

A 'Light' for Sociological Passengers, with the Camera Around the Neck

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[Review of the book: Contrasti – Le diseguaglianze messe a fuoco tra fotografia e sociologia, (Contrasts: inequalities through the lens of photography and sociology) by Lorenzo Nasi, Mimesis Edizioni, Milan – Udine, 2020. ISBN: 978-8857565392]

During my years of study and research at the university I have always questioned why there was not available a handbook of visual sociology that talked about the story of the subject and its teorization but, above all, that offered a concrete example of how to do visual sociology, presenting a “flesh-and-blood” search, with relative comments. Nasi’s text finally offers this possibility.

2016 was the year when I came to Sicily as a researcher with the whole team chaired by Professor Carmelina Chiara Canta, composed of experts of communication, researchers, photographers, PhD students and other students from the Department of Social Science at the University of Rome Tre, with the aim to carry out a research about female immigration in Sicily, with innovative techniques. It was at that time that I felt the strong need, as an expert of visual sociology, to offer to beginners a “practical guide” that could explain in the right way what is the visual sociology and how it can be used. I found this guide in the Lorenzo Nasi’s book, despite the fact that many other excellent books already exist on the subject. What distinguish Lorenzo Nasi’s book is the simplicity with which it explains the topic: as a matter of fact, it shows a constant equilibrium between history of the discipline and its application, theories and examples, singular explorations and general look. In a fascinating way this guide leads the reader into the challenges and faces of this particular branch of sociology. If we had had this book at the time of

the research, surely, we would have consulted it, with the possibility to better address the issue and clarify what is supposed to produce a sociological trigger. It would have been marvellous comparing our research results¹ with the directions provided by this book.

The Lorenzo Nasi's 2020 essay is a text *on* visual sociology, but also *about* visual sociology, that ably presents and mixes, within itself, several layers, although maintaining clarity of exposition. The book shows a double structure: a historical and theoretical part, synthetized by the preposition "on", and a more illustrative one, synthetized by the preposition "about".

In the first part (*on visual sociology*), Nasi shows the reader a precise and up-to-date analysis of the genesis and history of photography, giving an account of all its "inventors". Photography, in fact, is not a linear discovery, coming to light once and for all, and with a certain date, daughter of a single father. On the contrary, it has ancient and multiform origins, enclosed in its mythical name: "the term *photography* derives from the conjunction of two Greek words, light (*phôs*) and writing (*graphê*), what is written with light" (page 16). Since ancestral times, that light could *write* has been clear to human speculation (think of the Plato's myth of the cave), but the process through which it could do so or produce such a sorcery in a persistent form has been an incredible journey. It has marked human culture leaving traces in the etymology of many terms (*to take photo* as a metaphor: negative, positive, exhibition, dark room, white-black-colour, development of an image) and has shaped our way of thinking. This is the reason why, after having made an historical *excursus*, Nasi goes on to analyse more specific epistemological issues that have their roots in a philosophical reflection, such as visual perception and its relation with knowledge. What Nasi wanted to show us, above all, is the concomitant birth of sociology with photography (1839), in what at first sight was a "stroke of lightning", then interrupted by a sudden change in the editorial line of the authoritative *American Journal of Sociology* by the editor Albion Small (1915), resumed more decisively in the last decades of the past century (late 1960s).

For these reasons, in its first part, Nasi's essay is an important and useful tool. It takes stock of the situation for those working in the field and, at the

¹ Thanks to the project of Educational Activity of the University of Rome Tre, directed by the Professor C.C. Canta, it was possible carry out a series of cultural issues about the topic: the book "Ricerca migrante. Racconti di donne dal Mediterraneo" (2017); a short movie called "Racconti migranti", available at this link: <https://youtu.be/ymH6PhHC6R0>; an essay "Voci di donne dal Mediterraneo" (2017); a photographic exhibition edited by Marina Vincenti; and many academic and disseminating seminars about the results of research. The research group was composed by Professor C.C. Canta, Marco Saverio Loperfido, Andrea Casavecchia, Chiara Carbone, Marina Vincenti, Asami Tajima, Giusy Arena, Francesca Fiocca, Maria Colabello and two students, Valentina Munoz e Desirée Schena.

same time, gives a “snapshot” of the state of art of visual sociology, essential for future researchers.

After exposing some theoretical reflections on the inequalities in the sociological field, (such as inequalities of income, of conditions, of social power, until the broader concept of *social vulnerability*), in the second part (*about visual sociology*) the author sets out a specific visual analysis: the one on the National Photographic Competition, promoted in 2017 by the non-governmental organization *Oxfam Italy* and entitled “Contrasts”. As the organization declared, the main goal was to “stimulate participants to identify, share and describe the expressions of inequality, experienced or suffered in their daily lives” (page 122). This ensures that the images “of the research all represent documents, information and data that describe social facts – the inequalities – as they were *seen* by the subjects who took them” (page 213). Turning back for one moment to what we said at the beginning of this review, and so to the main point of the book: the secret of this essay is to merge history, theory and concrete examples of how to develop visual sociology with camera. In the presentation of the work’s data, Nasi makes a real open-hearted operation of the research, showing the categorizations applied, the tables derived, and the results, thus helping future researchers to understand how to put their hands in the science, how to use the necessary methodological safeguards, and how to maintain an attitude of “openness” toward reality, the only true beacon that illuminates the scientist’s path.

Undoubtedly, the text seems to offer a guide for those impervious and often hidden paths that aims at the great, although never definitely reachable, goal of the researcher (wherever, but especially in the qualitative domain): the total objectivity. Furthermore: the large number of photos taken from the competition and reproduced in the text are analysed and studied through the theoretical lens of sociology, which Nasi explains and describes step by step, maintaining and exposing its complexity. Ups and downs between different levels that lays a path of comprehension, joining together abstraction and concrete visualization. The result is not a merely systematic and rational journey, but an emotional one: it gives an overall view of the work and can be defined not only metaphorically as an overview but rather a cubist mixture of angels and layers.

What is lacking to the text, that would have enriched it, is an in-depth reflection on the difference between photography and video, on what the former can give the researcher compared to the latter, on when to use one approach instead of the other. This missing reflection can be a choice of field and in this sense, it is certainly understandable. These aspects actually exist in the book but they are just mentioned. In the above mentioned “sicilian” research, for example, the two students chose different approaches, videos or photos according to personal inclination. Nasi’s book, in this context, would

have pointed the right way just to one of the two students, but left without tools the other.

Taking up some of the book's final reflections, themselves mutated from Morin and Simmel, we could argue that Nasi's essay makes us explore the world of image and sociology in an original and vital way: neither as boring *tourists* nor as confused *vagabonds*, but as sociological *travellers*, with a camera around their neck and a watchful eye. The *sociological tourist* is the one who has lost passion, who has lost himself in a series of data to be consumed on the aphasic blackboard of the mathematical number. The *vagabond* is the one who passively suffers the sociological space without knowing its rules, criteria, forms: it wanders within himself and his own convictions. Fortunately, there is always a third way, the one this book suggests us: the sense of science as a careful path full of passion.