An eerie picture unfolds as a drone flies over the deserted streets of the city of Wuhan in January 2020, the epicentre of the new coronavirus epidemic. Wuhan has been under lock-down along with many other cities in the Chinese province of Hubei. We already know what is happening—the world’s media have been attentive to the situation, depicting state officials, medical staff and masked urban residents in situ, juxtaposed with an international effort to repatriate non-Chinese residents. The drone imagery is not simply providing the objective knowledge of total shutdown of a city larger than London, or simply an aerial perspective of the spatial planning or the lack of street traffic (Fig. 6.1). Rather, the drone shows the ‘ghostly emptiness’ from the perspective of the safe witness; we are presented with a snapshot of urban disaster management and the visible condition of trying to manage something unseen.

The short droneview of Wuhan is a snapshot of the existential moment of stasis and disrupted flow. It is an image of forceful discipline and mass
obedience as well as anxiety and fear. These images can be interpreted as the politics of containment, organization and politics of visuality as well as uncertainty. The post-production editing of the drone footage fosters a spectral sense of unease and renders the affective—atmospheric terrain of the event or condition tangible, cinematically built through the creeping tension of continuously empty streetscapes. There is no sound, no need for a soundtrack, as the piercing silence makes the visual more poignant, sublime, in the sense of ‘momentary arrest of our interpretive facilities’ (Callahan 2018: 476). There is, unexpectedly, a sense of violence because the eerie landscape of an empty city could as easily be mistaken for a dead city.

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1 Zuev, Interviews (2020).
The drone enables us to elevate our imagination and inhabit Wuhan for a few seconds in an embodied and affective way and ‘gain the situated understandings of what it might feel like’ (Pink 2017: 11) to be there. The scene of the empty Chinese mega-cities has a largely conventional ‘global’ resonance—a modern cityscape. We are presented with the hallmarks of Western urbanism—huge, multi-lane concrete highways cutting through the city and suppressing the greenness. Suddenly, with the absence of cars, the centrality of this highway, adjoining bridges and buildings exceeding the frame of the image, emphasizes the location’s super-modernity. The scene is dystopian and could be anywhere and nowhere. As the virus and quarantine move to Italy and Spain, we are beginning to see a different form of urban living that has a clearly defined geographic designation. A vision which becomes overtly resounding when looking at the spatial outlays of the modern city.

Starting with this example of droneviewing in Wuhan, we argue that aside from the methodological techniques which we have discussed, we must be cautious about seeking new objective findings. Rather we should seek new understandings and perspectives from which these technologies can afford, confine or underpin. We must explore how images emerge with or in relation to new technologies and how with new visual creativity new ethical questions will arise (Pink 2017).

Relationality, as we have suggested, is based on the action of diverse processes and exceeds the ‘visual’ of visual sociology that which is visible and routinely ‘examinable’. In this regard, the focus is not solely on the image itself or its reading. Rather it is on the assemblage of relations and networks that bring images into being and what they, the images, stand for. Part of this relationality is evidenced in the shift from the sociological analysis of images to a sociology with images, as well as the need to examine the ‘in-betweenness’. It is here that we move away from the image per se and think more routinely about visibility and the process of becoming in/visible. This can be understood and examined in a number of ways, including a move from a relatively straightforward documentary approach to a more technoscientific, collaborative and participatory discipline. In Chap. 1 we exemplified the relationality of the image through the work of Gilles Sabrié. What we are presented with is the ‘in-between visibility’ of the technoscientific as a way to map and manage populations. In the same ilk, we can look to the art space of public galleries as places where visuality and the relational image are being introduced as an engaging artefact that
is representative of unseen power, presented in the form of non-human interaction.

This is perhaps best articulated by Hagit Kayser’s video installation Restricted Zone: Temple Mount, co-created with Barak Brinker (2019) (Fig. 6.2). In this work, the drone project is a blend of critical, action-based fieldwork. Collaborative and participatory practice manifests as political artists, Keysar and Brinker, test the technological and civilian restrictions over the aerial space in Jerusalem. Displayed as a video installation, Keysar and Brinker present a sensorially provocative work that reveals invisible walls in the sky over the city. Unable to fly their drone over Temple Mount, the drone footage, which is projected onto a vast wall at the back of a darkened room, seems to stop mid-air, implying the limits to visibility expressed in a relation of what can be included and what should be excluded. The viewer is presented with a vista over the iconic sandstone buildings of Jerusalem. A technological barrier (geofence) encoded into the flight interface of drones manufactured by the Chinese company DJI

Fig. 6.2 Hagit Keysar’s visual Installation Restricted Zone: Temple Mount, co-created with Barak Brinker as part of Visual Rights, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, 2020. (Photo: Rob Battersby)
prevents them from taking off or passing through the area. The material existence of this restricted zone is revealed through making its invisible boundaries seen. Within the room the viewer is immersed in the complementary audio produced from the drone software. Played aloud across the room, it repeats ‘restricted zone reached’ over and over again. To reinforce the visibility of this no-fly zone (NFZ) around Temple Mount or al-Aqsa, the zone is replicated by a big red, tangible dot on the floor (Fig. 6.2).

From galleries to social media platforms, we as researchers are charged with the responsibility of seeing ‘the in-between’ and working out who is present, omitted or subjugated. As sociologists we can look to a range of everyday actions, spaces and platforms as sites of historical power imbalances and contemporary issues, like those presented in Keysar’s art installation.

From hidden barriers in the air over the city to the analysis of hidden labour, wealth and consumption, we must remember to question what we see and how it is presented. This notion is perhaps best framed in the surge of visual social media food photography. Arguably, such images place an emphasis on indulgence and lifestyle, in ways not too dissimilar, visually and contextually, to the Flemish still life paintings from the 1600–1800s. Whilst the foodstuff depicted in the still life paintings of the 1600–1800s is exotic, they are also removed from the context of their production. In this regard, the focus of the painting is a reflection of its owner’s wealth and status, rather than the painter’s skill. The social labour and colonial exploits that brought this food to the table are distanced (Jones 2019). Instagram food photography, arguably, displays a similar lack of awareness to the modes of production. Both still life paintings and elements of Instagram photography foreground wealth and consumption aligned to experiential status. For instance, we can suggest that to commission or buy a painting of a high-value item, in this instance exotic food items, typically largely inaccessible fruits, is contemporaneously akin to being in the space of high-value material consumption like expensive/elite dining experiences and designer goods and recording it. In part, this visual approach is also linked to dating apps that blend gamification, such as swiping, rating and randomization with the mechanism of mediated intimacy as well as visual acts of self-presentation and performance rituals that are aligned to status, wealth and lifestyle. Food photos are often a crossover, contextualizing frame. We present ourselves in desirable restaurants or luxurious locations, eating fine food, champagne flutes and luxurious dinner settings. We are communicating our ‘culture’ through images of conspicuous consumption, often embedded within appealing holiday photos, high-end material goods such as cars, watches, in vogue dogs and clothing (Fig. 6.3).
From photographing food to the documentation of places, landmarks and events, we are, as Jurgenson (2019) suggests, becoming constant tourists always looking for potential photographs and seeking out any number of microevents to record and share. More generally, the imagespeak of social media is composed of the profound and the silly; images of a lunch sit unproblematically next to an image of a disaster scene. Photo-sharing is the epitome of the continuous visual storytelling—a never-ending visual dialogue with anyone who is willing or happens to look. And perhaps this endless excessive visual storytelling is nothing but a race with death, each image of ourselves is the ode to the abundance of life moments, however big or small. Although images of ourselves are nothing new, and artists from Jan van Eyck to Marcel Duchamp and Cindy Sherman made self-depictions, the circulation of selfies in social media marks a significant

Fig. 6.3 Composite Instagram screen grab of the self-performance of glamorous living
shift towards the acceleration of self-documentation (Jurgenson 2019) and self-presentation (Rettberg 2014) that are yet to be fully reconciled. Through selfies we document our individual experience of the city and our connection to the place, at the same time disconnecting from the spirit of the place in a tourist gaze 3.0 (Urry and Larsen 2011). In this new tourist gaze, selfies become a new performance of consuming the place. Such excess in visual self-documentation has prompted Vienna—one of the global cultural capitals to launch a bold campaign to encourage visitors to reformat their viewing of the cities. Unhashtag Vienna, a selfie-shaming campaign, was launched by Vienna’s Tourist Board in 2018 to direct our attention to the act of seeing, and not the act of self-documentation, inviting the documenter to ‘enjoy the city behind your pics’ and to savour the aesthetics of photographic scarcity—indeed a nostalgic feeling. Unhashtag Vienna was also an attempt to resist the selfie and hashtags as signs of mobile culture and instead to decelerate and immerse in the Viennese inertia and cosiness (Kunzelmann and Mayerhofer 2014).

However, the logic of spectacular urbanism and aggressive tourism-driven marketing inevitably dictates that only one year later, in 2019, Vienna would launch its first ‘selfie heaven’ pop-up museum, whereby visitors were invited to become part of the artwork on display. Yet, selfies are not only done for us—as we have discussed, they are the image-data currency for connecting and sharing. Photo-sharing, as we have noted, is the pivotal practice to understanding the relationality of the image—the connective tissue, an exchange that involves not the images per se but sensations and experiences. ‘The imperative of sharing’ (Van Dijck 2013) is co-emergent with the imperative of new mobility, materiality of which is represented by portable devices that facilitate easy access to online visual storage and stimulate a constant visibility for visually based sociality.

As we upload images in social media profiles, we signal our presence—our activity and indexicality to a place or event. Even those of us who remove ourselves from the visual function of a specific platform like Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat might still use the platform to send messages. We struggle to consciously decouple ourselves from the medium. The very logic of the visual in social media activity is the notion of presence. Thus, it is not always about the constant upload of \( n \) number of selfies or self-produced images at regular intervals, but regular production of presence—through comments, emojis and \( 
\) (virtual gestures). Indeed,
presence, when it is made visible online, is the visibility of connection and openness to communicate.

Final Words

We opened this book with a snapshot of our troubled times, where the image is a vastly powerful tool, politically and socially. Images are transactional, they move within networks and are invested with emotions and ideas, ideologies and (false) hopes, misinformation and revelation. They are part of a new global language but also fraught with misinterpretation. We stated that, in the last 20 years, the world and the way we see it has changed rapidly, and for most of us, this is true. Huge shifts in visual technologies, related to both hardware and software in terms of size, mobility, power and connectivity, have altered or influenced our everyday life practices. Moreover, new forms of scholarship that foreground the visual as the springboard for understanding our society, past, present and future are now mainstays in many institutions across the globe, yet these approaches are often compounded by strict disciplinary boundaries. With the exponential growth of network-assisted visibility and the ways that images are created, used, stored, shared and deployed, we are now more connected than ever. We are watched and surveilled but also at a social level, changing how we engage with one another, tell stories and communicate emotions, from calmness to anxiety; these are significant shifts in social interaction.

With all this in mind, we sought to address some of these themes and to pivot on topics that included an overview and discussion of methods and approaches, old and new. To signpost to emerging and transdisciplinary ways of working and seeing communities and spaces, including socially engaged photography, the rise of big data analysis, the analysis of urban spaces on and offline, mobility and urban environment, performativity and social media as well as shifting our sociological lens to the sky. We also placed a marker in the sand for a way to think about the network of visible and invisible objects, images and interfaces in a relational context linked to the power of vision to shape what we see and how we behave.

While we move through the streetscapes and vertiginous heights of the city, social mediascapes encoded with multiple scripts, we come to see that visibility is in the persisting and resilient presence of our new, hyper-visual world. Where images have significantly altered our perception of truth, impacted our ways of telling stories, the image will continue to re-enchant
and reconnect us, to question and to revise, to store our memories and to distort our visions. Now more than ever, we relate to each other via visual narratives as much as we do via written words, as we continue to participate in them ourselves and contribute to the narratives of others.

While this book is a ‘pivot’ on the subject, signifying a provocation for revised thinking and new ideas, so too is it a starting point for the next sociology 3.0. Acknowledging this, we want to pose four sets of questions connected to relations of the image and the social world:

1. What do the visual social media platforms allow us to communicate? What do we learn about different cultures that incorporate the use of similar platforms and visual tools? And how do the practices differ and are similar across varying borders?

2. What is visual data in the age of BIG visual data and how does the visual data become so influential?

3. What do we learn about new ways of living in the city and new forms of everyday urbanism? How can we harness images and visual sociological ways of theorizing to depict and examine emerging and changing social practices and human interactions?

4. As we move upwardly, what is the next step in a more rigorous visual sociology of the sky? Will it be participatory, as we have noted previously, or more aggressively contested? How will social relations be managed and articulated through verticality and atmocultural consumption?²

As we have highlighted earlier, we are experiencing the shift in analysis from singular image to image-data streams, which are mediated by corporate power and surveillance logic. While focusing more on these image-data streams, we do not dismiss the iconicity and significance of a single photo. Instead this focus needs a thoughtful consideration not only of the context but the relationality of the images as mobile data. By mobility of the image, we imply that the content and authorship of images is constantly changing as they are faked, modified, shared or used for purposes not originally intended by the producer.

We maintain that while ‘logics’ of the software, platforms and application remain important to understanding the visual syntax of the images, there is still very little venturing into individual practices of

² On atmoculture, see Brighenti and Karrholm (2018).
self-presentation or self-documentation across cultures. While the new ways of watching are shaping surveillance imaginaries (Lyon 2018), one of the themes that has been threaded through our chapters is the issue of social surveillance and the proliferation of “surveillance cultures”, where consumers and citizens play an important role in generating visual data. Surveillance cultures are constituted of ways of watching and in parallel of antisurveillant visibilities, the ways of subverting and resisting surveillance practices. These transforming and proliferating cultures require that visual sociologists embark on further exploration of what constitutes visual data, as well as visibility and presence, specifically the objects and social processes, co-constituting visibility/invisibility.

Visual sociology will continue to uncover and put under scrutiny the emerging and transforming elements of the practices—the material relations, competences and meanings—and most importantly will do it cross-culturally and across borders, contributing to the mapping of the diversity of the social world and establishing a stronger belief in its epistemic mission.

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