

# Realities

Part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

## Working Paper

### The Darker Side of Visual Research

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October 2008

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## Summary

There are good reasons why 'seeing' research is gaining in importance. Visual research slows down and focuses observation and encourages reflection on how visual material is perceived. Researchers have always observed and rapidly, maybe too rapidly, converted those observations into sketches, diagrams, signs, words, codes and numbers. However, with rapid growth in the field during the 1980s, came fundamental divergence and different ways of conducting visual studies were held up as 'the only way'.

Academic writing usually takes two forms. The first type is positive and celebratory and reinforces the research 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. The paper which follows, for strategic reasons, is mostly of the second kind with all its incumbent weaknesses. It was presented at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2000 as part of an ESRC *International Visual Evidence Seminar Series*<sup>(1)</sup>, and argued strongly in favour of a constructive inclusive approach to visual research and railed against the 'one approach fits all' mind-set. The aim of the talk was to generate debate and to bring the issue of divisive fragmentation into the open. I believed that the seminar series (this was the third and final seminar) had skirted around the fragmentation/inclusion issue and this needed airing. Hence, from the outset the tone of the paper was purposely testy in order to draw out and spark audience debate. Early in the talk I used emotive and extremist rhetoric purposely, for example use of the 'darker side' metaphor, and implied that protagonists of fragmentation were acting subversively in undermining the potential of visual research. This was followed by a more celebratory tone by focusing on three positive case studies of visual research to illustrate the potential of a more inclusive approach to visual studies. The discussion that followed the presentation was fierce and arguments were raised by different academic camps but on the whole the discussion was constructive. I feel the paper worked as intended. The debate has moved on since 2000 and the paper, a product of that time, has minor historical merit. The talk, mostly unchanged but shortened from the original given in London, is as follows:

### Three 'Events': what is the 'darker side'?

Given the burgeoning growth in interest in the visual it may appear churlish to reflect on its darker side. Nevertheless, I believe that visual research is not achieving its full potential. My initial concern for the direction taken by visual researchers was aroused by three isolated and apparently unconnected 'events'. The first took place eight years ago at conference when I was furtively asked a

rhetorical question: "What's the definition of cultural studies - it's sociology for non sociologists". The comment may simply reflect the micro-politics of academia where individuals boost their ego by slighting others or a flippant remark that is part of everyday cut and thrust of critical debate. However, although hidden under a cloak of humour, such comments may represent serious misgivings about alternative modes of visual studies. The barb is indicative of a common concern that postmodernism and those adopting a cultural studies stance adopt, according to empirical sociologists, a 'beginner's mind'. This view stems from the conservative-minded belief that multi-disciplinary researchers, particularly academics borrowing and combining concepts from disciplines different to their own knowledge base, often fail to reflect concepts fully or accurately. For me, the first indication of the darker side of visual research is not a limited understanding of the complexity of inter-disciplinary research, but academic balkanisation and paradigm polarisation where walls are built to ward off 'bad ideas' but end up keeping the 'good ideas' out too.

Some years later the second 'event' took place. 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'. This particular interdepartmental difference was probably caused by territorial conflict: the Anthropology Department took the intellectual 'high ground' in the belief that the English Department merely reproduced culture whilst they alone possessed methodological skills and theoretical knowledge to fully understand the nature of *Culture*; and perhaps the English Department perceived the Anthropology Department as promoting grand theory, a feature of modernity, and hence a subject discipline that has lost its intellectual way. The first indicator of the darker side of visual research is 'wall building'; the second indicator is an overarching need by some to mark out academic territory by claiming cerebral supremacy.

The third 'event' was the recent publication of Emmison and Smith's (2000) visually methodology treatise. The authors propose that visual inquiry should be "observational" and focus on "what the eye can see". Their thesis, mostly beneficial to visual researchers, is undermined by their argument for a particular brand of 'seeing' and their enthusiasm to ignore key facets of the field's evolution. Emmison and Smith's treatment of visual sociology and visual anthropology ignores the early history and development of those sub-disciplines. The authors fail to make a case for their preferred approach which is to adopt a narrow critical theory perspective of 'what is visible' and to reject all forms of researcher created visual data, especially photography which they demonise. Although many of their points about researcher created photographic data are sound, if not new, to condemn the use of photography by empirical researchers as "tyrannical" is extremist rhetoric. Furthermore, Emmison and Smith 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 pivotal tenets of empirical image-based research. The first is an ethical dimension which is deemed important by the majority of visual ethnographers and fieldworkers. The authors assiduously maintain their inclination for a covert approach without discussing its implications or ramifications, which are significant and potentially damaging to visual research. The second is their rejection of still and moving images as a mode of representing "what the eye can see" thereby restricting a

valuable strategy in the visual researcher's armoury. Wagner's 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". Wagner points out that:

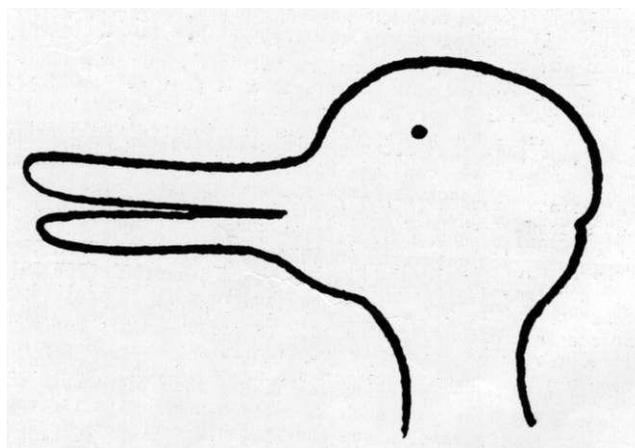
*In restricting their representational virtues for social research, (they) reject photographs in terms that are just as romantic as those of the researcher-photographers they criticise for over using them. Perhaps they have the wrong analogy. A more apt comparison than with the survey form or notebook 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 Emmison and Smith are openly critical of those who do. They subject a study of the evolution of farms in Pennsylvania by visual sociologist Harper (1997) for particular criticism, suggesting that the aerial photographic technique he used was unwarranted (see Fig 1). To propose that adopting a physically different visual perspective fails to add to other evidence, is not a strong argument on two counts. Firstly, the psychology of perception suggests that



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

changing one's angle of view may change our perception - the duck viewed straight on becomes a rather cute rabbit if the viewer's head is tilted to the left (see Fig 2). Viewed from the air we perceive the patterns of artificial structures and



**Figure 2: Duck or Rabbit?**

natural phenomena differently offering alternative interpretations and triggering new memories in the farms' owners, to those gained on the ground. Harper shifted his point of view physically and metaphorically, which is reasonable and legitimate practice for a visual researcher. Secondly, Harper makes a case for a mixed-method approach in which aerial data are supplemented and contextualised by other forms of data (the aerial photographs were additionally used for photo-elicitation with farmers and contrasted with data from semi-structured interviews and findings from a quantitative survey). Hence, the third indicator of the darker side is to be unaware of the limitations of ones own position.

The three 'events' highlight an unhelpful trend in contemporary visual studies. The first indicator of the darker side 'wall building'; the second indicator is the strict marking out academic territory; and the third is negativity and the propensity to assert an epistemological position by stating what it is not. Of course I have, by constructing an elliptical argument with my negative description of the third 'event' and the use of extremist rhetoric, shot myself in my epistemological foot. I should have pointed out the many positive aspects of Emmison and Smith's book but did not. Thus, the fourth indicator of the darker side is not recognising or seeking out the contrastive benefits of antithetical and adversative ideas.

## **Applied Visual Research**

To illustrate what can be achieved by a more positive, encompassing, collaborative, and interdisciplinary visual research, I turn to three studies from within applied research. They are exemplars of studies that are not visual-centric and are functional rather than overtly theoretical. Applied research attempts to resolve pressing, concrete, everyday issues. The focus in each case is on a problem and its resolution by adopting and adapting whatever approach resolves that problem. The research is conducted by teams rather than individuals, who draw on a creative, often esoteric, mix of techniques, methods, perspectives and theoretical frameworks, as necessary. A tendency of visual researchers, like most theory driven academics, is to reapply their knowledge and skills to similar sets of

problems. Of course applied researchers have similar tendencies but they are inventive out of necessity since their funding is often based on their past record in resolving everyday problems that affect people's lives. Applied researchers resolve difficult concrete problems whereas theoretical researchers focus on abstract problems and theory generation. Focusing on the practice rather than theory is useful since success is derived from adopting a pragmatic but positive 'can-do' approach and hence 'what works' is more important than 'what does not work'.

The *first example* is in the application of imagery to child abuse investigation by Wakefield and Underwager (1998). They provide a balanced discussion of 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.



**Figure 3: Anatomically correct dolls**

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. Wakefield and Underwager 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. For them best practice is derived from negotiating contrasts between the benefits and drawbacks of different visual stimuli used in different situations but always bearing in mind the quality of interaction with a potentially abused child. Multiple readings of images are always possible but in this case they gain poignancy following interaction with children. When contextualised within a study that seeks to protect children that poignancy is multiplied. Academic 'wall building', territorialism and negativity pall into insignificance when children's safety and well being is at stake.

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 assembled based on the description of a single witness. A team, led by Peter Hancock from the University of Stirling, found that likeness of a suspect is improved by merging together different images from multiple witnesses on a computer. They took visual descriptions from multiple witnesses which varied in terms of accuracy from quite good to very bad. When they digitally merged the identikit images the likeness was perceived as slightly improved on the best single image and much better than the worst (Figure 4). Hancock and his team suggest that each image of the original faces captures some aspect of the actual target but when merged together they bring out a commonality. 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 insightful about this study is its innovative nature. The team combined fine art, psychology and criminology to resolve problems, and this is unusual and instructive in itself. How a team comprising of such apparently disparate individuals joined forces in the first place is intriguing since they work in quite dissimilar fields, draw on different theories and often use different methodologies and different aims. They were not theory-method driven but were sufficiently intellectually flexible to engage with and resolve a particular problem. Their work indicates the sort of expansion in agendas that can be expected if genuine and creative collaboration across disciplines is embraced.

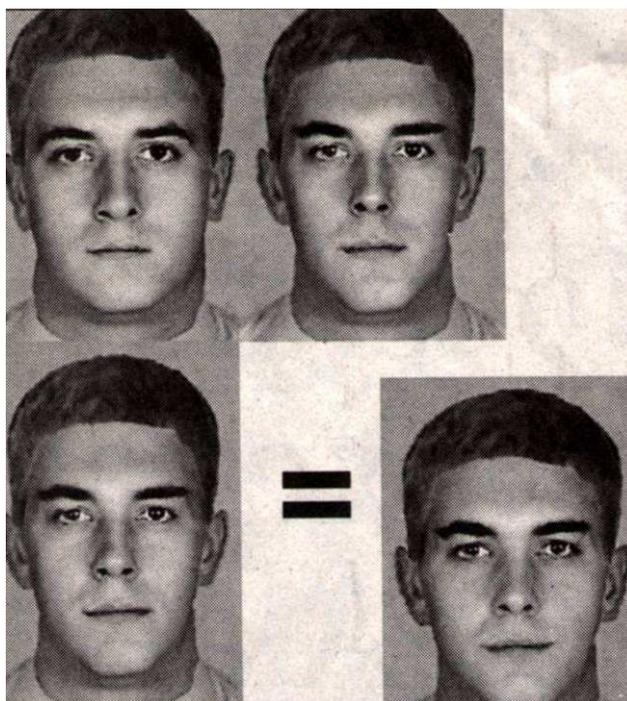


Figure 4: Merging identikit images (Courtesy Peter Hancock)

The *third example* provides a sombre insight of what happens when applied visual research is unsuccessful. 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 to study the reception and meaning making of texts, signs, symbols, graphics etc. However, the implications of contemporary visual communication theory are not always well communicated.

Kazmierczak (2001, 89) points out the importance of the visual in the visualisation and meanings of scientific concepts:

*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 the consequences may be dire, is borne out and 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. Moreover, Kazmierczak (2001, 90) 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." Failure of meta-communication cost the lives of the seven crew members.

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 effective 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). The study by Kazmierczak reflects on 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. The aim of disaster studies - to identify cause and effect – is positive when systemic changes are made.

The three examples illustrate what can be achieved by a positive, encompassing, collaborative, and interdisciplinary approach to visual research. They are studies which are not overtly visual-centric and therefore not prone to constrained thinking and theoretical or methodological dogma. In each case difficult research problems are overcome by an additive model of adopting and adapting whatever approach resolves that problem.

## 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, and deters flexibility and invention.

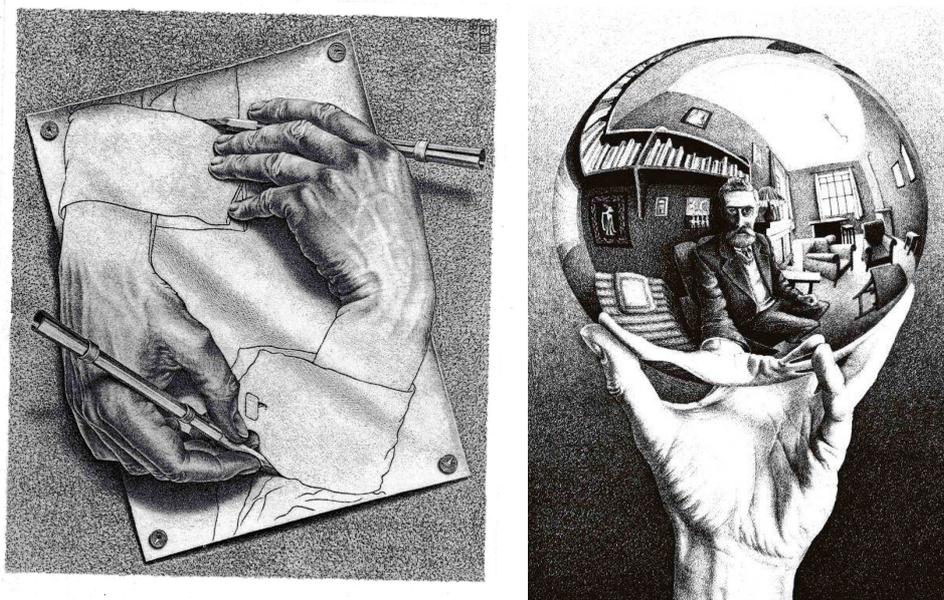
Increasingly over the past decade in visual research, a climate exists where protagonists of the 'darker side' act as prophets when challenging the position of those they attack but become high priests defending their territory when they in turn are challenged. This creates an intellectual vortex with two conflicting tendencies at work. The first is for one faction to denounce another faction of visual research 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.

There will always be intellectual tensions and rifts in academia but these are rarely about primacy of 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 magnified the division between image-based empirically orientated social science on one hand and postmodernism, cultural studies, and visual culture on the other. Intransigence is the prime indicator of the darker side of visual studies when researchers are neither able to see weaknesses in their own approaches nor the strengths other approaches offer.

A starting point for improving this situation lies in revisiting awareness of the centrality of researcher(s) to the research process. Past reflexive accounts by

ethnographic fieldworkers attempted to render explicit the process by which data and findings were produced. Emphasis was placed on the dialectical relationship between the researcher and the researched. Escher's essentially two-dimensional depiction in Figure 5 'Two Hands' (left drawing), of left and right hands drawing each other, is a visual metaphor for this process. This is limited reflexivity because epistemological reflexivity is subsumed when primacy is given to emphasising personal and procedural reactivity. By over emphasising researcher-researched relationships too little emphasis is given to the impact of broader disciplinary or cultural factors.

Escher's drawing, 'Hand and Sphere' (Fig 7), on the other hand, is a visual metaphor for a more encompassing and inclusive perspective. His 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. This suggests he is both inward and outward looking. Escher is telling us something about himself and the influences that shape his thinking.



**Figure 5: M. C. Escher, Two Hands (left) and Hand and Sphere (right).**

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Second, it suggests awareness that the wider context is distorted which in turn distorts the individual and therefore the visual study. Finally, for artists the sphere has usually symbolised the 'whole' and the spherical mirror does this but Escher chooses pragmatism and limits the space shown. Visual researchers could emulate this vision which encompasses a balanced perspective incorporating researcher, researched, and a wider research context.

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.

Summatively, the 'darker side' of visual research is unproductive because it comes in the form of ideological and methodological intransigence. For visual research to attain its potential and make a greater contribution to knowledge creative work is needed that draws on the combined strengths of inter-disciplinary mixed-

methods research that is robust and extracts best practice to establish innovative plural of modes of theorising.

## Endnote

(1) The *International Visual Evidence Seminar Series* took place in 2000. There were three events which took place at the University of Oxford, University of Leeds, and the National Portrait Gallery in London. The series was supported by a grant from the ESRC.

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