



The Second International Visual Research Methods Conference was interdisciplinary, innovative, questioning and poignant; therefore when approached by *Visual Methodologies* to provide a review, I was pleased to accept the invitation. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to revisit the experience of the conference; and its ideas, techniques and concepts. Secondly, being part of the inaugural publication of this post-disciplinary visual journal resonated well with the collaborative ethos of the conference; and I expect to see many conference papers as forthcoming contributions to *Visual Methodologies*. Unfortunately, I could not report on all of the sessions, exhibitions and films; at best the review is selective and subjective. However, my review should offer an insight into the valuable methodological, ethical and theoretical contributions generated by the event.

#### **Day One - Community, Institution, Hope, Public History and**

**Private Time:** Travelling from Cardiff meant that I missed the first plenary by Katerina Cizek, director of Out My Window; part of the HIGHRISE project. I will not attempt to discuss 'the unseen' but it is worth mentioning that this creative cinematic experience can be accessed through the conference website; alongside other films and exhibitions. My true review begins with the paper '*Visualising meanings and experiences of a community: insights from a photography walking tour*' presented by Janet Fink. Reflecting on a research project in a marginalised community Fink asks how the visual can help to understand the experiences and practices of everyday life and how these understandings can combat stereotypes and also influence policy. Participants in her research area have a mortality rate that is 12 years earlier than that of their neighbours; a useful statistic, but Fink argues that statistics diminish people's lives by treating them as figures. The photography walking tour, then, is an attempt to go beyond the figurative and engage with the visual; furthermore the act of

walking engendered a situation where the participants, experts of their area, lead the way for researchers to follow. The method engendered a more participatory mode of data production where thick descriptions, and the creation of openings to experience and shared emotions, were able to reveal the often overlooked 'mundane' and perhaps reach policy makers in ways in which statistics cannot (see Fink 2012).

In the following paper, '*1892- 1914 Photographing London's Rowton Houses*' Rebecca Preston compared institutional photographs of men's boarding houses with the written accounts of their residents; finding both agreement and dissent between the company's visual presentation and the anonymous written experience. Preston emphasised the importance of understanding such photographs within their historical context and an appreciation of the limitations of the institutional image.

For the next session I selected a screening of '*Vortex*'; a multiple award winning ethnographic documentary film created by John Oats, Csaba Szekeres and Pal Sander; which focuses on the everyday lives of Roma families and their isolation, poverty and discrimination; but also the work of artist Nóra Ritók and the ways in which art can create joy, even in desperate circumstances. This was followed by Roxanne Varzi short film '*Plastic Flowers*'; which examined how martyrdom became Iranian state policy during the war with Iraq in which 800, 000 died; and also beyond in graveyards, museums and prolific street murals; moving public history into private time. Both films resonated with Fink's discussion of statistics diminishing people's lives; offering the individual in the shadow of similarities.

Later in the day there was an opportunity to view the exhibitions on display in the library. I was particularly drawn to the exhibitions connected with '*Vortex*'. Ritók's '*Personal*

*development through visual methods'* offered an opportunity to view examples of Roma children's artwork; one piece titled 'a glimpse of their dreams and imagination'. *'Lives of Roma children in Hungary'* featured a collection of photographs of Roma families; photographs that communicated a far more sanitised and hopeful representation than the one that I had been confronted by in the film footage; a further argument that the photograph cannot speak for itself. Oates was available to discuss his work and the earlier disquiet of the audience was palpable in the account of the researcher returning from a site of ever-present poverty with photographs, film and memories; which can only ever offer partial representation.

Day one was rounded off by a reception and light supper supported by Sage and the ESRC Seminar Series: Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research. Katie Metzler, Commissioning Editor for Research Methods at SAGE was surrounded by a set of new and interesting publications on 'the visual'. While Janet Fink and Helen Lomax's exhibition *'Bringing the spaces and places of community life into view'* (discussed in more detail in their separate presentations) acted as a flagship for Visual Dialogues. Importantly, participants from their project were guests at the reception and could see how their understandings of community and neighbourhood were represented. It was a great start to the conference; and for me conversations of the day's exhibitions and presentations continued into the night with other delegates staying at the conveniently situated and great value Vicarage Road Youth Hostel Association.

**Day Two - Contested Voices, Diaspora, Artisanry and City portraits:** The second day of the conference again proved to be a melting point of ideas around, employment of, and perspectives on visual research. I chose to begin the day with the screening *'9,000 frames between us'* by Rebecca Savage.

This excellent short film captures the ways in which families divided by migration, from Mexico to North America remain connected through video footage. Interestingly the film not only captures the human cost of separation but raises salient points about temporally fixed and imagined communities.

The film juxtaposes footage of family video, with images family members watching these scenes and discussing the enactment of family togetherness through film. Emotions surface in their talk; 'in videos, that's how I've seen them grow up', 'when you don't see them, you think they are as you left them but they are not ... time slips away and you can feel it'. Savage's visual ethnography explores how film extends togetherness in time and space; and is resonant of Rose's (2010) discussion of the family photograph as both a temporal and spatial social practice.

The plenary speaker Ludmilla Jordanova, Professor of Modern History at King's College, again symbolised the multidisciplinary nature of the conference. Jordanova convincingly argued that the kinship between history and the social sciences has weakened but that the visual needs to be woven into the historical; and draw upon its accumulated perspectives overtime. The somatic response engendered by the image was discussed; and again the ways in which the visual is always tied to other senses was presented as demanding multidisciplinary and multimodal inquiry.

Jordanova reminded the audience that although photographs are often attributed transparency, iconography and connoisseurship is predicated on the ability to recognise and interpret an image. In this way the visual and verbal become conjoined with metaphor and the visual can never be ring fenced; researchers therefore, need to apply the artisanry skills of looking. Visual knowledge also has economic value; art commodities have inherent value and become ratified as 'works

of art'. However, for Jordanova value becomes problematic when the social organisation of academia creates professional advantage for 'the specialist' and 'specialisms', which act to create barriers to cross disciplinary learning and engagement. Rather than estrangement between disciplines, Jordanova argues for integrative practice, commenting that although this may appear utopian, '*what's wrong with utopia?*'

The integrative practice advised by Jordanova had been apparent across the conference and in the following sessions I revisited the work taken from a collaborative research project by Fink and Lomax, two researchers from complimentary but separate fields, brought together by the visual. On the first day, I had listened to Janet Fink's presentation, and this was complimented by '*Contested voices? Methodological tensions and the politics of knowing*', presented by Helen Lomax, which focused on different aspects of the same research project (see Lomax et al 2011).

Lomax argued that large comparative research often involves cultural assumptions that are symptomatic of 'what children are and what children should be'. Participatory methods, then, have become an important theme in the sociology of childhood; where the voice of the child is prioritised. Nevertheless, as Lomax discussed there is a danger with linking the visual with the participatory, which becomes problematic practice; not least because visual outputs cannot speak for themselves. Even here where children were involved in planning, filming and editing, these films were produced through dynamic relationships; children's (unequal) relationships with each other, the researchers and residents on their estate.

Directly after Lomax, I presented my paper titled '*Who put that on there...why why why? Exploring the power games that remain in play when the intrusive voice of the researcher is removed from*

*the site of visual data production*'. The paper linked well with the preceding session; focusing on the ways in which researchers often employ the visual to engender participatory research and to limit the intrusive presence of the researcher (Mannay 2010). In the research study from which the paper was drawn participants produced photographs, collages, maps and stories in their own home. This practice was employed as a participatory tool; however, the paper argued that when the intrusive presence of the researcher steps out of the site of visual data production, this leaves a space that is often filled by siblings, partners, parents, and friends - an intrusive presence of significant others.

Paul Sweetman presented the next paper, '*City portraits: visual methods, ethics, representation and recognition*', and having already shared a session with him, and Laura Hensser, at the ESRC Seminar Series: Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research, I looked forward to seeing how this work had developed. At the seminar series I had been very much blinded by my own immediate and unresolved concerns about anonymity (Mannay 2011); a preoccupation that acted as resistance to discourses of participant visibility. However, in this session I felt that Sweetman presented a convincing challenge to the dominance of blanket assumptions regarding the need for participant anonymity and/or confidentiality in social research.

Sweetman began by setting out the key assumptions and best practice guidelines of the ESRC and SRA research ethics publications; then problematised this as an ethics of concealment and argued for an 'ethics of recognition'. Drawing on his involvement with a large scale art installation, featuring life-sized photographic portraits of Southampton residents, Sweetman argues that visibility engenders a potential for advantage. This act of being seen was regarded by many participants as a transforming process; which provided pleasure in seeing the photograph, a new perception of self, the seizing of opportunities

and the affirmation of greater ownership of Southampton. At the level of community the project also acted to promote integration, engender a sense of belonging and stimulate an incentive for community involvement.

The final paper of the session, *Participant information clips: digital technologies to recruit, inform, debrief and disseminate* was presented by Simon Hammond. This was the first time that I had been introduced to participant information clips (PICS) as an alternative or supplementary method to established consent procedures. Hammond described his research with looked after adolescents and their response to the traditional informed consent form - 'I saw a space that needed to be signed, so I signed it'. Having experienced the inertia of the consent process in my own research it was refreshing to see such innovative and creative work with PICS; which has the potential to transform staid ethical conventions with something that can actually engage participants (Hammond and Cooper 2011). Hammond shared examples of his PICS around consent and the aims of his research project. PICS are economically produced, easily stored, accessed and reviewed, and importantly in this case, also inventive with multiple visual and audio strategies to ignite and maintain participants attention.

Day two was brought to a close with a Conference dinner, which adhered to Jordanova's suggestion that rather than estrangement between disciplines, the visual offers an opportunity for integrative practice. There was lively international discussion at the dinner table and later at the bar between anthropologists, sociologists, historians, journalists, medical researchers and artists with the central focus of visual methods forging new academic connections and friendships.

**Day Three - Presence, Absence, Embarrassment and Development:** On the morning of day three, the contingent of Youth Hostel Association delegates indulged in a cooked breakfast

before packing up and sharing lifts to the conference centre. The first paper of my day was *'The visual narratives of slow food Presidia: photo documentation as a methodological approach'* presented by Elisa Bignante; which focused on presence and absences in the spatial organisation and visual images displayed in food stands at an international slow food fair. Bignante found a strong presence of nature in images of the natural environment, traditional farming methods and picturesque landscapes. In terms of absences, the advertisers aesthetics of power and sex commonly associated with product promotion were invisible, and there was a dis-identification with sexualised images and the technologies of science; a reminder that visual research should always be interested in not just that which can be seen but with what is hidden, erased and absent.

The next presenter, Rebecca O'Connell drew from a research study employing visual methods to explore children's diets with the paper *'Picturing food practices: The contribution and challenges of visual methods in a multi-methods study of food and families who work'*. O'Connell argued that when examining the research question 'How do children negotiate food practices?' the visual has the potential to break the wider frame of reference and bring the mundane into view. A number of innovative techniques were used including a paper plate exercise where children draw in their preferred foods, an empty shopping trolley template to be filled with images of children's consumption favourites, photographic vignettes and elicitation interviews. The use of multiple techniques of data production was seen to collaborate, elaborate and also contradict data; in so doing offering more nuanced perspectives, additional insights and fresh dimensions to understanding family food practices.

The final paper of the session was given by Angela Dickinson and titled *'Rejecting the visual? I would be embarrassed for you to see what I eat'*. The paper focused on a study set in a faith-based

community lunch club and was interested in capturing the social context of meals, as well as their content. Participants were asked to keep seven day food diaries discussed in elicitation interviews and the research also piloted the use of participant-directed photographic data production. Dickinson found a resistance to the use of cameras across her participant base and when asked about their lack of engagement with this technique, participants reported that it was 'too nose-y', 'unnecessary' and 'embarrassing'.

Dickinson argues that this lack of engagement with the visual was not a result of the technological competence of participants; an explanation often applied to older groups; but rather the point that food and its consumption is surrounded by strong moral discourses. Shelia Peace's exhibition '*Transitions in Kitchen Living*', which I viewed directly after, reinforces Dickinson's point about competency as the visual collaboration developed with 48 older participants demonstrates a creative skill; which illustrates the temporal nature of everyday living. The shame of over-eating or being wasteful, then, was seen as the genuine barrier to participation with the technique.

The final plenary, presented by Professor Carey Jewitt, was titled '*A history of visual research methods*' and offered an overview of contributions from Mead, Bates and Spencer. I was impressed with this acknowledgement, as it is important to restate these classical studies, not least to counter the often unintentional reinvention of the wheel, where photo-elicitation, walking methodologies and participatory film-making are too often presented as novel and creative visual techniques. Jewitt also offered an insight into multiple approaches, including the power of the visual to disrupt narratives, iconology with everyday artefacts and ways of looking behind the image. As Jewitt commented, over the last decade Sage publishing tables demonstrate a prolific increase in visual methods resources;

however, our cross disciplinary learning should always be embedded with historically accumulated perspectives.

### Summary:

The Second International Visual Research Methods Conference provided a platform, where a range of diverse projects and researchers could be brought together to communicate the potential of 'the visual', and the ways in which it can benefit the development of academic, documentary and policy based research. The conference made an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the value of visual research and communicated a palpable enthusiasm for its subject. Presentations, conversations and connections forged over the three days will be a valuable resource for academics across disciplines, as well as artists, activists, and third sector agencies looking for innovative visual methodologies, collaborative research and social intervention. I shall look forward to forthcoming papers reflecting the excitement and innovation generated by the event, and of course the Third International Visual Research Methods Conference in 2013.

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