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Vernacular imaginary, forms of visual memory, elicitation and aesthetic community in an ethnographic research.

Visual Ethnography

n. 2 · 2022

dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2022.2-118

Abstract: In these pages, I propose a visual reflection in which, by listening to the voices of the protagonists of an ethnographic research, we witness the evocation of images and visions that will allow us to enter into synergy with the vernacular imaginary that becomes a projection of the place of self and community.

The privileged object of the investigation was the cultural category of the depopulation, above all in the areas of investigation which, taking into account the variables that determine it, made it possible to reflect on the culturally constructed nature of the territory, space, place and movement also thanks to the tools of investigation and detection of experience such as ‘map-elicitation’, ‘photo-elicitation’, ‘place-elicitation’.

Keywords: Vernacular imaginary; vernacular memory; depopulation; photo-elicitation;

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Her anthropological research is focused on the politics, rhetorics and abandonment processes in some small towns of Basilicata. In 2016 she participated in the Italian-Iraqi Archaeological Mission of the University of Rome “La Sapienza” in Abu Tbeirah (Southern Iraq) as a cultural anthropologist and photographer. Some shots of the photographic work *Dreaming Iraq* have been published by National Geographic Italia. She works as a visual anthropologist about 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, Metropolis 2017, MAVI 2019. Since 2019 she is Photo Essay Editor of *Visual Ethnography*, a Peer Review Journal (Classe A, Macrosettore 11/A5).

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Memory is a fruitful field of investigation because it is a dense space of local, supra-local, trans-local representation where the relationships and discursive practices that fill public, private and symbolic spaces emerge. At the same time, memory can become the bearer of cultural differences which is important to understand in order to enter into the plots of the memory of places and in the practices that can become collective, public, institutional, individual, private and daily.

In these pages, I propose a visual reflection in which, by listening to the voices of the protagonists of an ethnographic research, we witness the evocation of images and visions that will allow us to enter into synergy with the vernacular imaginary that becomes a projection of the place of self and community.

The research context was deepened during the PhD in which I had the opportunity to question me on the ways in which vernacular memory conveys sense and cultural meanings both of individual identities and of collective identities. Through these narratives, it was possible to have a projection of phenomena such as depopulation, voids, abandonments but also the processes of cultural creativity in a specific geographical area, which corresponds to the research area of the PhD, the Materano, in Basilicata (Italy), and specifically the towns of Accettura, Grassano and Grottole which have made it possible to restore the spatial, subjective and collective dimension in which cultural experiences, the qualitative and statistical analyzes of migratory and demographic flows are located.

The Ethnographic research and the field research, by adopting the qualitative methodology, has favored the use of qualitative, participatory, collaborative tools which have allowed, in the meetings with the various stakeholders, to elaborate visual narratives which, in turn, have favored the multisensory unfolding of the experience going to build and deconstruct the representations of the forms of transit of the territory.

The privileged object of the investigation was the cultural category of depopulation, above all in the areas of investigation which, taking into account the variables that determine it, made it possible to reflect on the culturally constructed nature of the territory, space, place and movement and on the fundamental links for reasoning self and hetero representations of space also thanks to the tools of investigation and detection of experience such as 'map-elicitation', 'photo-elicitation', 'place-elicitation' (which consists of bringing people to a place that stimulates them to tell about it place through memories of episodes and situations of daily life and historical memories).

Furthermore, the visual anthropology methodologies are particularly relevant, from the photo-elicitation centered on vernacular photographs or produced by the researchers themselves, to the analysis of other institutional and non-institutional visual documents; from the collection of narratives stimulated by the maps to those solicited from places visited at the same time by the informant and the researcher, e.g. *hermeneutic itineraries* (Berardi 2018).

In fact, the elicitation practices, whether through the images, photo-elicitation, or through other practices such as photo-voice, in this research path, has been intended to elaborate a reflective awareness

“when native eyes interpret and enlarge upon the photographic content, through interviewing with photographs, the potential range of data enlarges beyond that contained in the photographs themselves” (Collier, Collier 1986, p. 99).

In the local worlds, ethnographic solicitations become unpredictable and interconnected and clearly show how obsolete all the rigid and monolithic conceptions linked to the concept of place are. Living, observing and crossing small towns, like it happened in the countries of the research, at this time characterized by the *anguish of no return, of ever being the same*, is an opportunity to grasp ideas that undoubtedly signal some profound transformations.

To reason on these layers, in this photo-essay I propose the possibility of passing along the paths of the imaginary with some of the people who have contributed to building the ethnography.

The participatory and elicitation practices have made it possible to build the emic itineraries internal to the experience, along spatial and temporal coordinates, in which the photographs serve to give voice to profound narratives and to build a sort of intimate and choral mapping of the territory and of its multiple identities.

The protagonists of the research have been invited several times to build and deconstruct their own experience by drawing on both family, institutional and public archives, and on the memory of themselves and of places, both through vernacular photography and archival photography.

With regard to the case relating to the use of photography from public archives in this research path, I made use of some photographs conserved at the “Istituto Centrale per il Patrimonio Immateriale” (Central Institute for Intangible Heritage, ICPI). The ICPI, with which a fruitful dialogue has been initiated in order to access, consult and make use of this precious heritage, has made available some unpublished photographic materials made on the occasion of two photographic campaigns conducted by Annabella Rossi in 1959 and 1966 in the municipalities of Grassano and Grottole (Basilicata, Italy).

These photographs, of immeasurable aesthetic and cultural value, which in turn became part of the elicitation process also experimented through social networks, have served above all as a visual starting point for building a plot of the ways in which one recognizes oneself in a territory by evoking a unprecedented memory, as those images are not part of a local visual repertoire and therefore were completely new to the protagonists of the research.

Annabella Rossi, like the anthropologist Enzo V. Alliegro recalls, “carried out a widespread research campaign in the 1960s in the major sanctuaries of southern Italy, including those in Basilicata. As a completion of the survey work, in 1969 the scholar published the book *Le feste dei poveri*” (Alliegro 2019, p. 171, translated by me).

Some of these unpublished images become real itineraries which, on the one hand, consolidate research and studies which contributed to the creation of a powerful imaginary, and on the other contribute to a construction of the other and of the otherness on which it is necessary to linger in order to understand the cultural scope.

Some of these pictures have not only highlighted glimpses and elements of a world that is both close and distant to us, but have become an elicitation tool for elaborating narratives on the memory of places that become discourses on the memory of the sense of places.

This photo, for example, returns to the memory a space that no longer exists.



Photo 1 Annabella Rossi, Grassano, 1959. ICPI, AFM Fondo Annabella Rossi, inv. 726352.

The photographed agglomeration is in an area of Grassano that is as of today no longer inhabited and the few remaining houses are unsafe and forbidden to the visitors, as can be seen in the following picture.



Photo 2 Grassano 2020. Photo by Marina Berardi.

When I showed Annabella Rossi's photograph, I never initially revealed the location, and the interlocutors expressed reactions mostly on the basis of their age group. In circumscribed communities such as Accettura, Grassano or Grottole, there is the conviction of knowing every alley, every nuance of the town, a tiny fragment is enough to find one's bearings. This photo turned out to be a puzzle as it differed from owned visual heritage, and while the younger generations give up, as they have no visual reference of any kind, the older generations, who remember the area, when they recognize it, beside feeling reassured, they activate intimate and personal narratives with respect to the memory of the place.

The second case, which I focused more on, relates to the ways in which vernacular photography can evoke a vernacular memory in the protagonists of the research, through the solicitations of the encounter and the connections of the imaginary.

What do I mean by *vernacular memory*?

The vernacular memory acts on the level of self-representation, it is a practice that incorporates official visions, but at the same time it has a subversive charge that gives us back the vastness of the ways of understanding, living and representing human being's relationship with time.

It is useful to recall what John E. Bodnar says about the gap between official memory and vernacular memory

"Public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions. The former originates in the concerns of cultural leaders or authorities at all levels of society [...]. Official culture relies on "dogmatic formalism" and the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms. It presents the past on an abstract basis of timelessness and sacredness. [...]. Vernacular culture, on the other hand, represents an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole. [...] Vernacular

expressions convey what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like. Its very existence threatens the sacred and timeless nature of official expression” (Bodnar 1992, pp. 14-15).

We pass from the *vernacular memory* to the *vernacular imagery* which reveals the ways in which the relationship is also understood with all the ways in which the relationship with otherness is expressed like it happens through writing which, like the visual narratives, is a complex doing and practice, an *incomplete collection, a piecemeal object* (Clifford 2006 p. 26).

How did all of this happen? One of the requests that I often put to the various interlocutors consisted of asking them to try to imagine taking a photograph that would restore what for them is the essence of the places; to follow up, I often asked for the description and identification of a photograph of their knowledge (belonging to family archives but also not belonging to their family albums) that could give us further visual coordinates.

A great collective and internal visual narration has been created starting from the solicitations of memory, through:

Family and institutional archive photos - this is because archives are dense spaces;

Verbal representations of subjective visual projections;

The references to a vision other than us that we bring back to our way of “looking” at places.

These visual solicitations that the different interlocutors return to us, these *strategies of the eye* (Faeta 2003), allow us to look at each other and reconstruct what Francesco Marano has defined as an *aesthetic community* where “a group of people [...] who recognize themselves in a certain common sensory experience, whether or not it belongs to the past, also connected to a certain social context, and who, on the basis of this shared experience, initiate communication practices of various types. ‘Aesthetics’, therefore, not in the sense related to art or poetics, but of *aisthesis* in the original meaning of sensory experience” (Marano 2005, 45, translated by me).

The voices of the protagonists of the research that accompany the single images allow us to carry out an exercise of *responsive understanding* (Sobrero 2009) and of correspondence - in the meaning given by Ingold (2019) - that is, in movement and connection between practices and processes, with what emerged in the entire research.

The research of the images that accompany the visions of the protagonists took place over time, in some cases the findings were fortuitous or the result of the generosity of those who granted me their use, in other cases I drew on my personal photographic archive to seal this reciprocity. It is a way to return to where we started from: to the places and people encountered along this journey, along this way of living, returning an unedited mapping of places through a vernacular archive.

The restitution is an intimate dialogue in a landscape inserted in locally recognizable coordinates which underlines its dialogical and procedural nature.



Photo 3 Accettura, 9th June 2019. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“So, if you allow me to do it on June 9th. I would take the picture on June 9th, why?! For a simple reason. Because 9th June is the real Accettura. Because, with the new generations, with the changing way of understanding life, with the problems that are increasingly exasperating, we too have changed a bit. Perhaps we are impatient, we are quarrelsome. On June 9th, we are all together, everything is forgotten, everything goes behind our backs, and that is truly the pride of the Accettura area” (Alfonso Vespe, Mayor of Accettura, interview excerpt 23rd May 2019).



Photo 4 Grassano, Chiesa Madre, Cinti street. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I would photograph the Mother Church, the glimpse of the Cinti, the Casa comunale and the emblem of the Knights of Malta at the Mother Church, which unites the whole town. The views from the Cinti area are a spectacle and I would also like to pass this on to those who are no longer in Grassano because it creates great emotions” (Filippo Luberto, Mayor of Grassano, interview excerpt of 31st May 2019).



Photo 5 Historic photo of the Grottole Fair. Source Varuolo 2002 p. 142.

“I think of the photo that represents the fair. It’s a photo that gives an idea of how the country was before, which then clearly transformed with the evolution of the situation, the rural culture disappeared. That photo is essential” (Michele Rondinone, interview excerpt of 8th October 2019).



Photo 6 Grottole, inside of a cave. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I would photograph the caves district because it was the first settlement in Grottole, where the civilization of Grottole developed. What are today cellars previously were cave-dwellings from which Grottole takes its name and therefore we are trying to rediscover our roots that started there, from that area which is also the favorite spot for foreign tourists who come to Grottole” (Silvio Donadio, interview excerpt of 24th October 2019).



Photo 7 Grottole, Detail of the Chiesa Diruta. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I would photograph my favorite monument of Grottole which is the Chiesa Diruta, not the side facing the new town, but rather the side facing the internal area, therefore the old town, the Church with a group of people who are the heart of the community” (Michela Santangelo, interview excerpt of 24th October 2019).



Photo 8 Grassano, Corso Umberto 1980. Author unknown.

“The photo that represents Grassano, for me, is the one of the earthquake. There are two or three photos that I have kept here, we printed them when we did the VP Story, the exhibition about our history, we asked the Grassano archive” (Giovanni Siggillino, interview excerpt of 7th March 2020).



Photo 9 Grassano, historical postcard. Piazza della Libertà. Unknown author.

“I have no idea who took it, it’s the postcard of Piazza della Libertà, our square, when it wasn’t there. Our Piazza was completely different from how it is now. In fact, I don’t even know what year this is, there was no indoor market, it was all flat, there was another bar, it was different” (Ivana Calabrese, interview excerpt of 26th March 2020).



Photo 10 Carlo Levi, 1935, Grassano come Gerusalemme.

“I think of Carlo Levi’s work where you can see the hills, the wheat. When I think of Grassano I think of the wheat” (Antonella Gramegna, interview excerpt of 28th April 2020).



Photo 9 Grassano, Piazza della Libertà, detail of the statue of The sower made by Pietro Benevento. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I would photograph the statue of the *Seminatore* (the sower) because first of all it is located in what for me is the central square of the town, the beating heart where all age groups follow each other over the hours, from the morning at 5am with the farmers to late night with the young people sitting on the steps screwing around.

Then, I would choose it because its sculptor, Pietro Benevento, is a local artist who died prematurely and in my opinion deserves to be remembered, and finally I would choose it for what it represents: the sower, an ancient trade linked to the earth and to the grain, the greatest wealth present in Grassano” (Antonella Gramegna, interview excerpt 2021).



Photo 12 Grassano, Santa Lucia, 9th December 2019. Photo by Giuseppe Liuzzi.

“I would take a photograph of hope. The photograph I would take is of a Basilicata that can truly be reborn, this is the thing that I feel I have to effectively create: an alternative for living, above all, not for the people who are from here, rather to attract people who can come and live here” (Giuseppe Liuzzi, interview excerpt of 11th May 2020).



Photo 13 Pietrapertosa (Pz), 13th September 2019. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I think of a photo taken at sunset, however looking towards east, not towards the sunset, when there is that slightly indigo sky that seems full of energy, of the energy of the evening that is about to begin, like if something magical is about to happen, there’s something magic that is very strong in our land” (Antonio Graziadei, interview excerpt of 15th May 2020).



Photo 14 Tricarico, Saracen Gardens. Antonio Infantino filmed by Mimmo Nardozza, Antonio Graziadei, Salvatore Laurenzana. Photo by Mimmo Nardozza.

“I think of a photo of Antonio Infantino taken in the gardens of Tricarico, in the Saracen gardens, Antonio was sitting on one of the water collecting and irrigation tanks. I think this photo was taken by Mimmo Nardozza, with Salvatore Laurenzana who is back there with a film camera, we were doing an interview; there is Antonio interviewed in the Saracen gardens with an Ethiopian shawl on his head. This image is very ambivalent, it has a dimension strongly rooted in a tradition, a tradition so strong that it has its roots into the earth, in the small plots of the gardens of Tricarico, it has a tradition linked to an Arab presence perhaps, who knows, but it is also an extraordinary vision of Antonio, his ability to be an elder and in the remote future. It is an extraordinarily strong image” (Antonio Graziadei, interview excerpt of 15th May 2020).

Photo 15.



Photo 15 Lucanian forest, 2017. Photo by Marina Berardi.

“I see the essence rooted in the ecological environment we live in. When today we go to Mount Croccia or to Pollino and you see those places, you see those woods that have so much history, we have trees that are over a thousand years old, the Loricato pine, or you see those beech woods, these woods with these columns that seems to enter in a cathedral. If someone goes towards Accettura, have you seen the beech trees in the woods?! How beautiful, this is the essence, if I have to find the spirit of this land. One of the names of Basilicata is land of the woods, perhaps this is the meaning, the one of the woods, the one of the light, the sun. I was in Northern Italy and saw whole days without sun and I think of my land as a land of sun, you can still see the clear sky, it’s sunny almost every day, only that sometimes it burns you a little” (Vincenzo Ritunno, interview excerpt of 22nd June 2020).



Photo 16 Grassano, via Rome. Unknown author.

“I think of a photo of a wedding taken in via Roma, in front of my grandparents’ house, there was this slope that makes a “v” and all the people posing. Every time I go to look at it I try to recognize a grandfather, a great grandfather in that photo but then I never find any. It belongs to a marriage made on the street of via Roma where there is the *lammione*, the *lammione* is the historic residence of our village, where most of the people lived until a few decades ago” (Francesco Paolo Bonelli, interview excerpt 30 September 2020).



Photo 17 Historical photo of the Grottole fair. Unknown author.

“The photo I would choose is the one of the Grottole fair. There are no monuments in that photo, but there is strong human aggregation, there is the confusion of fairs... people with chickens. There are more shots, I think taken by the same photographer, I'd keep them all, a general shot of the fair area; another showing the former church of San Luca Giuliano premises where the merchants exhibited their goods, from chickens to horses up to carpets, to agricultural equipment, it looks a bit like a kasbah, I don't know, those Tunisian, Moroccan markets where there are the voices, the mess, the smells and the carpets” (Antonio De Giacomo, interview excerpt of 2nd October 2021).

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