Philip Smith

Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research". New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 214 pp.

Ente di afferenza:
 ()

Book reviews

Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 214 pp.

The traditional "visual sociologist" used photography as an illustrative tool for ethnography, or set out to decode and explain existing images such as news photographs and adverts using the resources of semiotics. Until about ten years ago "visual sociology" and its referents made up an enclosed domain of inquiry largely defined by particular methods and data forms rather than any theoretical concerns. In an attempt to reshape the field Michael Emmison and I (*Researching the Visual*, London, Sage, 2000) argued that the scope of a comprehensive visual sociology should be much wider. We insisted that objects, settings and interactions belonged as much as images; that themes of display, visibility, signaling and surveillance could be thought of as pivotal; and set out to connect the field to the wider domain of social and cultural theory that – by contrast with the ghettoized field of self-proclaimed "visual sociology" - most sociologists actually cared about. At that time we were able to draw a parallel between the ongoing situation and that of M. Jourdain in Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. He famously discovered that he had been speaking prose without knowing it. Likewise we suggested that "many investigators have been exploring visual data and using visual methodologies but have not been aware that they were undertaking a visual inquiry" [p. x]. Our task required a magpie-like raiding of the sociological tradition for materials with which to justify this heretical claim.

In the period since our early survey and reconstruction much has changed. The awareness that visual sociology can be about more than just ethnographic photos, documentary film and the decoding of adverts is now widespread. Claims have been made to speak to the field from multiple directions. There is the "iconic turn" in cultural sociology that sets out to explain the mysterious influence of non-discursive meanings and the allure of sensory impressions. Next we have neo-Foucaultian explorations of surveillance and power. In addition there are scholars from the facet of urban sociology that has long been concerned with strangerdom, civic design, public interaction and flaneurie. Themes of mutual display and territory enter with Goffman; spectacle with Debord and postmodernity with Jameson. Ethnomethodologists are increasingly using video instead of audiotape to explore sense-making in the context of naturally occurring interaction. "Visual sociology" and the "sociology of visuality" might be thought of as a trading zone in which many now see themselves as having a stall. The spirit here has not been one of aggressive imperialism, but rather a "me too" call for inclusion. As a result the field is now considerably more diverse, historically aware and theoretically sophisticated than it was twenty years ago. The time has come for some serious housekeeping activity. One might think of Andrea Brighenti's book as setting out to undertake this task from the perspective of social and cultural theory.

Whilst Michael Emmison and I engaged in an eclectic *bricolage* to substantiate our claims, Andrea Brighenti's book is in many ways more thoughtful and systematic. With a nod to normative social theory rather than method he is able to provide what we

might think of as a deeply considered voyage around the interlinked and proliferating discourses of the visual, visuality and visibility. He sees these not simply as objective processes but also as meaningful and contested dimensions of social life that are linked to power and social ordering. Of these three terms, *visibility* is the one that Brighenti mines to the greatest depth. At the outset he establishes that it constitutes relational fields between agents that are structured by, and generate, power, knowledge, subjectivities, identities and emotions. In this way he is able to sociologize and expand what would otherwise be a somewhat existential exploration of the gaze. Visibility, he insists, is not just about what can be seen with the eye. Brighenti's remaining chapters explore dimensions of this process. He shows for example that visibility is constituted by technologies such as the Internet or television (for example, these make knowledge of distant suffering possible). Disputes over new technologies can be thought of as struggles over this visibility. The politics of Internet 2.0, for example, is very much about democratizing visible opinion and information, thereby bootstrapping civic participation. Brighenti moves on to show that the city is a domain of circulating publics constituted by mutual regard, by the pleasures this brings, and by architectural designs that facilitate flow, communicate civility, or struggle for visual supremacy. Following the path blazed by David Lyon and others Brighenti suggests that surveillance is an increasingly fundamental aspect of social ordering in late-modernity. Democratic resistance, he says, should consist of "making new territories through new visibilities" [p. 185] as much as in resisting the efforts of the powerful to monopolize and shape visibility itself.

How are we to evaluate this work? Brighenti is clearly an intellectual who is very widely read in various languages. This is a serious book from an erudite person who knows social theory very well. As the Germans would say, Brighenti is a scholar who shows and deploys his *bildung* to great effect. The book makes a convincing case for the centrality of visuality and visibility in social life. There are brilliant moments of analysis here, notably in Chapters 1 and 2 where Brighenti sets out his theoretical stance, and in Chapter 4 where he explores how the Internet is a domain where the politics of visuality underlie diverse contentious issues. At the same time the book has its limits. The minimalist two-page index that does not extend beyond the letter V is simply inadequate. Brighenti's writings on the city and, particularly, on surveillance were to this reader at least, less inventive than the earlier chapters. Some may prefer a more polemical argument: Brighenti's position that visibility is social, contested, relational, related to spatiality, citizenship, democracy etc. is one that few sociologists will find objectionable even if he must be given credit for demonstrating in meticulous detail exactly why this is so. At times I wished the author's energy had been directed towards a more outrageous and provocative stance, or that he had twisted the knife a little more as he made critiques. To a certain extent the book flits around from topic to topic, not only between but also within chapters. Often we find blocks of beautifully constructed text each of around five or six paragraphs separated by headings. These make points that stand alone as thought items. They do not really require the paragraphs coming before and after. Although each could sustain a monograph if expanded, the resulting impression is of a tour with flashes of insight rather than of a grand vision of visibility in late-modernity. It is as if Brighenti, perhaps knowingly, perhaps unwittingly, transposed the Baudelaire/ Benjamin vision of urban life into a complete mode of intellectual exposition. This frag-

mentation has a cost when it comes to finding a grand narrative that summarizes the book as a whole. At the end of the day it is hard to say what the "Brighenti theory of visuality" might be other than that it is ubiquitous and worth studying. Still, with its considered theoretical work and barrage of illustrative support this book does what it set out to do. Here we have some theoretical groundwork that establishes visibility as a viable, surprisingly diverse and evidently fundamental category for sociological analysis.

Philip Smith
Yale University