

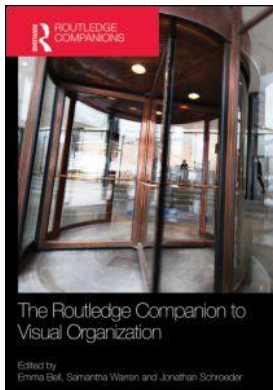
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Visual sociology and work organization

An historical approach

Tim Strangleman

Introduction

The sociological approach to the visual understanding of work organizations is a rich, fascinating and, at times, contradictory one. Sociology has a long history of engaging with its subject matter visually but, as a discipline, it has often been reluctant to acknowledge this legacy and achievement. In this chapter, this history is explored in all its complexity and richness. Rather than suggesting that there is a coherent story, one of unfolding logic, it will show the different ways sociology and sociologists have engaged with the visual around the topic of work, workers and organizations. It is important to recognize that some of the material presented here goes beyond sociology, borrowing from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, art history and social policy; this is done to think more deeply about how work has been understood visually and how we might use this legacy in contemporary visual studies of organizations. This chapter aims to provide a number of insights. First, it is a selective account of visual representations of work. Second, it provides an overview of the visual sociology of work. Finally, it is a reflection on the methodological practices of the visual sociology of work and approaches to the types and nature of data in the field.

The chapter begins with a reflection on nineteenth-century visual studies of work, going on to look at the maturing corporate use of photography. It reflects on the high point of corporate photography in the post-war period before examining the ways organizations have been portrayed in the context of deindustrialization. Finally, the chapter examines ways in which we can use images in sociology of work, asking what the visual adds to our understanding of work.

A short history of the visual sociology of work

With the rise of visual sociology and visual methods in the late twentieth century, it is easy to forget that sociology has a long and distinguished history in the field. Historically, sociology and photography grew up and matured in parallel (see Stasz 1979; Chaplin 1994). Here we are concerned in particular with sociology and work organization, but, in doing so, we have to see this as part of a wider interest in modern society and its problems. It is also important not to fall

into the trap of viewing the visual as simply photography. Some of the earliest visual engagement by social scientists can be seen in other media such as engraving and mapping. Take, for example, Henry Mayhew's (1985 [1865]) *London Life and the London Poor*, which is an important but arguably neglected early piece of social research that made extensive use of illustrations in the form of engraving alongside his prose (Yeo 1971, 2011). These engravings showed types of the various London workers that were discussed in the written text. Similarly, Gustave Doré, a French engraver, produced iconic images of work, workers and, by extension, their social conditions in *London: A Pilgrimage* in collaboration with essayist Blanchard Jerrold (Jerrold and Doré 2006 [1869]). In copious plates, Doré animates trades and aspects of working life in London in the mid-nineteenth century. Another non-photographic visual approach to exploring aspects of work in the nineteenth century was the mapping carried out by Charles Booth (1840–1916). His poverty maps of London were explicitly about social class and relative income, but are also a powerful way of visualizing occupational groups (see Bales 2011).

Photography was arguably the most important visual media during the nineteenth century, and work and labour were often captured by either design or by accident by early photographers. In the United States, two photographers' portfolios became synonymous with the representation of work. Jacob Riis (1849–1914) was a pioneering photographer of the conditions of the poor in New York during the later nineteenth century. Riis, a Danish immigrant, began taking photographs in New York after being hired by the *Tribune* and Associated Press as a reporter in 1877. He was quickly promoted to police reporter, gaining access to the ghettos on the city's lower east side. Ten years later, Riis developed a lecture series that highlighted the wretched conditions of his subjects, which he began to illustrate with lantern slides. These pictures alongside a series of essays were published in 1890 in his *How the Other Half Lives* (Riis 1998; see also Yochelson 2001).

A second major figure in the tradition of photography of labour is Lewis Hine (1874–1940). Hine obtained a Master's degree in sociology at Columbia University. Socially committed, Hine spent his time taking photographs for a series of socially aware magazines and later for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). The NCLC used his photography in a very direct way as evidence of child exploitation (Gutman 1967; Goldberg 1999). Importantly for the purposes of this chapter, Hine's sociology and general academic training was influenced in part by American pragmatist thought, which stressed ideas of engagement and reflection on experience (see Trachtenberg 1989). One of Hine's lesser-known assignments was his involvement in the Pittsburgh Survey, a pioneering project combining photography with statistical data and interview material (Cohen 2011).

Rise of corporate photography

Lewis Hine's career as a photographer acts as a useful bridge in our story. His early work influenced by sociological purpose shifts after the Great War ended in 1918 towards his later work for corporate clients. There is continuity here with that earlier sociological imperative and a clue is offered in a reflection on his career: 'There were two things I wanted to do. I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated' (Hine, quoted in Langer 1998: 20).

This second aspect of his craft celebrated labour and the worker in industrial society, subverting the notion that, in an industrial age, humans became mere appendages to their machines. Rather, Hine lionized heroic workers and labour, most famously in his series of photographs recording the construction of the Empire State Building in New York (Langer 1998; see also Doherty 1981; Gutman 1974; Hine 1977; Orvell 1995; Trachtenberg 1989).

The shift in Hine's focus came at a time when corporations were increasingly aware of the power of photography and of the need to develop their own images with their customers, with politicians and with their own workers. The corporate use of imagery has generated a wealth of material on the workplace and labour, companies often employing the best photographers of the day. Images were created for publicity; for training purposes; as scientific management tools; as well as the act of record. This range and nature of corporate photography is a subject that is strangely neglected by sociologists, its exploration carried out mainly by historians and visual scholars remote from sociology (see Brown 2005 and the discussion below). This is all the more surprising given the fact that photography, sociology and the modern corporation emerged near simultaneously in the nineteenth century (Stasz 1979).

Industrialist Henry Ford, as in so many other respects, was a pioneer in the use of photography for corporate purposes. Having purchased a camera for personal use in 1896, he later set up the Ford Motor Company motion picture department in 1914. His moving and still pictures record many aspects of the organization and its workforce, including the handling of raw materials, detailed photography of the assembly lines as well as specialist engineering functions and the large bureaucracy that managed and organized Ford's plant. These images were used for internal training purposes as well as to promote the company to its customers and a wider public. The scale of this endeavour can be seen in the fact that, as early as 1963, the company presented the US National Archives with approximately 1.5 million feet of silent film and the collection of more than 75,000 stills from the company's Rouge plant taken from its opening in 1917 to 1941 (Bryan 2003: 246).

There is a growing literature on corporate photography and the use of images. David Nye's (1985) book *Image Worlds*, for example, examines the use of photography in the ideological construction of the General Electric Company in the USA. In turn, Nye looks at the way the company recorded its workforce, managers, products, factories, engineers, publicity and consumers. Nye's *Image Worlds* was and still is influential because it mapped the different purposes to which a corporate body put its images. General Electric early on recognized the different audiences it had, both internal and external, and the ways in which visual material could reach them. Nye is also important in the way he considers how one thinks about a vast corporate collection or archive. How do you make sense of a collection that may run into hundreds of thousands of plates? This is an issue we will return to later in the chapter (see also Sekula 1983).

Another influential author is Roland Marchand (1998), who, in his *Creating the Corporate Soul*, discussed the way corporations in the USA developed the practice of public relations, achieving this through both written and visual texts. This was made possible by the improvements in photographic technology and reproduction. Marchand argues that corporate America became aware of its ability to, and the necessity of, visual public relations in the Progressive era.

Elsbeth Brown's *The Corporate Eye* (2005) also explores commercial use of photography for public relations purposes – including internal and external promotion to staff and customers. But Brown also maps a range of other purposes to which the camera was applied. She examines more generally the way various businesses, managers and the emerging discipline of management science in the USA made use of photography from the 1880s onwards. These included using photography to identify and screen potential workers based on their physiognomic features in order to exclude those with the wrong 'character'. As Brown notes, this particular branch of science and its use of the image petered out in the twentieth century, replaced by psychological and behavioural approaches. Another aspect of corporate photography which *The Corporate Eye* lights upon is its early adoption in another aspect of scientific management, namely the rationalization and standardization of work movement exemplified in the research of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth. The Gilbreths were influenced by F.W. Taylor and sought to show

the way photography could be used as part of time and motion studies. These studies fragmented the labour process frame by frame, and represent work and labour in an abstract and decontextualized format in order that it might be better understood and rationally planned. Brown suggests that the Gilbreths developed their thinking from seeing photography as a form of:

functional realism, according to which the image serves as an empirical substitute for the object, a type of evidence, to an instrumental realism, in this case, using the realist promise of the photograph as truth to restructure the ways in which work is performed.

(2005: 71)

In a fascinating paper on the photographic study of movement, Corbett shows the way early techniques pioneered by Eadweard Muybridge were applied to work by the Gilbreths. As he notes:

The Gilbreths' work was conducted at a time when the cult of efficiency had as fully infiltrated American work culture as it had in late 19th century France. ... The Gilbreths were concerned primarily with the elimination of 'wasted motion' and sought to create their 'own visual vocabulary of efficiency – one in which labour is finally made fully alienated and therefore manageable through and through'.

(Corwin 2003: 146, cited in Corbett 2008: 117)

Another way of exploring corporate image making is by revisiting the sources themselves which have been reproduced for a variety of reasons. An interesting but limited discussion of the use of corporate photography can be found in Douglas Harper's (2001) *Changing Works*, which, in part, uses the archive of Standard Oil, which commissioned Roy Stryker to produce 'a photographic documentation of the uses of petroleum in America' (ibid.: 8). This project explicitly aimed at portraying the social aspect of the company's product from 1943 to 1950. The autonomy granted to the photographers involved in the project resulted in images of great beauty as well as lasting historical sociological value.

One element of the representation of work is the reproduction of classic corporate photography in nostalgic reflections on the past. These publications are not intended necessarily for academic use but act as a wonderful fund of material for those interested in the portrayal of labour. Bryan's (2003) book *Rouge* is a good example of this, as are Olsen and Cabadas' (2002) *The American Auto Factory* and Cabadas' (2004) *River Rouge: Ford's Industrial Colossus*. All of these volumes are ostensibly produced for automotive enthusiasts and are packed with images of labour taken by talented corporate photographers whose role was to capture both the mundane everyday shots of production as well as significant milestones of factory life. This audience for industrial heritage is echoed in various other sectors, including railways, steel and mining (see Swanson 2004; Wollman and Inman 1999).

Researchers have access to a growing body of corporate film material which has been commercially released to a general public or is held in archives. In Britain, the pioneering work of the Documentary Film Movement (DFM), whose members were employed directly for the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), the General Post Office (GPO) or later nationalized industries has been available for some time. While not exclusively about work, they are dominated by industrial labour and subjects include fishing, shipbuilding, steelmaking, coalmining and railway work among other trades and professions (see Swann 1989; Aitken 1998; Russell and Taylor 2010).¹

It is important that we do not overlook the role of the state as a corporate sponsor of art and photography, and of course the GPO and EMB were both quasi-autonomous arms of the British state. During the interwar period in the United States, there were important developments in the use of documentary photography. This was stimulated by the creation of a series of photo magazines, newspapers and the state sponsorship of photographers during the Depression years of the 1930s through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and later the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The FSA photography provided pictures that would support the work of the Resettlement Administration. Under the directorship of Roy Stryker, dozens of photographers recorded conditions of farmers, the unemployed and the working poor across America (Hurley 1972). The resultant images, which have become icons of American life during this time, were made available to magazines and newspapers. Importantly, the wide range of subjects covered by photographers included 'race', gender, domestic work as well as paid employment. The FSA collection was later housed in the US Library of Congress and amounts to 165,000 prints, a further 265,000 negatives, as well as 1,600 colour slides (Daniel *et al.* 1987; Orvell 2003). Aside from these pictures of working life and social conditions, the photographers were important as many went on to produce further images of work and labour in a variety of genres including corporate and propaganda settings. The US government was also a huge sponsor of non-photographic depictions of labour. For instance, the New Deal Programme established in 1934 a section that commissioned art for federal buildings. As Melissa Dabakis notes:

Within New Deal visual culture, the image of the industrial worker took center stage. Borrowing from the tradition of worker imagery ... public images were deployed to new ends – most notably, but not always, as propaganda for federal programs. In so doing, the image of the heroic worker bolstered the notions of American individualism and self-sufficiency at the same time that it promoted the expanding role of the state in social welfare.

(1999: 223)

Erika Doss (2002) has written an important overview of some of this material and, in particular, the way it portrays work and labour. As is so often the case, Doss is an art historian rather than a sociologist, emphasizing the absence of more sociologically focused attempts to theorize and understand visual material. Of critical importance when examining corporate photography is the need to keep a series of questions in mind about the intent of the commissioning body, the choice of subjects, the limits placed on artistic freedom and the subsequent selection, editing and cropping of material. All of these aspects of the production process of corporate photography are not neutral, but rather deliberate choices made by different people. We also need to be aware of the reuse and recycling of images. Good examples of reuse can be seen in the reissue of nostalgic collections mentioned above. In a recent paper, American Studies scholar David Gray (2006) highlights the way images produced as part of FSA projects were cropped and captioned for reuse as US propaganda posters during World War II. The point to stress as sociologists here is not simply to develop a critical awareness of image manipulation; it is also that, in discovering more about the process of fabrication, we come to a deeper understanding of the way labour is presented, represented and how these images are received (see Hurley 1980 for an overview).

Post-war images

Some of the most stunning corporate photography dates from the period after World War II. The reasons for this are complex and linked to economic, political and social factors.

In part, corporations felt the need to develop strong visual identities, often to improve their images in a post-war period dominated by welfare states and a sense that industrial relations were now to be less conflictual after the collective sacrifices of the war years (see Fones-Wolf 1994). At times, corporations such as Standard Oil (see Harper 2001) had to repair their reputations with the political class as well as the public. Harper describes the way Standard Oil commissioned a range of photographers during and after World War II to take pictures of rural life where their oil products were being used. This was to soften the company's image dented by their secret pre-war agreement with the German firm I.G. Farben. As Harper notes:

Plattner quotes a Standard Oil official responsible for the project as asserting that the photographs were 'to concentrate on "the human part" of the company's work, particularly the everyday lives of its workers and their families ... [to] foster the impression in the public mind that Standard Oil was composed of "human beings like everybody else" ... Standard Oil sought to project a public image as a company that 'is a good citizen ... that always works in the public interest.'

(quoted in Harper 2001: 8)

Harper's *Changing Works* makes extensive use of these images in various ways for illustration and as part of the interviews he carries out for his own later project. On both sides of the Atlantic, companies spent considerable sums on photography to promote their products, goods and services and in the process employed some of the most talented photographers of the day. These include photographers such as the German Walter Nurnberg (1954), who worked for the steel, textiles and brewing industries among others; Maurice Broomfield (2009), whose work included photography for the steel, engineering, paper and textile industries and was responsible for the so-called 'New Look' in industrial photography; and the American Arthur D'Arazien (2002), who is best known for his stunning images of the North American steel industry. These photographers and others produced images of organizations and the work processes for a variety of purposes. Like Standard Oil, these companies were attempting to go beyond simply recording what went on in their factories, mills and shops. They were attempting to communicate a range of stories about what they did and the value it had for the wider community. These images also help to contribute to a narrative of the value placed on work and industry in the post-war period; they speak to a desire to project and build a positive image of organizations and work but also of an audience ready and willing to consume such images.

It is important that we look beyond still photography in this discussion. One of the defining things about the decades after World War II was the flowering of industrial filmmaking. This is a huge field in its own right. As we saw above, the roots of post-war industrial film in the UK can be seen in the pre-war DFM, headed by John Grierson (see Aitken 1990; Swann 1989). The DFM produced many films on a range of social and economic themes but often dwelt on organizational and corporate issues; this was not surprising since their funding came from public and private corporations. Many of those involved in the pre-war DFM themselves later graduated into corporate filmmaking after 1945. These films were commissioned both by the public and private sectors in the UK. For example, nationalized industries commissioned or funded many films in the 1940s through to the 1960s and 1970s. These were sometimes training films but often were meant as short features to be played in cinemas and church halls. Their aim was to explain industrial processes and organizational change, stressing, in the case of the state-owned industries, the value of nationalization and the efficiency it would bring (see Russell and Taylor 2010). This trend was by no means exclusive to the UK with corporate filmmaking common in Europe and North America during the period (see, for example, Hediger and Vonderau 2009).

Both still and moving images were part of sophisticated and highly creative public relations strategies adopted in the period. But it would be wrong to see these images as crude propaganda, certainly in the case of the UK (see Fones-Wolf 1994 for a discussion of the context in the USA). Often the artists who made these images were informed by left politics with social consciousness and, likewise, they were often afforded huge amounts of discretion as to the style and content of their art. For these reasons, many of the images from the 1950s and 1960s retain their power because of the production values that created them.

Visualizing work and organizations in decline

One of the fascinating features of the last three decades for those interested in issues of work and organization has been the process of deindustrialization. Arguably, the visual has played an important part in charting this process and shaping the reaction to it. Deindustrialization paradoxically tells us a lot about work and organizations. The empty buildings and vacant lots serve both as reminders and prompts for thinking about the nature and value of employment. Visual images of deindustrialized sites, especially certain Rust Belt cities such as Detroit, for example, proliferate in today's media. Clearly, there are marked differences between such accounts. An early example of this genre was *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass* by Dale Maharidge, who worked alongside photographer Michael Williamson to record the effect of job loss and industrial change in the USA. Originally published in 1985, *Journey to Nowhere* illustrates both the journeys laid-off workers made to find new jobs as well as the settlements destroyed as a result of economic change. In a later edition of the book, Bruce Springsteen writes a powerful introduction, telling of how he was inspired late one night to produce his own representation of labour in his songs 'Youngstown' and 'The New Timer' on his album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (see also Maharidge and Williamson 2011).

The pictures of abandonment are certainly beautiful and aesthetically rich. What often marks out later books on deindustrialization is the absence of people in the images chosen. James Jeffery Higgins' (1999) *Images of the Rust Belt* is a good example of this trend, with the nearly 50 colour plates completely devoid of people, even in the context where part or the entire site being photographed is still active. It is also important to note that this desire to capture abandoned industrial space is not unique to the USA. In Britain, for example, we could point to Julian Germain's *Steelworks* (1990), which takes for its subject the town of Consett in the northeast of England; *Ming Jue* (2008) by Stuart Whipps, which shows the abandoned former Rover car plant in Birmingham (as well as its rebirth in China); and finally *Billancourt* by Bon and Stéphanie (2003), showing inside and external images of a disused Renault plant near Paris just prior to its demolition.

In the USA, there are a growing number of urban explorer-inspired² coffee-table books in part or exclusively about former industrial space, and nowhere is more explored than Detroit, which may no longer produce the world's cars, but does provide the raw material for countless books on ruins. These include *The Ruins of Detroit* by Marchand and Meffre (2011); *Lost Detroit: The Stories Behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruins* by Dan Austin and Sean Doerr (2010); and *Detroit Disassembled* by photographer Andrew Moore (2010). Other examples of the genre would include *Forbidden Places: Exploring our Abandoned Heritage* by Margaine and Margaine (2009); Dan Dubowitz (2010) *Wastelands*; and *Beauty in Decay* by RomanyWG (2011). Trying to summarize these publications is difficult because they are so varied and are designed for different audiences. Some are clearly academic, others are meant as local and regional or even industrial history. Others fall into the category of fine art that happens to draw on industrial subjects. Related to this type of account are those by and for the urban explorer movement.

The commentary in each is similarly varied with some giving a great deal of attention to the former industries and people that the ruins once housed, and this can be even true of those books aimed at a fine art audience. Julian Germain's book, for example, combines his images of Consett post-closure with a wide variety of professional and amateur photography, which tells a complex narrative of this former steel town. Often, these books will include forewords or more substantive pieces either reflecting simply on the photographs or providing a wider analysis of the context of closure. The value of these books and publications in the context of this chapter is that they add a new dimension to the way we can read organizations visually. One of the best theorizations of the power and role of ruins can be seen in the writing of Tim Edensor (2005). In *Industrial Ruins*, he reflects of the meaning and role of abandoned industrial sites and importantly theorizes both the physicality of space as well as the absent labour that formerly populated the buildings he encounters. As he notes:

photographs are never merely visual but in fact conjure up synaesthetic and kinaesthetic effects, for the visual provokes other sensory responses. The textures and tactilities, smells, atmospheres and sounds of ruined spaces, together with the signs and objects they accommodate, can be empathetically conjured up by visual material in the absence of any realistic way of conveying these sensations, other than through words and images.

(Edensor 2005: 16)

We need to think expansively about the range and quality of visual material on offer to us on the subject of work and organizations. Such material is not always obvious, and is often produced by artists and others for very different reasons than ours here (see, for example, Chatterley *et al.* 2000). The point, though, is that photography and other visual media make an intervention that is different to the written text; it allows access to different meanings and understandings. Mention of Edensor brings us nicely to the point where we can discuss the more formally sociological account of work in and through visual media.

Visual sociology and work

In this part of the chapter, I want to develop this discussion further by looking at the way sociologists look at work and organizations, and how they actually produce accounts of work visually through their own practice. An early example of a sociologist using visual material to look at work is Francis Klingender and his pioneering *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (1972 [1947]), which examined the impact of new technology and industry on the English landscape (see also Pooke 2008). It is possible to argue that a visual sociology of work really begins to emerge during the 1980s, as part of a more general interest on the part of sociologists in the visual (see, for example, Rose 2012; Chaplin 1994; see Strangleman 2004, 2008 for a review). Work sociologists had used visual approaches before this time, Berger and Mohr's (1975) *A Seventh Man* dealing with migrant labour is a good example. Images of labour had also been used as illustration in studies of work: Jeremy Tunstall's (1962) *The Fishermen* is extensively illustrated with pictures of labour being carried out at sea and on land. Another example would be Ray Pahl's (1984) *Divisions of Labour*. The point is that the visual is not a method of research or analysis as such, but does represent more than simple illustration.

In the UK, an early sociological pioneer who did adopt visual approaches in a more developed sense was Huw Beynon. Known most famously for his ethnography of a car plant *Working for Ford* (1973), he is less well remembered for his book with photographer Nick Hedges *Born to Work* (Hedges and Beynon 1982). After the passage of three decades, *Born to Work* is both

dated and remarkably fresh. The book acts as a time capsule revealing in its pages a lost world of work, exploring in its images the life-world of labour in light manufacturing in the English West Midlands. This was the same terrain on which Paul Willis' (1977) 'lads' began their working life in *Learning to Labour*, and the same industrial space that was decimated during the 1980s (Dolby *et al.* 2004). Crucially, the book is a combination of words and pictures: the one exemplifying the other. The images used here are not simple eye-wipes, introduced to break up text. Nor is the text there to act as an extended caption for the photographs themselves. Perhaps one of the most notable things about *Born to Work* is that it seems to have had so little influence on industrial or work sociology; this is even more inexplicable given Beynon's central place in that sub-discipline. This lack of influence is possibly due to the conservatism of work sociology and the discipline more widely (see Strangleman 2005; Halford and Strangleman 2009).

An example of where academics explore what the visual adds to research is the collaboration of photographer Bill Bamberger and English scholar Cathy Davidson on their 1998 book *Closing: The Life and Death of an American Factory*, which tells the story of the end of production at the White Furniture Company factory in North Carolina. Mixing images with interview material from the workers and interweaving this with a history of the plant, *Closing* is a model of how narrative and imagery can be combined to increase our understanding and empathy with the subjects of study. The authors used the photography at the end of the book to stimulate final reflection from the workers sometime after closure occurred and this is perhaps the most poignant part of the volume. Here workers' life narratives embedded in and by work and then disembedded by layoff speak to a sense of loss not simply at the level of community but also at the level of the nation. There is a sense here of mourning for a lost industrial era. In an epilogue entitled 'Does anybody *make* anything anymore', Davidson writes:

White's wasn't perfect, and none of the workers says it was. Yet metaphors of death run through the comments so many of the workers make about the closing precisely because people felt that something of themselves died when White Furniture closed.

(Bamberger and Davidson 1998: 168)

Any discussion of the visual sociology of work has to consider the writing of American visual sociologist Douglas Harper. Through a series of books and articles, Harper has used work as a focus around which he explores what the visual can add to a sociological understanding of social forms and practice. His engagement with work as a subject began tangentially with his *Good Company* (1982), a study of tramping and the world of the tramp (see also the revised and expanded edition, Harper 2006). His later book *Working Knowledge* (1987) was an in-depth study of a mechanic in a small machine shop. Harper, using photo elicitation techniques, sought to understand notions of skill and working knowledge embedded in an experienced worker. More recently still, Harper's (2001) *Changing Works*, mentioned previously, was a comparative study in mechanization and rural agricultural life and labour. This again used a range of visual techniques including photo elicitation but included the use of images from a corporate archive. This sense in which Harper shifts the focus of his research between different types of work and also in the mix of the visual techniques he employs has produced a rich body of material. This variety helps capture both different forms of work but also different moments of economic life, freezing and making intelligible elements of culture and interaction, the detailed minutiae of labour and in the process gains important insights into work identity and meaning.

There are a variety of work and organizational sociologists now using visual approaches as part of their teaching and research. Examples include Carol Wolkowitz (2006) in her pioneering

Bodies at Work, which employs visual material and approaches in looking at a range of body work; and organizational sociologist Susan Halford, who draws on visual material in a number of her studies (Halford and Knowles 2005). Other organizational sociologists working in the field include videoethnographers such as Heath and Luff (2000; see also Hindmarsh 2009 for a review). In my own work, I make extensive use of visual material and methods. In my research on the Guinness brewery at Park Royal in West London, I combine various photographic and other material, which has been self-generated, taken by photographers I have collaborated with or derived from company archives (see Strangleman 2010, 2012).

How do we make sense of the visual and work?

So far, we have seen a variety of examples of the visual interrogation of work by a great range of people, both academics and non-academics. We have seen that work has been a recurring subject that has attracted people researching in visual media. In this section, I want to examine how we make sense of this material, asking questions about how we analyse it and what uses we can put it to for a sociological understanding of work and organizations. It will look at the visual as illustration, in reflection theory, content analysis, photo elicitation, semiology and iconology, and visual ethnography.

As illustration

We could look at the visual record of work in terms of illustration, as representing an historical record of bygone ways of working or organizational structure. What all visual media have in common is that they freeze in time an image of work or a workplace. We can return to them to learn a variety of things. There has been an understandable tendency to downplay this aspect of the visual as, quite rightly, we have learned to be suspicious of images as telling a 'truth'. We expect to ask questions about the choice of subject, the selection of the field, the cropping and framing, all of which leads us to a sophisticated rejection of images as 'simply' doing anything. While we must be alert to all of these points, we should not dismiss the important potential of the image archive to provide us with a rich array of historical material ranging from images of vast spaces of production through to detailed studies of craft skill and knowledge. Although ironically this is probably the most common form in which the visual makes an appearance in work sociology, at least historically, it is also the least reflected on (see Burke 2001; Samuel 1994; Miller 1992). As we saw above, many sociological publications concerned with work do employ visual material. In the 1960s and through to the 1980s, this was not really reflected on as deeply as it might have been. In many ways, work sociology, and the wider discipline for that matter, lacked the critical language to interrogate and make use of visual material in any sustained way. There was arguably a deep-rooted suspicion of images and what one could say with them, linked to an overwhelming desire to privilege text-based evidence (see Stasz 1979; for an account of British sociological historiography, see also Savage 2010).

Reflection theory

This leads us on to reflection theory itself. Victoria Alexander provides us with a useful definition of the approach: 'Researchers who study visual documents, especially media texts, often rely implicitly on "reflection theory". They believe that visual documents mirror, or tell us something about, society' (2008: 464).

It is important to note that reflection theory alerts us to the relationship between an image and the society that produces and consumes it, but does not establish an objective account of the truth. Rather, reflection theory allows us to study how a society's values, fact, fiction and fantasy may be read into a particular image or collection. The sociology of work and organizations can look at a set of images and start to ask questions about what this tells about work in the past. What are the aesthetic tropes drawn on, why was an image produced, by whom was it commissioned, and what was the intended audience? Reflection theory – although that term is very rarely used by sociologists of work – alongside illustration are historically the most commonly adopted approaches to images. Theoretically, sociologists have tended to look to other disciplines for a visual vocabulary. Interestingly, it is the increasing presence of other sub-disciplines in the area of work that has introduced a greater confidence to reflect on visual material; the best illustration of this is in the case of the sociology of the body (see Wolkowitz 2006).

Content analysis

An approach related to reflection theory is that of content analysis. Here the researcher takes a sample of material from an archive and tries to discern patterns within the content. A good illustration of this would be if one were interested in looking at front covers of company or trade union publications. The researcher could look at a selection, or indeed all of a run, of magazines. You could look for patterns, similarities and differences across time. You could ask questions about the types of things that feature on the covers: do these include people, if so, what sort of people – men, women, what is the presence of ethnic minorities? Of course, if you had the time and resources, you could extend your analysis to the inside of the magazines themselves (see Wall 2008). Both Sekula (1983) and Nye (1985) are good examples of where researchers tackle the question of how to make sense of large archives of material on work. In Nye's *Image Worlds*, for example, he explores the problem of how to think analytically and critically about a huge corporate archive:

I therefore took the entire archives as my subject. It made no sense, however, to view the photographs in isolation, as matters of pure form. I began to examine the company's publications to see where different images had appeared and to see what sorts of stories accompanied them. These in turn led me into the literature of technological history. At the same time I moved in quite a different direction to understand photography as a technology and as a means of communication. Thus the research bifurcated, and I began to see the archives in two quite different ways. Corporate and institutional history offered one analytical framework; the literatures on photography, communication, and semiotic theory suggested another.

(1985: x–xi)

There are a number of points to be made here. Material can be ordered and understood in many different ways. In part, this ordering is a function of the disciplinary background and the literature the researcher uses. The quote also shows how the study of corporate photography is inherently interdisciplinary in terms of methods, approach and the substantive subject of the archive – in Nye's case, electrical engineering and machinery. In this sense, we cannot be just an historian, sociologist or semiologist. The richness of an interpretation emerges from a willingness to combine and transcend disciplinary silos.

Photo elicitation

Again, a related method is that of photo elicitation whereby images (usually photographs) are explicitly deployed as part of the interview process itself. The images elicit ideas, reflections and comments from the interviewee, and are a useful probe to garner more information than would usually be the case. There are a number of examples where this has been applied to studies of work and organization; the various projects in which Douglas Harper has been involved are perhaps the best examples. Importantly, photo elicitation techniques have the added advantage that they create a more democratic relationship between interviewer and interviewee; as Harper says:

The researcher gains a phenomenological sense as the informant explains what the objects in the photograph mean, where they have come, or developed from, and what elements may be missing, or what photographs in a sequence may be missing. This method provides a way in which the interview can move from the concrete (a cataloguing of the objects in the photograph) to the socially abstract (what the objects in the photograph mean to the individual being interviewed).

(Harper 1986: 25)

Bolton *et al.* (2001) provide another example of photo elicitation techniques where researchers gave child worker respondents cameras and then interviewed them using the images they had taken as a basis for the discussion about their lived reality and meanings. In their essay 'The visual and the verbal', David Byrne and Aidan Doyle use visual images of industrial landscape as an integral aspect of their method. They were especially interested in the salience of images of coalmining landscapes and the effect on the local communities they studied. Using images of destruction and ruin, they ran focus groups of local residents of deindustrialized spaces, attempting to get at 'structures of feeling' and the 'actual lived experience of change' (Byrne and Doyle 2004: 167). As they argue: 'Images of change – images of how things had been and how they are now – could be used to elicit people's response to those changes' (*ibid.*).

In all these examples, what is valuable here is precisely the subjective understandings that photographic and other types of images offer up. The images bring to life latent ideas about aspects of experience. This type of methodological approach is one, in all its variety, that is becoming increasingly popular with sociologists of work.

Semiology, semiotics and iconology

Perhaps the least used form of visual analysis in terms of work sociology are the various forms of analytic deconstruction associated with semiology, semiotics and iconology. Such an approach allows the researcher to think in detail about how an image is constructed and how it works, as in how meanings are attached to symbols. This allows us to understand and appreciate the taken-for-granted assumptions about images and their meanings. Work and organizations are subjects that have produced powerful images across the years as we have seen, and this type of approach is a significant one for understanding the relationship between society and the economic sphere (see Rose 2012). David Nye's *Image Worlds* is a good example of where a researcher has used semiotic approaches in combination with other methods. The issue with these detailed deconstructive techniques is that they may not allow the researcher to do justice to the sheer volume of a particular archive. Nye tells how he produced a catalogue of 7,000 images from the General Electric archives, stressing that this was a selection from one million photographs.

Visual ethnography

Finally, sociologists of work have used what is known as visual ethnography to explore the topic of work. This takes a number of forms such as videoethnography, where researchers record workplaces to understand the relationship between formal and informal work cultures, detailed interaction and the relationship between the said and the unsaid in workplace interaction (see Heath and Luff 2000; Hindmarsh 2009). Some studies use still photography to explore the workplace; often the images are used to expand the ethnographic imagination and add to the richness of the evidence and analysis. Finally, a popular version of visual ethnography is to ask one's respondents to take images of their own workplace. These images are then used in photo elicitation interviews to gain greater insight into the complexity of organizational life.

Conclusions

This chapter has done a number of things. It set out to examine how the visual study of work had emerged in the nineteenth century as a by-product of the desire on the part of Victorians to better understand their society. There was a concern with the social condition of people brought on by the rapid expansion of industry and creation of large cities. A variety of visual media helped in this recording and examination from engraving and mapping through photography and film. Later still, we saw the way in which the visual was drawn upon by corporations to promote their own self-image to consumers and others, and they also used images to rationalize, control and organize work and their employees. The chapter then looked at the ways social scientists have used the visual in order to better understand work in a variety of ways – as historical record, as mode of investigation, as stimulus to reflection or as a tool of analysis.

The visual offers the sociologist of work a very powerful way of understanding work historically. By drawing on photography and other visual media, we can understand far more about how work is organized, carried out and managed as well as opening up knowledge about the meanings and identities that have attached to labour. By exploring formal archives as well as private collections, we gain insight into how work is valued, perceived, made up and received by different actors. We learn about the politics of production as well as those of consumption. We come to a fuller appreciation of the changing meaning of work for society across time and space.

Contemporary society is saturated with images of work and organizations. We live in an incredibly rich visual moment and are privileged in our unprecedented ability to access archival material bequeathed to us from previous generations of image makers. The Internet has opened up a treasure trove of corporate photography and films are readily available to study and enjoy. All of these developments mean that sociologists of work have immense possibilities to understand work in so many new and exciting ways. The visual is a powerful way to unlock cultural and social meanings in and around employment. It allows new ways to explore how organizations develop and promote themselves, how this changes over time and also how they used visual methods to rationalize their own systems of organization. What is also exciting is that, while the social science of the visual is over a century and a half old, it still seems a very new area.

Notes

- 1 The British Film Institute has recently issued a comprehensive collection of 40 British Documentary Films on DVD, *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement 1930–1950*. See also two further

collections from the BFI, *Portrait of a Miner*, a collection of films from the *National Coal Board Collection* (2009), and *Tales from the Shipyard* (2011).

- 2 Urban explorers are individuals or groups who visit industrial and other ruins and in the process often take still or moving images. For more details, see Ninjalicious (2005).

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