

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Douglas Harper, *Visual Sociology*. New York: Routledge, 2012, 294 pp. \$43.95 paperback (978-0-415-77896-1).

Douglas Harper has spent his career realizing Howard Becker's call to "make sociology visual" (p. 1). For more than thirty years he has been an innovator, leader, and promoter of visual sociology. He is the author of four books based on ethnographic studies incorporating visual research: *Good Company* (Chicago, 1982), *Working Knowledge: Skill and Community in a Small Shop* (Chicago, 1987), *Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture* (Chicago, 2001) and, with co-author Patrizia Faccioli, *The Italian Way: Food and Social Life* (Chicago, 2009). As a founding member of the International Visual Sociology Association and as the first editor of the association's journal, *Visual Studies*, he has played a central role in establishing the institutional presence of visual research and in mentoring subsequent generations of visual researchers. His eagerly-awaited new book, *Visual Sociology*, offers a knowledgeable history and up-to-date, critical overview of the field. It also functions as a career retrospective, filled with Harper's photographs and extended examples from his evolving research practice.

Visual research is less well known in sociology than it is in anthropology or cultural studies. But visual research approaches are growing in popularity in many social science and human services disciplines, now that digital technology makes it easy to create, store, and disseminate visual material. There are a number of common visual research strategies, which are generally associated with qualitative research. These include the use of photographs or video to generate ethnographic data, photo elicitation interviewing, and collaborative projects in which research participants use cameras to document their lives. Other research strategies analyze visual representations (e.g., archival images) or study visual practices (e.g., family photography).

There are presently quite a few books on visual research, with more coming out every year, but none of them is explicitly sociological, and that is the gap Harper intends his book to fill. His goal is to show how photography-based visual methods can contribute to recognizably sociological research in areas that deal with familiar sociological topics such as social and community life, social change, social stratification, and social construction. Not everything social has a visible form or leaves vis-

ible traces, but quite a lot does: we lead embodied, emplaced lives, and sociology has been remarkably backward in recognizing the investigative potential of the visual. Exploring social settings using visual methods “leads to new discoveries and insights” (p. 56). Furthermore, visual approaches can “invigorate a discipline that is increasingly abstract and distant from the world it seeks to understand” (p. 4).

Harper is not just promoting visual sociology as a set of invigorating methodological options. He is also promoting visual sociology as a body of literature and a community of practitioners. He starts with a history of visual ethnography, and follows that with an enthusiastic history of documentary photography and its relationship to sociology. Then he gets into the various visual methods and approaches, which he introduces by way of examples drawn from the work of visual researchers. There are no methodological recipes here, just appreciative — but not uncritical — descriptions of actual projects, along with well-informed discussions of ethical, analytical, and presentational issues related to visual research.

The strongest chapters are those in which Harper features examples from his own research and teaching practice. He writes engagingly about his experience and the kind of ethnographic, symbolic interactionist sociology he knows best. As a skilled photographer, Harper’s understandable preference is to wield the camera himself or use archival images made by professional photographers. He makes a strong case for the ways craft skill can enhance the data value of images through technical control and knowledgeable use of added lighting, lens choice, and framing. Craft skill also underlies the production of images with expressive and communicative power, which also matters to Harper, who uses images not just as intermediary data but as important elements in the presentation of sociological analysis.

The weaker chapters are those in which Harper features approaches he admittedly doesn’t understand very well (ethnomethodology) or doesn’t himself do (photovoice). Perhaps not surprisingly, he is also at his most critical in these chapters. It annoys him that ethnomethodologists use video data but pay little attention to what visual sociologists are doing. What he likes is ethnomethodology’s focus on situated sense-making, including practices of looking. But instead of discussing ethnomethodologically informed research on looking and visual practices (underrepresented in this book), he argues that some documentary photography and visual sociology is in effect ethnomethodological because of its attention to the act of looking. His short chapter on photovoice is a crowded literature review without the personal research stories or extended examples that enrich the other chapters. Harper is not a fan of photovoice, a rather prescriptive, collaborative approach which is popu-

lar in applied studies. He considers it fairly, but criticizes (rightly in my view) its unexamined assumptions about photographic truth and its (non) use of participants' photos in published reports. This is definitely a partisan book. That makes it uneven in parts — but more interesting.

Visual Sociology is described as a textbook on the back cover, but I think it will probably be most useful as a resource for researchers and instructors and as an overview for those who want to know more about what visual sociology can do. There's a chapter on teaching sociology visually and an appendix of sample assignments. These offer intriguing suggestions for incorporating visual exercises into regular sociology courses. The appendix of recommended works of documentary photography and visual sociology is a handy resource. I do have a complaint, however, concerning the visible surfaces of the book. The text is printed in an elegant but small sans serif font that seems to melt from view, especially when the page is touched by glare. This makes the book uncomfortable to read, physically. The one hundred black-and-white photographs, on the other hand, are beautifully printed.

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Liza McCoy is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Calgary. She teaches qualitative research methods and visual sociology. She specializes in the social organization of knowledge, with a particular interest in practices of visual representation. She is currently generating visual data in an ethnographic study of a social dance community.

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