Moving Pictures: Notes for a Visual Sociology in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper starts with an analysis dedicated to the state of the art of visual sociology to understand its historical evolution, with a specific focus on the reality of studies produced in the Italian and American fields. It concentrates on the age-old problem of defining this approach poised between theoretical discipline and research methodology. Great attention will also be paid to visual sociology as a tool for analysing a social reality increasingly suspended between real life and digital identity. Finally, to account for the advent of the digital society and the pervasiveness of digital tools for sharing images, an attempt to conceptualize images relating to the use of social media will be made explicit.

Keywords: digital society, image conceptualization, social media, visual sociology.

1. The image society and its representations

More than twenty-five years ago a reflection on Italian visual sociology (Faccioli, Pitasi 1995) as a sociological discipline and on its future perspectives identified two fundamental approaches underlying its hermeneutic ability to penetrate the social fabric and to grasp new and sociologically relevant aspects. It has been proposed either as an integrated methodology that provides additional tools for learning about social reality or as an autonomous science with its own field of study and with a peculiar knowledge paradigm.

Before illustrating the two heuristic orientations and their theoretical formulations, it is useful to make a digression on the value of visual culture in postmodern society and on previous forms of communication.

The relational horizon in which we live is crossed by semantic "arrows" of different thickness and unequal communicative power that pile up, add up, integrate, confirm each other or cancel each other out in an expansive and sometimes redundant melting pot of voices. They are signs that refer to verbal and non-verbal languages, olfactory, gustatory, phonic-acoustic, visual signals. Everyone is able to make us perceive emotions, to trigger sensations, to stimulate emotional and / or rational responses, to let us know in a mediated or immediate way the other one who is the interlocutor of our cognitive processes, whether it belongs to the animated world or to the inanimate one.

At the beginning of time, man was given to live in a polyphonic context of sounds, smells, flavours, smooth, rippled, pungent surfaces that relied on phonic-acoustic, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and visual language. In this semantic horizon the word, first spoken and then written with difficulty, makes its way by designating the things created by nature and by the hand of man, later binding them through logical and analogical relationships, elaborating abstractions, transmitting knowledge, allowing the individual to have memory of the past and to plan the future.

The word inaugurates a new way of being in the world, it is a means of socialization and sharing; in primary oral cultures, words become producers of a semantic circularity that involves the speaker and the listener in a single communicative field (Ong, 1986).

With the advent of the written word, signs bearing meaning find their place in a circumscribed space that delimits them, holds them over time and delivers them intact to those who will come (Innis, 1982). The privileged relationship between narrator and listeners is lost, but the approach to the written word, while subtracting the magical halo that is typical of a fruition characterized by a spatial and temporal proximity, allows the reader to deepen and make his own the text of which becomes, through interpretation, a co-factor, aware or not (Barthes, 1975).

The semantic ductility of words and the cheapness of their use compared to any other linguistic system, have guaranteed their role as guardian of knowledge for a long time. This primacy in the organization and dissemination of knowledge is maintained until the entry of electronic media (Meyrowitz, 1995) which forcefully enter the communication system, gaining from the figures and landscapes, which are immortalized in the photographs and images that flow on the television screens, constant attention in a process of semantic enlargement that involves people belonging to different socio-cultural classes.

The sense of sight takes on a priority role in communication processes; after all, as Umberto Eco (1997) suggests, sight is a sense particularly suitable for knowledge and, as Berger affirms, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak." (Berger, 1972: 9).

Visual perception plays a fundamental role in the process of knowing the other from us that is perceived in the first contact through the image it projects of itself, whether authentic or mystified. Therefore, the sense of sight plays a role in interpersonal relationships and in the acquisition of the object world: the memorization of what is perceived from early childhood is transformed into a background from which the visual categories originate and become operative in the process of selecting what is acquired through the sensory organ of sight.

The whole iconic universe that the eyes allow us to know and introject pushes man to try to reproduce for himself or for others the complex world that the sense of sight has allowed him to master. Entrusting one's experience to visual representation, to express oneself, one's *weltanschauung* has accompanied the cultural evolution of humanity since the beginning of time.

The image as an instrument of representation of the world has a history that has its roots in a very distant past, but which have accompanied man's life from the beginning making his cultural and relational universe richer and more complex. We think of the rock paintings of the Lascaux caves in Aquitaine or the delicate images of the Egyptian tombs in the valley of the kings or the frescoes of the Roman *domus*, up to the figures that stand out on the walls and above the altars of Christian churches that invite reflection and meditation.

In the past the visual representation had an ancillary function due to the invention and subsequent dissemination of the written word as an instrument of knowledge, especially since the discovery of Gutenberg made it possible to multiply a text with an increase in the number of readers. Instead, in mass media society, it is the image that becomes the primary source for knowing the world (McLuhan, 1991). In fact, the iconic representation gains an ever-greater space not only in the urban landscape that feeds on new forms and new colours, but also within the domestic walls in which fragments of distant reality find place. With the introduction of the television medium, windows open to distant universes, not only spatially, but also culturally and socially, allowing the users to see different worlds, participate in new stories and meet new characters.

As Peters (1973) suggests, the image performs three functions: firstly, it can replace reality by being able to inspire the same emotional impact. Secondly, it can become evidence of a cross-section of reality and therefore fulfil the task of informing and making known. Finally, when the image takes on an artistic dignity it can have a value in itself, even if it can be seen as a substitute for reality or as a source of information and knowledge. All three of these functions not only have an impact on our system of perception and learning of the world, but also directly involve the subject who, in the act of looking, puts his own interpretative capacity into play, thus giving voice to the point of individual view.

This ability of the image to fulfil several functions is in fact based on its polysemic nature (Barthes, 1988) and as such susceptible to multiple readings in which the subjectivity of the one who produces the image or of the one who uses it becomes the protagonist in the heuristic process of discovery, analysis and deciphering of reality. Precisely from the communicative power and the fundamental importance of the image as an instrument of communication and knowledge in the media society, a discipline is born that has as its privileged object of its gnoseological process the iconic representation which is a means to know and interpret social reality, to communicate it and to grasp its sociologically significant signs.

The social sciences approach the image as a medium that is able to offer more meaning to the exegesis of reality than any other investigative tool.

And this is particularly "true" today given the exponential multiplication of images in the everyday context and in the virtual world (Castellano, 2020), their commercialization, the manipulation of the iconic representation which is not exclusive to digital compared to analogical, but which it is a distinctive feature. In the digital society, interpersonal exchange through the different devices, in a sharing in the space of flows and in a timeless time (Castells, 2012), acts on the being in the world of the individual and of the groups, on their socio-cultural background and therefore contribute to influence about what we are. The epistemological status of visual sociology has to deal with this liquid reality that constantly changes as the images that designate it change and therefore make the reading and interpretation of society and its signs more complex.

2. Visual sociology: methodology or discipline?

Approaching reality today regardless of the use of images is impossible, except for those who surrender to existential loneliness, given that the face to face relationships themselves have the first moment of their realization in the sight.

We not only live in the world of images, but we feed on images that transform our collective imagination and that are inserted in the processes of construction of the self and of the social fabric in which the self lives and with which it interacts. Observing the world through the images it produces is therefore a fundamental moment to understand it, to interpret it and to communicate to others what has been learned.

Visual sociology has dedicated itself to this task, producing a series of researches that investigated issues such as poverty, marginalization, family and group dynamics, problems related to the sociology of work and the territory, consumer practices, the restructuring of a city, through the photographic medium and video.

Let us consider as an example the research conducted by Harper (1982) on railroad tramps. Railroad tramps are men looking for seasonal jobs wandering from place to place where their arms are needed, moving on American freight train wagons. The research took place over two years, and in this period, Harper shared the experiences of the tramp entering his rhythms of life, knowing from the inside his visions of the world, the relationships of friendship, the rules that regulate his way of surviving.

Old Carl is the tramp with which Harper shared his days for two long years: with him the observer not only ended up establishing a friendship with the observed, but he also learned to live in an unknown territory. Carl not only became a mentor when Harper had to deal with a socio-cultural fabric of which he was totally inexperienced, but he also, and above all, taught him how to look at an unknown universe, immersing himself in his logic and emotions and thus becoming capable of adopting his point of view as well.

Through the splits of reality represented in the photographic images that document the evolution of this life story over time, the figure of Carl has abandoned the stereotypical role of the vagabond who is not part of our experiential horizon, but has taken on the contours of a person concrete to deal with and therefore cannot be ignored. At the same time, Carl has become a social model whose non-continuous work is functional to the productive dynamics of American society.

In his sociological investigation, Harper adopted the gnoseological path that Becker (1981) identified to profitably address the work of sociologists who use images as an observation tool and to point out the difference between the work of the photographer and that of the researcher. The latter, in fact, uses the photographic medium as a means for his exploration of social reality and to grasp its sociologically relevant dynamics.

At the base of the work of the visual sociologist there must be one or more theoretical hypotheses that guide his photography practice. The participant observation carried out daily in the field allows the researcher, through the living testimony of the images that document the study carried out through the objective of a device, to verify, or on the basis of Popper (1963) to falsify, the hypotheses formulated by the start the search and, if necessary, carry out an overhaul. This procedure makes it possible not to juxtapose one's working hypothesis with the observed phenomenon.

Nothing is taken for granted and the sociological concepts that are being developed and that find their explanation in the images are not the result of pre-established and dogmatically assumed legitimate ideas that use the photographic medium solely as a means of confirming their heuristic validity.

This is only possible if field research is conducted over a long period of time in such a way that, through participatory observation, the researcher does not look at the world he has to study through what his socio-cultural background allows him to see. Gradually, he must acquire the ability to make his own gaze coexist with that of the other in order to understand what is distant and alien.

As in Harper, empirical investigations, conducted through the study of images or through their use for data collection, have always been accompanied by theoretical hypotheses underlying a vision of visual sociology, or rather one of the visions that sociologists' visuals have argued.

Visual sociology is a young hermeneutic approach (Mattioli, 2007) and, as such, does not yet have a consolidated univocal definition in the field of sociological sciences.

The crucial question that Italian visual sociologists still ask themselves and to which they try to answer is the following: is visual sociology a methodology of investigation or an autonomous discipline?
The majority of Italian sociologists who are interested in visual sociology and who have carried out important research using the image as a tool for the investigation and interpretation of social reality agree, with different nuances, on the fact that it is a methodology.

Mattioli was the first to use the term visual sociology in Italy (1984), translating it from English since in the Anglo-Saxon world the definition of visual sociology had been in use for quite some time.

He underlines that the term methodology must be understood in a Hegelian as a controlled investigation procedure, but which at the same time refers to a certain theoretical system, to a conception of the world and of knowledge that starts from some assumptions and favours some factors over others. As if to say that behind a method, one can recognize a doctrine or at least a *Weltanschauung* (Mattioli, 2007: 48).

In Mattioli's view, visual sociology is not a mere technique, but a specific way of analysing social reality and communicating it, a way that synthetically portrays the world with respect to the verbal language that describes it sequentially.

Cipolla (1993, 1997, 2007), analysing the methodological cycles of research, assigns visual sociology the task of assisting the sociologist's investigative activity, supporting other cognitive strategies. Visual sociology would therefore be neither a technique, nor a mere study of communication through images, nor an autonomous discipline, but a sector of sociology that finds in the iconic epiphenomenon a useful, sometimes indispensable, source for social research.

Frudà (2002) insists that visual sociology is not an autonomous discipline in a particularly categorical way, arguing that, since visual sociology does not have a theoretical framework of reference, it cannot be considered a discipline. Visual sociology is therefore a method whose singularity, within the typical framework of the unified theory of the method, lies in the plurality of investigation techniques that it can use. The technical syncretism that, according to Frudà, defines the singular approach of visual sociology can represent a heuristic advantage, but also requires in-depth knowledge of the chain of techniques that are used and expertise in their use.

A particular colouring that underlines the importance of the visual observational dimension in research activities is that proposed by Boccia Artieri (1999, 2001). Looking at social reality, investigating its orientations and developments through interviews involve dynamics of self and hetero observation in which the contributions of visual sociology enter as an element that can take on a discriminating value. In the same way in the reading of the experiences of individuals and groups, in the phenomenological approach to the waste of the past and present cut out and posed in the stillness of photographs or captured in the making of the dynamism of videos, especially in the digital age, sociology visual can play a decisive role and can find the privileged place in which to exercise its cognitive functions.

Although with different nuances, the reflections of Faccioli (1997, 1999, 2001, 2010) and Losacco (2010, 2012a, 2012b), who for a long time collaborated in the *Laboratory of visual sociology* of the University of Bologna, can be combined: for both, visual sociology is at the same time a methodology and an autonomous discipline, both founded on a hermeneutic approach of observation of reality through the focus of a device objective and equipped with both a theory and a set of peculiar research tools. Indications that could not be traced in any other way. As a discipline it has two fields of investigation that are its own: the visualization processes and the practices of daily life.

Faccioli emphasizes the difference between the photographer's way of looking at the object of observation, who captures an aspect of reality as an expression of his particular point of view. While the sociologist starts from a theory that is the ground on which his cognitive path is built, carried out through the image. For Losacco it is important to underline how what distinguishes the visual sociologist is his approach to the subject which is always viewed from the point of view of the other: in fact, he makes available his skills of description, analysis and comparison to the subjects of the research.

The most reductive vision of visual sociology is that of Secondulfo (1999) according to which visual sociology is a family of techniques that can be used as long as they are supported by a robust methodological rigor. However, he recognizes that there are research areas in which the visual tool offers a heuristic idea that other techniques, such as the questionnaire, are unable to explain.

This brief excursus on the hypothesis around the epistemological nature of visual sociology and its hermeneutical perspectives attests that the definition of this subject is still in progress.

More than twenty years ago, the question was raised about the possibility that the status of visual sociology would abandon the strictly methodological sphere to assume a disciplinary one. The extraction of visual data from the visual facts, the foundation of a multidimensional hermeneutic strategy capable of creating an interlocution between the qualitative and quantitative aspect of the research, the identification of a peculiar perspective, a cognitive paradigm that belongs only to visual sociology would constitute the prerequisites for the foundation of a visual sociology as an autonomous and inclusive discipline.

This identity has not yet been defined, moreover, as we have seen, in the Italian debate among the experts who are interested in visual sociology and its growth prospects, the conception of a visual sociology as a methodology that helps to see and to interpreting the world and supporting other investigation methods.

Visual sociology, however, be it an autonomous discipline or a methodology, is today faced with a great challenge: the scenario in which the social scientist is called to know, understand and, if possible, predict what will come, is strongly marked by the phenomena of globalization, cosmopolitanism, turbocapitalism, and therefore requires systemic knowledge with high added value (Pitasi, 2012, 2013, 2014). Visual sociology must be part of this project of identification and understanding of the dynamics set in place by global platforms and world memetic catalogues: it must move in an articulated and changing reality thanks to its knowledge that has the globe as its horizon and the catalogue as its world.

The heuristic potential of visual sociology, the skills and knowledge that have been formed over the years thanks to visual research in the field that have opened new horizons to sociological knowledge, are essential to face the confrontation with the globalization of the digital age and its visual manifestations. In this regard, Bruno, with respect to the universe of images, proposes a philosophical theory of emotional geography, an interpretative discipline of the various arts.

Her starting idea is linked to the relationship of places that generate memories and that, therefore, provoke emotions: the way in which a place captures our history is not only in relation to time, but also to space, which, following Bruno's reflections (2002), we can define as haptic inasmuch it describes a relational mode deriving from the sense of touch. The sense that makes "able to get in touch with" things. As stated in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film,* "As a function of the skin and touch, then, the haptic constitutes the reciprocal contact between the environment and us. It is by way of hapticity that we apprehend space, turning contact into communicative interface. As a sensory interaction, the haptic is also related to kinesthesis, or the ability of our bodies to sense their own movement in space. In this sense, then, I take the haptic to be the main agent in the mobilization of space—both geographic and architectural—and, by extension, in the articulation of the spatial arts themselves, which include motion pictures". (Bruno, 2002:6). For the author perception occurs with an exchange of mechanical energy of information between the body and the environment that surrounds it.

The fact that a city can be represented by a photo, by a painting, by its architecture shows us that a space is not just a physical experience: with the imagination you can travel the world. And this is possible because the term imagination now translates into virtual: our idea of place added to the various artistic and scientific knowledge provides us with a full and exciting result. So, she introduces a new concept: in this era everything is virtual because extreme importance is given to images and little to contact; she argues, instead, that communication is something tactile and not abstract.

3. Image observation as a knowledge tool

The relationship between iconic language and verbal language accompanies our being in the world, the way of communicating our experience and the vital worlds that belong to us and to which we belong.

There is therefore a constant communicative interaction between words and images, but their semantic destiny is ontologically different. Words can allude, mystify, hide, but their primary vocation is to circumscribe, define, make explicit the truth; the images instead entrust their communicative power to the substantial semantic polyfunctionality of their messages.

The iconic representation is ambiguous as it is the result of a more or less conscious choice of the one who calls it into existence and at the same time because its reading is based on the interpretation of the one who uses it. The image does not explain, but evokes, asks for emotional adhesion, rather than rational deciphering. So iconic communication is able, perhaps more than words, to bring out the unspoken, the hidden side of the self, the background beyond the front stage (Goffman, 1959), the latent feelings, the fears or the unconscious desires, our way of seeing the world and of looking at ourselves and others within the relational universe in which we found ourselves living.

Arnheim postulates the supremacy of sight as an instrument of the mind. This is because verbal language must dismantle the relational relationships that exist in thought when it is exercised in a process of knowledge of reality, while sight allows them to be experienced immediately (Arnheim 1969).

The images are therefore a source of knowledge whether they are used as investigation tools within a research methodology or whether they become a specific area of analysis of an independent discipline.

Talking about visual sociology as an autonomous discipline first of all implies identifying a specific research field that only it can explore. Faccioli and Losacco identify two fields of investigation in which visual sociology can exercise its heuristic capacity of observation and interpretation of social reality in an autonomous dimension: *visualization processes* and *daily life practices* (Faccioli, Losacco 2010).

The visualization process is a cognitive dynamic based on two fundamental analytical moments: deconstruction and reconstruction. To illustrate this process, one can take as an example the research carried out by Grady (2007) on advertising images featuring a black person that appeared in Live magazine from 1936 to 2000 with the aim of capturing the patterns of social relationships in Contemporary America. The development of the survey on 590 advertising messages was based on the identification of the variables and values connected to them in the images, starting from the first illustration. Each time a variable and a new value were identified, the investigative work began again by re-examining the photographs already analysed, deconstructing and reconstructing the cognitive process.

Immortalizing the acts of everyday life is a social practice that began with the discovery and use of the photographic medium. The images are a mirror of the ways of portraying oneself, of interpersonal relationships, of the relationship with the surrounding environment. The cognitive process afferent to the practices of daily life centred on images investigates the being in the world of those who took those images, the meaning of the past, the memory and future planning, therefore essentially on the dynamics of construction and presentation of the self.

Chalfen's (1987) research on family albums testifies to this cognitive practice which assigns an autonomous role to visual sociology that cannot be identified with other sociological disciplines.

There are many tools and research paths that visual sociology as a methodology offers to identify and describe the semantic traces that can lead to a vision of a cross-section of society and therefore interpret it as a piece of a larger mosaic.

Cultural processes, social mutations, metamorphoses of relational dynamics and the evolution of identity acquisition mechanisms can also be grasped in the field through the photographic medium, analogue or digital, which icastically retains a portion of reality and delivers it to us full of emotions and thoughts waiting to be released. This process takes place because every iconic representation is susceptible of multiple readings and multiple interpretations, and at the same time it is testimony to the hermeneutic gaze of the one who has chosen it among the possible reproductions of reality that he could have portrayed and who instead delivered to oblivion (as an example the photographic fieldwork in Harper 2012).

The in-depth interviews find in the photo-elicitation procedure, that is, in the reading and commenting on some images by the interviewees, a fundamental tool to go beyond what words express by defining, explaining, rationalizing one's thoughts. Observing the relationship between image and decipherer is able to open up for the collector of sociologically relevant data a possibility of comparison between the statements entrusted solely to verbal language and those originating from the use of visual forms; therefore, of deeper understanding of the other who is the interlocutor of the cognitive process.

The practice of data retrieval within the visual methodology also makes use of the technique called *native image making*. The "subjective production of images", the choice to privilege a space in places and an instant in time, to isolate a portion of reality by removing it from the relationship with a continuum in which it is inserted, the decomposition and recomposition of the world represented in a series of fragments fixed in an apparent naturalness by the device allow the scholar to trace a story of the experience of an individual and therefore to come into contact with his/her vision of the world in a direct way without the mediation of verbal language.

Not only does the fruition of images concretely reproduced and offered in their materiality as a deliberate or unconscious presentation of the self help the researcher to penetrate the interiority of the subjects of a research but also the proposition of symbols, of mental images evoked through words can illuminate the cognitive process and therefore help to grasp what goes beyond the mask or multiple masks that reveal and/or shield the identity of the ego (Pizzorno, 2008).

An image can assume the role of testimony of a way of being in the world selected by a subject or as a documentation of a hypothesis of reading of a social context by a researcher. Or it can be used as a useful investigative tool that allows you to grasp the impressions and suggestions that an image arouses in one or more people when you show them a photograph during an interview and study the immediate reactions.

This process of analysis that starts from the visual representation to reach a critical reworking of its message can be reversed. Following an unprecedented research method, one can start from the request to an interlocutor to mentally visualize a concept, an object, a cross-section of reality to represent it through an image that symbolically summarizes its meaning and communicative value. We could call this process "mental creation of symbolic images". In this case, it is not a question of a photograph, analogue or digital, which is used in its concreteness, but of a mental image which is verbalized, which can assume the function of litmus test of the affirmations which, during an interview in depth are provided by the research subject.

4. Pictures from the digital universe

A study on Facebook carried out through the qualitative tools of participant observation, the long semi-structured interview and the focus group had the aim of investigating the communication practices of the users of a social network, their verbalization processes, the influence that using a social network has on the dynamics that preside over the construction of identity processes, on the bonds that are established in the digital world, and on their influence in everyday relationships (Bonazzi, 2014, 2015).

The research had as interlocutors' users between twenty-five and thirty years old at the time of its realization, i.e. those who use the computer and its more advanced applications with competence and ease, but who have not been literate in digital practices since childhood. The aim of the research was to understand and interpret the experiences of users towards the network, digital identity and its facets, the emerging relationships between the real and the virtual.

In the analysis carried out on the verbal responses of the interviewees, it clearly emerged that the virtual reality experienced through Facebook interacts with material reality, the space of flows with the space of places, timeless time with becoming marked in a continuum according to a first and a then rigorously measurable and therefore reconstructable in its rhythms and scansions.

For the subjects of the research, the relational dynamics that come to life in the world of Facebook and which make it possible to converse with several people through the screen in a horizon of widespread relationality do not involve any dualism with respect to the tangibility of everyday life. They represent a privileged opportunity to increase one's offers of friendship, to see them materialize in the virtual and real and to take advantage of the possibility of cultivating them by establishing easier and more lasting relationships that extend over time beyond spatial separations and impediments created by the duties required by work and family needs, which can be an obstacle to the continuity of the encounter with the other.

In the opinion of its users, frequenting Facebook interacts positively with frequenting lived in the concreteness of face-to-face relationships.

In the final phase of the investigation in which the voices of Facebook users were directly listened to through long semi-structured interviews, this question was asked to the research subjects: "If you had to represent Facebook with an image, what would it be?".

The aim was to immediately bring out how Facebook users experienced this network of virtual relationships and whether the answers they had previously given were congruent with the mental image which enclosed a point of view, an idea in a single symbol, a complex concept. This process calls into question the concept of *rhizome*, developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2001), which designates a structure in continuous evolution, in all horizontal directions, and without levels. The use of the term rhizome in philosophical reflection is an image, which allows us to grasp the multiplicity, one of the founding characteristics of the digital network.

The answers were varied, but they all opened up a way to better understand how users relate to social networks and what Facebook represented for them.

A cloud; an extra-terrestrial space where people can meet to communicate… if it had one colour it would have all the colours of the rainbow; a megaphone…a sounding board to give people a voice and create new social interactions; a very elaborated mind map; a hub with all the people connected; these are some of the interviewees' answers.
A cloud brings to mind open and boundless skies in which a light and wandering cloud roams freely. A place suspended in infinity that communicates a feeling of peace and tranquillity.

An extra-terrestrial space transmits, in analogy with the cloud, the perception of a freedom that is enjoyed beyond the banal and abstract everyday life, full of obligations and duties. But it is also characterized, as the interviewee explicitly states, as a space of socialization and encounter that welcomes and includes and that generates in those who join in a sense of understanding, serenity, joy as the colours of the rainbow are serene and cheerful, which blend harmoniously into each other.

The megaphone is an instrument that extends the sound of the voice into a larger space, multiplying its possibilities of being heard. The sound box alludes to the amplification of a sound, in its figurative meaning it indicates everything that has the power to spread information, impressions, comments, ideas. If the social network is depicted as a megaphone or a sounding board, it means that it is experienced as a tool that allows everyone to make their voice heard to communicate their thoughts, which does not exclude, but rather generates inclusion and opens up to more social interactions.

The image of Facebook as a complex mental map suggests the idea of something alive and pulsating that is able to offer us an intelligent scheme of the world that we must read in order to move around it with awareness. A map contains in itself paths that meet, roads that converge or move away towards other destinations, a space that encloses other spaces, a significant territory loaded, as mental, with thoughts and emotions that intertwine significantly.

The hub is a device that connects multiple transmission lines; thinking of Facebook as a hub with all connected people means interpreting it as a fulcrum around which semantic intersections develop that extend to the whole world and which therefore involve anyone who wants to make their voice heard through the digital medium. The image of the hub can also suggest the idea of a large airport that connects all the places in the world, which is itself a place where casual contacts are made which can pave the way for impromptu sharing, but not necessarily shallow. A meeting space where it is possible to reveal a part of oneself to the stranger.

All these views of Facebook have in common the idea of the social network as a relationship tool that allows the semantic intersection of several people in a shared territory.

Other entries point to new images: binoculars and a visual exploration through a keyhole, a wall with a face sticking out and glancing to one side, a cat chosen as a symbol of curiosity that pushes one to observe everything, to gently lift objects and to scrutinize what is hidden under their thickness.

The visualization of binoculars that scrutinize everything from afar and see everything magnified by an industrious lens, unaware of what is being watched; the image of a glance that is not fleeting, but persistent through a keyhole suggests the desire to know a universe that attracts and seduces, but which does not rightfully belong to the one who looks at it. It is a world that fascinates, that arouses indiscreet interest, but which evidently is characterized by its separateness and therefore still does not fully open up to friendly sharing with the one who observes it from afar. In this case the interviewee seems to want to know everything about the others without getting excessively involved and without giving anything of himself. One wonders if for personal choice or for fear of rejection by others.

The same reading is suggested by the face that emerges beyond a wall that protects a tempting but not yet possessed universe. Here there is greater proximity than in the previous images, as only a wall divides the observer from the observed.

The cat is a symbol of grace, self-sufficiency, regal autonomy, but also of curiosity as felines are careful observers of what is around them, they are curious, shrewd, capable of discovering what intrigues or attracts them.

The interviewee who chose a cat as a symbol of Facebook visually declares that his approach to social media is marked above all by the desire to know, to satisfy his need to probe and explore a universe in the making. The characteristics of the symbolic animal suggest that this user is able to move with circumspection and awareness on the net, knows where to find information on friends and friends of friends and in his/her serene self-sufficiency is happy to establish friendships with those who are worthy of his consideration.

Many visions of Facebook, many interpretations of the same phenomenon: the translation into symbolic images of thoughts on the social network helps to understand the way in which it is lived and also something more than those who were interviewed. The image evoked supported the words exchanged and added more meaning to our approach to the world of Facebook and the universe of its users.

Conclusion

The world in which we are immersed is increasingly thought, perceived, experienced and known through images and icons that cross our eyes like traveling symbols in our daily life or in the feed of our profiles in social networks. Therefore, a reflection on the forms and ways in which the narratives of the contemporary age evolve and change, being inserted in a media landscape completely rewritten by the advent of social networks and characterized by the omnipresence of mobile devices, becomes preeminent (Castellano, 2020). In this paper, therefore, an attempt has been made to retrace the history of the discipline in Italy to open a glimpse into a future in which images will increasingly play the central role they are already playing.

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