How to Use Methods of Visual Sociology to Study Global Threats

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Abstract

This paper argues for the significance of employing visual sociology methods to study global threats. The central theme revolves around the human tendency to struggle with recognizing shared humanity, often resorting to negative stereotyping that contributes to dehumanization and social injustices. The author draws on decades of experience in using visual semiotics to confront the stigmatization of diverse communities, emphasizing the role of the visual in reshaping perceptions. Addressing the dehumanization inherent in conflicts, the author emphasizes the importance of recognizing the "Other" as part of the human family, advocating for a right to be seen and represented in diverse ways. The essay critiques historical and contemporary visual practices that exclude and denigrate minorities, citing examples from film history and modern media. It underscores the persistence of negative stereotypes and advocates for counter-narratives that portray the diversity and humanity of marginalized groups. The conclusion reaffirms the author's commitment to using visual technologies and emphasizes the integration of visual technology with traditional approaches as a means to foster a deeper understanding of our multicultural world.

Keywords
visual sociology, global threats, dehumanization, visual semiotics, urban environments, stigmatization

Introduction

In this brief visually-enhanced essay I hope to discuss the importance of seeing in important matters that are often ignored. As to global threats, I think most people would agree

with me that the greatest threat is war. As I write this essay, the mass media and the virtual world has turned their attention away from the COVID-19 global pandemic to the variously described "war in Ukraine." The effects of this war are being felt far beyond Ukraine itself (Delisle, 2022; Kuzemko et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2022; Roland, 2023; Sedrakyan, 2022). Attention today is also on potential "invasion" of The Republic of China by The People's Republic of China. Certainly, such conflicts affect the economy, forcing us to cope with new challenges (Bougias et al., 2022; Del Lo et al., 2022; Nóia Júnior et al., 2022; Qureshi et al., 2022). Some pundits are warning that these conflicts, proxy or not, could light the fuse for a nuclear holocaust in World War III (Helfand et al., 2022). In this regard, it might seem rather pointless to discuss "How to use methods of visual sociology to study global threats." However, as I have learned over too many decades of conscious existence, most threats to humankind can be traced to the difficulty of, if not the impossibility of - if I be allowed to paraphrase - "seeing our neighbors as ourselves," as opposed to seeing them as "others" who are unworthy of equal, humane treatment.

I have spent decades directly and indirectly visually confronting, in words and images this pervasive and universal problem of recognizing our common humanity via a rather pedestrian version of visual semiotics. As I continue to explain to my students, or others less required to listen, we learn the meanings of the things that we see via our occipital lobes through the process of socialization. Those meanings, sometimes referred to as attitudes, norms and/or values, contain not only factual knowledge about the objects of our corneal attention, but aesthetic and moral evaluations as well. How else could it be possible to see our fellow human beings as tall, short, handsome, ugly, or at the same time people to be exterminated or enslaved?

The dehumanization that makes possible the all too common historical and contemporary tragedies of genocide and slavery, depend in large part on the successful negative stereotyping of ethnic and other socially defined groups such as members of the LBGTQ+ communities (Kteily & Landry, 2022; see also Bonache et al., 2016; Croom, 2015; Durante & Fiske, 2017; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016; Heinrich, 2013; Kim & Loury, 2019). For example, I began my work combatting the unwarranted stigmatization of African American neighborhoods which was used to justify their mistreatment by public and private agencies (Krase, 1973). To appreciate what I later termed the "Visual Semiotics" of race and ethnicity, it is necessary to recognize that ordinary people have the power to change the meanings of the spaces and places they occupy and use. Although they may not be the most powerful of entities in our glocalized world, they nevertheless, perhaps naively, sometimes consciously, and more often unconsciously, compete with other individuals, groups, and organizations to define their micro worlds for themselves and for others. Relatedly, another emergent question is "What does racial or ethnic look like?" A more direct way of phrasing the question is "How does the appearance of a neighborhood lead to it being defined a particularly an ethnic or racial one?" And; "What are the consequences for the residents of local designations such as enclave, ghetto or slum?" Most importantly; "What are the meanings of those designations to those who have the power, legitimate or not, to influence if not determine their life chances?" As I have often written:

When we newly pass through urban spaces, we are like tourists using our eyes to decipher the clues and cues that loudly and quietly surround us. 'Is this a safe or a dangerous place?' 'Am I welcome here or should I leave before it is too late?' 'Are the people who live here rich or poor?' 'What is their race, ethnicity, or religion and how (or why) does it matter?' Some things are easy to tell on a street, such as whether there are things for sale. Legitimate merchants make it obvious that they are seeking customers with signs that compete for attention, but for the sale of illicit goods, the signs vendors give off are subtler. Yet, for the knowledgeable customer they in plain view. This reading of the 'street signs,' is no mere aesthetic exercise. As I first argued in The Presentation of Community in Urban Society (Krase, 1973), what we see on the street makes a difference in how we respond to the places and the people we

encounter in our increasingly complex and changing urban surroundings (Krase, 2012, p. 1).

To help address this issue visually I synthesized the following formulation:

1. Presentation - what ordinary people do in their everyday lives that is displayed in public.
2. Re-Presentation - how their lives are more or less objectively recorded and reported by social scientists, journalists, and other observers.
3. Representation - the standardized re-presentation that comes to stand for those people.

Methods

The field of visual sociology can be helpful in examining global threats and issues. Visual sociology employs visual data, such as photos, videos, drawings, and other images, to analyze social phenomena. This method aids in gaining a deeper understanding of global threats. Photo-documentation involves taking pictures or videos of issues like climate change, poverty, and conflict, followed by an analysis to assess their impact within the social and cultural context. When examining mass media, the focus is on scrutinizing visual content such as news photos and online videos to understand how they shape public opinion and perceptions of global threats. Visual ethnographies involve observing the lives and activities of groups connected, either directly or indirectly, to global threats. Lastly, mapping uses geographic information systems to create visual maps that illustrate the distribution of global threats and their effects on different regions.

Employing visual tools for crafting questionnaires or conducting visual interviews with individuals grappling with global issues facilitates data collection while observing their responses and reactions. Analyzing visual content available on the Internet and social networks enables us to discern the perspectives and emotions of a population deeply concerned about a threat. It is essential, during global threat research, to handle visual materials with care, adhering to ethical standards and ensuring the privacy and safety of individuals who may be subjects of study. In examining the visual sociology of global threats and problems, it is pertinent to identify key philosophical orientations. Visual anthropology, which delves into cultural and social phenomena through visual analysis—specifically observation, photography, and videography—offers valuable insights. The concept of "visual ethnography" is encompassed within this framework. Exploring the symbolism and imagery associated with global threats aids in comprehending societal perceptions, unraveling the images employed in media and sociocultural contexts. The study of semiotics proves instrumental in dissecting symbols, signs, and their meanings within visual materials pertaining to global threats. Consumer anthropology, examining the visual culture of consumers and reflecting their attitudes toward global issues, provides another philosophical dimension. The incorporation of marketing and cultural research becomes useful in this context.

The works of Ferdinand Tönnies (1998), Roland Barthes (1985), Susan Sontag (1990), and John Berger (2013), among others, can prove beneficial for the exploration of visual sociology and global threats. Each of these scholars' methods and concepts contributes to broadening our understanding of global threats, their societal impact, and the diverse ways in which these issues are perceived and integrated into cultural contexts. The complexity of analyzing a multicultural world becomes evident, requiring an appreciation for and interpretation of cultural differences and interactions among various groups. To effectively analyze the multicultural world, a methodological approach is suggested. This involves adopting a systems approach that perceives the multicultural world as a system wherein different cultures, subgroups, and individuals interact. The emphasis is on understanding the relationships between these components and their mutual influences. Ethnographic research is recommended to gather data from diverse cultural groups, utilizing observations, interviews, and participation in cultural

events to acquire insights into their lives and values. Additionally, a study of textual sources, encompassing literature, media, religious texts, and other materials reflecting the cultural values and identities of various groups, proves integral to the analytical process.

Visual sociology assumes a pivotal role in scrutinizing visual materials, including photographs, drawings, advertisements, and other depictions reflecting cultural diversity and stereotypes. The analysis of the impact of globalization on the multicultural world encompasses the proliferation of mass culture, migration, and communication technologies. Consequently, it becomes imperative to investigate social practices, customs, and rituals across diverse cultures, examining how they interact and adapt to one another. An in-depth exploration includes analyzing conflicts and cooperation between cultural groups, understanding the conditions and causes of conflicts, and exploring avenues for peaceful coexistence. Delving into the concepts of identity within different cultural groups, along with how they define themselves and others, is essential. Sociocultural anthropology contributes by exploring concepts such as cultural relativism, cultural apparatus, and cultural development, enhancing our comprehension of the multicultural world. This methodology serves as a powerful tool to gain deeper insights into the intricacies and interrelationships within the multicultural world. It facilitates the identification of opportunities for enhancing intercultural interaction and understanding.

Results

Although the initial units of analysis for my studies had been socio-spatial, i.e., neighborhoods and cities, over the decades I have modified this simple formula to include related scholar activist studies of variously stigmatized social groups themselves and, in a way, to see the world as a cosmopolitan city (Krase, 2020, 2012b, 2010, 2004, 2003, 1977, Krase & Shortell, 2015).

My work is both a theoretical and methodological practice for as put by John Grady (1996) "... producing and decoding images which can be used to empirically investigate social organization, cultural meaning and psychological processes" (p. 17). In my neighborhood studies, I focused on what John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1984) called vernacular landscapes that are part of the life of communities which are governed by custom and held together by personal relationship which are, according to Dolores Hayden (1990), "...an account of both inclusion and exclusion" (p. 11). David Harvey (1990) also argued that: "Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways. This elemental fact is often overlooked by those theorists who presume a priori that there is some ideal-typical and universal tendency for all human beings to construct a human community of roughly similar sort, no matter what the political or economic circumstances" (p. 265). According to Gottdiener (1985) "the study of culture which links symbols to objects is called semeiotics." and "spatial semeiotics studies the metropolis as a meaningful environment" (pp. 15-16). He adds that the most basic concept for urban studies study is the "settlement space" which is both constructed and organized. "It is built by people who have followed some meaningful plan for the purposes of containing economic, political, and cultural activities. Within it, people organize their daily actions according to meaningful aspects of the constructed space" (Gottdiener, 1985, p. 16). As to the importance of seeing strangers, Lynn Lofland (1985) noted that "city life was made possible by an 'ordering' of the urban populace in terms of appearance and spatial location such that those within the city could know a great deal about one another by simply looking (p. 3). Obviously, her observation is even more true when looking beyond the borders of cities and more problematic as to the moral evaluations attached to the appearances (representations) in a world of eight billion strangers (Shortell & Krase, 2013).

As to the "Right to the City," Lars Frers and Lars Meier (2007), argue that the word "right" has many meanings which must be adjusted as local and historical contexts, and must pay

attention to the right to practice diversity within it. With specific reference to immigrants, Marcello Balbo (2009) sees the right to the city as "a series of legitimate claims to the necessary conditions of a satisfying, dignified and secure existence in cities by both individual citizens and social groups." These "rights" are clearly tied to the notion of a cosmopolitan city, where people have learned to live with diversity and to respect each other's differences. Marius Ossewaarde (2007) argues that cosmopolitanism requires an appreciation of a global humanity. "This appreciation depends on weaker social bonds between locals, thus allowing for a more abstract, universal, indeterminate and virtual" community that would include the Other. Cosmopolites, or "citizens of the world," are essentially those who willingly belong to the same community as diverse "Others." Such an idealized urban condition is something devotedly to be wished because every society has its own virtual ideal of local community its members are often unable to see minorities and other strangers as legitimate citizens of the cities they share.

Although there are many excellent and more elaborate definitions of visual approaches to the study of human society as in visual sociology and anthropology and related (inter) disciplines, my own, less eloquent version which is the foundation of my work is simply the use of visual technologies, such as cameras, for the collection of data for analysis and consequently to visually enhance findings. In much of my camera work, I have tried to capture others in such a way that our common humanity can be more directly grasped as suggested, as I interpret it, by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl, 1982). With simple quotidian images I hope to remove (bracket) the meanings that have been artificially attached to the object/image by the societies in which we live which makes intersubjectivity (recognizing our common humanity) more possible. For example, I have tried to demonstrate how visual and virtual technologies can be integrated with traditional modes of research to foster an understanding of multicultural urban environments. In some cases, by simply walking through the ordinary spaces of im/migrant neighborhoods to counter stereotypical images presented by biased media. While Michel De Certeau wrote of creating the city in the act of walking (De Certeau, 1985), I have tried to create more inclusive cities by weaving critical ideas into narratives of places through which I pass (Krase 2010, 2012a).

A significant aspect of the dehumanizing "Othering" necessary for warfare; that is, killing fellow human beings, is seeing others as unworthy of humane treatment. We can think of this as a problem of inclusion... Who is to be included in the human(e) family. As to inclusion, I believe that all human beings should have the right to be seen as they are and according to our own personal and cultural values. People also must be able to create and control their own images, even if they are ignored and perhaps feared. These depictions of quotidian diversity or commonplace "otherness" also have practical value, as they can serve as antidotes to the negative portrayals in the mass media that hinder the mobility as well as the inclusion of diverse groups, such as migrants and minorities, in cities today.

Images and acceptance of diversity are socially and politically bound together. As Charles Taylor (1994) wrote: "Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it." He continues: "The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized" (p. 36). This sensitivity to the power of images is crucial for any approach for creating a shared sense of community in the world today. It can be suggested in this context that human rights and social justice depend not only open access to tangible territorial and geographic spaces but also concern visual/virtual spaces.

Both Europe and the United States have long and ignoble histories of using images to exclude despised minorities and otherwise denigrate diversity. In the selection of images that follow this text, Figures 1 and 2 are examples of how images disseminated in popular media were used to show the ineligibility of freed Black slaves, Irish immigrants, and Jews for local

as well as national community membership. Such visual practices continue today in more sophisticated and technologically advanced ways and accomplish the same exclusionary goals. Common to both venues in the current century is the visual stigmatization of more recent minority group migrants and, especially post 9/11, Muslims.

Two of the best-known examples of modernist visual defamation were the films *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) and *The Eternal Jew* (Hippler, 1940) or *Der ewige Jude*. Using racist stereotypes, in Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith made his film more personal by presenting a perverted version of The U.S. Civil War through the lives of two families and their servants. During emotion-evoking scenes slaves and abolitionist are shown as the villains and, during Reconstruction, the racist Ku Klux Klan heroically rises. *The Eternal Jew* (Hippler, 1940) or Der ewige Jude is a "classic" documentary style propaganda film that served to expound the menace of European Jewry. Jews are visually depicted as filthy, evil, and corrupt. Selective scenes of Jewish life and clips from Jewish cinema serve to visually "explain" the Jewish problem and the film ends with Adolf Hitler declaring that, if there is war, the Jewish race will be annihilated (*Vernichtung*).

Whether documentary or fictional, the cinematic portrayal of despised minorities has much in common as to media technique. Marlon Riggs' documentary *Ethnic Notions* (Riggs, 1986) shows how powerful stereotypes have fed anti-black attitudes throughout American history. The images she presented of loyal uncle Toms, carefree Sambos, faithful Mammies, grinning Coons, savage Brutes, and wide-eyed Pickaninnies in cartoons, feature films, popular songs, minstrel shows, advertisements, folklore, household artifacts, and children's rhymes show how racial images have evolved. These caricatures were popular from the 1820s through the Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968) and, although somewhat muted, continue today (Wacquant, 1993).

As Islamophobia continues to be a plague in European and American discourses today, we should also consider *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Jhally, 2006). From silent films to current Hollywood hits Arabs have been shown: "from Bedouin bandits and submissive maidens to sinister sheikhs and gun-wielding 'terrorists.'" As in *Ethnic Notions* (Riggs, 1986), it offers important insights into the source of these stereotypic images and how they influence domestic and foreign policies. See also *Latinos Beyond Reel* (Picker & Sun, 2013). Whether for Blacks, Jews, Arabs or others, the persistence of negative images makes prejudicial attitudes seems "natural." As do I, *Reel Bad Arabs* argues for counter-narratives that would do "justice to the diversity and humanity of Arab people and the reality and richness of Arab history and culture" (Shaheen, 2001a).

Unfortunately, in both Post-9/11 Europe and America, negative images of Arabs, and of Muslims in general have proliferated and iconized visual expressions of Islam such as veils and mosques have become even more contentious (El-Aswad, 2013; Krase & Shortell, 2010, 2015; Shaheen, 2008).

Discussion

I have attempted in the preceding text an overview of my attempts to show how human diversity and inclusion are not mutually exclusive and how visual technologies can be integrated with traditional modes to foster an understanding of our multicultural world. What follows are some examples from my own and the work of others that were discussed or alluded to in the forgoing essay. Although I believe some can stand without captions, I have included them to provide some context.
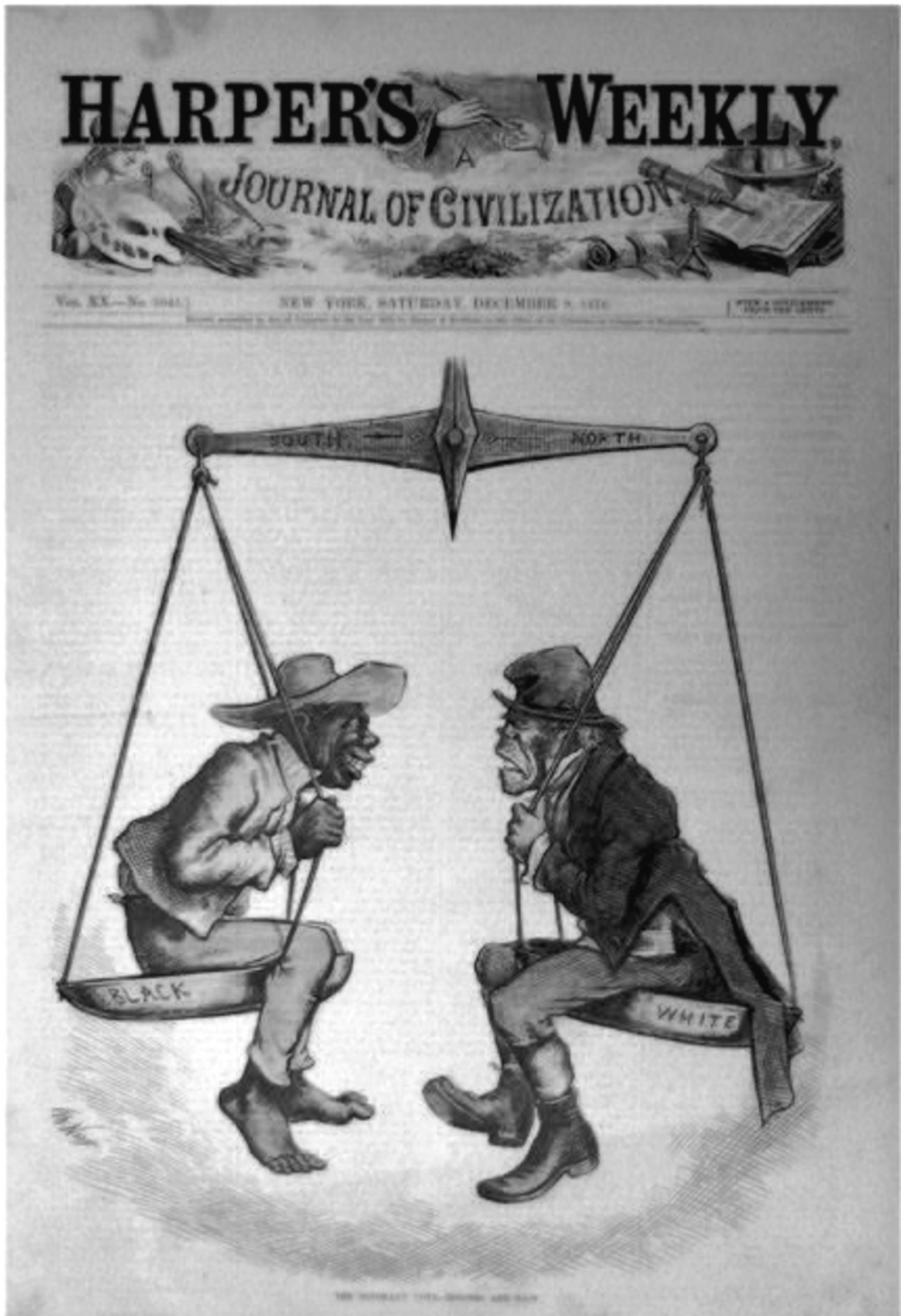
Figure 1. The Ignorant Vote, 1876 by Thomas Nast.

Note. This cartoon was published during the 1876 election, in which both sides charged fraud. Nast compares the African American Republican vote in the South to the Irish Catholic Democratic vote in the North (Nast, 1876).

Figure. 2 *The Eternal Jew* or *"Der ewige Jude,"* 1940.

Note. The Eternal Jew (1940) or *Der ewige Jude* is a "classic" documentary style propaganda film that served to expound the menace of European Jewry. Jews are visually depicted as filthy, evil, and corrupt.

Figure 3. "Veil in London," 2007 by Hazel Thompson.

Note. The large and small negative reactions to the wearing of head and facial coverings by Muslims and others in nominally "Christian" countries are captured here in the facial expression of a rider on the London Underground.

Figure 4. Caribbean Band in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn. 1975 by Jerry Krase.

Note. In the 1970s the Prospect Lefferts Gardens was stigmatized a dangerous black ghetto. Here is a photo from a neighborhood association block party.

Figure 5. Jolly N- Mechanical Toy, Circa 1900.

*Note.*I bought this object at an antique store as a reminder of commonplace are stigmatizing racial stereotypes in American society. As a backdrop I placed a copy of the catalogue "Imprinted: Illustrating Race" presented at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts during the summer of 2022.

Figure 6. Grandfather and Grandchild in Oslo, Norway, 2020, by Jerry Krase.

Note. I took this photo in the summer of 2010 where, in the summer of 2011, Anders Behring Breivik killed eight people when he detonated a bomb in central Oslo. Later that same

day he opened fire, killing 69 more, at a youth camp because he thought it was necessary in order stop the "Islamisation" of Norway. Breivik also accused the governing Labour Party of promoting multiculturalism and endangering Norway's identity. It must be noted, that he was not declared insane despite appeals by prosecutors (BBC News, 2012). Since that horrific incident, Norway, as the rest of Europe, has seen the successful rise of anti-immigrant electoral politics.

Figure 7. Artist in China, Hangzhou, China, 2017, by Jerry Krase.

Note. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the people of China at home and abroad were vilified. Given the current increasingly cold relations between the West and China, I have added photos like this to my collection which I show to audience to counter negative historical and contemporary images.

Figure 8. Child in Istanbul Mosque, 2010, by Jerry Krase.

Figure 9. Cape Town Kids, Cape Town, South Africa, 2000.

Note. Pictures of children are powerful antidotes to denigrating images of all groups.

Conclusions

Utilizing visual sociology methods for studying global threats offers an opportunity to gain a more profound understanding of the sociocultural dimensions of the issue and its societal impact. Here are steps to follow when employing visual sociology methods for studying global threats:

1. Identifying the specific global threat you intend to study, such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, etc.
2. Collecting a diverse range of visual materials associated with the chosen threat. These materials could include photographs, images from social media, news reports, artistic drawings, etc.
3. Applying visual sociology analysis techniques to delve into the meanings and perceptions conveyed in the visual materials. This analysis may involve assessing composition, color, symbols, context, and other elements within the images.
4. Analyzing the results and interpret how the visual materials reflect societal perceptions of the global threat. Considering variations in these perceptions across different cultural contexts and among diverse social groups.
5. Examining how the perceptions of global threats, as expressed in visual materials, influence people's behavior. This analysis could encompass studying public reactions, precautionary measures taken, and the emergence of social movements.
6. Comparing your findings with data from other studies on global threats conducted using different methodologies. This comparative approach helps validate your findings

and broaden the overall understanding of the problem.

7. Presenting your findings visually using tools such as photographs, graphs, charts, maps, etc. This visualization enhances the accessibility and comprehension of your research outcomes. This approach enhances the accessibility and comprehensibility of your research.

Visual sociology introduces new dimensions to the study of global threats, enabling scholars to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional and cultural aspects influencing society's perceptions and responses to these threats. In the context of this study, several additional concepts and approaches can be considered:

1. Utilizing a semiotic approach to analyze images for signs, symbols, and their meanings.
2. Exploring the role of social media in shaping public opinion regarding global threats. Examining how images and information shared on social networks impact the dissemination of certain moral or cultural norms.
3. Encompassing not only photographs but also videos, graphics, and other multimedia materials to comprehensively capture the dynamics and diversity of visual representations of the threat.
4. Participatory research allows individuals to express their perceptions of global threats through visual means, such as organizing photo competitions or mass photography projects to gather first-hand materials.
5. The geographic dimension of global threats entails the analysis of visual materials from diverse regions worldwide, exploring how different cultural and geographic contexts shape perceptions and responses to threats.
6. A long-term study involves monitoring changes in the perception of global threats, unveiling the evolution of public opinion and reactions over time.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of cultural contexts regarding threats in various cultural settings aids in understanding how cultural characteristics influence perceptions and adaptation to global issues. The incorporation of these methods, approaches, and concepts in the study of global threats through visual sociology provides a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on how society perceives and responds to the challenges facing the world.

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