



## visual ethnography

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### ***Photoethnography of the urban space, or how to describe the urban world beyond words: presentation of a multimedia essay***

#### **Abstract**

*In our research project, entitled “At the heart of the city: analysing the pulse of the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona” and financed by the Inventory of Ethnological Heritage of Catalonia (IPEC), which belongs to the Department of Culture of the Catalan government, the question of images and sounds was central. After our fieldwork, the question of how to present our work arose; we did not want to do it through text alone. The idea then was gradually born of the multimedia format presented here, which is part of a more general reflection on the attention to be paid to sounds and images for the analysis and understanding of contemporary urban life.*

#### **Keywords**

Urban ethnography, Ethnographic writing, Multimedia, Public space, Barcelona

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How can we grasp a public space from visual or sound data? What are the benefits of such a perspective in comparison with other approaches? How can images dialogue with words and sounds, without these different registers repeating one another? These questions, through which we consider images and sounds no longer as simple illustrations of a discourse but as research tools and means of dissemination, raise writing issues. We understand writing as the presentation of a reflection which is not only based on words but which could also use light<sup>1</sup> and sound.

The ethnographer is first and foremost a scribe, as Yves Winkin (1996:103) reminds us, following the etymology of the word, and this task of writing (which takes place in several stages during the fieldwork and the analysis) may be materialized in several ways: by writing texts, of course, but also through sketches, maps, drawings, and by organizing sequences of photos together with sounds. When we “write” – with letters and symbols, light, figures, sounds, etc. – we conceptualize, we give a shape to our thought. For a long time, description in anthropology was regarded solely as a problem of literary quality: a text was either well or badly written (Laplantine, 1996). But since Clifford Geertz’s reflections, with his idea of ethnographic “thick description” (1973),<sup>2</sup> the impact of the researcher on his own research and its influence on the results have been well known. Therefore, instead of talking of data “collection” techniques, I would rather refer to the “production” of data in order to show that the latter are a construction, i.e. produced throughout the fieldwork according to the research questions rather than “collected” as if they were raw material. So everything is there to be constructed, including the way we look at things. I shall present here how we constructed a “photographic” gaze on public space, one which also takes into account the sounds of this space.<sup>3</sup>

### The gazes we bring to bear on the city

“bring objects to life, which formal languages will then organize. These gazes result from postures, ways of positioning and moving the body in space, positions taken within the city. The ways we do or not see things, the ways in which research objects are constructed, depend on the observer’s posture, the places he occupies in the social space and how he places himself within it. Objective knowledge, which postulates the externality of the observer and of the object perceived, is no exception to this rule: the

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<sup>1</sup> This raises the much debated question of whether we can think through images. This text contributes to the debate, but without entering into all its issues, since this would go beyond my present intention. It is however pertinent to mention on the one hand the very thought-provoking collective work edited by Etienne Samain (2012), which postulates that images carry thoughts and as such make us think; and on the other hand, the article by Andrés Davila (2011), which encourages one to focus on the verbal-visual texts of Lewis W. Hine in order to write sociological texts combining words and images.

<sup>2</sup> The idea is to view facts by combining the perspectives of the ethnographer, of the main interlocutors and of those with whom we live and with whom we study, while paying attention to the discourses of other disciplines (sociology, psychology, history, political sciences, architecture, town planning, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Although the purpose of this paper is not to discuss the notion of public space, I wish to mention the polemical aspect of this term (since, although they are in principle accessible to all, public spaces are not always so in practice), which leads me to prefer the term “urban space” to “public space”.

painter is inside the painting, the gaze at the city is also a gaze within the city” (Topalov, 1996: 2).

Observation thus presupposes having a purpose and intentions; and, at the meeting point of the visible and the invisible, the eyes of the onlooker make things exist (Havelange, 1998).<sup>4</sup> “Knowing how to observe,” “knowing how to be with others” and “knowing how to write” are thus the three skills required by any ethnography (Winkin, 1996: 103). The ethnographer has to learn how to look at things, how to listen, and also how to use the writing techniques available in this early 21st century in order to report his work as effectively as possible.

The ideas set out below are based on a research project conducted with María Isabel Tovar on the dynamics of the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona.<sup>5</sup> They were discussed and enriched during teaching experiments at the National School of Architecture in Versailles<sup>6</sup> and in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona:<sup>7</sup> there I invited my students to think about images as tools of research and analysis as well as means of dissemination.

Although I am unable to present here the research on the Plaça de Catalunya in its entirety,<sup>8</sup> I shall first address the contributions of an approach based on photographs and sound recordings to the understanding of how an urban space operates. We wanted to reveal the different in which the central square of Barcelona is used and socially constructed, paying particular attention to the social meanings of interactions and displacements. When she investigated the square in 2000 and 2001, the researcher Gabriela de la Peña (2003) emphasized the role of the vantage points for reconstructing this space and suggested an analysis based on visibility *versus* accessibility axes; We found this view interesting and endeavoured to make a more in-depth study by exploring how the eye can grasp reality and the games of visibility at play as well as the issues of visibility or invisibility.

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<sup>4</sup> For more detail on the way we approach the links between knowing and seeing, see Monnet, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Entitled “Al cor de la ciutat: anàlisi dels bategs de la Plaça de Catalunya a Barcelona” (At the heart of the city: analysing the pulse of the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona), this research was financed in 2005 by the Inventory of Ethnological Heritage of Catalonia (IPEC) and the Department of Culture of the Catalan government. The following year, we were granted a second research aid from the Catalan Institute of Anthropology (ICA) to create a model of a website, which can be accessed on the site [http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom\\_plcatalunya\\_2011/intro.html](http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom_plcatalunya_2011/intro.html)

<sup>6</sup> Among other things, the Master’s seminar entitled “Décrire l’espace habité” (Describing inhabited space) (2009-2010) run with my colleague Evelyne Volpe, to whom I wish to pay tribute here; and the Master’s first year research initiation workshop entitled: “hotoethnography of public space) (2010-2011).

<sup>7</sup> With the Master’s courses taught in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 on the uses of photography in ethnographic writing

<sup>8</sup> The research paper, available from the IPEC, has never been published in its entirety but, for a brief introduction to it, please refer to Monnet and Tovar, 2006 and for examples of developments, the 3rd essay by Monnet, 2007 and the writings of 2009.

In a second stage, I shall present the reflection process which led us to elaborate a multimedia writing to disseminate our research as well as the keys for reading it.

### **Images and sounds allowing attentive observation of the smallest details of daily life**

When we observe the hubbub and agitation of the city, we are overwhelmed with information. Taking photographs and capturing sounds are helpful in outlining phenomena as they freeze instants in a constant to-and-fro and record clues which may not always be decipherable immediately, but gradually become clearer, as in the visual archaeology suggested by Luiz Eduardo Robinson Achutti in “Madame Émile est partie” (2004: 16-31).<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, taking photos or recording sounds undoubtedly establishes us as observers of a place (Maresca and Meyer, 2013: 30) and makes it easier to defamiliarize an everyday and habitual context like a square which one may frequently walk through mechanically, without noticing. Capturing images and sounds assists this decentring process, provides the necessary distancing required by the ethnographic gaze to see and hear better what goes on before our eyes. For, as Augoyard (2001: 127) emphasizes, the researcher in an urban context is generally “doubly hearing-impaired. He suffers from misunderstanding caused by a deafening racket; and from misunderstanding due to not listening properly. Sound only reaches him in excess or through silence.”

Sounds and images hence enable us to see the elements we cannot perceive immediately, so as to obtain “thicker” and more systematic observations. Moreover, photography and captured sounds enable us to observe and listen, in several stages, to certain things that we would not see or hear on the spur of the moment. As we were working on the Plaça de Catalunya, we would meet regularly to look at and comment upon the pictures taken by each of us.<sup>10</sup> This enabled us to bring out certain regularities which we had overlooked during in-situ observation (recurrent phenomena, users of the square whom we could suddenly identify and see again on the following days, etc.).

Like Albert Piette (1996), we consider the “photographic click”<sup>11</sup> an ideal means to discover the smallest details of daily life and stimulate a “new way to look at social life” for a “better ‘rupture’ effect for the eyes than the film image”. That is because a photograph,

on its own or alongside other images with similar or contrasting features, can bring out something ‘remarkable’ (Moles, 1990), ‘cause a sudden illumination’<sup>12</sup> and give visual

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<sup>9</sup>In this prelude to his manual on photoethnography, L.-E. Achutti portrays the former resident of the apartment that one of his acquaintances had just purchased. By photographing her personal belongings and furniture, which had not been moved after her death, and deciphering the clues she had left, he takes us into the life of this “French female factory worker who lived during a major part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (2004: 4).

<sup>10</sup>It should be mentioned that both of us were amateur photographers, but in most of those meetings, one or more professional photographers helped us comment on the images.

<sup>11</sup>To which we added a “sound click”, as explained below.

<sup>12</sup>This is the *punctum* referred to by Roland Barthes (1980).

relevance to features not obvious to the naked eye for people in their daily interactions or for observers who no longer notice them (Piette, 1996: 150).

### ***On the classification of the photos taken on the Plaça de Catalunya***

Thus, for example, the photos of what we had designated as “entries into the square” drew our attention to the body postures which make it possible to distinguish groups clearly. We should explain in this regard that we were required by the IPEC (Inventory of Ethnological Heritage of Catalonia) to identify the content of the photos to be deposited in their archives. As neither of us both was born in the city of Barcelona and we are sensitive to identity issues,<sup>13</sup> we declined to classify these people on criteria of supposed membership of groups (as we had not asked the people we photographed how they wished to be portrayed) and therefore did not interfere with the spectators’ interpretation in that respect. This posture gave rise to the following typology of human configurations according to the way they occupy the space: “empty space,” “individual” (single person), “small group”, designated in turn as a family group,<sup>14</sup> couple (if there was visibly a close relationship between the two people), duo (when no sign of such relationship was perceptible), trio, etc., “compact group” (group of more than ten people who tended to perform a similar activity), and finally “flow,” when groups were impossible to distinguish.



Example of photo tagged “Duo” for the files of the IPEC, where the way bodies pose and are clustered under the same umbrella clearly delineates a unit of mutual acquaintance.

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<sup>13</sup> Gérard Althabe warned, more than 20 years ago, that “by staging social worlds in their works, whereby they emphasise ethnocultural singularity, ethnologists delineate the boundaries of their exclusion and thus contribute unwittingly to the exclusion process” (Althabe, 1992: 255). For a reflection on the perception of otherness in Spain and the importance of the choice of words used to describe migratory phenomena, see Santamaría, 2002 and 2008; and for a more specific reflection on the Catalan case and in connection with our field work on the Plaça de Catalunya, see Monnet, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> While family links are often not readable in the public space, we place in this category the people who declared them the square, for example the common case of children addressing an adult as “mummy” or “daddy”.



Example of photo tagged “Couple” for the files of the IPEC, given the intimate relationship implied by the persons wrapping their arms around each other’s bodies.



Example of photo tagged “Family group” for the IPEC files with children posing accompanied by people who might plausibly be their grandparents. As for the photographer, in the background, his kinship with the people photographed was revealed to us when one of them called out: “Go for it, daddy, it’s OK! Quick!”



Example of photo tagged “Trio” for the IPEC files. Here, it was the position of the feet and arms of the three people in the centre of the image that made us understand that they “are walking together,” in contrast to the gazes and positionings of the other people sharing the space with them. The latter are looking or heading in other directions or are not walking in step with them (in the case of the woman strolling behind).

As we progressed in our work,<sup>15</sup> by analysing the series of photos we had produced to capture the moments when the people entered the square, we realized that photography helped us understand some of our intuitions, when we established our typology of the different clusters present on the square. The convergence of a series of elements, such as the way of dressing, the gestures, the direction of the eyes, the spaces crossed, etc. makes it possible to underscore a certain staging in which a cluster can be unified and that makes it possible to define this cluster of people as a “small” or “large group,” but also the fact that they share a number of visible marks.



Examples of photos tagged “Entries into the square” for the files of the IPEC.

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<sup>15</sup> Not so much as a final phase, but rather during our research. On the working principle of the “pencil-camera” of Jean Rouch who “in full swing, by successive approximations” seeks to initiate a synthesis in situ, whereas the first editing provides a second reflective phase (Prédal, 1996: 36).

More generally, the processes of composition and framing enabled us to discern the “choreographic” qualities of the different clusters. Thus, compact groups, visible from afar, can only be grasped by using wide shots. Photography led us to reflect on the classifications used and the importance of the words selected to describe a situation that was observed. An individual may be perceived as a simple passer-by or be turned into a “character,” i.e. a characteristic user of the square, through a simple frontal shot, whereas otherwise he would have been defined by the abstract action of passing through. In the category “individual,” we therefore designated some persons as “performers”, when they put themselves on show in the square, or as “characters,” like the man in his sixties who regularly came to the square but who, every time we talked to him, presented himself with a different identity. The “characters” are thus people whom we could clearly identify on the basis of their activities on the site.



***“Performers”***

“I’ve got money! I’m rich! THANK YOU”





*"Man and woman gleaning"*<sup>16</sup>



A person putting on a show, then walking past people sitting on benches in the first row, asking them to join in.



*"Man on his round"*

A term borrowed from Gabriela de la Peña (2003) who coined the expression to describe the activity of some people on the square who spend their mornings or afternoons wandering in circles generally in front of the benches in the first or second row (to locate these spaces, see the map at p. 56)

<sup>16</sup> Referring to Agnès Varda's film *The Gleaners and I*, 2000.



"Pigeon man," by analogy with "cat ladies"<sup>17</sup>



"Peeping Tom"

We use the term "peeping Tom" (*voyeur*) intentionally, instead of observer, since this person would come regularly to that place which slightly overlooks the square (see the map at the p. 56) to stare at the people lying on the lawns behind the bushes.

So the pictures taken are important but so too is the selection of the words then used to describe them, a theme which cannot be stressed enough, as pointed out by François

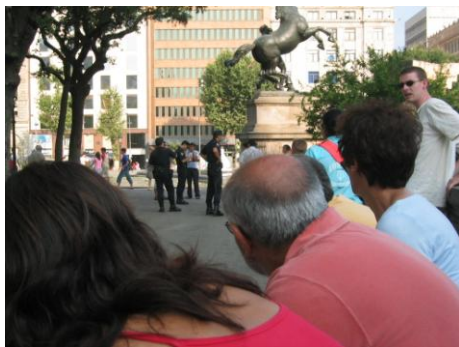
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<sup>17</sup> Yaël André has devoted a film to them, which is much more than an analysis and presentation of this human/cat relationship. In her film, *Chats errants: espaces temporaires d'inutilité* ("Stray cats: temporary spaces of uselessness," Belgium, 2007, 69 min), she conducts a very thought-provoking and inspired reflection on Georges Perec's work on space.

Laplantine, who remarks on “the lack of astonishment at the potentialities of language” (2009: 71) manifested by most researchers in the social and human sciences.<sup>18</sup>

### **On the ways of presenting oneself in public**

The permanent or semi-permanent users of the square include “specialists,” i.e. practitioners hired and legitimated by the authorities to manage the activities performed on the square (the various police departments operating in Catalonia but also, depending on the events held on the square, private security services), its maintenance (water service, conservation of monuments, parks and gardens, etc.), to “clear” it (the refuse and sanitation service) so as to keep it “clean” and in compliance with the standards expected of a public space in Barcelona. It is not a difficult task to recognize these specialists. They are readily identified by the insignia they wear, their uniforms and/or the items linking them to the institutions that give them legitimacy: the City Hall and its different departments (Parks and Gardens, Water service, Conservation of Monuments, etc.), the Catalan government (Generalitat), the city, national or Catalan police (Mossos d’Esquadra).



*Supervising the square*

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<sup>18</sup> One of my leitmotifs when teaching is to insist on the words used giving an account of observations made in the public space. We need to remember that words and concepts are socio-historical constructs; they have a history and implications. Too often, we lose sight of the fact they are reductive because they fail to embrace the reality in its totality. Constructed categories are always viewpoints on something at a given time, like the net evoked by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, with which one catches some of the real without being able to catch all of it. Classifying and creating categories are important and necessary processes, but they constantly need to be questioned and revised so that thought can develop and reflection can progress.

The distinctive signs conferring an identity through clothing and/or complements worn on the bodies present are not, however, specific to “official uniforms.” As we were observing the square and building our photographic register (especially when selecting and analysing the photos) the ways people dressed suddenly appeared as means of bodily territorialization of the space occupied or crossed in the square, a territorialization which thereby constituted it. Photography thus led us to reflect on these complex visual signs implicit to the different clothing styles that are juxtaposed on the square.

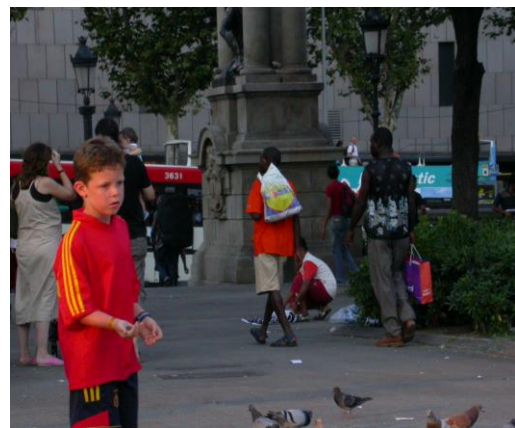


*Marks of identity*

Some ways of dressing seem to obey very specific codes, such as those of some young adolescents, who habitually cluster around the “Monument to Francesco Macià”. Their clothing style (wide trousers, sports cap and t-shirt) corresponds to an “urban style” adopted by groups of young people identified as “Latinos” and which relates to fashions appearing in “transnational” urban contexts.

Thus, many identity marks may be ostentatiously displayed as carefully and deliberately self-effacing. The game of appearances, as we well know, is very complex and is always deciphered on the basis of (conscious or unconscious) preconceived patterns.<sup>19</sup>

Class, phenotype and gender inhere in people’s bodies, both their tangible and their imaginary bodies, says Moira Gatens (1996), since images, symbols and beliefs shape the social and political reality of individuals and groups. A person is grasped first through their body. The body presents and represents simultaneously. We present ourselves and are present through our bodies. Our body bears within it our social identity, it *is* this identity. This why we work on our bodies to make them presentable. We mould them as best we can to the shape that is considered legitimate. But bodies are not simple surfaces to be written on or presented. Bodies are also actors. The ethnographer of urban spaces must therefore decode what the dance of bodies in public space tells us and try to understand how these bodies are changing with the generalized acceleration of mobility. The aim is thus to scrutinize the social logics through which a public place becomes something more than a territory for access and circulation, a network of unstable relations among strangers or vague acquaintances, a constant, changing proliferation.



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<sup>19</sup> During the informal conversations we had with various users of the square, the question of identity was an unavoidable theme and enabled to adjust or to readjust preconceived ideas on the identity of the interlocutors and to share impressions on those of the other occupiers of the square.



*“Bags” series*

### **Images and sounds which guided the ethnography of the square**

Thus, the photographs and recorded sounds were more than simple illustrations or evidence of our presence on the place of our study. They became tools and stimuli to thinking, which enabled us to build the ethnography of the square. Let us mention finally that the use of the camera during the work in situ implied a permanent dialogue among different images produced concretely or mentally (when it was not possible to record them on the spur of the moment). The discussion of the photographs that we could not take was itself instructive.

Our photography, in its exploratory phase, enabled us to describe, to “write with light” (according to the Greek etymology photo-graphein), and in this process it led to a double disclosure. On the hand, it revealed aspects of the reality observed that were not always perceptible through a text-dominated observation, as we have noted above. Indeed, according to Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (1997), visual anthropology should mainly focus on these visual aspects of culture. The minuscule details that our naked eyes much less readily perceive suggested new ways to approach fundamental aspects of our research which might not have emerged so easily with other methods.

On the other hand, photography revealed to us our own gaze. It made us think not only about the photographs we were taking but also about what had not been photographed. Our photographic eye incorporates, whether we are aware of it or not, a series of presuppositions, a mass of accumulated knowledge related to other images that have shaped the way we understand and picture cities. So, while at the outset our photographic approach was mainly descriptive and observational, we became immersed in some of the most intimate aspects of the square, with close-ups, sometimes extreme close-ups, concentrating on the textures of the place, as we advanced in our work and as we began to discover what the groups implied in terms of choreographies, as we increasingly understood them as an integral part of the space observed. This enabled us to break out of the realist paradigm of pure, unfiltered observation, to include elements of the poetics of the urban space, as advocated by Pierre Sansot (1971).

While the visual is essential for understanding the dynamism of any urban space, its sound characteristics are no less important. From the distant rumble of traffic on the roads adjoining the square to the cooing of pigeons, the whispers of the smooching lovers on public benches or on lawns, to the shouting and laughing strollers playing with the pigeons in the centre of the square, via the various exchanges and conversations in different languages, captured during our work in situ, all these sounds fully contribute to the specific configuration of the place. Although we could not record all these sounds during the first phase of our research, we still “registered” them following the model we used with the photographic material, in other words we noted them and then created a form for each of them like those the IPEC asked us to complete for the photographs. These forms mentioned their different characteristics, first specifying whether we were dealing with a panorama (undifferentiated murmur, wind rustling in the trees, rain pattering on the mosaic pavement, etc.), a general view (differentiated murmur, various accents and languages, etc.) or a close-up, i.e. sounds whose sources can be identified easily (siren or driving by of a police car, exchanges between a vendor and his customers, comments of a tourist guide, etc.), which we designated a “sound map”. We had deliberately kept the visual registers to catalogue the sounds and conversations we heard, thereby implicitly echoing the database of photographic material, from which we also borrowed the other categories (type of sound, duration, date and location of the “shot,” summary of its content).

#### **Fragment 9**

Exchanges in French among four people, apparently a family of tourists. Close-up.

3-4 minutes

Tuesday 12 July 2005

On a bench in the second row, corner B.

Exchanges between the three people sitting on the same bench as the researcher, and a man who arrived saying:

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” (in a reproachful tone)

“Have you been out of *Casa* long [a furniture store close to the square]?”

“Yeah, quite a time!”

“We told you we were going to look for a bench and we tried to find one that wasn’t too smelly” [Then comes an account of the various changes made by the people seated (a woman and two young girls) because of the smells around the benches in the third row. After these brief exchanges, they agree to walk towards the Ramblas “to have a drink”].

#### **Fragment 15**

Sounds

General view

5 minutes

Monday 15 August 2005, afternoon

In the centre of the square by corner D

A firecracker explodes. The pigeons fly away immediately. Flutter of wings as pigeons take off then fly in circles (squawking and flapping of wings) with many onlookers exclaiming “oh!”, “ah!” and “heel!”, in unison.

Note: This phenomenon recurred three times within 15 minutes.

*Examples of sheets generated*



Conversation in Russian. In this area of the square (corner B), it was also common to find newspapers or journals in Russian, left behind on the benches or small advertisements in Cyrillic, stuck to the lamp posts.

Paying attention to the sounds produced on and around the square, we could note that life in general, and the life of the square in particular, is composed of these sensory aspects which incorporate a range of significations, relationships and tensions inscribed in the bodies and cityscapes that photography enabled us to reveal. It was then that the notion of ambience, developed by the CRESSON laboratory at the National School of Architecture in Grenoble, became meaningful. The urban and architectural ambience no longer defines the space simply by its physical, built-up, tangible dimension but also through the social



interactions governing it and the phenomena of perception linked to the involvement of the body (as a feeling subject) within it. So space is no longer defined only by its shape but also by the way it is experienced.

The capture of sounds and pictures thus provided us with an element which is not always welcome in the social sciences, namely inclusion of the unexpected, the non-measurable, which breaks the pre-established patterns, the rigid models framing the research. In photography and sound recording, the unpredictable, the random, the unexpected have a value that goes beyond the rational frameworks, the “*studium*” (Barthes, 1982) of photography, but which provides a dose of freshness and vitality to be integrated into our ethnographic accounts. Urban life is itself composed of these unexpected events, these glances and ironies, just as the Plaça de Catalunya is a meeting place for surveillance and creativity, minor resistances and inevitable and benign randomness.

The contribution of these sounds and images or of what could be termed the photographic eye<sup>20</sup> thus unfolded at several levels: as field diaries (but with pictures and sounds this time), as tools of analysis, but also as material for the dissemination of research which was first formalized as a photographic sequence accompanied by sound ambiances of the Plaça de Catalunya that we have reproduced below. This sequence aimed to be the synthesis of our research and the presentation of the elements that we had encountered when observing the Plaça de Catalunya – namely, bodies and their language, the clothing styles, the identity marks, the objects and gestures that are used to establish relationships, and the transformation of the public space in its materiality, the negotiations of spaces in the implicit game of looks, the appropriation of space.

### **A photographic sequence, accompanied by sound ambiances, to present the results of our research<sup>21</sup>**

When we describe, we construct, and it is precisely to emphasize this constructivist aspect that we disconnected images and sounds in the sequence (using the patten of rain over sunny pictures, for example), to stress the fact that we did not consider images and sounds as mimetic productions of the real world but rather as traces of it. Like the ethnographic text, it is constructed objects that refer to the particular act of an observer (a photographer and sound recorder), which rules out considering image and sound outside their relationship with him or her. The photographs make things visible more than they reproduce the visible, just as

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<sup>20</sup> Echoing the “filming eye” suggested by Claudine de France (1992), we mean by “photographic eye” paying heed to the way the real world is shaped during the recording, then at the time of editing. The aim would be to emulate the work of the still camera (or the movie camera in the case of cinema) when observing, recording or organizing the ethnographic material. It is the pencil-eye of Vertov and Jean Rouché (1968), with or without a camera, to which we have added a pair of ears.

<sup>21</sup> The montage can be seen in the “Essay” section of the journal. We presented it in 2006, at the conference which followed the 25<sup>th</sup> edition of the Bilan du Film Ethnographique (Overview of the ethnographic film) in Paris with the paper “Essai d’ethnographie visuelle ou comment cerner le pouls de la place de Catalogne au travers de photographies et d’ambiances sonores” (Visual ethnography essay or how to take the pulse of the Plaça de Catalunya through photographs and sound ambiances), which introduced our approach. The latter is available on the following link: <http://comitedufilmethnographique.com/nadja-monnet-et-maribel-tovar/>.

sound recordings allow one to listen better. The images and sounds are therefore not neutral documents. They are both sources of information and interpretations of the reality. As Howard Becker wrote (2002), we know that images are constructed, that they can be made to say (or not say) almost anything we want them to, but “we also know that in our daily lives we look at photographic images and think (...) that we have learned about something beyond the photographer's ideas and beliefs.” That is why Becker prefers to speak of photographs as “visual evidence,” which enables us to avoid the “muddle about 'truth' and talk more realistically and reasonably about what photographs can actually do for social science arguments” (2002: 4).

The montage presented here draws inspiration from the works of John Berger and Jean Mohr, that is to say, a critical posture with respect to the supposed revealing capacity of the single image, considering on the contrary the possibilities of montage, or photographic narrative, as an integral part of the construction of an ethnographic narration. In their book *Another Way of Telling*, i.e. storytelling with photographs, Berger and Mohr (1982) distance themselves from two genres, from which we would also wish to distance our sequence – photographic reporting and the photo-novel. A photographic report may well relate a fact, but purely descriptively and from an outsider's viewpoint (i.e. that of someone who comes in for the occasion to “cover” the event, without having the time to gain a full sense of the situation described); and in a photo-novel, photography is reduced to being an element in the reproduction of a story built on the codes of cinema and theatre.

The offer of this collaboration between a photographer and a writer was an invitation to reflect on the articulation between ethnographic and photographic narrative, and on a type of narration that articulates particular events with other, more general ones, without necessarily being constructed on the basis of a given linearity, since the 150 photos of the sequence entitled “If every time” (1982: 131-275), dealing with the life of a female peasant born in the Alps at the beginning of last century, are indeed presented in a certain order but the reader-spectator is free to look at them in any order. This is also the approach of the “photoethnographic narrative” proposed by Luiz Eduardo Robinson Achutti (2004: 123) although Achutti grants more prominence to words in his approach than Berger and Mohr do in the photographic series mentioned above.<sup>22</sup> Like them, Achutti introduces his sequence of 161 film photos with a short contextualizing text on his research work in the National Library of France (BNF), but follows it with two other texts. The first is a transcription of the visitors' book of the exhibition he put on in the corridors of the BNF for the people with whom he had worked. The second is a rewriting from the words left by the visitors at the exhibition (who in that case were also his interlocutors during his research). The whole work presents us with a polyphonic reflection on the relationships between the staff and the building, and their strategies for adapting to and appropriating the premises.

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<sup>22</sup> In *A Seventh Man* (1975), another collective work by these two authors, the balance between texts and images is quite different from that in this sequence, in which the visual takes precedence over the words

### **From the photographic and sound sequence to the multimedia essay**

The limits to our essay in sound and photographic ethnography nonetheless appeared rapidly in the light of the perplexity of our spectators, which was in strong contrast to the enthusiasm inspired in us by the many new “illuminations” that struck us after each viewing. The need to make explicit, and not only verbally, our interpretation of the material presented in the sequence led us to construct a multimedia essay<sup>23</sup> in which the images and sounds are as important as (and possibly more important than) the texts, in any case not subordinate to them. So it was a matter of revaluing the images and sounds, but not at the expense of the text, playing them *with*, not *against*, the writing, and thinking also with our eyes and ears, thereby paraphrasing the title of the epilogue to Maresca's book (1996), with the addition of hearing.<sup>24</sup>

The main question then is how to establish links between these different elements. As Bruce Mason and Bella Dicks (1999) emphasize, the most interesting promise of the hypermedia lies not so much in their “rhizomatic” and polyphonic possibilities as in the opportunity to combine different registers: sounds, texts and images.

“There are potential gains to be derived from exploring how ethnographic representation can simultaneously be a verbal and a pictorial, a visual and an aural activity. [...] A well-constructed ethnographic hypermedia environment would seek to take advantage of the specific communicative modalities of each medium, rather than seeing them as add-on ‘special effects’ (Mason & Dicks, 1999: n.p.).

Hence we took up these challenges and explored the possibilities of the Web medium by conceiving the multimedia essay with the assistance of the Web designer and anthropologist Jorgelina Barrera and the computer specialist Federico Joselevich.

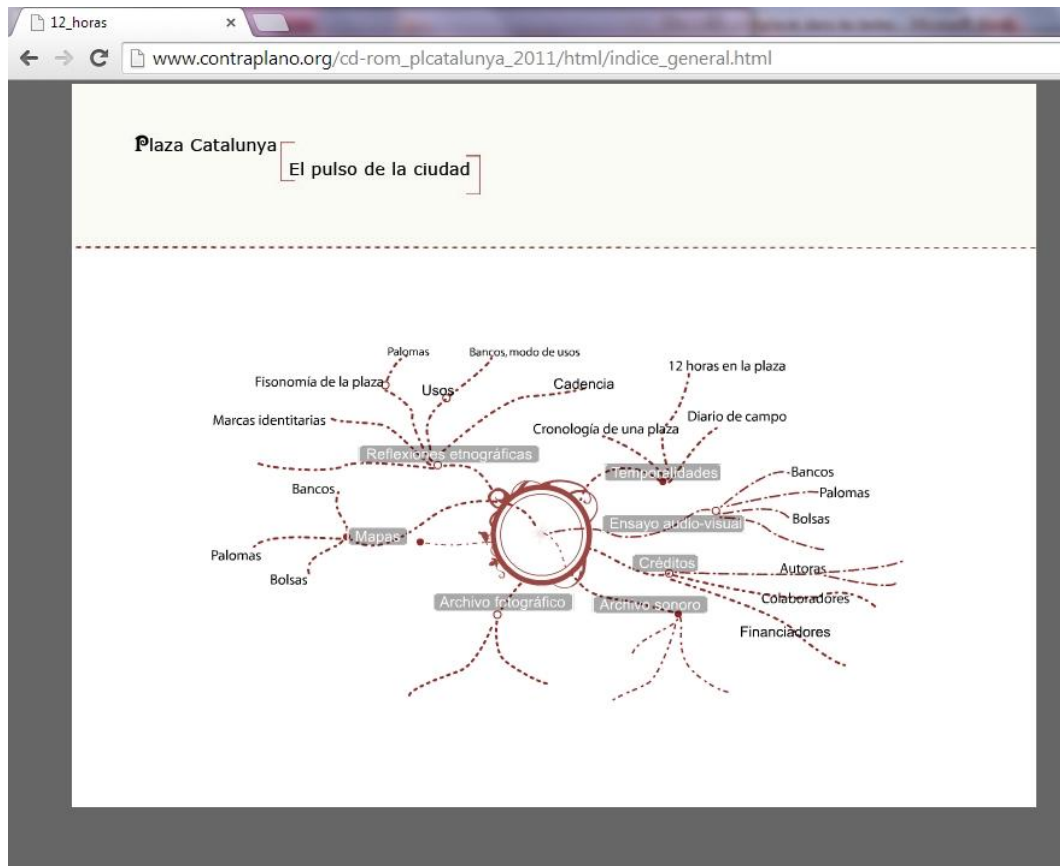
It opens with an image reproducing the pattern of the centre of the square, which the user clicks on to enter and arrive at the main page, which contains the sound and image montage presented above.<sup>25</sup> Top left, the pattern of the centre of the square gives access to the main items of a circular table of contents whose parts appear and disappear as the cursor is moved. By clicking again in the (now enlarged) centre of the pattern, the different parts forming the Web page can be unfolded completely.

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<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, the model could not be developed beyond what can be seen starting from this link: [http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom\\_plcatalunya\\_2011/intro.html](http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom_plcatalunya_2011/intro.html) .

<sup>24</sup> The title of the epilogue to Maresca's book is: “Thinking also with our eyes”. Maresca goes on to say that “the ambition would rather be to nurture the original link with images during the intellectual work properly speaking, so as to reactivate at any time the powerful creative engine provided by vision” (1996: 240).

<sup>25</sup> The essay contained in the multimedia package is a new, reworked version of the essay in sound and image ethnography presented at the Bilan du film ethnographique in Paris.



This time, not only is the pattern of the surface of the centre of the Plaça de Catalunya completed, but dotted lines run across it and extend beyond it. They suggest the itineraries followed by the passers-by and indicate the developments of different portions visible on the previous phase.

The visitor can return at any time to this table of contents by clicking on the star in the middle of the square, represented in the upper left corner of the screen, or go to any other main parts (maps, ethnographic reflections, temporalities, audio-visual essay, credits, sound and photographic archives) by clicking on one of the itineraries from the centre of the square. The idea is to enable free, non-linear browsing among the different elements. Some are currently empty, although their contents are already planned and the material selected for incorporation in them, but others remain intentionally nameless to suggest that the themes still to be addressed go beyond those presented. So the table of contents remains open or in the making, since it can be expanded by further research and by reflections which might spring from the material so far provided.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ideally, we would have liked visitors to be able to post comments and additional material to enrich the site and generate debates around the questions addressed, according to the philosophy of interactive, collaborative platforms. Long before them, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (another important reference for verbal-visual

We would also have preferred the audio-visual montage<sup>27</sup> to open up full-screen (at present it is only visible in a small format, in which it loses a great deal of its strength) to indicate its centrality in our reflections. It did indeed have special status relative to the other parts, which unfold from it.

Let us now reconsider this sound and visual sequence, in order to discuss the linearity which we tried to combat. In deciding to organize our sequence as a slide show, accompanied by sound ambiences, we did reintroduce it. After a long discussion on the appropriateness of that procedure, we finally decided to present the sequence in that way since the sounds gave a real thickness to the images. It would nonetheless be interesting to give visitors the choice of viewing the montage with or without sound.

To enable visitors to reorder the montage as they choose, one would need programming that allows free reordering, as in the projects developed by Ulrich Fischer<sup>28</sup> and Célia Gradín Montero.<sup>29</sup> Because we could not do so, we incorporated a more rudimentary system which, at the moment, only allows the user to superimpose three images with the rest of the montage: those that appear on the screen when the cursor is moved over the numbers at the bottom of the audio-visual sequence. A space is provided on the right to list the topics addressed in the montage.

Ideally, each picture in the sequence should be linked with the maps and with the photographic archives. Then the viewer/reader would have been able to pause the show and bring up information on the images and sounds reproduced. At present this linkage cannot be made, but an example of the type of information we would have liked to make available to the visitor is seen in the “maps” column, which is arranged according to the themes presented in the audio-visual montage.

### **The functioning of the multimedia browsing: the example of the “Pigeons” item**

The visitor has several ways to enter the different themes that we wish to develop. If we take the example of the pigeons, which can be considered a constituent element or even as possible actors in the square, one can enter this theme by clicking on the “Pigeons” item, on the right of the audio-visual sequence, or by clicking on “Maps” then on “Pigeons” in the menu in the top corner of all the pages. Taking this second route, we arrive at a map which has been redesigned on the basis of the working overview presented here:

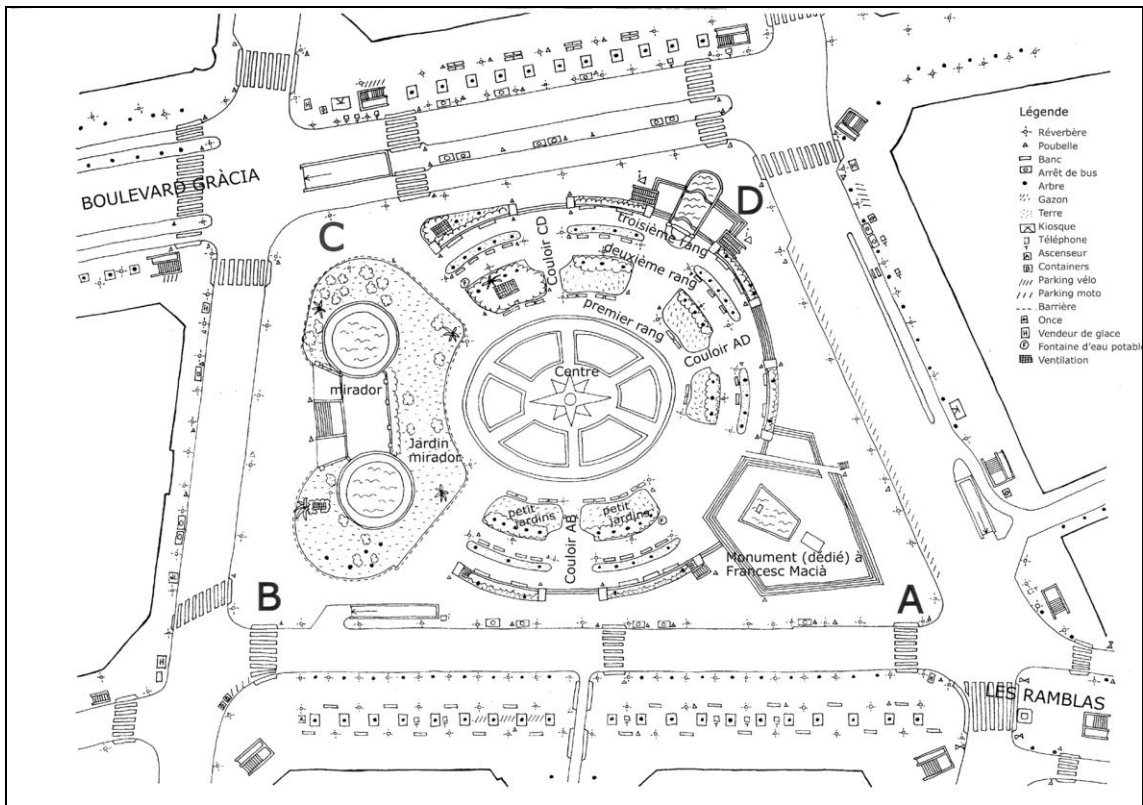
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texts), James Agee was already concerned about his readers’ opinion, when he wrote: “Those who wish actively to participate in the subject, in whatever degree of understanding, friendship, or hostility, are invited to address the authors in care of the publishers” (2001: xi).

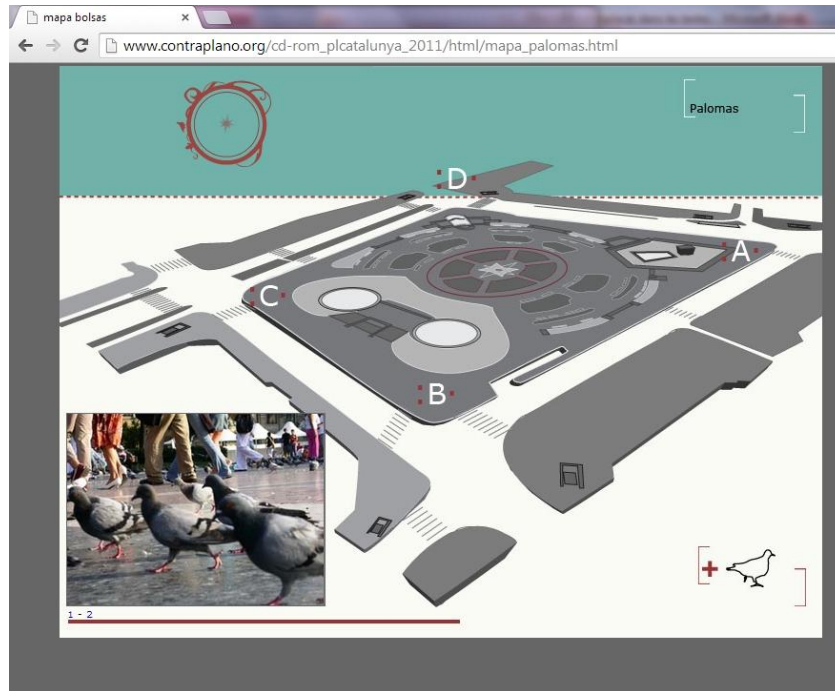
<sup>27</sup> I deliberately write “audio-visual” to stress that we intentionally dissociated the audio from the visual. For more detail on this approach and on the principles of the montage see the paper mentioned in Note 21 above.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.walking-the-edit.net>.

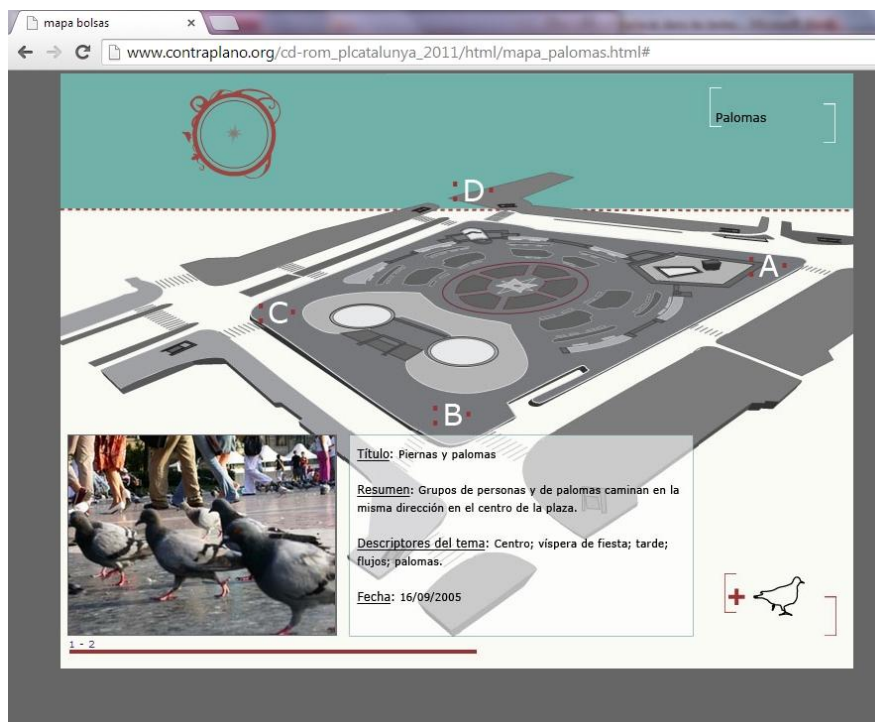
<sup>29</sup> <http://www.kilkor.net>.



Survey of the square made by architect Julie Rouault and used during our work in situ



It is planned to present here a series of photos associated with this topic by locating them on the map. An information sheet on the photograph appears when the user clicks on the number at the bottom of the picture.



These succinct data (title, summary, themes and date) were modelled on those provided to the IPEC for its database. They nevertheless violate our principle of non-repetition, since they contain a verbal description of the image in addition to a location – not only in the titles the IPEC asked us to place on every image, but also in the content of the “summaries” of the photography.

Indeed, the main challenge of this multimedia essay (apart from the IT challenges) was first and foremost not to say the same thing with different means. In other words, we did not want, for instance, to present a picture of a pigeon with a cooing sound and a caption saying that pigeons coo. Rather, we wanted to give information on the role of these birds in the square, to show images of different types of activities associated with them and to make their presence heard using sound fragments related to them.

To obtain information on these birds which differs from their location in the pictures, the user must click on [+ Pigeon] at the bottom of the page on the right of the entry through the maps, which leads us to the page one could have reached by entering through the “Pigeons” item on the right of the sound and photographic essay. By clicking on either of them, one is led to the verbal-visual page below, with on the right a short introduction (max. 2 screens) to the theme and on the left a sequence of images that can be scrolled by clicking on the numbers situated at the bottom. Clicking on the white circle below the photos, the user is offered various icons to switch to other pages: the loudhailer icon to access sound archives, the M to go back to the maps, the arrow to retrieve the audio-visual essay, etc.





Since their introduction into the square in 1929, pigeons have been a “decorative” element, but their function goes far beyond this. They are at the origin of most of the activities and interactions taking place on the square. If we observe their movement, we can see a real symbiosis between these birds and the human users of the square, on the one hand because human activity enables the pigeons to survive and reproduce and on the other hand because their movements around and the ways they occupy the space are governed by the human activities on the square. Pigeons are part of the very definition of the square and generate discourses [link to sound archives, fragment 7, which reproduces a dialogue between a woman eating a sandwich on her own and the pigeons] and performances. During our fieldwork, the pigeons were one of the elements on the square that echoed the then current media debate on the city's image: we could experience directly on the benches of the square the issue of their overpopulation, which was abundantly addressed in the free newspapers at the time of our research [link to ethnographic reflections].

*Translation of the text introducing the pigeons theme*

It should be emphasized that even within this introductory text, links to other parts of the multimedia essay are planned but not yet implemented. The link relating to ethnographic reflections contains longer developments on this theme. Concretely, as regards the pigeons, they occupy seven screens, divided into two parts: the reflections themselves, followed by ethnographic examples from our field notes.

I shall conclude this presentation by remarking that we were inspired by Albert Piette's suggestion of making links between images and texts with symbols which highlight certain details of the images and the texts.<sup>30</sup> Although this attempt remains at the embryonic stage and deserves more in-depth reflection, we should mention the meticulous work of Jorgelina Barrera in her choice of the graphics and the colours, which are never bland or arbitrary.

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<sup>30</sup> A similar attempt to do this is made when we discuss the public benches to emphasise the importance of the postures and the gestures which invite or discourage access to some of them [ [http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom\\_plcatalunya\\_2011/html/bancos.html](http://www.contraplano.org/cd-rom_plcatalunya_2011/html/bancos.html) ].

They were selected on the basis of the corpus of photographs produced in our fieldwork and debated at length.

### **Sounds and photographs to write/describe the dynamics of urban space**

Our reflection finally turned towards issues concerned with the composition and selections of words, images and sounds to describe the physical characteristics and social dynamics of the square and its users. This led us to consider questions about the visualization and “sonorization” (the presentation through images and sounds) of the construction of knowledge, i.e. the manifestation of the choices and positions of the researchers.

In anthropology, photographic practice is often purely forgotten or relegated to the role of “decorative evidence,” in contrast to the increasingly frequent, although still too rare, use of cinematographic language and video. It is not a question of exploring the reasons why photography has been marginalized in the social sciences, but rather of underscoring, as Elizabeth Edwards has suggested, the fact that it is precisely the specificities of photography, the very features that may have led to its loss of appeal for “visual ethnographers,” that should be recovered and exploited to the full:

“Photography can communicate about culture, peoples' lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description, but as a visual metaphor, which bridges the space between the visible and the invisible, which communicates not through the realist paradigm but through a lyrical expressiveness” (Edwards, 1997: 58).

Like film, photography provides knowledge not only through an accumulation of written data but also through emotion. Roland Barthes wrote that the photograph “immediately yields up those ‘details’ which constitute the very raw material of ethnographic knowledge” (1982: 28). Thus, photographic and ethnographic writing meet up on certain points, such as their fragmentary nature, the meticulous and material ways in which they dwell on details which in turn enable us to look further, to evoke or transport ourselves to a wider context than their original one. In this sense, visual images, like ethnographic texts, work as much with what we see/write as with what we do not see/do not write.

When John Berger declared that a single photograph can “relate the particular to the general,” he went on to say that “when it happens across a number of pictures, the nexus of relative affinities, contrasts and comparisons can be that much wider and more complex” (Berger and Mohr, 1995: 281). This link between the particular and the general became increasingly obvious as we progressed in our survey of the square. We found there mechanisms reflecting not only the reality of the square but also the way social life and the (obvious or underlying) public agenda in Barcelona operate: the campaign in favour of civic-mindedness, street vendors, mass tourism, begging, mass consumption, etc. are topics that we could touch upon on the basis of the presence (more obvious in some cases than others) of “clues” left by certain objects, certain attitudes, or through non-verbal elements, often captured on the fly by our cameras.

Photography and sound recording are thus much more than simple tools available to researchers. They deserve to be paid greater attention when analysing contemporary urban dynamics. Their communication potential should also lead us to ponder the ways of incorporating them further when disseminating our research, as the pioneering works of Margaret Mead, Lewis W. Hine, or James Agee and Walker Evans have shown. How do we deal with images and how do we articulate them with sounds, utterances and writings to form verbal-visual texts? This question leads us to another debate, mentioned briefly at the beginning of this paper, i.e. the possibility or not of thinking through images. We have hardly touched on this vast question here, but it is fundamental to the recognition of photography in its capacity to intervene in the very context of observation.

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