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Visual Methods in Migration Studies:

New possibilities, theoretical implications, and ethical questions

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Abstract

The purpose of this brief is to reflect critically on the use of visual methods in migration studies and to provide concrete examples of their application. We propose to think of the adoption of a visual methodology as a way to access and produce knowledge within the field of migration studies, rather than relying on disciplinary framing.

Based on a collection of empirical cases, we show that researchers can mobilise still and moving images in the context of knowledge production. Specifically addressed in this brief are mental maps. In the field of migration studies, visual methods generate new possibilities for data collection and their analysis. Nevertheless, questions pertaining to methodological challenges, theoretical implications, as well as ethics remain.

This brief is based on a volume entitled "Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities theoretical implications, and ethical questions", currently in the process of edition. The proposal has won the IMISCOE competitive book for call last fall, and publication is foreseen in 2020.

Introduction

In the last decades, visual anthropologists, visual sociologists and visual geographers have consolidated the "visual" through associations, seminal publications, journals and book series. Nonetheless, the debates taking place in these different venues have reinforced a disciplinary-bounded understanding of the "visual", rather than its relation to a particular field of study. Without demining in any way the rich debates that have taken place in the different disciplines, we propose to start deconstructing this disciplinary framing by thinking of visual methodology as a way to access and produce knowledge within the field of migration studies. In this piece, we refer to "visuals" as images (stills, moving images, illustrations and maps) produced during a research project (either at data collection, analysis or dissemination stages), by scholars or by research participants.

Based on a collection of empirical cases presented at *Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities, theoretical implications, and ethical questions* (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, forthcoming)[i], this paper contributes to the claim that researchers can mobilise visuals to develop theory.

In the first part of this paper, we theorise the use of visuals when studying migration. In particular, we focus on new possibilities that the adoption of a visual methodology generate for social scientists working in the field of migration studies. The second part presents one project addressing mental maps as a visual method.

Adopting a visual methodology for knowledge production

With the edition of the volume *Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities, theoretical implications, and ethical questions* (Nikielska-Sekula & Desille, forthcoming), we modestly participate in a movement which aims at overcoming the disciplinary boundaries that have characterised the debates around the visual over the past decades (see annex "Further readings"). More specifically, based on a collection of empirical cases, we propose the adoption of a visual methodology as a way to access and produce knowledge within the field of migration studies.

What is a visual methodology?

Firstly, what difference do we make between the visual, visual methods and a visual methodology? Following Ball and Gilligan (2010), visual methodology refers to the theories, concepts, methods and technologies used to operate a visual research project. In our opinion, the epistemological value of the visual is anchored in *embodiment* - the relation between the bodies (of researchers and research participants) and the places under scrutiny; *interpretation* - by researchers, research participants and the audience; and *participation* - which sanctions participants and other collaborators as equals to researchers in the process

of producing knowledge. In the edited volume, we make our case through three mediums, which are photography, ethnographic films and mental maps.

By limiting the study to the field of international migration, we want to highlight specific challenges researchers in migration studies meet that feed the reflection around the adoption of a visual methodology. As a disclaimer, we want to reaffirm that we do not reject established forms of data collection based primarily on language. Rather, we want to find a moment when visuals are not merely illustrative by "talking through the images". We are careful to nuance the full value of visuals because of the specific constraints of our field of study.

Crosscutting issues: reflexivity, participation and ethics

Both humanistic and critical schools have had influence on the reflection researchers engage in during their projects[ii]. They are constantly encouraged to reflect on their positionality, the power imbalance it can generate and the ethical underpinnings of their endeavours. In migration studies in particular, researchers often benefit from mobility privileges that their participants do not have. Working in regions they did not grow up in, they carry with them preconceptions that they project on findings. Racial differences are also often at play. Those relations can be even more acute when one engages with the visual. The adoption of a visual methodology is not a safeguard; neither does a more "traditional" choice of method dismisses questions of reflection, participation or ethics. Nevertheless, mobilising a visual methodology will hopefully encourage researchers to ask themselves these questions, and find ways to fairly negotiate with their participants.

Often, deploying a visual methodology and employing adequate visual methods tend to require more participation. Drawing, photographing and filming trigger encounters and dialogues which are expected to reestablish some balance in the participant-researcher relationship. Obviously, researchers should not be naive about the participatory potential of the visual, and thus plan each stage in a way that will favour participants' views on the process.

Ethics is a crucial issue crosscutting fieldwork, analyses and the very dissemination of research results. Images have limited abilities especially when it comes to anonymising data. They display whatever they depicted. In this context, the question "what to display" becomes salient (Nikielska-Sekula, forthcoming). With the issue of migration being highly politicised in the last few years, researchers have the responsibility not to participate in the "border spectacle" (De Genova, 2013).

Adopting a visual methodology: potential to generate theory

To summarise, we believe in the epistemological value of visuals. This is anchored in a three-step process of *embodiment*; *interpretation*; and *participation*. During the process of knowledge production, researchers should be particularly attentive to their positionality; the way participants are included in research projects; and the ethics of research.

Visual methodologies: new possibilities in the field of migration studies

In this section we focus on four aspects of the research process involving visual methodologies in the field of migration: bodies and places, storytelling, participation, and representation. These aspects, corresponding with the sections of the volume *Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities, theoretical implications and ethical questions* reflect (though not exhaustively) the main trends found in contemporary visual methodology applied to migration.

Bodies and places

A main contribution to the theoretical debate surrounding the visual, made by humanistic and cultural researchers in particular, is that of the "sensorial experience". Both researchers and participants are "embodying" experiences. The researcher in particular, loses its status of observant, to become a full participant. As for people who have experienced migration, visuals enable to break free from the idea that they are always on the move, floating or dislocated. The "neither here, nor there" prejudice they might suffer from can be countered by visualising the places they inhabit, activate, change and contest. Moreover, in line with Pink's (2006; 2011) multisensorial approach, visual methods involve not only the use of sight but they activate other senses too. The social world may be observed by the researcher (or research participants) through the camera lenses, but the whole research situation is perceived by all the senses, which in turn, further projects on the interpretation of the collected data. We therefore argue that sensorial experiences can be channeled through the visual.

Storytelling

A second important contribution has to do with visuals' capacity to add more complexity to the ways participants are portrayed in research projects. Often reduced to short background descriptions and a collection of selected quotes from interviews, participants tend to become "characters" of their own narratives. Visuals give "flesh" to uprooted descriptions and enable a more nuanced understanding of participants' individualities. Visuals can therefore offer a fruitful platform to counter the oversimplified "migrant character" and make ways for forms of storytelling that support complexity, layers and more.

Perhaps Berger and Mohr's Seventh Man (1977) can be thought of a breakthrough in this attempt to build a powerful and emotional response through images, poetry and essay. Visual essays, collaborative filmmaking and other forms of critical visual ethnographies pave the way to creative methods aiming at revealing the complexities of migration experience(s) and of people who have experienced migration.

Participation

A third contribution is the recognition that research participants are indeed participants rather than informants. The capacity to produce knowledge is not limited to researchers. Participatory research schemes can therefore provide new spaces of knowledge production. Rather than "giving" a voice (as if researchers would possess that in the first place), the planning of a research project along with principles of equality is crucial (Zeitlyn & Mand 2012). As we have argued before, the reality is often that of power imbalance. Co-producing audiovisual materials serves well the goals of participatory methods, overcoming a positivist model of keeping distance between researchers and participants as a guarantee of reaching "the truth" (Queirolo Palmas 2015:114). Adopting a research design based on the parity of participants and researchers is not a guarantee of an equal, fair and participatory research project, but it seems crucial to set these principles, and acknowledge the laborious and endless, yet necessary, process of decolonising bodies, spaces, but also research itself.

Representations

A final contribution lies in the debate regarding representation. Here, in a context of politicisation and exceptionalisation of the migration experience, we encourage researchers to adopt a militant position and resist against certain discourses and images deemed harmful to the freedom of movement and the right to a decent life. A blunt example occurred as Europe experienced the highest arrivals in Europe since WWII in 2015: images were often manipulated to present migration either as a threat or as misery experienced by vulnerable actors, the former delivered by anti-immigration discourses, the latter provided by humanitarian organisations. Somewhere between the political and humanitarian visual narratives of migration, the case of the "Kurdi images"[iii], together with other depictions of migration present in media after 2015, draw attention to the power of representation with regard to highly politicised topics, but also to the vulnerability of images as prone to manipulation to shake political scene.

In the section that follows, we introduce one empirical case, based on the research project conducted by Franz Buhr between 2013 to 2018.

A case study: mental maps

From their early appearance and consolidation (Lynch, 1960) as a research method in the social sciences to today, mental maps have made their way into migration research as a widely used visual research tool. Also called 'cognitive maps', these graphic images have served various purposes in social scientific scholarship. Researchers have asked participants to produce mental maps in order to understand identity formation, spatial awareness, orientation and navigation, social perception of boundaries, emotional geographies, spatial confidence and unsafety, etc. Within migration research, mental maps have brought to light migrants' everyday whereabouts and exposed the various ways belonging and segregation are lived and spatialised.

Mental maps vary a lot in their form and pictorial components; yet, a simple and practical definition would have mental maps as freehand drawn images outlining (but not limited to) spatial elements as they are experienced by individuals. Along these lines, mental maps constitute a very versatile research instrument as participants may be asked to sketch their usual itineraries across the city, the spaces in which they feel safe or unsafe, their spatial landmarks used for orientation, their migration trajectories and border-crossings, etc. These maps contain a vernacular knowledge of space, a user's know-how, and thus entail an important epistemological break from the monopoly of traditional cartographical knowledge. Placing individuals' mental maps within the context of critical counter-cartographies (kollektiv orangotango+, 2018) provides research with useful tools for reading and interpreting these maps, but also brings forth their potential to uncover inequalities and expose lay spatial understandings of migrants, minorities and neighbours.

Although there seems to be a facile recourse to mental maps as mere illustrations to research data, mental maps do bear the potential to provide relevant spatial information that would hardly surface otherwise. For such, mental maps require careful reading, and studies have relied on different strategies to analyse and interpret them. A more formal analysis of mental maps consists of juxtaposing participants' drawings with official cartographical maps and measuring participants' competencies such as precision, accuracy, scale and the number and type of spatial elements depicted (Ramadier, 2009).

Another form of working with mental maps departs from the premise that they function not as a straightforward registering of a given spatial state of affairs, but as 'an imaginative effort produced under the needs of the moment' (Tuan, 1975, p. 209), that is, the researcher-participant engagement. Following this line of thought, a formal analysis of mental maps does not suffice; mental maps should rather be seen as authorial works, inevitably partial, subjective and positioned in their nature, and their meanings should be re-embedded into participants' narratives. As Fenster (2009) has argued, this interaction builds up trust and confidence between researcher and participant over the meanings of the drawing.

The mental map provided below came about in the ambit of a research project concerned with understanding the ways migrants learn to use and move about in a new city. The project addressed the relationship between migrants and their urban surroundings, which involves not only the city's built environment, its locations and morphologies, but also the complex system of practical knowledge and skills employed by inhabitants in order to cover distances, use spaces and comply with all sorts of life requirements.

Jessica arrived in Portugal in 2001 coming from Cape Verde, an archipelago country in West Africa which gained independence from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975. Jessica conducted her dentistry studies in Portugal and has worked in her field for many years. Due to the nature of her profession, she has always had multiple and simultaneous workplaces in Lisbon, and very rarely was she able to live near any of the clinics where she worked. This entailed a need to own a car, also because she has to carry her materials from one workplace to the other. Such an intense transit through Lisbon's neighbourhoods has provided Jessica with a very rich repertoire of routes and places in the city.

Jessica's mental map (Buhr & McGarrigle, 2017, p.230)

Jessica drew the mental map above when asked to represent on a piece of blank paper 'the city that she used'. She began by drawing her home neighbourhood in the centre of the map, surrounded by a black circumference. From that starting point, she selected and distributed Lisbon's neighbourhoods based on her practical needs: to the left, she listed the places she goes to for a night out; up from the centre, where she goes shopping; on the top right, she arranged the places she frequents for leisure activities; and finally, on the bottom right, the two clinics' neighbourhoods where she works at the moment.

Rather than a distanced, birds-eye view of Lisbon's landscape, Jessica's mental map is best understood as a *taskscape*, a term coined by Ingold (1993) to describe the tapestry of dwelling activities, which sew together time and space. The power of her map does not refer to Jessica's cartographical skills and accuracy

of depiction, but to the way she actively selects, emphasizes, reorients and juxtaposes urban resources as a function of her own experiences and needs. This ability to 'bend' urban space to a given purpose (Buhr, 2018) goes hand-in-hand with her cumulated urban expertise, itself a product of the sum of various journeys, exposing her habitual practices and spatial choices.

Jessica's and the other research participants' mental maps have provided a window into their own urban expertise and to the ways migrants have come to know and mobilise urban resources. Their relationships with Lisbon are seen here not from the lenses of pre-established integration definitions but as a product of the complex, embodied and quotidian process of turning a once unknown territory into a series of practical functionalities allowing individual migrants to build their urban livelihoods.

Conclusion

This short piece aimed at presenting a preliminary reflection on the use of the "visual" in migration studies. We structured our argument along four claims. One, visuals enable to ground research into places, and focus on the embodied experiences of persons who have experienced migration. In that sense, it counters the preconception that migrants are neither here nor there. Two, visuals tell stories. Against the reduction of migration experiences to one generic migrant figure, they hold the potential of multiplying and complexifying accounts of migration. Three, the adoption of a visual methodology increases the possibilities for cooperation, and therefore the need to recognise the competency of participants in knowledge co-production. Finally, these three claims all feed in the transformation of representations of people who have experienced migration. Researchers are responsible for these representations as much as other media they often criticise. As such, they have to regularly question: the power imbalance between them and their projects' participants; their positionality and the subjective character of their interpretations; and matters of ethics when carrying out research on migration.

Buhr's use of mental maps come as a case in point. His assumption - the use of the city is indeed embodied - enables him to adopt a subversive approach to unsettle the accepted definition of integration. In his project, knowledge of space is not defined by indicators created by the "receiving society", but is understood through the collection of individual narratives. The mental maps he collects are powerful as they depict daily activities of his participants, working in parallel with other "texts" he collects. Therefore, he recognises their competency and the types of resources they mobilise, despite the fact that their knowledge does not fit the academically-recognised conventions. Buhr has shown throughout his work that spatial integration can mean "becoming local" (2018), hence pushing the boundaries of the concept of immigrant integration.

Throughout the text we have made an argument for an interdisciplinary and field-oriented approach to visual methodology. Nevertheless, case studies presented in the volume *Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities, theoretical implications, and ethical questions*, while involving disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and geography, leave some other relevant works beyond its scope, i.e. from the field of psychology. Further collaborative work across disciplines is needed to achieve a better understanding of the challenges and potentials of visuals in the field of international migration. With this piece and the volume, we hope to inspire such collaboration.

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Annex: Further readings and research groups

Anthropologists and ethnographers have long discussed the "visual": as methods for data collection during fieldwork, but also as an overall methodology, which includes the analysis of still and moving images, and the production of stories. However, visual anthropology distinguishes itself from other visual disciplines for its emphasis on empirical research. The constitution of the discipline of visual anthropology and visual ethnography dates back to the 1980s (see for instance, Hockings, 2003; Pink, 2013). Nevertheless, visual anthropologists still negotiate over the visual today. Venues include the sub-section Visual anthropology at the European Association of Social Anthropologists, which edits the journal Anthrovision; and the society for visual anthropology, and their journal Visual Anthropology Review.

Visual sociologists in turn have looked at representations as a core concept (see for instance, Banks, 2001; Pauwels & Margolis, 2011). A main venue is the International Visual Sociology Association (https://visualsociology.org/), which edits the journal Visual Studies. Additionally, the International Sociological Association also includes the RC57 Visual Sociology thematic group.

Visual geographers have debated the constitution of a subdiscipline more recently (Cresswell & Dixon, 2002). Publication venues include GeoHumanities and Cultural geographies. Cultural studies, media

studies, cinema, and communication studies have also participated in the debate, with works disseminated through the [Journal of visual culture](#) as well as the [Visual communication journal](#).

In an attempt to overcome disciplinary frames, new interdisciplinary journals such as [Entanglements](#) but also [visual methodologies](#) (a "postdisciplinary"[iv] journal) have disseminated works on the visual. Similarly, in the Francophone scholarship, several peer-review journals address the visual, including the [Revue Française des Methodes Visuelles](#) and [Science and video](#).

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[i] This piece is based on a volume entitled "Visual Methods in Migration Studies: new possibilities, theoretical implications, and ethical questions", currently in the process of edition. The proposal has won the IMISCOE competitive book call last fall, and publication is foreseen in 2020.

[ii] For social scientists of the humanistic and cultural schools, visual methods enable, on the one hand, a "sensorial" ethnography, revealing experiences, bodies, gestures, emotions and other non-oral data, and, on the other hand, material data on specific places. For anti-colonial scholars, the adoption of a visual methodology can prove useful to "decolonise" the visual. Similarly, feminist scholars reaffirm the potential of visuals to reactivate agency, subjectification, exercising power and exercising citizenship.

[iii] Nilüfer Demir´s photograph depicting Alan Kurdi´s body at the Turkish coast has shaken the public opinion. The picture of this three-years-old Syrian boy who drowned in the attempt of his family to reach Europe has triggered response of the world leaders and affected 2015 Canadian federal elections. The original photographs inspired a series of what some researchers have called "Kurdi images" engaging all together in a "a visual dialogue" and informing other images such as the one of Ai Weiwei (Cambre 2019, 127).

[iv] See About us at: http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/about