Situated Imaginaries: How Audiovisual Analysis Contributes to the Understanding of Adoption*

Imaginarios situados: contribuciones del análisis audiovisual a la comprensión de la adopción

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SUMMARY

In this article, I inquire about the kind of new knowledge audiovisual insights could provide in the field of International Adoption studies, and how these outcomes could give rise to new ways of approaching that subject. In doing so, I tackle the centrality of cultural imaginaries in International Adoption and the prolificacy of audiovisual research in anthropology to gain a better understanding. Hence, I consider adoptive itineraries as culturally situated contexts that render folk ideologies visible and may become foundational imaginaries that demand the encompassment of academic research with a more general ethnographic comprehension of such cultural representations and ideologies.

Key words: Audiovisual Research; Anthropology; International Adoption; Adoptive Imaginaries.

RESUMEN

En este artículo reflexiono acerca de los nuevos conocimientos que la investigación audiovisual podría aportar al ámbito de los estudios en adopción internacional y en cómo sus resultados pueden iluminar nuevas formas de aproximarse al problema. Para ello, parto de la centralidad de los imaginarios culturales en la adopción internacional y de la fecundidad de la investigación audiovisual en antropología para su mejor comprensión. De este modo, considero los itinerarios adoptivos como contextos culturalmente situados que visibilizan ideologías populares y pueden devenir imaginarios fundacionales que reclaman la imbricación de la investigación académica con una comprensión etnográfica más general de estas ideologías y representaciones culturales.

Palabras clave: Investigación audiovisual; Antropología; Adopción internacional; Imaginarios adoptivos.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I seek to explore how academic approaches toward international adoption are (and may be) substantially enriched by audiovisual[2] research. Indeed, research studies on adoption and fosterage have experienced remarkable growth since the early 1990s —with such an increase being even more pronounced in countries with shorter adoptive trajectories. As a consequence, cultural imaginaries of adoption have become in some fields a central issue to understand and cope with adoptive narratives and broader social accounts of what Volkman has labelled «new geographies of kinship» (2005: 2). Such geographies have been (and are) mapped by disciplinary and cross-disciplinary academic research on adoptive narratives that has persistently shown an unequivocal piecemeal nature, since most of this research consists of specific insights into sectoral phenomena (i.e. adaptation and catching-up[3], developmental problems, stigma[4] and identity and so on) without encompassing a wider ethnographic understanding of their broader cultural dimension. In order to overcome such fragmentation, adoptive itineraries should be examined as the integrated result of cultural representations and ideologies, social practices and legal rules (when appropriate), both in the origin and the placement country. I think that the consideration of audiovisual production and the incorporation of an already existing repertoire to ongoing projects may draw our attention to this necessary encompassment, as I will further develop in this essay.

Furthermore, such adoptive itineraries must be considered as culturally situated (Haraway 1988) interactive contexts. Hence, among many other things, adoption makes folk ideologies visible in relation to the basic fields of identity, substance, legitimacy and inclusion, which occasionally intersect with debates about immigration, belonging and naturalization (Howell 2006). Such essential ideologies take shape in foundational imaginaries (Dorow and Swiffen 2009) that would afterwards assemble the cultural frame of a given society. Oral and written narratives have largely been the targets of studies carried out to investigate such conjunction but, unfortunately, the audiovisual level is yet to be fully explored.

In my opinion, anthropological research should integrate audiovisual methodologies and their resulting repertoire as central strategies for apprehending and explaining the multiple enquiries that surround adoptive issues (from the weight of folk biogenetic models in procreation and parenting to the thorny issues that surround certain private adoption practices in some countries, for example). Furthermore, they may also shed light on the profound debates that lurk behind many ethnographic enquiries into kinship, political, symbolic and even economic subjects. In order to show the prolificacy of audiovisual research in the adoptive field, I pose two major questions in this paper: (a) what sort of new knowledge can audiovisual research provide in the adoptive

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[2] I prefer the label *Audiovisual* than *Visual* since sound —in its many levels and variants (from a production's overall soundtrack to the tone of voice of its characters)— is of utmost relevance both as a strategic narrative artery and as a methodological and technical research tool.

[3] The physical and psychological recovery from previous situations of deprivation caused by a lack of proper health and psychological stimulation (Juffer and van Ijzendoorn 2009).

[4] Understood as the perception that certain traits or circumstances may acquire negative connotations and could therefore lead to social discrimination (March 1995; Wegar 2000).

field? And (b) how can this resulting knowledge shed light on new ways of approaching adoption issues?

In doing so, I will combine relevant previous studies with some outcomes of my own research in order to establish particular connections between the audiovisual enquiry and the particular ways of seeing and knowing adoption. With that purpose in mind, I will firstly delve into certain spheres where audiovisual materials are produced and/or circulate concerning folk knowledge in the adoptive field. And secondly, I will deal with how these audiovisual materials may contribute to particular ways of seeing and knowing that are particular to the imaginary of adoption.

1. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUDIOVISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO ADOPTIVE RESEARCH

To begin, I agree with David MacDougall's statement (2011: 100-101) that visual research is a method of enquiry as well as a way of creating and communicating knowledge. To a great extent, this is due to its ability to merge different layers of the visual world into an integrated insight that gives rise to a unique comprehension of reality by operating a distinctive penetration into the recording of social life. Furthermore, as Cristina Grasseni recalls: «One 'learns to see' in cultural ways» (Grasseni 2011: 23) and there may be little doubt that one also learns *how* to learn and *how* to communicate the acquired knowledge according to specific procedures and narrative patterns. Hence, it is of uttermost importance to take into account the influence of specifically trained and oriented gazes in the consideration of how to tell the tale, since, as Grasseni states: «[...] learning how to look at the world, or how to visualize particular objects of phenomena is a form of social apprenticeship» (2011: 20). Such apprenticeship, in the end, does shape cultural schemes by understanding and representing broader cultural assumptions, and it is at this level that the audiovisual repertoire becomes an absolutely crucial target to provide a new kind of knowledge in the adoptive field —as well as in other academic areas. Such knowledge may come from, at least, seven assets in the audiovisual repertoire:

— New explorations of self-narratives using audiovisual languages and methodologies.
— The effectiveness of elicitation as a discursive device, as a data-gathering technique, as an intentional approach to talk with adoptive children about origins (or any other stage in the adoptive process), and as an empirical way to uncover the children's past.
— The cultural portrayals of adoption issues in formative and collage materials.
— The connections between audiovisual industries, state policies and the media construction of significant adoptive events.
— The documentary approaches to adoptive issues through audiovisual methodologies and techniques, as well as the possible reception impact either on general (or rather more narrowly targeted) audiences.
— The narrative elaborations of reality with refractive purposes.
— And, finally, the academic analysis of Social Networking Sites (SNS) by focusing on the social activity (with various levels of active involvement) of SNS users in virtual environments.

I will shortly develop all these insights, using the audiovisual repertoire as a unique research resource, but let us first take a look at the four general spheres within which this new comprehension is traceable:

1.1. DETAILED SCRUTINY OF AUDIOVISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF CULTURAL FOLK NOTIONS

Gordon Gray refers to the academic value of film by stating that: «[...] the study of cinema can provide insights into areas of a society of a different time or place that otherwise may be difficult, or even impossible, to access» (2010: x), and this is possible because we can use film to retrieve: «[...] information on the ideas and prejudices of a particular time and place, again particularly of the culture-producing class» (*ibíd*.). Audiovisual narratives address major social issues in particular ways that enable different options in the portrayal of filmic situations that one way or another evoke broader cultural patterns. We can find many and diverse examples since the very invention of the film camera in many different film genres and subgenres (documentary, fiction, drama, comedy, biopic...).

1.2. ANALYSIS OF HOW PEOPLE SEE THINGS AND HOW THEY REPRESENT THEM

But to properly understand social imaginaries as the result of these specific depictions we must consider the situated nature of such imageries. In this regard, any given imagery is much more than the mere depiction of real items: it is the result of social processes that shape such images according to specific understandings in *this* precise way. Thus, beyond the physical ability of seeing, the gaze soon becomes oriented by ideological correlations and cultural understandings of social environments. Therefore, it is largely influenced by political readings or hegemonic interpretations that may shape dominant ways of spreading visual examples of credited —or discredited— patterns and practices.

1.3. TO DOCUMENT AND ANALYSE THE PURPOSIVE INTERVENTION OF CULTURAL PRODUCERS IN THE SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF GIVEN CULTURAL ITEMS

Closely intertwined with the intentional embedding of visual tropes into meaningful contextual scenarios, we must ponder the agency of certain social and political instances on the selection and configuration of particular situations. Within the adoptive field, several studies have in recent times shed some light on delicate issues concerning the interstices of adoptive practices, aiming at grey areas or even illegal practices of child abduction, such as the well-known example of Australia's *stolen generations* (Valentine and Gray 2006) or kidnapped children (Smolin 2006). Such theoretical frames explicitly focus on corruption, child laundering and the uncontrolled traffic of people and material goods (Hoelgaard 1998), and occasionally go hand in hand with narratives on organ trafficking and child prostitution (Campion-Vincent 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1996).

Sometimes, the audiovisual repertoire also offers negative depictions of the adoptive fact. While these visions often rely on explicit complaints about child abuse, poor care conditions or similarly distressing issues considering child abuse, Bordo (2002) claims that frequently one should counterbalance inertial negative depictions —frequently shaped by overt misconceptions or misunderstandings— with reality and facts. It is on this basis that audiovisual productions play a critical role as cultural operators. Therefore, audiovisual production is not subordinate to social contexts, nor is it passively received (and/or subsumed) by various audiences. Rather, it has been purposely patterned and shaped in order to actively promote certain reactions within those audiences.

1.4. To analyse the culturally constructed explanation of social phenomena from a more multisensory dimension: «Visual images are not simply visual» (Pink 2011: 603)

But Sarah Pink goes beyond the mere audiovisual level in the analysis of social events. In her contribution to Margolis and Pauwels' volume on visual research methods (2011), she draws our attention to the fact that all senses, vision included, are ultimately culturally constructed categories that overtly transcend the plain performance of physical organs. Thus, following her previous research on sensory anthropology, Pink calls for a multisensory methodology in scientific research, that:

> [It] does not necessary involve inventing new methods especially designed to use the senses [...] Rather, it involves applying a particular understanding of the place of vision in relation to the other senses and of the multisensorial nature of images to the research process and the chosen method (2011: 612).

Consequently, if we accept that imaginaries do actually result from depictions embedded in culturally structured contexts and that, as Ingold states, visual practices clearly go beyond the mere contemplation of images (2010, quoted in Pink 2011: 602), then the audiovisual repertoire may provide substantial information on at least three different —though complementary— levels: the intentional disposition of cultural features within the depicted situation, the contextual nature of that situation and the correspondence between different senses involved in certain productions[5].

2. THE AUDIOVISUAL REPERTOIRE AS A DOCUMENTARY SOURCE

In order to show how these sources contribute to the cultural imagery of adoption, let us now deal with the second major question of this article in greater depth: the capabilities of this resulting knowledge to give rise to new ways of approaching different forms and contexts of adoption. As previously stated, there are at least seven different areas in which audiovisual productions become essential documentary sources

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[5] Furthermore, as human experience always takes place in multisensory environments, the ability of anthropology to grasp such combination would significantly help to properly assimilate the result of such experience in a more integrated way (Howes 2003).

and in which audiovisual anthropology may provide an advantageous theoretical and methodological framework in this field. As a matter of fact, some of them have warranted specific attention within my research and I shall provide some first-hand evidence of these items.

2.1. (Audio)Visual Auto-ethnographies

Far from taking autobiographies and self-narratives as solely diary-like activities, the use of media as self-reflexive narrative and analytical devices has received the attention of social anthropology —as well as other social sciences— as a valuable qualitative research methodology (Chang 2008). In this light, for example, a recent article about David MacDougall's film *The Age of Reason* (2004) explores the self-inscription of the filmmaker into his film in order to shape a different account from an inner/outer integrated perspective (Carta 2013). Actually, the increase in self-consciousness as a relevant academic topic was already addressed by Nash *et al*. (1972) nearly forty years ago, and its role and relevance in writing production has already been stressed several times (Okely and Callaway 1995 [1992]; Hayano 2001 [1979]; Ellis 2004; Muncey 2010; Collins and Gallinat 2013 [2010]). Moreover, in recent years the relevance of auto-ethnography as methodological insight has also gained relevance in visual and audiovisual approaches, from autobiographical comics (El Refaie 2010) to participatory videos (Zoettl 2012). Whatever the chosen format, some recurring themes comprise the ekphrasis and the complicated connection between the representation and those who are represented (Zeitlyn 2010; Adams and Bochner 2011), identity and self-identification (Kim 2000; Chaney 2001; Aoki 2007), ethical issues (Roth 2009; Tamas 2009), and self-commitment in research (Rangan 2011). All of them demonstrate the potential of audiovisual enquiry combined with ethnographies of the self that would also be worth exploring in other international adoption studies.

2.2. Pictures, collections and family albums

If we consider the analytic use of collected images (say, for example, in family albums or similar compilations), we find that elicitation techniques usually provide a large amount of information for qualitative research. The range of topics covered within this analytical strategy is remarkably wide, and is not restricted to the study of kinship issues[6]. In light of this, Clark-Ibáñez (2004) underlined the potential of photo-elicitation interviews for qualitative methodologies in two broad directions. On the one hand, from the researcher to the interviewee, by showing images and subsequently

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[6] Thus, for example, Allen (2013) uses photo-elicitation and photo-diaries to address the discursive construction of sexual desire among adolescent females. Brand and McMurray (2009) also found them useful to explore the perceptions first-year nursing students had of elderly patients with whom they would professionally deal in the future. In both cases, images become crucial methodological tools to explore missing or not fully developed theoretical paths, as well as agency-oriented devices to transform and improve sociocultural assumptions of particular social groups.

seeking meaning in the participant's biographically filtered narrative. On the other hand, participators may use pictures as keystone complements to their own records. As a matter of fact, both dimensions could possibly merge and expose a new dimension of shared interests in anthropological research[7].

On a more anthropological foundation, Bouquet (2000) refers to the value of kin pictures for the family collective memoir in a similar methodological way to Christian (2012) alluding to the relevance of images for the study of collective religious experiences. Likewise, the family album becomes a medullar device for life stories and the past-present reinterpretation of biographies (Naguib 2008), as well as the study of emotional responses to research enquiries (Samuels 2004), the provision of evidence for theory (Twine 2006) or self-representation strategies (Vivienne and Burguess 2013), among other fields.

More specifically, concerning adoption, Rice, Primak & Girvin's research (2013) on teenage youths in foster care does not only continue the application of photo-elicitation strategies to explore the participants' feelings, but also shows how this sort of findings may be of high value when practical actions are needed or planned to improve the quality of life of deprived children (most of whom have been affected by different sorts of trauma).

In my own research experience, pictures and family albums may also serve other purposes. Firstly, informants could access pictures from biological families. For instance, Mary (a 35-year-old woman married with three children, one of whom is adopted) explained how she and her husband were worried about the uneasiness of their adopted daughter if at any point in her later years she would ask about her biological family. After conversations with the adoptive parents group to which she belongs, the couple made up their mind and looked for information about the child's origin. After some time, they contacted a person in the country of origin who knew the biological family and could even provide a picture of them. Mary and her husband keep this picture hidden since the child has not yet shown interest, but from their point of view such a *document* may be of help in the future, as the girl's interest grows and questions start to appear.

Jane (unmarried, 53-year-old with one adopted daughter) regularly travels to her child's country of origin due to her professional (as well as vocational) duties. There, she managed to make enquires and eventually find the girl's biological family. She managed to follow up this contact despite the difficulty of keeping track of a nomad group, and she was able to trace a genealogical chart of the girl's ancestors back to the great-grandparents' generation. As part of this documentation, Jane keeps pictures of the family, which help to complete the adoption narrative she has shared with her child since her early childhood. These pictures help the girl to properly frame her biographic trajectories and are of great value to both of them.

Also in this vein, Sophie (43 years old, married, two adopted children with special needs) has a good amount of information about the biological family of both children, as well as some pictures of them. She explains how their older child (the girl) is still curious and wants to obtain more information about her origins, while her younger brother seems more reluctant to ask. As in the two previous cases, visual images are of great help in completing the children's biographical structure —even if they are safely kept in a drawer waiting to be revealed.

Secondly, pictures are used (or kept to be used at a later stage) as narrative operators to provide the child with a better understanding of his/her adoptive process. Such is the case of Lucy, a 42-year-old married woman with one adopted child. The girl, currently 4 years of age, started asking about her adoption one year earlier, after seeing her mother's friend breastfeeding her baby. In an effort to explain to her why she was never breastfed, pictures are used to better delineate the whole process and to create a visual timeline where the girl can place herself at every stage of the process. In a similar way, Katherine (54 years old, married, two adopted children), describes how pictures of the whole process have been of great help to explain to her two children that «I never wanted to bear children in my womb, but I always wanted to be a mother». Megan (42 years old, married, three children, two of whom are adopted) also tells how pictures are important tools to explain to their two adopted daughters (currently 5 and 4 years old) why their younger sister came out of her mother's womb (it was a late, unexpected pregnancy) and how the three of them finally arrived home. In their case, adds Megan, pictures are uploaded onto a tablet device, so the three children can look at them as often as necessary.

Thirdly, pictures may be used to enlighten the child's past by providing a specific face and a particular physiognomy to blurred memories —when not directly non-existent. For instance, Sonia (a 49-year-old married woman with two children, one of whom is adopted) explains that her adopted daughter (currently 11 years of age) once told her: «Mom, I would like to think about my Chinese mother, but I can't since I do not know what she really looks like». Sonia encouraged her to choose a picture so that image could act as an imagination trigger. Indeed, she explains, soon after that her daughter started to weave stories about her Chinese mother and about the whole adoption process, thus helping the girl to make her own tale about her life so far.

Fourthly, images may also be used for seeking purposes. For example, Helen (a 54-year-old unmarried mother of one adopted child) found a picture of her daughter arriving at the orphanage by browsing the Internet. After pursuing more information, a family provided her with a short video in which the girl appeared but she could not find any further information about the girl's past. Liz (44 years old, married, with three children, one of whom is adopted), found a picture of her adopted daughter in a local newspaper shortly after being given up for adoption. She tried to obtain more information but was not successful, so she and her partner planned to make a family trip in the future to fill in the gaps —insofar as possible. Sometimes, as Mark (41 years old, married, with two children, one of whom is adopted) reveals, pictures are also necessary for a more active seeking: one year after the arrival of his adopted son, Mark hired a private investigator who was able to find the boy's biological family in Russia and could even provide a good set of photographs. Hence, although the boy is still unaware of this story (he is currently 9 years old), such pictures are now part of his tale and are ready to be provided as the need to know some more may arise.

Fifthly, pictures may also be used with therapeutic purposes. Such is the case of Erika (43 years old, married, mother of three children, one of whom is adopted), who tries to overcome her daughter's expressive disabilities (although it was not a «green passage» adoption, the girl later revealed serious neurological, physiological and psychological problems). Following the suggestion of her daughter's teacher, taking pic-

tures of different activities may help the girl to express her feelings and therefore achieve better emotional communication.

Finally, pictures may be used for a totally different purpose: to share information via online connections with relatives and acquaintances in the country of origin. Such is the case of Susan's adopted daughter. Susan is a divorced 53-year-old woman with two children (actually her biological child is in his mid-twenties now), one of whom was adopted when she was already 10 years of age. This circumstance meant her adoption became a «green passage» one (that is, a special needs adoption, in this case due to the child's older age) and this fact made some significant differences when compared to an «ordinary way» adoption. For my purposes here, the most remarkable one is that at the time of the adoption the girl already had good knowledge not of her biological family, but of her foster family (i.e. the family who met her after being relinquished and took care of her until they could no longer keep her and the girl entered the International Adoption process). Among many of the fascinating traits in this adoption trajectory, a remarkable one is that the girl still keeps in regular touch with her former foster family and friends in the origin country through a popular social networking service. As part of this regular contact, picture sharing serves as a sort of updating mechanism where their daily activity and life can be more vividly experienced. Hence, far from becoming a prospective resource for responding to further curiosity, visual images become a routine exchange and follow-up activity.

2.3. COLLEGE TEXTBOOKS AND OTHER LEARNING SUPPORT MATERIALS

Another kind of image compilation comes from educational materials. For example, written texts are primary sources in the management of cultural stereotypes, and educational matter is by no means an exception. In this vein, several studies deal with the representation of parent-child relationships within the adoptive sphere. Although my focus here is on audiovisual and representational issues, the interest in identitarian and emotional features in children's books about adoption is remarkable (Ayres 2004; Fitzpatrick 2012), including family formation processes (Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey 2013) or even the correlation between long-term discourses on adoption and other social practices such as abortion (Hall and Stolley 1997). Furthermore, the specific conditions that international adoptees meet at school, as well as the role of teachers as professionals who must be aware of such differences, are also considered in some specific literature (Baker 2013).

At another level, some studies reveal that the portrayal of adoption in college textbooks —as well as in marriage and family literature— is generally negative or seems

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[7] Similar strategies are selected in recent relevant studies from different disciplines. Hence, for example, Lachal *et al.* (2012) deal with the role of food in parental relationships in families with obese adolescents; Matteucci (2013) explores the pros and cons of introducing images in combination with interviews in tourism studies, and Stockall (2013) considers the weight of pictures in the inclusion of children with disabilities in association with other techniques form the visual semiotics perspective.

[8] Compared to abortion, for instance (Stolley and Hall 1994). For more extensive information about family textbook literature, see Klein and Smith (1985), Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey (2013).

to deserve less attention than other family-related events, due to an alleged lower social impact[8] (Stolley and Hall 1994; Hall and Stolley 1997; Fisher 2003). This would be a fine example of how audiovisual production may help to counterbalance those pessimistic and potentially damaging depictions of adoption previously highlighted by Bordo, by placing reality as a factual compensating source of information.

2.4. NEWS BROADCASTING AND DIFFERENT TV SHOWS

Moreover, if we shift our attention from the visual (pictures) to the audiovisual, we notice that the role of television in the spread of adoptive narratives has also been of notable concern for adoption researchers. As mass communication devices, newsreels and other TV formats deal with adoption facts and figures and mobilize opinions, focusing on certain interpretations. In doing so, they may influence public opinions of certain issues while excluding others. For instance, Hosu Kim takes the Korean search-and-reunion shows as an example of this power and she states that television becomes: «[...] a critical cultural institution for establishing adoption discourse as a cultural trauma» (2012: 439). Furthermore, she explains how:

> Over the past 20 years, numerous television search shows, with their faithful commitment to the search-and-reunion narrative, have brought forward Korean adoptees, as well as their Korean mothers, both erased from Korea's official history, now presented as individual subjects of national trauma. The story of the Korean adoptees' search for their birthmothers and their eventual reunion are seen as reconciliations, both as a personal trauma and as a collective cultural trauma. By reforging broken family ties, Korean adoptees and their Korean mothers become nationally-recognized citizens who push forward Korea's reconciliation with its past, as well as carry out Korea's current global agenda. (2012: 440)

Hence, it can be observed how easily the media industry becomes closely intertwined with major state policy goals concerning the adoptive arena. In view of such influence, Tobias Hübinette explores the Korean imaginary towards overseas-adopted children. He notices the journalistic pressure in political instances in order to have an active impact on adoptive policies, but he also reflects on the potential contradictions between certain popular discourses and the mainstream media's stories (2005a and b)[9].

Beyond the Korean paradigmatic case, the role of audiovisual media in shaping and transmitting cultural narratives on adoption issues deserves greater attention in anthropological research due to its pivotal role in the mediation of broader ideological and symbolic parameters and particular social relations within specific historical contexts. For example, the overall connotative tone in adoptive media depiction narratives, or the reiterative presence —or, rather, the persistent absence— of certain situations and agents may generate a sort of dominant interpretative code and attitude toward adoption issues. In Kim's words:

> Mainstream representations of domestic adoption in the U.S. media have been historically negative, sensationalist and marked by a fascination with search and reunion [...].

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[9] The relationship between adoptive imaginaries, identity policies of the Korean State and diverse media representations on adoption has been suggestively developed by Hübinette (2002), Kim (2000, 2007) and Prébin (2008), among others.

> Representations of transracial, transnational adoptees have been scant, but growing acceptance is notable in advertisements and television news shows which represent these adoptions as touching humanitarian gestures by Americans (usually celebrities) who, like all of us, believe in building loving families [...] Indeed, constructions of adoption as «deviant» have been reproduced by media representations which portray adoptees as socially maladjusted, troubled or even violent. How these representations might alter with the increasing practice of open adoptions and the growing strength of the domestic adoptee movement (which has won important legal battles in the recent past), is yet to be seen. (2000: 59-60)

Also, the role of mainstream media in shaping and spreading certain *weltanschauung* to national audiences could be extended to the configuration of media themselves —or their professionals— when tackling thorny social issues such as traffic and organ theft networks narratives, for example (Campion-Vincent 1997: 31). All such approaches open and expand academic pathways to the study of historical and contextual relationships between cultural and visual perceptions of human behaviour.

In this vein, television broadcasting may undoubtedly become a major social amplifier. This effect is not only evident in the impact of certain productions on the audience (as I will exemplify in point 5), but also in the general concern that may follow the unveiling of embarrassing realities. As media studies have repeatedly shown, TV becomes the most important source of information for larger sections of the public, and might even lead to a cropped version of reality so that the only world many people would know about may in the end be a screened piece of it (Sartori 1998, 2001). Within international adoption, some salvationist narratives are often counterbalanced by media enquiry into unwanted or distressing aspects of reality.

This is the case of Sophie Przychodny's documentary *Etats-Unis, Enfants jetables* (2016), where she exposes that thousands of adopted children are relinquished by their adoptive parents every year and then rehomed privately via private agencies or personal agreements. The lack of proper regulation throws some of them into dangerous environments without official authorities being aware of it. As this documentary has been aired (in Spain, at least twice: once on the public state channel TVE —19th November, 2016— and again on the public Catalan channel TV3 —27th November, 2016—) general audiences echoed the abhorrent practice.

Although academic research has more than once pointed to the problem of grey and black areas in International Adoption (e.g. Smolin 2006), public concern over unethical practices in the adoptive field is more generally fostered by mass media production, especially if it is concealed under an informational, and not-very-technical, veil.

2.5. Documentary films and other audiovisual productions specifically made with documentary purposes

In this vein, we can observe the weight of specifically documentary-oriented audiovisual productions in the adoptive sphere beyond the realm of television. Let us take, for example, the case of Spain, a country with a relatively short —though spectacular— trajectory in International Adoption, which experienced a remarkable turning point in the mid-nineties with regard to this sort of applications. At the same time

(in 1995), the state-owned public broadcasting corporation televised *The Dying Rooms* (1995), a touching documentary about the deplorable situation in which tens of female and disabled babies were forced to live in poorly equipped state orphanages. Following the screening of the documentary there were 3,666 phone calls, most of them (around 90%) openly seeking information about adoption procedures in China (Berástegui 2005). According to some sources, up to 500 prospective parents showed interest in adopting precisely one of these orphaned babies (El País 1998). It was October 1995 and Spain had only adopted 4 children from China thus far (RTVE 2011). By 2005 —ten years after the screening— this figure had already increased to 2,753.

This is just one example of how powerful the effect of a documentary can be on the adoption milieu. Of course, *The Dying Rooms* should not be considered as an ordinary documentary and few productions have hitherto reached such a huge impact. There is a noticeable variety in the kind of issues approached by adoption documentaries, from gay adoptive couples (*Daddy & Papa* 2002) or the reconciliation between biological and adoptive families (*A Place Between* 2007), to explorations of grey and black areas such as child trafficking (*Baby Business* 1995). Whereas the range of production is wide enough to cope with different goals and research strategies, the uniqueness of the audiovisual approach confers these documents an invaluable status.

During my own research, I have collected 130 audiovisual references concerning —more or less centrally— adoptive issues (including the exercise of parental roles with fostered children). The time range covered is from 1921 to 2013 and it comprised different film genres, lengths and countries of realization. Although my main interest was in fiction productions, I also worked with a limited repertoire of 19 documentaries (which made up 14.6% of the total references) which dealt with different relevant topics. One of them, *Adopt Me, Michael Jordan* (2013) adopts a girl's point-of-view as the story develops from an orphanage in Ethiopia to the adoption process through which she ended up in the bosom of an American family. Others expose the controversial nature of stolen children or the trafficking transfer of babies in particular countries (such as the abovementioned *Baby Business* 1995, *Voleurs d'organes* 1995 or *Stolen Generations* 2001, among others)[10]. Others focus on the search for the biological family (*Foster Child* 1987) or on visits to the child's origin country (*Birthplace Unknown* 1988).

Other documentaries follow particular cases, such as for example «massive» adoptions (*Who Are the DeBolts* [...]? 1977; *My Flesh and Blood* 2003) or deal with gay adoption and the ideological or religious environment of the adoptive family (*Dear Jesse* 1997; *Daddy & Papa* 2002; *We are Dad* 2005; *Mommy, Mommy* 2007 or *Preacher's Sons* 2008).

However, regardless of the particular slant they take, not only do they develop a particular theme or story, but they also articulate the informative and documentarian dimension of the audiovisual production with particular ideological and technical selections which enable the researcher to work with the entanglement of narratives, the precise ways in which these narratives are told, and a whole set of informational inputs that may not be recorded as faithfully in other supports or formats: facial expressions, tone of voice, gazes, silences, etc.

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[10] Interestingly, this topic has often been the nuclear plot of many fiction films (see for example *Stolen babies* 1993; *Terror in the shadows* 1995 or *The lost child* 2000, among others).

Furthermore, Kim (2000) also considers other distinctive contributions in the domain of auto-ethnography productions, a sector where exploration or testimony often go hand in hand with documentary styles. Her article is a clear example of how adoptees may be active agents of critical inspections of their own selves. Besides, the critical exercise of exploring self-awareness through the lens goes beyond the mere will to address keystone assumptions of identity, selfhood and the cultural construction of family as well as other social bonds.

2.6. FICTION FILMS AND MAINSTREAM CINEMA AND TV MOVIES

Let us now consider the main source of imaginary in our cultural environment: Fiction —understood in the etymological sense of its Latin root *fingere* (to feign, shape, elaborate)—, is by far the main audiovisual source for wide audiences in the current broadcasting panorama. Consequently, films provide a large amount of «information» about others by means of intentionally prepared depictions that instead of providing accurate ethnographic scenarios, often draw the course of events according to ideological orientations and pre-set statements[11]. Hence, as Cassetti (1993) and Chaplin (1994) claim, we must pay attention to the various roles that ideology and symbolic constructions play in the social patterning of proper and improper attitudes according to the hegemonic mechanisms of power at a given time and within particular contexts (Grau Rebollo 2015: 72)[12].

Therefore, mainstream fiction cinema becomes a paramount *documentary* source when we deal with the outcomes of hegemonic expressive patterns, or with the standardization of dominant ideal models. It may also help us to disclose narrative 'blind areas' that could only be overtly exposed through an intentional distortion. Furthermore, the very option of using fictitious material to deal with the past and present of adoptees' trajectory and current situation poses a daring question about «the powers of fiction»: «under what circumstances and to what degree can such powers be safely invoked and deployed» (Brookfield, Brown and Reavey 2008: 487).

In recent years, I have been working with a repertoire of 111 films made from 1921 to 2013 that deal to some extent with adoptive issues. Such films cover different genres (drama, comedy, science-fiction, etc.) and were especially abundant in the 90s (37%

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[11] As Giroux pointed out: [Fiction films] produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times [...] Put simply, films both entertain and educate (2002: 3).

This statement exposes the pivotal role of movies in our cultural landscape. If we think of the best communicative artery to propagate certain ideas during the most part of the 20th century (before the generalization of web-based services and other information and communication technologies), we would possibly find that cinema would be the perfect vehicle to play this role. Thus, if used purposely, films' intentions may be addressed '[...] so as to authorize certain readings and to discredit others' (Barbash and Tylor 1997: 60).

[12] In this vein, film may also be approached as a subversive device. After all, a film's diegesis '[...] may just as easily subdue the status quo, counteract repression, and empower our subjects, as the opposite' (Barbash and Tylor *op. cit*.: 60). It is in this realm where fiction becomes a critical asset for social and cultural research.

of my sample)[13]. Some major topics were orphanhood, the quest for the origin and the biological family, barrenness, the desire for parenthood, pregnancy (with recurrence of teenage gestation) and abandonment. The analysis of filmic narratives on those topics may help us not only to identify ideological standpoints on legitimacy or proper care concerning procreation and child placements, but also to plunge into cultural narratives and the setting of specific situations where such attitudes are embodied. Let me provide two examples on that matter.

The first is extracted from Susan Bordo, an adoptive mother herself, who approaches fairy tales, popular films and other children-oriented narratives by considering how images and ideological assumptions effectively intertwine with each other to embed particular situations when adoptees face, sooner or later, their condition as transferred children. Hence, Bordo brings our attention to some interesting intertextual turns in filmic versions of children's literature such as in *Stuart Little*, for example, where for some reason Stuart —a mouse— appears in the movie to be a couple's adoptive child rather than their own biological son (2002: 320).

The second example comes from the materialization of the parenthood desire, as «Having a child [...] is a necessary moment in their life history as women, as men and as a couple» (Bestard 2004: 29; my translation). And this necessity is audiovisually developed in carefully created dialogues, situations and character profiles. Hence, for example, *Penny Serenade* (1941) or *All she ever wanted* (1996) tackle the (mainly) maternal desire to have biological children, the major setbacks they experience with health problems and subsequent difficulties getting pregnant, and adoption as a second-hand way of becoming parents. The plot situations via which the script develops the main theme in both films offers the researcher in adoptive issues a unique opportunity to analyse how maternal/paternal desires, the ideological reference of biological reproduction or the vicarious role of adoption become embodied in particular words, lines and social interactions.

Hence, fiction serves here as the narrative varnish that allows sociocultural assumptions to find a way to emerge. Consequently, audiovisual fiction may help the researcher to analyse what is being said and presented, but also —and most importantly— how these situations are settled in order to weave a certain meaning. In the end, cultural assumptions are exposed in a unique narrative way that combines text (what is said), sound (how it is said and what other dramatic sound effects or music are employed to reinforce the desired effect), image (how it is all together visually depicted), as well as frame and sequence composition (how everything is arranged within a certain visually cumulative logic). Altogether, as Giroux points out (1995, 2002), it serves not only entertainment purposes, but it also shapes and influences the way in which cultural landscapes are imagined and ultimately explained.

2.7. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL-ORIENTED INTERNET WEBSITES, FACEBOOK, AND OTHER NET-
    WORKING SETTINGS

In addition to conventional printed and audiovisual media, technologically and computer-mediated communication has become an emerging research milieu in eth-

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[13] However, the filmic dimension is not the only field I have researched, so a more thorough prospection could show different proportions. Thus, further research is needed to establish a more extensive delimitation of this issue.

nography, being extensively explored in the last decade (Hine 2000 and 2008; Burrell 2009; García *et al.* 2009). The rise of digital technologies has opened up new valuable research lines in social science. Hence, Wilson, Goslin and Graham (2012) undertake an exhaustive review of academic literature specifically regarding the use of Facebook as a strategic investigation tool. From their point of view, there are at least three major reasons to seriously consider the advantages of this social network. Firstly, the kind of activities that take place within the different spaces provided by the platform; secondly, its growing popularity during the last decade[14]. And, lastly, the benefits (and also risks) that this sort of virtual networks entails not only for the network users, but also for all those who may be affected by the information and/or images uploaded to any site.

Moreover, by browsing the Internet, one can come across dozens of Facebook sites somehow related to adoption or adoptive agencies. The potential of such virtual spaces for quantitative and qualitative research still has a long path ahead and is yet to be fully explored, despite some remarkable recent contributions. Among them, for example, Murthy suggests the multi-sided condition of Facebook as a data provider: from the ability of sites to provide research respondents, to their potential use by social researchers to disseminate useful information to the general public (2008: 844-855). For my purpose here, I would also add the academic potential of a multimodal approach taking into account several research layers: the textual dimension —with the constrictions and consensus generated around specific communicative platforms—, the imagery employed in several page forms and news feed channels, and the visual conjunction of texts, images, colours and other items according to pre-set templates but also to the user's desires and patterning preferences. In addition, Facebook sites may warrant the ethnographer's attention at several levels: (a) the production part —e.g. who sets up the site and why, what kind of information is placed or sought, and what sort of intertextual strategies are used to channel and publicize relevant contents—, (b) the day-to-day management and evolution of the site —what kind of new information is added, who joins the page, what sort of structure does mutual interaction between registered users shape, etc.— and, of course, (c) the user's perspective —i.e. the reception study of a site's impact among targeted audiences—.

Nevertheless, a relevant and notoriously active Internet-based research activity is carried out in adoption studies via online surveys. Thus, web-based questionnaires become useful tools to gain access to large delocalized samples or merely to simplify and increase the flexibility of complex surveys (Mohanty, Keoske and Sales 2006; Mohanty and Newhill 2011; Mohanty 2013). However, such potential should not conceal the less social impacts of Internet webpages on adoptees and other adoption communities. Specifically concerning adoption services, and considering some potential risks of Internet-based adoption activities, several voices have lately requested an effective regulation of the sites (Roby and White 2010), especially at a time when a large number of prospective parents turn to the Internet in search of guidance and training (Pacifici *et al.* 2006; Wong 2010).

Considering these parents' interests in more detail, I have approached the use of

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[14] According to Facebook's own data, there were 1.32 billion monthly active users as of June 30, 2014 <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info>. Accessed on October 3, 2014.

the Internet as a repository of information, as well as a relational space that adoptive families recurrently use to discuss parenting (Grau Rebollo, García Tugas and Vich Bertrán 2016). It soon became evident that the adoption process intervenes in the Internet activity on several levels: (a) it facilitates access to practical information at different levels, (b) it offers the possibility to share experiences and provides emotional support, and (c) it promotes specific online interactions.

In this light, the most frequently requested information comprised general concerns about the adoptive project, experiences of other adoptive families, practical data about certain pathologies and information about origins. However, the kind of involvement in all that activity showed different profiles: intensive networking, mainly at a user level; intensive networking both as a user and as content editor; occasional browsing but extended in time (i.e. once-off queries or non-systematic follow-up of thematic forums or specialist sites), and occasional and time-limited browsing (i.e. once the purpose of the search has been fulfilled the browsing activity comes to an end).

Also, following Hine (2008), we wanted to document specific online interaction within a particular site and explore it from a basically qualitative perspective. Thus, we decided to open a Facebook page oriented at monitoring the flow of information between users regarding the adoptive field to see what type of users were connected, what kind of information circulated between them and how often it happened. This Facebook page was launched in May 2013 and from then until April 2015 we systematically monitored online activity, accompanied by periodic information harvesting concerning social interactions (always complying with all confidential requirements). Therefore, instead of taking the site as a platform to obtain a snowball sampling (Bhutta 2012) or as a space for recruiting informants for a specific purpose (as in some of the studies examined by Wilson, Goslin and Graham 2012: 213-215), we considered it as a non-participating observation space for data collection and analysis purposes (Grau Rebollo, García Tugas and Vich Bertrán 2016: 49).

The main shared information concerned 4 main fields: queries about information or help, general announcements (sometimes unrelated to adoptive issues), specific announcements about activities related to adoptive parenting, and various kinds of personal announcements (from the circulation of humoristic memes to overt complaints about the cell-phone provider). In many of them image plays a central role, being either the core of the message or becoming a mere illustration within it.

Furthermore, the relevance of the Internet as a formative source —or, rather, as a worldwide source of formative materials— goes hand in hand with its weight as an ideological transmission tool. Therefore, many prospective parents learn about proper ways of «doing» and «becoming» a good parent through collective forums, thematic websites and other spaces generated with online communication technologies (Gill 2009). But the inclusion and use of different visual and audiovisual material (including picture and film clips) in *online* interactions are yet to be explored in-depth in academic research. Therefore, further research is needed to fully analyse the systematic usage of images and short videos in Social Networking Site (SNS) communication and communicational patterns following forwarded or re-sent audiovisual materials.

CONCLUSIONS

International Adoption itineraries generate a broad range of cultural narratives that ultimately result in the conformation of imaginaries that shape social expectancies of them. Following Haraway (1988), I regard such imaginaries as situated constructions, given their incardination in particular historical and cultural coordinates. Whereas these narratives have been mostly analysed by different social sciences on a written and oral basis, I propose in this article that audiovisual anthropology can (and does) contribute to opening new research pathways as well as possibly playing a part in complementing and expanding previous investigations on that matter.

The potential of these culturally situated imaginaries to explain different aspects of human behaviour goes hand in hand with the necessary encompassment between sectoral academic approaches and the broader sociocultural dimensions of adoption. As a result, one can scrutinize the audiovisual mediation of culture and social practices and relations so to «[...] provide critical insights into how culture and social relations are being mediated through cinema, television and video in local, national and intercultural settings» (Ginsburg 1994: 6). On this basis, I consider visual and audiovisual productions —in all possible formats and genres— as cultural operators that have an enormous influence on the social perception of several cultural elements closely related with folk ideologies.

Using these parameters, in this article I have explored how audiovisual research may provide a new sort of knowledge on adoptive issues and how such insights could be applied in order to find out new ways of undertaking research. Hence, I consider dominant imageries about International Adoption as «visual tropes» (Briggs 2003) that intentionally shape, direct or funnel cultural understandings on adoption —along with its multiple variables: care systems, abandonment or relinquishment, positive or negative depictions of the adoptive milieu, etc.

This new knowledge applies to different supports (documentary films, Facebook and social networking sites, TV productions or fiction films, among others), and stems from the intertwining of visual, audiovisual and specific transmedia languages with the elicitation capabilities of still and moving images, as well as the refractive power of fiction (as fiction films have a long-proven extraordinary ability to penetrate the social tissue and subsequently to spread embodied abstract living standards and ideas). Thus, through the examination of audiovisual materials, the researcher can operate particular connections between adoption narratives, concrete embodiments of such narratives and theoretical backgrounds in order to gain a better understanding of promoted visions, cultural ideologies and social practices surrounding the adoptive field.

Consequently, audiovisual repertoires become prime tools to retrieve key information about *folk* ideologies, cultural understandings and social practices. In addition, they become fundamental analytical keystones for academic inquiries and play a major role as communicational devices in regard to research outcomes.

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