

Panel 6

IVSA Conference 2009

Appreciating the views: How we're looking at the social and visual landscape

Panel Title	
What do photographs mean?	
Description	
<p>Few today take the strict positivist position of considering cameras to be "pencils of nature" as did William Henry Fox Talbot in the middle of the 19th century. In the first book illustrated by photographs he informed readers that: "The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation". Currently, there are a number of epistemological conceptions of photographs. One I'll term postpositivist in that assertions or meaning have two limitations: they are statistically probable, not certain, and they must be falsifiable in the sense defined by Karl Popper; theories, hypotheses, or propositions are subject to rigorous testing and must be in principal falsifiable if they are to be considered scientific. The photographic researcher/critic makes "warranted" statements backed by evidence – but the warrants can be overturned at any time by new evidence. Postpositivism emphasizes photographs as representations of "things in the world," while recognizing that cameras are not simply mechanical transcription devices but the photographer is making an interpretation by framing, manipulating depth of field and exposure time, choosing when to release the shutter and so on. As Edward Steichen put it:</p> <p>"The camera is a witness of objects, places, and events. A photograph of an object is, in a sense, a portrait. But the camera with its glass eye, the lens, and its memory, the film, can in itself produce little more than mirrored verisimilitudes. A good photograph requires more than that. The technical process simply serves as a vehicle of transcription and not as the art.</p> <p>The photographer, unlike the painter and regardless of his subjective feelings, is forced by the very nature of his medium to concentrate on the object, on what Goethe referred to as "Das Ding an sich" in a portrait: on the person, or the meadow, the mountain, the flowers, or the horse being photographed."</p> <p>In contrast to the postpositivist view of photos as artistically composed representations of "the thing in itself", documents, or reflections of reality, the "hermeneutic" perspective emphasizes photographs as texts open to semantic and semiotic interpretation for any meaning to emerge. Allan Sekula termed as fallacy assumptions that photographs "transmit truths"; "reflect reality"; or are "historical documents." "The very term document, entails a notion of legal or official truth, as well as a notion of proximity to and verification of an original event. Roland Barthes separated the denotative from the connotative meanings of photographs and developed notions of "studium" and "punctum" to discuss photographic meaning.</p> <p>This session will be open to papers that examine visual theories and photographic meanings in addressing the broad question: what are the implications of the various theoretical perspectives on photography for visual social sciences?</p>	
Panel Chair Name:	Eric Margolis, Arizona State University
E-mail address:	emargolis@gmail.com

Final Selected Papers

Name:	Tapani Huovila, University of Jyväskylä
E-mail address:	huovila@jyu.fi
Paper Title	
Visuality as the object of analysis	
Description	
<p>The purpose of my paper is to introduce an analytic schedule of visuality. I concentrate on researchers and their comments who have developed the understanding of images in examining the visual object or the interpretations of the object. The object can be a photograph, painting, layout, architecture etc.</p> <p>In the schedule there are two levels, the basic one and the general one. On basic level I study how different elements alone (Message of elements) and with each other (Composition) produce meanings. The elements are dots, lines, forms, colours and tension between them. The composition is an arrangement of the elements. The elements and the compositions includes messages.</p> <p>On the general level I concentrate on the questions how the visual messages produce meanings in the society and culture (Influence in Society). As its complex the visual object is in the interpretations of the society and culture while the object can get meanings. The meaning can be icon, index and symbol (Peirce) or associations like similarity, polarity, simultaneity or sequence. The research of visuality is multidisciplinary and for example the history of art, sociology, gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis etc. can contribute to research on the visuality.</p> <p>The meaning of the object is often developed within culture. A star is not just "a" star, but it can have additional meanings, for example a premium car, a popular singer or a People's Republic. The meaning, interpretation, of the visual message develops in the society in which it appears or where it is used.</p> <p>Usually the visual message is more effective if there is only one main element which concerns the main visual idea of the message. Other elements which are related to the composition must not give wrong messages or make the visuality more difficult.</p> <p>I hope the schedule will help to understand the visuality both to help to design and to research the visuality.</p>	

Name:	Tine Blom, Lillehammer College
E-mail address:	Tine.Blom@hil.no
Paper Title	On the connection between photographic theory and visual research practices
<p>The essay will discuss the claim that various photographic theories are useful in different stages of a visual sociological research. The post-positivist approach informs photographs as "field-notes", and claims authority to the findings of the final presentation. The phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches inform the selection and interpretation of the visual data material, and the return to the research field for new exploration. The hermeneutic approach is also useful to understand the audience' responds.</p> <p>The interconnection between photographic theory and stages of practice should be considered a resource for photographic education where the aim is to tune down the traditional contradiction between theoreticians and practitioners.</p>	

Name:	Athanasia Batziou. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
E-mail address:	athanasia.batziou@gmail.com
Paper Title	
	What do press photographs mean?
Description	<p>Based on Framing Theory, this paper looks at the meaning of press photographs of immigrants in two traditional emigration countries of the European South (Greece and Spain) that have seen their social landscape change dramatically due to the influx of immigrants. According to Framing Theory, meaning is created through the activation of pre-existing schemata in the memory and conscience of the viewer. These schemata include beliefs, historical memory or myth, stereotypes, customs, values and rules that exist in the conscience of a society and its members. Frames are the devices or mechanisms used to activate these schemata. Frames are so deeply embedded in the society and civilisation in which they are created that they are accepted as "natural" and are usually unnoticed. They can be verbal or visual and they function as a direction showing the way a message is to be interpreted and understood, thus leading to a preferred reading. Techniques of visual framing include the simple act of selection but also composition, lighting, size, distance, etc. Such techniques are used to produce representations of maliciousness or otherness, to stress or overshadow one's individuality, to create a sense of proximity or detachment, to signify danger or threat.</p> <p>Through the examination of various visual framing mechanisms used in press photographs of immigrants in Greece and Spain, this paper identifies the dominant frames used to represent these relatively new populations that have altered the social landscape of these two countries in recent years and analyses their connection to the pre-existing societal and cultural schemata that these frames activate, in order to create meaning.</p>

Name:	Liza McCoy, University of Calgary
E-mail address:	mccoy@ucalgary.ca
Description	
How Do People Mean with Photographs?	
Description	
<p>Visual sociology requires explicit theories of reading/viewing/activating photographic texts. This paper offers one theoretical approach based in the works of Dorothy E. Smith and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, and informed by ethnomethodology's focus on people's sense-making practices in actual settings. This approach recognizes that visual images come to mean as they are activated by embodied viewers in time and space and within ongoing courses of action; the epistemological status of the photograph (its relationship to what came before the camera) is thus a member's concern. What is needed are theoretical and analytic strategies for exploring how people mean with photographs and how photographic texts coordinate social practices of knowledge. Meaning in this sense is not an individual hermeneutic conversation between an individual viewer and a photographic image, but a social relationship between people, mediated by photographs. In other words, what is getting done? How are people activating the resources of the photograph? The coordinative work of photographic images is not strictly local; photographs like other texts hook individual viewers into extended relations of knowledge, coordination and control, or what Smith calls relations of ruling. How do broader discourses inform the local meaning of the photograph? How does the photograph itself aim at future contexts of viewing and evoke particular interpretive frames? How can all this be investigated ethnographically? Finally, what are the implications of this approach for visual sociologists who generate their own images for use as data and in public presentations?</p>	

Name:	Beatriz Véliz Argueta, Francisco Marroquin University
E-mail address:	beaveliz@ufm.edu
Description	
Image, language and power: reading photographs	
Description	
<p><i>Seeing comes before words (...) It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words</i> Berger 1977</p> <p>Photographs play a critical role in the production of knowledge. This paper moves away from the notion of photographs as 'objective fragments of reality' and understands them as negotiated realities – re-presentations (Barthes) –where the photographer has the power to frame, to select. Nevertheless photographs contain information and thus can be <i>read</i>. This paper proposes that a set of photographs <i>narrate visually</i> and create a statement about the world, a discourse. In this sense the relation of meanings become the carrier of the relation of power¹. My argument is that signs and the relation between objects within the photograph <i>speak</i> of relations of power, not in a fixed way, but just as language, constantly evolving. The paper focuses on the link between image, language, power and the production of knowledge.</p> <p>Bearing in mind that both the act of looking² and the image itself are not neutral – they embody a “way of seeing” (Berger) – the context of the author and his work is crucial in order to critically <i>read</i> the photograph. The photographer is the one with the power of delimitation. He is making a reductive interpretation, a statement; what is left outside the frame remains silent.</p> <p>Photography continues to represent and shaper our world (Warner). Considering that photographic and visual language are not neutral, that they offer a certain perspective and make a statement of the world, the responsibility of social scientists engaged in visual representation and making use of visual methodology is considerable and they need to be aware of this.</p> <p>The structure of the paper is as follows: In the first section I will elaborate on the theoretical framework of images. In the following section I will discuss photographs as negotiated realities. The third section deals with the context of the author and his work; the following segment focuses on the link between photographs, language and power and elaborates on the idea of <i>visual statements</i> and <i>visual discourses</i>. For this purposes the work of selected photographers will be analyzed. The last section presents the conclusions and proposes some further research directions.</p>	

¹ The argument that ‘the relation of meanings becomes the carrier of the relation of power’ challenges Foucault’s statement that “history (...) has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Foucault 1984: 56).

² Gombrich also points out that “there is no vision without purpose, that the innocent eye is blind” (cited by Mitchell 1984: 525)