Epistemological premisses of converting video of social events into the narrative

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About thirty years ago D. Harper remarked that although photography and sociology emerged almost simultaneously, visual sociology — the use of photos, films and videos for the study of society, as well as the visual artifacts of society itself — is not quite productive and is developed on the periphery of Sociology as an integrated discipline (Harper, 2002). Indeed, in theory, the ambition of sociology, which claimed that it brings a truly scientific way for describing social life, might be directly supported by the new means to document the observation of the social life and above all — by photography. Possible technical difficulties, on the one hand, and the habit to rely upon written documents and numbers, on the other, prevented the amplifying the sociological data with photographic evidence, although it is likely that sociologists providently adhered to the typical for the science at that time belief that substantial is not visible and appearance is deceptive.

The specific way of verifiable study of the aspects of social life appears in sociology after the visual turn (Rubi, 2000; Heath, Hindmarsh, Luff, 2010; Back, Puwar, 2013; Pink, 2012; Prosser 1998, et al.). To put it quite simply, visual sociology, if it is something different and something more than a set of technical methods, can not, but proceed from the fact that the most important, or at least something extraordinarily important can and should primarily be **seen** in the social life. This means that a tacit assumption of invisibility of social substance has been dropped, and the substance of the visible was put in its place. What kind of social phenomena could provoke this turn?

On the Phenomenological nature of the Subject-matter of Video-based research

Non-communicative forms of social events' organization in the public area are of interest primarily because there are no adequate narratives for them, even if a wide variety of surveillance equipment and video fixation currently exists. Numerous surveillance cameras, security monitoring, etc. can be technically perfect, but they are completely useless, if the language of understanding and description of what is fixed on video would use the terms of intentional action, the meaning of which is captured by the participants in a conversation. If the conversation is not used or is not available to the observer, any attempt to submit — in Ricoeur's words — «meaningful action as a text» is ineffective and sometimes self-deceptive (Ricoeur, 2008; Ricoeur, 1976). The behavior of large masses of people, who in the strict sense of the word do not communicate — they do not talk to each other, in airports, squares, «public places», etc. — has been described, if at all documented, by extremely scarce and inadequate means. The same can be said about human interaction with a variety of the latest electronic devises.

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In today's world the development in technology runs parallel with the new social phenomena, to describe which we often have very scarce theoretical resources, even if the empirical, experimental observation base, sophisticated and reliable methods for obtaining data, are available.

Special attention of social researchers was recently attracted by the phenomena that are referred to in political and philosophical literature as a multitude, i.e., large entities, which do not suit the usual terms «group», «gathering», «audience», or even «crowd». Dispersed multitudes, coordination occurring beyond verbal means of communication (not-intended coordination), physical phenomena' coherence at the level of anticipation of partner's expressions and activities — all of this are found (or looked at) in part for the first time, and partially supported (embodied as the data) by the visual methods.

Phenomenal nature of the Social (Social as a visible phenomenon) was recognized by the phenomenological sociology, and, although not every visual sociology is based on the provisions of the philosophical and sociological phenomenology, the relationship between the visual turn and rapid career phenomenological sociology made in the 60s — 70s. is evident.

Indeed, the world of everyday life, with an interest in which phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, and some other non-formal approaches are often (and sometimes in vain) identified — is a world that is visibly occurring. The structures are not observable. Social systems *per se* are abstractions, their existence is disputed and, in any case, requires an additional evidence and testimonies. At the same time, actions, interactions, everyday communication can be seen as it is, and the question is not whether we can register it visually, but what is the advantage of one or another way of its detection and fixation, how to make it more heuristic. Since the interpretation of what is embodied in the picture, as well as the scenes recorded on camera, do not speak for themselves, in spite of all the evidence, visual studies were somehow preserved as an important but still a subsidiary method. Visual method usually came to the rescue when the other methods were not sufficient, still, it took considerable theoretical effort to account for visibility and observability as the specific features not only of the sociological method, but of the phenomena social life as well.

The point, once again, is that the video-records do not provide us with the material of social life as a such, as if we were dealing with theory in pictures.

Roles, institutions, structures, groups, systems, organizations, and more only in very rare cases speak for themselves. What we are likely to see directly in the photos or films, in fact, goes through several processes of interpretation, which simply cannot be avoided.

«What do we see?» — making Visible the Social and Video the Data

First of all, it is determined, of course, — socially, culturally and technically — by the observer's position. Selecting the shooting location, details, length, angle stability, etc., puts the imprint not only of the individual research interest. It is important, what scientific community an observer belongs to, what is considered to be important for the observation and follow-up communication at the outcome of the observation, how long will take the field work as a part of the project and how is justified the duration of the very project in the communication with the research community. Further, the amount of video material, except for the occasional shooting circumstances also depends not only on what I would like to know as the observer. The guidelines for visual sociology often mention the fact that usually a person gets tired, and his attention becomes dulled. Saved observations materials allow to return again and again to what could escape from the attention of the tired observer. The records remain forever the same and can be transferred to other colleagues for the study of exactly the same data. There is a temptation to conclude that these methods are utmost objective. But, of course, this is not so, and a reminder of the social constructedness in this sense is never superfluous.

The reflexivity of the researcher, taking into account the relativity of its own position and its dependence not only on the norms of acquiring knowledge in the community of observers, but also on the cultural and social conditioning of what he sees and hears, is a sine qua non for an ethically responsible sociological project. But it is not only that in the case of video.

Video creates a feeling of empathy and immersion rather than merely represents the picture. We get (by not only shooting, but also by retrofitting) inaccessible to the human unaided eye pan-optical image in action, which does not just «describe» what is going on, but directs our attention in a certain way. Therefore, a new attitude toward video-methodology can be called (borrowing the term from Lorimer)«more-than-representational» (Lorimer, 2005). Operators familiar with the situation, when looking through the footage, discover that on the screen, in the video, events, individual actions, objects look different (sometimes strikingly different) than it had in «reality», at the time of the shooting. They seem to be «estranged», even if they represent something very familiar, personal, intimate. Using video allows one to «see and hear the world other than we used to see and hear it in our everyday life» (Simpson, 2015, p. 28), and in this video to a greater extent than any other method meets the basic epistemological problems of scientific social study. Among such problems Z. Bauman distinguishes «estrangement» of the object as one of those epistemological methods that distinguishes scientific knowledge and judgment from the common-sensual one (Bauman, 1990).

The role of the camera, however, is much more sophisticated — it is able to strengthen impression (visual and audial) of the spectator, even if the spectator was present at the time of shooting; the camera can act as a Fabricator, storyteller, a magician... In any case, its role is ambiguous — it simultaneously connects (smiling with) and removes (smiling from) your object.

Video as a research material literally forces the «analyst» to use in his work not only his cognitive ability, but also affects, bodily and sensory practices (Back, Puwar, 2013). Thus, there is a problem of converting multi-modal and multi-sensory content of video material into uni-modal text / narrative. It remains open. How to make the out-coming data to «speak», and even more so — to «tell» something that is not available to the pure theoretical logic of everyday sight? How to «coin» the result or finding obtained in video analysis into recognizable for social scientists form of the text without losing the peculiarity of this analysis and without sacrificing details in the description of the result? How is possible such a narrative?

We are interested in the narrative which is not simply a statement of what happened, in «memory» as a «recalling», but rather in articulating, embodying the pronunciation of «here and now»; the content of this narrative is not transferred from the «mental maps of events» into the text, but is rather the summoning up of the direct visual impressions.

The Four-fold structure of the «multi-ordered observer»

The reflexion of the observer is a crucial part in converting images and details into the narrative. But what is «the observer's narrative»? In this case we deal with, so to speak, «multi-ordered» observer. And one and the same person can serve as the observer of different orders.

Thus, the observer of the first order (even armed with the camera), in fact, is a participant observer: he produces a video, creates the material / story to the narrative (or even «video-narrative») being inside a situation, part of which falls into the camcorder lens. His narrative (and vision) of this situation may not coincide completely with what gets in the video. However, this narrative contains a reflection on the distinction between the content of the situation, which falls into the record, and the general plan of the situation, which includes the observer / operator, but which does not coincide with the entry.

The observer of the second order is watching the situation recorded on video and, at the same time, he can watch the operator's position and to reflect on the «point of view» of the operator (even if it was the operator himself). This is reflection of non-participant observer

working with the image as the text, analyzing the situation given the content of its fragment (captured on video). His narrative and reflexivity (as to the judgments on situation are made on the basis of only its part observation and that the video situation is not in fact the situation itself, but an artifact, and, finally, that these judgments may depend on conditions / circumstances of operation with this artifact, ie video viewing conditions) are limited to the visible content and basically boil down to answering the question «What do I see in this record?», «What's going on here?», «How what has been going could be referred to?».

The observer of the third order — the one who, «taking off the layer» of the first impressions / Gestalt, is not satisfied with only the answer to the question «What's happening?», But seeks to respond to the next, deeper, question «What lies behind it?». To do this, one is, first of all, to delve into the «factuality» of what is happening in the video, marking, selecting, recording in his narrative of the smallest details visible in the picture of the situation. This view is actually an observer's and researcher's view, his narrative — it is rather a meticulous record (not necessarily «significant», «significance» is defined as a result of the study) all the components are taken into account and the «factuality» of the video itself. Actually the «significance», attributed to some detail and minute episodes in the picture is the «natural attitude», which is overcome in the third-order observation, the observer «estranges» from (his own or not)«self-evident» ideas about the importance of the observed situation in the context; This is the highlight of the third order reflection of the observer.

Finally, the fourth-order observer is placed in the experimental situation. He looks at the video in slow motion, the storyboard into fragments for a period of a few tenths of a second. He sees the «invisible» to the naked eye, it is able to reflect this mode synchronicity many parts (and not only the synchronicity of their co-presence of static and relations, but also the dynamics of this relationship changes — the actual movement, 'development' situation). His narrative — a story about what lies beyond the visible, usual, expected, unnoticed, self-a-evident, recognizable, reliable, obvious, etc. (Bankovskaya, Filippov, 2015).

Conclusion

How to construct the narratives of the video-files? Can we identify some general requirements for various narratives about the same structure of the video? What are the features of narrative structures of various orders of observation? What is happening to reflexivity in the narrative in the transition from one observation register to another? All these questions are both inevitable for the theory-oriented research based on video-methodology, and still open for reflexive consideration.

In general, the use of video as a data serves as the check-up and verification of our limited (and sometimes wrong) intuitions and memories; they make available for the observer the wider range of materials as the data, as well as provide some assurance that the analytical considerations and «findings» do not arise as artifacts of intuitive idiosyncrasy, selective attention or memory, or as a result of field experiment (Lorimer, 2005; Heritage, 2011; Vannini, 2014).

The need for penetration into the text (and then — into the video as a text) requires from sociologists to focus not only on the linguistic problems (and then — on the problems of Fine Arts — in the broadest sense). To be indexical in operating the data of their research sociologists are expected to get open not only to the directly related subjects but also to keep in practice «the absolute adequacy method» and «indifference» to the interdisciplinary barriers.

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