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ETHNOGRAPHY AND PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY: NEW PERSPECTIVES, TECHNOLOGIES AND NARRATIVES¹

Marina Berardi, *University of Basilicata*

Chiara Scardozzi, *University of Foggia*

ABSTRACT

Ethnography and photography are relational practices configured as two forms of writing with their own specificities that intersect. Considering the profound technological changes in the recent decades and the crisis of ethnographic authority and photographic representation, the attempt of this special issue is to generate an overview of the plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches relating to the use and production of images in social research.

KEYWORDS

Photography; ethnography; visual ethnography; social research; collaborative ethnography; visual research; images; visual methods.

BIO

Marina Berardi is an anthropologist and a photographer. She is a Ph.D. candidate in Cities and Landscapes: architecture, archaeology, cultural heritage, history and resources, at the University of Basilicata, with an anthropological research project on politics, rhetoric and abandonment processes in small towns of Basilicata, Italy. She graduated at the School of Specialisation in Beni Demoetnoantropologici, after graduating from the University of Rome, La Sapienza. She works as a visual anthropologist in intangible and material heritage, depopulation, material culture, and vernacular imagery. Some of her photographic works have received national and international mentions and awards, including Nikon Talents 2013, Sony World Award, and Metropolis 2017. In 2019, she was among the winners of the MAVI Photography Competition (Museo Antropologico Visivo Irpino). Since 2019 she has been the Photo Essay Editor of *Visual Ethnography*, a peer-reviewed journal, Classe A, Macrosettore 11/A5.

Chiara Scardozzi holds a Ph.D. in Ethno-Anthropological Disciplines at the University of Rome, "La Sapienza". Currently she is Adjunct Professor of Visual Anthropology at University of Foggia, Italy. Since 2009 she has been working between Italy and Latin America, where she develops her research activities, mainly concerning the ecoregion of Gran Chaco, the processes of inter-ethnic coexistence, and land rights of indigenous peoples and *campesino* families. In 2014 she received the "Francesca Cappelletto Award" from the University of Verona, (Centre for Ethnographic Research and Italian Society for Applied Anthropology), for the best MA thesis in the field of public anthropology. In 2015 she graduated from the Roman School of Photography and Cinema, where she read for her master's in "Reportage and creative personal research". Her works are published in *Visual Ethnography Journal*, *National Geographic Italia*, *La Repubblica*, *Witness Journal*, *Yogurt Magazine*, and *C41 Magazine*.

marinaberardi@gmail.com

chiara.scardozzi@gmail.com

¹Although the introduction to this Special Issue is the result of common reflections, the paragraph entitled "Introductory Notes" is to be attributed to Chiara Scardozzi, and the paragraph entitled "Steps to a hermeneutics of the gaze" is to be attributed to Marina Berardi.

The call for contributions

Ethnography and Photography are founded on relational practices which are based on encounter and storytelling. In such an observation, participation and representation space, these disciplines are configured as two forms of writing with their own methodological specificities, as well as zones of contact.

Considering the profound technological changes in the recent decades (such as greater accessibility to photographic devices, the increasing production and circulation of photographs, the diversification of virtual spaces, the new digital ethnography), what are the current links between ethnographic research and photography? What kind of contribution do the visual languages offer to the production of anthropological knowledge? Which kind of relations are established between texts and images? How creative and/or authorial artistic research combines with scientific knowledge?

The aim of this issue of Visual Ethnography, is to generate a critical reflection starting from intersectional points between the two disciplines and the plurality of visions and methods. It is conceived as a moment of thought and comparison on the role and the future of photography in ethnographic research, through a theoretical and visual approach, to start a reasoning about theoretical and practical tools of cultural and social anthropology, considering how photography and/or post-photography and its uses declined through the different devices, in addition to making the research contents visible, can also be considered as a real collaborative practice, methodology of intervention, restitution and/or autonomous authorial narration.

The call was open to papers and photo-essays focused on experiences of collaborative visual ethnographies that use photography to solicit specific narratives and/or include methods of participatory photography aimed at involving groups and communities in the research and co-production of visual contents; researches that explore the possibilities of creating subjectivity in the online life by sharing new forms of self-representation of the body, gender, identity; reflections that interweave ethics and aesthetics in the representation of *otherness*; studies concerning photographic collections that are interpreted through their political and public use and inserted (or censored) within the so-called *heritagization* processes; researches relating to the most innovative and creative trends in contemporary photography that redefine the boundary between reality and fiction starting from the idea of 'post-truth', using different media and methods.²

Introductory notes

The idea for this call was born from several years of collaboration, in which we carried out numerous workshops and training activities related to Visual Anthropology, both inside and outside the academic field.³ These activities were aimed at students and researchers from the social sciences, interested in developing greater awareness of Photography, but also to amateur and professional photographers interested in social issues, and willing to refine their gaze through the lense of Cultural Anthropology. These encounters have been valuable opportunities for mutual learning, and they have led us to consider how our 'double nature', as anthropologists and photographers, is sometimes reflected in specific individual paths, but very rarely contemplated in the training opportunities offered in academic courses, or outside them, at least with regard to the Italian context. We are convinced that these fields need to be integrated in order to mutually enrich each other, both theoretically and practically, and that the need for discussion on the 'visual' is a current and essential issue, even in the face of the so-called 'digital turn' and its effects in social, epistemological, and ethical terms, and its repercussions in the social sciences, in the study of media, communication and interaction.⁴

We are not only faced with changes in the ways of practising and understanding photography - its semiotic status - but we probably look at and perceive reality in a different way, starting from the physical mediation of screens, smartphones and cameras. We are at the same time both the users / viewers and the producers / creators of a quantity of images that are difficult to quantify in terms of speed and size.

² Extract from the call "Ethnography and Photography today: new perspectives, technologies and narratives" published in April 2021 by Marina Berardi and Chiara Scardozzi.

³ To name a few: "Phototelling. Rethinking ethnography through visual languages", National Conference of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology - SIAA, Catania 2017; "Ethnography and visual research", Anthropology Festival, Bologna, 2018; "Visual anthropology and photographic research", Deaphoto Cultural Association - Florence, 2021.

⁴ At least since the early 2000s, research abounds, and just to name a few examples closely related to the visual: Horst and Miller (2012); Favero (2018); Larsen and Mette (2014); Pauwels (2015); Pink (2011); Pink et al (2016).

The technological innovations of the last decades have certainly made the production of photographic images more accessible, rapid and 'democratic'. With digital technologies, the internet, mobile telephony, and social networks, their diffusion has also been transformed, through communication channels and media different from the past.

Within the contemporary visual hyperproduction and overstimulation, the Catalan photographer Joan Fontcuberta (2016) imagined *Homo Photographicus*, the species towards which we humans have evolved as beings characterised by the compulsion to produce images. It is precisely in the *post-photographic era* (Mitchell 1992; Fontcuberta 2016), in which it is easy to surrender to the thought of having already seen and said everything, that we believe it is important to problematize, through the sensitivity of ethnographic observation, both the act of 'seeing', and the responsibility of 'giving to see', combining ethnographic rigour with the awareness of the photographic choice, and the creative ability to 'let the images speak'. This kind of reflection clearly requires an approach that transcends disciplinary boundaries, and shows the richness of the visual social sciences, not only as a study 'on' the visual, but also 'through' the visual (Pauwels 2015: 3).

It is no coincidence that the authors of the contributions hosted in this Special Issue belong to the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, Psychiatry, Cultural/Media/Communication and Visual Studies, Architecture, Art and Graphic Design, and interact heterogeneously with Photography; observing Photography as an *object of analysis* (Grasso, Ohashi and Mizuno), and using Photography as a *method of investigation* (Chatagny, Prisco, Sousa), a *resource for social documentation* (Mestroni, Leon-Quijano), an *instrument of creative expression* (Arteca, Berardi, Ceccarini, Scardozzi), and as a *collaborative practice* in the public sphere (Benbrahim and Björn, Thieftaler and Lynch).

The call for contributions had an international resonance and a response that exceeded our expectations, forcing us to give up numerous significant contributions that we hope will be published and enhanced on other occasions.

On the basis of the abstracts received, we made a selection that could account for the plurality of theoretical and methodological approaches relating to the use and production of images in research, and which, without claiming to be exhaustive, was able to generate an overview of some of the communicative, expressive and cognitive possibilities of photography and its uses, and declined through multiple *perspectives* (what we look at, and from what point of view), *narratives* (how we tell it) and *technologies* (with what means).

For us it is important to underline how the different research experiences start from a common awareness of the crisis of ethnographic authority (Clifford 1983) and of photographic representation. Both in the papers and in the photo essays, these critical assumptions become constitutive of visibility, and it is understood as a dialogic practice, with the related ethical and aesthetic implications: the need to decolonize the gaze and bring the observation back to the contexts of proximity, and up to the auto-ethnographic exploration; the incorporation of participatory visual methodologies, such as *photo-voice* and *photo-elicitation*; the possibility of practising visual ethnography not only as an appendix of academic anthropology and documentary support to the field investigation, but as real research applied to topics of collective interest and in the public space (Pink 2007; 2013).

Visibility thus becomes a learning opportunity, a meeting ground and collaborative possibility; it gives us back a *polyphonic gaze* that is affirmed through heterogeneous tools, practices and languages.

If we think that digital technology has engulfed every possible alternative, definitively dematerializing the photographic image, the contributions collected in this volume testify, on the contrary, to the coexistence of multiple techniques and the adaptation of the means to the ends: in fact, the authors measure themselves with different devices, and show us, for example, how smartphones have entered the toolbox of researchers in the field - thanks to portability and ease of use - but without replacing film cameras; instant image films coexist with pixels; digital archiving practices do not necessarily replace paper prints but enhance and preserve them; virtual environments do not cancel the terrain, but amplify it. Thus the act of photographing is not an automatism necessarily dictated by software, but it is a subjective choice that requires awareness, as well as, and above all, an awareness of what is shown and what is not.

The smartphone, intended as a 'personal portable archive', becomes similar to a family photo album, and it is at the centre of the collaborative contribution of Kana Ohashi and Daijiro Mizuno, who use it to analyse a painful and existential transition in the life of one of the authors. Looked at retrospectively

in an auto-ethnographic key, the photos are 'traces' capable of materialising absence, visualising the change, and trying to reconcile the events.

Instead, the digitization of a public archive is the starting point of Erika Grasso's essay, which explores the dark Italian colonial experience in Somalia through a photographic collection, preserved in the archive of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography at the University Of Turin (MAET). In this case, the photographs are dense objects, in need of a new reading that can shed light on the positivist and objectifying paradigm, used to define *otherness*, essentializing it into racist categories. Half way between tangible and intangible heritage, these 'visual finds' condense history, memory and social significance, and are witnesses of the colonial gaze behind the photographic device.

The political ontology of photography (Azoulay 2012), the asymmetry of power in favour of the photographer versus the photographed, are at the centre of Manuel Francisco Sousa's contribution. Starting from research conducted in the Ukrainian context, the author critically reflects on the need to think of photographic documentation as a collaborative process: what is shown is therefore the result of a negotiation that necessarily presupposes the consent of the people portrayed.

The ethical questions underlying the photographic representation are also the background to the contribution of Guillaume Chatagny, who reasons on the authority and responsibility of the researcher to 'show' the reality of a mosque in Switzerland, choosing to return to the informative value of photography intended as field 'data'. Here the photos, analysed a posteriori, are documents that help to 'see better', to reconstruct the research space and its configurations.

The problematic representation of the Neapolitan peripheral urban areas is the fulcrum of Marilena Prisco's research, who, through the participatory method of photo-elicitation, investigates the perception of stigma among children living in public housing. Here the potential of the visual method unfolds, and they act to rethink and orient interventions in the field of architecture and urban planning.

We have chosen to give ample space to photo-essays, because we are convinced of the need for a critical reflection on the relationship between words and images, starting from the value of photographic research as an autonomous authorial product. This is a series that develops ideas through anthropologically oriented research that the authors return to us through stylistically coherent narratives, composed by means of a careful selection, and the studied juxtaposition of images. It is through this editing operation that the expressive and communicative richness of the photographic story is revealed, which can be 'read', like a text with its own characteristics and specific grammar.

The multiple expressive languages, often even distant from the aesthetic canons of 'ethnographic photography' to which we are accustomed, push us to overcome the realistic paradigm of photo-ethnographic representation, effectively recomposing the fracture between aesthetic expression and fieldwork documentation.

In the contribution of Camilo Leon-Quijano we find again the problematic representation of the suburbs of cities and their inhabitants. The author, while using the classic black and white style, moves away from stereotypes relating to the Parisian *banlieue*, a symbol of marginalisation, exclusion and violence, by showing us the creative and constructive experience of urban gardening.

Simone Mestroni's work on the conflict in Kashmir is also placed in the name of social reportage, this time in colour. With a closer look, and by means of what the author defines as 'visual tombstones', we are able to enter the complexity of the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, and of the violently repressed guerrilla warfare of the Indian army.

The documentation becomes something more evocative and personal in the work of Damian Arteca, who portrays his hometown, Sudbury (Canada), working by subtraction, and starting from the remains left by the production of nickel, in which heterogeneous landscapes are united by the 'presence of absence'.

The extractive territories of Sicily, Italy, are instead investigated in the work of Chiara Scardozzi, who tells the complexity of late-industrial scenarios, by contrasting decadence and splendour, and combining the documentary photographs made by the author in 2019, with the tourist postcards produced in the 1960s.

Sabine Tiefenthaler and Gemma Lynch present a collaborative project carried out in the Extraordinary Reception Centers (CAS), in Sardinia, Italy. Based on the *Photo-Voice* method, this project is effective in restoring voice and visibility to young women seeking asylum, who become active protagonists of their narrations and photographic representations, subverting stereotypes related to gender and migratory paths.

Also in the vein of collaboration and self-ethnography is the work of Dina Brenbahim and Kári Björn, created with snapshots that portray the author nursing her daughter Naël in different situations. It is an impressive example of serial work, which draws on private life to subvert the stigma associated with breastfeeding in public places.

Gianluca Ceccarini travels back through the history of anthropology, evoking *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, and draws on the photographic repertoire of an ethnological matrix mixed with digital post-production, inviting us to reflect on the paradoxical topicality of the evolutionist paradigm and its gaze on *otherness*.

Finally, far from the positivist utopia that thought of photography as a faithful and truthful proof of reality, Marina Berardi, by means of *in-game photography*, expands our perception of the terrain. She inserts herself into the split between online and offline life, suggesting (provocatively) for us to reconsider the relationship between reality and fiction, and the intrinsic ambiguity of images.

Steps to a hermeneutics of the gaze

This Special Issue of Visual Ethnography is therefore an attempt to initiate a fruitful dialogue between researchers who have chosen to contribute to a critical reading on the ways in which it is possible to narrate through images, as well as an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which images, as cultural and symbolic devices, become the object of critical readings and theoretical positioning, especially if observed in their reproduction, in everyday life and in the worlds we investigate. The questions from which we started try to intercept the great issues that have been reflected in an extraordinary participation, and this has translated into a discursive need, that we are happy to have intercepted. The heterogeneity of the contributions highlights how visual practices are anchored in ethnographic practice, which requires a continuous focus, made possible also through identity narratives.

The feeling of ethical responsibility that photography brings within the anthropological discipline, already attentive to the internal, local and emic point of view, is quite transversal in the various contributions (Chatagny; Prisco; Leon-Quijano; Sousa; Tiefenthaler and Lynch), and amplifies the complex process that passes between auto and hetero representation, which also requires us to consider the aspect linked to the imaginary, the imagination as a projection, not only aesthetic (Appadurai 1996).

The images are placed in the narrative by wavering the *textocentric hermeneutics*, or the centrality of writing, becoming no longer subordinate forms of knowledge, but forms of reflexivity and critical instances. On the one hand, the challenges of the contemporary bring out the need to understand the ways in which the circulation of photographs can be read; on the other hand, attention must be paid to the ways in which forces of various kinds contribute to the construction of a discourse that risks essentializing and naturalising otherness.

The attention to biographies, present in the contributions, is necessary to enter the texture of everyday life, into social life, and into the interstices in which the different forms of individual and collective self-representations come to life, and the ways in which they interact with the plane of imagination and the projection of oneself into the world, and of the world into itself.

Another moment of analysis concerns the ways in which aesthetics problematise the boundaries of 'authorship' through a critical representation of places and the production of localities - already understood to start from the boundaries of one's own body, and therefore immersed in the expression of emotions - within the visual production (Arteca; Björn and Benbrahim; Mestroni; Scardozzi; Tiefenthaler and Lynch), becoming a dense discourse and bearer of critical, reflective and processual demands, as well as bringing the criticism of the gaze within the discipline itself (Ceccarini).

This extends to the process of memory, private and public, which contributes to the critical construction and deconstruction of the gaze. The postcards and colonial photographs present in the essays (by Scardozzi and Grasso), albeit coming from completely different contexts, highlight how the aesthetics of the representation of places, through the diachronic lens, heals the fracture between memory and oblivion, and allows us to imagine building an archive of places and communities. Appadurai writes:

Thus, we should begin to see all documentation as intervention, and all archiving as part of some sort of collective project. Rather than being the tomb of the trace. The archive is more frequently the product of

the anticipation of collective memory. Thus the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection (Appadurai 2003: 16).

This Special Issue stems from the awareness that being in an expanded world, through the multiplication of *global cultural flows* (Appadurai 1996), means being in a world whose coordinates place us at unimaginable distances in contrast to the past. In this expanded world, digital ecosystems (Favero 2018; Pink 2017) are an example of how technologies, on the one hand, are able to unhinge the paradigms of truthfulness, and on the other, they are dialogic, relational, poetic, mediated and experiential space.

In some essays the choice of the instrument is not secondary to the narration: in the essay on the Game-Industry (Berardi), through the digital choice, one enters a world that otherwise would not exist, and one enters a vision in which it is possible to rethink the body and boundaries of the self in a new reflective narrative. At the same time, the choice of preferring analog instruments, such as Polaroids (Benbrahim and Björn) or disposable Film cameras (Tiefenthaler and Lynch), is an explicit self-reflective and collaborative poetics as an aesthetic, and therefore political gesture (Bourgeois, Schonberg 2011).

In other contributions, the poetics of representation meet the practices of elicitation and give rise to new and dense ways to participate and observe (Prisco; Tiefenthaler and Lynch), "photo-elicitation solves 'memory problems' and evokes responses" affirm Collier and Collier (Collier and Collier 1986: 100-101), and photography becomes a tool to generate a narration induced by the two-dimensional space of the image, in which a back-knitting of events and elements (material and immaterial) takes place, which, for those involved in elicitation practices, they ideally also represent spaces in which to practice local identity and self identity.

The *deep* meaning of this Special Issue is to give back one of the relationships in which to start a dialogue on the different and multiple forms that the visual tools take in research, and in the worlds we traverse. The discursiveness that follows, leads us in the direction of *community art* (Crehan 2011), in which the community and researchers build a dialectical and processual space through multiple forms of cultural representation.

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