Book Review

Visual Sociology
Douglas Harper, 2012,
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was pleased to be invited to review Douglas Harper's *Visual Sociology* for *Visual Methodologies* as my research interests lay within the realms of the visual (Mannay 2010; 2013); moreover, being in the midst of writing my own text for Routledge, *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics*, it was also an opportunity to extend my background reading. On receiving my copy of the text, I was impressed with its size, it is a large book but, importantly, not too big for reading on the train. It is beautifully illustrated and it has large margins that remind me of Open University texts, which are great for scribbling notes; and my copy is now full of thoughts, reflections and ideas.

Harper is an engaging writer and, like the images in his book, his words are able to connect with the reader and take them on a journey. There are eleven chapters that move through the expected themes of visual ethnography, the documentary tradition, reflexivity, ethnomethodology, semiotics, photo elicitation, photo-voice and techniques for teaching visual sociology. In the space of a short book review, I will only be able to engage with some of these chapters; but they were all worth reading and I gained new insights from each one.

In chapter two, *Documentary Photography*, Harper contends that studying the documentary 'allows us to see how photographs create meaning in historical, sociological and political circumstances that are themselves in motion'. The chapter locates the documentary traditions' essentialist foundations, which aimed for verisimilitude, sympathy, relevance and the opportunity to illuminate social injustice. Postmodern critiques contend that in such works causality is often vague, blame is not assigned and therefore, the fate of those captured in the images cannot be overcome. However, Harper is able to work between these contrasting positions and demonstrate the value of both more contemporary engagements and historical contributions, as well as their dangers; as he travels from the 1880s to the 1960s and

encounters the work of key figures such as P.H. Emerson, Jacob Riis, Bill Brandt, Dorothea Lange and Bruce Davidson.

Chapter three, *Reflexivity*, captures the spirit of its title as Harper sensitively returns to his early work with Jim Spradley on a project that proposed a humanistic and artful ethnography of homelessness. As Rose (2001, p.130) contends 'reflexivity is an attempt to resist the universalising claims of academic knowledge and to insist that academic knowledge, like all other knowledge is partial'. Accordingly, Harper offers a form of autobiography in his writing where he reflects upon the emotional costs of ethnographic research, the shift from seeing photography as a means rather than an end, the lack of space to write in the first person and be reflexive before the 'cultural turn'; and why ethnography needs to include an account of its creation. The chapter also appreciates the value of the visual image, as Harper concludes, 'trying to tell a complete story of a culture always fails, but adding a visual dimension makes the inevitable shortcomings much more interesting'.

The sixth chapter, *Ethnomethodology, semiotics and the subjective*, has a clear and well defined section on semiotics. The chapter was a set reading for my third year undergraduates when the visual became centralised in the module *Issues in Social and Cultural Psychology*; demonstrating the usefulness of the text beyond a purely sociological readership. After setting out Barthes concept of myths, denotation and connotation; the chapter moves to the world of advertising to apply semiotics to study hidden meanings. Harper discusses Goffman's classic work around gender politics in print advertisements and the physical grammar of gendered subordination; updating this with his more recent research that provides valuable insights into how national cultures influence the ways in which sexualised photographic advertisements are read and interpreted.

However, chapter six also presented a 'thorn in my side' in relation to Harper's dismissive appraisal of the field of cultural studies, which is given a title heading but less than a page of text. The cultural studies tradition in the UK has had a significant impact on social science research; and engendered a legacy of empirical and conceptual work, not least from the central influence of the recently deceased Stuart Hall; perhaps best known for the seminal publication *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978). Harper claims that 'cultural theorists tend to assemble ideas and contemplate their connections rather than do field work'; but this ignores best practice examples such as the ground-breaking work of McRobbie and Garber (1977); who explored the subcultures of teenage girls through ethnographic practices and a centralisation of the visual. The inclusion of such a short section, for me, cannot appreciate the depth and contribution of cultural studies to visual sociology; and it may have been better not to include any reference to the field, rather than offer such a curt and narrow summary.

Nevertheless, in a book of 298 pages this less than a page section is my only real criticism. Overall, this is an excellent text that provides a comprehensive guide to visual sociology for both experienced researchers and students. The book brings together a range of historical and contemporary studies, and theoretical approaches; which are communicated effectively for the reader in a well-crafted story of the visual. As Harper argues, 'visual hunger has been present since the cave painters began making images more than 3,000 years ago'; and *Visual Sociology* acts to both sustain this hunger and engender further appetite for an engagement with visual methodologies. This book is a central text on my undergraduate reading list; and is a publication that I would highly recommend to readers with an interest in visual research and the social sciences more widely.

References

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