

## On the relation between ‘visual research methods’ and contemporary visual culture

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### Abstract

One of the most striking developments across the social sciences in the past decade has been the growth of research methods using visual materials. It is often suggested that this growth is somehow related to the increasing importance of visual images in contemporary social and cultural practice. However, the form of the relationship between ‘visual research methods’ and ‘contemporary visual culture’ has not yet been interrogated. This paper conducts such an interrogation, exploring the relation between ‘visual research methods’ – as they are constituted in quite particular ways by a growing number of handbooks, reviews, conference and journals – and contemporary visual culture – as characterized by discussions of ‘convergence culture’. The paper adopts a performative approach to ‘visual research methods’. It suggests that when they are used, ‘visual research methods’ create neither a ‘social’ articulated through culturally mediated images, nor a ‘research participant’ competency in using such images. Instead, the paper argues that the intersection of visual culture and ‘visual research methods’ should be located in their shared way of *using* images, since in both, images tend to be deployed much more as communicational tools than as representational texts. The paper concludes by placing this argument in the context of recent discussions about the production of sociological knowledge in the wider social field.

**Keywords:** visual culture, visual research methods, inscription device, convergence culture

### Introduction

Over a decade ago, in this journal, Holliday (2000: 503) lamented that ‘visual representations. . . have been largely ignored in the social sciences’.<sup>1</sup> One of the most striking developments across the social sciences since then has been the proliferation of a diverse range of research methods, all of which work in one way or another with ‘visual representations’: what Puwar (2009: 382) has described as ‘the recent fetishisation of visual methods’. This emergent field has sometimes been characterized as ‘visual sociology’ (Grady, 2008; Harper, 1988; Pauwels, 2010) but, given the widespread use of such methods in a variety of different disciplines, the term ‘visual research methods’ is probably preferable.

'Visual research methods' are methods which use visual materials of some kind as part of the process of generating evidence in order to explore research questions. These methods are diverse, and their diversity inheres in both the sorts of visual materials they work with, and in the procedures to which those materials are subjected. Most recent studies deploying visual research methods have used photographs of one kind or another, so this paper will also pay most attention to work using photos; but diagrams (Crilly *et al.*, 2006), relational maps, timelines, self-portraits (Bagnoli, 2009), films (Murray, 2009; Pink, 2007), video-diaries (Holliday, 2000, 2007), collages (Mannay, 2010; O'Connor, 2007), maps (Spencer, 2011), memory books (Thomson and Holland, 2005), drawings (Garner, 2008), graphic novels (Galman, 2009) and photo-diaries (Latham, 2004) have also been used. Such materials are treated differently in different visual research methods, too, as a review by Pauwels (2010) emphasizes. Some work with visual materials generated by the researcher; in others, materials are created by research participants; yet others work with 'found' visual materials. All of these visual materials can be theorized, contextualized and analysed differently. And visual materials are central to the dissemination of the results of research using some visual research methods, while other visual research methods require that their visuals remain absent from the final research outputs. Despite this diversity, and some sceptical voices (Buckingham, 2009; Dicks *et al.*, 2006), the collective term 'visual research methods' is gaining ground, consolidated by a range of journal special issues, handbooks and reviews (Ball and Gilligan, 2010; Banks, 2008; Emmison *et al.*, 2012; Gaimster, 2011; Hamilton, 2006; Harper, 2005; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004a; Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001; Mitchell, 2011; Pauwels, 2010; Pink, 2007, 2012; Pole, 2004; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Stanczak, 2007; Tinkler, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

This paper focuses on 'visual research methods' as they are being constituted by this literature. That is, the paper focuses *not* on the full range of research methods that use visual images, but rather on the methods that are given most attention by these various texts that in *surveying* a field of practice also *constitute* it (if not fetishize it). For these reviews and handbooks are by no means comprehensive in their discussion of visual research methods. They focus almost entirely on qualitative research methods, and, as has already been noted, they are dominated by methods using photography (thus, for example, the anthropological film-making tradition makes a sustained contribution only to the work of Pink, herself an anthropologist, and the diverse cartographic traditions associated with geography are also almost absent). The paper uses the acronym VRM to emphasize the specificity of its definition of visual research methods.

The constitution of VRM is particular, then, in terms of the specific methods referred to. Another peculiarity of VRM is the suddenness of their surge in popularity. Some sociologists have been taking photographs for decades, of course, among them no less a figure than Pierre Bourdieu (*The Sociological Review*, 2009; see also Doug Harper's work in Harper, 1992, 2001, 2006;

Harper and Faccioli, 2009; Knowles and Harper, 2009); so why is it only now that their photographic work is reaching a wider audience? Why have VRM developed so rapidly in the first decade of the twenty-first century?

Their growth certainly has not been driven by technological changes, as is sometimes suggested (Sweetman, 2009), since none of these methods rely on digital technologies (indeed, photo-elicitation research projects must be one of the last remaining markets for disposable cameras). Other explanations point elsewhere, and in particular to the importance of the visual in contemporary culture. Knowles and Sweetman (2004b: 1), to take just one example, note the recent growth in such methods and continue, 'non-coincidentally, mass culture is hyper-visual' (for similar comments, see Ball and Gilligan, 2010; Knoblauch *et al.*, 2008; Spencer, 2011).

Certainly, parallel to the growth of visual methods there has been much work devoted to the notion of 'visual culture'. 'Visual culture studies' has emerged as an academic discipline during the past two decades, with its own journals and handbooks, all concerned to elaborate the implications of the 'hyper-visibility' of much contemporary everyday life. In this work, visual experience is understood as embedded in social and cultural practices (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009; other key texts include Evans and Hall, 1999; Mirzoeff, 2009; Mitchell, 1994; Smith, 2008). A working definition of visual culture – taken from one of the field's most influential textbooks – thus describes visual culture as 'the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 3). There are different theoretical elaborations of this claim, of course. Some scholars betray the influence of an art history focused on images as the site of meaning-making, with Jay (2008: 183), for example, claiming that visual culture is enacted by artworks. Others, whose arguments shape the claims of this paper, are more influenced by social science work in areas such as audience studies, postcolonial anthropology and social semiotics, and explore the social practices through which specific visual objects become meaningful (for further discussion, see Rose, 2011, 2012). This *theoretical* orientation towards visual objects, in which images are 'not representations in the sense of a screen onto which meaning is projected', but rather 'compressed performances' (Pinney, 2004: 8), is accompanied, in parts of visual culture studies, with accounts of the *empirical* characteristics of specific visual cultures: a discussion fully cognizant of the difficulties in describing and delimiting any sort of culture in a globalizing, hybridizing world (Kress, 2010; Sandywell and Heywood, 2012). This paper elaborates its own understanding of some of the key characteristics of a contemporary visual culture in its third section. For now, though, it is important to emphasize that, just like VRM, this paper's account of visual culture will be a particular one; for example, it is most embedded (and even then, still unevenly) in those places that are also hegemonic in the production of qualitative research methods: the 'Euro-American core' (Hsiung, 2012).

If it is granted that the visual is a very significant aspect of contemporary social practices of many kinds, then it is perhaps not surprising that visual methods should be flourishing at this historical juncture. Yet there are no sustained reflections on just how the dynamics of contemporary visual culture and the practising of VRM by social scientists and/or their research participants might be related. This paper aims to provide such a reflection. It focuses on the relation between VRM and contemporary visual culture. It interrogates the relation between a particular contemporary culture in which visual images are central to many 'symbolic and communicative activities', and a specific set of social science research practices that also use visual images to make (social-scientific) meaning.

The next section of the paper explores VRM in more detail. It examines what its advocates describe as its particular strengths and, following Law's claim that 'methods practices are performative. They help to enact the world that they describe' (Law, 2009: 249), assesses whether those strengths are where VRM's relation to visual culture lie. That is, the first section of this paper asks whether the relation of VRM to contemporary visual culture should be located in the sort of 'social' that is produced as VRM are enacted by researchers. The answer is 'no'; the use of VRM does not generally produce a social that constitutes meaning through the visual. The following section therefore tries a different approach: drawing on Latour and Woolgar's (1979) notion of an 'inscription device', it asks whether the photograph – by far the most common image used in VRM – is, as an inscription device, the means by which the deployment of VRM performs the 'symbolic and communicative activities' constitutive of visual culture. The section demonstrates that, in the performance of VRM, photographs are too unstable an object to act as such a device. This allows the paper in its third section, however, to draw on VRM researchers' uninterest in 'the visual', as well as on the instability of the photographic object in so many VRM projects, to develop the claim that the relationship between VRM and visual culture consists of their shared understanding of images as tools with which communicative work is done. In both VRM and much contemporary visual culture, visual materials are put to work to achieve multiple ends in diverse contexts; and it is in this profligacy of use that VRM and visual culture converge. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of its arguments in relation to another recent (much more ambitious) account of the relation between sociological work and contemporary cultural practice (Savage, 2010).

### **VRM and the social their use enacts: making things visible**

This paper's interrogation of the relationship between VRM and contemporary visual culture begins by exploring what sort of social is enacted by projects using VRM; not to assess their accuracy in revealing the real, but rather to evaluate the consequences of their specific 'fields of questioning' (Osborne

*et al.*, 2008: 526). Law (2009), following Foucault, describes this tactic as an 'archaeology' that unpacks the specific and various social realities performed by a particular method's practices, technologies and inscriptions. So, what sort of social do visual research methods produce?

The answer to this question is most clear in what the users of VRM argue are its special strengths. There are three of these.

First, VRM are argued to be especially effective in generating evidence that other methods – especially interviews, not to mention surveys – cannot. Almost all VRM involve talk between the researcher and the researched, and it is claimed that things are discussed in the talk about visual materials that don't get discussed in talk-only interviews. For example, Darbyshire *et al.* (2005) wanted to examine the extent of children's physical activity, and part of their suite of methods was to ask a group of children to take photographs of their activity over the course of a week. The researchers argue that this was valuable because it was only the photographs that showed the importance of pets and trampolines to the physical activities undertaken by the children and thus allowed the researchers to pursue these topics with the children. Interviews-with-images can also prompt talk in different registers, it is argued: more emotional, more affective, more 'ineffable' (Bagnoli, 2009: 548). Images themselves are also argued to be especially effective at describing the 'ineffable'. Banks (2008) suggests that one strength of the photo-essay format, for example, is its ability to offer a sense of the subjective experiencing of a social situation, and images are also argued to be powerful conduits for the sensory experience and feel of urban environments, or what Latham (2004: 129), in his discussion of photo-diaries, calls their 'feel and texture'. Pink (2007) also suggests that the visual may have a special relation to the sensory. Thus, the richness of research data generated with and by visual material is often emphasized by advocates of VRM.

Secondly, many researchers argue that visual materials can 'reveal what is hidden in the inner mechanisms of the ordinary and the taken for granted' (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004b: 7). Thus interviews with participant-generated visual materials are particularly helpful in exploring the taken-for-granted things in their research participants' lives. Asking them to take photographs of that life, and then to talk about the photos, involves the participants reflecting on their activities in a way that is not usually done; it gives them a distance from what they are usually immersed in and allows them to articulate thoughts and feelings that usually remain implicit (Beilin, 2005; Blinn and Harrist, 1991; Holliday, 2007; Latham, 2003; Liebenberg, 2009; Mannay, 2010). Photographs taken by the researcher can likewise be a tool 'to uncover, reveal and convey deeper aspects of habitus' (Sweetman, 2009: 500). In this way, VRM are often used to uncover the implicit knowledges in everyday practices; indeed most studies with visual materials focus on the ordinary and everyday. Taking photographs can also allow the researcher to reflect on what they encounter in their fieldwork and on their own relation to the field (Emmel and Clark, 2011).

Thirdly, VRM are argued to be inherently collaborative. Banks (2001: 112), for example, suggests that researchers taking photographs have to collaborate because taking a photo always entails some sort of negotiated relationship between the person making the image and those being pictured. Several others have argued that making any sort of image with research participants as part of a research process entails negotiations over the making and meaning of images (Croghan *et al.*, 2008; Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Jenkins *et al.*, 2008); and similar arguments are made about researcher-created images (Harper, 2003: 244). Some take this further, claiming that VRM empower research participants. For projects creating participant-generated images, this is because participants are the 'expert' in the interview as they explain their images to the researcher (Liebenberg, 2009; Mannay, 2010; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; White *et al.*, 2010). Although sceptics are also making their voices heard, suggesting that VRM are no more immune than any other sort of method from the complex power relations inherent in research (Joanou, 2009; Johnson, 2011; Packard, 2008), it is also the case that these claims continue to be made (for nuanced versions, see Allen, 2008; O'Neill, 2012). The importance of collaborative participation is a factor making photography a popular choice for visual methods researchers, too. Many scholars using VRM report that asking people to take photographs is a good way to enrol participants into a research project because taking photographs is perceived as easy and fun – it is ordinary, if not always everyday – and participants get something from their involvement: the photos (Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005; Wright *et al.*, 2010). Taking photographs also draws on many people's existing skills and it thus allows them to participate more confidently in the research project than, for example, drawing, mapping, painting or working as a graphic novelist (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly *et al.*, 2006; Galman, 2009).

These then are the three key strengths of VRM, according to many of their advocates. To continue the archaeological excavation, what sort of social is being evoked in these descriptions of VRM?

Most obviously, the version of the social being created by projects using VRM is one that is *visible*. As Hodgetts *et al.* (2007) emphasize, the structure of an image-elicitation interview is that of 'showing': showing, and then talking about what is shown. VRM create a social that shows itself. A participatory project which explored mental health issues with an LGBT community group demonstrates this attention to the visible quite clearly (Johnson, 2011). That project used VRM in order 'to enable participants to reflect on their everyday experiences of living with mental health issues' (Johnson, 2011: 174). Participants were asked to take photographs that 'represent[ed] and reflect[ed] on their mental health' (2011: 176). This was a complex project which also involved an exhibition of the photographs, but for the purposes of this discussion, the project was typical of VRM work in its analysis of the photos themselves. The photographs were analysed as addressing one of three themes: affective states, weight gain and medication, and support and emotional connections. The analysis is very attentive to the content of the photographs, as

well as the captions provided by the photographers, but only to their content: to what is literally on show. The significance of the photos is seen to rest on *what* is pictured, not *how* it is pictured. So a photo of everything one participant eats in a day ‘demonstrate[s] the dramatic effect medication can have on an embodied sense of self’ (Johnson, 2011: 181), while photographs of people (and of a door with an Alcoholics Anonymous sign stuck on it) show ‘support and emotional connections’ (Johnson, 2011: 182). Hence aspects of the social are showing themselves through things that can be visualized in some way or another through devices like cameras. The emphasis on visibility can create an interest in what-is-not-visible, it is true, but this is usually phrased, for example, in terms of what things were not photographed during a photo-elicitation project (Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007), so the concern remains with what is *potentially* visible (*contra* Knowles and Sweetman, 2004b). More precisely then, in VRM, the social is one that is put on show or could potentially be put on show. Moreover, it is put on show by people collaborating, doing things together, on as equal a footing as possible (though this may not be very equal). And the effects of those doings that has been most emphasized to date is the interpretative but also the *experiential*, which includes the sensory, the affective and the emotional. All those explicit explanations of why VRM were used also attest to *reflexive* researchers. Finally, VRM research is also heavily invested in the *everyday* – photo-elicitation projects, for example, often ask participants to take photographs of ‘an ordinary day’ – which creates a social of the ordinary rather than the extreme.

This very general account of course neglects all sorts of nuances and complications in the deployment of VRM. However, it is worth risking, I think, because it suggests several things about VRM. One is that it becomes very evident that, as well as any possible relation to contemporary visual culture, VRM as they are currently being constituted evidently have a close relation to some of the key shifts in social theory over the past decade. The concern for embodiment, the sensory and the affective all speak to the popularity of VRM alongside what a variety of what might be described as the post-cultural-turn turns. Further, the close, reflexive attention paid to the role of the researcher and their relation to those they are researching is clearly influenced by feminist, postcolonial and queer scholarship. All this further suggests that the constitution of VRM as overwhelmingly qualitative can partly be explained by qualitative methods’ efficacy in generating research data that are understood to speak to some significant theoretical positions within the social sciences over the past decade.

One thing that the version of the social produced by these accounts of visual research methods does not do, though, is to produce a version of the social that is *visual*. They are centrally concerned with the *visible*, it is true. But they are *not* concerned with that notion of *visuality* that drives debates about contemporary visual culture: that the visual is a perceptual field profoundly shaped by ‘symbolic and communicative activities’ (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 3). As Foster (1988: ix) argues, *visuality* refers to the *cultural construction* of visual

experience: 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein'. Researchers using VRM, as they are currently constituted, are much more concerned with making meaning by working with what images show, than they are with unpacking the effects of contemporary visualities on the processes of making and interpreting visual materials. This is evident in the study of children's physical activity cited earlier in this section (Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005). While its authors acknowledge in passing that photographs (though not maps) are 'interpreted and selective' (2005: 243), their own use of the children's photographs is based entirely on what the photographs show. It is the objects made *visible* in images that these VRM researchers are interested in – in this case, pets and trampolines – not the children's (or the researchers') interpretations of the meaning of the photos as 'symbolic communication'. Similarly, none of the photographs generated with the LGBT community group are interpreted in relation to established photographic genres (Johnson, 2011): advertising, for example, or family photographs. Indeed, content analysis of the things displayed in photographs is a common method of analysing participant-generated photos (see, for example, Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Croghan *et al.*, 2008; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003).

This uninterest in visuality can be seen elsewhere in the literature using VRM, and in particular in its understanding of 'research participants' as uninvolved in contemporary visual culture. There is an almost total neglect in the literature using VRM of research participants' 'symbolic and communicative' competencies in that culture. There are remarkably few discussions of how people taking part in VRM projects may bring a range of visual knowledges and skills to bear on what they are asked to do. Participants are asked to draw maps and take photographs and make films as if they had never opened an A to Z, seen a family snap or been to the movies. This uninterest in the visual creativity of research participants occurs even in studies that otherwise explore in highly nuanced ways the agency of research participants. As an example, take Allen's (2008) account of how a group of young people, asked to take photographs about 'how they learned about sexuality at school', negotiated with considerable dexterity the complex ethical terrain in which their photography took place; yet even this discussion does not consider how those photos might also be negotiating with images in those young people's own visual culture. The few discussions in the VRM literature that do mention participants' visual savvy in passing are revealing, however: homeless people taking photos deliberately designed to counter the stereotyped images of the homeless in the mass media (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007); young people posing for photos as if they were going to appear in a celebrity magazine rather than a research database on contemporary fashion (Woodward, 2008); cameras intended to record experiences of 'chemotherapy' or 'consumption' or 'childhood' being used to make family snaps instead (Croghan *et al.*, 2008; Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Lutrell, 2010; and see Radley, 2010). Clearly, even if it is rarely acknowledged, many research participants are conversant with a range of



genres of image production, and use that cultural competence when they create images for research projects. There is also very little acknowledgement in the VRM literature that such competence may also include competence in engaging with the ethics of producing knowledge with and about images (Allen, 2008, and Clark, 2012, are exceptions here). While ethical guidelines for visual methods research now exist (British Sociological Association, 2006; Papademas and International Visual Sociology Association, 2009), there are very few discussions about the ethical competencies of research participants, despite hints that, for example, family photographs are subject to quite elaborate notions of what is proper and improper to do with them (Rose, 2010; Wiles *et al.*, 2008).

It seems clear, then, that most uses of VRM do not assume or create an understanding of social life conducted through culturally mediated visual materials. Rather, their deployment generally produces a social that is visible rather than visual, and research participants whose images record objects rather than engage in 'symbolic and communicative activities'.

### **Images in VRM: photographs as unstable inscription devices**

The previous section argued that users of VRM almost always assume that the images that are created as research data make aspects of the social visible. This focus on *visibility* rather than *visuality* sidesteps the understanding of images as meaningful objects central to symbolic and communicative activity that is core to many theorizations of contemporary visual culture. This section therefore examines in more depth how researchers using VRM approach the nature of the images with which they work. Here, another of Law's (2004) tools is useful: the inscription device.

Foucauldian discussions of social science methods understand research methods as specific sorts of practices, often undertaken with, and in part enabled by, particular pieces of equipment like tape recorders and computer software (Uprichard *et al.*, 2008). Such equipment is theorized by Law (2004), following Latour and Woolgar's (1979) account of a Californian neuro-endocrinology laboratory, as an 'inscription device'. Latour and Woolgar (1979: 41) describe the laboratory they studied as 'a system of fact construction', and 'inscription devices' are central to that system. An inscription device is 'any item of apparatus or particular configuration of such items which can transform a material substance into a figure or diagram which is directly usable by one of the members of the office space' (Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 51 – 'members of the office space' refers to the scientists who use the figures and diagrams generated by inscription devices as unproblematic data with which to write scientific papers). Law develops this definition when he notes that an inscription device is not always technological; it can also be 'a set of arrangements for labelling, naming and counting. It is a set of arrangements for *converting relations from non-trace-like to trace-like form*' (Law, 2004: 29).

In some ways, Law's definition describes very well the understanding of VRM-created images as making things *visible*. Becker (2002: 3), for example, says that photographs 'state a general idea embodied in images of specific people, places, and events'; drawing with captions is described as creating 'a richly textured snapshot of participant experience' (Galman, 2009: 213); and 'collage production presented an opportunity for participants to create a visual representation of their worlds' (Mannay, 2010: 98). VRM-generated images are thus understood to be a trace of social identities, processes, practices, experiences, institutions and relations: this is what they make visible.

Although many sorts of visual inscriptions offer traces of things such as social ideas, experiences and worlds, photographs are without doubt the type of inscription most favoured by VRM research. Photographs are central to the most common forms of VRM, as documentation, as prompts in elicitation interviews, and as means of conveying analyses and of disseminating findings (Rose, 2011). As the previous section noted, their popularity can in part be explained by how easy they are to create. Understood as inscription devices, though, their popularity can also be explained by the widely held belief that a photograph is a trace of what was really there when the shutter snapped (a belief whose history is discussed by Tagg, 1988). One of the earliest advocates of 'visual sociology' claimed that 'photographs are precise records of material reality' (Collier, 1967: 5) and Grady (2008: para. 12) is typical in his claim that 'photographic data provides a more direct record of the actual events being investigated than any of the other major forms of data collection used by social researchers'. VRM research project participants' photographs can thus be accurate records of reality – so that photographs of pets or trampolines can show things that participants may not talk about (Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005) – and researchers can also use photographs to create accurate visual data (Suchar, 1997). Photo-essays too, it is argued, rely on the ability of photographs to carry large amounts of information about 'how culture and social life looks like . . . that's difficult to represent in text alone' (Wagner, 2007: 47). Photos are also valuable for the way they convey 'real, flesh and blood life', according to Becker (2002: 11), making their audiences 'bear witness' to that life (Holliday, 2007: 61; Johnson, 2011).

Now, this faith in the photograph as trace might encourage the same lack of attention that Latour and Woolgar's neuroendocrinologists pay to their inscription devices because, in both cases, 'inscriptions are regarded as having a direct relationship to "the original substance" ' (Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 51). However, unlike Latour and Woolgar's neuroendocrinologists, social scientists using VRM, driven by their methodological reflexivity, continue to attend to the production of the traces with which they work. For example, the pervasive trust in what Pauwels (2010: 557) calls the photograph's 'mimetic strengths' is *not* a naïve belief that 'the camera never lies'. Unlike neuroendocrinologists, visual methods researchers do *not* erase the mediating role of the apparatus and the person using it. Grady (2008: para. 24), for example, insists that 'it must be acknowledged that all interpretations are ontologically

dependent upon the picture taker's moment of engagement with a subject', and even the most descriptive use of a camera by a VRM researcher, in the photo-documentation method, requires the development of a clear, theoretically driven 'shooting script' to justify what photos are taken and why (Suchar, 1997). According to Latour and Woolgar (1979: 69; and see Law, 2004), 'inscription devices . . . appear to be valued on the basis of the extent to which they facilitate a swift transition from craft work to ideas'. In the case of researchers using VRM, however, there is a great deal of discussion about the craft of making images.

And in the course of this discussion about working with images, those inscriptions become a much less stable entity for visual methods researchers than is the assay for neuroendocrinologists, because visual methods researchers clearly have different ways of understanding the relation between the image as a trace and what it traces. This is particularly clear in the case of photographs. This paper has just argued that some researchers using VRM understand photographs as traces of what was visible when the shutter snapped: 'real, flesh and blood life'. But the previous section demonstrated that photos are *also* conceptualized in much VRM work as traces that enable talk about things that are not visible. This is the basis of the richness of the photo-elicitation interview, which Hodgetts *et al.* (2007) describe particularly clearly in their discussion of a research project which asked homeless people in London to take photographs of a typical day:

In its most straightforward form, a participant might photograph an object such as a can of cider and then move, in discussion with the researcher, beyond this depiction to talk about drinking schools and other social formations often inherent to cultures of homelessness. It is common for photo-production participants to offer stories that take off from photographs, moving well beyond the depiction, and raising issues about the history of depicted events, relationships and places. (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007: 266)

The same approach to the photograph as a visible trace of aspects of the social is evident in the photographic project with an LGBT group discussed in the previous section (Johnson, 2011), in which a photo of a door is a trace of 'support and emotional connections'. In yet other uses of VRM, however, photographs are understood as traces that elicit affects *beyond* talk. Photographs, it is also suggested, have a unique ability to pierce through language, to be 'mysterious' (Back, 2009: 486), perhaps to wound, perhaps to haunt; Back (2004) concludes from a project that took photographs of individuals on a street in east London that 'we need to project ourselves into [photographs] in order to hear the spectral chatter of those who address us directly with their look' (Back, 2004: 145). Then there are those who see the significance of photographs' traces as dependent on the context of their viewing. Sometimes this context is the 'wider cultural discourses', as in Pink's (2007: 82) claim that:

visual images are made meaningful by the subjective gaze of the viewer, and that each individual produces these photographic meanings by relating the image to his or her existing personal experience, knowledge and wider cultural discourses.

And sometimes it is the performative, communicative interactions in which photographs are embedded:

photographs are things that people work with, use to explain and to show. Photographs provide a vehicle for invoking and considering situations, events and issues. The meaning of a photograph is thus more fluid and variable in response to the changing circumstances of the photographer, the viewers, and what is being done in the interaction between them. (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007: 266–7; see also Croghan *et al.*, 2008; Lomax and Casey, 1998)

Here then are five fairly distinct understandings of the photographic trace, and echoes of more than one of them are always found in discussions of the value of photographs to research methods.

Now, these multiple understandings of photographs as traces *could* be seen as a form of conceptual incoherence. However, to describe this multiplicity as incoherent only makes sense from the perspective either of neuro-endocrinologists, or of a large body of work, prominent in visual culture studies, which for a long time now has debated the essence of 'the' photograph (see, for example, Elkins, 2007). Researchers using VRM, in contrast, seem singularly untroubled by the diversity of claims made on behalf of photos produced in VRM.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, several explicitly state that they have no interest in attempting to define what a photograph is in its essence, and therefore what it is or is not capable of doing methodologically. Spencer (2011: 35), for example, notes that there are 'several different aspects of images and their uses as research evidence', without attempting to decide between them, while Gleeson (2011: 316) and Mitchell (2011: 65) agree that 'it is hard to answer the "What do you do with the pictures?" question in any definitive way'. Lutrell (2010: 225) 'resists any single orientation to children's photography', and one of the most widely cited discussions of photo-elicitation concludes by describing the role of the photo in that method as 'mysterious' (Harper, 2002: 22).

This lack of concern about the adjudicating nature and effect of visual inscriptions has been noted by others. In relation to photo-elicitation studies, for example, Croghan *et al.* (2008: 346) note that:

while visual and linguistic data appear to enrich one another and to elicit more elaborate verbal accounts, the specific ways in which these accounts might differ from purely verbal interviews have not been examined. There is frequently an assumption that the visual will act as a trigger to an oral response or that the visual and the verbal will somehow strengthen one another, without examining the ways in which they differ as modes of

representation, or the problems that arise for researchers attempting to interpret them.

Several essays discussing the photo-elicitation method suggest that visual methods researchers are uninterested in the ‘problems’ posed by photos because they are more interested in the talk that photos prompt (Beilin, 2005: 61; see also Hodgetts *et al.*, 2007; Jenkins *et al.*, 2008; Radley, 2010). The consequence is that elicitation studies in particular tend to pay most attention to talk about images, rather than the images themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Photographs, then – by far the most common type of image created by researchers working with VRM – are understood as diverse kinds of inscriptions, produced by devices whose workings are much less taken-for-granted than those of the scientists and doctors studied by Latour and Woolgar (1979) and Law (2004). Researchers using VRM, and those they research, engage with those photographic inscriptions in diverse ways and, through those engagements, a variety of accounts of the inscription of the image as a trace of something else emerge. It appears that photographs – and by extension the wide range of image types generated by different VRM – are highly unstable inscription devices. The next section takes this instability and returns to the question of the relation between VRM and visual culture.

### **Visual culture and VRM: doing the same thing with images**

Thus far, this paper has argued: first, that the research created using VRM constitutes and explores a social that is visible rather than visual; secondly, that its research participants are only rarely constituted as competent in visual culture; and thirdly, that the inscription devices used in VRM are unstable, apparently working in quite different ways to create visible traces of diverse other things. This section will now argue, building on the previous section’s discussion of inscription devices, that research using VRM is focused on what can be *done* with visual materials, and that this kind of engagement with images – as objects to be used in multiple ways, by more-or-less reflexive practitioners – is strikingly similar to certain empirical descriptions of specific aspects of contemporary visual culture.

As the introduction to this paper hinted, any description of ‘contemporary visual culture’ risks over-generalization. However, this section will draw on several similar accounts of recent changes in ‘the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities’ (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 3) that allow this paper to outline how VRM and visual culture do indeed converge (Jenkins, 2008; Kress, 2010; Sandywell and Heywood, 2012).

While Sandywell and Heywood (2012) are scholars of visual culture, Kress (2010) is a social semiotician and Jenkins (2008) hails from that part of cultural

studies concerned with fans and audiences, all argue that the past decade has seen significant changes in technologies, in meaning-making and communicative activities, and in the power relations that are performed through those activities, for many people. All emphasize the widespread use of digital technologies for creating, editing, distributing and audiencing texts of all kinds, visual and otherwise. They concur that the combination of new digital technologies and neoliberal globalization means that a 'new communicational world' is emerging marked by 'provisionality and instability' (Kress, 2010: 6), in which the rhetoric of self-realization through consumption is creating a 'fluidity of social forms [which] finds its counterparts in the fluidity of communicational practices' (Kress, 2010: 20), such that 'self-reflective audiences positively welcome and celebrate "the terror of uncertain signs"' (Sandywell and Heywood, 2012: 37). Jenkins (2008: 254) is particularly interested in the widespread irrelevance of the distinction between those who create cultural texts and those who can only consume them in his account of what he calls 'convergence culture':

Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery system. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.

Empirically, then, this account emphasizes 'vernacular' or 'user-generated' ways of picturing and doing social identities and relations digitally, via camera-phone and video use (Buckingham and Willett, 2009), for example, as well as online distribution sites like YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009), Facebook (Livingstone, 2008, 2009) and Flickr. And while Kress comments that those most at home in this digital visual culture are the under-25 age group – to the extent that, particularly around the issue of cutting, pasting and mash-ups, he suggests that there is 'an entire and mutual incomprehension between generations' (Kress, 2010: 24) – it is important to note that there are accounts of older (and more extensive) visual practices that also identify fluid and context-specific communicational practice: family photography (Larsen, 2005; Rose, 2010), for example, and the activities of fan sub-cultures (Jenkins, 1992). Most pertinent for this paper's argument, this account of contemporary visual culture also suggests the need for a different approach to 'symbolic and communicative activity'.

Kress (2010) argues that the (complex) participatory nature of much contemporary text production using digital media is fundamentally reshaping how people make meaning. Like Jenkins, he suggests that there are now widespread 'new principles of text-making composition' (Kress, 2010: 20) that depend in large part on reusing existing materials and that pay little attention to the integrity of those materials; new texts are designed using whatever is

to hand, in order to communicate something in specific social contexts. He further suggests that the fluidity of convergence culture means that acts of communication should be thought of as *designed*, because each one must be tailored by a reflexive, communicating agent to the specific context in which that communication is taking place: the context includes the communicator's interest, their understanding of their audience, the resources they have, and the mode of dissemination they will deploy (Kress, 2010: 26):

*design* is an assertion of the individual's interest in participating appropriately in the social and communicational world; and an insistence on their capacity to shape their interests through the *design* of messages with the resources available to them in specific situations [. . .] It is the position taken by those who have become accustomed to *produce* (for *YouTube* even if not in or for the school) and who disseminate their messages in and to a world which they address confidently. (Kress, 2010: 23)

As a result, meaning is now more than ever provisional, unstable and fluid and, rather than analyse what particular images mean, 'it is more fruitful to ask after the origins, uses and appropriations of visual artefacts and media' (Sandywell and Heywood, 2012: 39).

This is clearly a truncated discussion of a geographically and socially specific contemporary visual culture. Nonetheless, a parallel should be emerging between this particular description of a specific visual culture and its diverse and context-dependent use of images as a means of communication, and the approach of researchers using VRM to their visual images. In both cases, meaning is communicated by what is done with images, in specific moments of interpretation and evocation. In both cases, images are treated not as if they carry inherent meaning, but rather as objects which can be deployed in very different ways. In both cases, visual materials are made to make sense depending on the context of their use. In (convergent) visual culture, images are used in very diverse ways. They are created, shared, pirated, broadcast, narrowcast, copied, mashed and otherwise circulated; they work to record things, to represent things, to argue and to create affect; they are meaninglessly cute or silly; they are sent as messages to maintain or destroy social relationships; and they achieve this through what they show, how they are seen, and what is done with them. What matters is what is done with an image. Similarly, researchers using VRM are not interested in what meanings are inherent in the images generated by VRM; rather, like Knowles and Sweetman (2004b: 6), they emphasize 'the analytical and conceptual possibilities of visual methods' in terms of 'what it is that visual methods are able to achieve', rather than in terms of what the visual materials created by VRM inherently are.

In such circumstances, it seems that researchers using VRM are quite typical of the 'designers' evoked in Kress's account: they are typical in their uninterest in deciding on the nature of 'the' photograph, or the essence of 'the' drawing; they are also typical in their reflexive engagements with images. As Kress (2010: 26) puts it, in a world:

marked by instability and provisionality, every event of communication is in principle unpredictable in its form, structure and in its 'unfolding'. The absence of secure frames requires of each participant in an interaction that they assess, on each occasion, the social environment, the social relations which obtain within it and the resources available for shaping the communicational encounter.

The second section of this paper also noted that most VRM still rely heavily on words, whether written or spoken, to clarify the meaning of images, to the extent that some advocates of VRM argue that far too little attention is paid to the image itself and what it does. But this, again, is what happens in the contemporary visual culture describe by Jenkins (2008) and Kress (2010); text is a necessary requirement for framing, provisionally, the fluidity of meaning in the communicative context provided by contemporary, convergent visual culture.

What this section has argued, then, is that the relationship between VRM and visual culture consists in what research using VRM *does* with images, as part of its practice. Using VRM *performs* a contemporary visual culture, rather than finding it *represented* in the images it generates, in the social it performs or in the research participants it enrolls. In particular, the indecision of VRM as a body of work about the nature of the various kinds of images VRM create – the uncertainty about how those images form traces – is performing the provisionality of contemporary, convergent visual culture. It is here, then, that VRM and visual culture coincide.

## **Conclusion: VRM as visual culture**

This paper began with a question: what is the relationship between the recent remarkable increase in the use of certain visual research methods and the intensification, for many people in many parts of the world, of visual culture over the past decade? The first section of this paper attempted to suggest an answer by discussing 'visual research methods' as they have been constituted in a range of recent handbooks, reviews and papers discussing their use, and argued that the 'social' that is explored and performed as VRM are deployed was most often emotional, sensory, everyday, reflexive and *visible* rather than *visual*. The second section then focused on photographs as the most popular inscription device used in VRM research projects, and explored the differences between the traces created by those photographs, and the traces produced the inscription devices of the scientists described by Latour and Woolgar (1979). It argued that researchers' deployment of photographs in VRM produced diverse kinds of traces and that as a result, their inscriptions were constituted in multiple ways. Hence the inscription device most commonly used in VRM projects is unstable, shifting what it achieves depending on the specific project that uses it. The third section of the paper suggested that this instability was, in fact, where VRM and visual culture converge. The multiple ways of doing



things with images in VRM seems to reflect the multiple ways of doing things with images in a contemporary visual culture; and the reflexivity demanded by VRM may be driven by the importance of designed communication in visual culture now. Hence it is what researchers using VRM *do* with images that seems to epitomize the visual culture that they also inhabit. Banal, performative, designed, created by anyone, affective, saturated with reflexive talk and not always paid very much attention: this is how images are treated in many VRM projects, and that practice reflects key aspects of a visual culture in which meaning is increasingly conveyed visually and provisionally. VRM, therefore, as well as being an innovative development in social science research methods, are also a symptom of a much wider cultural shift taking place, unevenly, in contemporary society.

In addressing the relation between an aspect of contemporary social science practice and a wider field of cultural practice – that is, in posing the problematic of the relation between VRM and contemporary visual culture – this paper bears some relation to recent debates in sociology concerning the relationship between the production of knowledge about the social by sociologists, and the production of knowledge about the social by other social groups, from corporations' databases and journalists to pressure groups and bloggers. 'We encounter multiple reflections on the nature of our present', note Osborne *et al.* (2008: 520); 'our daily lives are permeated by market research, opinion polls, interviews with the famous and the ordinary, television documentaries, descriptions of life in zones ranging from world cities to refugee camps and suburban housing estates'. In his recent history of social science methods, Savage (2010: 91) uses the term 'sensibility' in order to identify orientations shared across these multiple reflections. In his history of social science methods, he consistently places the social sciences, and sociology in particular, alongside other reflections of the social, particularly those found in literature, and uses the term 'sensibility' to refer to the specific practices and assumptions that traverse these fields; thus, for example, he describes a technocratic and investigative 'sensibility' that travelled across a particular range of 'modern' occupational groups, social milieux and cultural forms in the 1950s, inflecting science fiction literature and a technocratic 'middle class' as much as social science research methods. What this paper has proposed is that a certain visual culture could also now be described as a 'sensibility' in Savage's manner, inflecting a range of contemporary social practice, including visual methods researchers in the social sciences. Most work developing the implications of Savage's approach for contemporary sociology has been emphasizing the ways in which all sorts of knowledge about the social is made by non-sociologists (Beer and Burrows, 2010; Savage and Burrows, 2007). This paper instead has inverted that emphasis, in a sense, to suggest that those social scientists deploying VRM are enacting key aspects of contemporary visual culture in their professional research practice.

What does this analysis mean for those advocating VRM? One issue that deserves some discussion, I would suggest, is raised by Savage's (2010)

discussion of a 'sensibility'. A sensibility, such as that exemplified by specific social science methods, according to Savage, is complicit with a particular social grouping because 'social groups are both mobilized by, *and themselves deploy*, various kinds of device' (2010: 13, emphasis added). Savage's history of social science research methods takes the sample survey and in-depth interview as methods that performed a particular, professionalizing fraction of the middle class. So, if VRM are also a new kind of social science 'device', are they also being deployed by a specific 'social group'? Are VRM, like the sample survey and in-depth interview before them, according to Savage, also a marker of 'fixities being performed and stabilised in cascades of (partly social science) devices' (Savage *et al.*, 2010: 9), and if so, what – or who – are those fixities?

Here the implications of the argument offered in this paper are less clear. For Savage (2010), the use of innovative social science research methods entails 'the politics of method' because it establishes not just technical competence but also social distinction. But this paper has been arguing that social science researchers using the images generated by VRM are *not* in fact particularly distinct from the patterns of practice that constitute contemporary visual culture. So should the question nonetheless be asked: are there social distinctions being enacted in the emergence of VRM which preserve the social science research as 'expert'? Or is the 'convergence' identified by Jenkins (2008) in the field of cultural production also happening in the field of social science knowledge production?

Whatever the answer to those questions, this paper has offered an answer to another: the relationship between VRM and a specific form of visual culture. Saturated with the everyday and with talk, with meaning and with affect, images – both in VRM research projects and elsewhere – are made in diverse ways and shared and displayed in any number of ways. They may be representational images that carry significant meaning; they may be tools for thinking with; they may evoke the ineffable; they may be sent as messages; remembered forever; deleted after a moment. In these diverse uses of images, and despite their apparent uninterest in visual culture, then, it seems that VRM are indeed 'non-coincidentally' part of contemporary visual culture.

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## Notes

- 1 This is not of course quite accurate. Several social science disciplines have, to some extent or another, long-standing engagements with various kinds of visual methods: geography, anthropology, sociology and economics in particular.
- 2 The International Visual Sociology Association, the British Sociological Society's Visual Sociology Study Group, the biennial International Conference on Visual Methods and the new journal *Visual Methodologies* should also be mentioned here.
- 3 This uninterest is underlined by the almost total lack of engagement by researchers using VRM in the visual culture studies literature. To my knowledge, the only engagements with visual

culture studies' urtext on photography – Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1982) – in discussions of VRM are Croghan *et al.* (2008) and Hodgetts *et al.* (2007). It should be noted, however, that the uninterest is mutual: most visual culture studies scholars are uninterested in social science discussions of VRM, as exemplified by the *Journal of Visual Culture* (for similar arguments see Bal, 2003).

- 4 This might well explain the uninterest among the advocates of VRM in Geographical Information Systems, anthropological film-making, data visualization and quantitative visual methods; none of these methods consider discussion of the image fundamental to what such images communicate.

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