



CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS AND NARRATIVE TEXT IN THE FORM OF A VISUAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses attention on how I combined unique qualitative methodologies in a recent study, which examined the construction of self-identity through photographs and narrative text as primary data, in order to develop a visual autoethnography. *Critical visual methodology*, grounded in Barthesian visual semiotics, was combined with traditional and non-traditional ethnographic methods to interrogate these data in order to construct the autoethnography. These data came from a gallery showing of my photographic exhibition: *Wunderkammer: Specimen views of my postmodern life*. The resultant analyses of narrative text and photographs revealed an underlying sub-text of significant racial encounters as well as several social and institutional ideological issues that contributed to my findings. Implications from this particular methodological design indicate usefulness not only in photography, but also in allied disciplines such as communication, education, cultural, and media studies. This form of analysis also finds a place in the broader notion of social or cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the conjugation of dichotomous data through a unique combination of qualitative methodologies in order to construct a visual autoethnography. Ethnographies tend to be written by researchers from one culture looking into a specific, different culture and follow such established methodologies as participant-observation or the ethnographic interview process (Spradley, 1979, 1980). On the other hand, visual ethnographies utilize the photograph as a central data component, but this is usually generated by the researcher (Banks, 2007; Pink, 2007). Autoethnography on the other hand can be an "autobiographical genre of writing and research" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In this particular instance, that is a *visual autoethnography*, the combined data entailed researcher generated photographs and personal narrative text, which comprised a gallery exhibit titled: *Wunderkammer: Specimen views of my postmodern life* (Ownby, 2010). Each photograph had its own narrative panel that textually and visually provided discourse for the art patron's understanding of each photograph's subject matter content. These narrative text panels were used in similar fashion to Barthes' (1977) notion of text as anchorage and how a caption interacts with the photograph in that, "the text loads the image" (p. 26) in order to imbricate the two with cultural and ideological artifacts. In order to explicate meaning from these visual and textual discourses therefore, a *critical visual analysis* (Rose, 2007, 2012) framed within Barthesian visual semiotics, coupled with traditional and non-traditional ethnographic methods (e.g., domain and taxonomic analyses, Spradley, 1979, 1980; research poems, Cahnmann, 2003; Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006; Langer & Furman, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Poindexter, 1998; Richardson, 2000) was used to develop a visual autoethnography. Therefore, I will focus attention on *critical visual methodology* (CVM), which was combined with ethnographic methods to interrogate visual and textual data for understanding self-identification construction.

METHODS

Initially my study was twofold: (1) to understand the construction of self-identity within a particular childhood geographical and ideological culture, and (2) integrating the methodological design through an interdisciplinary approach. The primary data analyzed in that visual autoethnography comprised narrative text and photographic images, which necessitated a blending of methods for a holistic view of the narrative that emerged from the original research questions. I called that study a visual autoethnography because the data derived from text and photographs I produced. Therefore, what follows in this section will describe the various methodologies employed in that research project (Ownby, 2011a).

The central question of that research sought to answer concerns of self-identity construction: How self-identity was defined through the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of my photographic exhibit called *Wunderkammer: Specimen views of my postmodern life*. Since autoethnographies tend to be about one's self, as was the case here, my data ($N = 18$) was purposeful. Both soft and hard data (i.e., "memories of my lived experience" [Wall, 2008, p. 45], and photographs or narrative text) comprised that sample. I refer the reader interested in viewing those photographs and narrative texts to my recently published article (Ownby, 2011b).

Primary data for the visual semiotic analysis using the critical visual methodology consisted of photographic images ($n = 9$), which were composed as still-life compositions of personal artifacts that chronicled my life over half a century. In addition, there were corresponding narrative texts ($n = 9$), which I called *story panels*, that accompanied each photograph and those data were the genesis of the autoethnography proper. Those narrative texts were based on personal memories, journals, family snapshots, and other artifacts. Secondary data included retrospective field texts (Burke, 2007; Ellis, 2004) in the form of my reflexive journaling during a one-year period that encompassed pre- and post-exhibit activity; I referred to those as my personal field notes. Thus, my field notes were combined with the narrative panel texts and framed within a *three-dimensional space approach* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) in order to write my autoethnography. Additional family snapshots, documents, personal journals, memos, and artifacts not contained within the *Wunderkammers* became tertiary data sources. The three data sources therefore, created a triangle of validation, referred to by some scholars as qualitative triangulation (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

PROCEDURE

Qualitative data analysis software was utilized for data manipulation. Specifically, *HyperRESEARCH* software imported photographic images, narrative text panels, and my transcribed field notes for analysis. Thus, I was able to conduct the ethnographic analysis needed to write my autoethnography, as well as the semiotic analysis using Rose's (2007, 2012) critical visual methods. Through inductive open coding, I developed an extensive code manual with definitions to guide subsequent coding processes for the photographs and all texts (i.e., narrative story panels and field notes). I moved from general descriptive codes of data chunks to more focused analytical codes, similar to axial coding used in grounded theory research, which allowed me to recognize recurring ideological themes and patterns within the data. Once my data coding was completed, I used this information as a foundation for developing what Spradley (1979, 1980) called a cultural domain analysis. During the coding process and the domain analysis I employed the traditional ethnographic technique of memoing for both texts and photographs. *HyperRESEARCH* allowed me to insert memos and codes directly into each photograph undergoing interrogation. Once the cultural domains were identified from the narrative texts, I created concept maps and numerous taxonomies to link the emerging themes and patterns. In turn, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggestion for describing and analyzing data within-case studies such as mine, I created a time-ordered display known as an *event listing*. That enabled me to reconstruct the data around the major actors and temporal geographical shifts in order to tell my acculturation story of self-identity. In similar fashion, I used *HyperRESEARCH* during the semiotic analysis of the photographs for addressing the various modalities found within sites of meaning making. Since photographs played a central role in my research and since this paper's focus concerns semiotic interpretation of those images, I now turn to the visual analysis.



Critical Visual Methodology

Rose (2007) posited a theory for critically analyzing “found visual images” (p. 12) within research method designs that investigate visual culture. Although I professionally crafted my *Wunderkammer* photographs in the studio, they were not created for the research project under examination, per se. Rather, since they existed as a separate collection of images created for exhibition, they could now be classified as “found” when used within the context a visual semiotic analysis using the critical visual methodology. Additionally, several of the *Wunderkammer* photographs contained other “found” images in the form of snapshots from my past. Regardless whether the images are found by or crafted by the researcher, Rose’s solid methodological approach to image interpretation is equally applicable to both genres of photographs, which is why I used her method in my analysis.

Rose told me (personal communication, December 3, 2010) she was modifying her approach to include researcher created images. However, she began developing her methodology during the last century as a means of teaching students how to critically interpret visual images (see Rose, 1996). During the ensuing years, she refined this theory, resulting with the publication of *Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials* (2007). Her theory of critical visual methodology (CVM) could be applied in both quantitative and qualitative studies that include, but are not limited to (a) content analysis, (b) semiology (i.e., semiotics), (c) psychoanalysis, (d) discourse analysis, (e) audience studies, (f) anthropological studies, and (g) photo-elicitation or photo-documentation research. In other words, this methodology can be utilized across broad fields of inquiry. The key feature of this methodology is not only its focus on the image, but also its production and reception by its audience. Therefore, I will summarize the underlying model of her theory. First, at the visual literacy level, the visual consumer needs to consider how images create meaning in order to produce interpretations of visual images, which occurs at three disparate sites of interpretation or meaning making. Rose also suggested within each of the three sites of interpretation for visual images there resides three modalities for image interpretation intertwined therein. A closer look at each of these components is in order and how these three disparate sites of image interpretation are simultaneously imbricated with these different modalities.

The sites at which visual image interpretation eventuate are: (a) *the site of image production*, (b) *the site of the image itself*, and (c) *the viewing site of audiences* (Rose, 2007). Furthermore, at each of these interpretive sites, Rose envisioned three modalities concurrently contributing at various levels to understanding visuals: (a) the *technological* modality, (b) the *compositional* modality, and (c) the *social* modality. The technological production of images involves various physical apparatus implementation (i.e., equipment or tools) and their associated technologies. They could range from simple paintbrushes to digital cameras to photo-blogs on the Internet. Compositional modality, on the other hand, references the formal structures of image design, such as color, positive-negative space, implied lines of direction, and so forth. In other words, how the compositional elements are used in the denotation of visual content within the image frame. Finally, social modality concerns “the social, economic, political and institutional practices and relations that produce, saturate and interpret an image” (p. 258). This social modality is the plane where connotation resides, such as social or political ideologies. Rose, therefore, situated each of these modalities within three sites of image interpretation. Figure 1 shows this concept in relation to questions the researcher might ask regarding the interaction of sites and modalities.

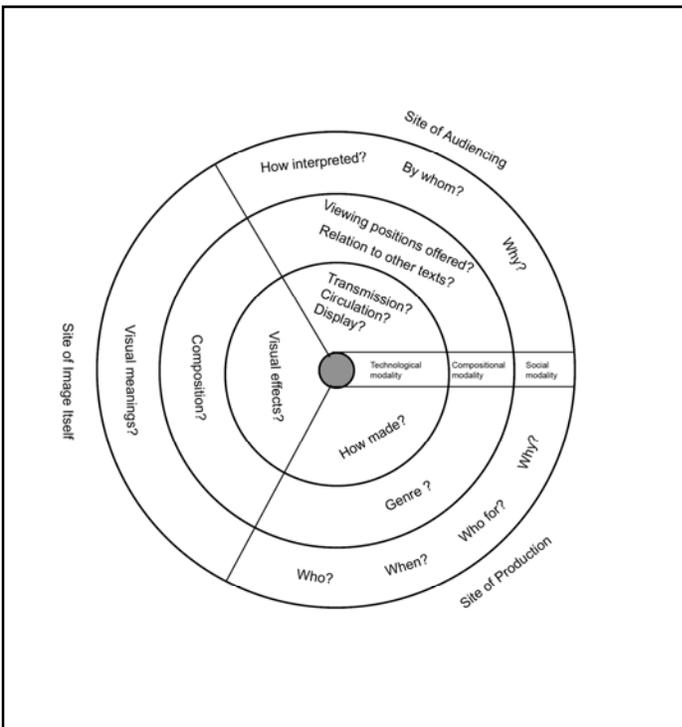


Figure 1. Image sites and modalities for visual analysis. Adapted from Rose’s (2007, 2012) critical visual methodology. Used with permission from Gillian Rose.

The above information out-lines the core of Rose’s (2007, 2012) critical visual methodology as I have adapted it for the visual semiotic analysis of my *Wunderkammer* project. Thus, while broadly using the theoretical lens of Barthes’ (1972, 1977) notion of visual semiotics in conjunction with Rose’s (2007, 2012) *critical visual approach* for interpreting the photographic images from my *Wunderkammer* exhibit, I was able mine visual information for integration with ethnographic result. By combining these two approaches I developed my visual autoethnography in the spirit of interdisciplinary research.

Although I have briefly discussed both analytical methods for the narrative text and the photographs as a means of combined analyses, due to limited space in this paper, I will limit my discussion that follows to the critical visual analysis. This abbreviated synopsis should provide the reader a general view of how this type of methodology works.

DEMONSTRATED CVM ANALYSIS

When critically examining photographs, Barrett (2011) suggested the critic begin with description, which means developing a list of facts about the subject matter within the image. That is, description becomes a “data-gathering process” (p. 17). Further, he argued at the base level of description, the critic is establishing a typology of the photograph’s subject matter, also known as *content*. This would be congruent with Barthes’ (1977) suggestion that “all images are polysemous” (p.38) due to their content and thus create a complexity for the visual reader when choosing which aspect of the photograph to read and pay attention to and which aspect to ignore.

The image’s *subject* is not necessarily the same as its *subject matter* (Faris-Belt, 2012), and the initial cataloging of the subject matter, therefore, is the starting point for any visual semiotic analysis. Operating at the first level of understanding is the subject matter content, which is simply known as denotation. The *subject* occurs at a second level of understanding, which is connotative, according to Barthes (1977). Additionally, Rose (2007) claimed, “many semiological [i.e., semiotic] studies therefore tend to concentrate on the *image itself* as the most important site of its meaning” (p. 76, emphasis in original). At the first level of interpretation of a photograph, the subject



matter is addressed in order to develop understanding between signified, signifier, and sign, as typified within semiological studies. Furthermore, within semiotic analysis, the semiologist also needs to interrogate both the *compositional* and *social* modalities within the site of the image to fully explicate meaning.

In the original study there were nine photographs within the *Wunderkammer* series and they are grouped into three sections corresponding to my life stages, (1) *First Impressions of my Normal World* encompassed my elementary school years, (2) *Passage to Maturity* spanned my coming-of-age years and then into graduate school and military service, and (3) *Getting Comfortable* traced mid-life transitions after career and military service to my current moment. For demonstration purposes, I will direct our attention to the first set of photographs from my analysis: *First Impressions of My Normal World*.

First Impressions

The first three *Wunderkammers* in this series visually depict my elementary school days while growing up in the geographical region of the United States known as the South. In order of appearance at my gallery showing, their titles work in concert with their content: *Little League*, *Scouting*, and *Space-Age*. Temporally, these three images span the years from 1960 until 1966, which was the year we left Florida because my father's job transferred him and our family to California. My age ranged from six to twelve during this period, which began at first grade and up until my first semester of seventh grade at the local junior high school. The *Little League* and the *Scouting* photographs contain artifacts and objects that could broadly describe many American Baby Boom boys of that era, regardless of geographic region. Pocketknives and baseball gear, toy airplanes, snapshots of fishing trips and other outdoor Scouting activities, rock and stamp collections populate both photographs; these were popular pursuits for many children across America to engage in during the 1950s and 1960s. Activities such as these and similar ones marked and established American childhood.

However, the third *Wunderkammer* titled *Space-Age* presents a different situation. While many American children of the 1960s were exposed through the news by mass media to our nation's race-for-space against the former Soviet Union, only a limited number of children lived close enough to physically engage this scientific and technological endeavor. Those were the children that lived in close proximity to Cape Canaveral and NASA's (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) Launch Operations Center (Ryba, 2008, ¶27) on Merritt Island, Florida; and I was one of those children.

Nearly every artifact in this *Wunderkammer* speaks to America's early space program. The 8"x10" black-and-white glossy photographs are unique in that they are originals taken by NASA and U.S. Air Force photographers and were given to my father because of his job in that particular environment. The group photograph of men standing and kneeling on a rocket launch tarmac includes my father, along with three of the original seven astronauts of Project Mercury (Gordon Cooper [Faith 7], John Glenn [Friendship 7], and Gus Grissom [Liberty Bell 7 and Apollo 1, in which he was killed in an onboard fire]). The collection of three badges in the specimen display case in the upper right corner was my father's, which gave him access to the various rocket launch facilities where he worked. Hand-written papers along the bottom of the photograph were various elementary school assignments I had written, specifically about the space program.

Thus, these particular artifacts move this specific image out of the ordinary and become extraordinary from other American boys and girls who lived outside the rural Atlantic coast of east-central Florida. Other artifacts in this particular image are not directly related to the space program, but were objects collected during this timeframe and represent childhood mementos, such as the display case of pop culture trinkets known as *Rat Finks*, often traded among boys playing on the school yard or during our bus ride to and from school. The upper left corner holds hand-painted clay figurines of American Indians around a campfire (toys passed on from my uncle's childhood) and interspersed throughout the remaining areas of the photograph are other simple childhood toys and good-luck charms. Thus, the above description of photographic content conforms to and establishes the data-gathering process that Barrett (2011) suggested for all visual analyses and critiques.

The Analysis

Semiotics lends itself well to critical visual methods and when considering how we think about visual meaning, can be constructive. Visual semiotics poses three criteria for meaning-making from photographs: (1) it insists on detailed image analysis, (2) the use of case studies, and (3) usage of unique sophisticated analytical terminology. By using a critical visual methodological approach to visual semiotic analysis, this method provided an excellent means for describing and "understanding how the structure of images produces cultural meaning" (Rose, 2007, p. 106) within my *Wunderkammer* exhibition. When considering a critical visual methodological approach within this context, there are three critical areas or *sites* (Rose, 2007, 2012), to consider when analyzing photographs: image production, the image itself, and the audience of the image. Further, Rose stated that in most semiotic analyses emphasis on the *image itself* was considered most important for making meaning from the photograph. Additionally, since semiotics focuses on the meaning of signs and their interpretation at the connoted level, *compositional* and *social modalities* also play an important role in meaning interpretation. However, it is important to give some attention to the sites of *image production* and *the audience*, as they do bring some amount of meaning to the images under consideration.

For brevity sake, I will highlight portions of the analytical process and limit my discussion to generalities and only to images from my childhood experiences, since I explicate these processes in detail elsewhere (Ownby, 2011a). To begin this analysis, therefore, I began with the *site of image production*. Here, a researcher needs to answer to the best of his or her ability, why the author created the visual work. What was their impetus for image making? In the case of my *Wunderkammer* series, these photographs did not simply appear nor were they produced as domestic snapshots, but rather, they were meticulously researched, planned, and constructed as part of my scholarly/creative research activities as a tenure-track photography professor at a Midwestern regional state university in the United States. They were also created as part of my personal self-expression as a visual artist in response to life situations, specifically, the death of my father. It was a personal cathartic process. What I am describing here is the *social modality* within the *site of image production*. Specifically in this particular modality, the notion of *auteur theory*, or the intended message of the visual image's author, should offer information about the photograph that will aid in one's understanding and this comes from the author's intentions. However, from within the site of image production, describing how the images were created also addresses the *technological modality*. For instance, discussing in detail how an image was researched and then crafted in a digital environment within a studio would be sufficient at this point in the analysis.

Now I direct attention to the *site of the audience*. In discussing how viewers of images read photographs differently, Rose (2007, 2012) argued the environmental context of the viewer could alter perceptions based on whether that person was viewing in a formal or informal setting, such as a gallery versus a mass-produced magazine. This is where she situated *social modality* as being important in how audiences understand photographs. She stated two criteria are influential in audience response to photographs: (1) the social identities of the spectators, and (2) the social performance of spectating. Since this was a gallery exhibit, my spectatorship is viewed from that of art patron and how I reacted to viewing my show at the gallery along with other art patrons on opening night. This is a reflexive exercise that does not rely solely on the photographs themselves, but rather, on supporting documents used in the ethnographic analysis. These were primarily extensive field notes in the form of personal journaling, along with detailed research notes about the design and layout of the gallery space for the exhibition. Thus I am addressing the second criteria of social performance of spectating, or viewing.



For a visual semiotic analysis, the image in and of its self is the most important consideration (Rose, 2007, 2012). Thus, within the *site of the image* compositional and social modalities become locations for meaning contestation. Here the Barthesian visual semiotic analytical framework of varying levels of signification using denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972), will influence this aspect of semiological understanding in self-identification construction through objects and images. From a compositional modality, for example, each image in the series had common design elements that helped create a cohesive look when hung together in the gallery. Those design elements included the repetitious use of scientific cases to house certain memorable artifacts and these cases were visually arranged on an invisible grid that aligned them with the edges of the photographic frame. On the other hand, items not contained within individual scientific display cases appear within the image area in a more haphazard, random, or casual arrangement. This juxtaposing of grid-like precision and haphazard randomness visually functioned in the social modality as denotation, yet connotatively, this speaks to a diametrical tension created by a trained modernist functioning in a post-modern environment, see Figure 2.



Figure 2. Representative photographs depicting social modalities as denotative and connotative constructs for visual semiotic analysis.

But what do all these elements communicate to the viewer or *reader* of the photographs? The answer to that question will vary in complexity based on who is viewing, as each individual will bring their own set of ideological assumptions and experiences to bear based on personal experiences. Since these images were used as data for analysis of my personal construction of self-identity in the form of an autoethnography, I am able, therefore, to move the dialectic into "second order levels of signification, or connotation, between signifier and signified" (Ownby, 2011a, p. 138). Due to the brevity of this paper, I refer those interested in further understanding this concept to Chandler's (2007) work. This is the juncture in the analysis where interpretation of ideological codes became important and *HyperRESEARCH* software was extremely beneficial in their interpretation. As I noted earlier, objects within the photographs were selected and highlighted, thus enabling the qualitative practice of *memoing* to be accomplished within the photograph proper. The software refers to this as *annotations*. Additionally, constant comparison between the photographs and the textual data analysis enabled the detection of the embedded ideological codes needing interpretation. For instance, contained within the two photographs previously shown (see Figure 2), ideological codes of racism, conservatism, and militarism presented themselves. The objects contained within the *Cub Scout* image, when functioning at the second order of signification, spoke directly to racial issues experienced during the height of the American *civil rights movement*, of which my personal first-hand experience as a cultural insider needed consideration. Thus, we see both compositional and social modalities imbricated simultaneously within the site of the image.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to highlight applied steps in a visual semiotic analysis using a critical visual methodology, as proffered by Rose (2007, 2012). My purpose was to explain and demonstrate how I applied CVM within my research as I created a visual autoethnography of my personal acculturation journey. As with any methodological approach, there needs to be an overarching framework and here I used the notions of Barthes' (1977) semiological understanding through signification levels of underlying ideologies. Within this framework, I have explored three sites image meaning-making: the image itself, the production of the image, and audience response to the image. Additionally, Rose suggested three modalities within each site for further explication: social, compositional, and technological, which were demonstrated within this write-up. The CVM could be applied directly to image interpretation, but in my research I chose to combine it with traditional ethnographic and autoethnographic techniques for understanding the narrative text. I have assumed the reader to be familiar with these other qualitative methods and focused my discussion instead on the visual component of my research project. Implications from this particular methodological design indicate usefulness not only in photography, but also in allied disciplines such as communication, education, cultural, and media studies. This form of analysis also finds a place in the broader landscape of social or cultural identity.

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