

Book Review

Visual Methods in Social Research

Marcus Banks and David Zeitlyn, 2015, 2nd Edition,
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Reviewed by

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It was a pleasure to take up the invitation to review this second edition of *Visual Methods in Social Research*, as I had gained so much from reading the first edition and looked forward to returning to the updated volume. In the original book, Marcus Banks (2001, p. 7) argued that 'our initial understandings or readings of images are always pre-scripted' and he suggested that we ask particular questions about found images, 'what the image is of, what is its context?, who took it or made it, when and why?, how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it?'. Drawing on Hindu philosophy, Banks encouraged readers to locate this more productive seeing in relation to 'darshan'; the ability to see and understand multiple points of view and schools of thoughts; and I have carried this philosophy in my own work with visual and creative methodologies (Mannay 2016).

In this second edition, David Zeitlyn is the new co-author, and this works well as he shares a similar background in anthropology, which offers an element of consistency. Despite this foundational base in anthropology the book still provides a practical guide for students and academics across the social sciences; however, the closeness in approaches may have curtailed a wider view of the literature. Of course, neither all approaches nor every author in the field can be considered in one book, however, I was surprised by the omission of leading figures in visual methodologies such as Gillian Rose and Sarah Pink, who did not get a mention.

The book still features a range of concrete examples to support the reader. For example, in the opening chapter, *Reading Pictures*, a postcard picturing a scene from India, is employed to explore the category of form, thinking about the positioning of the photograph's subjects in relation to the camera. Then, in the relation to the content, the subjects, their clothing, the background and the interpretation of these things from a Western gaze. Then finally, the message on the back of the photograph, which provides a narrative to add further context and about the sender and the recipient of the postcard. This new edition also features other useful working examples from Zeitlyn's research in Africa; and it is this presentation and communication of real work in the field that engages the reader and helps to make the complexity of visual research more understandable.

In chapter five, *Making Images*, the new edition offers an addition section on ethics and visual research, this is useful in the current climate, which has experienced significant shifts since the publication of the first edition. There is an emphasis on embedded ethics and the need for consent to be ongoing and collaborative, rather than the standard practice signing of a single form. There is also a consideration of found images, which importantly, the authors stress are 'not there for the taking' (p.125). The afterlife of the image is also reflected on, and a salient example is provided about a participant being 'extremely unhappy about the past intruding on his newly created present' (p.128). This corresponds with Brady's and Brown's (2013, p. 102) point that once a visual image is created it becomes very difficult to control its use, or remove it from the public arena, if participants decide that they no longer want to be represented in a fixed visual trope for 'time immemorial';

and it is crucial that new researchers, and indeed experienced researchers, think beyond the present to ensure that they are practicing an ethical and thoughtful craft.

Chapter seven, *Perspectives on Visual Research*, reflects on some of the main themes of the book and presents its take home messages. There is a restating of the point that visual images are not simply a methodology of their own and that they are always, or at least should be, embedded in wider forms of social research. This is an important distinction between technique and methodology and one that resonates with my own view that 'what is needed is a solid and secure foundation that underpins the research journey and offers the casing for these loose tools so that they become a functional tool kit' (Mannay and Morgan 2015, p.168). In this final chapter, there is also a restatement that 'participants know more about their own lives than a visiting researcher can ever hope to' and that 'social research has to be an engagement not an exercise in data collection' (p.165); and in supervising many projects that involve visual approaches this is will be a useful reference that I will be passing on to my students.

The book set out to provide views from an anthropological base, in relation to the visual, that would be useful for researchers across diverse disciplines such as sociology, education, health, and cultural geography. The first edition of *Visual Methods in Social Research* was presented to readers where the visual path was less travelled, now it has become a path far more travelled, across disciplines and approaches. For this reason, a second edition was timely and I am sure that it will provide a useful map and guide for students, researchers and practitioners who incorporate visual materials in their projects.

References

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