A Possible Framework for Digital Visuality.
Reflections from the Perspective of “Expanded” Ethnographic Practice.

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Introduction

1 Working in the terrain of visual social science today entails walking on a thin line that, depending on the points of view, either connects or separates ‘things visual’ from ‘things digital’. With the ongoing penetration of digital technologies and tools across the world, the act of conducting visual research increasingly entails a capacity to incorporate a broader horizon characterised by multimodality and multisensoriality, by algorithmic and automated logics and importantly by new possibilities for collaboration. This “expanded” terrain asks for an “expanded” ethnographic approach (see Favero forth.) capable of bringing into dialogue online and offline worlds, digital and analogue practices, material and immaterial spaces. It also asks for a grounded rethinking of the nature of (audio)visual(sensory) communication, a practice that today appears more than ever as a more dynamic and performative one, dominated (importantly) by centripetal forces. Differently from conventional stereotypes, rather than pulling us into a (centrifugal) terrain of detachment and dematerialisation, digital technologies today bring us closer to one another, closer to other scholars and to research interlocutors, and closer also to our materials. More than ever, (audio)visual(sensory) materials are simultaneously carriers of information, tools for arousing feelings and for creating togetherness.

2 Entering the complex digital habitats of today’s world also entails a grounded rethinking of what images (the key tools at our disposal) are, mean and do. As I will address in greater depth below, images embrace a new role as multimodal, multisensory and multi-perspectival producers of relations, of material, spatial and temporal engagements with the world that surrounds them. Such a transformation requires a grounded rethinking of our practice and the design of a methodology of work capable
of capitalising upon the dialogue between the old and the new, the established and the emergent. This is in my view the key contribution of this special issue, namely the capacity to span across a variety of techniques of research that bring more conventional methods in touch with the new possibilities brought to us via digital technology.

In the following pages, I aim to provide some theoretical and methodological reflections on the terrain that surrounds the practices and possibilities that are discussed, addressed and engaged with in this issue. My hope is to be able to add some methodological and theoretical perspectives that can complement the articles that compose the issue. Differently from the approach that characterises this issue (theory-driven fieldwork), my work is mainly characterised by practice-led theory. Basically, my entry into the terrain of digital/visual practice builds upon a playful engagement with tools, techniques and technologies for making images and for grasping other sensory experiences. Throughout my career, I have tested this terrain by using different cameras, by experimenting with online practices, and by sharing materials via social media etc.

Below I start with outlining the key themes that in my view define the terrain of contemporary digital cultures and technologies. Let me share some key assumptions that can guide us when entering the terrain of “the digital”, of “digital visuality”. These are crucial for exploring the contemporary ecology of (post)digital images. Finally, I will, in light of the previous sections, directly focus on some of the key topics addressed by the special issue and mainly those of collaboration, mediation and comparison. But before I do so, let me start with a preamble.

**Preamble**

As scholars conducting (audio)visual(sensory) research, we are today faced with a fairly unprecedented situation. Never before have we been surrounded by research interlocutors who have similar (and at times even superior) skills in making, editing and sharing images compared to ourselves. This levelling can be detected not only at the level of practice but also of theory.

Regarding the former, today more and more people know how to edit (and importantly also fake) images. The smartphone has indeed played a tremendous role in this change. During my most recent fieldwork in India, I was able to realise the amazing skills that children growing up in slums have in taking, editing and sharing images. With a smartphone (but also a camera) in their hands, they conjure the most fascinating portraits, using original and unexpected forms of composition and *mise-en-scene*. Gone are the days when the act of making an image was solely in the hands of the white Western male anthropologist. Indeed, the kids I met in India were, clearly, not the owners of a smartphone (or for that matter of a camera). Nevertheless, most had access to one. Even in the poorest of slums, most families, extended households, clusters of neighbours, and circles of friends had access to at least one smartphone. And despite not being permanently connected to a 4G network or Wi-Fi signal by a formal contract, they have learned to use their phones to the fullest. So, the smartphone has indeed had a powerful impact on the spread of this form of digital/visual skills and literacy. And let me add that the size of this change is indeed impressive. Just to give you one figure only, in 2020, 90.9% percent of the 1.43 trillion images taken during the year were done...
so on smartphones, testifying to the increasing spread of smartphone-enhanced, image-making possibilities.

And with the spread of skills also comes a growing awareness of, and critical attitude towards, the world of images. Most people inhabiting one of today’s ever growing digital habitats (but not only) have become abundantly aware of what images do and mean and of the possible manifold acts of deceit they can trigger off. Such actors have abandoned simplistic notions of the image as a “transparent window on the world” (Mitchell 1984:504) and have also endorsed Howard Becker’s (1978) invitation to stop looking for ultimate truth in images. They know how easy it is to fake an image, how to photoshop it. They have also learned to manage the power of selecting what to include and exclude when “framing” an image. However, they have not lost their attraction to this world. In fact, their interest has only grown. It is possibly exactly because of their manifold entanglements with the world of algorithms that images are more than ever the magical objects that “enchant” us (Gell 1992). Images are magical objects that both “mean” and “do”, that actively intervene upon the lives of the people who come in contact with them.

What is the Digital?

As anticipated above, in this section, I aim to share the key assumptions that guide my approach to the terrain of digital culture and technologies. Reflecting upon “what” the digital is, I invite the reader to consider this as an attempt at drafting a “good practice” that can be used as a starting point when entering this terrain. Basically, I do not aim at being exhaustive but rather proactive.

One - The first assumption that should guide our entry into the terrain of ethnography in a digital habitat builds on the observation that today, an ever-going part of the world’s population (and surely the majority of those inhabiting metropolitan contexts) live in constant negotiation between online and offline worlds. Digital and ICT mediations are, in such habitats, a way of “being in the world” (cf. Merleau Ponty 2012). They are more than an extra dimension or an infrastructure. Rather, they are one of the things that define our sense of being human (cf. Horst and Miller 2012). Tackling this question from an extreme end, let me for instance suggest that algorithms too, that are often addressed as symbols of the dehumanising, automated nature of digital technologies, have been proven to be racist. This is the case of predictive algorithms used by US police forces that are guided by racial bias. Algorithms (and AI at large) in fact grow in interaction with human agents. They learn from us. This is also the case with the automated suggestions made by our Instagram or Facebook streams based on what they have previously learned about us on the basis of our choices. Agency in a digital terrain is neither human nor non-human. It is “distributed” (Gehl 2009), hence it transcends strict dualistic distinctions. Following this, I suggest that scholars, policymakers and citizens at large today need to better grasp the ways in which concrete subjects in concrete everyday life settings use, understand and approach online worlds. How, when and in what way do online practices intersect, communicate with and possibly craft lives offline? We are still in need of empirical studies capable of exploring the meaning that digital technologies have for concrete, situated social actors in concrete mundane contexts. A detailed, “connective” (Hine 2015) and
“expanded” (Favero forth.) ethnographic study of contemporary online worlds will allow us to do exactly that.

Two - As a second assumption, let me suggest that the digital is, in terms of its internal logic and function, not entirely a new phenomenon. As Keith Hart (2000) suggested, this is just another form of abstraction and mediation that helps humans organise their lives. Translating quality into quantity, the digital is according to Hart similar to numbers. It promotes the translation of quality into quantity, hence making comparisons among things that would, in the absence of such mediation, be incomparable.

Three - A third key assumption is that the digital is in fact real and concrete. From GPS tracking applications, to live tracking COVID-19 or dating apps, to smart fibres, watches and clothes, etc., the digital emerges more and more as a form of direct interaction with our movements and concrete ways of living and being in space. The digital puts us in motion in different ways and redesigns also the spaces in which we live hence also causing urban environments to change accordingly. During my research in Havana and Santiago de Cuba (where 4 and 5G connectivity is centralised by the government), I was able to witness how shabby street corners turned, due to the introduction of public distributors of Wi-Fi signal, into thriving meeting and commercial hubs, leaving beautiful parks in their vicinity to fall in oblivion and decay. Cities are redesigned by means of Wi-Fi access and also by means of the digital traces left by users of GPS tracking maps. The accumulated tracks for instance of tourists, commuters, or runners (as shown by the data produced by smartphone apps) help municipalities improve access to infrastructures, areas of leisure, and attractions, etc. The digital is hence effective. Through digital technologies, states McQuire (2006) “the public domain now emerges in the complex interaction of material and immaterial spaces”. Hence it makes more and more sense today to speak of the (post)digital to indicate the terrain in which we are today where digital and analogue, humane and more-than-human constantly coexist.

Four - Connected to the above two assumptions is also the observation that the digital must today be considered as embodied. We live our day-to-day lives in a constant dialectic between bodily/sensory and technologically-mediated perceptions. Paraphrasing the observations made above regarding the correspondence between digital technologies and money, I suggest that the digital can be looked upon simply as a new form of mediation. Today, we are no more mediated than before (language, images, printed press, media, skin, eyes). We may mediate our perceptions of the world in many different ways but we are and will always remain in mediation. Being online, for instance, is not something we do when seated in front of a laptop and Googling. It is also something we do when going out for a walk in the middle of a sunny day, taking pictures with our smartphone, reading the menu of a restaurant through a QR code, checking the location of our next stop, measuring our steps and heartbeat with a smartwatch. I believe that it will not take long before we will speak of the time spent online or offline like we today speak of that spent indoors or outdoors. We will hence not address them as opposites but as co-constitutive of our daily lives. As mentioned above, I have suggested elsewhere (Favero forth.) that an “expanded ethnography” can help address and use the expansion that digital tools and technologies exercise on our senses and our ways of being in the world. This also entails that we need to find ways of
studying online worlds away from dualisms. We need to address the online and the offline, the digital and the analogue, the virtual and the material as co-extensive.

Five - We have learned from David MacDougall (1997) that studying a particular subject (no matter what it is) visually, means also studying the visual culture in which it is embedded. The same applies for digital visuality. When entering an online space, we are also studying the notions and views on “the digital” and “the online” of the individuals who inhabit that space. This is fundamental because it opens up the doors to one of anthropology’s (and to an extent also sociology’s) key goals, i.e., the comparative endeavour (an important key term of this special issue). We discover that the digital (and its various emanations in the form of internet sites, social media, and smartphone applications, etc.) is not a monolith but rather takes shapes differently in different environments.

Six - Finally, I believe that “the visual” offers a privileged entry for understanding “the digital”. Following again MacDougall’s (1997) insight that the visual offers a unique entry to the world of the senses, I situate my work here as a critique of the language-centric approach that characterises most of the approaches to online ethnographies. Images are seldom contemplated in their complexity but are rather, through a narrow linguistic approach, reduced to carriers of meaning (Were and Favero 2013). While being embedded in linguistic codes, images are also sensory, affective, corporal and performative objects. They “act” more than just narrate. This takes us directly to the next section.

What is Digital Visuality?

When applied to the terrain of digital visuality, the reflections above entail the identification of a number of changes as well as of continuities. Undoubtedly, the way human beings engage with images in digital habitats contains many elements of novelty. But at the same time, there are also important continuities with the past, with notions and practices that are rooted in specific historically and culturally situated places and times. In particular, I believe that the digital has put images in motion in novel ways.

I tend to disagree with those scholars who addressed the arrival of digital technologies in the terrain of visual culture as a revolution. Mitchell (1992) spoke about this as the introduction of a “new model of vision”. “New images” were, for him, “a new kind of token, made to yield new forms of understanding [...] to disturb and disorientate by blurring comfortable boundaries and encouraging transgression of rules on which we have come to rely” (Mitchell 1992:223). Digital technologies contributed, in his view, in “relentlessly destabilising the old photographic orthodoxy, denaturing the established rules of graphic communication, and disrupting the familiar practices of image production and exchange” (Mitchell 1992: 223). Pushing this even further, Crary (1990) suggested that the birth of digital imagery constituted “a transformation in the nature of visuality probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective” (Crary 1990:1).

I tend to take a much more mediating position in this debate. A matter of computer-driven decomposition and recomposition of discontinuous chunks of information (the pixels), digital images appear indeed, at first, to be different from analogue images with their dots populating a continuous and indefinite landscape of visible information. And
most certainly, the principle behind the creation of a digital image differs significantly from that of analogue images. Digital images function through a process called ‘filtering’, which builds upon the attribution of a value (a number defining tone and colour) to a pixel at the level of the raster grid (the processor). Every unit (every pixel) always contains a definite amount of information limited in spatial and tonal resolution. A complete image is then nothing else but the result of this numerical act of giving a value to each individual pixel. This processuality is the reason digital images are conventionally addressed through notions of performance.

18 The procedure of creation of a digital image, centred as it is on the presence of what McLuhan in the 1960s called ‘electric circuitry’ (McLuhan and Fiore 1967), constitutes therefore indeed a significant break with the chemical procedure that characterised analogue photography. It has taken away, for the lovers of analogue photography, the feeling of certainty over the adherence of the image to the referent that the analogue provided. It also led to the pervasive associations between the digital and immateriality. The positions of those who claim for an essential, radical difference between digital and analogue images are in my view characterised, however, by a too narrow focus on the level of production, that is, on the opposition between processor and chemical reaction. And no doubt, at this level, the rupture is significant. Nevertheless, I cannot stop being fascinated by the feelings that many photographers have of the distancing that the digital has caused from the real world. Digital photography is often accused of being characterised by automated procedures that escape our capacity to understand. Yet, how many of us do really know how chemicals function? As Zylinska (2015) has suggested, photography has always been characterised by a degree of automation. Building upon a continuous integration of automated procedures at the level of chemistry (first) and electronics (later), as well as to a number of automatic or instinctive reactions to the world surrounding the photographer, photography has from its very inception been simultaneously human and nonhuman: ‘it is precisely through focusing on its nonhuman aspect that we can find life in photography’ (Zylinska 2015: 132).

19 Following up on this line of reasoning, I believe that a degree of continuity can be found if we shift the focus to other aspects that lead to the creation of a (photographic) image, such as the lens/objective and the human actors involved (the photographers with their gestures). The optical device has, across the decades, largely remained the same. It keeps conveying light into the body of the camera, that is, to the processor (previously the film) that is the source of image creation. Some of its core aspects have indeed been automated and improved (autofocus, etc.). Yet, at the core of its functioning, an objective is still based on the same principles. For the third element, instead, we must acknowledge the role of what Barthes (1980) called the ‘operator’ (the photographer), the agent in control of another couple of core ingredients: time and space. The operator selects when to click and what to include in and leave outside the frame. Roughly, we could say that while the processor has changed significantly, and the lens has largely remained the same, the operator is a matter of both change and continuity. The ‘gesture’ i.e., borrowing from Flusser (2006), the photographer’s way of using the camera for playing with space and time, has adapted for instance to the invention of LCD screens first and of live image viewing later (in both regular cameras as well as smartphones). These technological devices have indeed liberated the eye of the photographer from that of the camera, making it possible to preview the result of a photograph not only once taken but also during the process. As a consequence of the
introduction of LCD screens, photographing is today more than ever the result of a triangularization of gazes. The LCD screen is a mediator between the direct exchange between the ‘referent’ (what is photographed) and the ‘operator’. Newer, emerging camera technologies, such as life-logging and action-cameras push this exchange further, liberating the operator from the responsibility of choosing time and frame. And this is even more true if we were to include in our list 360 degree cameras and drones (see Favero 2019).

In this scenario, however, it is worth wondering about the extent to which the digital has actually changed our way of experiencing and relating to images. Regardless of the way in which it is produced and distributed, a picture “remains much the same for viewers” (McQuire 2013, p. 225). I would tend to agree with this statement adding also that a lot of the images that circulate on the net today are analogue at their origins. However, they come to us in a digital format. And the use of “they come to us” is here meaningful. In fact, what really changes is the journey, the travel, the distribution, i.e. how images come to us and how we use them. “Present images” (Favero 2018) ask us to to engage with them dynamically, saving them, editing them, sharing them. They wrap us into their own multi-sensory act. This, I suggest, is where our focus should lie today in terms of both theory and practice. In my work both as a theorist and a practitioner, I engage with images along a continuum that goes from the analogue to the digital, the ‘actual’ and the ‘virtual’, from the manually to the mechanically produced, the still and the moving, the visible, the acoustic, and the verbal. This dialectic gives birth to things, practices and tokens that are, at once, new and old.

Let me now shift to another dimension and address some of the key characteristics of images in a digital habitat. These insights are again designed to both address matters of theory and (ethnographic) practice.

One - Relationality: analysing and using images as they circulate in networked environments (such as social media, chats etc.) entails incorporating in our work also the broader system of metadata that surrounds them, that is of #’s, @’s, of contacts, groups, maps, comments, links, embeddings, emojis, etc.. Algorithmic distribution, “distributed agency” (Gehl 2009), and archival practices (Theunissen and Favero 2020 and Sandi 2020) are key aspects of this terrain and we need to learn to pay careful attention to them.

Two - Multimodality: attached to the above reflection is also the fact that images, as they come to us in digital terrains are intrinsically multimodal. It makes increasingly less sense to work within the framework of previously consolidated media distinctions. The strict separation of media between still and moving and between flat (2D) and immersive (3D, 360 degree) images is today challenged by the different types of formats that compose the terrain of present images. Just think of the GIF’s with their constant merging of the still and the moving; or of time lapses and the various other formats such as panoramas, 360 degrees, virtual reality, augmented reality, etc. that are hosted in the latest generation smartphones. Digital supports also bring different types of information to bear upon one another, offering an unprecedented merger of image, text, sound and geo-social metadata. And in addition to all these changes we must also take into account the blurring of the distinctions between the producer/image-maker/writer and the consumer/reader/viewer as well as that between the professional and the amateur. In this scenario, the doors for new collaborative endeavours are more than ever open. Again, let me point out that the smartphone is probably the most
evident tool for learning to exploit all these characteristics. It is also a perfect, to stick to one of the underpinning topics of this special issue, and precious heuristic tool, encouraging the broadest variety of subjects to teach themselves.

Three - Performativity: images in digital habitats do more than represent. For properly understanding and exploiting the potential of digital visuality, we must today move beyond the representational framework and enter that of performativity. In many contexts, such as that, to mention but a few examples of ‘transformative’ photographs and videos (see Theunissen forth for the terrain of gender transitioning), or of online training community groups (see Verplanken forth.), and why not also of standard selfies shared on Instagram, images can be seen to anticipate the events of the real world rather than to just narrate them. Human bodies catch up to their own image, and are crafted according to it, rather than the other way around in a dynamic that may remind us of non-Western epistemologies such as Advaita Vedanta for which the material world is an emanation of the mind and not the other way around. In these contexts, images are more like beacons and pointers towards the future than mirrors of the past. They remind us of Kandinski’s (1989) observations on art when he said that images today do not merely “reflect” and “echo”; they also function as a “prophecy” (p. 20). Images posted online can hence be seen not as diaries of past events but rather anticipations of what is to come, of a desirable world. This could also be said of 3D printing which translates an idea first, with the help of 3D design software such as CAD, into an image. At the second stage, this image is translated into an STL (stereolithography) file capable of splitting the image in horizontal layers hence creating an image/path for each layer. A specific material, called printing ink, looking like a plastic thread and conventionally made up of a variety of different materials (from recycled thermoplastic to wood, salt, cement, nylon, etc.) is at this point liquefied so that it can be progressively dropped to shape up an image layer by layer to then become an object. The object here too comes after the image.

Four - Temporality: in contemporary digital habitats, a new temporality is hence attributed to the act of viewing images which must be understood in terms of an ongoing dialectic of loss and transience. In an early analysis of Flickr and of the introduction on this site of the ‘photostream’, Murray (2008) addressed the critical role of this particular way (at the time still a relative novelty) for viewing and sharing images. She wrote: “[t]he photostream moves old pictures out of the way to make room for the new, which creates a sense of temporariness for the photos – as if each one had limited time in the spotlight before it would be replaced by something newer” (Murray 2008:155). Quoting Jake she added “[t]he nature of photography now is it’s in motion. It doesn’t stop time anymore, and maybe that’s a loss. But there’s a kind of beauty to it” (Murray 2008: 155). The sharing and viewing practices that characterise Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram signal an important move away from photography as a technology aimed at preserving time or, to use Bazin’s (1967) term, at “embalming” it. They rather serve the purpose of creating a shared, simultaneous experience of time, mediated by the image. McQuire (2013) has addressed this aspect suggesting that today “[p]hotography is becoming less about capturing ‘memories’ (as Kodak famously phrased it in the 20th century) than about commenting on present events as they are taking place” (p. 226). And in a first essay on MMS (Multimedia Messaging Services), Ito (2005) carefully analysed the sense of shared belonging capable of transcending spatial boundaries (see also Koskinen 2004) that images, in connection to that particular
digital affordance, were able to create. She opted to call this a case of “visual co-presence” (Ito 2005).

Six - Space: contemporary digital image-making and image-sharing tools and technologies also interpellate (and integrate) space in novel forms. The integration of image technologies with GPS positioning (cf. Lapenta 2011; Favero 2014; Favero and Theunissen 2018) has made possible new ways of incorporating metadata in images making them at once synonymous with time, place and also, as we have seen, through the various encapsulations of ‘#’s and ‘@’s, within a community. ‘#’s and ‘@’s make, in fact, visible the circle of connections that surround the various images that are posted for instance on social media, hence drawing a specific social geography around those who post. In the confluence of various types of metadata, digital images seem to realize the intuitive instances of ‘bifocality’ that Peters (1997) described when looking at the role of visual media in the context of ongoing dialogues between the local and the global. According to Peters, our experiences of the world are increasingly being mediated by technologies of representation (he used the example of satellite maps used in weather forecasts) that make us constantly aware of who we are in relation to the context in which we live. They ‘position’ us.

Seven - Embodiment: last but not least is the fact that images and camera technologies are today extensively embodied. This act of closing of the gap with the body can be detected at a variety of different levels. Partly, bodies are increasingly becoming the carriers of technologies and procures of images. This is the case in the above-mentioned life-logging cameras, the small wearable cameras that, worn by the user, take a picture every 30 seconds or one minute. Here the control of framing and choice of time evade the choices of the photographer. The body of the latter becomes instead the true viewfinder and the camera algorithm itself takes over the role of decision-maker when it comes to selecting the moment in which to click. Another dimension of embodiment is the terrain of immersive images, i.e. of those images that tend to wrap (or “swallow” Favero 2018b) the maker and the viewer in their own space (for more see also Favero 2018a). But we are today also on the verge of a new possible change. With the Metaverse being launched and with the constant experimentation with wearable glasses, augmented reality lenses etc., we are today on the cusp of the screen being possibly overtaken. Smartphone and photographic cameras may not be the repositories of the act of making and viewing images in the nearby future. This space may be occupied by other tool acting form nearby (and why not also within) the human body.

So, from social media to 3D printing, from VR, MR, AR, XR, to iDocs and wearable cameras, images evidently do much more than ‘illustrating’, ‘reflecting’, or ‘capturing’ the world out there. They rather concur at its very crafting. They are performative, transformative and ask us to look more, as Mitchell (2006) anticipated, at what they ‘want’ and ‘do’ rather than at what they stand in for. Increasingly multisensory and participatory, they stitch together users with one another and with the world that surrounds them. Images today are, hence, invested by a duty of doing many (and at times contradictory) things at once: of representing and presenting, of presencing, crafting and connecting. This mirrors what Manovich said about digital photographs being ‘paradoxical’ objects that are ‘radically breaking with other modes of visual representation while at the same time reinforcing these modes’ (Manovich 1995:240). An approach to contemporary visualities needs to take these shifts into consideration.
Concluding Remarks on Collaboration, Mediation and Comparison

The scenario that I have painted above quite evidently seems to address the three key words that stitch together this special issue, i.e. collaboration, mediation and comparison. Let me start with the first of the three terms.

In the practices that I described above, collaboration and participation emerge indeed as key dimensions. Digital visuality seems to invite us to integrate different forms of interaction. As I demonstrated above, digital images ask you to constantly play with them, to share them, to add metadata hence enlarging their scope of action. As promptly identified by De Musso, I too identify the terrain of iDocs as a leading space carrying the promise of the possibility for a more integrated, multimodal and participatory approach. As I have discussed elsewhere (Favero 2017, 2019), the world of iDocs is better understood as a continuum that goes from the ‘active’, to the ‘participatory’ and the ‘immersive’. With the first of these terms, ‘active’, I refer to those documentaries that offer the viewers a variety of angles from which to explore the materials that make up the documentary itself; with “participatory” I instead address primarily the creation of new materials; and finally “immersive” iDocs, are in my view, the ones aiming more explicitly at closing the gap between the image and the everyday lived experiences of the viewer (both physically and metaphorically). I absolutely see the potential for incorporating this particular visual form. As I have earlier suggested (Favero 2019), iDocs can, in the context of research and teaching, function not only as tools for communicating research results but also, and primarily, for producing new (collaborative and participatory) ethnographic evidence. Transforming a space of display into a space of on-going production of ethnographic evidence, iDocs carry the potential of functioning as a matrix of crowd-sourced data production and of constant critical reflection. While posing a threat to the epistemological authority of the ethnographer (the tension between “free clicking and authorial supervision” as suggested by De Musso), these practices open up the space for the progressive incorporation of a multiplicity of voices (of different researchers but also viewers) and for ongoing dialogues (between researcher and researcher, researcher and material, researcher and viewer). In the context of iDocs, publishing means continuing to produce materials and insights. This is a never-ending matrix of ethnographic production, a practice that is particularly valuable especially when the ethnographer, as in the case of De Musso, also dares to enter the terrain of coding approaching it as a form of ethnographic writing.

Platforms such as that of an iDoc can also function as precious areas for collaborative exchanges between scholars. This is a dimension of the work that the present issue is sharing that I appreciated the most. In line with the theoretical framework I described above, digital tools seem to ignite this phenomenon. They can provide us with valuable spaces, tools and techniques for developing work in teams. I explored this some years ago with the design of EthnoAlly, a tool for making and organising multimodal fieldnotes. Besides functioning as a personal assistant for ethnographers in their exploration of people and places, this is a participatory tool that researchers can use with their interlocutors and colleagues. Similarly, to an iDoc, EA allows for the almost immediate sharing of materials of a varied nature (still and moving images, sounds, maps, speed of movement, written notes). Multimodal in nature, spaces of digital
visualia can function as tools for conducting what I call "multimodal elicitation" (Favero and Theunissen 2018), a key ethnographic technique that in my view still remains at the centre of ethnographic practice and that can today be revived thanks (and not in opposition) to the new. Multimodality (and a dialogue across the human and the algorithmic) characterises the contribution by Plajas, Ragazzi and de Ven. Maps, diagrams, snapshots become here more than illustrations but a proper terrain on which new directions and ideas are produced. Morphing into a more-than-human creature (we are forever indebted to Donna Haraway for her endless inspiration), this terrain becomes in their narration like a proper being, a new actor, lending its body to the making (and not just representation) of knowledge. The collaborative aspect is also dominating in Walstra’s contribution. Addressing the multifaceted aspects of photo elicitation across different media and in groups, it provides us with a beautiful bridge between the old and the new.

The concept of mediation is another key term at the centre of this special issue. I think I have unravelled it enough in the previous passages, stressing the extent to which mediations are always at the core of our own ways of “being in the world”. As I made obvious already above, the digital is just one more way in which we mediate our experience of the world. And this mediation, as rightly pointed out in the special issue, is also an act of creating togetherness. So, bringing together these two terms and ambitions (collaboration and mediation) is the way in which digital tools build togetherness. Gracjasz’s contribution provides us with a precious set of reflections on this while offering a link between the established and the emergent. In her work, the camera appears as the mediator between different actors, between the researcher’s experiences and those of the interlocutors and spaces that make up her field. This leads me to reflect back upon the need to envision the camera more and more today not as an exceptional intervention upon the environments that we study but as a kind of natural prolongation of our body/mind complex, a kind of link between the self and the other, the observer and the observed. The smartphone, I believe, is the key tool for opening up this relation especially with our interlocutors. But I cannot hide my preference today for immersive technologies such as 360 degree cameras and drones when it comes to reflexively foregrounding and visualising the relation between observer and observed, the researcher and the world surrounding them. When we photograph, we should think about this aspect of togetherness and Gracjasz’s reflections indeed instigate that feeling. Vasile and Grasseni push photography into a hybrid terrain where it is a practice shared by the researcher and research participants but also by the archives of different sorts (social media and private ones). Photography is here a tool for entering the tense relations between citizens and institutions and for crafting a narrative around the conflicting visions of the “urban green”.

This brings me to the last keyword, the comparative dimension. In a somewhat old-fashioned anthropological spirit, I consider the comparative in anthropology as a yearning more than a concrete technique. In other scientific contexts, the comparative means something significantly different. I cherish instead the silent, tacit agreement underlying the implicit comparative nature of anthropological research that supports projects such as the one this special issue is dedicated to. Connecting to the topic of my paper, this comparative endeavour can today be seen as a natural prolongation of the very incorporation of digital tools and techniques. In line with my reflections at the beginning of this paper, we could say that the digital, like money is just another form of abstraction that makes possible, though its translation of the most varied types of data
into numeric codes, the comparison, proliferation and differentiations of things, hence
boosting also the production of knowledge. This proliferation can also help us provide
evidence for the various culturally situated discourses and practices in the terrain of
digital visuality.

Before I conclude, let me devote a few lines to the question of ethics in the terrain of
digital visuality. Even though voyeurism seems to be key to our multiple ways of being
online, scholars involved in this terrain need to do their best to protect their research
interlocutors, just like they do offline. Ethics is key to ethnography, no matter whether
in digital or analogue environments. I believe that the solid principles of informed
consent and mutual trust should be the pillars on which to build up this kind of work.
We should be wary of not mixing ethics up with privacy or risk prevention
management, as it is common to do today in the present neoliberal climate. We must
let ourselves be guided by the awareness of not exposing our interlocutors to any harm,
either as we conduct research nor when we communicate its results. Simultaneously
we must also reflect on sound ways for archiving and storing our materials. Let us
develop our own systems of folders, and not just rely on the search possibilities offered
by smartphones and computers. And especially let us keep our materials offline.
Commercial clouds are not safe places to store ethnographic material, from neither a
data management nor ethical point of view. I tend to trust manual solutions; multiple
copies in multiple hard drives in multiple locations. I encourage the reader to consider
this as an aspect not only of data management but importantly of ethics. So, ethics in
an expanded terrain constitutes a new challenge. It incorporates archiving practices,
search routines, traces and makes us rethink also conventional practices of
anonymisation. Ethics in a (post)digital habitat is defined in a space where personal
relations meet and merge with algorithmic logics, where the human meets the post-
human.

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NOTES


2. I have recently engaged with the term “present images” in my work to address both the images that characterize this particular historical conjunction (hence a specific temporal dimension) and also the quality of such images, with their performativity, reciprocity, relationality, and tactility. My attempt has been to move beyond the digital analogue divide also terminologically.

ABSTRACTS

With the ongoing penetration of digital technologies and tools across the world, the act of conducting visual research increasingly entails a capacity to incorporate a broader horizon characterised by multimodality and multisensoriality, by algorithmic and automated logics and importantly by new possibilities for collaboration. Such an expanded terrain requires an expanded ethnographic approach and also a grounded rethinking of what images (the key tools at our disposal) are, mean and do. Images today embrace a new role as multimodal, multi-sensory and multi-perspectival producers of relations, of material, spatial and temporal engagements with the world that surrounds them. Indirectly commenting upon the papers that make up this special issue, the present paper aims to offer some theoretical and methodological guidelines on how to address, understand and use the terrain of contemporary digital visual practices.

Avec la propagation continue des technologies et des outils numériques dans le monde entier, la conduite d’une recherche visuelle implique de plus en plus la nécessité d’intégrer une perspective nouvelle caractérisée par la multimodalité et la multisensorialité, par des logiques algorithmiques et automatisées et, surtout, par de nouvelles possibilités de collaboration. Un
terrain aussi vaste exige une approche ethnographique élargie et une nouvelle réflexion sur ce que sont, signifient et font les images (outils clés à notre disposition). Ces clichés jouent aujourd'hui un nouveau rôle en tant que producteurs multimodaux, multisensoriels et multiperspectifs de relations, d'engagements matériels, spatiaux et temporels avec le monde qui les entoure. En commentant indirectement les articles qui composent ce numéro spécial, le présent article vise à offrir quelques lignes directrices théoriques et méthodologiques sur la manière d'aborder, de comprendre et d'utiliser le terrain des pratiques visuelles numériques contemporaines.

Resumen

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Palabras claves: digital, visualidad digital, visualidad, smartphone, etnografía audiovisual, etnografía sensorial, estética digital y visual, etnografía expandida

Mots-clés: numérique, visualité numérique, visualité, smartphone, ethnographie audio-visuelle, ethnographie sensorielle, esthétique numérique et visuelle, ethnographie étendue

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