The stories emanating from different news channels and platforms constantly remind us that we are living in an ever-increasingly digital hypervisual world often awash with antagonistic ideologies and ideological movements. These movements are laden with images, image events, and politically charged symbols and emblems that contribute to the gradual ‘symbolic thickening’ (Kotwas and Kubik 2019) of public culture through the intensification of national and religious visual displays and social performance. As we write this introduction, we are witnessing recurring outbursts of socio-political frictions in Hong Kong, Venezuela and Sudan, intercommunal conflicts and displacement in Myanmar as well as throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. States of military occupation persist, most notably in the ongoing Israel-Palestine and Russo-Ukrainian conflicts. The optics and the ways in which these events are witnessed and presented to us are multiple and contested. As well as the traditional forms of communication, these events, such as those noted above, are condensed to memes (Ibrahim 2018) or mimetic signifiers when applied to social media profiles (Gerbaudo 2015: 927) that visually attest to one’s social, cultural or political position. These signifiers come in many forms. One such recent example is the adoption of ‘pic badges’ and ‘profile ribbons’ that can be applied to one’s social media profile photo. This includes a virtual poppy in the UK or the ribbon of St George in Russia, used to memorialize those lost in past wars. In other contexts,
social media users adopt the rainbow flag insignia or rainbow filters in support of LGBTQ+ communities. When applied across social media platforms as replacement of profile photos, these visual signifiers should be understood, not as a self-standing activity, but often as part of an action embedded in one’s wider socio-political and cultural engagement with a prospective audience and, importantly, as a visual performance.

Focusing on the visual as a performance, as something that moves across platforms, that can be adopted and co-opted, edited or appropriated into text, slogans or even a meme, call attention to the potential role and production of the visual as a means of establishing possibilities for political responses, however flippant or short-lived, are worthy of study (Bratchford et al. 2018). These new objects and actions are, we suggest, important to note from a social and political performance perspective, particularly when we look back at how the use and function of images has changed in recent years.

In the last 20 years, the world and the way we see it has changed rapidly. With the rise of visual methods and the emergence of visual culture studies, the exponential growth of network-assisted visibility and the ways that images are created, used, stored, shared and deployed have changed dramatically. To examine politics, practice and contested spaces within this timeframe requires us to think about images as both relational and performatif. The ephemerality of digital culture can be understood in a wider context of image production and visual performativity. The 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center, New York, is perhaps one of the most visceral examples of this. Indeed, 9/11 is a seminal visual event (Stubblefield 2005). Due to the monumental devastation and destruction, the attack was arguably the first global event of this magnitude to be seen both on and offline, played out repeatedly on TV across the globe with different audience reactions. The 9/11 World Trade Center attacks in 2001, along with the train bombings in Madrid 2004 and the 2005 London transport bombings, marked a determination to make the means of circulation itself both a target and a weapon against the prevailing order of Western society. None were designed to achieve a specific goal—or likely to produce a favourable outcome, yet the attacks weaponized visibility. It is, in part, this realm of (in)visibility that we are interested in.

The same can be said for the performative capacity of more recent technologies such as the military drone and its relationship to (in)visibility. As James Bridle notes, the ‘drone stands in for part of the network’ (2012).¹

¹See James Bridle’s personal website, accessible: http://booktwo.org/notebook/drone-shadows/ [accessed 25 November 2019].
An invisible network that produces, enables and engenders sight and vision from a distance. This network of visibility, one which extends primary vision, or the act of first-hand experiential witnessing can now be immediately entwined with a secondary visibility. Bystanders, as well as those participating in an event, are able to broadcast live with ease, sharing footage across their own network via cellphones (Bratchford 2020) or GoPros (Stein 2017) that attest to the viral visibility and the performative nature of images online. From the televised spectacle of the 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center, New York, to the most recent images of the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, which was live-streamed on Facebook, images and their presumed context have now broken out of whatever boundaries had been established for their control (Mitchell 2015: 55). Images now have a kind of uncontrollable vitality, an ability to migrate across borders, screens, audiences and sometimes below the threshold of official registers, such as news agencies and broadcasters; instead, events like 9/11 or the Christchurch terrorist attack are live-streamed, peer to peer, often to unassuming audiences who just happen to ‘pass by’. The post-9/11 era can be argued as having gone from performance to performative affect—it became stuck in a cycle of visual, viral violence—from grand spectacle to endless car bombs and martyr videos uploaded to YouTube and the contested nature of drone-assisted ‘vision’ and real-life, real-time broadcastable shooting sprees. To this end, the boundaries through which images are to be understood and researched must also change.

It is against this backdrop that we as visual sociologists must learn to engage with the image, but now, more so than ever, work to understand its relationality to the means of production, consumption and its affective quality. Visual sociology is the study of the visual and the way it interacts with society, people and the spaces they inhabit, yet historically, the use of images in sociology has been marginalized, with text and figures taking precedent in the discipline. At best, images have for the most part functioned as mostly illustrative as well as largely untrusted items (Holliday 2000). This assertion is commonly presented in the introductions to many visual sociology texts but is done so as a way to reaffirm the fledgling status of our relatively new para-discipline (see Pauwels 2010; Cambre forthcoming) as well as a measure of how far it has come in such a short time. While traditionally the emphasis has been largely focused on photography, other visual practices have come to the fore. From the use of GoPros

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2 This includes images and image production including, but limited to, still or moving, digital or analogy, paint or pencil, professional or amateur.
to inform digital ethnographies (Pink et al. 2017) or the analysis of digital mapping practices (Lin 2020) have sought to expand the scope of material through which analysis is formed and information elicited (Pauwels and Mannay 2019). Thus, we must learn to look with images, as well as at them. We must come to understand not only how they come into being, but where and how they move.

The twofold aim of this book and the future book series, *Social Visualities*, is to unpick some of the pre-existing imaginaries and boundaries that still dominate a major discipline like sociology, in particular when it comes to engaging with images, their production and use in specific spaces and contexts. The ways in which images are shaped, used and deployed are prisms or lens through which we explore the cultures and spaces, which images occupy or contest.

Firstly, in an effort to offer a sense of what visual sociology can do (whilst also acknowledging where it has come from), the focus of the book is on contemporaneous examples of image production and methodological approaches in environments and practices that have until now received less attention sociologically. These include lesser analysed global urban settings, post-industrial landscapes and the consideration of photo-artists to widen the photographic canon of sociological research (Chap. 3), social media spaces, platforms and performativity (Chap. 4), and the vertical and aerial realm (Chap. 5). These chapters, supported by smaller case studies and vignettes, are furnished by methodological examples and processes that reflect how the discipline of sociology can be further enhanced by new and innovative visual approaches. In doing so, the book also signposts the reader to where visual sociology, complemented by other practices, might be moving as a more technoscientific, collaborative and participatory discipline.

Secondly, the book discusses the nature of images as mobile, performative and relational. Relationality, as a part of a diverse process-based action, 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, both on and offline, that bring images into being and what they, the images, stand for. The practices and politics of this allow us to see not only the emerging regimes of visibility but also the relationship between the images

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3 These three domains are not intended as a rigid three-dimensional framework, but rather as three aspects that help us to take further the understanding of the changes in the practices and politics of the visual.
(visual) and movement (mobility)—the new regimes of mobility of images. Thus, the relational image is no simple object, but a mobile social-aesthetic-data currency, which is produced, networked, modified, shared and projected publicly to different user interfaces and networks.

To this end, the substantive focus of the book are three empirical Chapters (3, 4 and 5) that speak to the nature of the relational image across three different spaces—urban space, cyberspace and the atmospheric space. On the one hand, our rationale is guided by the evolution of human-technical visual interfaces, as we move from close contact and vision to an increasingly distanced process of visibility and a form of contact that ‘resembles closeness’, proximity and presentness. This quality is manifested in our relationship to images, environments and their politics. On the other hand, we provide three illustrations of the changing nature and social impacts of the visual as a social texture, images as social agents and finally how both visuals and images are a form of mobile data. This tripartite look at the visual should be of specific interest to sociology and related fields in the humanities and social sciences.

The image, and its presence within our visual field, is a battleground. It can be strategically deployed, reveal and omit, punish and liberate. Images also engage, engender and perform how we feel, so too do they become relational. The relational image refers to the system through which the image exists and operates in this new hyper-visual age. We are not surrounded by images like we once were; rather, we are surrounded by ‘human-machine’ interfaces. In his seminal text *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger argued that images jostle for our attention. On walls, in magazines and on television screens, the image was for the most part tangible; the image was present. Even broadcast material was on celluloid or tape. Today, in the hyper-visual digital world, images live and relive in greater volume online than offline. Moreover, images are modified and corrupted, repurposed over and over. We snap, produce, edit, post, circulate, stitch, tint, filter and upload to multiple streams traversing the image-data-mediated sphere. In addition to what *we* can do, technologies, beyond our everyday reach, build archives of image-data, contributing to instant, constant and intensifying visual flows, the mechanisms of which are far less visible (and sometimes intentionally left out of the scene). The early 2018 data capitalism\(^4\) scandal, linked to Facebook-Cambridge Analytica’s

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\(^4\) Data capitalism is marked by an increasing number of scandals regarding the storage, sharing and leakage of data, starting with WikiLeaks to Huawei scandal and Amazon versus Microsoft.
involvement with US President Donald Trump’s social media presidential campaign of 2016, is one such example whereby Facebook users had their ‘data lifted and systematically engineered to be invisible’ (Gadwalladr 2019) in order to target swing voters in key US states. The outcome was targeted marketing with personalized advertisements in the form of memes and political posters that aimed to influence the decision making of the electorate.

While images are presented back to us, mirroring our emotional and political register, Beijing-based photographer Gilles Sabrié has spotlighted how the Chinese State employs a range of techniques and technologies aimed at capturing our image for a host of alternate purposes (Simonite 2019). By visualizing the invisible, Sabrié’s 2018 project The Surveillance State reveals the hidden and asymmetric system that operates at a regional and national scale. Sabrié’s project demonstrates the emergence of the relational image through the documentation of SenseTime technology. This includes crowd motioning systems that measure crowd density as well as identifying ‘abnormal behaviour’, in addition to CCTV apparatus systems linked to facial recognition cameras (displaying, in real time, at the side of crossroads, jaywalkers along with their name and ID number). What we are presented with is a fragment of the image-data stream—a new type of visual information that makes up one aspect of a wider narrative of a new panopticism that aims to shape a ‘high-quality and a trustworthy citizen’ (see Fig. 1.1).

The relational image refers to and does not centre on itself as a self-sufficient microcosm. The logic of presenting and viewing the photos is mediated and determined by software and platform interfaces that leave ‘visual signatures’ (Hochman and Manovich 2013). The relational image is the result of operative software logics, which are driven to create a collective visual experience. Relationality connects the ways images are organized via a system of associative behaviours and nodes of relationality between one user/person and another through place, action or identity within the same coordinate system (ibid.). We are now engaged in new forms of image-based performances (following, watching, editing, posting, sharing and posing). Indeed, the mystery of the photograph and pictorial surface is dissolving, despite ongoing exhibitions and photobook publishing, the function and purpose of images in general are increasingly informatic and less aesthetic. As James Bridle (2013) notes, ‘obscurity is a

5SenseTime is a Chinese artificial intelligence software as a service (SaaS) company.
classic tool of power, but it’s now married to another one: ignorance’. Actions carried out in plain sight are hidden not from sight, but from understanding, cloaked in the aura of technology. Yet, the works of Gilles Sabrié and others featured in this book are exemplars of how artists (and sociological thinking) employ and present these ideas in technoscientific visual ways in order to reinvigorate understanding—a new visual literacy for an age of image-data and the relationality.

As visual sociologists, we must begin to think these questions through. Do images offer more emancipation than before the digital age? Are we getting more visually dependent? And if so, what is the nature of these visual dependencies? More broadly, who is seen, how, where and when? How we can deploy or apply visual tools, methods and techniques in an effort to see and understand better the world around us? Images and the platforms they operate from provide an illusion of connection and closeness as well as an incredible sense of distancing. As visual sociologists, we

Fig. 1.1 Screen capture of CCTV live footage using the face and vehicles recognition system Face ++. The AI system coupled with the CCTV camera allows for basic descriptions of individuals and vehicles. (Gilles Sabrié 2018. Copyright: Gilles Sabrié)
shall continue to build on the work of those who helped establish the field (see Chap. 2) whilst learning and borrowing from other disciplines. From primary to secondary visibility (Goldsmith 2010; Bratchford 2020) to the relational image, visual sociologists are beginning to work beyond the lens of the camera, and the frame of the picture. Methodologically, their work is more social, more collaborative and engaged and, significantly, ‘techno-social’ (Lyon 2003) giving way to what Knowles and Sweetman noted over a decade before as a rise in the ‘subtle shading of the intellectual micro-climate in which social [visual] research is produced’ (2004: 1).

The purpose of this book is to attend to these questions while at the same time providing a user-friendly, case-study-oriented guide to visual sociology that pivots around these themes through analysis, debate and examples. Hesitant sociologists should be enthused and encouraged to experiment with visual data, to include it in their own analysis and fieldwork complementary to their own traditional data-analysis and collection techniques. Whilst those for whom sociology is not their major discipline, those in the arts, media and culture studies, as well as urban studies, geography, conflict studies and more, can better see how their own work can be deployed in a sociological context.

The shift to visually focused sociological research is built on strong foundations. The International Visual Sociological Association (IVSA), founded in 1981, is now complemented by the International Sociological Association (ISA) Visual Sociology Research Committee, which has grown fast from an ‘Ad Hoc’ group (2008) and then as ‘Thematic Group’ (2010) to a full Research Committee in just 10 years (with more than 100 paid members, globally). In addition to these international platforms, national groups, such as the British Sociological Association (BSA), now have a visually focused forum. Many established scholars, early career researchers and practitioners [now] see visual sociology as a nexus between their arts-based background and their curiosity for the world we inhabit. In addition to official groups, the subject is presently part of a taught curriculum, within sociological and arts-based disciplines or as fully fledged degree. The MA in Visual Sociology at Goldsmiths, London, is perhaps the most notable.

In this regard, the book speaks to the interdisciplinarity of the subject and the varied constituency of scholarship and visual practice. To this end, this is not a visual sociologist’s manual or a comprehensive review of visual-based methodologies (we will show later that there are other more comprehensive volumes on this); rather, this is a study of the nascent visual dependencies and visual utility emerging in contested spaces (defined
This book examines how divergent visibilities emerge from tensions and relations between the seer and the seen, the dynamic complexity between the structure and the agency of the visible and invisible.

Our main intention is to sharpen the depth of the field for visual sociologists, connecting instances that have thus far eluded the qualitative visual sociological eye. We will argue that visual social scientists need to get focused on specific instances of user practice to render their environment more intelligible. We will examine existing and common visual practices as well as setting pathways for new agendas. This includes making the case for drone-afforded visualities, or the role of such objects (and their networks) in shaping an emerging visual grammar and aesthetic codes for spaces, communities, volume and politics in newly relatable ways.

Allowing for the analysis of people and things, spaces and actions, places and events, mediations, representations and performances, both of the subject within the frame and of the frame itself, visual research techniques offer a set of strategies for understanding numerous socio-political settings and interactions. As Knowles and Sweetman note, visual techniques ‘offer an analytically charged set of methodologies which incline researchers towards the tracing of connections between things of quite different [social] scope and scale’ (2004: 8). Historically, few sociologists have done more than Howard Becker, John Grady and Douglas Harper to advance and reclaim the importance of the visual and specifically photographic practice within sociology. Becker’s 1974 essay ‘Photography and Sociology’ underscores how photography as a practice and the resulting images can be useful sites of social and cultural exploration. While a persisting cornerstone of visual sociology, there is a need to move beyond the centrality of the photograph, both as a site of critical enquiry and a space of knowledge production or methodological insight. In this book we build on this logic and reflect on the changing nature of the image through examination of practices and politics in contested spaces whilst seeking to advance visual sociology as a scholarly field. In an effort to do so, we propose, in addition to signposting new techniques and remits of complementary visual practice that might be co-creative and co-authored, it is also necessary to think about a progressive step away from a sociology of or through images (Goffman 1976; Harper 2002; Heng 2017; Krase 2012a) towards a sociology with images (see Traue et al. 2019). It is here that we move away from the image per se and think more intensively about visibility, the process of becoming visible and relationality (Bratchford 2020; Nathansohn and Zuev 2013; Zuev 2016) that points at visual sociology’s post-disciplinary futures (Cambre forthcoming).
Practices in Contested Spaces

The world is dominated by contestation, both large and small, national and regional, international and local, micro and macro and how we see it or the ways it is presented to us vary. While we use the definition of practice referring to communication practices mentioned by Kress and Leeuwen (1996), we also theorize them in the light of social practice theory as nexus of ‘doings and sayings’ (Schatzki 2002). We address the criticism of social practice theories—the apparent lack of attention to the power relations by showing the politics behind the practices and the practices behind the politics—how practices may be subverted, resisted or followed. The practices of visual communication are performed within regimes of visibility. Visibility as a phenomenon is inherently ambiguous, highly dependent upon contexts of production and receiverships, and operates between complex social, political and technological arrangements. In doing so, we will look at the various conditions and modes of visibility as a series of ‘regimes’ (Brighenti 2010: 3) that are stratified across a number of narratives. Visibility, we argue, can be defined as an element of social structuring and bound by number of co-dependencies that are adhered to, challenged or subverted. To this, the practices/politics nexus will be the binding theoretical thread of the book, as we identify this relationship in three distinct domains and related socio-material assemblages.

The contested spaces in our book are a variety of contexts and settings, where the relational image ‘grows’ and is mapped across the following three distinct domains of this visual sphere—the ground-level domain, virtual domain and aerial domain. While there is already a long tradition of scholarship on each of these domains, theoretically and methodologically, few works have addressed the relationship of these three domains, sociologically, in relation to the co-existence and emergence of the visual within each one of them.

As noted by Zuev and Krase (2017), it has been real people and places that have long seemed the most appealing subjects for visual sociologists, who wished to observe and record for themselves the near and distant, static and changing, social realities. However, as we have observed, the ever-expanding contemporary galaxy of images available on social

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6 By virtual, we mean online or social media domain and do not imply that it is less ‘real’ than offline domain.
networking sites invites and demands sociological investigation of large collections of visual data, generated by multiple individuals, publics, communities and channels. The rapid development of information technology is paralleled by a tremendous increase in the use of visual forms of communication. The digital storage and transmission of images, the availability of video technology and its digital accessibility, the dissemination of visual surveillance technologies and the transformation from textual to visual forms of communication turn visualizations into an integral part of contemporary culture and everyday life (Knoblauch et al. 2008). Visual social scientists must learn how to observe the evolution of the practices of self-presentation and visualization and (re)invent tools for analysis of images produced and circulated by mobile devices, shared via different applications and platforms.

The agenda of visual sociology is not limited to the analysis of 2D images or even the proliferating new ways of disseminating images in cyberspace. Throughout this text, we review the use of social practice and performance theories appropriate to the ways in which we now see the world—sociologically and politically. Additionally, we sketch out a framework for the analysis of visual production practices in two separate, but interlinked ways. Principally, and most importantly, in relation to our contemporary, multi-visual environment and the capacity for images (ours and others) to have a ‘performative capacity’ and, secondly, in terms of visual production practices and pertinent technologies, embedded in these practices. Combined, the notion of performance and practice can be understood through the transformative ways in which we consider what an image is and how we consume images, but also in the ways that we now use and deploy imagery to work for, with us or against us.

The Range of Visual Sociology

Much of what we come to learn is based upon what we see and sense. In an intensely hyper-visual age, images and visual artefacts shape our understanding of the world and influence how we interact, present and perform within it. Images surround everything we do, and it is no coincidence that the analysis of and the ways in which we receive and respond to images has become a field of intense enquiry for a host of disciplines, including sociology. Visual sociology is part of a wider scholarly and pedagogic ‘visual turn’ within the social sciences which is now complemented by the emergent field of visual global politics and international relations (Bleiker 2018;
Callahan 2020; Chouliaraki et al. 2019) and visual criminology (Brown and Carrabine 2019; Carrabine 2012).

It can be argued that each visual iteration is, in part, the result of three interconnecting processes. Firstly, there is a revival of visual methods (Rose 2010; Pink 2007; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Prosser 1998) within the social sciences. Secondly, there is now a greater awareness of visual culture scholarship as an established intellectual field (Mirzoeff 1999; Sturken and Cartwright 2018), one that borrows from cultural theory whilst placing the power of the image and ‘ways of seeing’ at the centre of its analysis. Finally, we are witnessing a growing admittance of the visual as a crucial element of global politics and an important method of resisting linear teleological narratives, even in such conservative disciplines as international relations (Callahan 2020).

In part, our book seeks to build on these foundations, working at the intersection between visually orientated political practices and the sociological sphere. Images now saturate the technologically enabled contemporary world. Literal images surround us on walls, screens and portable devices. Figurative images fill our mental landscapes. As new methods and collaborative approaches unfold against the backdrop of an ever-widening chasm between those who have the right to be seen and to see and those who don’t, now more than ever, we need to move away from the entrenched reliance on linguistically based approaches, such as the image as text, and develop systematic ways to approach images on their own terms (Gill 2020) as well as acknowledging the networks in which they now reside and function.

Visual sociology has engaged with a great variety of topics. Perhaps, it is Erving Goffman who played a pivotal role in establishing early visual sociological foundations and directing its analytical agenda through conceptualization of encounters, rituals, modes of social and public interactions as well as the examination of gender displays. His work on gender advertisements was fundamental for analysis of visual media (advertising), but also of social performance embedded in a particular social situation (Goffman 1976). Without a doubt some of the key theoretical and inspirational ideas that supported this drive for the visual analysis of social interaction and performance came from cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and his contemporaries at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hall et al. 1992), in addition to photography theorists and critics including Roland Barthes (1981) and Susan Sontag (1979). Critically and methodologically, sociologists in
general have used visual thinking and visual methods to address key sociological issues such as urban transformations (Krase and Shortell 2011; Bratchford 2020), work environment and labour relations (Pauwels 2015; Messier 2019), indigenous rights (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2012), tourist experience and mobility (Haldrup and Larsen 2003; Zuev 2006), ethnic identity and inequality (Heck and Schlag 2013; Mannay et al. 2018; Vergani and Zuev 2011) and class distinctions (Bourdieu 1990; Tyler 2019). While others have focused on particular subjects such as global cities (Krase 2012b), all the nominally ‘urban’ disciplines do use visual approaches more or less explicitly whether through mapping, architectural rendering, photographic surveys, or land use and building surveys (Zuev and Krase 2017).

Throughout this book we will further elaborate the argument that visual sociology deals with more than just an image-based world. The oft-mentioned methodological caveat in image-based studies is that visual research goes well when other methods are used alongside it. But images and representations, collected, produced or co-produced, need to be analysed within regimes of visibility (Brighenti 2010) and invisibilities (Sindelar 2019) as much as they can be read through a host of other ‘lenses’ or frames including, but not limited to, the shifting practices of the gaze, as gendered (Goffman 1976; Mulvey 1975) or material (Bousquet 2018) contexts.

In this text we question the status of the image and we use it as a door to access ‘bigger social landscapes’, social issues and relationships, hence the relational image. As we use the image as an access point, it is paramount to reflect on its workings in different contexts and settings, and this has a particular methodological valence. Moving through the book we shift the focus from the more familiar and well-documented domain of urban landscapes to a less familiar one—that of visual social media—and further still to the domain by visual sociologists and indeed social theorists—that of aerial visibilities and the multiplicity of social-political, economic and artistic moves within this emerging arena. The movement from one domain to another is methodologically intentional to reflect on the new kind of image or visual that is emerging. In doing so, we suggest that the ‘relational image’ is now much more significant than in the 1990s, when many social researchers initially noticed and focused on the visual (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). These reflections, empirical findings and observations all contribute to an ever-increasing analysis of the
hyper-visual world while also being aware of the ‘fleeting’ nature of the
visual; we concord that the visual can be potentially less ambiguous or
misleading than other forms of qualitative data. Our case studies deal with
people and places, connecting local social issues with global image politics.
Notwithstanding the book’s title Visual Sociology (which reflects our root-
edness in sociological methodology and approach to visual data from the-
oretical perspectives of social practice theory and visual culture), we try to
avoid any scholarly bias (anthropological, geographical or media studies)
and argue for a cross-disciplinary conceptual exchange that puts the visual
and its relationality at the centre of investigation.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Following this introduction, Chap. 2 outlines and reviews existing litera-
ture within the field of visual sociology with an emphasis on seminal works
as well as texts specifically pertinent to the themes addressed in this book.
Additionally, the chapter will foreground works on a small selection of
methods, visual analysis and the emerging literature on participatory visual
methods. We review some fruitful approaches that can be used by students
and instructors in social sciences with application to new media and their
visual interfaces. The chapter is concluded with a vignette on dealing with
big visual data.

Throughout the chapter we draw cautious tones about some of the
pitfalls of working with vast image-datasets, which at times produce reduc-
tionist outcomes. The vignette in the chapter presents a more optimistic
case. Focusing on an inter- and transdisciplinary collective, named The
Visual Social Media Lab, the vignette unpacks how a multi-method
approach, working at macro and micro levels of image analysis and inter-
pretation of a specific image and case (in this case, the 2015 iconic image
of Alan Kurdi washed up on the shore of a Turkish beach), can tell us
about the affective power and the often hidden life cycle of one image that
is repeatedly shared by millions of users.

Chapter 3 introduces our first domain of analysis: the ground domain—
the city and its streetscapes. At ground level, society and its effects are at
its most tangible and visible. At street level, in cities, suburbs or neigh-
bourhoods, the space of encounter opens up dialogue between researcher
and participant, collaborator or camera. The texture of these environ-
ments, spatial systems of movement, places of local understanding and
sites of contestation, flux or engagement are all the more sensorially
apparent and visible when we ‘listen with our eyes’ (Back 2007: 100) or ‘see with the feet’ as suggested by Von Wissel (2013). The street, in the city or otherwise, is discussed from the perspective of researcher as he or she feels and sees through the act of walking, identifying liminal spaces and boundaries of formality and informality, potential knots of conflict and contention. Here, relating the image to the actual urban divides and social relationships, we discuss the potential for visual methods as a tool for examining change as well as working with others to help us better ‘see’ change (Bratchford et al. 2018). We use the visual as a way of exposing environmental and social injustice and inequalities and focus on a range of mixed methods, from photo walks and Google Street View to artistic-driven approaches, to better understanding cities and the ways in which they can be used, experienced and interrupted (Jordan and Linder 2016).

Walking is central to understanding cities (Shortell and Brown 2014). Walking streetscapes is a mobile method that is also touched upon in Chap. 2 and which lets us unpack the ‘pseudoscience of city planning’ (Jacobs 1992: 13), or simply help to better understand one another, allowing for embodied knowledge, experience and memories to be shared (O’Neill and Hubbard 2010). In doing so, walking research offers the sociologist the possibility to see and sense their environment as well as understand the rhythms of the city (Edensor 2010). Chapter 3 also takes into account the ways in which urban spaces are sites of transition, transaction, transgression, thresholds of visibility and resilient presence—as will be shown in one of its vignettes. The first vignette takes to the streets of Montreal, Canada, to explore urban change over a prolonged period of time. Blending offline, physical fieldwork with Google Street View-assisted mapping, the notion of indexicality becomes significant to how we read and understand how a location changes over time. The final vignette of Chap. 3 examines the practices of urban mobility in China and specifically theorizes e-bikes as an object central to this urban fabric.

Chapter 4 focuses on visual social media interfaces, audience experience and user performativity. As our second domain of analysis, we venture into the virtual, online domain of user-generated and user-focused platforms, like Instagram, YouTube and Facebook, to unpack practices of producing and circulation of images, sharing, self-presenting and visualizing. In this chapter, we are less concerned with the general status of the image and more so with its potential use to which it can be put. As strategic and targeted as well as peripatetic or nomadic (Belting 2011), images travel through and to events and spaces and, more so than ever, handsets such as
phones and tablets. We start from the position that the image is not reducible to the medium, but instead works actively to engage with its very own space of appearance. In this instance, images for the Internet have their own inherent visual syntax and can be specifically devised and framed for their host environment as well as for specific audiences.

The online realm of image exchange and engagement is ripe for instigating or maintaining contestation between different groups and ideologies. In this chapter, we provide two vignettes related to the analysis of YouTube videoblogging as a practice of alternative news making and a means of exercising power to render events, people and social processes visible. In the second vignette, we show how a fake video circulated via social media can undermine our trust in visual evidence. With these two vignettes, we sketch out the multiplicity of image-driven performativity and the reciprocity of image performances as conversation. In this regard, the sociology of the image is not just an analytical task or a matter of looking harder or more closely but is an examination of what actively shapes the frames of our seeing (Traue et al. 2019). These frames, the spaces of constructed visibility and provocations to see are always bound by or in response to a system of power, however subtly. Thus, visibility is not strictly a simple practice of presentation and representation, but an aspect and element of social and cultural orders.

Our final domain is that of the machine-aided aerial vision—a vision which defines the perspective and production of image and video. Such visions and processes play an instrumental role in the definition and design of society into groups and/or units of data. In Chap. 5 we analyse the present and future of drone-facilitated aerial and vertical vision and potentialities of drones and new aerial imagery for visual sociology and social science. Taking the position that such practices and processes shape a new politicization of the aerial space, as the space of enhanced visibility and thus either empowerment or control, machine-aided vision and the space it operates within is both increasingly democratized and subjugating.

In this chapter we explore the politics of drone video production and aerial photography at large. Despite the growing literature on the use of drones as technological devices, the visual production side of the drone has been largely ignored. We explore two distinct communities of practice and scopic regimes: military (militant) and activist (civil). We draw on case studies from the Middle East and the use of drone imagery by activist and state media in Syria as well as in Israel and Palestine, paying particular
attention to bottom up, grassroots approaches to aerial photography as a tool of collaborative participation and as a means of challenging the asymmetric nature of aerial vision in and over contested spaces. In this chapter we argue that the emerging *dronetopia* is a qualitatively different space of aerial visual data in contrast to the space of the cameras on the ground and an emerging space of visibility, where military, technological, legal, visual and research perspectives on the use and implications for user communities conflict and converge (Zuev and Bratchford 2020). The chapter finishes by reiterating the underlying power relations and *visual grammar* in two different drone-aided scopic regimes.

In conclusion, the aim of this book and the subsequent chapters is to advance the trajectory of the discipline and signpost to new areas of visual sociological research and surveying specific themes and spaces to guide future moves in the field. Our aim is to also show that the three domains of analysis, the urban, the social and the aerial interrelated but not exhaustive. Our three domains work in concert and in some ways are co-dependent upon one another. We see the city (Chap. 3) through selfies, dashcams and GoPro cameras (Chap. 4) in the same way we see urban landscapes (Chap. 3) via drones (Chap. 5) and so these domains offer a hybridity of analysis, yet we recognize that other scholars might choose different domains or ‘lenses’ to see through. The selection is not exclusive nor is it absolute. By way of assistance, the vignettes within each chapter are there to offer more extensive and tangible case study like examples that also ease the transition from chapter to chapter.

Our conclusion, Chap. 6, Coda: Towards Visual Sociology 3.0, works to bring all of this thinking together while furnishing the chapter with topical discussion points that may set an agenda for future work. These include the analysis of droneviewing over China as the outbreak of the coronavirus COVID-19 renders vast public spaces empty as well as artist-activist-researcher projects of contested spaces reformulated for public consumption in art galleries.

In the following chapter, we address some of the methodological issues within our shifting field. For those interested in the history of our subject, we spotlight some of the classic works within our field as well as glimpse over the threshold of our disciplinary boundary and look at new approaches, emerging practices and new trends in visual research methods and approaches.
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