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Visual Methodologies: Theorizing Disasters and International Relations

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Summary
There is an increase in extreme weather conditions due to human-induced climate change. Their impacts are most severely felt by the marginalized and the poor in the Global South. Increasingly, study of international relations focuses on the varied forms of disasters and the global politics that emerge around them. Disaster studies scholarship actively challenges the myth of existence of "natural disasters." Instead of defining them as being "natural," disasters are conceived as serious disruptions to the functioning of a community or a society with human, material, economic, or environmental losses. The disaster concept is thus separated, first, from hazards such as earthquakes, cyclones, and floods, and "disasters" are not limited to events resulting from natural hazards. Disasters emerge also as a result of major economic and political instabilities due to the nature of the contemporary global political economy and global financial crises. Disasters also include those that often go unnoticed such as violent conflicts or famines, and also include global pandemics such as Ebola and COVID-19. Disasters understood in this way also include aftermaths of resource extractivism and settler coloniality.

The intersection of disasters and visual methodologies offers insights into theorizing International Relations nature, the everyday, and the politics of disasters. This article focuses on such visual and audiovisual scholarship that has predominantly emerged from, and actively engages with, collaborative visual methodologies and a rethinking of research processes. Such works offer insights into critical exploration of academic knowledge production processes and praxis, suggesting that visual is not a method, but a methodological and ethical choice. Research processes adopting photo-elicitation, graphic novels and comics, and films in specific disaster contexts challenge text-dominated scholarship and offer reflection on the roles between the researcher and researched, and on the question of authorship. Turning to visuals also brings to the fore questions of representations and the strategic use of the visual in the overall scholarly storytelling practice. Further, scholars have suggested that instead of focusing on the visual devices, or the visual products, visual methodologies as a process orientation allow questions related to democratizing and accessibility to the research process to be addressed, weighing up whose priorities matter, that is, making research useful for (Indigenous) communities and resisting legacies of the imperial shutter.

Keywords: visual methodologies, disaster politics, international, knowledge production, decoloniality, Indigenous knowledge, collaborative research, epistemic violence

Subjects: Conflict Studies, Development, Qualitative Political Methodology

Introduction

Since the 1980s, the world has witnessed a steady rise in environmental disasters such as droughts, earthquakes, cyclones, landslides, and floods, and it has been established that such increased disaster risks are connected to ongoing climate change and human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. The impact of such disasters on people's lives and livelihoods are most severely felt amongst the marginalized and the poor in the Global South, but increasingly also amongst the emerging lower middle classes across the world. Scholars contributing widely to the study of international relations (IR) increasingly focus on these varied forms of disasters and the global politics emerging around them. Scholarship that resides in an intersection of disasters and visual methodologies offers new insights into theorizing International Relations (IR) and climate extremes. Such works draw from varying visual and collaborative methodologies and they all share an ethos of reflecting on, or attempting to decolonize, knowledge production processes and ways of theorizing disastrous events, and the politics that surround them.

Visual studies has emerged as central to the study of the IRs. Such works include studies on the role that visuality has in politics and the forming of international (Bleiker, 2018, p. 1) and security studies (Andersen & Vuori, 2018). Some examples in which films and videos appear in the study of international include Sophie Harman's research of global health politics through a feature film Pili in order to "make the leap from reading visual politics to writing visual politics" (Harman, 2019, p. 7/202); I Am an American, a series of short documentary films by Cynthia Weber as a reaction to a post-9/11 broadcast American public service announcement (PSA), later augmented with a book "I Am an American": Filming the Fear of Difference (Weber, 2011) written as a filmmaker. Further, research into conflicts, peace, and security have included methodological innovations such as Frank Möller's (2018) Peace Photography and Rune Saugmann Andersen's (2012) video essay The Battlefield of (In)visibility, exploring the politics of (in)visibility in the media coverage of the Middle East conflicts and their transformations, and later theorizing on visuality (Andersen et al., 2015). There has also been analysis of the roles of film, theatre, literature, music, dance, and visual arts in peacebuilding (Mitchell et al., 2020), and of war and displacement (Hast, 2018). And, further, specific focus on the visual, and on ethics and humanitarianism (Campbell, 2006; Hutchison, 2014; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2021; Lisle, 2004; Rothe et al., 2021), as well as innovative analyses focusing on nuclear weapons, North Korea, and demilitarized zones (DMZs) by David Shim (2013), Shin Choi (2016), Saara Särmä (2014), and Roland Bleiker (2018), just to name a few.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections: the first, "Politicizing Disasters," outlines principles of critical disaster scholarship and focuses on cascading disaster risks and their connectedness to inequalities; "The Visual is Not a Method But a Theory" specifically focuses on the visual as knowledge production methodology through feminist, Indigenous, and decolonial principles; and, "Theorizing Disasters Visually", provides insights into examples of scholarship, drawing on such visual methodologies. Finally, the "Conclusion" draws attention to core insights, commending the reader for their application.

Politicizing Disasters

Disaster studies scholarship actively challenges the myth of "natural disasters." Instead of defining them as being "natural," such scholarships conceives of disasters as serious disruptions for a community, or a society, with human, material, economic, and environmental losses (UNISDR, 2009, p. 9). The disaster concept is thus separated from hazards such as earthquakes, cyclones, and floods. Nor are disasters limited to those resulting from natural hazards, but also emerge from major economic and political instabilities due to the nature of the contemporary global political economy and global financial crises. Further, disasters include those that are often not classified as "disasters": violent conflicts, famines, and global pandemics such as Ebola and COVID-19. Disasters understood in this way also include aftermaths of resource extractivism and settler coloniality, but also fires, such as that at Grenfell Tower (see, e.g., Bulley et al., 2019).

Despite being initially a technologically driven discipline, for decades disasters have been studied by anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. Social scientific and humanitarian aid practitioners focusing on disasters since the early 1990s have argued that focusing on the technological and engineering solutions of disaster response and disaster prevention is insufficient. They called for a shift from understanding the prevention of natural disasters as a purely technical and scientific concern, to one which is more holistic and understands the socioeconomic aspects of disasters. The artificial separation between people and natural hazards has been challenged and it has been argued that analysis should incorporate both the everyday lives of people and the structures and patterns of inequalities embedded in their societies, state structures, and global policymaking (Wisner et al., 2003, p. 4). Feminist scholars studying everyday IR (e.g., Enloe, 1989) have filled the gap created by a lack of interest in everyday physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects. This actively disrupts the legacy in IR that focus on state-centricity and elites (world leaders, diplomats), such as the study of war through military strategies, battlefield tactics, weaponry, and foreign policy (Sylvester, 2011).

Accordingly, disastrous aftermaths are often used as "analytical windows that can help answer wider societal and political questions" (Siddiqi, 2019, p. 6), and can enable populations and government structures to "build back better" (for analysis of the Indian Ocean earthquake and the tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, see Daly et al., 2016; Feener, 2013; Jauhola, 2013). This research has illustrated that instead of a neutral and technical recovery agenda, the agenda to "build back better," when analyzed holistically, that is, considering social, economic, political, cultural elements, and experiences of intersections of inequalities, sheds light on the political nature of disaster response, also referred to as disaster politics (see, e.g., Cheek & Chmutina, 2021).

In fact, such scholarship challenges the "camps of IR" (Sylvester, 2007), distinctions and theorizing separated between the study of diplomacy, wars, conflicts, disasters, or "development." Instead, Racioppi and Rajagopalan (2016), studying South Asia, suggest that analytical connections between wars, socioeconomic survival strategies, increased risk of disasters, or development policies and interventions are essential scales of analysis for any research. Aligning with this, Braithwaite and D'Costa (2018, p. 21) have proposed that there is a lack of attention to interscalarity, that is, how violence and power relations cascade and how contestation of power "that may be located at different scales and involved in complex, tactical, multi-scalar alliances explain[s] the uneven outcomes of international

interventions." Thus, understanding the politics of disasters requires an "adjustable lens to be attuned to see and hear the local and a lens that can be widened to national, regional, global or other levels" (Braithwaite & D'Costa, 2018, p. 21).

Further, feminist disaster scholars, drawing from the early activism and scholarship of Black feminism, such as the Combahee River Collective (Taylor, 2017), have drawn attention to the complex concerns of crises for decades: vulnerability to the impacts of natural hazards is a result of a complex intersection of social, political, and economic environments, and gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, class and caste, and other social categories are essential elements when analyzing the social dimensions of disaster aftermath (Enarson & Fordham, 2001; Enarson & Meyreles, 2004; Fothergill, 1996; Hyndman & de Alwis, 2003). Yet, as scholars have pointed out, these intersectional relationships to disasters in their disaster policy usage may become depoliticized and used without deeper understanding of the sociohistorical contexts (Carrigan, 2016, p. 205), or produce overgeneralizations of women, or vulnerable people in general (Enarson et al., 2007).

Thus, disaster reconstruction efforts are never "just" technical. Rather, disaster-affected individuals navigate through reconstruction interventions with experiences of social inequalities, and economic and political grievances. As earlier disaster research clearly illustrates, such experiences are not direct results of "disastrous" or "sudden" events, such as the Indian Ocean earthquakes and the tsunami in December 2004. Rather, risks and vulnerabilities to disasters are results of a longer-term processes that reflect "failed or skewed development" (Wisner et al., 2012, p. 11), combinations of neglected disasters (Wisner & Gaillard, 2009), and indeed are part of the normal existence of people (Wisner et al., 2003, p. 4). Accordingly, analysis of disaster responses should not be segregated from gendered everyday living that often remains invisible and tied to the domestic sphere (McConnel et al., 2014; Williams & McConnel, 2011). Rather, focusing on the biopolitics of disasters allows an analytical distinction to be drawn between governmental apparatuses that attempt to strategically control individual and collective life processes in the aftermath of a disaster ("power over life") and "power of life," referring to meaningful socioecological relations that are created as a response to a refusal to be governed as intended (Grove, 2013, 2014). Examples of research discussed in section "Theorizing Disasters Visually" work in the contexts of intersections of (post)coloniality, ecological and cultural extractivism, settler coloniality, armed conflicts and political violence, hurricanes and earthquakes, suggesting that being siloed analytically to separate fields or camps of study of IR, reduces their relevance to the lived everyday lives of the Majority World (Alam, 2008).

In short, while it still may be considered by some as a limited study of natural hazards, disaster studies scholarship has for decades offered new lenses to understand not only the multiscale analysis of vulnerability and structures of inequality, but also efforts of changing them.

The Visual is Not a Method But a Theory

Proposing the visual as a methodology starts from the premise that the use of the visual is more than just a choice between research methods. Rather, the use of the visual constitutes theory-making and knowledge production activity (Callahan, 2015, p. 893). Yet, the

scholarship discussed here pushes it further. As Black feminists have expressed for decades, knowledge production is always embedded in power relations and intersections of hierarchies of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Collins, 1990; Taylor, 2017). These hierarchies have a bearing on visual research, access to and ownership of visualizing elements and their dissemination, and thus their outreach and possible inclusion in theory formation of IR.

In fact, nontextual forms of expression have formed an important resistance toward colonial governmentality:

> In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, Third World and minoritarian film-makers have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their own images, spoken in their own voices. It is not that their films substitute a pristine "truth" for European "lies," but that they propose counter-truths and counter-narratives informed by an anticolonialist perspective. (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 249, quoted in Knopf, 2008, p. 17)

Thus, unlike the canonical references to the visual turn in IR, "the visual" has, for a long time,
been an essential part of decolonizing the Western gaze on IR.

For example, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, an Aymara/Bolivian feminist sociologist, historian, and activist, has used audiovisual and film to explore colonialism and forms of Indigenous resistance since the invasion of Abya Yala (Indigenous name for Latin America) by Europeans. According to Cusicanqui, concepts historia oral (oral history) and sociología de la imagen (sociology of the image) provide a space in which the implications and tactics of the colonial order can be interrogated (Cusicanqui, 2009). Her works include Khunuskiw, Recuerdos del porvenir (Khunuskiw, Remembrance of Things Future, 1990) and coproduction Voces de Libertad (Voices of Freedom, 1989), which focus on the rise of the anarchist labor movement in Bolivia in the aftermath of World War I, and explore the different conceptions of time and space, memory and oblivion, history and myth (Feder, 1999). To Cusicanqui, historia oral and sociología de la imagen transform the ideas of epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy, with the specific aim of disrupting Western conceptions of history understood as the written word.

Another example, from disaster research, is a collaboration by development/humanitarian organization UN-Habitat Indonesia (United Nations Human Settlements Programme Indonesia) and Indonesian visual anthropologist and filmmaker Aryo Danusiri. The film Bermain di antara gajah-gajah (Playing between Elephants, 2007), the fourth film by Danusiri, focuses on documenting frictions (Tsing, 2005) between the global and the local using observational cinema (see, e.g., Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009). It draws attention to the complications of survival of traumatic events, such as the Indian Ocean earthquake and the tsunami, nearly thirty years of armed struggle between the Indonesian government and the Aceh independence movement, and the experience of global humanitarian aid intervention by following a post-tsunami reconstruction effort to rebuild houses in an Acehnese village. The representations in the film are dramatically different from any progress reports of aid organizations, focusing on the achievements and deliverables.

Further, archives of the visual as methodology include such classic works as the films by Trinh T. Minh-ha: a study of Vietnamese transnational traditions and belonging (A Tale of Love, 1995; Surname Viet Given Name Nam, 1989), a critical film with an anthropological eye (Reassamblage, 1982), and a study of the relationship between house and cosmos in rural Senegal (Naked Spaces: Living is Round, 1985). Only later did she turn these explorations into book format (Minh-ha, 1992). Her works have been described as anti-ethnography—"resisting objectification and excoticization of otherness" and "breaking down dominant languages to imagine other forms of relation and expression" (Balsom, 2018). In her own words, she engages not in "speaking about" but rather "speaking nearby":

> When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you're very close to your subject, you're also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them . . . Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize in it a strong ethical stance. By not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies in knowledge. While this freedom opens many possibilities in positioning the voice of the film, it is also most demanding in its praxis. (Balsom, 2018)

Thus, the question of authorship, or in the case of films, the question of who does the scripting, recording, editing, translating, and archiving of raw materials, comes to the fore (see, e.g., Harman, 2019). Focus on intersectional hierarchies connects the knowledge production processes to wider questions of Eurocentrism and colonial legacies of scholarship, which often is further replicated in key academic texts as omission of works initiated in the Majority World (Alam, 2008).

Thus, the turn to the visual is not by any means a way to undo or sideline questions of coloniality and power hierarchies in knowledge production. For instance, visual ethnography, part of wider ethnographic methodologies, as a research methodology has, in over a hundred years of history within Western academic knowledge production, in particular in the fields of anthropology and sociology, developed primarily to observe (see, hear, smell, taste, and touch) and represent (through writing) the social life of non-Western cultures (Gobo, 2008; Harrison, 2018). As a consequence, ethnography has been criticized for sharing a direct intellectual genealogy with that of the European settler-colonialist governmentality. Although there is not just one definition of what ethnography is, or can entail, common to different descriptions of the methodology is the focus on study, description, representation, and theorization of a culture, social world, or a phenomenon (Harrison, 2018, p. 5; for critical review of use of ethnography in IR see Vrasti, 2008, 2012). As with other forms of knowledge production or academic representation, ethnographic research is always situated in a particular context: the knowledge is created from and by certain people, for a certain purpose, and at a certain historical moment, and thus, it is not immune to stereotyping or prejudices (Gobo, 2008).

However, Carolina Bejarano et al. (2019, p. 2) suggest that "Anthropologists today are more attuned to the roles of power, history, and political economy in shaping cultural realities and to the relationships between large-scale, often global problems and the local worlds of the people and institutions they study." As an example of an ethnographic study of IR, Meera Sabaratnam (2017) offers a methodology involving the reconstruction of subjecthood, aiming to address the critique, and impact, of Eurocentrism in academic knowledge production. By subjecthood, she means "the property of having one's presence, consciousness and realities engaged in the analysis of the political space" (Sabaratnam, 2017, p. 39). Focusing on the possibilities of becoming subjects through research allows more systematic rethinking of what the research process itself should entail. At the heart of this process is the recognition and recovery of historical presence, political consciousness, and material realities (Sabaratnam, 2017, pp. 39–47).

Sabaratnam proposes that epistemological "standpointism" (Harding, 2004) would allow scholarship to "embrace the partial, limited, embodied and situated nature of knowledge practice but radically expand [those] whose perspectives and experiences [are] considered useful, [and] worthy of attention" (Sabaratnam, 2017, p. 48, emphasis in the original). The requirement of strong objectivity "creates a form of political triangulation to for claims about the world and requires knowers to think about overlaps, resonances and tensions between positions. Science must therefore understand itself as polyphonic, politicised and plural" (Sabaratnam, 2017, p. 48).

Therefore, visual research is essentially also an exploration into alternative ontologies, theorizing, ways of knowing, and forms of knowledge production. It further challenges how certain canons, such as textual representation (articles, monographs, book chapters), are normalized in academia and nontextual ones rendered into exotic, raw, yet to be analyzed and textualized empirical data.

Further, Bejarano et al. (2019) argue that efforts to decolonize ethnography require decentering the canons and historical traditions and reversing the roles of the researcher and the researched (see also Jauhola, 2020). Sarah Pink (2003, p. 179) has pointed out that the different disciplines engaging with the visual increasingly share an interest in questions such as reflexivity and collaboration on research ethics. According to Pink (2003, p. 186), "a researcher should attend not only to the internal 'meanings' of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers."

For example, new materialist documentarism explores the possibilities, and difficulties, of collective ethnography and filmmaking, and examines questions of authorship and research such as the open-ended, co-creation of worlds (Coppens, 2012, 2013; Hongisto, 2015). At best, the collaborative and collective processes could "claim a territory in the dialectical relationship of the reality being filmed and filmmaking—negotiation gives rise to a performative documentary truth" (Hongisto, 2015, p. 15). However, there is a more fundamental question concerning scripts and screen writing that deserves further interrogation. Dominant theories of screen writing, or script writing taught at universities, are Eurocentric in following canonical notions of story and character building and representations, sequencing, and creating the storyline (for an example of a canonical textbook see Field, 2005).

In contrast, to give an example, Helena Oikarinen-Jabai's (2017) collaborative workshops and visual productions with Somali youths living in Finland on belonging were the starting point for characters, plots, and storyline commitment to open and negotiated dialogue with the research participants. In her artistic research, audiovisual is central to approaching and analyzing lived reality. Oikarinen-Jabai (2017) describes how conceptualizations of the following have been essential in guiding her in this process: first, "unfinished knowledge" and "dialogical knowledge production" (Yuval-Davis, 2011), where the production process allows time for the participants to become established as a temporal collective through which the diverse epistemological starting points are negotiated and accepted into the group. Second, "ethnomimesis," which refers to dialogical spaces that are created through the bonds of ethnography and artistic process when critical thinking and analysis emerge as part of the process (O'Neill, 2008), and, third, "borderlands" (Anzaldúa, 1999) understanding borderlands in the context of audiovisual production as contextual and temporal spaces created through the production process where multiple narratives emerge, change, and are encountered and actively negotiated. Oikarinen-Jabai describes how these connect intimately to Trinh H. Minh-ha's understanding of "the subjectivity as non-I/plural I, differing from the subjectivity of the sovereign I (subjectivism) or the non-subjectivity of the all-knowing I (objectivism)" (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2017, pp. 39–40).

Finally, this points toward a conceptualization of "visual sovereignty" (Raheja, 2007), that is, reconfiguring ethnographic documentarist filmmaking from the perspectives of Indigenous people. In that format, the process from inception to release is slower and caters to interests other than those addressed by dominant documentary films; potentially, such filmmaking also seeks alternative venues to, say, film festivals, for its dissemination. Michelle Raheja (2007) has outlined principles for visual sovereignty: members attempt to reach consensus on the details of the film; the director or producer is a facilitator, or a contact person, rather than solely in charge of making final decisions; and versions are screened before an audience and edited according to feedback. Usually, the filmmakers continue their relationship with the film's content and its multiple spectators long after the cameras stop rolling (Raheja, 2007, pp. 1166–1167). In the words of Justin de Leon (2018, p. 96), "theory without action does not benefit the lives of those located at the margins."

Theorizing Disasters Visually

Theorizing disasters through visual methodologies offers insights into methods or "visual devices" such as photographs, graphic novels, and films. Examples of scholarship are discussed to focus on how such a methodology challenges text-dominated scholarship and to offer reflection on the roles between the researcher and researched, and the question of authorship. Turning to visuals also brings to the fore questions of representations and the strategic use of the visual in the overall scholarly storytelling practice. Further, scholars have suggested that instead of focusing on visual devices, or visual products, visual methodologies as a process orientation allow addressing questions related to the democratizing of and accessibility to the research process, and weighing up whose priorities matter, that is, making research useful for (Indigenous) communities and resisting legacies of imperial shutter.

Further, this scholarship does not restrict an understanding of disasters as aftermaths of natural hazards, but rather, disasters are understood to range from earthquake recovery, discriminative and exclusive postconflict reconstruction efforts, and also more hidden Indigenous cultural genocides and the aftermaths of extractive political economies. Each of the visual productions introduced have taken place in a particular temporality and social-historical context, which are briefly introduced, but references to original works allow the reader to deepen their appreciation of the complexities at hand.

Photo-Elicitation, Authorship, and Representations

Two examples of the use of auto-photography in combination with photo-elicitation—use of visual images to elicit conversation—will be introduced here: use of auto-photography with Liberia's women veterans (Vastapuu, 2018) and the 2001 Gujarat earthquake survivors (Jhala, 2004). Both of the scholars, and their methodologies, aim at addressing questions concerning whose stories become available, visible, and intelligible, and they both offer insights into multitudes of perspectives that negotiate, resist, or subvert the dominant narratives of the aid industry, and also actively engage with visual storytelling methods or the "empathy stories" of disaster victims (Jhala, 2004). They suggest that work on auto-photography first diversifies the picture of the reconstruction and aid deliverables, but also challenges, or at least opens up the possibility, of shaping the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

What is photo-elicitation? Leena Vastapuu (2018, p. 26) defines it in the following way:

> By "photo-elicitation" I mean the step in the interview processes in which I have placed the participant-generated photographs one by one in front of the interviewee/ photographer, who has provided me with detailed insights into each picture. Together, these two steps form the auto-photographic research approach.

Questioning the right to capture images and use visuals for research purpose, or reliance on images of the "pain of others" (Sontag, 2003), this methodology includes handing over cameras and films to the researched, getting photographs them printed, and using these photos as material for interviews in which the photographs and their interpretations by the researched lead the discussion.

In developing the curious contrapuntalism methodology to study women veterans in Liberia, Vastapuu draws from Cynthia Enloe's ideas of feminist curiosity, which Enloe has described as "curiosity that prompts one to pay attention to things that conventionally are treated as if they were either 'natural' or, even if acknowledged to be artificial, are imagined to be 'trivial,' that is, imagined to be without explanatory significance" (Enloe, 2004, p. 220), and Edward Said's notion of contrapuntalism:

> [W]e must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others. (Said (1994, p. 36)

The choice of auto-photography, according to Vastapuu, was essential in an attempt to diminish the “epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988) imposed by research and the research process. Vastapuu (2018, pp. 2–3) specifically relates this to formulating research questions and choosing themes for preplanned interviews when studying the lived experiences of the women veterans of Liberia and gaining an understanding of their perspectives on the Liberian civil war. Spivak herself, when articulating acts of epistemic violence, speaks of silencing and reducing complexity into one voice, “casting the women in question as a homogenous group and committing thereby an act of epistemic violence” (Spivak, 1988, p. 281). Thus, ethical commitment to contrapuntalism can be seen an active stance against such violence.

However, Enloe’s research, as part of the wider critique of unproblematic adoption of the ethnographic method in IR, has been critiqued as having assumed and naturalized “a certain literary licence that allows her to reconstruct the experiences of militarised women in her own voice” (Vrasti, 2008, p. 289). Vrasti places particular focus on the act of writing: “[o]ften, they remain token representations of female oppression, whose silent presence allows Enloe to preserve an innocent authority throughout the text. Enloe’s monological writing style, although engaging and provocative, is a direct consequence of the absence of fieldwork” (Vrasti, 2008, p. 289). This critique of silencing allows closer attention to be paid to the role of auto-photography and photo-elicited interviews, both in the research process and in the ways such research data are disseminated and reported for wider audiences.

Photographs taken by veterans are used in interview situations as they were originally printeds. Vastapuu (2018, p. 21) suggests that a research methodology that protects interviewees’ identities and exposure to global consumption of the visual is an essential part of building an ethical relationship with the researched, especially in risky environments, such as gendered postconflict contexts. In order to protect the research participants when disseminating the research results to academic and wider audiences, Vastapuu (2018) has collaborated with two visual artists, metal welder Mirja Kurri and comic artist and illustrator Emmi Nieminen, who transformed the photographs into welded metal works titled “Metal Women <https://www.galleriahuuto.fi/metallinaisia-metal-women/?lang=en>” and exhibited in an art gallery and illustrations that became part of the research monograph.

How firmly are the stories of the female veterans textually and visually represented and positioned in the monograph? Although studied in diverse contexts, in-depth firsthand data on long-term impacts of warfare, and politics of postwar Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs on former girl and women war veterans is rare (Vastapuu, 2018, p. 2). Vastapuu refers to Liberian women war veterans as social rafters (Vastapuu, 2018, pp. 7–10) conceptualized further from the concept of social navigation. Her book chapters focus, among other themes, on DDR, which, based on the research, is renamed Disarmament, Disillusionment, and Remarginalization—reflecting the historical life experiences of the women interviewed. As a result, Vastapuu’s research provides a complicated, complex, and gendered description of an (in)secure environment in the aftermath of the Liberian civil wars, drawing on more than 130 interviews and thousands of photographs.

For instance, the concept of social rafting, understood as both as agency, but also as a material reality (resources), are discussed in postwar Liberia through narrating the situatedness of three veterans—Amy, Teta, and Priscilla—through the author's own description using third-person narrative. In later chapters, the veterans' perspectives become available for the reader through Emmi Nieminen's illustrations (see Figure 1), without captions or direct references in the text.

[Figure 1]

Figure 1. "Abduction." Illustration from the book Liberia's War Veterans. Source: Copyright Emmi Nieminen, originally published by Zed Books 2018.

Illustrations such as Figure 1 form a separate visual narrative of affects, experiences, actions, and agency from that of the verbalized and textualized interviews. At times, such as the narrative of the abduction of Hawah (Vastapuu, 2018, pp. 46–47), the life histories emerge through a first-person narrative placed in a box, separated from the researcher's voice, and at times, the research encounter is kept visible by quoting a transliteration of the interview between the researcher and the researched. The monograph itself—the crafting of chapters, locating and cutting the individual stories into sections in chapters—is a result of the researchers labor and decision-making while writing and editing with the publisher's representatives.

Thus, the dilemmas of representations, authorship, ownership, and control over the use of the stories that have emerged as a result of this research process cannot necessarily be eradicated, when such voices are constructed inside a single-authored academic monograph (for the failures of fieldwork/ethnography see also Jauhola, 2020; Kušić & Záhora, 2020).

Turning to Jayasinhji Jhala (2004) and the visual anthropological methodology adopted to understand the politics of post-earthquake recovery programs in Gujarat in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake may offer an interesting alternative perspective, however. Jhala's methodology combines photo-elicitation and other visual methodologies to provoke a contrasting and negotiated view on the recovery. This method actively juxtaposes the use of visuals—which he describes as appropriation of visual anthropology by aid machinery, that is, the Indian government, donor agencies, and numerous civil society organizations. He aims to challenge learned beneficiary responses, which Jhala (2004, p. 59) calls the "television method," that is, respondents behaving and taking stances based on their learned expectations of constructing "empathy stories" of victims.

Jhala engages with visual methodologies as an active stance toward the politics of disaster visualization, and a way to provide examples of what remains unseen or hidden by the aid complex. Besides photo-elicitation, Jhala collaborated with number of earthquake-affected communities using videography, creating posters, and employing video techniques such as bird's-eye view, which helped in seeing how the reconstruction efforts had strengthened caste divisions, for example. Reflecting on the research in Gujarat, Jhala offers the following five guidelines for ethical visual research. First, follow the principle "inside resonates, outside provides," that is, research collaborators should be able to articulate their needs and thus guide the direction for action. Second, researchers should choose technologies and

means of communication that are already used by local people, ones with which they feel comfortable. Third, researchers should develop their language and behavior competency to work within the context. This requires humility and critical reflexivity of the researcher's actions in everyday encounters. Fourth, researchers should facilitate technical learning so that audiovisual methods can be adopted locally and become useful practice; and finally, researchers should follow the "to see is to know" theory and plan their research accordingly (Jhala, 2004, pp. 67– 68). Interestingly, Jhala (2004, p. 68) concludes his article with an aspiration:

> These guidelines would allow applied visual anthropologists to assess their place in local society and provide them with an awareness of the concept of personal obsolescence. When the "visual ethnography concepts, methods and technologies instrument" is adopted, the applied visual anthropologists' teaching task might well be over. When this happens, it is time to begin a withdrawal and leave quietly.

Jhala seems to suggest that a researcher's methodology may successfully negotiate epistemic violence when the methodologies adopted during the research process are carried on, or further adopted, by the research collaborators for their own purposes, independently of the researcher. Thus, it would be interesting to hear what role, if any, the auto-photography introduced by Vastapuu, or any of the other visual methods adopted by Jhala, have had in the lives of the research collaborators after the researcher has departed. What happened to the printed photographs and how did veterans and their family members continue telling the stories of their lives?

Graphic Novels: Democratizing Scholarship through Participant Review Processes

This section offers insights into quests for democratizing scholarship through graphic novels. Graphic novels, popularly known as comics, have increasingly had an increased presence in scholarship, particularly since the publication of Nick Sousanis's Unflattening. Sousanis (2015) describes drawing as thinking and literacy that we all have access to and suffests how to think in comics. The key is accessibility, both of the comic maker and of the audience. As described by other scholars, Unflattening both critiques textual-only-driven academia, illustrating its Western bias, and advances the argument that images are equal partners in theorizing (Finch, 2015). Sousanis (2015, p. 32) defines unflattening as "a simultaneous engagement of multiple vantage points from which to engender new ways of seeing."

An example of a graphic novel depicting disaster politics is Gemma Sou's collaboration with illustrator John Cei Douglas in After Maria: Everyday Recovery from Disaster, focusing on the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017 (Sou, 2019a). It draws on Sou's year of research into low-income Puerto Rican families recovering from Hurricane Maria. After Maria abstracts the experiences of all families who participated in her research into a story of a fictional family. When focusing on character-driven narratives, Sou (2019b) has suggested that graphic novels enable communication of the rich and complex lived experience of people to an outside audience; this allows for more nuanced and ethical portrayal of the lives of the research participants to emerge. The shift from text-based academic publications (such as Sou & Webber, 2019; Sou et al., 2021) toward producing graphic novels is often motivated with the quest for accessibility, democratization of the

research process, and increased participation and co-ownership of research products by the research participants. Sou and Hall (2021, p. 102) suggest that “it requires researchers to work collaboratively and dialogically in order to effectively translate research findings into an engaging and accessible visual narrative.”

Importantly, it is not just about the medium, but is essentially about the process. From the outset, choosing noncanonical mediums, such as comics, which provokes primarily visual grammar literacy rather than the grammar and literacy of complex academic language, provides the opportunity to involve the research participants in molding and shaping the story in collaboration with the researcher and participate in debating it (Sou & Hall, 2021, p. 109). However, Sou and Hall (2021) suggest that there are key lessons to be learned regarding ethical challenges in relation to representations, pedagogy, and processes of translation.

When collaborating with artists, ethical considerations include how to secure the integrity of the research and researched—especially in relation to representations and accuracy and the nuance of the research findings. Dominant representations of disasters in media are criticized for relying on aesthetics of suffering, helplessness, and lack of agency, resulting in simplified experiences and flattened contexts and complexities (Sou & Hall, 2021; see also Hutchison, 2014). However, research is not immune from this, but rather, IR is known for having been dominated by an approach that Eve Tuck (2009, p. 10) calls “damage centered research,” reducing phenomena and lived experiences into agony, vulnerability, and oppression (see also Sou & Hall, 2021, p. 110). Similarly, Sou and Hall (2021) suggest that ethical attention also needs to be directed toward avoid romanticizing resilience and resistance (see also Jauhola, 2013, 2020), and allowing space for multitudes of affects to be explored (Figure 2).

[Figure 2]

Figure 2. Affects and memories in After Maria.
Source: Copyright John Cei Douglas and Gemma Sou, originally published by University of Manchester 2019.

Articles, and the graphic novel’s authorship remains with Sou and her UK-based illustrator Douglas. Sou and Hall (2021, p. 102) explain:

> Using her in-depth ethnographic data, Gemma wrote the script, which included the dialogue, narration, perspective, information about what is happening in the scene, characters’ emotions and even the mood/ambience, which all helped John to create the visual story. The script was written to ensure that each individual page communicated at least one major finding from the research. For example, the gendered impact of disasters; loss of identity and sense of home; weak state capacity to support household recovery; the increase in community solidarity.

[Figure 3]

Figure 3. Sketch used in the research participant review process of After Maria. Source: Copyright John Cei Douglas and Gemma Sou.

At the outset, this processing does not change the authorship or widen the options for research participants to play an active role in the process. However, the production of After Maria included circulating summarized scripts and sketches (Figure 3) among the research participants with the aim of gathering feedback and editing the graphic novel storyline and visuals in it. Sou and Hall (2021, p. 107) suggest that using such a mode of working (sketches) encourages the research participants to engage with and critique the researcher. This can be seen as constituting a research participant review (vs. an anonymous peer review) process into the overall research and subverting researcher–researched relations.

What remains to be explored is how the visual products might be different if the scholars mentioned so far had actively collaborated with visual artists, or research participants, from the regions they studied. Visual methodologies also relate to questions of grammar and the intelligibility of visual and script writing, as the following section, “Decolonizing the Film,” will explore, that is, resisting the operation of the imperial shutter (Azoulay, 2019, p. 7). Imperiality, or Eurocentrism, frames reality like a lens of a camera, creating continuities of representations, differentiations, and exclusions consumed in the present moment.

Decolonizing the Film: From Product to the Process and Back

Ariella Azoulay (2019, p. 79) has suggested that the process of “unlearning imperialism refuses the stories the shutter tells.” Further, she suggests:

> Such unlearning can be pursued only if the shutter’s neutrality is acknowledged as an exercise of violence; in this way, unlearning imperialism becomes a commitment to reversing the shutter’s work. This reversal must overcome the dissociation between people and objects in which the experts specialize. Imperial shutters are operated and controlled by experts of different sorts who are mandated to determine how the commons is to be exploited, what could be extracted out if it and under which circumstances. The photographic shutter contributes to the reproduction of imperial divisions and imperial rights and is used as lasting proof that what was plundered is a fait accompli. (Azoulay, 2019, p. 7)

To reflect on the need to resist imperialist methodologies, this section turns to the use of films in research. Three examples of resistance are discussed here: de Leon’s reflections on his research on settler coloniality and the tradition and culture of the Lakota Sioux of South Dakota; Katja Gauriloff’s effort to decolonize the ethnographic archive of her grandmother Kaisa, collected among her Sä’mmlaž community since the late 1930s; and using film to disseminate experiences of collective and solidarity-based disaster relief and recovery after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

First, as described in “Graphic Novels: Democratizing Scholarship through Participant Review Processes" section, using visual methodologies in research and scholarship challenges canonical methods of theorizing, but also communicating of research results. De

Leon (2018, p. 97) describes the difficulty of translating film into academic spaces that prioritize literal and explicit ways of knowing—where, if an idea is not stated, it is presumed absent. Film, on the other hand (and like many other forms of artistic expression), often resists the confines of language and explanation, which can actually limit meaning. I decided to approach film not as an IR method, but as a way to be useful to Native communities.

For de Leon (2018, p. 96), focusing on the medium of film allows him to practice "an Indigenous, feminist responsibility—an approach placing less emphasis on academic conventions and more on usefulness to the communities from which one learns and serves." In de Leon's work with the Lakota cultural and traditional practices in navigating (in)securities (de Leon, 2018, 2020a), as for Jhala (2004), the use of film consists of assisting communities and artists. The role of the researcher evolves into providing the means to facilitate participants to visualise their desires and representations that do not focus on hopelessness and difficulties but also on hope, visions and knowledge of everyday lived realities (de Leon, 2018, p. 97).. This has meant making raw film materials available for videos that serve the purpose of the community's internal processing, commemoration, and mourning, and, as de Leon (2018) describes, focusing more deeply on the process, rather simply on the film (cinematography, storytelling, production, and acting). As he describes, the focus is rarely on "the impact of the process of making the film on the empowerment of the community or its impact on those who were part of the filmmaking process" (de Leon, 2020b, p. 116). In the chapter "Process as product: Native American filmmaking and storytelling," de Leon (2020b, p. 114) focuses on the experience of the Lakota praxis of tipi-making as a process that can "transform the purpose, meanings, and outcomes of filmmaking and training of filmmakers." Understanding film as a medium of storytelling, the relevance of this experience focuses on the transfer of knowledge and "provide[s] lessons of reciprocity, transferring important aspects of culture between peoples and families, as well as providing documentation for lived realities" (de Leon, 2020b, p. 117).

As an example, the documentary More Than a Word (2018) focuses on the Washington football team and their use of the derogatory term R*dkins. It is a film by Standing Rock Sioux brothers John and Kenn Little, in which de Leon was contributing editor and cinematographer. Providing perspectives from both those in favor of changing the name, and those against, the film explores the history of Native American-based sports mascots, and the history of Native American cultural appropriation, from the Indigenous perspective. The film has been screened at over 250 universities in the United States.

Further, experiences of Lakota Sioux communities, such as the 2016 resistance by Native American water protectors against the Standing Rock-based Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), are at the center of de Leon's ethnographic work. Such pipelines cross the Lakota reservations and threaten to contaminate the water resources and wellbeing of those living close by, and as de Leon (2020a, p. 34) suggests, attending to Native cosmology and security should gain focus in understanding of Native cosmologies and ontologies despite the context lacks direct armed conflict (de Leon, 2020a, p. 45). As de Leon (2020a, p. 44) illustrates, Lakota cosmology consists of traditional stories and lessons concerning nature, human existence, and the creator, and how such dimensions create an understanding of place, personhood, and the world:

> The Lakota people understand themselves as complex products of multiple relationships of power, power relationships that inform their lives, as well as their negotiated political identities. They have survived and navigated, and continue to survive and navigate, violence at the dangerous intersections of white supremacy, imperialism, racism and classism. This nexus creates troubling paradoxes not easily understood at first glance.

De Leon (2020a, p. 52) has suggested that centering Indigenous cosmology offers an opportunity to reinvent and reorient IR theorizing and imagining of decoloniality, but also the modality of film from product to process:

> attention to process and journey, combined with the potentialities of storytelling for Indigenous communities, makes the act of making films and training filmmakers a unique decolonial space, a pregnant space that falls at the convergence of sacred approaches to creativity, modes of resistance, nonlinear conceptualisations of time and life, and ultimately, representation and cultural rejuvenation and reclamation. (De Leon, 2020b, p. 61)

Thus, by no means is the medium of film "just" a method. It holds radical potential, as illustrated by the example from Sápmi filmmaking discussed next.

Kaisa's Enchanted Forest (2015), a film directed by Katja Gauriloff, draws on her grandmother Kaisa's oral history recordings and provides insights into the practice of decolonizing meanings and knowledge production and communicating back to one's own community. Kaisa's Enchanted Forest is a poetic journey into and recovery of Sä'mmlaž matrilineal tradition and the experiences and traumas of World War II, during which Sä'mmlaž were expelled from their Indigenous territories and subjected to a civilizing and assimilating agenda by the Nordic and Russian states (Nyyssönen & Lehtola, 2017).[1] destroyed Sä'mmlaž Indigenous cultural, social, political, and economic traditions, including that of oral knowledge transmission. At the core of the film, Kaisa narrates the Sä'mmlaž war experiences alongside with her granddaughter Katja's animations: the film recounts the Sä'mmlaž cosmology in which the aurora borealis consists of the blood of those who have suffered violent blood-death. The aurora borealis was believed to predict wars and the blood in the sky running into wounds of the dead in the underworld—supernatural world of the dead, located below the world of the living. The film and its poster (Figure 4) underline the connectedness of human and nonhuman, as well as the inseparability of humans and ecology, but also humans and their ancestors.

[Figure 4]

Figure 4. Poster for Kaisa's Enchanted Forest. Source: Copyright Oktober Ltd., poster design by Paul Wilson at yellow1.dk.

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[1] Sä'mmlaž are often called Skolt Sámi; this article uses the name they call themselves in their own language.

Kaisa's story is reconstructed by Gauriloff from the recording archive of Swiss Robert Crottet, who first traveled to the Sä'mmlaž village in Suenjel in 1938. Over the years to come, Crottet recorded the legends and stories told by Kaisa and published several books on them. He also played an important role in speaking on behalf of the Sä'mmlaž, who, at the end of the World War II, had lost their homes, livelihoods, and most assets, by donating the amount received from the book sales to the Sä'mmlaž and by establishing a foundation that was campaigning for war relief.

The film's promotional material describes the relationship between Kaisa and Crottet as friendship. However, reconstructing Crottet's original film materials and adding elements of poetic animation, Kaisa's Enchanted Forest can also be seen as a film that is an act of resistance to appropriation of Sä'mmlaž war archives, what filmmaker Carmen Baltzar would call anti-ethnography (Quettier & Tennant, 2015), and that regains Sä'mmlaž/self-representation, decolonizing the archive. In hindsight, Crottet's travels to Sápmi can thus be seen as an exemplar of the imperial shutter (Azoulay, 2019) and "white saviorism," the desire to help and save the "brown people," by exoticizing the people Crottet was destined to document, making a career out of the despair of Sä'mmlaž, and holding onto the film archives before they were finally repatriated to the filmmaker.

Fine nuances in the film point to this direction: gazing at the camera and Crottet, Kaisa asks playfully with heartfelt laughter: "What stories? I have no stories to tell." bell hooks (2003, p. 103) has described the critical resistance of dominant ways of knowing and looking as oppositional gaze, and continues: "we do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions." Kaisa's Enchanted Forest is simultaneously an intimate process of regaining relationship between the filmmaker and her grandmother, and serves a wider purpose of reestablishing Sä'mmlaž oral history and recreating narratives of relations to nature, war, and loss. The film has been screened at film festivals but it has also provided an important visual storytelling medium as part of complex ongoing internal Sápmi community discussions on the truth and reconciliation process that the government of Finland has initiated, documented by another Sápmi filmmaker, Doavtter-Piera Suvi Máret Suvi West, in a critical process-oriented film called Eatnameamet—Our Silent Struggle (2021).

Both of these films are poetic, as proposed by Italian poet and director Pier Paolo Pasolini in his text "The Cinema of Poetry," investigating the chance of a film to transform and render reality as a poetic experience (Cavallini, 2013, p. 126).

To gain these rare Sápmi perspectives has meant building trust and intimacy with their community, expressing interest in and respect for people's memories, wounds, everyday lives, mundane routines, and hopes—and offering spaces through the film to resist coloniality and form one's own narrative of the history. Yet, what disasters do these films theorize? Kaisa's Enchanted Forest narrates the cultural genocide of Sä'mmlaž, whereas Eatnameamet—Our Silent Struggle draws specific attention to the violence of settler coloniality in history, both embedded in contextualized settler-colonial state initiatives to address such violence. Both films pay attention visually to such forms of disasters that are less visible and more silent ones, than those that gain attention through the humanitarian aid industry complex, as does the work of de Leon.

Conclusion

Extreme weather conditions due to human-induced climate change are on the rise. Impacts of disasters, be they droughts, earthquakes, floods, or hurricanes, or other types, such as the aftermaths of conflicts, political violence, or settler coloniality and extractivism, create inequalities that intersect with gender, age, health, ethnicity, and other social categories. Scholarship focusing on studying disasters through collaborative visual methodologies explores the visual not as a method, but as a methodological and ethical choice. Examples of engagement with photo-elicitation, graphic novels, and films in specific disaster contexts offer insights in how to challenge text-dominated theorizing and focus on process, instead of on a research product. Drawing on several examples of how visual methodologies are adapted to the study of disasters and disaster politics provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the researched and researcher, and the author and the object of research, as well as on diversifying narratives and perspectives and resisting the legacies of the imperial shutter.

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