

Volume 5, Number 1

Special Issue

4th International Visual Methods Conference

16 – 18 September 2015
University of Brighton
United Kingdom

Conference Report IVM4



visual methodologies

a postdisciplinary journal

<http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/index>

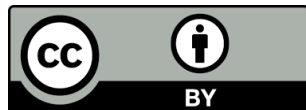
Cover Photograph by Ray Gibson

Dawn Mannay

Cardiff University, UK

Dawn Mannay is a Lecturer in Social Science (Psychology) at Cardiff University. Her research interests revolve around class, education, gender, geography, generation, national identity, violence and inequality; and participatory, visual, creative and narrative methods.

MannayDI@cardiff.ac.uk



This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Back Through the Looking Glass: A Review of the Fourth International Visual Methods Conference



The title 'Back through the looking glass' reflects my ongoing engagement with the evolving and dynamic biannual International Visual Research Methods Conference. What I really like about the IVM is the way it encourages innovation and change rather than becoming a staid repetition that rolls out a similar format and style that engenders inertia. To some extent this is encouraged by the newness of the conference team every two years; different people, different places and new ideas and ways of thinking mean that each conference is fresh and exciting, but also resonant of the original aims of IVM, to enable a space for sharing, learning, exploring and of course challenging visual methodologies, performances and practices.

I was particularly pleased to write up my reflections for this special issue of *Visual Methodologies*, which showcases some of the papers from IVM4. In the inaugural edition of the *Visual Methodologies* journal, I wrote a piece about the second IVM conference in Milton Keynes, and discussed the ways in which it was interdisciplinary, innovative, questioning and poignant (Mannay 2012). Since this time the journal, like the conference, has established itself and become a home for post-disciplinary dialogues about creativity, visual research and ethical practice. In writing this account of IVM4, it was enjoyable to remember, revisit and re-visualise what I learnt last September, although I can only touch on some key highlights in the space of the review.

I did not attend the pre-conference workshops and I missed the 'great pebble dash', although I did sit on the pebbles a few times on the sea front in my visit to Brighton as we had some late summer sunshine. On the first day of the main conference, Gillian Rose was the morning keynote session. Rose's book *Visual Methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*, was an invaluable source of support when I became interested in 'the doing of' visual research and later her volume *Doing Family Photography* considered the politics of the visual and the place of the photograph in digital, visual economies (Rose 2001, 2010). Consequently, I was eager to hear what was new and where her keynote paper, titled 'Visual methods in an expanded field: mutable, mass and mobile', would take the audience.

The presentation explored the ways in which a tentative consensus has evolved in visual methodologies around four key areas: The rationale that creative techniques generate 'new data', which other forms would not; the idea that these are 'different kinds of data' that provide insights into affective, subjective and sensory experience; the principle that 'taken for granted knowledges' are made perceptible via visual means; and lastly that visual methodologies can enable 'participatory' collaborative and negotiated pictures of the world. Certainly, this consensus is fragile and there are limits to the visual's ability to fight familiarity (Mannay 2010) and critiques of the easy marriage between the visual and the participatory (Lomax

2012; Luttrell and Chalfen 2010; Mannay 2013); nevertheless, these four claims have become dominant discourses in visual studies.

These commonalities unpicked, Rose moved on to ask if there are other things we should be doing to appreciate the wider contemporary visual culture? (see Rose 2014). The visual saturates the everyday and there seem to be images everywhere that are no longer 'photographs' as such but elements of material culture that speak of elaborate post-production, digitalization, digital visualisation and seeing ourselves through digitally generated forms. Considering contemporary visual culture, Rose considered the 350,000 images that get sent to Facebook every day. These 'mass mobile' images circulate through and constitute social networks and they are 'mutable', made to be shared, changed and modified. Accordingly, while much work in visual methodologies has been qualitative in nature Rose suggests that we think about the usefulness of quantitative work, to explore the scale of the saturation of everyday life, new forms of mass expression, and meaning that emerges from cumulative effects across populations. Challenging traditional divides, Rose considered how we could merge quantitative and qualitative methods and how we could negotiate the tensions of collaborative inquiry.

Moving from keynote to parallel sessions, it is a difficult task to decide which ones to feature here, as there were so many diverse and interesting presentations, but I have included some of my selective and subjective favourites. I was particularly impressed and intrigued by Curie Scott's paper, 'The use of drawing to explore perceptions of ageing'. Appreciating that there are a number of different ways that something is qualitatively experienced, Scott applied a multimodal ethnographic approach to explore the concept and experience of ageing with participants in late adulthood. Scott demonstrated how collaging and the creation of an ageing mask enabled a progressive dialogue about self-ageing, on and with the creative activities. Scott offered the conceptual frame of the 'inter-logue' to discuss the ways in which these multiple layers of refection-in-action, released participants from dominant myths of the elderly and allowed a new space to create different ways of becoming in relation to ageing. The masks explored how participants would like other people to see them as they grew older, while the 'landscape of life' activity posed the question 'if this is what life is like now, what will happen up to the age of 99?'. Importantly, the project offered a nuanced insight into participants' subjective meaning making but also enabled participants to reflect on their lives and make changes. For example, one 70 year old participant began lessons to play the saxophone, realising within the project that this was an ambition not yet met. Although the project itself was not designed with these outcomes in mind, this demonstrates how creativity can foster positive changes, beyond the remit of research aims and goals.

In the same general topic area, Angela Dickenson presented 'Older people and

foodborne illnesses: the contribution of visual methods'. The study investigating domestic kitchen practices in UK households drew on observations, interviews, photographs, maps, videos, written reflections and scrap books, to explore the mundane and taken-for-granted and to make the familiar strange (see also Wills et al 2015). Dickenson argued that the visual and creative elements of the study allowed an understanding of these real world settings and the entangled practices that are often difficult to articulate in purely verbal forms. Moving from data production to projects of dissemination in 'Critical perspectives on older people's respect and inclusion in the city', Sara Ronzi discussed how photographic exhibitions can create an opportunity for critical dialogue in the community; and at the same time take the products of research back to a community space. For Ronzi, photography helps people to see and images gain added significance through the ways in which communities engage with and interpret them; and the presentation was a useful contribution to the ongoing debates around the 'ethics of recognition' (Sweetman 2009; Mannay 2016).

Erminia Colucci, who I met previously at the third IVM conference in Wellington, presented 'Finding our way', which focussed on stories created by people from migrant and refugee backgrounds living with emotional and mental health issues. Participants wrote, voiced, created and edited their films and used music, words and art forms to express their journey of recovery, as one participant Akeemi explained, 'we will try to see the colours of life again'. The films, available at <http://www.mhima.org.au/finding-our-way>, were poignant and engaged the audience at the level of affect. Colucci was also highly sensitive to the ethical tensions of creating these films and the her role as researcher, and experience as practitioner, and she discussed the ways in which creative activities open up participants but how it is also important to close for safety; with the well-being of participants always being the priority over the project of research.

Deborah Warr, who co-edited a previous special issue on the ethical challenges visual researchers face, in this journal (see Waycott et al. 2015), presented the paper 'Visual navigation and articulation of place'. The paper explored issues of place-based stigma and considered the mocking, demeaning and disparaging representations of people who live their 'reality effects'. Warr explored the de-solidarizing effects of fragmented communities and the tensions between changing perceptions and accessing resources. For Warr, photographs can bring poverty to public attention but contemporary media representations bombard the viewing public with pathological representations of marginalised neighbourhoods.

Responding to Warr's central message, Eva Elliot, Gabrielle Ivinson and Ellie Byrne presented 'Arts as transformative practice: using arts based methods to illuminate place and make change'. The discussion centred on the challenge of partial and discriminative views of place and the ways in which 'sticky reputations' and the



Image by Scriberia

'blemish of place' legitimate neoliberal forms of increased marginalisation and territorialised stigma. Exploring the post-industrial landscape in Wales, Elliot argued that the deep abandonment of communities by governments is justified via media projections of disgust. In response to this toxic representation, Byrne discussed a photo elicitation project with young people that generated more nuanced, experiential and authentic images of place (see Byrne et al. 2015). Ivinson also illustrated how films have been created to move beyond the taboo of place that acts to silence its communities. The films offered alternative narratives of place, and they are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsVVkxmva3w&feature=youtu.be>.

Overall, IVM4, like its predecessors, provided an exciting opportunity to engage with the diverse field of visual studies. The programme of keynotes, papers, workshops and social activities certainly made the most of creative approaches. For me, the event centralised the ongoing importance of 'embracing interdisciplinarity, while at the same time respecting and nurturing individual disciplines' (Mannay 2016, p.130); which is key in advancing visual and creative methodologies. I will look forward to reading this special edition of Visual Methodologies, which will capture some of the significant empirical, theoretical and artistic themes from IVM4. Additionally, I will eagerly await the 2017 IVM5, which has a lot to live up to. However, I am convinced, given the enthusiasm and commitment of those who work within visual fields and creative industries, that it will be an event not to be missed.

References

- Byrne, E., Elliot, E. and Williams, G. (2015). Poor places, powerful people? Co-producing cultural counter-representations of place. *Visual Methodologies*, 3(2), 77-85.
- Lomax, H. (2012). Shifting the focus: children's image-making practices and their implications for analysis. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, Special Issue – Problematising Visual Methods 35(3), pp. 227–34.
- Luttrell, W. and Chalfen, R. (2010). Lifting up the voices of participatory research. *Visual Studies* 25(3), pp.197–200.
- Mannay, D. (2010). Making the familiar strange: Can visual research methods render the familiar setting more perceptible?. *Qualitative Research* 10(1), pp. 91-111.
- Mannay, D. (2012). A delegate's perspective: review of the Second International Visual Research Methods Conference 13-15 September 2011. *Visual Methodologies* 1(1), pp. i-vii.

- Mannay, D. (2013). 'Who put that on there ... why why why?' Power games and participatory techniques of visual data production. *Visual Studies*, 28(2), pp. 136-146.
- Mannay, D. (2016). *Visual, narrative and creative research methods: application, reflection and ethics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*. London: Sage.
- Rose, G. (2010). *Doing family photography: the domestic, the public and the politics of sentiment*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Rose, G. (2014). On the relation between 'visual research methods' and contemporary visual culture. *Sociological Review*, 62 (1), pp. 24-46.
- Sweetman, P. (2009). Just anybody? Images, ethics and recognition', in John Gillett (ed.) *Just Anybody*. Renja Leino, pp. 7–9. Winchester: Fotonet/The Winchester Gallery.
- Waycott, J., Guillemin, M., Cox, S. M., Warr, D., Drew, S., and Howell, C. (2015). Re/formulating ethical issues for visual research methods from the ground up. *Visual Methodologies*, 3(2), 4-15.
- Wills, W.J., Meah, A., Dickenson, A. M. and Short, F. (2015). 'I don't think I ever had food poisoning'. A practice-based approach to understanding foodborne disease that originates in the home *Appetite* 85, pp. 118–125.