

**From the hand to the product: the utensil in
handicraft production. A hypertext visual essay
experiment.**

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From the hand to the product: the utensil in handicraft production. A hypertext visual essay experiment.

[ITALIAN VERSION](#)

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Abstract

In the pages that follow two experimental attempts are described: on one side, an attempt to construct a meta-text to interact with a photographic text on the tools of craftsmen (Secondulfo [2013](#)), conceived as a visual essay, that is to say one entirely developed through images, in this case photos; on the other, an attempt to explore the expressive and cognitive potentialities afforded by an electronic - telematic support like the magazine you are reading, through the insertion of hypertext links for the purpose of specifying, going more deeply into and intensifying the message entrusted to the text.

In the essay that follows an endeavour is made to explain, with the aid of images, the logic that governed the visual essay experiment, that is to say both the grammar that informed the choice and the sequence of the images, and the grammar that guided the construction of the single images, trying to show how the aesthetical stylistic traits were governed for the purpose of composing a sociological reasoning entrusted precisely only to the images themselves.

In this connection it may be useful to read a brief explanation of the criteria that informed the construction of the links.

<i>Text</i>	<i>Refers to</i>
Author's name	Biography
Year or title of work	Fact sheet on work

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1. Visual techniques, investigation and sociological reasoning

For several years in sociology too the use of imagery techniques for analysis of reality has been accepted, and in recent years this line of investigation has been consolidated under the name of Visual Sociology ([Cipolla, Faccioli 1993](#); Faccioli, [Losacco 2003](#), [Harper 2012](#)). After some pioneer uses of video techniques ([Cipriani 1985](#), [Agamennone 2005](#)), for a long time the sociological use of photos and videos was relegated to a “play” role, one of support and illustration of scientific reasoning that however could only totally entrust itself to the written word, unlike the work of the anthropologists, who immediately began to use visual technical to fix the “other” realities that they studied (drawing, films, photos, recordings). Anthropology and ethnography, driven perhaps by the difference in the reality studied and by the awareness that any verbal description would not have been able to reproduce the richness and diversity of the society and the groups studied, make [visual instrumentation](#) an essential part of their toolbox, often blending it with the concept of culture and material culture, in the reproduction of tools and their use. And it is from anthropology that these techniques cross over, not without difficulty, into sociology. Although by now the old distrust has gone, it is still difficult, for much of sociology, to accept the argumentative content and scientific capacity for observation of these techniques of investigation, also because of the poor technical competence of some generations of sociologists, whose background is in philosophical or political studies, and who are accustomed to transferring concepts and arguments entirely with the word, being suspicious of areas of symbolic mediation distant from the rational message inherent in the alphabet and in the ordered sequence of words ([McLuhan 1963](#)). They are incapable of seeing visual techniques outside the game intents with which they are used, in general, in society, and therefore mistrustful and constitutionally unable to “to take them seriously.” Yet, as we have amply demonstrated ([Secondulfo 2011](#)), there are aspects of society that it is impossible to study without resorting to photos, films, drawings, etc.

But the logic of images is not only applied to the empirical part of the investigation; it is also possible to apply it to the discursive development of results, that is to say to the scientific essay that collects them and divulges them. An evolution of the idea of photo story is already attested inside the techniques of visual sociology. Just as it is possible to develop a narration linked to an event or phenomenon that one intends to introduce and to analyze, so too it should be possible to develop an iconographic narration that works out the logical-inductive reasoning usually entrusted to the written

word of the scientific essay. This is the attempt carried out in the volume to which this article refers and that takes up the argumentative logic very often used by photo-reporting, whereby in the sequence of photos and in their aesthetical - argumentative structure a line of reasoning unfolds, entrusted to the photos themselves and to their iconographic components, representing the topic, the thesis, of the sequence of photo as a whole, considered as a single text.

This is the endeavour that is at the root of my book of photographs on handicraft tools (Secondulfo [2013](#) "*Mind hand tool*"), and with which these pages would like to hold a dialogue. It is an attempt that is justified by the decision, in the volume of photographs, not to frame the photos of handicraft tools with a "learned" introduction that, fearing aphasia of the images, sought to anticipate the problem, explaining to the reader what the photos were meant to say by themselves. Once, when I was a young photographer, an "elder brother" of mine constantly repeated that the longer the explanation is, the worse the photo is. And this has been the project of the book of photographs: to see whether the photos succeed by themselves in saying something, and communicating, only through the reproduced image and the sequence of pages, the idea that conceived them. This is an application of the criteria of visual sociology applied to the study of material culture. In this connection, in this field the additional possibilities offered by iconographic techniques, including photography, are particularly evident. There are phenomena and meanings inherent in the material culture and in its forms of organization, which could only be perceived and analyzed through techniques of an iconographic type (Secondulfo 2011): for instance, the spatial structures traced out by the position of the objects in social spaces, both private and public, the structures of authority inherent in the spatial organization of tables, classrooms, squares, etc... and a lot more.

A second experimentation entrusted to these few pages concerns the possible lines of evolution of the scientific essay, in the human sciences too, from the point of view of the wider and wider use of the expressive and communicative possibilities made available by the new computer platforms, more and more numerous also in the field of human sciences, with the proliferation of online volumes, essays and magazines. Very simply it is a matter of inserting a little hypertextual material in the essay, with cross-references variously linked in order to suggest clarifications or amplifications of the subjects dealt with. As regards these pages, the hypertextual aspect is limited to a first link level, above all to avoid dispersing rather than focusing the reader's attention, and also because the creation of autonomous pages linked together (as in websites) rather than giving a direct reference to pages already existing would have enormously encumbered the essay and its

structure, to the point of making it unsuitable to publication in a magazine, even online. I hope my readers will appreciate this small innovation, which, moreover, has allowed me in different cases to specify beyond the writing the sense that I intended to give to my words – and this, in a *visual sociology* essay, is almost obligatory.

2. Craftsmen and tools

“The word ‘craftsman’ immediately evokes a scene. If we peep through the window into the shop of a [carpenter](#), we see a man of a certain age surrounded by his apprentices and by his *tools*” (Sennett [2008:27](#)).

The general interest in the material part of social reality, the visible part of human culture ([Douglas, Isherwood 1984](#)), and particularly in the minute objects of daily life, arises within the revival, in Italy, of studies on consumptions ([Alberoni 1964](#)), which, though slowly, add to reflections on consumer behaviours and on the social processes linked to consumption a more and more attentive look at the objects in themselves, and to their world ([Appadurai 1986](#), [Secondulfo 1990](#)). This fits into the wave of renewed interest in minute daily life inaugurated by the studies of the French *École des Annales*. In this line of studies, reflections on handicraft tools desire to contribute, in the wake of the [encyclopaedists](#), to recognition of equal dignity as an object of study both to the liberal arts and to the mechanical arts, which the mind - hand separation has always relegated to an ancillary and marginal role; likewise, more in general, the study of consumptions has had in the first place to conquer for this sphere of social action dignity as an object of sociological study, dignity for a long time denied to daily life, considered to have too banal and modest a stature to become an honourable object of study for human sciences.

The idea of the tools of the craftsman starts instead from a two-year-long reflection on the handicraft work inside a national research [project](#) directed by Prof. Federici of the University of Perugia.

The craftsman differs from capitalists and proletarians not only by having enough capital not to work for wages without having enough to employ paid workers in a rationalized form, but also by being able to construct his own instruments, his own tools, thanks to the individualization of his production, distant from the standardized rationality of the production line and industry. In the cycle of material culture ([Secondulfo 2012](#)), the first stage is production, the socio-technological sphere in which, in every society and every epoch, nature becomes utility (see, for instance, the [Levallois](#) reduction

strategy, of the Neanderthal age). This stage too has its own material culture, the stage of its symbol-objects, which are tools; from the stick to get termites out of the nest and eat them, to guided robotic laser technologies (masterfully summed up in the sequence of the monkey in Kubrick's [2001 Space Odyssey](#)) or to nanotechnologies. Every society transfers strategic quotas of working ability to tools, making them become inorganic parts of bodies (Secondulfo 2012), able to multiply their abilities, and precisely for this reason vital, not only for the people that use them but also for society as a whole. However, it is not on the clash over control of production tools that I want to dwell. More modestly, the idea upheld in this photographic-sociological, or perhaps photographic-anthropological book, is to bring out the mind-product line of handicraft work in the corporeity of tools that the craftsman uses and at times "custom" builds, being his own master and engineer.

From the most elementary tool, the hand, down to the most refined precision lathe, tools, in work and in the ability that they incorporate and return to the action of the craftsman, trace out a sort of "civilization" that, according to the model delineated by [Elias \(1969\)](#), develops through successive and more and more complex technological "intermezzos" that distance the hand from the product, and "raise" the craftsman. This is one of the lines of narration and analysis that the book proposes in the form of images; the other is the harmony and dance that is impressed in the material of the tool where it has to meet the hand and to prolong its intention. And finally the attempt to redeem, aesthetically, humble handicraft tools, often the fruit of reuse of objects created for other purposes but submitted to a person's own project, always simple, modest and humble servants of the hand, which firmly maintain dominion over productive action in the work of the craftsman. These little big things, silent companions of the craftsman himself, who is often a solitary worker and possibly a little unsociable, are his world, the bubble of reality in which he spends his life and in which, even before leaving it in the product, he leaves his own mark.

3. Lines of the photographic essay

But let us see the *concept* and the logical organization of the volume, as well as the reasons that guided the choice of the images that, being a book of photos, have to be not only significant and suitable but also pleasant. In this connection, in the preparation of the photograph volume, many other crafts were explored and discarded, like that of the musician or of different types of repairers, among which those of computers, as well as the world of programmers, since it became difficult to draw significant images from these

examples, in the sense that I intended to give to the visual essay. In some cases, for instance, wanting to dwell on the musical instrument, it became difficult to distinguish the craft of the musician from that of the builder; the final selection of the “trades” investigated was also influenced by the aesthetic malleability of their world and greater or lesser ease of rendering their meaning through photography.

The images begin from the “degree zero”, in which ability is still all in the hand, in the wise and expert “touch” of the craftsman. The knife sharpener is the best example of it: the angle, the pressure with which he pushes the blade on the stone or the stone on the blade, are the masters of the knife edge, everything is in the wrist, in the fingertip, in the vibration; nothing has yet been transferred to a simple machine – whether sharpening a ham knife or a Japanese *katana* or extracting from a wooden pole a capital or a mullion for the *trumeau*. As this book will try to show, the images then continue presenting handicraft activity with a more and more sophisticated and precise instrumentation, where the tool gradually incorporates the ability of the hand, in a passage from pre-modern corporeity to the technology of modernity.

Photo: itinerant knife sharpener



Under the pressure of the thumb and the torsion of the wrist the blade is curved so that the angle and the friction of the grindstone get the best effect;

the hands are everything and bear the evident signs of their direct instrumentality.

The *working knowledge* ([Harper 1987](#)) is totally unwitting, a sort of extension of the corporeity and sensibility of the skin and the fingers that is extended to the blade and the metal, the latter being guided and controlled in an automatic and aesthetic way, just as the movement of the hand itself could be controlled. There is a silent and continuous dialogue between mind and matter through “the intelligence of the hand”, or, more exactly, “of the fleshy part of the fingertip.” Perception of the perfection of the result is still entrusted to the measurement of the look or the touch and not to external checking tools. Hands, blades and grindstones still form a harmonious mutual dance, whose perfection is entrusted to the sense of the body and the direct perception of the senses: sight, touch, sense of smell.

The control and the distancing of corporeity is still minimal (Elias 1969), the hand is still marked by pre-modern uses, like the long nail of the little finger, traditionally devoted to personal hygiene.

Photo: itinerant knife sharpener (detail of the hand)



From the point of view of photographic language, the endeavour was to bring out the surfaces on which the tool and the matter are in contact, and to graft onto this contact the idea of the mastery of the hand. The grindstone was photographed so as to represent its movement, an attempt also being made to extol it through the contrast with the skin of the hand. The hand has been expressed according to the fairly classical stylistic traits of this kind of

images, highlighting the wrinkledness of the skin that almost appears like a continuation of the creases of the sleeve, in an attempt, together with the prominence given to the fingernails, to suggest a general profile of the person and his lifestyle.

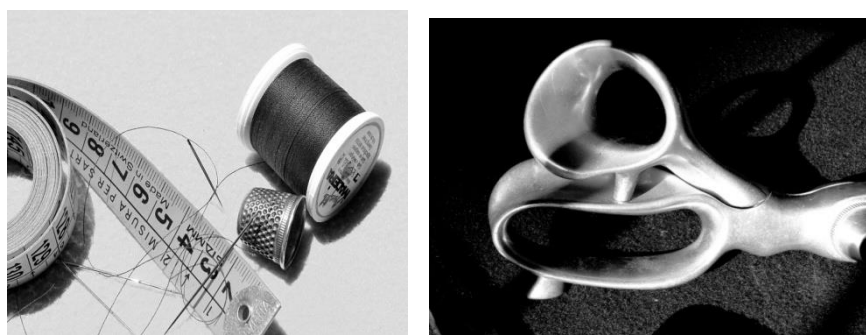
A decision was taken not to represent the motorcycle of the knife sharpener, ingeniously turned into a small itinerant shop, to concentrate attention on the creative action more than on the ingenuity of the apparatuses. Besides, the essay concerns the tools and not the work, and so it is the tools and not the general self-organization of the craftsman (which is by the way a characteristic of his) that the images concentrate on. Lastly, it is not an essay on the picturesque aspects of craftsmen, in a sort of romantic vision of handicraft work (Sennett 2008:107), or on vanishing trades. In this aspect, all the images portray people in normal productive activity at the time of being taken. But the craftsman is not only the artificer of the material; through this he can become the artificer of the person, of the [Goffmanian](#) (Goffman 1959) staging of the self; this is the case of the tailor and the barber, necessary complements of the gentleman. Here the action gets complicated, first in the barber with his skill with the razor, still a close relative of the knife sharpener that has sharpened it, a prolongation of the barber's hand that strokes the beard and the face varying pressure and angle, as the knife sharpener did for the edge of the blade. Then in the tailor bodies are decidedly distanced: the tailor constructs the customer's body through the armour that he manufactures, that he supports, corrects, hides or illuminates according to the desires and defects of the person wearing the garment. With the tailor, the tool, every craftsman's master (what engraves and moulds matter) becomes complex: from the simple hand, from the simple blade, we move to the scissors, in which the transmission of the will of the hand grows complicated, as the hilt grows complicated, down to miming a sort of embrace with the hand.

There still remains the simplicity of the needle connecting the tailor with the craftsmen of touch, leaving to the hand, in its simplicity, the big part of the job and of sensitivity in the construction of the product. Just as for the knife sharpener, the pressure and the angle directly transferred the result from the hand to the product, so the pressure, the angle, the tension of the thread directly transfer the will, the ability and the result from the tailor's hand to the suit. Lastly, in the distancing of the bodies there arises the tool of measurement and control, the tailor's rule, which allows him to apply a rational interface to adaptation between body and suit, which is integrated with and goes beyond mere physical competence or aesthetics, and then made it possible industrially to manufacture clothes. Through the rule, a glass of rationality is interposed between the craftsman and his product, increasing his

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precision but bringing the interaction between hand and subject into the world of modernity, into the obligation to face up to the standardized measure of the metre, the entrance of the universality of the modern into the pre-modern world of the craftsman of touch. The suit is not made “to measure” by chance, where “measure” has a double meaning, of adaptation but also of precision and uniqueness, and this is indeed a product of the ability of the tailor’s hand, but is also guaranteed by the objectivity of the standardized tool of measurement, the tailor’s rule, precisely.

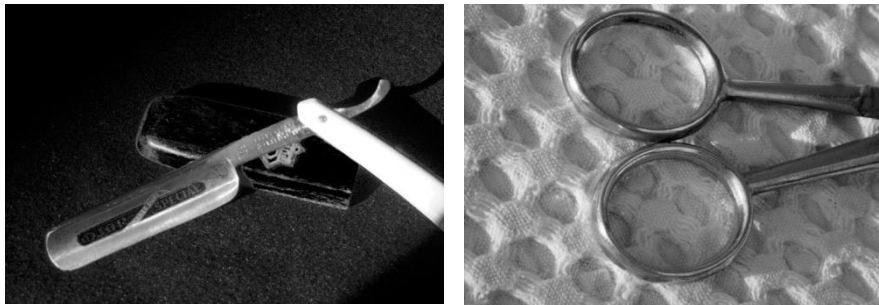
Photo: tailor, scissor handles, needle and thread



The handles of scissors and razors, the tools that “engrave” matter, so that for them the hand’s capacity for guidance is particularly important, mirror this close relationship in the ergonomics of the handles; in the latter it is easy to notice the point where the hand impresses its governance on the blade, since we find its imprint in the handle of the tool. Particularly charming are the tailor’s scissors, engaged in cutting the cloth following those curves of the design that will have to take into account the individual particularities of the customer; it will have to have an interface with the hand that is particularly detailed and ergonomic, able to transmit to the blade, which will engrave it on the cloth, every small command, something still similar to the direct command that the hand of the knife sharpener imparts to the blade. The action of cutting, as definitive and irreversible determination, characterizes the tailor much more than sewing or putting together the garment. This second function is characterized as “ancillary” in relation to the creative and definitive determination of the cut of the fabric; it is here that the tailor moulds and decides the shape; the rest is only application and diligent realization, clearly in line with the division between mind and hand and between teacher and student in the tradition of the craftsman’s shop (Sennett 2008). It is not by

chance that, wishing to characterize a style of attire, one speaks of “cut” and not of tailoring, as in the famous [“English cut”](#) that colonized middle-class Europe (“taglio all'inglese” in Italy, “corte angles” in Spain) . Usually there is no tailor that does not remember the first time that he had to apply the scissors to a cut of cloth to manufacture a suit. Alongside this, needle, thread and rule complete the picture. For this third image, as for many others, a moderate macro effect was using, but with a medium length optical system to increase the depth of field. The emphasis on the graded scale of the rule, as on the graded scale of the watchmaker-s lathe, is intended to attract attention to the entry of the standardized rule into the work of the craftsman.

Photo: barber, blade razor, scissors handle.



From the point of view of photographic language the stress here is above all on the tools, to emphasize that these represent a significant distancing from the preceding images of the knife sharpener or the cobbler. Through contrasts and lights, the endeavour was to lead the reader’s attention to the metallic nature of the tool, in contrast with the grindstone and the hand in the preceding images, to represent in the smooth, polished and coloured surfaces a significant detachment and autonomy of the tool in comparison to the hand. The tool that begins to conquer its own space between the hand and the material also affirms this strength of its own through its own peculiar aesthetics as well as through its materiality and this, particularly for the image of the handle of the scissors, is also underlined by the difference of texture and shades between the background and the tool. In the representation of the tool, the parts that come into contact on one side with the craftsman’s hand and on the other with the material to be modified are those to which the images try to draw the observer’s attention, mainly through management of contrast and the points of reflection of light.

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An image of the hand remains, but only to try to render the idea of care, which here is blended with dominion, and to remind the observer that behind the tool there at any rate remains the hand, also here rendered in contrast with the texture of the fabric on which it imposes itself and which at the same time it caresses. The gesture and the care of the fingernails contribute to the idea of attention and want to express further the difference with respect to the hand-tool of the knife sharpener. A little ethnographic note: notice the thimble above without protection (perforated) – a distinctive characteristic of the tailor, traditionally a male, who cuts, compared to the people that sew (traditionally apprentices, mostly females) – that is inscribed in the vast dichotomic tension between phallus and vulva (plough and earth, chisel and stone, [lingam](#) and yoni, etc.); besides, “craftsman” is clear in this sense.

Photo: tailor (detail of the hand).



A similar figure is the cobbler, who dresses the foot as the tailor dresses the body. In his case standardization is entrusted to forms, which give preventive organization to the relationship between the customer’s particularities, those that he entrusts precisely to the handicraft of the cobbler as to that of the tailor, in a universalistic starting scheme on which there will then be individualization by the craftsman’s hand. It is not by chance that suits and shoes, in the phase of mass production, are easily enough taken away from the craftsman to become the fruit of the assembly line and standardization of production, without a big loss of adaptation to the person and his or her particularities. It must also be said that feeding, gymnastics and,

recently, [fitness](#), considerably smooth out the individual particularities of bodies, making it easier to put them into the pigeonholes of mass production. Often the tailor-made suit, in caressing the body following its particularities rather than smoothing them over and standardizing them, appears almost embarrassing in revealing the body without that intervention of symmetrical homogenization of forms that the tailored suit causes, detaching itself from the body as much as is necessary in order not to be contaminated by its shape and particularities. It is more a uniform than a suit, well away from the hand of the craftsman, but often necessary in a mass society.

“Anyone who is able and wants to follow the fashion often enough wears new clothes. But the new suit conditions our behaviour more than the old one, which has adapted completely to our gestures, surrenders without resistance to each of them and often reveals our innervations in the least particularities ... For this reason the new suit confers on the wearer a certain supra-individual uniformity in the attitude; the prerogative that the suit exerts in the measure of its novelty on individuality means that men that closely cling to the fashion appear relatively uniform.” ([Simmel](#) 1985: 24-25).

The fact is that following the fashion is also a way to communicate one’s subjugation to social rules, in this case aesthetic ones, and therefore, at the moment when one manifests one’s individuality in distinction one already foregoes it through the modality of affirmation, which places the container (the garment) ahead of the content (the body). To recover some individuality all that is left is the garment that is indeed in fashion but is tailor-made.

From the point of view of photographic language, it is still the hands that are the protagonists; pliers and thumb help each other in the construction of the shoe, already around the mould but still incomplete, in an attempt to visually express the process of construction, from shapeless matter to formed product.

Photo: cobbler, sewing a shoe.



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The observer's attention is led to the coupling of pliers and thumb, to underline the shift of the function from the hand to the tool. In this image attention to the hands and the pliers has been rendered with the use of a wide-angle lens, which, slightly distorting the perspectives, has magnified the close-up effect almost making us lose sight of the rest of the image. A longer lens would have balanced the perspective too much, giving presence to the whole group (hands-bust-legs) without bringing into the foreground the relational structure on which the observer's attention was to be focused. But the quantum leap, regarding distancing of the body from the product, instrumental precision and the thickness of the cushion of tools that separates the craftsman from the subject, is with goldsmiths and watchmakers: the precision of the hands turns into the precision of the tool, and the harmony of the spheres and the beauty of the result now pass through precision and the quality of the tool much more than in the past. That precision in the goldsmith is minute detail and ability, while in the watchmaker it becomes an absolute universal rule, rigid harmony of the spheres; cogs, screws and pliers make their appearance and the micrometric rule marks the "jump in level" in comparison to the hand craftsman. Elias would be happy about it (Elias 1969). It is not by chance that the white coat makes its stable appearance, with a clear allusion to the physician or the surgeon, a strong symbol of distancing between bodies and the rational interface, a rejection of pre-modern fusion between the body of the craftsman and the body of the material that he is transforming to the advantage of rationality of technique, well represented by the evolution of the specific tools. In comparison to knife sharpeners, tailors or cobblers, in which the body still fuses with the product, and in which facture is still guided instinctively by the movements of the body without the mediation of specialized tools and without the feedback of instrumental verification of the results, goldsmiths and watchmakers distance themselves from the objects of their work, interposing vast and varied instrumentation, which includes part of the ability of the hand that guides it. Just as the process of civilization has estranged us from corporeity, separating the hand from the food through cutlery, the belly and the ears from rhythm through instruments, the body from the earth through chairs and tables, it has similarly estranged the body of the craftsman from his product thanks to the instrument, the instruments, which from being tools move towards becoming machines. The precision is now no longer in the physical sensitivity of the craftsman but also in the perfection of his instrumentation and in his inorganic body that, as in the rest of society, modernity increases and specializes, like a ring of fire between body and nature. Tools become the inorganic body, in this case of the craftsman, but this is a general process that broadens to all of us, when for instance we learn to ride a bicycle or to drive a car, when the tool is

incorporated in the bodily scheme of the person that uses it ([Leroi-Gourhan 1977](#), [Warnier 2005](#), [Secondulfo 2012:87](#)) until use can occur in an almost unwitting way, as if the object (tool) were part, organically, of the body, in the same way as we move, unconsciously, an arm or a leg. This happens when the interiorization of the tool produces a “[motor conduct](#)” (Leroi-Gourhan), that is to say a series of interactions with the object that are profoundly interiorized to the point of becoming unconscious. The object is no longer a simple tool but a real artificial element of the body itself. And it is at this level of fusion, which is attained with constant training and daily familiarity with certain objects, that something becomes a “tool.” The mechanism of motor conducts naturally concerns all craftsmen and moreover is a process inherent in the life of each of us. Looking at the craftsmen that I present here, however, the motor conduct emerges more forcefully in those crafts in which the tools are most complex and variegated, and in which their role of mediation between hand and material is greatest, meaning greater importance, for the craftsman, of mastery and skill in the relationship with the tool, and therefore of appropriate and profound motor conduct. When the tool is almost nonexistent, as for instance in the knife sharpener, the “wisdom of the fingertip” and of the hand are probably sufficient to guide the work, though I believe that the colloquy with the grindstone, made up of sparks, colours and sounds, is not only intense but also automated and automatically demands adequate responses of the hands and of the fingers to reach the desired result.

Photo 1: goldsmith, tools; Photo 2: watchmaker, worktop and tools.



Alongside the hand, however, there is also always the vigilance of the eye, watching, on behalf of the mind, over the action of the hand and the tool and the judge of the final result. But with goldsmiths and watchmakers, in the realm of precision, the eye itself is no longer enough, and it too gets fitted out with appropriate tools to amplify its function. Enlargement lenses of various

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kinds, with various adaptations to the eye, regularly accompany the work of this “family” of craftsmen, underlining, also symbolically, the minute detail and the precision. From the photographic point of view, apart from the usual control over the reflection of light to extol the metallic effect of the tools, in contrast with the wood of the structures, in the images of the tables a wide-angle lens was used to slightly distort the perspective and to extol the effect of the presence of the tools in the drawer, which the wide-angle lens “opens” towards the observer enhancing, in the photo of the goldsmith, the effect of wrapping and availability of this “bubble” of the world, of this belt of tools, the true inorganic body of our craftsman, at the same time a nest and a workshop.

However, there constantly reigns the order-disorder typical of the handicraft environment, in this sense so different from the standardization of the industrial environment. Disorder also has the symbolic function of underlining the personalization and uniqueness of the craftsman, since for him alone what is disorder for everyone else in reality becomes functional order. In the house-workshop the struggle between the workshop with its productive handicraft disorder and the house, with its moral and representation order, often managed by the wife-mother, becomes almost proverbial, especially in the phase of embourgeoisement of the craftsman, when from an ethos of a rural type the family moves toward the bourgeois or petty bourgeois ethos, thus also beginning to adopt and exhibit the “correct” moral logics in furnishing, as a request for social recognition. This is a process that to the craftsman, solitary in his relationship with the product and with “doing well” rather than “looking good”, is often extraneous.

Photo 1: goldsmith: drawer of the worktop; photo 2: watchmaker, taken from behind the lens.



In the images an endeavour was made to underline both the abundance and the minuteness of the instrumentation, naturally always in the “disorder”

that characterizes the individuality and eccentricity of many craftsmen and that is in marked contrast with the symmetry and standardization of mass production. As before, an endeavour is made to underline the metallic consistency of the tools, exploiting the incidence of the light. Eye and hand are exemplified by the image that lines up eye, lens, hand, gear and tools, in the attempt to sum up visually not only the relationship but also the hierarchy that intervenes between these various players in handicraft work. The closing of the reasoning set going in the two preceding images, represented in the last image, uses as an argumentative stylistic trait the incidence of the light on the gear that recalls and fits in with the spot of light of the eyepiece of the craftsman, creating a logical-iconographic loop that seeks to express the bond between the two points and however contains, as in brackets and like an element in a chain of equations, in the area in shadow, both the hand and the tool. The gear, together with the screw and the nut, represents, at the level of material culture, one of the symbols par excellence both of modernity and of industry, as well as of the precision of the craftsman. The gear, in particular, alludes to the idea of a machine, and hence of focused and precise organization; to each gear there corresponds another one, in a project in which precision is a condition of the result; it is not by chance that in the coats-of-arms of many democracies, including the Italian one, precisely a [gear](#) is represented.

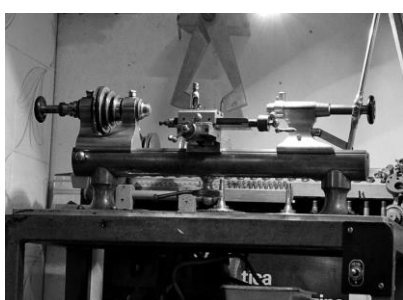
But at some stage, even in handicraft work, the tool and not only the result become [machines](#), and the need for control and precision that the hand, though helped by technical prostheses, does not succeed in guaranteeing with enough minute detail and regularity, is entrusted to the sequence of materialized movements and frozen once and for all in a machine. At this point the control of the hand only intervenes in a dialogue with the machine through analogical interfaces and no longer only through physical sensitivity, and the control largely moves to the result rather than the process, often requiring further precision tools built ad hoc and not only the look or the touch. The craftsman, on a small scale and in a flexible way, starts to become a gear of industrial manufacture, a passage made possible precisely by the standardization created through the use of machine tools similar to the industrial ones. The way is open to the concept of “[satellite industry](#)” and “[diffused factory](#)” that characterizes the absorption and domination of handicraft work by capitalistic industrial manufacture. After all, if it is true that “The use of defective or partial tools stimulates the imagination to work out the ability to mend and to improvise” (Sennett 2008:19), the contrary is also true.

The precision lathe is certainly the machine tool symbolising serial industrial manufacture and allowing standardization; and micrometric

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precision, in principle, does not even disappear with the robotization of productive processes. In the images an endeavour was made to give the machine, naturally in a “handicraft” version, therefore small and with entirely manual regulation, a stage presence of its own, photographing it with a portrait lens and from its own height, as if it faced us.

Photo: watchmaker lathe and regulations interface.



The detail dwells on the man-machine analogical interface, unknown to the preceding tools, mere silent extensions, not endowed, like the car, with an organization of its own that translates, rather than applying, the intentions of the hand that, in fact, come to it not from a physical and tactile interface but from a symbolic and mechanical interface, in which the action of the hand has no direct relationships with those of the car, but is only mediated by the code of communication between the two entities, which appear, more and more, as individuals that communicate with one another and not as a single individual provided with a naturalized prosthesis.

The regulating wheels represent and symbolize this break, and open up the way for cybernetics and the increasing autonomy of the machine as a complex and autonomous entity, with which man holds a dialogue rather than blending. The machine, for its part, takes on corporeity and identity, good or bad character, groans, sweats and stinks in an autonomous, peculiar way, similar to but different from the man that tries to command it but possibly does not fully succeed in doing so. Machines begin to take on an [autonomous](#) space in man's life; from the simulacra of the first order we move towards those of the second and the third order ([Baudrillard 1976](#), [Perniola 1980](#), [Viviani 2008](#), [Secondulfo 2007](#)).

With the introduction of machines and the idea of standardization in handicraft work there opens up, as I said before, the phase in which the craftsman is absorbed by the structure of capitalistic mass industry, and in which both the particularity and the productive effectiveness of handicraft work are lost. With this evolution, handicraft work is divided into two lines. One is that which is assimilated to industrial work, and is dominated by the latter, not only at an economic level but also at a cultural level, “becoming proletarian” as was once said and completely losing autonomy, becoming ancillary to industry and following its destiny for good or for ill, incapable of finding autonomous pathways of growth and market at the moment when the “diffused factory” [knocks it out](#).

The other is that which, taking a sort of “step back”, seeks refuge in the romantic vision of the craftsman, with the complicity of the cultural movement that in society in general begins to re-evaluate the natural in comparison to the artificial, the small in comparison to the big, etc. This new [economic-cultural niche](#), defended and upheld both by professional associations and by local bodies, in a tourist key, allows both the maintenance of some old individual and creative activities like that of the goldsmith, the watchmaker, the blacksmith, the cobbler, and the development of new handicraft activities and workshops like that of the restorer or the “carpet man”, an emulator of the [flower children](#) and the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, seeking freedom by building small objects tied to a personal choice of life and personal narration of reality, or, in the worst version, gradually reduced to being a mere dealer in cheap bijouterie made in series abroad.

So we will end this overview with some other images: in some of the activities of the restorer, the competence still moves to the craftsman, and in it tools once again become mere extensions of the hand without bringing into play either the machine or standardization, to which, indeed, the activity of the restorer, which is characterized by close adhesion to the object, to its history and its individuality, is hostile and distant. Others, not inserted in the photography book that is the object of the essay, refer to some “street” craftsmen. In this case too the tools are minimal and the romantic and individualist appeal is maximum.

In the photos the stress is above all on the hand in order to mark the difference from the mechanical environment of the preceding photos. What is stressed about the hand is the age, intended to signify, according to a fairly consolidated stylistic feature, experience and mastery, as well as care, entrusted above all to the ring in the second image, to indicate the artistic content of this activity and the preponderance that the personality and the competence of the craftsman have, in this activity, on the instrumentation that he uses. From the

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point of view of the iconographic narration, this hand closes off the circle begun with the hand of the itinerant knife sharpener.

The lightness of the touch, signified from the visual point of view by the lightness of the tool and by the type of haft, closer to the “handle” of a pencil or a pen than to that of an tool, by the force of the impact between the tool and the material, here light and impalpable, as well as by the type of grasp made by the hand, is also meant to detach this activity from the preceding ones regarding the action on the material, which here is delicate and light. Indeed, not by chance, the activity of the restorer, closer to care than to surgery, unlike the “traditional” crafts, has been particularly widespread among the female sex.

Photo: restorer.



From the photographic point of view, the use of a medium telephoto lens makes it possible to draw attention to the hand, while maintaining the presence of the contour on which it operates, and the lights are handled in such a way that the stylistic features that should recall the concepts of seniority, mastery and refinement which I spoke of before.

The use of the picture that “looks” into the camera with the lilies below proceeds in this direction, endeavouring to underline the particularity of the matter on which the restorer, in this case a female restorer, operates; it is matter that is anything but shapeless, endowed with a personality and a history with which the restorer has to learn to hold a dialogue.

And lastly there are “street craftsmen”, at least those that they are left and have not turned into vendors of bijouterie made by others elsewhere. This is the most “romantic” choice among the various ones that can lead to handicraft work, usually blended with an existential search for freedom and with a vision of the world and nature that is inspired by spiritual or animistic conceptions typical of the “*new age*” and a distant relation of the ideas of the

1960s and 1970s. These are conceptions that often guide and are also reflected on the products, characterizing them as little cultural and symbolic “splinters” of conceptions of the world that are often distant from “normal” daily life and also for this reason are interesting and attractive ones.

Photo: craftsman of rings and small fusions in silver, reviving the myths and the rituals of the Indians of America.



From the photographic point of view the photo uses a medium wide-angle to extol the hands and the small tool employed; the background shades off but not enough to annul the particularity of the creations on display, whose presence is helped by the contrast with the dark machine (filtered) behind them. The range of grey is softer in comparison to the preceding photos, both for the natural illumination and to try to make the romantic sweetness of this choice of life that is set apart from the world and out of delicacy towards it.

In both these last evolutions of the craftsman the machine and standardization disappear and the minimalism of the tools returns.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe I can affirm that the two experiments that are the object of this brief essay can be indicated as possible pathways for scientific reflection.

In the first place the visual essay, has a particular ability to bring into scientific reasoning a richness of humanity and meaning that the dry words of science often do not succeed in evoking. In addition, the visual essay requires the researcher to enter a new province of meaning, that of images, which is often unknown to him but can open up a narrative dimension and further scientific sensibility, stimulating observation of reality, and attention to detail and to the human meaning of the world, often largely entrusted to the material culture of various social groups. In comparison to studies on material culture, obviously, the visual tool is inescapable, from both the exploratory and the argumentative points of view, and the visual essay is perhaps the most harmonious and respectful form of scientific analysis of material culture.

This obviously has two very interesting merits-defects. First of all it forces the sociologist to go outside his or her reassuring *hortus clausus*, protected by the walls of the academic differentiation of knowledge, to face up to anthropologists, ethnographers, photographers, etc., who are possibly more skilled and incisive than him in this field of communication; and secondly, it forces him or her to master not only a new language but above all a new technique, since images are not spontaneously born from ideas but must be manufactured in a handicraft way, beginning from the latter, and the result will be more influenced by the technical mastery of the result than by the goodness of the starting idea, even if, naturally, there are no tools able to act alone, even in the world of cybernetics. There is an obligation to “have your feet on the ground” and a substantial admission of parity between abstract forms of knowledge and technical forms of knowledge, already dealt with very acutely by Sennett (Sennett 2008:94) in relation to the turn that, in this relationship, was brought by the French encyclopaedists, which blends well with that of *homo faber*, that *craftsman* that is the object of this essay.

Secondly, there is the hypertextual essay, according to a multilevel display technique that by now is even banal in computer products and in the web, but still struggles to be used in scientific essays, anchored to the paper support even when it uses online digital techniques. I believe that the more or less marked introduction of this display technique in scientific essays can afford enormous expressive and analytical possibilities for reasoning and the use and enjoyment of texts.

Hypertextual material allows us, much more than the two-dimensional surface of paper, to get close to the weft of the thought of the person writing, often multilevel and multimedia, but until now forcedly crushed in the two-dimensionality of the sheet and in the linearity of the alphabet. Perhaps, along

this pathway, scientific essays could regain some of that appeal for the public that the multimedia products of *infotainment* have taken away from them, relegating them to the exercise of few people, at times with suspected points of masochism. Probably, scientific essays are still in that phase of approach to the new technologies in which rather than setting out to explore and apply the new possibilities contained in them, they make do with transferring the products made and conceived for the old platform, in this case paper, to the new ones, perceiving the advantages of innovation over the product (for instance ease of communication) but not *in the* product, which remains identical to the past. Already in a first, ingenuous application like the one experimented with here, hypertext makes it possible to recover the richness of information that in the past was entrusted to the apparatus of notes, a true parallel text to the text of the essay, which the passage to faster forms of notation long ago caused to evaporate.

At the moment different shadows hang over the future of the craftsman. First of all there is the profound crisis of that handicraft, above all mechanical, but also manufacturing, which had gradually fused with the productive organization of capitalistic industry in a “satellite” form, and which was the first thing to be sacrificed both by the crisis of many traditional industrial branches like the car, which had stimulated enormous handicraft satellite industries and small enterprises around it, and by the subsequent productive shifts, which abandoned to their destiny the satellite industries that had developed as diffused factories. As mentioned, the specialization of these handicraft skills in relation to the central productive structure has meant that the possibilities of productive reorganization are very ephemeral if not inexistent, with violent [downsizing](#) of these productive areas. But even the survival of “traditional” handicraft workshops, though inside small niches or in situations strongly linked to tourist flows, is not simple, and this is because over the years the perception of the “handicraft product” by the consumer has greatly changed. Within the biennial national survey directed by Prof. Federici of the University of Perugia I referred to at the beginning of these pages, of which the photo-book on craftsmen’s tools is one of the products, a sample investigation was carried out on Venetian consumers in order to examine in depth the idea of craftsmanship and handicraft product deposited in the perceptions of consumers, and for us the results were rather amazing. The result in my view most significant was that, although 74% had sometimes or often purchased a handicraft product in the last five years, because of the culture that they represent and the superior quality, these products were, in the large majority of cases, alimentary products. This is a change that markedly redraws the “traditional” idea of handicraft as something that produces objects (made by goldsmiths, knife sharpeners, watchmakers, cobblers, tailors)

to something that produces above all foodstuffs. Perhaps here it could be specified that the examples are taken from Italian television programs. And it is in these foodstuffs that through years and years of advertising pressure – from the television programmes on [typical](#) products with lunches cooked in the piazzas of the cities, to the bombardment with [television](#) cookery programmes in which the non-industrial quality and the peculiarity of the products used were underlined, or the initiatives of SlowFood on the typical quality and cultural content of the foods, down to the advertising campaigns on wines and oils presenting them as handicraft testimonies to [local culture](#), the ideas of particularity and cultural value have been consolidated. Before these ideas were linked to the world of handicraft and its products, also in its romantic version opposed to the standardized and anonymous world of the industrial product. If those meanings of culture, personality, human quality of work, testimony to history and particular culture that had been shifted, romantically, to the world of handicraft in answer to its industrialization, are only or primarily concentrated on food, the risk of a loss of meaning and therefore of appeal by handicraft that is “*not food*” becomes strong and concrete, with the risk of placing these activities on a blind track, somewhere between the museum and the obsolete item.

In all societies only what exists has a meaning; losing meaning means evaporating from reality.

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