of these studies: "traffic signs and flags, visual literacy development, forensic evidence , and the imagery of science and technology, and for empirical analyses of imagery appearing as journalism, advertising, memorial photographs and etc. He calls empirical objects material artifacts (in traditional research) or archive materials and varied social and cultural documents (for example, family photographic albums, websites, presidential speeches and conversations, holiday ephemera, and so on)." [9]

Another approach is the existence and discovery of empirical visual objects. Finding out where scientists find material for their research, L. Pauwels points out "many types of societal imagery (for example, family pictures, ads, postcards, paintings, newsreels, feature and documentary film, various picture archives, maps, and charts) have been used by social, cultural, and behavioral scientists to study a variety of subjects and issues: labor (Margolis, 1994); school culture (Margolis, 2004; Burke and Grosvenor, 2007); family dynamics (Musello,1979; Chalfen,1987; Pauwels, 2008a); traumatic experiences (McAllister,2006;Gödel,2007);youth culture (Larson, 1999); stereotyping (Hagaman, 1993); migration (Wright, 2001); nature versus culture (Papson, 1991; Suonpää, 2000; Bousé, 2003); deviance (Lackey, 2001); race and ethnicity (Mellinger, 1992; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2002; areas of enquiry where these sources Grady, 2007); health (Bogdan and Marshal, 1997); gender and identity (Goffman, 1979; Edge, 1998); and globalization (Barndt,1997).

However, many areas of enquiry and many types of visual materials are still waiting to be explored." Also visual "material culture" includes artifacts and objects (boardrooms, home settings, art objects) and larger visible structures (for example, urban areas, cemeteries). This is "found materials of no known origin" or "Pre-existing Visual Artifacts" [10].

J. Wagner points out a special kind of visual objects: visually interesting materials and activities such as "paintings, sculptures, and other works of art; diagrams, signs, and other elements of iconography (Mitchell, 1986); shop window mannequins (Schneider, 1996); or household altars (Salvo, 1997)," combined: "for example, television programming, vacation homes, motion pictures, food, clothing, human sexuality, automobiles, advertising, etc. Studies that focus on material objects of inquiry—defined in this way—reflect a close correspondence between visual studies and studies of material culture (Banks, 1998)". [9]

It should be noted that special empirical objects (their subspecies) are distinguished here. This is already similar to the "visual object" *per se*, when an empirical object is primary in relation to the choice of the actual object of research (scope of the study) of a particular subject area (it happens in art history). A different case, and more common, when the stated scientific problem produces the ideal object of research (goal), and the empirical object is selected later (scope of the study).

Another type of object is the "respondent-generated data" and "researcher-generated visuals," which are produced specifically either by the respondents or by the researchers themselves. [10]

Wagner also writes about this using the example of ethnography and ethnology “third cluster of visual studies work centers around core concerns of ethnography and ethnology to document and depict the lives of individuals or groups”. It is “Photo and video documentation: panoramas of sites, settings, and environments; video recordings of formal and performances, including conversations, dance, and other rituals; handicraft production; and so on.”

There are also researcher-guided image-elicitation protocols, where “In some versions of this method, researchers invite (or instruct) subjects to make drawings, photographs, or videotape recordings that reveal how they think or feel about matters.

In others, researchers present visual artifacts of this sort—made or acquired by researchers or subjects—as prompts for subject interviews and focus groups. Imagen-based ethnography- photography, video recording, artifact collection.” [8]

C. Referents

In this work, new objects were shown. There are also close to our understanding visual objects called referent /subject of research by L. Pauwels: “Visual research in the social sciences predominantly has material culture and human behavior as its subject and—when visual representations are being produced—as its ‘referent’ (= that which is being depicted or visually referred to).” [11]

In addition, the author points to types of imagery and visual representations that do not necessarily have a (visual) referent in the material world, but rather embody relational and comparative constructs of “non-visual data and conceptual representations of ideas.”

This expansion of non-visual data and conceptual representations of ideas, and the gradual interests arising, constitute a very important aspect of sociology becoming “more visual.” The author refers to the referent objects of visual culture: “researchers may also take advantage of non-(technically) mediated or directly observed aspects of visual culture (signage, architecture) and of studying and using non-photographic representations (such as drawings, paintings, murals, graffiti, maps, charts).” [11]

IV. CONCLUSION

So, using the analysis, three groups of objects of visual research were discovered: “scope” objects, empirical objects and referents (real objects). The “scope” objects do not coincide with empirical objects and referents, because it is ‘extracted’ from them and exists as a mental image (phenomenon).

We can see the differences within the second and third groups. Empirical objects can be divided according to their independence (“objectivity” for studying): they can inspire research because of their own value, can be selected for research, and can be created specifically for research. This determines their own visual status.

The question arises: which of these objects can be called “more visual.” Apparently, those in which there is more

visuality that determines their existence and value. In our opinion, these are media objects (mediums).

The referents as real objects exist as an object of study in three forms.

1. As a material object coinciding with empirical objects (a work of art, for example)
2. In mediums as representations of material, physical objects
3. Only in media representations, if they do not have physical being (values, ideas, abstract concepts).

These groups of objects are presented in the tables.

Therefore, it can be concluded that of the three previously selected types, the first one is a kind of mental image (not always visual). The second object as a medium is the depiction (picture) of the third object plus something that does not boil down to the third, real object.

1) *Journal of Visual Culture*

Considered issue (journal of Visual Culture Volume 17 Number 3 December 2018), Themed Issue: Armed/Unarmed: Guns in American Visual and Material [12], i.e. target of research.

TABLE I. VISUAL OBJECTS

<i>Author of the article</i>	<i>scope of the study</i>	<i>empirical objects</i>	<i>referents (real objects)</i>
Michelle Millar Fisher	guns produced in the last century	the rifles	rifles
Brynn Hatton	artistic interpretations of the AK-47 and M16 by two contemporary collectives	the works of art	rifles
Colette Gaiter	the gun-carrying avenger/cowboy hero archetype The gun-carrying avenger/cowboy hero , visual mythology	the images	a man with a gun
Faye Gleisser	archetype of white masculinity	the works of art	a misfire
Lindsay Livingston	the racial dynamics and performative nature of US gun culture	the public theatrical gesture	human behavior with gun

The non-thematic issue of the same journal [13] makes it possible to follow the same with more varied material.

TABLE II. VISUAL OBJECTS

<i>Author of the article</i>	<i>Scope of the study</i>	<i>Empirical objects</i>	<i>Referents (real objects)</i>
Hentyle Yapp	connections	films and TV	dancing women of different races
Emily Candela, Sean Cubitt et al.	liquid crystals as a “phase of matter”	the images of liquid crystals	liquid crystals
Caterina Albano	the exhibition as an experiment	the images of exhibitions	exhibitions
Anna White-Nockleby	aesthetics, urban landscape	the films	cities

2) Visual Communication [14]

TABLE III. VISUAL OBJECTS

<i>Author of the article</i>	<i>Scope of the study</i>	<i>empirical objects</i>	<i>referents</i>
Per Ledin David Machin	the rise of a neoliberal control of domestic space	the representations and designs of kitchens in the IKEA catalogue 1975- 2016	kitchens in the IKEA
C. Csesznek F. Scârnci-Domnişoru	Changes in working practices	the photographs	working in a Romanian village
Steven Holiday, Harper D Anderson, Matthew J Lewis, Rachel C Nielsen	media coverage of the Guttenfelder Instagram photographs from North Korea	the post images of life within North Korea to Instagram in real-time the Guttenfelder Instagram photographs	life within North Korea
YJ Doran	the role of images in physics	the Texts with Diagrams end graphs	Diagrams end graphs
Matthew Peterson	the production of narrative	The medieval illustration and illustrations rendered by J. Wisdom	the strategies

3) Visual Studies [15], [16]

TABLE IV. VISUAL OBJECTS

<i>Author of the article</i>	<i>Scope of the study</i>	<i>empirical objects</i>	<i>referents</i>
Michael W. Raphael	an individual and cultural meanings of photographic images	horizon photography	color, light, horizon, real life situations
Roger Penn	an intrinsic part of the very ordering of the streets in contemporary metropolitan environments	10 photos in each city	graffiti in Rome and Buenos Aires
Brian J. Miller	Internet representation of religious buildings	Internet data sources – Google Street View and the websites of religious congregations (images on websites)	the religious buildings in the Chicago area (1936-2016)
Amber Kale	inclusive urban narrative	the process of painting a collaborative mural	behavior of people in the process of co-creation (writing murals)
Ayelet Kohn Rachel Weissbrod	relationship between the sequels and the original text of the work	the exhibition of illustrations titled 'Farewell Red Balloon'	the children's fairy tales stories
Casey Burkholder Jan Gube	cultural dynamics of interaction and school experience of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong	ethnic minority youth in Hong Kong	the pictures
Victoria Jane Palmer John Furler	a life with depression of Vietnamese women	the photos of Vietnamese women	the photo's images
Jan Smitheram Akari Nakai Kidd Scott Meekings	affective logic of competition images	the competition works of architects	color, composition, style, amplification of affect
Evanthia Tselika	ethno-national division of cities, art as a tool of social cohesion	the artwork and art projects in divided cities	the art images

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