Realities

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

Working Paper #09

The Darker Side of Visual Research

Jon Prosser
University of Leeds
October 2008

Realities, Sociology, Arthur Lewis Building, University of Manchester, Manchester
M13 9PL
+44 (0) 161 275 0265
realities@manchester.ac.uk
www.manchester.ac.uk/realities

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Author contact details

Jon Prosser
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT

j.d.prosser@education.leeds.ac.uk

Summary

There are good reasons why 'seeing' research is gaining in importance. Visual research slows down and focuses observation and encourages reflection on how we perceive visual material. Researchers have always observed and rapidly, maybe too rapidly, converted those observations into sketches, diagrams, signs, words, codes and numbers. With rapid growth has come divergence and different ways of conducting visual studies. This is to be welcomed since it provides alternative perspectives and potential improvements. However, paper considers its 'downside' - the darker side – the fragmentation of visual research which undermines the potential of visual research. The criteria for identifying a fragmentary perspective and suggestions for a more inclusive approach are examined.

Academic writing usually takes two forms. The first type is positive and celebratory and reinforces the community's belief in itself. The second type probes anxieties, insecurities and weaknesses, questions current achievements and points to the need for new directions. Both types of presentation tend to lack balance, for they exaggerate some parts of the fuller, more complicated picture. I fear this chapter is of the second kind with all its incumbent weaknesses.

Three 'Events'

Given the burgeoning growth in interest in the visual it may appear churlish to reflect on its darker side. Nevertheless, visual research is not achieving its full potential. My initial concern for the nature and direction of visual research were prompted by three isolated and apparently unconnected 'events'. The first took place many years ago at a visually orientated conference when I was tapped on the shoulder and asked rhetorically and furtively "What's the definition of cultural studies - it's sociology for non sociologists". The meaning of this comment was not clear. It may simply reflect the micro-politics of academia where individuals boost their careers by slighting others. It may be an apparently flippant remark founded on the cut and thrust of criticism or informed debate. However, it is equally plausible that such comments, hidden under a cloak of humour and caricature, are indicative of serious misgivings about alternative modes of visual studies. In particular the barb may highlight a common concern that those taking a post-modern stance adopt a 'beginner's mind' relative to an experienced social theorist operating within a given discipline. This view may stem from the belief that multi-disciplinary research, particularly by individuals borrowing and combining concepts from various disciplines alien to their usual knowledge base, too often neither reflects concepts accurately nor the complexity involved in juxtaposing ideas from different paradigms. The first indication of the darker side of visual research is not so much a limited understanding of the complexity of inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary studies but more the polarisation of pro and anti post-modernism.

I put the first 'event' to one side until some years later when I came across an article (Allen, 1996) describing how, at Oklahoma University, when the English Department sought to establish a Cultural Studies programme, the Anthropology Department objected on the grounds that culture was historically and methodologically their domain. What legitimates the position that one discipline or paradigm may claim exclusive scholarly rights over the study of culture? The simple answer is 'none'. There may be multiple reasons for this particular interdepartmental conflict such as: the Anthropology Department were taking the cultural 'high ground' in the belief that the English Department reproduced culture whilst they alone possessed methodological skills and theoretical knowledge to understand culture; the English Department could have been viewed by the Anthropology Department as postmodernists willing to adopt any interpretation of culture that creates a counter-culture; and perhaps the English Department perceive the Anthropology Department representing an epistemology promoting grand theory etc and thus feature of as modernity and hence has lost its way. The second indicator of the darker side is an overarching and consuming urge to establish supremacy of one approach over another.

I suspect similar paradigm rifts mirroring the one described above are taking place across academia. Indeed, any faculty, institutional, territorial, disciplinary or epistemological inflexibility undermines potential knowledge gains. But particular this case is not about knowledge but about power. Foucault (1980) reminds us that knowledge is contingent and bound up as much with power as with truth, since knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same coin. Pivotal to the constructive development of research is the need to resist institutional, conceptual and methodological 'straight-jacketing' by baronial factions. The inability of visual researchers to stand outside of power games has nourished the division between (image-based) social science and postmodernism (visual culture), undermining the development of an encompassing intellectual community. Intransigence is a hallmark of the darker side since it means that researchers are unable to see weaknesses in their own approaches and nor the strengths others may offer.

The third 'event' was the recent publication of a book on visually methodology[1]. The authors proposed that visual inquiry should focus on being "observational", focusing on "what the eye can see". Their considered, cohesive and thought provoking treatise could be beneficial to a cross-section of visual researchers. However, their argument for a particular brand of 'seeing' is undermined by the narrow parameters they impose. In their treatment of visual sociology and visual anthropology they mostly ignore the history, evolution and substantive nature of these fields. The authors also fail to make case for their preferred approach i.e., a predilection for critical distance of 'what is visible,' rejecting visual ethnography and image making by researchers, particularly in the form of photography. Although many of their points about photography in image-based research are sound to condemn their use as "tyrannical" is extremist rhetoric. They also essentially reject the usefulness of interviews to explore meanings of objects, images and space with the cursory comment "…we can often get by without it". They also neglect two other elements. The first, the ethical dimension, is a topic deemed significant by a cross-section of visual researchers. The authors assiduously maintain their inclination for a covert approach without discussing its implications. There is a substantive body of literature they could have called on, for example Ruby et al (1988), to examine the moral, ethical, methodological and legal issues involved when this stance is adopted. The second is the rejection of still and moving images as a mode of presenting or representing "what the eye can see" thereby restricting a valuable strategy in the visual researcher's armoury. Wagner's astute review of the book (2002, p 167) picks up on this point taking the authors to task when they state "Unlike other forms of storing information photographs are signs which bear an iconic resemblance to the reality they describe… Yet this should not negate their fundamental similarities with completed surveys, notebooks and so on as storage devices". He points out that:

> *In restricting their representational virtues for social research, (they) reject photographs in terms that are just as romantic as those of the researcher-photographers they criticise for over using them. Perhaps they have the wrong analogy. A more apt comparison than with the survey form or notebook appears between the photograph and the audiotape. Just as linguists or ethnographers might use a sample of transcribed audio-tape-recorded speech to illustrate and exemplify an important concept, or to compare speech patterns over time or across settings or speakers, or to listen many times over a segment of conversation, so too a visual*

> *researcher might use photographs or video recordings. Researcher observations and note taking can be extremely valuable in this kind of work. However, audio and visual recordings have some distinctive features – i.e., their capacity to simultaneously illustrate and exemplify and the opportunities they generate for systematic comparison and for repeated analysis of an incident or setting – that make it possible to examine research questions that would be very hard to investigate without them.*

In their enthusiasm to distance themselves from still and moving images the authors fail to adopt or adapt them as part of any research design and overly critical of those who do. They subject, for example, a study of farms (Harper, 1997) for particular criticism suggesting that the aerial photographic technique he used was unwarranted (see Fig 1). To propose, as they do, that adopting a physically different visual perspective, an approach common and valued in psychology, geography and archaeology, because it fails to add to other evidence, is not a strong argument on three counts.

Figure 1: Aerial photography as photo-elicitation (Courtesy of Douglas Harper)

Firstly, the psychology of perception suggests that changing one's angle of view may change our perception - the duck viewed straight on becomes a rather cute rabbit if the head is tilted to the left (see Fig 2). Viewed from the air we perceive the patterns of artificial structures and natural phenomena differently offering alternative interpretations to those gained on the ground. Harper may have shifted his point of view physically - from ground level to aerial - and metaphorically, which is reasonable and legitimate. Secondly, Harper makes a case for the ways in which aerial data supplements and contextualises other forms of data. Finally, it is somewhat disingenuous of the authors not to acknowledge the experimental nature of this study, which, in incorporating visual data, other forms of qualitative data, and a sociological survey, provides a model of multi-method research that deserves further critical development.

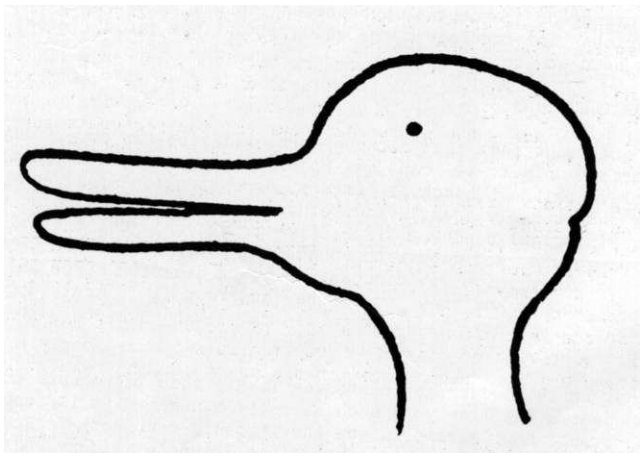

Figure 2: Duck or Rabbit?

The authors use 'seeing' to shape their narratives but are not prepared to create images or sanction others to create them. Their view, that documentary photographers use 'observation in the field' and narrow definitions of culture employ a simplistic 'window on the world', is valid. However, the book consists mostly of text with few images. Can a critique of the 'tyranny of the photograph' be applied to words on a page? To what extent is the 'shaping' of a photograph, a drawing, a cartoon or a video to represent social life, so different from shaping a letter, a fax, a paragraph, or a narrative? Prejudice, predisposition, cultural and gender bias, the influences of ideology and power, display themselves through all we do, say and write, and are not constrained by boundaries of discipline, media, modes of behaviour, communication, or methodologies. It is unfortunate that a pejorative stance is taken in the book since this detracts from its central message which is to move visual researchers away from images per se in the direction of a broader concept of 'seeing'. The authors could have taken more illuminative approach by drawing on visual anthropology (McDougall, 1978; Ruby, 2000: and Banks, 2001) and visual sociology (Harper, 1987; Grady, 1991) which are replete with authoritative, refined and novel approaches to communicating visual research that is audience sensitive and takes account of potential combinations of words, still and moving images. The book creates a watershed of 'goodies and baddies' instead of creating a bridge between good practices.

The three events highlight a number of unhelpful trends in contemporary visual studies. The 'darker side' of visual research is unproductive particularly in the form of epistemological and methodological intransigence. Traditional disciplinary hegemony is no longer acceptable and neither are approaches whose concept of multi-disciplinary are superficial or cannot see any value in orthodoxy. Reviews whose perspectives are single discipline or bipolar are less than useful if they are partisan, or politically, ideologically or epistemologically skewed. Nonetheless, there are single and interdisciplinary reviews (Statz, 1979; Grady, 1996; Harper, 1998; Morphy and Banks, 1997, Wagner, 2002) that are useful in backward mapping and act as signposts of potentially positive developments for visual studies. Even more helpful would be balanced and robust critical reviews that encompass the evolution of visual research which are trans-disciplinary, historically and philosophically based.

Of course none of this is new. Epistemological and methodological disagreements within research have historical precedents as Becker (1993, p 218) points out:

> *Attacks on qualitative research used to come exclusively from the methodological right, from the proponents of positivism and statistical and experimental rigour. But now the attack comes from the cultural studies left as well, from the proponents of the "new ethnography", who argue that there is no such thing as "objective knowledge" and that qualitative research is no more than an insidious disguise for the old enemy of positivism and pseudo-objectivity.*

Increasingly in visual research a climate exists where protagonists of the 'darker side' act as prophets when challenging the position of those they attack but become high priests defending their territory when they in turn are challenged. This creates an intellectual vortex with two conflicting tendencies at work. The first is for one faction to denounce another faction of the research community for its nonsensical ways, and then to find itself derided in return. The second is the response from outside of these conflicting factions who exercise pacification by never suggesting anything to which any faction might take exception.

Collectively this perpetuates isolationism and narrows methodological and theoretical possibilities. Current image-based work can be crudely placed along a continuum: At one end those operating within a similar 'visual' topic or theme and within the same visual mode (for example, a library based study of a family photographic album involving one researcher); and at the other those operating across a similar topic or theme, across different visual media some of which may be not intrinsically visual, different theoretical frameworks, paradigms, methodologies, representations or presentations, and recognising the multiple needs of multiple audiences (for example a study of power relationships within a Scottish family which draws on researcher generated images, 'found' images, symbolic images, statistical data, word-based qualitative research, which is represented by moving and still images, presented within a museum setting and involving two or more researchers).

Research across the continuum is increasingly producing interesting work but since most are engaged in smaller projects they generate more publications. Viewed positively this suggests that visual research is refining its knowledge base. Equally, it could be seen as unhealthy indicating an evolutionary trend that emphasises dependency on narrow approaches where breadth is pursued at the cost of depth. For visual studies to attain their potential and make a greater contribution to knowledge work is needed that draws of the combined strengths of inter-disciplinary research that is robust and extracts best practice from plural of modes of theorising.

Applied Visual Research

To illustrate what can be achieved by a more encompassing, collaborative interdisciplinary visual research I turn to four studies. They stand out because the visual remains important but they never become visual-centric and are all 'applied' visual research. Applied research attempts to resolve pressing, concrete, everyday issues. There is always a focus on a problem and its resolution and there is a willingness to adopt and adapt whatever approach may help resolve that problem. They draw on a creative or esoteric mix of techniques, methods, perspectives and theoretical frameworks, as necessary. Visual researchers, like

most academics, tend to reapply their knowledge and skills to similar sets of problems. Of course applied researchers have similar tendencies but they are inventive out necessity since their funding is often based on their past record in resolving everyday problems that affect people's lives. Applied researchers attempt to resolve concrete problems and demonstrate successful solutions in the everyday world whereas theoretical research focuses on abstract problems and whose audience is the academic community. Focusing on the practice rather than theory is a useful device for examining potential of multi-disciplinary visual studies.

Figure 3: Anatomically correct dolls

The first example is in the application of imagery in child abuse investigation by Wakefield and Underwager (1998). They discuss the use and misuse of different media and visual manifestations including anatomically correct dolls (Fig 3), children's drawings and material used in projective techniques in a rigorous and thought provoking way. Wagner (2001, 164) identifies key features of their work:

> *Two things make (the) chapter an exceptional read: first, the authors do not identify themselves primarily with any particular academic discipline, but as scholars - and policy analysts - with expertise in a specific strand of interdisciplinary research about the "child witness". Second, their analysis focuses on the full range of visual representations used to interview children in child abuse investigations - drawing on dolls, books, puppets, and photographs. Wakefield and Underwager consider each form of visual representation on its own and relative to other forms and to the merits of sensitive and insensitive verbal interviews. Precisely because their analysis is neither disciplinary nor photo-centric (and because it is something other than images per se) it provides what is perhaps the most provocative assessment of the situated interplay between images, objects, speech and text that I've read to date.*

The breadth and quality of this study with its apparent simplicity disguises the complexity of its multi-disciplinary approach in which individual, group and

national identities are mediated. Rather than undertaking a visual study because it's fun or trendy the authors have applied 'seeing' to a range of visual objects and media and incorporated this mode within a gamut of strategies and techniques for utilitarian ends. Banks (2001, p 12) makes the point: "At root all visual objects represent nothing but themselves; their existence in the world a material objects is proof of nothing but their autonomy." Multiple readings of images are always possible but they gain poignancy following interaction with humans. When contextualised within a study that seeks to protect children that poignancy is multiplied.

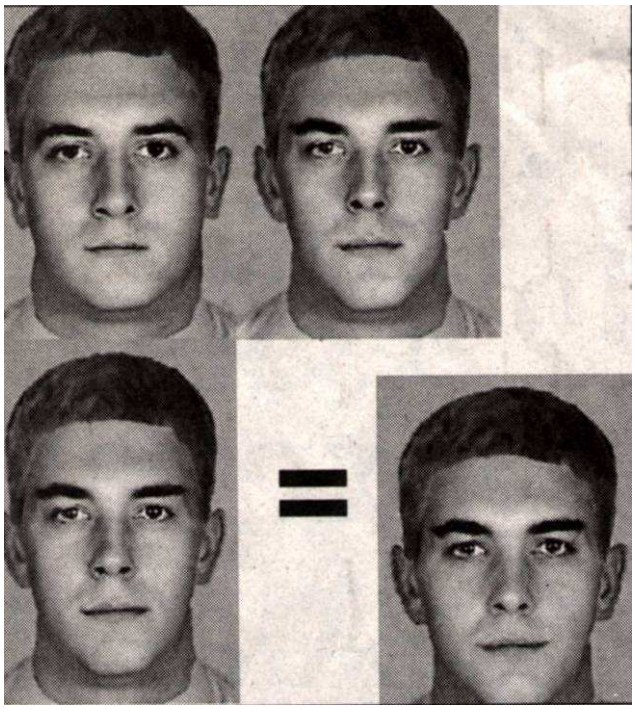

Figure 4: Merging identikit images (Courtesy Peter Hancock)

The second example illustrates how elegant visual solutions are being developed to resolve complex problems within criminology. The aim of the study was to obtain more effective and accurate identikit pictures of suspects. At present an identikit image is constructed based on the description of a single witness. A team, led by Peter Hancock from the University of Sterling, found that likeness is improved by merging together different images on a computer. They took descriptions from multiple 'witnesses' which varied in terms of accuracy from quite good to very bad. (Fig 4) When they were digitally merged the identikit images the likeness was perceived as slightly improved on the best single image and much better than the worst. They suggest that each image of the original faces captures some aspect of the actual target but when merged together they bring out a commonality. This approach draws on photography's capacity to provide extra-somatic 'memory'. The combining, merging or morphing of images is not new. For centuries fine artists have overlaid paint to provide a translucent quality to their work, and contemporary artists morph photographs to produce composite images. What is so stimulating about this study is its innovative nature. The team combined fine art, psychology and criminology to resolve a problem, which is unusual in itself. How the team joined forces in the first place is intriguing since they work in quite dissimilar fields and use different approaches. They were not theory-method driven but adopted intellectual flexibility to engage with and resolve a particular problem. Their work indicates

the sort of expansion in agendas that can expected if genuine collaboration with other disciplines is embraced.

The third example of the benefits of collaborative practice illustrates the sort of heterogeneity and profundity that is feasible on a large scale. During Millennium celebrations all over the world, exhibitions on the theme of *time* were mounted by many nations. The Royal Observatory at Greenwich entitled theirs *The Story of Time* whilst the National Gallery in London came out with *Telling Time.* However, the exhibition at the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest, titled *Images of Time* demonstrated many commendable facets of interdisciplinary visual research. What was most impressive was the interconnectedness of the exhibition. By that I mean visual and spatial elements were not only carefully considered relative to 'time' but also integrated within the multiple needs of a large-scale display.

Given that I have little knowledge of exhibition design and am not Hungarian, hence taking what Urry (1990) terms a 'tourist gaze', my views are necessarily partial and skewed. Accepting those limitations my impressions are as follows.

Bearing in mind the theme is *Images of Time*: the setting for the exhibition in Budapest, being a Parthenon-like structure, having a grand entrance with Corinthian pillars and an interior with an abundance marble staircases, was both apt and ironic. The exhibition designers avoided using large auditoriums and instead chose to take the visitor on a circuit of smaller rooms. Its atmosphere was alluring being designed to encourage questioning of the triangular relationship between time, the material and of oneself. The layout of each room was different, echoing post-modern interior design, being eclectic and using light and arrangement to create contradiction and paradox. The contrast between the austere classical façade and the contemporary use of the internal space invited visitors to contemplate very notion of the visual representation of *time* itself. To what extent can we, the visual research community, claim that the mode of presentation of our work reflects either the theme or visual mode of our work? Academia and publishers may sanction the presentation of research but do we actively consider alternatives or even refinement of the layout of a printed page? Our tendency is to 'get published' rather than develop new protocols of presentation and representation. We accept the status quo recognising we are both the analysts and producers of cultural products but unable or unwilling the change the parameters.

The exhibition was the result of a review of a wide range of material. Prior exhibitions, national and international, with a ‘time’ theme were examined by the design team for ideas: multiple interpretations of rites of passage was drawn from the Austrian Museum of Folk Art; the fine art and cultural historical time linkage was adopted from the from the Staatliche Museum; but themes that were central to other contemporary exhibitions in Hungary were avoided for fear of repetition. The organisers were clear in their own aims:

> *It is the kind of exhibition which is unusual by comparisons with existing exhibition practices . . . . In terms of its treatment of the material it does not wish to overwhelm the viewer with encyclopaedic knowledge but rather by calling attention to hidden relationships between phenomena and by highlighting unusual connections between objects, images and information it hopes to teach novel lessons. In its visual presentation it wishes to get away*

> *from bookish presentation reminiscent of a scientific treatise, and makes use of the fact that to a great extent an exhibition is applied art.*
>
> *(Zoltan, 2001)*

The internal structure of the exhibition was the result of interplay between two contrasting themes. The first was a divergence of *theoretical perspectives* of time, for example, our artificial organisation of time was contrasted with our everyday, subjective notion of time. The second theme was *pedagogy*. Bearing in the mind the nature of the audience and the complexity of the subject, the exhibition was organised in a spiral and contrastive curriculum aimed at imparting and revisiting different levels of knowledge. The *theoretical divergency* and *pedagogical* themes were presented under a series of sub-themes, for example, 'Individual Life', 'Family Time', 'The Time of the Earth', and 'Dreamtime'. The audience, in addition to gaining what Stuart Hall terms 'the preferred view' from the curators, are actively encouraged to ask different questions in each section based on their own interpretation of objects, images and texts. In 'Individual Life', for example, I found myself questioned why memory and context distort time - why is it that in middle age we remember the summers of our youth as long and sunny when meteorological data suggest they were not? This approach was expanded beyond personal experiences to include ethnic and cultural dimensions. In the theme 'family time', for example, a Buddhist Thanka represented a cyclical concept of time was juxtaposed with a family tree (Fig 5) depicting the linearity of time.

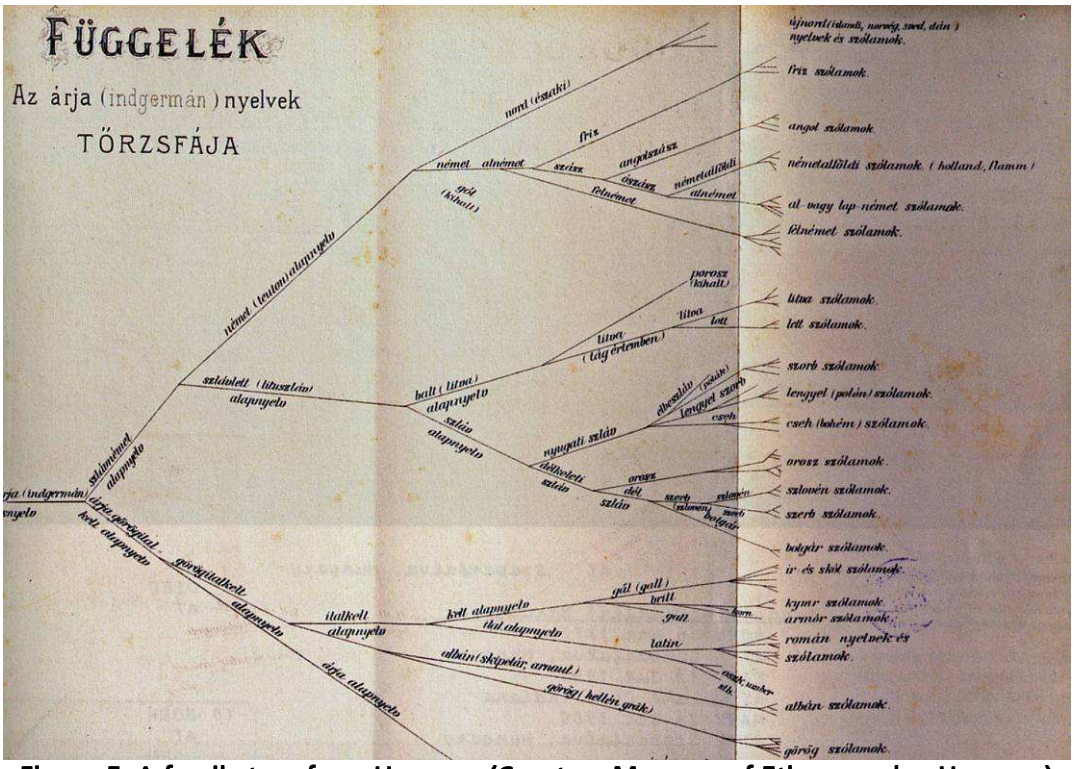

Figure 5: A family tree from Hungary (Courtesy Museum of Ethnography, Hungary)

These and other depictions lead the audience to question how different cultures make links with their ancestors and how those links are visual represented. The range of mode of material was stimulating being multicultural applied art presented through different communicative forms and different ethnographic knowledge. Hence it is possible to identify Evans-Pritchard's work (1940) on the Nuer people of Africa and their ecological and structural time. But also to

conclude that genealogies are not merely remembered out of respect for ancestors but they also serve as mnemonic devices for fixing and recalling social relationships.

The exhibition, like a good book, was rich in ideas, and could be revisited it many times making additional connections on each visit. It was augmented by different publications included a 5-piece CD, books, scientific presentations, film shows and children's programmes, which further focused on or expanded exhibition themes. The interweaving of theoretical texts and material culture enabled connections to be made across exhibition themes. Cumulatively, the exhibition was good visual research for three reasons. First, it did not overly speculative or assert the validity of findings with more certainty than was reasonable; second it did not resort to the 'botanical' model by which I mean the appeal to data as if these were the sole source of knowledge advancement and as if they were fixed in meaning; third and consequently they were able provide a sense of cumulative development of knowledge whilst concurrently sustaining exploration of different meanings and alternative interpretations. The resulting meta-analysis was the result of combining formal visual evidence with audience self enlightenment. None of this would have been possible without an interdisciplinary museum team able to share their research strengths and avoid applying sceptical arguments selectively and thereby avoid using epistemological radicalism to bolster political radicalism.

The fourth and final example provides a sombre insight of what happens when applied visual research is less successful. Over the past three decades the loci of linguists has shifted from discourse analysis which was linear and sporadic to visual communication, which is more encompassing. Visual communication often draws on social semiotics as an analytic tool applied to visual, spatial, and graphic communication systems. Contemporary visual communication studies are often sophisticated and include multi-semiotic approaches or multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuen, 1996; Kress and Ogborn, 1998) to study the reception and meaning making of texts, signs, symbols, graphics etc.

According to Kazmierczak (2001):

> *Dealing with the visual representation of conceptual structures and scientific data, one cannot underestimate the importance of information and its impact on the meaning of information.*

This view, that when applied visual communication fails consequences may be dire, is exemplified in the loss of seven crew members of the space shuttle Global Challenger in 1986. Edward Tufte's (1997) review of this incident reports it was the result of two rubber O-rings leaking due to the cold conditions on the launch day. Kazmierczak (2001) suggests the underlying reason for the tragic event was ". . . due to the lack of intelligibility of the information that the right decision of not launching to be made" and concludes "Although it is scientists' responsibility to allow the best access to their information, it is designers' responsibility to shape wisely the access to that information, by making it intelligible."

The act of communication, takes place effectively only when the questions 'who', 'says what', 'in which channel', 'to whom', and 'to what effect'? are fully answered (Lasswell, 1948). Central to this view is the notion that communication

is a shared experience (Shramm, 1973). The O-ring failure and the subsequent disaster was ultimately due to lack of transference of information between two disciplines one non-visual in focus (engineers and launch scientists) and the other visually orientated (information designers). This reflects a major weakness in contemporary visual research – a limited capacity to exchange ideas both across visual disciplines and between visual centric and non-visual centric disciplines.

Summary

The darker side of visual research is any discourse that takes an extreme form of prescription and encourages fragmentation, discourages collaboration, and the establishment of one dominant model, thereby limiting evolutionary potential. It is analogous to that of *palimpsest*, the expunging of one set of discourses and their replacement by another via a new agenda, a new vocabulary, and without consideration for what was worthy in the 'old' way. As with other socially transmitted diseases, it shows itself most clearly when it encourages the setting of minds, when it advocates an uncompromising theoretical position, deterring flexibility and invention. There are ways forward.

There is much to celebrate in contemporary visual research and this acts as a counterbalance to detrimental constituents. Clearly applied visual studies with their focus on concrete problems potentially make a positive contribution to society. Equally texts that contrast different approaches and are representative of an multi-disciplinary approach, such as van Leeuwen and Jewitt's (2000) 'Handbook of Visual Analysis', are beneficial to theoretical and methodological development.

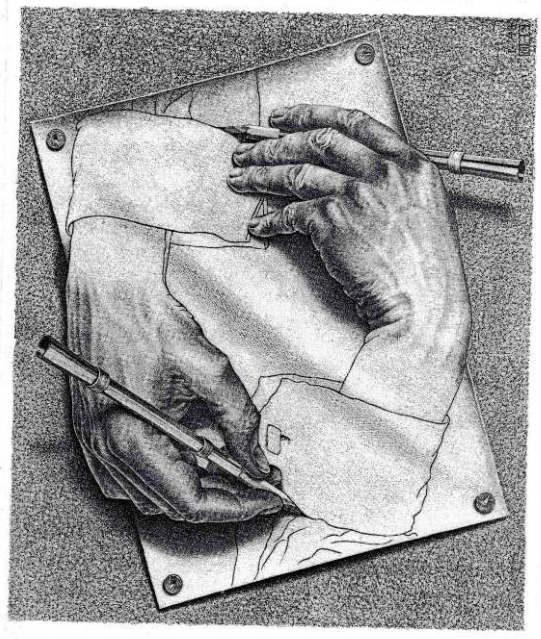

Figure 6: Hand drawing Hand

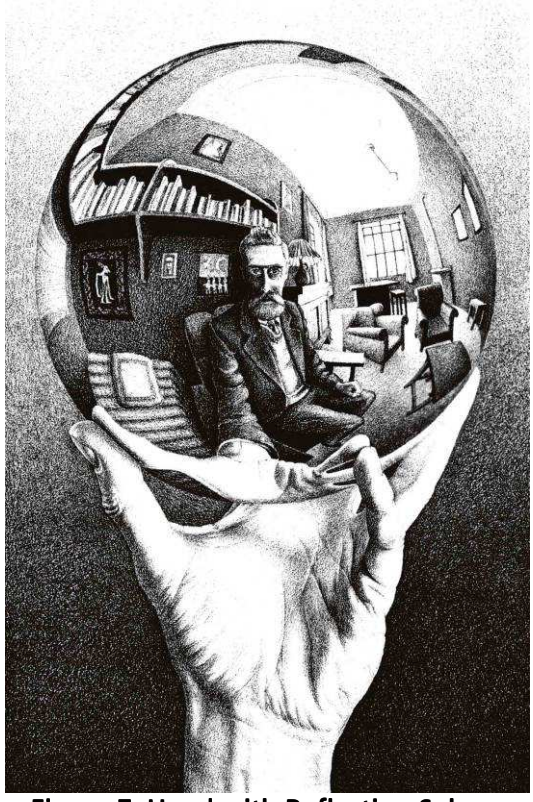

Figure 7: Hand with Reflecting Sphere

Scholarly activity is in danger of succumbing to political expediency. This subordinates the task of research to political ideology and fashion. Perhaps it is timely to review our relationship to the research enterprise. Past reflexive accounts by ethnographic fieldworkers attempted to render explicit the process by which data and findings were produced. Emphasis was placed on how the dialectical relationship between the researcher and the researched shapes the portrayal of a case. Esher's drawing, Figure 6 'Hand Drawing Hand', is a visual metaphor for this process. Hence sociological reflexivity subsumed epistemological reflexivity giving a model that emphasising personal and procedural reactivity placing too much emphasis on researcher-researched and too little emphasis on broader social and societal context. Esher's drawing, 'Hand with Reflecting Sphere' (Fig 7), is a visual metaphor for a more a more encompassing perspective. Esher's study represents observations in contextualised reflexivity. First, the study is a self-portrait, but, unusually, the amount of space dedicated to the artist himself is small compared with others of the genre. This suggests he is both inward and outward looking. Esher is telling us something about himself and influences that shape his thinking. The visual arrangement of the room is neither arbitrary nor capricious but provides an insight into who he is, what he does, and how he behaves in his room. Second, it suggests awareness that the wider context is distorted which in turn 'distorts' the individual and therefore the study. Third, the pictorial mode reflects the content of his work. For Esher the visual representation of ideas was important. He has chosen to draw himself and his surroundings but decides not to include the act of drawing. Finally, for many artists the sphere has always symbolised the 'whole' and the spherical mirror does this even more so because it reflects the surrounding space but in this case the totality of the panoptic eye is replaced by the pragmatism of limited awareness. Jay (2002, page 91) provides an insight into this kind of contextualised reflexivity:

> *As an American intellectual historian of mostly 'European' ideas, I recognise that I come to them with the prejudices of my formation, but I also understand my formation is always already filtered through ideas that have a European accent. So I guess it was only a matter of time before I was compelled to read a little more seriously in American sources and compare the results with what I had learned from a lifetime of reading European ones.*

Jay's position implies sensitivity to and tolerance of different, even contradictory approaches. This means placing the inscription of self centrally within everyday social research yet recognising the benefits of being proportionately influenced by a wider interdisciplinary discourse. Taking account of the distortions of self and recognising that any enquiry is a reflection of that distortion is not an exercise in hypersensitivity but a worthy starting point for human enquiry. His positional statement is valid but more importantly pragmatic offering a way forward for empirical and library based applications. It moves beyond sociological and individualistic reflexivity, beyond postmodern idealist notion of reflexivity yet holds back from encompassing Bourdieu's complex 'epistemic reflexivity. Jay adopts a moderate position which avoids the pretence of neutral objectivity and moral high ground reflexivity where the 'voice' of others is indistinguishable from the author's. No doubt Jay will continue to produce work that remains contested knowledge as it should be. His is not a strategy for gaining intellectual capitol but as a methodology for producing scientific knowledge of the social world. The object is to build a better future for visual research. That future is best served by probing the interstices of different disciplines in a spirit of reflexivity, creativity, flexibility, risk-taking and partnership.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was given at the National Portrait Gallery, London as part of a 'Visual Evidence' seminar funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK. I would like to thank the ESRC for their support of visual research.

Endnote

For a balanced review of this book see Wagner, J. (2001).

References

Allen, J. (1996) The Predicament of Culture at Room Temperature. *Surfaces* Vol. V1. 208 (v.10A – 13/12/1996). ISSN: 11882492.

Becker, H., S., (1993) Theory: The Necessary Evil. In Finders, J., and Mills, G., E., eds., *Theory and Concepts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives from the Field.* New York. Teachers College Press.

Emmison, M., and Smith, P. (2000) *Researching the Visual.* Sage. Thousand Oaks, CA.

Evans- Pritchard, E., E., (1940) The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of Nilotic People. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Foucault, M. (1980) Truth and Power. In C. Gorden (ed) *Power/*knowledge*: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977.* Brighton UK. Harvester.

Grady, J. (1996) 'The Scope of Visual Sociology' *Visual* Sociology 11 (2), 10-24.

Grady, J. (1991) 'The Visual Essay and Sociology'. *Visual* Sociology*.* Vol. 6 No 2 (pp 23-38). International Visual Sociology Association.

Harper, D. (1987) 'The Visual Ethnographic Narrative'. Visual *Anthropology.* Vol 1, No 1. (pp 1-19).

Harper, D. (1997) Visualising Structure: Reading Surfaces of Social Life. *Qualitative Sociology,* Vol. 20, No. 1.

Jay, M. (2002) That Visual Turn: the advent of visual culture. *Journal of Visual Culture.* Sage, London.

Lasswell, H. (1948) 'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society'. In Bryson, G (ed) *The Communication of Ideas.* London, Harper*.*

Ruby, J., Gross, L., and Katz, J. (1988) Image Ethics: the Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film and Television. New York, Oxford University Press.

Ruby, J. (2000) Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Shramm, W. (1973) *Men Messages and Media.* London, Harper and Row.

Urry, J. (1990) The Tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in Contemporary Societies. London, Sage.

Van Leeuwen, T., and Jewitt, C. (2000) *Handbook of Visual Analysis.* London, Sage.

Wagner, J. (2001) Contrasting Images, Complementary Trajectories: Sociology, Visual Sociology and Visual Research. In 'Challenging Sociology Visually' a special edition of *Sociological Imagination,* John Grady (ed), Spring 2001. Reprinted in *Visual Studies* (2002), Vol. 17, No 2, Routledge, (Taylor and Francis), pp 160-171.

Wakefield, H., and Underwager, R. (1998) The Application of Images in Child Abuse Investigations, in Prosser, J. (ed.) *Image-based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitiative Researchers.* Falmer Press, London.

Zoltan, F. (2001) *Introduction*, *Exhibition Catalogue, Images of Time*. Zoltan, F., Monika, L., Gabor, W. (eds.) Millenary Exhibition of Ethnography, 31 December 2000 – 31 December 2001, Neprajzi Muzeum, Budapest, Hungary.