

# A Very Short Introduction: The Scope of Visual Research

After reading our preface you might still be in the dark. What do we understand by visual research? What is its range? What exactly is this book about? Perhaps the most efficient way to answer these three questions is in the concrete rather than the abstract. So we turn to a study by Alexander Riley that recently appeared in the journal *Visual Studies*. In it, Riley (2008) explores the aftermath of the crash of United Airlines Flight 93. This was one of four airliners that were hijacked on the morning of September 11, 2001. As a result of the efforts of a number of passengers and crew in fighting back, Flight 93 did not reach its intended target – believed to be the Capitol Building or the White House – but crashed instead into a wooded field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all on board. Much less attention has been given to the crash site of Flight 93 compared with that lavished on Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center in New York, or to the Pentagon – the targets of the three other terrorist airliners. The World Trade Center footage in particular offers powerful confirmation of the role of iconic images in contemporary culture. Still, Riley suggests that Shanksville offers equally compelling material for the visual sociologist.

Riley's theoretical approach is derived from neo-Durkheimian insights into the role of symbols in the construction of culture. More particularly his aim is to discover 'precisely how sacredness is constructed from the events of Flight 93' (Riley, 2008: 4). He starts with an examination of what we term an item of 'two-dimensional' data: the so-called 'End of Serenity' photograph. The photograph (subject to copyright but still easily found on the Internet) was taken by a local Shanksville resident, Val McClatchey, some moments after the crash. The scene depicted in the photograph is not that of the crash site per se but something perhaps even more evocative. McClatchey's photograph captures what Riley describes as a 'picturesque

country scene from a mythical American rural past' (p. 5). Under a clear blue sky stand red barns on gently sloping green pastures, but disturbing this image of sacred pastoral harmony is an element of profanity – the black cloud of smoke from the burning wreckage of the aircraft rising ominously behind the distant line of trees.

Riley makes a semiotic and narrative reading of the End of Serenity. He works out what it means and what its implications might be. His argument is that the End of Serenity photograph has the effect of turning the events of 9/11 into a more fundamental attack on the wider American cultural tradition, with its connections to pastoral tranquillity. In his view it matters little that this is largely a fictional narrative or that the countryside was not the intended target of attack. As he puts it, 'The narrative power of the image draws on facts larger than those of mere logic and reason' (p. 6).

Surprisingly the End of Serenity is the *only* example of two-dimensional data that Riley includes in his article and the only photographic image he sets out to explain per se. For the most part he is concerned with describing the various efforts that have been made to memorialize the tragic-yet-heroic end of Flight 93. In this task he uses photographs only in an illustrative way. Riley focuses on two of these efforts: first an abandoned church located several miles from the crash site which, at the initiative of a priest named Alphonse Mascherino, was transformed into a memorial chapel; and second a temporary memorial which was erected on a hilltop overlooking the crash site approximately a quarter of a mile below. Riley's discussion dwells primarily on the civil religious symbolism which he uncovers through his cultural investigation of the two sites (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). For example, hanging outside the memorial chapel is a large bell bearing the title 'Thunder Bell: voice of flight 93' which he interprets as a direct reference to the Old Testament story of God (Yahweh) summoning Moses to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Inside the chapel the altar has been constructed to resemble the US Capitol Building, to honour the presumed target of the hijacked airliner. The closer temporary memorial features a 40 foot long by 9 foot high (about 12 m by 3 m) steel fence on which are now draped numerous objects left by visitors and chosen for their association with the flight – uniforms worn by the emergency workers, medals, other items of clothing bearing messages of sympathy for, and identification with, the passenger and crew, personal possessions deposited as gifts and 'many, many American flags'. Riley observes that the length of the fence was chosen to symbolize the 40 passengers on board, a count which significantly does not include the four suspected hijackers.

Riley offers an imaginative reading of these assorted things, taking them to be symbols through which he can reconstruct myth-making activity. We wish to draw your attention to their ontological status. In claiming that they represent examples of 'three-dimensional' visual data we want to highlight the fact that the objects Riley decodes exist ontologically in their own right.



Figure 1.1 The temporary memorial fence at Shanksville, PA (photo courtesy of Alexander Riley)

Because in his article Riley includes several photographs of the memorials, this fact is occluded. Yet in contrast to the End of Serenity, the memorial objects have an existence which transcends the photographic records he has made of them. We need a photograph of the End of Serenity in order to study it. We do not need a photograph of the Shanksville memorials to make sense of them as we could also visit the site to look at them, to investigate their display or count themes, to see what people do with them – these would also be a visual social inquiry. As material culture with which people can interact, the memorial objects can be understood as having their own ‘social life’ as things (Appadurai, 1988). The memorabilia placed on or near the temporary steel fence are continually changing as waves of visitors seek to record evidence of their encounter with the site. National Parks Service employees periodically remove items from the fence to create more space for new visitors but all items are stored and will be put on display once the proposed permanent memorial is completed. Well over 1 million people have visited the temporary memorial since its inception. Here we have a lot of material for visual analysis.

In the final section of his published article Riley turns to the controversy over a permanent memorial at the crash site. The central feature of the design, created by an architectural firm from Los Angeles, was to comprise

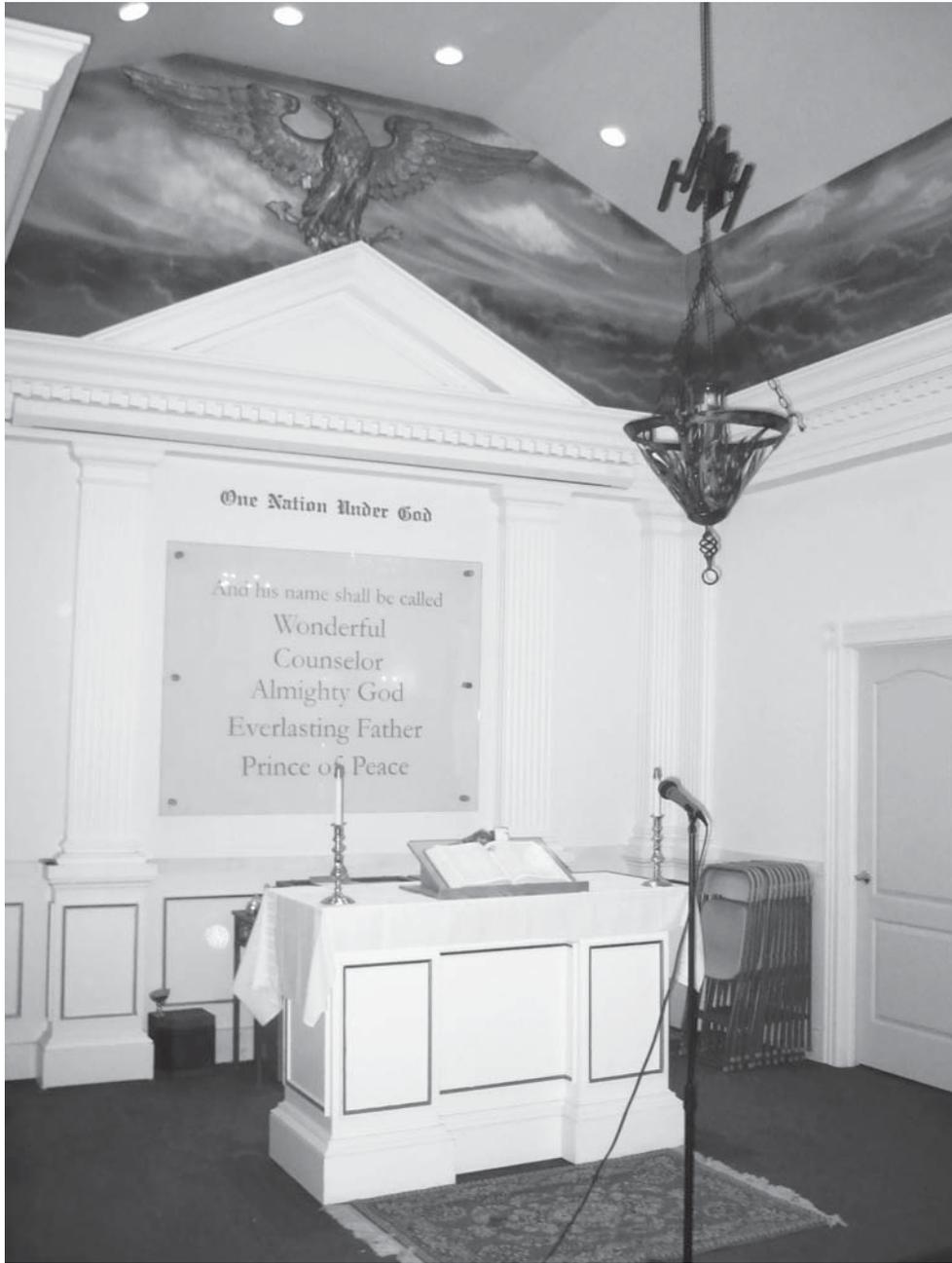


Figure 1.2 The altar in the memorial chapel at Shanksville, PA (photo courtesy of Alexander Riley)

a large crescent-shaped array of maple trees that would border a black slate wall with the planting to follow the existing land contours. Critics and conspiracy theorists were quick to suggest that it contained coded Islamic themes: that the memorial design was little more than a celebration of the crescent moon and star, traditional symbols of Islamic faith and which are

included on the national flag of a number of Muslim-majority countries. Pushing this dispute to one side, we suggest that when it is completed the memorial will constitute a third level of visual data, referred to in the book as 'Lived visual data'. By this term we want to suggest that the built environment – the buildings, locales and physical spaces that we inhabit – constitute a form of 'lived text' which can be investigated to uncover insights into cultural values and norms, insights which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data. The majority of settings which make up the built environment – shopping malls, hospitals, museums, schools and universities, and even the humble suburban home and garden – are innocuous and their design seldom engenders any public comment let alone the kind of controversy that the 'Crescent of Embrace' gave rise to. However, paying close attention to the way these everyday spaces and locales are organized and the assumptions they encode about such things as privacy, taken-for-granted gender roles, civilization, hierarchy and progress is a valuable possibility for the visual researcher. We consider these themes in Chapter 6.

At the time of writing, Riley's book on Flight 93 has yet to be published. However, we have read the manuscript. There he refers to yet another aspect of social life that we feel is amenable to visual inquiry. This is the movement and activity of people. We refer to this as 'Living Visual Data' in Chapter 7. Riley noticed that at Shanksville people were respectful and serious. There were relatively few conversations. Moreover, photography and videotaping were rare. He contrasts this demeanour with the more crass touristic behaviours to be found at the World Trade Center crash site. The meanings of the sites and the kind of people who visited them seemed to be objectively reflected in behaviours. Later in this book we suggest ways that such ordinary behaviours can be systematically investigated through observation, coding and low-key experiments. For example, the argument that the World Trade Center site is now understood as a global tourist experience and Shanksville is a pilgrimage might be tested through a comparative observational research design that codes and counts particular human behaviours and interactions.

Finally we might point to Shanksville's presence on the Internet. Here it exists as what we call 'Virtual Visual Data' in Chapter 8. Riley himself made use of the Internet to trace the beliefs of conspiracy theorists – people who could not find reputable publishers for their views. True enough on photograph and video sharing sites such as YouTube, we can find a large volume of conspiracy materials, but there are also a range of ordinary commemorative images. These offer researchers further opportunities. What do people consider worth posting online? What aspects of the Flight 93 memorial might be selected as interesting by people from different national backgrounds? What about those with varying demographics? More generally do people represent Flight 93 with reference to its tragic or heroic narration?

In Chapter 8 we suggest ways that Internet sources can be used for systematic visual sociology.

Flight 93 is, we suggest, a fascinating and thought-provoking example of the kind of options that are open to the visual researcher. Put simply we can:

- Look at images, objects, built environments, interactions and behaviours using visual research methods. Visual sociology is about so much more than just the analysis of photographs.
- Treat each of these in a hermeneutic way as something to be read for encoded deep meanings, or simply taken in a more positivistic sense as an indicator of more diffuse social processes and beliefs. Visual research as a field is not defined by any methodological or theoretical presuppositions. It simply explains or makes use of that which is visual, visible and therefore observable, or visually regulated.

Finally let us turn to the contents of this book chapter by chapter. Chapter 2 looks at ethics. We talk through some of the common ethical concerns that confront visual researchers and introduce some familiar protocols for resolving these. Chapter 3 cuts to the disciplinary core. For those of you wishing to understand what is most commonly understood by the terms 'visual sociology', 'visual research' and 'visual methods' this should be your first port of call. Here we review the uses of photographs in research as a means of recording research settings, eliciting information and generating reflexivity. After reading this chapter you will be part of the conversation. Chapter 4 opens up the use of two-dimensional (2D) data more widely. It begins our attempt to expand the referents of 'visual sociology' beyond the photograph in less recognized directions. We suggest that posters, maps, signs, cartoons and advertisements all offer opportunities for creative and innovative research. Chapter 5 is all about objects. We suggest that this three-dimensional (3D) visual data or material culture can be read for meanings. Further it can also offer an unobtrusive measure of various social processes. For example, we show that tombstones and statues provide a way to explore themes related to social inclusion and exclusion over time. Chapter 6 looks at the spaces people inhabit. We think of these as 'lived visual data'. We show that the seemingly functional design of houses and hospitals in fact reflects societal norms and taken-for-granted expectations. We can explore these visually through in situ observation or the analysis of architectural plans. Chapter 7 investigates people in interaction. We demonstrate that ordinary social life is regulated by visual cues; that people signal to each other; and that patterns of association offer a resource for the objective observation of public spaces. Our final chapter, Chapter 8, looks at the Internet. We explain the opportunities and challenges this provides, point to some interesting recent studies and suggest some feasible research projects that can be undertaken with what we term 'virtual visual data'.