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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY: TOOLS, ARCHIVES AND RESEARCH METHODS. INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

In this issue, we explore the use of visual materials in social sciences through experimental, creative and critical methodologies. Over the last twenty years, visual ethnography has transformed the way social scientists create and define knowledge. Therefore, we propose a series of articles in order to explore a variety of methodological and theoretical practices “in the field”.

KEYWORDS

visual, ethnography, research methods, methodology, phenomenology, participatory

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“Et demain? Demain sera le temps de la vidéo couleur autonome, des montages magnétoscopiques, de la restitution instantanée de l’image enregistrée c’est-à-dire du rêve conjoint de Vertov et de Flaherty, d’un «ciné-œil-oreille-mécanique» et d’une caméra tellement «participante» qu’elle passera automatiquement aux mains de ceux qui jusqu’ici étaient derrière la caméra. Alors l’anthropologue n’aura plus le monopole de l’observation, il sera lui-même observé, enregistré, lui et sa culture. Ainsi le film ethnographique nous aidera-t-il à «partager» l’anthropologie.”
(Rouch 1979, 71)

In his visionary article *La caméra et les hommes*, published almost forty years ago, Jean Rouch argued that as a result of technical improvements in visual equipment, new ways of conceiving and realizing ethnographic film would be developed in the future. He predicted that the anthropologist wouldn’t monopolize the observation, he would be observed, and, consequently, film would not only be an observational instrument, but a way of sharing and rethinking the ethnographer’s own culture. Within this issue we explore a diversity of approaches through a series of articles that consider Rouch’s proposal to (re) think how we use and conceive visual materials in ethnographic research. They are the outcome of two international conferences on visual methods that took place in Paris between 2015 and 2016¹. The main objective of both conferences was to cross-examine the way social researchers use visual and sensory materials when doing ethnographic research.

Ethnography, a methodological approach that allows us to describe, interpret, experience and represent cultures and societies through long-term participant practices, has been continuously redefined since the introduction of visual materials. Since the emergence of visual anthropology throughout 20th century (i.e. Bateson and Mead 1942, Collier and Collier 1986), the discussion about the use of images in ethnographic research has been regularly renewed. Empirical approaches allow us to regularly reconsider the relationship between the world we experience and the production of anthropological knowledge through visual materials. This issue re-examines the variety of methodologies and instruments that are employed

¹ Visual Ethnography: Tools, Archives and Research Methods. EHESS, 9 and 10 November 2015. Visual Participatory Methods: Perspectives in Ethnographic Research. EHESS, October 17th 2016.

when doing visual ethnography. In so doing, we revisit the way researchers from different disciplines and geographic origins use and conceive visual ethnography. In this volume, we do not argue for new theoretical and epistemological approaches for visual research methods. A well-established literature has already deeply explored the definition and multiplicity of theoretical principles (i.e. Cox, Irving, and Wright 2015; Macdougall 2005; Pink, 2006, 2013; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005; Ruby 2000; Rose 2000; Harper 2012; Alfonso, Kurti, and Pink 2004; Banks and Morphy 1999; Barbash and Castaing-Taylor 1997). Instead, we suggest empirical approaches in which images and sensory materials are used to provide new analytical and methodological perspectives on visual ethnography.

During both conferences, we explored a variety of ethnographic case-studies in which visual materials were deployed. Anthropologists, sociologists, historians and geographers discussed a series of questions: how might we use images in ethnographic fieldwork? What is the “status” of the “visual”/“visuality” in our ethnographic practices? What is the role of visual supports in our research processes? What is the status of “engagement” in our visual practices? What is the “place” of participatory practices in your ethnographic approach? What is the role played by reflexivity in your visual research?

Neither the speakers nor the authors were able to answer all of these questions. However, each discussion gave us a better understanding of their research processes and especially the plurality of points of view around what is considered visual ethnography. First, we embarked on a long discussion about new collaborative ways of doing visual research through participative and reflexive frameworks. Consequently, we encouraged new theoretical perspectives which acknowledged the claim for new ways of creating and sharing knowledge through visual methods. Accordingly, the authors showed how visual supports constitute an original way to reflexively situate their own ethnographic practices through alternative sensory methods. In *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (Banks and Morphy 1997) David MacDougall insists on the necessity of “develop[ing] alternative objectives and methodologies” while acknowledging that “visual anthropology can never be either a copy of written anthropology or a substitute for it” (MacDougall 1997, 292-293). In that sense, this issue engages in a double-sided discussion: on the one hand, it problematizes the way ethnographers use visual materials in the field.

It proposes a critical discussion about concepts such as reflexivity, restitution, participatory approaches, and sensory and phenomenological ethnography. On the other, it explores - through empirical studies - the construction of ethnographic knowledge within a visual and sensory approach.

In *Doing Visual Ethnography* Sarah Pink argues that there are essentially two paradigms in visual ethnography: First, a “scientific and realist” frame based on observational approaches (i.e. Collier and Collier 1986), mostly related to sociological inquiry (i.e. Wagner 1979; Harper 1998; Prosser 1998). Within this paradigm, visual materials are mainly treated as data: the epistemological structure of this approach is the requirement of objectivity and scientific validation. Second, she proposes a “phenomenological, sensory and non-representational approach” to visual ethnography “concerned with the production of knowledge and ways of knowing rather than with the collection of data” (Pink 2013, 35). Thus, visual ethnography as a reflexive, situated and collaborative practice necessitates critical and multisensory approaches (Cox, Irving, and Wright 2015).

During both conferences, we had the opportunity to witness a variety of approaches. For instance, in 2015, we had the chance to discuss with Howard Becker an article that he published in *Visual Studies* in 2002, in which he examines “how photographs provide evidence for social sciences arguments” (2002, 3). He argues that images are “specified generalizations, which invite us to generalize in the ways the text argues” (2002, 11). In a certain way, Becker’s conclusions frame a way of approaching the “real instances” of social life, by considering the images as a material “both specific and general, abstract and concrete” (2002, 11). The following year, we discussed a different perspective with Andrew Irving regarding the use and conception of visual materials in ethnographic research. Irving argues that “orthodox approaches are limited and we need to create new forms of collaborative research and representation with regard to understanding experiences”² (2007, 185). The specificity of visual ethnography is its capacity to “create new forms of collaborative research” to understand “people’s ‘everyday’ thinking and being” (Irving 2007, 185). In Irving’s proposal we find an epistemological and methodological shift vis-à-vis Becker’s perspective: co-researchers - involved “in a process of poesis rather than mimesis as persons are not reproducing the past but actively re-interpreting it” (2007, 205) - participate and “create a type of knowl-

² We refer to the article *Ethnography, art and dead*, in which he explores experiences of illness through a critical and collaborative ethnographic approach.

edge and appreciation that cannot be defined in terms of objective truth or shared, hermeneutic understanding” (2007, 206).

In this issue, we endeavour to explore the use of visual materials in social sciences through experimental, creative and critical methodologies. Therefore we privileged a phenomenological and collaborative approach to visual ethnography in which researchers use visual supports not only to describe, interpret or illustrate a social reality, but to create and imagine new interpretations of social experience through visual methods. In doing so, we encourage theoretical perspectives that stress critical approaches and question both “paradigms” by exploring the empirical uses of visual materials in an ethnographic research.

For instance, Carine Chavarochette shows how photography may be used in fieldwork as a “can-opener” (Collier and Collier 1986) to study the social experience of both locals and migrants at the border. She analyzes the multiple uses of multimedia supports within an ethnographic project on water access at the Guatemalan-Mexican border. Photography opens new understandings about the “paths” (traces) of social experience. If visual materials can be used to describe and interpret peoples’ lives, they are particularly valuable when they contribute to “restoring” (restituer) a part of social experience through multimedia supports such as POM (multimedia project).

Marie Kofod Svenson explores a different perspective of photographic practices in fieldwork. In her article, she studies the multiple approaches of participatory methods in ethnographic research (cf. Freire 2012; Hubbard 1991; Wang and Burris 1997; McIntyre 2008; Prins 2010). Kofod Svenson examines the relationships between social engagement and participatory photography within the AjA Project. As an ethnographer, she describes the way photography may be employed within a community-based program in San Diego. One of the main questions is: what may be considered as “takeable photography” within a participatory project? Kofod Svenson reveals the frames of representation and the paradoxes of employing this kind of project. She illustrates the complex relationship between empowerment, participatory photography and institutional control of visual representation. If “the participatory process in AjA is a social rather than individual matter”, the institutional choices of what is “representable” influence the way empowerment is conceived of.

Photography is not only part of a collective effort to engage critical thinking for social change, it is also an instrument to build an institutional aesthetic of social experience. As a consequence, Kofod Svenson engages a critical and reflexive statement about the status of participatory photography in social sciences³.

Furthermore, we encourage a phenomenological discussion on visual experience and filmic support. In that sense, Laetitia Merli's article explores the sensorial dimension of shamanism in France. She demonstrates that video-ethnographic survey is not a "virtual capture of a certain objective reality but a collaborative, reflexive and sensitive work" that fosters social relationships. Through "phenomenological walks" she explores the inner, subjective and reflexive experience of shamanism.

Film becomes a narrative instrument to engage with the emotional and invisible dimension of the corps chamanique. The hagiographic object is co-constructed in virtue of a filmic immersion in their material and esthetic world. In this way, Merli explores - following Irving's poetic re-engagement in ethnographic research (Irving 2015; Irving 2007) - the performative capacities of film to reinterpret shamanic rituals.

Within this context, we explore a diversity of visual and sensory supports employed in ethnographic research. Michèle Cros explores the daily life of Diniate Pooda, an inhabitant of pays lobi (Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire) through drawings. This medium not only allows her to describe his daily life, but it is a channel to engage new understandings of lobi culture through visual practices. She argues that drawings allow Diniate Pooda to engage an imaginative and "ethno-projective" interpretation of social activities. "Parler pour parler ne l'intéressait pas. Ce qui l'animait, c'était ses dessins": Cros examines the "invisible interiorities" of drawings, its capacity to depict what a camera is often unable to represent: the "jeux de regards avec l'invisible", the creative and eclectic experiences of "les petits génies de la brousse". Drawings invite the viewer to visualize the invisible, to depict the social experience of both Diniate and Cros. In that sense, this technique encourages new understandings of lobi culture by virtue of a reflexive and creative use of drawing.

Finally, Florencia Muñoz-Ebensperger's piece, provides new perspectives on the ethnographic use of material culture to study everyday-life (pérennisation du quotidien). By showing the material construction of new imaginaries through objects, she explores the dialogue between objects, performance and art installation.

³ Discussion about critical participatory photography approaches recently engaged by authors such as Fattal 2016a; Fattal 2016b; Packard 2008; Prins 2010.

The visual dimension of her ethnographic research reveals the variety of approaches when working with objects in an art gallery.

If visual ethnography seeks to understand the sensory experience and phenomenological knowledge of place, Muñoz-Ebensperger's report reveals the backstage of what she calls a visual and material ethnography of domestic interiors.

Over the last twenty years, visual ethnography has transformed the way social scientists create and describe knowledge. In this issue, we propose a series of articles in order to explore a variety of methodological and theoretical practices "in the field". In doing so, we try to explore the multiple dimensions of visual and sensorial experience in ethnographic research. Paul Stoller argues that "sensuous scholarship is ultimately a mixing of head and heart. It is an opening of one's being to the world - a welcoming" (1997, xviii). Following this perspective, we advocate for new collaborations, necessary to cross disciplinary boundaries in visual ethnography. If visual ethnography requires us to "rethink' the visual in terms of its relationships with other elements of experience and representation" (Pink 2006, 143), we encourage a sensorial, experiential and collaborative approach to visual ethnography based on critical understandings of its tools, archives and research methods.

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