I Am Not a Camera: On Visual Politics and Method. A Response to Roy Germano

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No observational method is "point and shoot." Even bracketing interpretive methodologies and their attendant philosophies, a researcher—including an experimentalist—always frames observation in terms of the topic of interest. I cannot ever be "just a camera lens," not as researcher and not as photographer. Framing research "shots," an observer always includes some features of the research question terrain while excluding others—of necessity, given human limitations and the partiality, always, of what we can know and the knowledge we can claim. With "shutters" open, we are never passive, always thinking, always world-making. While attention to videography and other visual research methods is welcome, researchers doing "visual politics" need to ask "political" questions: who has created the image being analyzed, for what purpose(s), what imagined viewer(s), and what unintended viewer(s), as well as consider the ethical issues that these methods entail.

> I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.
>
> –Christopher Isherwood[1]
>
> The camera's aid to observation is not new; Leonardo da Vinci described its principles.
>
> –Collier and Collier[2]
>
> What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses.
>
> –W.J.T. Mitchell[3]

I grew up surrounded by visual materials: from my father's 8 mm. home movies, my parents' newly acquired television, and my grandparents' photographs of family members (some lost to the Nazis) to the films of various sorts that populated my undergrad and graduate programs. So in what sense are we "*more* visual" in our communications today, as Roy Germano claims? And is audiovisual expression truly in need of freeing "from the hands of film and tv studios"?

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I read Germano's essay within the broader context of "visual methods." These include not only researcher-created materials that "record" data (technologies from pencil-and-paper [mapping, sketching, etc.] to video and still photography), but also situational members' creations constituting potential data for analysis (from eighteenth-century French paintings "read" for their depictions of contemporaneous race relations to organizational members' photographs, e.g., at Abu Ghraib; from political cartoons to policy-relevant spaces/places) and visual displays of data.[4] I appreciate his call for increasing engagement with film in political science, which joins other disciplinary efforts: Jim Johnson and Mark Reinhardt's ongoing American Political Science Association Short Course (since 2009), International Studies Association film screenings (since around then), and Western Political Science Association "Visual Politics" exhibits, Methods Café tables, and panels (since 2013). As things visual are part of the material world in and with which political acts take place, they warrant researchers' attention.

That said, Germano's treatment of visual methods concerns me. I find it unreflective methodologically vis à vis positive philosophy, filmmaking practices, and the protection of research participants. In addition, its treatment of contemporary documentary and anthropological filmmaking does not comport with current discussions and practices.

Film-making=worldmaking

I agree with the sense of Germano's statements that film can help researchers see what "text and survey data could not"—a claim commonly voiced by ethnographers and

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participant observers—and that film "takes" fieldnotes of a particular sort, enabling re-viewing in ways that print cannot. But film does not "reveal" those insights on its own, and film*making* does more than just "captur[e] and stor[e] information." It is not a "mirror of nature,"[5] belying Christopher Isherwood's statement (first epigraph) which led W.H. Auden, in a 1969 poem whose title I've borrowed, to proclaim the opposite.

Germano's approach adopts the conceit of "I am a camera" objectivity, his "analytic" filmmaking intended to comport with "the standards and practices of positive social science": being "objective," "value free," and so on. Yet all film-makers, himself included, shape the stories they tell. His desire for "more accurate and complete" research—a recurring refrain—via filmmaking belies this framing *and* the research reality that all social science can only ever achieve partial knowledge of its subject. Films are "ways of worldmaking."[6] Arguing that his filmmaking "privileges accuracy," Germano elides the film-maker's authorial eye and standpoint. Here is Isherwood's passive seer, taking everything in without composing, structuring, selecting, editing, arranging, cutting—all the techniques Germano writes about using. Completeness is a promise held out by the heritage of early social philosophy's notion of a finite and hence completely knowable social reality, as if a filmmaker could be omniscient and all-encompassing concerning the range of views on his topic. (Germano's inclusion of researchers' "*a priori* substantive knowledge" is therefore curious precisely because it speaks to the partiality and positionality of researcher knowledge.) His camera rolling uninterrupted has still been set up to frame some things in and others out. Even film that has the pretense of realism highlights some features, occluding others.

Consider the viewer's sense-making of the videotaped interview with a return migrant against background "images of well-dressed people walking through poor communities." This may be "strategic reiteration," but all the socialscientese in the world cannot mask the fact that that image creates worlds of ideas, themselves framed and thereby "pre-interpreted," for the viewer. Germano asks questions, off-camera, as he and his interlocutors seek to make sense of one another, in Spanish and in English, and as he seeks to understand their experiences and convey those understandings to his (imagined) viewers. Here is the intersubjective character of meaning-making "all the way down": a triple hermeneutic,[7] viewers interpreting the filmmaker's interpretations of others' interpretations of their own lives. Far from being external to what they are studying, documentary filmmakers, as Germano admits, are embedded in their settings, interacting with people, shaping—*making*—the film. Although a videographer may achieve some degree of blending in, she can be no more invisible than the ethnographer, despite the illusory promise of Timothy Pachirat's imagined "Fieldwork Invisibility Potion," which offers "the possibility of . . . research uncontaminated by observer-observed interactions."[8] The minute a researcher "arranges" video data "to create a coherent . . . narrative," she has engaged in non-objective worldmaking. Germano's practices do not meet his own methodological criteria—because they cannot.

Others of Germano's assertions are also methodologically contestable. How does film generalize? It is nothing if not grounded in particulars—including Germano's examination of the very particular immigration experiences of Michoacanos and others. Having used (still) photography in my own research, I would claim that one cannot film "the general." As to random sampling, what is the sampling frame here—a complete list of immigration problems? contemporary? historical? a complete set of villages in the state? of villagers? Or is Germano's sample drawn randomly from hours of a day? days of a week? something else?[9] Ruling out films portraying particular individuals' stories, Germano eliminates oral histories, shadowing, and other methods potentially central to political science research films. Furthermore, filmmakers would not necessarily turn only to "credible sources," nor do "credible sources" necessarily produce "accurate representations." Donald Rumsfeld, for instance, not so credible in the end on WMD, would surely be key in a film on the Iraq war precisely because of those (mis-)representations. Indeed, sometimes the "lies" people tell—their "inaccurate" portrayals of events or actors—are highly useful sources of information.[10]

Finally, although Germano proclaims his analytic filmmaking suitable for research involving human subjects, the essay is mute on the ethical issues entailed. What of human subjects protections (informed consent, privacy guards, avoiding harms to individuals or communities) required in many parts of the world? Many an ethics review committee would likely have something to say about "posting . . . unedited footage online"! Rolling his camera before beginning interviews, did Germano tell his subjects he was filming? Refusing to be filmed may be due not "to camera-shyness," but simply because people wish—*for whatever reason*—not to be filmed. A central concern for photo-journalists and visual anthropologists alike, picture-taking and dissemination commonly require signed releases. Additionally, is Germano implying that he would film anyway where recording is prohibited because people are now used to it? These concerns obtain regardless of methodological approach.[11]

Visual=power

Are we newly "visual"? The Lascaux cave drawings—arguably "the first picture show"[12]—suggest otherwise. Moreover, the Gutenberg "revolution" did not happen overnight,[13] suggesting that Germano's heralded changes may not erupt quite so radically.

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Differently visual, perhaps. And there is no doubt that attention to visual matters and methods is rising on the political science horizon, however *en retard* (the journal publishing changes that Germano rightly calls for already existing elsewhere): visual sociology harks to mid-nineteenth-century documentary photography; visual organizational studies, to Frank and Dr. Lillian Gilbreth in the early 1900s; and visual anthropology, to Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in the early twentieth century and Timothy Asch in the 1970s. Still, neither Germano's arguments about visual anthropology/sociology nor his definitions and discussions of documentary and ethnographic film fit either contemporary methodological treatments[14] or my experiences at the American Anthropological Association conference, whose Society for Visual Anthropology screened and discussed over a dozen documentaries, and at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), with over 300 films. The blurring of fiction and nonfiction and staged shots are problematized within visual anthropological debates and, today, are widely discredited; Germano's description of how video works describes precisely how ethnographic filming proceeds; and there is more to documentaries than "eccentric," "outlier" story-telling films and more to documentary filmmakers than those identifying as storytellers or focusing primarily on "engaging characters."

Research filmmaking does not live in a unity of science realm with a single set of "standards and principles." Indeed, visual "literacy" is not innocent. Through socialization or training, we learn to interpret visual materials just as we do textual ones, as Timothy Pachirat reminds me: "The visual is not some unmediated mode of communication that escapes the . . . hermeneutics that we apply to texts."[15] The power of visual literacy and the visual image can explain Germano's observation concerning film's potentially wider dissemination: even documentarian Frederick Wiseman's latest *At Berkeley*,[16] clocking in at over four hours, takes less time to watch than a typical social scientific book takes to read, requiring less specialized vocabulary, thereby potentially reaching more numerous and far-flung audiences, although some ethnographies have been equally impact-ful as some documentary films and not all videos draw the same attention that Germano's has. (Might that have something to do with his topic, immigration, being "hot" or, perhaps, with his marketing abilities?) But that power is also the source of the visual's potential for harm, as W.J.T. Mitchell notes concerning "the power of images for good and evil" (second epigraph). While I applaud the essay's promotion of film in political science research, its methodological blindspots detract from this advocacy and are potentially misleading for those engaging visual methods. As political science opens up to matters visual, we need treatments that are deeply reflective on the methodological challenges such uses pose and sensitive to their ethical issues.

Notes

1 Isherwood 1939.
2 Collier and Collier 1967/1986, 7; cited in Czarniawska 2014.
3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 1994; quoted on Jim Johnson's blog http://politicstheoryphotography.blogspot.nl/, accessed November 27, 2013.
4 Respectively, Bellhouse 2006; Van Veeren 2011; Danjoux 2013; Yanow 2013/2006; Tufte 1983/2001 and subsequent books. For a list of possible visual research materials, see Yanow 2014, table 10.1.
5 The phrase is Rorty's, 1979.
6 In Goodman's phrase, 1978.
7 Yanow 2009.
8 Pachirat 2009, 41.
9 I am obliged to Peri Schwartz-Shea (personal conversation, December 5, 2013) for suggesting these details.
10 Fujii 2010.
11 On ethical concerns in documentary journalism and in social sciences, see Ward 2011, *in*Visio 2013.
12 Wachtel 1993.
13 Cook 1995.
14 For up-to-date engagements, see Bell et al. 2014, Pink 2013.
15 Personal communication, December 5, 2013.
16 Wiseman 2013.

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