VISUAL AND MULTIMODAL URBAN SOCIOLOGY, PART A

Imagining the Sensory City

Edited by Luc Pauwels

RESEARCH IN
URBAN SOCIOLOGY

VOLUME 18A

VISUAL AND MULTIMODAL URBAN SOCIOLOGY, PART A

RESEARCH IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY

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RESEARCH IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY VOLUME 18A

VISUAL AND MULTIMODAL URBAN SOCIOLOGY, PART A: IMAGINING THE SENSORY CITY

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CONTENTS

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LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

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Chapter 1

VIEWING AND SENSING THE CITY: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES, METHODS, AND TECHNOLOGIES

Luc Pauwels

ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter starts off by discussing the differences and interconnections of visual sociology and urban sociology in their quest to understand human settlements. It then moves to argue for expanding the focus to other disciplines that are equally geared toward researching aspects of the city in visual and multimodal ways, since the urban context cannot be studied comprehensively without engaging a multitude of disciplines and trying to make productive connections between them. The chapter continues with a concise overview and discussion of each of the contributions in this first of two volumes of "Visual and Multimodal Urban Sociology" in the "Research in Urban Sociology" series. These twin volumes explore multiple ways in which the city and city life may be approached, studied, and expressed through visual and multimodal means and methods, thereby as much as possible including sensory experiences other than those related to seeing and hearing. It concludes with drawing some contours and challenges of visual and multimodal urban studies and the critical role of technology in advancing this cross-disciplinary field of inquiry.

Keywords: Visual sociology; urban sociology; multimodal; multisensory; cross-disciplinarity; technology

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1. THE URBAN AND THE VISUAL WITHIN AND BEYOND SOCIOLOGY

This new volume in the series "Research in Urban Sociology" is the first part of a double volume that explores multiple ways in which the city and city life may be approached, studied, and expressed through visual and multimodal means and methods, thus seeking to take advantage of the unique visible and multisensory features of human settlements as sources of knowledge.

Two subdisciplines of the social sciences, urban sociology and visual sociology, seem at first sight the designated partners to explore this field of inquiry through combining and reinforcing one another in terms of theories, methods, and practices. While often seamlessly combined in concrete research, these two subdisciplines have different premises.

Urban sociology is committed to a particular subject *area* in the most literal sense – the urban environment – and is focused on scrutinizing the structuring and organization of life in cities, their transformations, problems, and effects on society and civilization, using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. It is a vast and well-established subdiscipline since human life is increasingly situated in metropolitan areas, and these dominant forms of human settlement are rife with challenges but are also sites with relentless opportunities for improvement. Dedicated to a specific space/place of human activity rather than one particular theme or problematic, urban sociology entertains a more "spatial" orientation than many other "thematically" organized subdisciplines (like health, gender, and religion). Leading scholars in urban sociology have developed a "socio-spatial perspective" to study metropolitan problems, connecting the uneven development and opportunities of citizens, caused by inequities in class, race, gender, and age, to the spatial nature of large cities and densely populated suburbs (Gottdiener, Hutchison, & Ryan, 2015). With this central concern of urban sociologists for the interplay between social and spatial organization also comes an increased need for visualizations of sorts.

Visual sociology relates to the study of culture and society in a somewhat different manner: its main focus is not on any spatially situated activity nor on specific/singular aspects or problematics per se, but on the way societal and cultural processes and phenomena can be approached primarily through their visible traits. So, in essence, it is defined by "another way of looking" (to a large extent in a literal sense) at society and culture, thereby relying on an underexposed "channel" of information in social sciences – the visual – and by scrutinizing visible material culture and visually observable human behavior. In other words, visual sociology is largely defined by granting primacy to the visual sense for information gathering and knowledge dissemination. But of course, none of the sociological specialisms are purely verbal, numeric, or visual. Images and visual representations like charts or maps are used by virtually every discipline and so they are all – at least to some extent – *multimodal* in nature. However, within the social sciences and the humanities, distinct visual and multimodal methods have been developed for analyzing and producing visual data and for communicating insights in a partly visual manner. The particular expertise that

visual sociologists (and other visual scholars) may bring to the study of the urban resides in this specialized body of knowledge about: how to interpret and make sense of visible phenomena, how the "outer shell" of society may offer insights into immaterial traits of culture, and how these visual appearances and expressions may testify for particular values and norms, expectations, and aspirations of people in past or present times.

While the "visual appearances" of culture and society as prime materials for research may be directly observed, they most often will be "mediated" by image-producing technologies and practices for further scrutiny. This presupposes thorough knowledge of how visual media and image-making practices *transform* and *inform* the depicted in certain ways as well as how they can be used to express insights in appropriate multimodal formats (Pauwels, 2020).

Visual sociology may very well be the smaller and younger sibling in the sociology family (most certainly when compared with urban sociology), but this is partly due to the fact that it focuses on an alternative – somewhat disregarded – while prime channel of information gathering – visual appearances and visual perceptions – as a dominant aspect of knowledge production and decision-making in everyday life. However central the visual sense is in daily life, it is still a neglected source and tool of explicit knowledge production in the social sciences, as are – and even more so – the other senses. In fact, it is quite astonishing that most social research to date remains very *indirect* in its interrogation of the social world, asking people to tick or fill in predefined answering categories or focusing on what the respondents "say" about a particular issue or situation, not on what they actually do or have done in a real life. Validity is often sacrificed to representativity, for which statistics provide the needed reassurance. Visual social science involves a much broader view of what constitutes social scientific "data": not just easily quantifiable phenomena and verbal responses, but also visual and multisensory inputs and responses. It also includes creatively rethinking the options to process and transfer data and insights into more advanced visual and multimodal ways (Pauwels, 2015).

The communities of scholars who identify themselves as visual sociologists – and even those of visual scholars more broadly – may still be somewhat limited, but much more visual sociology exists than is so named, and many more visual sociologists exist than the number who would put themselves under that nomer. For visual sociology is most of the time also a sociology of "something" (a theme, a problematic, be it law, health, economics, politics, or poverty) "using" visual methods, and that particular area of application may very well be the field or theme with which practitioners prefer to identify themselves professionally. Thus, urban sociologists, or sociologists of law, or of health etc., may be practicing a more visual or multisensory and multimodal type of social science without consciously foregrounding that aspect of their practice.

A considerable part of visual sociology pertains to urban sociology as many lives are city bound and urban sociology deals with visually observable phenomena as well as visualizations of sorts. Visual sociologists operating in the urban realm (probably the majority) may indeed benefit from the vast body of knowledge produced by urban sociology, as one of the most established and

central subdisciplines of sociology, because human activities are predominantly situated in metropolitan contexts. Yet, a more explicit dealing with visual methods, media, technologies, and the specific types of expertise to accomplish this is desirable, as is the project of broadening the scope of disciplines involved with the multifaceted aspects of urban settlements and their challenges.

Visual sociology is everywhere and yet as a subdiscipline or set of specific methods and insights it seems to remain less visible. The term "visual sociology" itself may also be somewhat misleading since it is not a form of sociology that is purely visual in nature nor is it just a sociology *about* the visual or about visual images. Visual sociology takes the visible and visual seriously as unique data sources and forms of expression, while also requiring some form of written/verbal contextualization and interpretation that is grounded in the theories and empirical findings of the discipline at large.

Visual sociology too has experienced several "spatial turns" (using Geographic Information Systems, GPS tracking devices, wearable media, drones) beyond the fact that visual representations almost always situate the depicted artifacts or phenomena in the context of their immediate (spatial) surroundings. Today, the visual and the spatial are more than ever connected in data production and data representation, and modest but steady progress is being made regarding the inclusion of sensory faculties other than the visual or aural, as forms of data, experience, and expression.

An encompassing, more integrated, and more visual and multimodal study of the city and the urban realm clearly does not end with sociology or the social sciences. Visual and multimodal research requires crossing borders of (sub)disciplines, and the urban context likewise cannot be studied comprehensively without engaging a multitude of disciplines and trying to make productive connections between them. Both the urban realm and the visual sphere are part and parcel of many other scholarly disciplines, which have much to contribute to our understanding of both fields. Moreover, acquiring knowledge is not confined to scholarly activity; many other sectors in society produce useable insights and data in a myriad of ways (art, games, commerce, and culture).

The urban realm is indeed a prime subject of many disciplines and a growing number of them have moved to foreground the visual in their scholarly practices (through research, education, conferences, and publications). However, the importance of bringing these various perspectives, experiences, and insights *together* has seldom been acknowledged by these dispersed communities of visual and multimodal practitioners and theoreticians. This has resulted in a splintered visual and multimodal landscape marked by a less than productive proliferation of concepts and terms often referring to very similar aspects or ideas, and a less than optimal cumulation of cross-disciplinary insights.

While nurturing "more visual and multisensory" approaches of the urban realm in many disciplines and trying to integrate the dispersed visual subdisciplines, one should not forget there are many (sub)disciplines where the visual as input and the use of visualizations are so central that they do not need the prefixes "visual" or "multimodal" to emphasize these well-established practices. Architects and designers, for example, as well as geographers or cartographers,

are formally trained at least in a number of visual techniques, which are absolutely essential for their profession: they therefore have no need for developing a separate subdiscipline that promotes the visual and multisensory impressions as a valid data source, and the multimodal as a format for knowledge expression and dissemination (Pauwels, 2022). In that sense, the field of inquiry and the existing expertise is far more encompassing than one would appreciate at first sight.

2. DIVERGENT AND CROSS-CUTTING THEMES, ASPECTS, AND FOCI: A PREVIEW

In view of the arguments elaborated upon above, volumes 18A and 18B have deliberately expanded their scope to scholars, who would not necessarily consider themselves as urban or visual sociologists. Many contributing authors and discussed examples are from neighboring disciplines (visual anthropology, media history, photography, political science, architecture, human geography, media and communications, etc.) since those are as much involved and committed to scrutinizing urban society through visual and multimodal means, and because the visual and multisensory is a domain par excellence that does not belong to any one discipline.

Both volumes host a variety of approaches, not only with respect to disciplinary positions or specific aspects of urban life in past or present times but also in terms of scholarly "style," ranging from minute and detached theoretical and methodological studies to ethnographies consisting of intimate and expressive accounts, both in writing and using visuals. Together they provide a rich exploration into different ways to experience and represent the multisensory city.

2.1 Visual and Multimodal Urban Sociology, Part A: Imagining the Sensory City

Following this first chapter, "Viewing and Sensing the City: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives, Methods, and Technologies," which discusses the thematic focus of the double volume of "Research in Urban Sociology" as well as its grounding in different established and emerging disciplines and traditions, Chapter 2 "Imagining the City as Home: Functional Prerequisites and Moral Challenges" presents a substantial treatise about what defines a city and how this can be approached visually. Here, John Grady, a visual and urban sociologist in equal manner, provides the reader with a comprehensive framework for looking at various aspects and prerequisites of cities as core human settlements. These different elements are supported by powerful visual materials of a varied nature and origin (photographs, maps, conceptual maps, drawings, advertisements, street photographs, and propaganda posters, etc.), which already foreshadow the visual potential of the discussed matters. This wide-ranging and erudite essay about the city provides a solid framework for looking at its major traits and problematics. For Grady clearly reminds us that "Using visual materials to understand a social object requires the researcher to know that object's purpose, and this is true whether the object is an artifact, a restricted event, a small social world, or

something as massive as the modern city." He convincingly argues that his framework may form the basis for developing "shooting scripts" to produce visual data about specific aspects and problematics of the city. In fact, most of the problematics covered in the subsequent chapters of this volume are touched upon and brought into a broader perspective in this second foundational chapter.

Chapter 3, "Unpacking Urban Life in the Past: 'Time Machine' as a Data Visualization and Analysis Tool," by media historians Danielle van den Heuvel and Julia Noordegraaf, discusses a fascinating project called, "Time Machine," which is currently in development by the "European Time Machine Organization" with partners in different European cities. Its overall aim is "to join Europe's rich past with up-to-date digital technologies and infrastructures, creating a collective digital information system mapping the European economic, social, cultural, and geographical evolution across times" (www.timemachine.eu). The Time Machine infrastructure is both an unmatched repository of information and a remarkably advanced visualization tool to investigate different interconnected aspects of urban life in their visual and spatial context. Through integrating numerous forms and sources of "Big Data of the Past," it provides scholars and professionals as well as citizens opportunities to become "participant observers of the past." They can become time-travelers to particular locations and move between different levels or scales of observation (individuals, artifacts, streets, or neighborhoods). It is not a static repository of knowledge but a genuine site for further research. After an in-depth discussion of the advantages and limitations of current approaches, research methods, and tools to study urban experiences in the past, the authors illustrate some of the features of the Time Machine through a minute study of a neighborhood around the "Bloemstraat" in premodern Amsterdam. While holding much promise for numerous other urban projects, the authors are very much aware of the seductiveness of advanced 3D technologies and visualizations based on hybrid data forms and sources. As the source materials will typically be fragmentary to a certain degree, they stress the importance of finding ways to cope with missing and incomplete data, or data of an indeterminate nature. Such considerations are key for most attempts to capture, organize, and represent data, in particular when involving many authors, sources, types of expertise, and technologies.

Chapter 4 in this volume, "Geo-referencing Early Photographic Studios and Using Historic Photographs to Study Urban Processes and Environments," by photo historian, Jeremy Rowe, not only provides important new insight into New York-based photography businesses, their exact locations, and their activities in the mid-nineteenth century, but also discusses at length the potential and hazards of using "found images" of a past era to study the urban context. The author proposes a well-defined research trajectory to study photographs as prime historic documents, covering issues like provenance, selectivity, and serendipity, but also focusing on revealing the rich layers of information that reside in the photographs' content, aesthetics, and material properties. Again, the visual is combined with the spatial and together they reveal the nature and impact of these important image-making and image-consuming social practices at a particular time and in a particular space.

In Chapter 5, "Playing the Early Renaissance City," Ray Hutchison investigates to what extent games can impart knowledge about a city's culture and how to navigate it, by analyzing the popular "Assassin's Creed" series set in early Renaissance Florence. Games are an intricate feature of today's visual culture, both as a source of entertainment and a tool for acquiring knowledge and skills. Cities are often the scene where stories are set. The "Assassin's Creed" series is known for its realistic portrayal of cityscapes, historic events, and figures. Through a detailed analysis of the series, Hutchison provides a nuanced view of the often amazingly accurate and detailed depictions of Florence at the time of the described events, but he also notes quite a number of anomalies, omissions, and errors both in the depiction of the material culture of the city, and the places where historic events actually took place. The author also points at the impact these games can have on real life, on tourist guides, as well as on individual tourists in Florence, who are using elements of this game to find their way around. While looking into discussion groups of gamers Hutchison found one member exclaiming: "It is amazing how much the real Florence looks like Assassin's Creed." This reversal of the relation between the representation and the referent (or the depiction and the depicted) is a typical feature of visual cultural practices: tourists often look for the exact places where the iconic pictures in travel guides, films, and other visual materials were made, and may find reality at times disappointing. In such cases, images clearly take precedence over what they represent. One cannot expect or demand from the producers of fictional entertainment that they would observe the same standards as scholars, but they sometimes go to great lengths to ensure accuracy, and the infrastructure they develop may be inspiring for even more historically precise depictions, which provide people with new opportunities to experience and learn about the past or present (cf. the Time Machine in Chapter 3). Technologically sophisticated and meticulously researched mediations of the city in a past, present or future mode will no doubt become central tools for experiencing and learning the urban context across constraints of time and space.

In Chapter 6, "Learning from Street View: Lessons in Urban Visuality," media and communications scholar, Scott McQuire, offers a critical but balanced evaluation of Google Street View and Google Maps as key digital infrastructures in today's knowledge production of the urban context. While initiated for commercial purposes, this powerful, often taken for granted, digital infrastructure soon proved to be an invaluable resource for urban researchers, for example to perform "prior ethnography" or disembodied "site visits," and this massive repository of "raw" visual materials even inspires artists. It creates opportunities but also dependencies for many crucial sectors in urban society (tourism, transport, commerce, and health care, etc.) while retaining the power and decision making in private hands. This "free service" has some technical shortcomings, not only regarding resolution, spatial coverage (areas with less commercial value tend to be overlooked), and temporal discontinuities, but also in that several of these traits have undeniable political, economic, and social ramifications. McQuire addresses the fundamental ethical and political implications of a privately owned key resource. He calls for crucial issues to be tackled, like privacy

protection, access to data for researchers and communities, and the capacity to influence or co-create data to mitigate the current power imbalance regarding a major player in the production of urban visuality. Many of McQuire's critical observations can be extended to a host of social media applications, which steer and capture our behavior as citizens for all sorts of undisclosed purposes and with little or no outside control.

Volume 18B of "Research in Urban Sociology" called "Visual and Multimodal Urban Sociology, Part B: Exploring the Urban Everyday," will further present a number of "in situ" visual and multisensory methods and resources for researching the urban context and contain a rich and varied set of ethnographies of the urban everyday:

(1) Visually Exploring Globalizing Cities: From data visualizations to "in-situ" approaches/*Luc Pauwels*
(2) Perception in Motion: Alternative research techniques for exploring the urban landscape/*Saskia I. de Wit*
(3) The Visual Commons: Where residents become neighbors/*Jon Wagner*
(4) Burned Out: A visual and lyrical sociology of smoking in the city/*Stephen Coleman and Jim Brogden*
(5) What We See and What We Don't: Resignifying urban traces of colonialism/*Giovanni Semi and Annalisa Frisina*
(6) For an "Expanded" Visual/Sensory Ethnography: Co-living with death in New Delhi/*Paolo Silvio Harald Favero*
(7) Isolated Buildings as Indicators of Social Change, a visual essay/*David Schalliol*

3. PROSPECTS OF VISUAL AND MULTIMODAL URBAN STUDIES AS A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY FIELD

Visual and multimodal studies – in particular those related to a sensory rich environment such as a city – ideally call for multisensory approaches, at least as far as possible, since capturing and communicating sensory experiences other than those related to seeing or hearing (namely smell, touch, and taste) remain cumbersome. Often, they need again to be transcribed into visible or aural representations ("visualizations" or "verbal utterances") to be recorded and shared with others.

Visual, multisensory, and multimodal research has always entertained a strong connection with technological developments and will continue to take advantage of the new possibilities such developments may offer for data-collection, production, and dissemination (Pauwels, 2020). Networked digital multimedia and geolocative technologies are indeed able to generate ever more captivating types of data as well as novel ways to archive, process, present, and share knowledge to diverse audiences, for diverse purposes. Citizens can be motivated to produce and upload visual and multimodal data and help researchers to annotate these products, though the production of metadata needs to be streamlined and