

PRESENTING THE RESULTS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH THROUGH THE VISUAL ESSAY

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Abstract: *The article draws attention to the visual essay as an artistic approach in presenting the results of social research. It describes the concept of visual essay, the way it is produced, the purposes and the appropriate contexts for using it and the expected results. The article also includes examples of visual essays and discusses certain issues which could be encountered by the researchers who present such products to the audience. The visual essay is a less conventional method of presenting research findings, it has a great impact on the public and it is also accessible to the non-specialised audience.*

Key words: *visual communication, visual research, visual sociology, visual artistic product.*

1. Introduction

Conventionally, the results of social research are scientific data presented textually, numerically and/or visually. Typically, these are descriptive, explanatory and predictive sentences which can comprise or can be validated with figures, percentages, statistical parameters, etc. and which can be illustrated with images such as tables, diagrams, photographs and even films.

Producing new knowledge implies referring to existing knowledge, therefore presenting the research findings also means referring to previous theories. More specifically, it implies mentioning the theories which were applied in the research, those which were expounded on, modified, contradicted or grounded in the research.

Besides setting objectives regarding the dissemination of the research findings to a specialised public, there are also situations in which researchers establish objectives such as informing and awareness raising among the general public or authorities. There are many forms of presenting research findings which are accessible to audiences other than the scientific community. Many of these are artistic methods – e.g. metaphors, stories, films, theatre performances or exhibitions of drawings or photography.

Here are some examples: Pink (2008) aimed to study the difficulties faced by people with disabilities; therefore, she also presented the research findings in the form of a photography exhibition illustrating people with disabilities faced with situations where

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the urban development and built environment obstructed their accessibility. Since the photographs invited the audience to put themselves in the same positions, requiring therefore empathic engagement, it was a persuasive presentation (for example, the pictures showed that a person in a wheelchair who wanted to go to the bank had to phone the employees of the bank so they would come out in the street to talk to the person with disabilities). Another example is the creation of a picture album with the city of Dresden. Photographs were taken (in the same places, from the same angles) before and after the destruction of the city in the World War II bombing. The album (with sequences of 'before and after' photographs) produced strong emotional effects and helped raise funds for the restoration of the monuments destroyed in Dresden (Christmann, 2008).

The visual essay is one of the artistic approaches to visual presentations of research findings (see also collages, posters, films, etc.). I will try in this article to describe the visual essay, the way it is produced, the purposes and the appropriate contexts for using it and to discuss certain issues which could be encountered by the researchers who presents such products to the audience.

Before defining and describing the visual essay, I would like to insist upon the artistic (and therefore not scientific) character of this method of reporting research results.

2. The Visual Essay as an Artistic and not as a Scientific Approach to Presenting Research Findings

Pauwels (2012) asserts that the visual essay is one of the most visual and expressive forms that a visual research report can take. Moreover, he underlines its potential and predicts it will have a promising future, given the fact that images are increasingly present in social research. At the same time, however, the author notes that the visual essay remains a method rejected by the majority of the scientific community. Pauwels describes the visual essay 'as a mode that seems very remote from traditional social scientific practice and hence likely to produce controversy, both at the level of journal boards and organisations measuring academic output. While at present this issue has barely surfaced, many journals, by default, reject these kinds of contributions as they fail to meet the required format of a scholarly contribution' (p. 1).

In my opinion, the issue raised by Pauwels doesn't stem from the fact that the visual essay is an approach far from the traditional scientific social practice, or from the fact that it falls outside the range of standard academic contributions, but from the fact that it is an artistic and not a scientific form of reporting research findings. Although many authors operate with concepts such as *art* and *artistic* when describing the visual essay, they do not seem to acknowledge the consequences of such a label. So, given the artistic nature of the visual essay, it is no wonder that scientific journals legitimately choose not to publish such works. Artistic products do not belong to scientific journals. However, there are also journals which do not aim solely at scientific results and their objectives are not only to promote knowledge production, but they are also keen on promoting various methods of communicating the latest knowledge. *Visual Communication*, *Visual Studies* or *Multimodal Communication* are examples of journals more inclined towards arts than science, which publish visual essays too.

In my opinion, confusion is often made between employing artistic techniques in research and using artistic products as a result of social research. Grady (1991), for example, argues that 'while visual sociology, as it continues to grow, will become less marginal, it will never become completely accepted until it lives up to its full potential: utilizing a vital art form to study human social relations. The visual essay has an important role to play in that process not despite, but because, it is a medium for artistic expression' (p. 26). My opinion is that visual sociology and the use of images in research continue to have an uncertain status and are still considered with caution by the academic community precisely because of such misunderstandings.

I consider that we need to make a clear distinction between the scientific results of research and the use of images in social research or research reports. In other words, it is not only correct, but in numerous circumstances it is even necessary to employ images in research (for example, to collect, analyse and interpret photographs, drawings or films). It is also acceptable to use the multitude of creative approaches yielded by the visual approach of the social (such as object manufacturing, collages, Lego constructions, sandboxing), even to invent new methods, regardless of how unconventional or artistic they may be. Illustrating the research reports and the scientific texts by means of images which support, prove and exemplify the research findings, could also make them more attractive, easier to understand, etc. (see Scârneci-Domnișoru, in press). But, in my opinion, images cannot be scientific results *per se*, visual artistic products cannot be scientific products. Knowledge is (at least for the moment) understood as text, it is articulated in language, and any production of new knowledge involves additions, contradictions, textual formulations. Therefore, presenting a visual essay as the scientific result of research is nonsense.

Banks (2007) indicates the presence of a debate in the specialised literature on whether an ethnographic film could be considered an intrinsic product of social research, or it also needs a description to facilitate the interpretation. Grady (1991) raises the same issue in a different manner by asking whether the artistic presentation of the results disqualifies the authors as scientific researchers: 'Could they still be considered real sociologists should they produce photo essays or make movies?' (p. 24). My opinion is that scientific results should have a certain standard, a certain format, and they are never to be confused with artistic products, although the scientific results can also be presented in an artistic manner. Therefore, since there are situations when a less conventional presentation of research findings is indispensable, I believe that sociologists could add more value to their endeavours if they are not only scientists but also artists (especially if they make a clear distinction between science and arts).

So even if the visual essay does not have scientific value, it does not mean it has no value at all. I consider that a competent social researcher needs to know not only how to collect data (both from a university professor and an illiterate person), but also how to communicate the research findings to the academic community as well as to the general public. As the general public is the subject and the direct beneficiary of social sciences, I think that researchers should find accessible and comprehensible ways of delivering scientific results. Sociological knowledge has no applicable value if it is communicated only among specialists, if scientists do not translate it to those who are able to make decisions, to those who have the power to change the lives of human beings.

And in order to make oneself understood, one sometimes needs to turn to artistic means. Art can reach more easily non-specialised audiences and visual art even more so. Research results can also take various literary forms (for example, stories, poems, plays), but the images have a higher expressive potential and are more accessible than language. I consider the visual essay to be one of the most prominent visual artistic presentations of research findings, as it fully explores the remarkable characteristics of images.

Visual essays are more suggestive than texts and numbers. They capture the ineffable, have a greater impact on the public, are memorable and facilitate empathic understanding (Weber, 2008). Thus, visual presentations of research findings may have a greater influence on the audience, may be more spectacular, less monotonous, less difficult to follow, and easier to comprehend. Therefore, an artistic visual display of research results allows reaching a wider audience, albeit unspecialised, it can generate various feelings, it is long-lasting, it can be haunting and it can call to action. And if you want to reach the public, to persuade, to raise awareness or just to inform, pictures can be the perfect means.

3. What is the Visual Essay and how Can it Be Produced?

Pauwels (2012) defines the visual essay alongside other art-based approaches which try 'visualising and expressing insights in novel, more experimental and experiential ways' (p. 1). And Grady (1991) describes the visual essay as 'a statement about human affairs that purports to represent reality and is consciously and creatively crafted from non-fictional materials that are, at least in part, directly connected to the affairs thus represented. The primary medium of expression for the statement is some variant of photographic imagery' (p. 27).

The visual essay is designed as a sequence of images (often accompanied by short texts) which attempt to reveal various aspects of socio-human interest. The essay can be created by the researcher or in collaboration with other specialists in communication, public relations, artists, etc. Photographic essays are most common but the essays can also consist of successive drawings or could be films.

I refer in this article to the case where the visual essay is the product of research; however, the visual essay does not necessarily emerge from research, since it is an artistic product in itself. If it is the result of research, images which can be used in visual essays are primary visual data (collected in the field – by the researcher, produced by participants or existing in archives and collections) and secondary visual data (diagrams, tables, networks, etc. resulting from the processing of collected data). Any kind of images found or produced by the researchers or their collaborators (usually people with artistic talents) can also be used.

The most common situation is where visual studies generate visual essays, but it is also possible that studies which do not operate with visual data be the source of inspiration for visual artistic products. In Scârnci-Domnişoru (2016) I mentioned two such examples taken from the works of my students. One such case is an interview-based study, which also resulted in a visual essay containing drawings made by the

researcher (artistically talented), illustrating scenes from the lives of the adolescents who came from a background of domestic violence (see such a drawing in Figure 1).



Fig. 1. 'Violence ties us down' (Reproduced with the permission of Ioana Murgoci)

The second example is another interview-based research, which resulted in a film showing day-to-day challenges affecting wheelchair users (see some freeze-frames in Figure 2).

Consequently, the visual essay is 'a more visual and expressive way of constructing and presenting sociological insight as an end product of visual research or even as a visualisation of more traditional (non-visual) research' (Pauwels, 2012, p. 1).

As they are artistic products, visual essays have different degrees of subjectivity. Nonetheless, those resulting from scientific research should be as objective as possible. In order to meet this requirement, the research objectives are usually the main objectives to attain in the visual essay. Therefore, the essay should present primarily the research findings, should reflect what has been discovered on site and should describe the explored reality as accurately as possible. For example, a film about the daily difficulties faced by wheelchair users should include all and only the aspects identified in the research. To this intent, the visual essay employs images and texts collected during the research phase. For example, extracts from interviews or images produced by subjects at the request of the researcher and their original descriptions are used.



Fig. 2. *A day in the life of a wheelchair user*
(Reproduced with the permission of Alexandra Şoglu)

In Sorea and Scârneci-Domnișoru (2018) we gathered unorthodox depictions of God in a visual essay. The essay was the result of a research study on 473 children between five and twelve years of age who were asked to draw God and to explain what they had drawn. The visual essay consisted entirely of drawings made by the children and of texts resulted from the interviews transcriptions, reproduced without any alteration. It was illustrated as a dialogue between children who drew God. The dialogues (abounding with images) depict God as a woman, as a fairy, living in space among rockets, wearing glasses, having pets, etc. Here is a brief fragment of this illustrated dialogue: the children are discussing God's feet – some think He does not have feet because He does not walk on Earth (and this aspect is illustrated by drawings in which God is depicted without feet), others claim that He has feet and the dialogue gets to the part where God's shoes are described; some say that 'God is barefoot' (and there are drawings in which God is portrayed barefoot), others state the contrary and claim that 'God wears slippers' (we reproduce here details of the drawings depicting God's feet, wearing slippers) and others comment further, by showing that the slippers are, in fact, sandals (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3. 'God wears sandals' (Reproduced with the permission of Daniela Sorea)

The objectivity of a research-based visual essay results also from limiting the 'independence' of the theoretical background. See, for example, the visual essay *The Burden of Existence*, by Marrie Bot, and described by Pauwels (2012, p. 4) as a work which 'truly excels in terms of its theoretical grounding and broad contextualisation'. The essay was based on an ethnographic research study which lasted 11 years, and it featured 'the informed and compassionate view of the different kinds and degrees of mental impediments' (idem).

For objectivity purposes, the visual essay can be produced to reflect the data processing and analysis operations performed during the research. For example, the topics which are visually illustrated in the essay can be arranged according to the frequency of their appearance in the research. In Scârneci-Domnișoru (2017) I created a visual essay in which I tried to depict the life of people suffering from incurable diseases. The photographic essay used images of cancer patients participating in the study. All the

photographs were thematically organised and the resulting themes were arranged according to the frequency in which they appeared. I considered that the more often a subject appeared in photographs, the more important it was for the participants. In order to illustrate their importance in the visual essay, the arrangement of photographs was done according to the following themes: support providers, activities, important things in their lives, the impact of the illness, the desire to be 'normal' again and the return to the past. For example, the topic 'Who Provides Support' (the most important theme of the research, which became prominent and best visually illustrated throughout the essay) included pictures with spouses, parents, friends, specialised institutions (see one of the photos illustrating this theme in Figure 4).

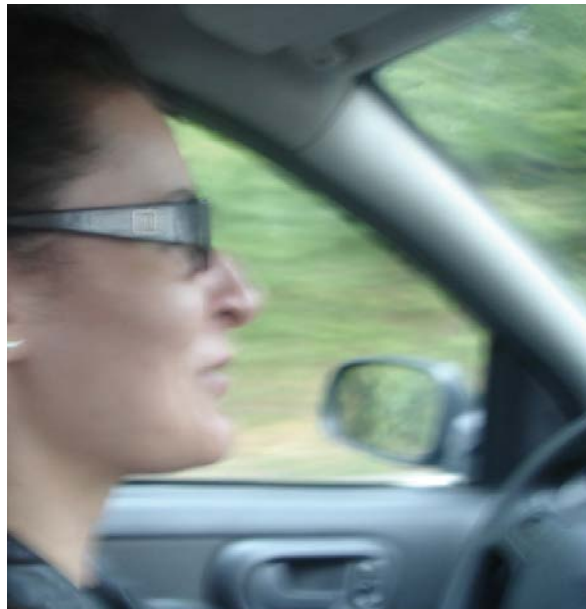


Fig. 4. *'She is the one who stood by me, from hundreds of friends...'*
(Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Braşov)

As I have mentioned previously, the essay should meet the research objectives. Moreover, visual essays should be created in such a way so that they would also meet the communication and artistic objectives. All existing or newly invented artistic means can be used in order to create a convincing, impressive final product, taking into account the audience to whom it is addressed, the level of understanding and sensitivity of the audience, etc.

The central idea of the visual essay is that the image speaks for itself and that sometimes it is 'worth 1000 words'. For example, in order to make someone understand how difficult, how severe the illness of a child is, the image in Figure 5 is highly illustrative, as it depicts the table prepared for dinner by a normal family in which one of the children is very sick. The detail which is worth a thousand words is the sick child's plate in which no ordinary cutlery is placed, but a tube and a syringe.



Fig. 5. *'I want to be able to eat with a spoon and fork, like everybody in my family...'*
(Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Brașov)

Or an adult can convey what it means to be ill by means of the picture and the description from Figure 6.



Fig. 6. *'When you are on the stretcher!'*
(Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Brașov)

Such images accompanied by explanatory texts which sometimes amplify the power of the visual message are frequently used in photovoice projects. When used in research, the photovoice method involves collecting data in the form of images produced by participants at the request of the researcher. These are photographs which speak for themselves about the topic investigated or which are accompanied by short explanatory texts also provided by the subjects. Typically, participants in such studies are people whose voice is not heard or listened to in public space, and who, through images, try to draw attention to their condition or to the community to which they belong. The

problematic situations faced by these people, and about which they "speak" better and more suggestively through images, are usually discussed. Photovoice projects are one of the most important and expressive imagistic sources for visual essays.

I have mentioned earlier the communicative potential of individual images; but the essence of the visual essay actually lies in bringing such individual pieces to create a whole. Thus, the visual essay becomes even more spectacular when the images (and the accompanying explanations) are arranged successively. They create a story, make the message explicit, amplify it, etc.

For example, I tried to show how hard it is for children who use wheelchairs to live a normal life in a country which does not care about them. To that end, I made a visual essay by consecutively arranging photographs and texts which reveal everyday life situations faced with great difficulty by these children (see Figures 7, 8 and 9).



Fig. 7. *'When the lift is out of order, going up the stairs to the third floor is tormenting'*
(Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Braşov)



Fig. 8. *'When it rains, it is very hard to get on... the way home'* (Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Braşov)



Fig. 9. *'I feel so relaxed and so good after taking a bath, but it's so hard to get in and out of the bathtub...'* (Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Brașov)

The messages of visual essays can target specific people or institutions, can be addressed directly to the target audience. They may include, for example, complaints about the lack of wheelchair ramps in institutions, about the lack of public transportation vehicles accessible to wheelchairs by means of ramps, lifts, or kneeling systems, about the lack of hospital equipment, about staff attitude and behaviour, about discrimination, etc. For example, in a visual essay addressed to the Romanian authorities, I showed how difficult it is for children who use wheelchairs to go to school (see Figures 10 and 11) and how difficult it is for people who need mobility assistance to enter official state institutions (see Figure 12).



Fig. 10. *'I have such great classmates; they take me upstairs and downstairs every day at school...'* (Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Brașov)



Fig. 11. *'The road from home to school: 2 kilometres'*
(Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Braşov)



Fig. 12. *'The Town Hall stairs'* (Reproduced with the permission of Hospice Casa Speranței Braşov)

Most commonly, visual essays address issues of social care, related to poverty, discrimination, child labour, violence against women, etc. But the visual essay lends itself to any subject of social interest which can be rendered visually. For example, when talking about visual research, social change studies are always mentioned among options. Such a photographic essay was employed (see Cseznek and Scârnci-Domnişoru, 2019) to depict the changes in working habits in a typical Romanian village. We illustrated visually (comparatively, by photographing the same sets 13 years apart) more or less consistent changes which had occurred in domestic and specialised labour. In Figure 13, I reproduced one of the most important changes in housework: washing laundry in the river was replaced by automatic washing of the laundry.



Fig. 13. *Doing laundry in Drăguş - 2004/2007*
(Reproduced with the permission of Codrina Csesznek)

Other examples of visual essays in the specialised literature are as follows: in his article, Pauwels (2012) presents visual essays on different topics and belonging to different authors: the life of a peasant woman in the Alps (in 150 photos), the impact of the loss of parents, in black and white photos accompanied by the voice of a narrator (35 minutes), death rituals in ethnic communities in Rotterdam, love and sexuality at older age, people with Alzheimer's disease, end of life care, urban material culture and human behaviour, etc. And in his book, Sernau (2016) describes the different roots, dimensions and challenges of inequality, presenting some visual essays about Honduras, about the life of the Navajo people, or about deindustrialised urban areas.

Therefore, the themes which generate visual essays are numerous and very diverse, just as are the forms of these artistic products (see their size, duration, characteristics of the images used, the presence or absence of explanatory texts, the dimensions of these texts, etc.). So far, there are only examples of visual essays and no strict patterns for producing them.

4. Issues which Visual Essay Creators must Consider

In my opinion, the most important issue concerning the presentation of visual essays is given by one of the features of the images: their multivocality (Banks, 2001), which means they can 'speak' differently to different audiences. But I think this is a risk that accompanies all artistic products, not just the visual ones.

Therefore, it is very likely that what one wants to transmit through images might reach the audience in a distorted manner. By looking at an example, Banks shows that, especially in the case of student audiences, they do not 'read' ethnographic films 'naturally', as the ethnographer would like them to do. Students are more likely to use the actions of the filmed subjects to confirm their stereotypes about 'primitive' or 'tribal'

people. And this kind of 'reading' is far from the intention of the film producers to make the viewers understand the subjects.

In reference to the same issue, Holm (2008) talks about 'the intentions' of those who look at images: because of their personal life experiences, they can interpret differently certain images, and these interpretations may be far from what the creators of the pictures intended to convey. Therefore, the way an image or sequence of images will be interpreted cannot be entirely controlled or predicted. In Wiles et al. (2008) there are other references to authors who argue that the way images are regarded may differ from the intended meaning. The use of images together with descriptions which make the intended meaning explicit is among the solutions offered to this problem. I have already mentioned that the visual essay is often made up of images accompanied by explanatory texts, even though they sometimes reduce the artistic effect of the image arrangement.

Another important issue is of ethical and deontological nature: do we violate any norm when we publicly expose images where people can be identified? Is it fair to make public the images in visual essays depicting people explicitly (even if they have agreed to be exposed) or do we need to resort to various tricks which hide the identity of those photographed or filmed?

In the case of photographs and films, there are major issues of ensuring anonymity, and those who appear in them 'can be seen and recognized by those who know them or found by those who are looking for them' (Banks, 2001, p. 130). Some identity obscuration strategies can be used to protect the subjects: changing pixels from facial areas of people in images, using anonymisation software which converts photos or film frames into drawings and masking the eyes, face, or other elements which reveal identities (Wiles et al., 2008). But in Scârneci-Domnişoru (2016), I have shown that there are many reasons why obscuring images is not a desirable practice (e.g. because obscuration is associated by viewers with crime, or because it masks identity and facial expression, elements which are necessary for the complete understanding of the intended message).

It should also be noted that anonymisation is often a researcher's problem rather than a concern or desire of the participants. There are subjects dissatisfied with the researchers' attempts to obscure their images; there are participants who even want to be seen - being identified is a desire and a right they claim for themselves; their participation in research is due in these cases to their belief that they will be identified and that they will be able to take pride in their involvement in a study (Wiles et al., 2010). The same authors also point out that often identification of subjects is not just a matter of being seen, but also of having a message or a viewpoint to be heard. The latter is really important for stigmatized groups for whom being seen is a way to escape anonymity. And the visual essays respond to these very needs - to convey a message, to get out of anonymity; therefore, obscuring images reduces much of the expressiveness and power of the message that is intended to be transmitted through the visual essay.

I think the most difficult problem of identifying people in the images presented in visual essays is that those who are exposed may be subject to social, economic, political or even physical risks. This is the reason for which the creators of visual essays should

try as much as possible to anticipate the effects of visual products that reveal the participants' identities, to carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of their exposure and to use the images with caution even when the participants offer them total freedom in using the images in which they appear or which they have produced.

The use of visual research is strictly regulated by all kinds of codes of ethics, but the use of images in artistic products is more dependent on copyright.

Images are considered artistic products and are legally protected under this statute (see Wiles et al., 2011). Those who produced, created the images are the copyright holders, and when someone wants to use images which do not belong to them in their visual essays (for example from personal or public archives on the Internet), it can sometimes be very difficult to find their owner or copyright owner. To make things even more complicated, copyright rules may vary from country to country; then, reproduction of images might be expensive - sometimes in exchange for the permission to use copyrighted images one needs to pay various amounts of money.

I have listed some general issues encountered by those who create and then try to make publicly available visual essays. There are certainly other challenges to be faced (for example, technical ones), but none of them are so large as to stop someone from artistically communicating the results of their research.

5. Conclusions

It is true that science is not art, and that the scientist does not have to be an artist but, through this article I have tried to show that sometimes the visual essay is an indispensable way for researchers who want to communicate their results to non-specialised audiences.

Creating visual essays is accessible to anyone, it does not involve great effort or too much knowledge or talent and it does not raise insurmountable problems; the presentation of visual essays facilitates communication, understanding, empathy, the reaction of certain categories of audiences for which the message from specialists is otherwise difficult, inexpressive and cryptic.

I think that utilising artistic knowledge can be a viable solution in many situations where classical scientific communication of results cannot be used. That is why, in my opinion, ignoring this possibility of data interpretation and public exposure of research findings would lead to a great loss of information, ideas, knowledge, and, implicitly, of understanding, attitude, change and progress.

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