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## Visual geographies and mountain psychogeographic drift. The geography workshops of the Childhood and Primary Teachers Education course of the University of Turin

Cristiano Giorda<sup>a</sup>, Giacomo Pettenati<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione, University of Turin, Turin, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società, University of Turin, Turin, Italy

Email: [giacomo.pettenati@unito.it](mailto:giacomo.pettenati@unito.it)

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the theoretical background, the methodological tools and the main findings of the integration of visual methods to psychogeographic drift as a technique of exploration and interpretation of places. The experimentation has been carried out in the last three years during the workshops organized for students of the Childhood and Primary Teachers Education course of the University of Turin. Based on the idea of territorial education as a complex approach to geographic education, the workshops take place in the mountain village of Prali (Western Alps) and their location is fundamental in creating a fruitful learning environment. Visual methodologies are variously used during the workshops and in the last three editions they became part of the “mountain drift” activities, inspired by the psychogeographic “urban drift”, and used as a learning tool with students.

**Keywords:** Geographical Education, Territorial Education, Mountains, Psychogeographic Drift, Didactics, Workshops, Territorial Values, Visual Geographies

### 1. Introduction

This contribution presents the theoretical approach and empirical test of some visual methodologies used in university workshops for future primary school teachers (class of Basics and didactics of geography of the single-cycle master's degree course in Childhood and Primary Teachers Education of the University of Turin). The main purpose of these activities is the development of geographical and territorial education through the introduction of innovative methodologies in the teaching of geography. The

fieldwork activities described in this contribution have been developed from 2011 to date by Cristiano Giorda, the professor in charge of the course, and by a group of teachers and researchers who alternately conducted the workshops and experimented new teaching methods. Among them Giacomo Pettenati (University of Turin), who introduced the methodology of psychogeographic drift and the use of images in documentation and representation of the fieldwork experience, and Matteo Puttilli (University of Florence), who developed the idea of territorial education as an experience of active learning

based on an understanding of places as learning environments (Giorda and Puttilli, 2011; Giorda, 2014).

Widely acknowledged as fundamental tools for teaching geography critically, effectively and creatively (Rose, 1996, 2003; Bignante, 2011), images and visual methodologies are part of this experience from three perspectives:

- 1) As a tool to document the territory and collect information on landscape, its values and how they are perceived by the subjects who live or enjoy places. During the workshops students and teachers experiment different techniques of visual data collection and use (photographs, videos, drawings, etc.) and do not use professional instruments, but everyday technologies like smartphones and small digital cameras.
- 2) As a material to narrate and represent the places of research through slide presentations that include a variety of visual and multimedia materials: photos, audios, video recordings, sketched maps, etc.
- 3) As mediators between places and the knowledge of the subjects that observe, understand, tell and represent them.

The aim of this approach is to increase students' ability to critically understand the potential of images in exploring and knowing places; to recognize and deconstruct the cultural meanings and rhetoric embedded by images; to make room for geographical imagination and to think changes with an ecological thought. that includes the experience of the subjects who live in those places.

In this way the teaching of geography gives value to the active role of students, who observe, interpret and critically learn (Bignante, 2010), enriching the best experiences in the geographical education of the past (Bissanti, 1985) with the new tools and knowledge available today (Sidaway, 2010; Garret, 2011; Mavroudi and Jöns, 2011; Anderson, 2013).

## 2. Teaching geography and territorial education

Territorial education is based on the idea that greater experience, knowledge and competence on places leads to the development of a better ability to make decisions for oneself and one's own living space; to a deeper relationship with nature and to a greater ability to understand the relationships between environment and human societies (Giorda and Puttilli, 2011).

Its objectives are based on the general considerations expressed in the international documents on geographic education, such as the IGU Rome declaration on *Geographical Education* in Europe (2013) and the International Charter on Geographical Education (last version was signed in 2016). The core idea is to organize in a coherent unique framework the different principles and objectives of geographical education (from the more "environmental" to the more "social" ones), in order to develop a set of skills based on a common field of application: territory, understood as a system in which human society acts in an organized way transforming the environment and adapting it to the needs of communities and individuals' lives.

Particular emphasis is placed on the concept of territorial value (Dematteis and Giorda, 2013). It is understood as what we can identify as a strength, a resource or as a heritage of the territory. A territorial value can be material, such as a cultural heritage or biodiversity; it can be immaterial, like traditions, ideas, habits recognized as a specific, positive and enriching trait of the territory and its places.

The territorial value can be referred to the identity and the sense of the place, but also to an element that connotes an aspect of the environment, the economy, culture, history and society.

The concept of territorial value also makes it possible to identify the set of negative characteristics that impoverish the heritage of the territory and are critical factors that worsen the quality of life.

To provide students with conceptual and operational tools linked to territorial education (that they have to learn themselves and that they

will teach their future pupils at school) is the main objective of the workshops organized as part of the class of Basics and didactics of geography of the single-cycle master's degree course in Childhood and Primary Teachers Education Sciences of the University of Turin, that are described in this paper.

The class of the Basics and didactics of geography of the single-cycle master's degree course in Education Sciences of the University of Turin requires students to take part in 16 mandatory hours of laboratory activity, to supplement the 60 hours of frontal lessons of the course.

Starting from these theoretical premises and from the desire to offer students an experience of study and practice of geography alternative to that experienced for most of their scholastic and university career, some residential laboratories are organized during the course, allowing future primary school teachers to "get their feet dirty" (Fremont, 2005), by experimenting fieldwork in geography. Starting from 2011, More than 500 students took part in this territorial education workshop organized at the Agape Ecumenical Cultural Center in Prali, a small mountain village located in the Piedmont Alps, about 1500 meters high.

In the following paragraphs we will describe these experiences, focusing in particular on the importance of the location of the workshops as learning environment; and on the experimented methodologies of integration of psychogeographical drift and visual methodologies in the analysis and interpretation of mountain places.

### 3. The learning environment

The location where the workshops take place as learning environment plays a crucial role in their success and is part of the methodological framework used with and provided to students. The theoretical background is the awareness of the importance of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) and of fieldwork in geography teaching and learning (Kent et al., 1997; Fuller et al., 2006).

The choice of the location where the laboratories take place can be explained by considering three scales of analysis and three interrelated dimensions.

First, the mountain areas are generally identified as useful territorial contexts in which to achieve the objectives of the laboratories. The main reasons for this choice are primarily related to the (relative) ease of reading the mountain landscape, due to the many existing observation points generated by the differences in height. These facility of observation brings the main recognizable elements of the socio-cultural and geomorphological evolution of these places right in front of the eyes of the researcher and the observer. Since the time of the first European Grand Tours and the "discovery" of the mountain landscape by travelers and scholars, it was clear that this was presented as a sort of anatomical theater en plein air, like a large outdoor laboratory, where it is possible to study the phenomena of nature (Giacomoni, 2001).

Second, the possibility of empirically deepening the knowledge of a mountain area also represents for students, mostly coming from the urban context of the metropolitan area of Turin, to know and experience the complexity and variety of a typology of place where many of them have been before mainly as tourists and perceived as scarcely complex and as static<sup>1</sup>.

Third, for the majority of students the mountain context is characterized by a sense of spatial otherness, whose understanding, through the passage from "imaginative geography" (Said, 1978, other more recent ref) to a practiced and conscious geography, constitutes one of the objectives of a complex vision of the contemporary teaching of geography (Byram, 1997).

Zooming onto the specific territorial context where the workshops are carried out, the village of Prali was also chosen for its cultural otherness, which significantly contributes to the interest and positive judgment that the participants attribute to the laboratory<sup>2</sup>. The municipality of Prali is in fact in Val Germanasca, one of the

<sup>1</sup> This information about the perception of mountain territory by students derives from the brainstorming activities that take place at the beginning of the workshop, aimed at bringing out the different representations that the participants in the workshop have of the mountains.

<sup>2</sup> This element emerges recurrently during the feedback activities that are carried out with students at the end of the three days of work.

three so-called Waldensian Valleys of Italy, together with Val Pellice and part of Val Chisone. They are the only areas in Italy to be mainly populated by Protestants, of the Waldensian cult. The Waldensian Church takes its name from the merchant Peter Waldo, who around 1170 founded the movement of the Poors of Lyon, called “Waldensians” after his death. The medieval Waldensians were paupers, pacifists, with a faith linked to the biblical text, read and disseminated in the vernacular, before the Protestant Reformation. Despite the great persecution by the Catholic Church, the Waldensian movement survived, especially in the western Alpine area. In 1532 the surviving Waldensians joined the Protestant Reformation and in 1559 formed an independent reformed Church. After further persecutions and periods of forced exile (especially in the seventeenth century), the Waldensians were allowed to practice their creed, but limitedly to the so-called “alpine ghetto” of these valleys until 1848 (year of granting civil liberties to Waldensians and Jews by Charles Albert of Savoy). These territories are therefore characterized by a strong cultural specificity, which still today distinguishes them from the surrounding valleys and represents an element of interculturality contributing to building the complex vision of the area that students should explore, understand and learn to teach. In this small section of the western Italian Alps it is also possible to observe some peculiar morphological, hydrographic, climatic, pedological and vegetational characteristics.

The third relevant scale of the context where the workshops are held is the punctual scale of the structure hosting the activities: the Agape Ecumenical Center, built in the 50s by the Waldensian Church, upon initiative of the Waldensian pastor Tullio Vinay and starting from a daring architectural project by Leonardo Ricci, in the middle of the larch forest overlooking the Ghigo di Prali hamlet.

Since its opening, Agape, owned by the Waldensian Church, but completely secular and run by very young volunteers from all over the world, hosts fields of activity and discussion on various topics related to current political and social issues, gender issues, spirituality, theological debate, training. Every guest, including the students of geography labs, are required to con-

tribute directly to the management of the center during the activities, in particular helping to tidy up the dining room and kitchen after each meal. The international and community dimension that the participants of the laboratories experiment, unexpected for them, contributes to creating disorientation and wonder, functional for the construction of a complex approach to the analysis and understanding of a territory, in line with the objectives of the laboratory.

#### **4. Methodology: the application of visual methods to the psychogeographic drift**

The program of the workshops' activities varies according to the teachers involved (usually two for each shift, with a ratio of about one teacher every 15-20 students), the weather conditions and the desire of the coordinators whether to consolidate already used methodologies or to experiment new ones.

Over the years the teaching and analytical potential of different methods of territorial analysis have been explored, through their theoretical presentation to students and their practical application through intense fieldwork. Among the main activities carried out during the workshops are (a) brainstorming and (b) mental maps, aimed at stimulating critical reflection on representations and stereotypes of students towards the environment and the mountain territory; (c) the experimentation of different analysis techniques of the mountain landscape, with the dual purpose of providing students with knowledge of the socio-economic and geomorphological evolution of the highlands and skills related to the role of the landscape as an educational tool (Castiglioni, 2011).

Since 2016, the experimentation of a hybrid methodology has been started, combining elements of the so-called psychogeographic drift to visual methodologies and to an active approach to observation and knowledge of the territory, considered fundamental for an educational project. Knowing one's own territory is a way to take root and orient oneself in the world. It means to develop knowledge and skills related to living space, citizenship, civil cohabitation and the environment. It also means immersing

the child in their own culture, bringing them to know the ways in which the community to which they belong has organized the place in which they live (Giorda, 2006).

The concept of psychogeography and its practical application, urban drift, was born in the late 1950s, within the International Situationist, a movement of political and artistic avant-garde, of Marxist and anarchist matrix at the same time, mainly active in France and Italy, with the aim of putting into practice a radical critique of the society of the time, through an experimental construction of everyday life and the search for a new interaction between urban planning and social behavior (Coverley, 2012).

This is a concept characterized, as recognized by its own main promoter, Guy Debord (1958) by “pleasing vagueness”, which makes it malleable to different interpretations. Psychogeography should be seen as a literary movement or a political strategy? As a set of avant-garde practices or as a new age approach to space? According to Coverley (2012, p. 1), as “all of these things, resisting definitions through a shifting series of interwoven themes and constantly reshaped by its practitioners”. Debord defined psychogeography in the first issue of the Bulletin of the Situationist International (1958), as the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. There are evident links with the idea of *flânerie*, elaborated in the XIX century in Paris and made famous by artists like Baudelaire, who wandered around the city aimlessly observing the details of a literary element (Nuvolati, 2013).

A few decades after their theoretical elaboration and their artistic-political application, psychogeography and urban drift began to be used – above all by artists, writers and researchers – as tools for the exploration of places, oriented to the diffusion of the awareness of urban transformations, in search of a new relationship between citizens and urban space and more education to an open and attentive look on human environments (Smith, 2010).

One of the best known examples is that of the project by the British writer Iain Sinclair (2002), who in his essay *London Orbital* recounts his psychogeographic drifts carried out by walking

around the M25, London’s outer-ring motorway. In Italy, the writer and architect Gianni Biondillo (Biondillo and Monina, 2010) has created a similar project, explicitly inspired by London Orbital, walking with the music critic Michele Monina, along the Milan highway ringroads (*tangenziali*).

The aim of the project was to bring out the complexity of places and territories that are usually just crossed quickly, without looking at them, walking along paths that are not totally random (as it probably should be in more orthodox psychogeography) but through itineraries open to variation, walked along with an approach that is attentive to interstitial spaces and focused on importance of apparently meaningless details. In Italy, Biondillo is one of the main experimenters of the use of psychogeographic drift as a tool for the education to the conscious observation of places and the analysis of the transformation of the territory, both in urban areas (project *Sentieri Metropolitan* in Milan<sup>3</sup>) and in extra-urban areas, through the work done since 2013 with the students of the course “Elements of psychogeography and narration of the territory” of the Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio (Canton Ticino), collected on the site <http://www.psicogeografia.com/>.

According to Biondillo’s approach (2016), psychogeography is a transdisciplinary practice which conveys various fields of knowledge focused on understanding the territory: sociology, economics, geography, anthropology, urban planning, but also the literature, art, cinema, philosophy, etc. Walking across places, with a psychogeographical approach, means to try to interpret and understand contemporary landscape, out of its commonplaces, giving back dignity and identity to apparently ugly or banal places, through investigation and narration. The purpose is to spread a new awareness of the importance and beauty of everyday ordinary landscapes, as a palimpsest where the meanings and dreams of the populations that have inhabited it and who still live in it are deposited (as declared by the European Landscape Convention signed in 2000 by the Council of Europe).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sentierimetropolitani.org/>.

The narration of the experience of the psychogeographic exploration of places is a recurrent component of these methodologies and therefore in most applications of methods of exploration and analysis of the territory inspired by *flanerie* and psychogeography visual methodologies play a central role (Campa, 2015) The representation of the activities, in fact, is often based on photographs or videos collected during the fieldwork, in order to catch and reproduce the key elements of the individual perception of the territory by the subjects involved.

During the last editions of the laboratories held in Prali the students were divided into groups of 4-5 and were asked to carry out an “attentive drift” for some hamlets of the surroundings (starting from the central square of Ghigo di Prali). The groups were asked to reach different points in the territory of Prali, without following a defined path, but instead letting themselves be guided by sensations and curiosity, with the aim of collecting useful materials to provide a representation of the territory crossed, starting from details that have attracted the attention of the participants. The materials collected could be of different types: photographs, video, audio, excerpts of interviews with the people encountered, sketches.

The choice of these methods is connected to the general objectives of the laboratory activities, which at the same time aim to provide students with analysis techniques and understanding of the territory and methods for geography teaching that will be useful for their future professional activity.

## 5. The visual narration of mountain drift

The representation of the mountain drift experience is composed of two main parts.

First, a visual narration of the drift, where students describe their itinerary to teachers and their colleagues, with the support of the visual material they collected and produced during the fieldwork. The focus should not be so much on the objective elements of the places crossed, but rather on the group’s experience in the territory: the shared choice of the itinerary, the internal

dialectic in the choice of the elements to use in the representation, the comparison between the group members on the interpretation of what was observed. The visual narration of each group is presented on the third day of the workshop, with the support of a Power Point presentation.

Despite the diversity of the results, linked to the characteristics of each group, some recurring elements emerge from the analysis of the materials produced in the last four editions of the laboratories (2016 and 2017).

The first concerns the difficulty of many groups to really let themselves go adrift, observing the territory explored during the workshops with neutral eyes. In fact, many of the elements photographed and included in the presentations are connected to the (little) information provided to the students during the first day of activity, in relation to the territorial context where the laboratory takes place. For example, there are signs of the coexistence of the Waldensian faith population and the Catholic population in the local cultural landscape, with a clear prevalence of the former, considered probably more connotating the context of Prali (Figures 1 and 2).

In the representation of the remarkable elements of the drift of the groups some elements recur, which confirm the representations of the mountain that many of the participants bring with them before starting the workshop. They are mostly linked to the traditional and pleasant elements of the mountain landscape, represented for example by farm animals (Figure 3) or by architectural elements considering them as characteristic (Figure 4).



Figures 1 and 2. The two Waldensian temples of Prali photographed by participants to the workshop. The new temple (above), opened in 1962, and the XVI century old temple (below).



Figure 3. Horse farming in Ghigo di Prali as part of the idyllic vision of the mountain economy represented by many groups.



Figure 4. Presumably traditional architectural elements are often photographed by drifters, in search for “typicity”.

In the opposite sense, some groups include elements that have surprised them or that they would not have expected in a mountain context. This may be due to the bias deriving from the instructions given by teachers, who explicitly ask participants to go beyond the traditional mountain representations and the already known. For example, almost all the groups participating in the laboratory noticed and photographed an old community wood oven now re-functionalized as a bookcrossing point (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The bookcrossing point into an old community oven at Ghigo di Prali.

Often, the elements of the ordinary life of a place, like building sites or works in progress, are perceived as disturbing elements in a territorial context to which many of the participants attribute characteristics of “idyll” and “purity”, linked to their habitual fruition of mountain territory during holiday periods and for recreational purposes. Therefore, a construction site for the rearrangement of a section of the Germanasca river is described as a “criticality” of the territory (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Restoration works on the Germanasca river are perceived as a criticality of the place.

The second part of the visual representation of the drift consists in the graphic realization of a hand drawn map of the itinerary followed by each group, enriched with creative elements: drawings, collages with objects collected during the drift, small texts, photographs, etc.

The cartographic representation of the route highlights the interaction between the group and the spatial context in which the drift occurred, determining the choice of the route. The instructions are in fact deliberately very vague, and nothing is said about the itinerary to follow, except the destination of arrival, so as to leave as much space as possible for the participants to define an itinerary.

From the analysis of the maps, some relevant elements emerge.

First, the unwillingness of the groups to leave the paved roads, in favour of the many paths that connect the different hamlets of Prali, with some exceptions, often linked to an active approach to the exercise (Figure 7).

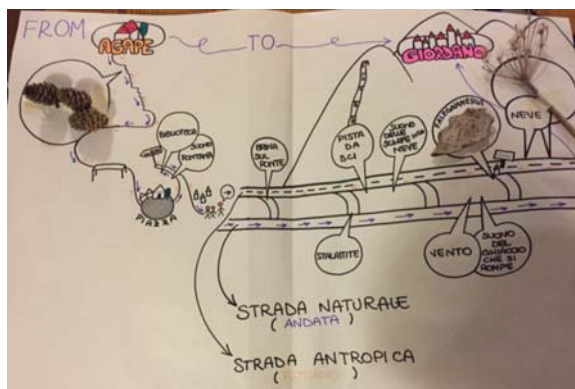


Figure 7. The map of a group that left the main paved road and explored alternative itineraries to reach the destination.

In most of the maps produced by the participants the articulation of mountain territory into altitudinal bands, characterized by a different relationship between human society and the natural environment, clearly emerges (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A map showing the altitudinal organization of the places crossed during the drift.

Many maps are witness to the complex relationship between the imagined mountain landscape that the students already had in their minds before the drift and what they actually meet and notice during their walk. In some cases, they implicitly looked for the “typical” mountain that was part of their imaginary, more than looking at the landscape they were immersed into with neutral eyes (Figure 9).





Figure 9. The reproduction of the “typical” mountain landscape in a map made by participants.

## 6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, regarding the role of the images in the methodologies adopted for territorial education during our workshops, we can distinguish between two types of results: those most related to geographic education and related skills, and those more closely related to the teaching of geography and in particular to changes in the way of learning and how to evaluate learning.

One of the goals of territorial education is the development of a geographic education that actively brings the learner back to the centre of the process. The use of images and new technologies thus plays the role of mediator in the process of knowledge that develops between the learner and the space in which the geographic educator develops his or her own educational project. This space coincides with a portion of territory, and develops in a concrete, lived place, where explorations, observations, the collection of information and its re-elaboration take place through representations and narrations.

The first relevant information emerging from the analysis of the learning process is students' activism. We would like to underline that this activism is not limited to the creation of enthusiasm and active participation around the activities, a result that is still awaited and important, but also includes the activation of participatory modalities and individual and group creativity, which is implemented in the re-elaboration of information and in its communication through images.

This activation of the representation and communication components requires metariflexions and therefore stimulates the use of critical analysis skills and the structuring and organization of knowledge on the basis of the values, symbolic systems and implicit relationships that images convey.

The activities presented combine different skills concerning orientation, observation, documents and data collection, analysis and inference with other skills related to geographic communication that include the representation of places and phenomena, as well as the integrated use of different languages. The activation of social and relational skills should also be considered, because this kind of work requires collaboration and soft skills. Finally, work includes subjective experience and leads to a reflection on how it connects people and places, involving skills of perception, empathy and reflection on one's own experience.

A complex relationship between professional, geographical, and citizenship competences thus emerges. Implemented in the territory through active participation, they are one of the most important outcomes of geographic education.

This observation leads to the didactics of geography. The active methodologies for geographic territorial education, through the use of images and visual methodologies more in general, change the way of learning through the connection of three factors:

1. The close link between observation, collection of images, development of a narrative and a representation of the geographical space. In this way, there is not only a simple analysis of the images, because the subject is called to play an active role in learning in all phases of the process of the construction of knowledge. In all the phases of its process of realization, from the one which requires an implicit idea of the values of the territory to the one that, after their documentation and representation, is constituted by their sharing through a participated narration.
2. The critical attention placed on the instruments of representation, which are explored in their heuristic potential. What emerges is the link between the scientific dimension of

geography and the research activity, which necessarily passes through ideas, hypotheses, tests and verifications.

3. The verification of learning, which does not take place as a separate activity but is given by the product itself of the educational path, by the process through which it is realized and by the observation in an active context of the skills mobilized to face the learning scenario developed by the teachers.

Going back to the experimental integration of visual methodologies into the psychogeographic drift, it turned out to be a fruitful technique of transmission of tools to students whereby to read the complexity of places and to add new skills to their methods as future geography teachers.

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