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Visual anthropology of the body and its material cultures

Edited by Marie-Pierre Julien and Denise Pettinato



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*The tazzut/taska forged by
Mohammed's father. The burn marks
on Mohammed's left hand are visible.*
Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

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Abstract

The first part of the introduction contextualizes, within French, Anglo-Saxon, and Italian academic circles, the contribution of (audio)visual methods to research focused on the relationships between bodies and their material cultures through the sensorimotor processes. In the second part, it brings together the articles in this issue around four themes: the methodological approaches deployed to reveal what remains unspoken in sensorimotor processes, based on identities; the way in which audiovisual methodologies transform the sensorimotor practices of anthropologists in the field; the insights these methodologies provide into processes of identification and subjectivation; and the epistemological transformations they bring about.

Keywords

Visual anthropology; material culture; bodies; sensory-motor skills

The authors

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Les savoir-faire et les habiletés corporelles, qu'ils nécessitent et engendrent dans un même mouvement, ont été un objet de l'anthropologie et du cinéma depuis leurs naissances simultanées à la fin du 19^e siècle (Piault 2000 ; Meloni 2023a). Mais cet objet a été théorisé de façon plus explicite avec le texte de Marcel Mauss (1950). Si en 1934¹, l'ethnologue français pensait pouvoir approcher la question en éliminant la culture matérielle pour rappeler l'importance des actions corporelles dans toutes les techniques qui parcourent le quotidien des sociétés humaines, son texte ne fut pas très concluant en ce que les objets traversent tous les exemples de son article (Julien 1999). Leroi-Gourhan, élève de Mauss, affirme que le lien entre l'humain et ses cultures matérielles remonte à l'adoption de la bipédie, qui a transformé le rapport entre les membres supérieurs et le cerveau, ouvrant à la fois sur la fabrication d'outil et sur le langage. En croisant paléontologie humaine et animale, génétique et biologie, soixante-dix ans plus tard, Jean-Pierre Warnier (1999 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025) préfère parler de paradigme culturo-bipédique au sens large : non seulement la bipédie a changé notre façon d'appréhender le monde mais en fonction de nos cultures matérielles, nous ne percevons pas ce monde de la même façon et nous y mouvons différemment.

Mais il fallut attendre les 30 dernières années en anthropologie et sociologie pour qu'un material turn rappelle l'importance des cultures matérielles, à l'exception notable mais marginalisée d'André Leroi-Gourhan (1943 ; 1945), André Haudricourt (1968), Robert Cresswell (1975) et les membres du laboratoire Techniques et culture (Martine Garrigues-Cresswell, Aliette Geistdoerfer ou Pierre Lemonnier par exemple) dont le premier bulletin éponyme est publié en 1976. Tous·tes se sont intéressé·es aux gestes et à leurs outils comme actions efficaces sur la matière (éléments naturels, plantes, animaux, etc.) et aux contextes socioculturels de cette efficacité. Parallèlement, Daniel Miller en Angleterre (1985 ; 1987) dessinait les liens conscients et inconscients entre les objets et les identités sociales. Céline Rosselin-Bareille et Jean-Pierre Warnier (2025) ont récemment recensé la richesse des recherches francophones et anglophones qui ont participé à cette prise en compte de la culture matérielle depuis la fin des années 1990, regrettant que l'accent soit rarement mis sur la centralité de la culture matérielle dans la subjectivation de chaque humain.

À partir des années 1990, les chercheur·es du groupe Matière à Penser² se sont plus particulièrement intéressé·es à la façon dont les corps et les cultures matérielles sont inextricablement liés dans les cultures motrices (Rosselin 1994 ; Warnier 1999 ; Roustan 2003) et la façon dont celles-ci conduisent à l'émergence de sujets différents en fonction des groupes socioculturels spécifiques au sein desquels ils agissent (Julien 2004 ; Naji 2008 ; Warnier 2004). Relisant Mauss (1950), ce groupe s'est appuyé sur ses idées innovantes pour saisir l'activité humaine, recouvrant tant les techniques professionnelles que les techniques de vie quotidienne, et démontrer son efficacité simultanée sur les

¹ Date de la conférence qui sera publiée en 1936 dans le *Journal de psychologie*, puis reprise dans le volume qui regroupe plusieurs textes de Mauss, avec une introduction de Levi-Strauss, en 1950.

² Cf. l'histoire qu'en a fait, en italien, Pettinato (2024).

matières transformées et l'hexis corporelle (Julien et Warnier 1999). Mauss a amorcé ainsi une réflexion développée plus tard d'un côté par Pierre Bourdieu (1980), sur les liens entre les habitus et l'hexis corporelle (Bert 2023) ; de l'autre, par les collègues de Techniques & Cultures pour travailler l'efficacité sur la matière. Pour ce faire, il décrit la façon dont les sociétés proposent des scripts d'action que les individus s'approprient de façons plus ou moins consciente jusqu'à en devenir experts et penser leur façon de faire comme naturelle. Dans son texte, le fondateur de l'anthropologie française mentionne à la fois des techniques traditionnelles et l'introduction de techniques nouvelles (en nage ou dans les formes de marche par le cinéma par exemple), ouvrant à l'idée d'une réflexivité des acteurs sur leurs habitus pour pouvoir adopter de nouvelles hexis corporelles. Il ne développera pas ce point peut-être parce que cela entraînerait vers une anthropologie en rupture trop importante avec la sociologie durkheimienne (Julien 1999 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025).

Or c'est dans ce double mouvement constant entre gestes préconscients et concentration sur l'activité que les objets sont incorporés et désincorporés dans l'action (Rosselin 1996 ; Warnier 1999 ; Julien et Rosselin-Bareille 2009 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025), que se font les apprentissages par essai-erreur ou jeu, que prennent place les accidents qui marquent les corps de façon spécifique (Lave 2011 ; Lave & Wenger 1991), que l'hexis corporelle se modifie (Faure 2000) et qu'opère la socialisation des perceptions sensorielles et cognitives (Wathelet et Candau 2013). Dans un numéro consacré au faire, Rosselin-Bareille (2017) présente le rapport à la matière comme constitutif des identités dans une dialectique " faire-être ", au sens où le sujet se construit dans le faire. Il s'agit alors de comprendre comment le faire est au centre du processus de subjectivation (au sens foucaldien) en étant non seulement dirigé sur la matière mais aussi sur soi à travers un travail de maîtrise de gestes, perceptions, émotions, cognition, qui place le sujet au centre de rapports de pouvoir multiples. En anthropologie, comment observer ce processus de subjectivation, la façon dont les conduites sensori-affectivo-cognitivo-motrices travaillent le sujet en lui permettant d'adapter constamment ses gestes aux contextes matériels et sociaux, avec des ratés qui peuvent lui être plus ou moins fatals physiquement, psychologiquement ou socialement ?

Ce numéro de *Visual Ethnography* s'intéresse à ce que l'anthropologie visuelle apporte à une anthropologie du corps et ses cultures matérielles, indéfectiblement unis par les sensori-motricités qui font notre humanité. Il s'agit d'une invitation faite aux auteur·rices à réfléchir sur leurs travaux en tenant compte de la contribution de ces méthodologies aux analyses des pratiques humaines, ces techniques du corps, d'objets ou de soi -en fonction d'où est mise la focale- qui provoquent à la fois assujettissement et pouvoir (Julien et Rosselin 2009 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025).

Dès ses fondements l'anthropologie sociale et culturelle, dans une démarche d'enregistrement avant disparition a utilisé, dessins, photos, films et enregistrements sonores pour rendre compte d'un fait social (Glass 2018). En sus, Boas montrait les enregistrements aux enquêtés pour avoir leurs explications sur le sens des activités sociales enregistrées et pour inverser les asymétries de pouvoir, posant les enquêtés autochtones comme sachant face à un scientifique euro-américain ignorant (Kalinowski,

Joseph 2017). Cet élément sera repris un siècle plus tard de deux façons : dans les entretiens d'explicitation à partir de documents audio-visuels (dessins, photos, films, audios) et dans les réflexions des anthropologues et des sociologues sur la place des enquêté·es dans la co-construction du document audiovisuel. En 1948, Leroi-Gourhan insiste sur la spécificité du film pour rendre compte du " jeu entre l'homme et le matière " (1983 [1943] : 63), du script socioculturel proposé aux individus pour agir efficacement. De son côté, Jean Rouch propose une réflexion sur le cinéma du réel depuis les années 1940, en s'intéressant à des faits sociaux en train de disparaître (Les magiciens de Wenzerbe 1949 ; Les tambours d'avant : Tourou et Bitti 1971) en Afrique puis à l'apparition de nouvelles subjectivations dans les sociétés contemporaines africaines (Les maitres fou 1954 ; Moi un Noir 1958) et dans l'Hexagone. Le film de Jean Rouch et Edgar Morin, Chroniques d'un été (1960) est fondateur d'une nouvelle socio-anthropologie filmique qui met l'accent sur la subjectivité de l'acteur et l'importance du quotidien pour donner à voir autrement le social (Piault 2004) : un social en pleine mutation qui rend compte du regard des jeunes sur le travail. Désormais l'image, fixe ou animée, ne rend pas seulement compte d'une réalité, mais elle est support à la réflexivité. Celle des chercheur·ses qui, certaines fois, ont utilisé l'image pour prendre de la distance avec des situations d'enquête particulièrement difficiles ou insupportables (Bourdieu 2003) et celle des acteurs, qui opèrent en transformant la situation d'enquête en une situation de co-production de connaissances.

Ainsi, la sociologie du travail se saisit de ces nouveaux médias dès les années 1960 mais, le regrette Géhin (2013), soit pour construire une réflexion épistémologique de l'audiovisuel sur le travail, soit pour produire une œuvre documentaire sur le travail, sans que ces deux démarches ne soient connectées. Dès les années 1960, Naville (1966) s'inquiète de la réduction à la production scientifique langagière et écrite sur le travail et souhaite une sociologie visuelle mais celle-ci tarde à se développer. Géhin résume les années 1980 et 1990 par l'effacement du travail dans le cinéma documentaire, deux publications s'interrogeant même sur les possibilités de filmer le travail (Images documentaires, 24, 1996 ; Champs visuels 6, 1997) dont l'activité n'est pas seulement le geste mais " une activité physique et mentale, individuelle, interactionnelle et collective " (Géhin 2013 : 19). Dans Champs visuels, des chercheur·ses du CNRS en sociologie et ergonomie, séparent recherche et réalisation : le film comme outils de recherche pour analyser l'activité en situation et les interactions entre gestes et paroles au travail, comme outil d'auto-confrontation ou de confrontation croisée, versus le film comme réalisation qui permet aux auteur·rices d'analyser la fabrication des films et les difficultés de la collaboration entre chercheur·ses et professionnel·les de l'image.

De leur côté, durant les années 1970 et 1980, les anthropologues des techniques utilisent le film à des fins de recherche pour rendre compte de la chaîne opératoire. Mais à la fin des années 1980, Claudine de France insiste le double rôle de la caméra : enregistrement de gestes et projection à des personnes non présentes lors du tournage (les spectateur·rices), en proposant de réfléchir sur la triade filmé·e/filmeur·e/spectateur·rices (Buob 2017) et sur la relation instaurée par la situation anthropologique (Piault 2000). Cette réflexivité entraîne les anthropologues visuels des

deux côtés de la Manche, dans deux directions : révéler les hypothèses qui ont prévalu au film et leurs conséquences sur la construction de celui-ci (Ruby 2000) et intégrer cette réflexivité au film (Pink 2003). Parallèlement, les anthropologues des techniques insistent sur la subjectivité des acteurs qui transpire à travers les choix techniques qu'ils font en situation filmée. Tous·tes se retrouvent dans l'idée soulignée par Buob (2009) que la présence de la caméra a des conséquences sur le déroulement technique (Pink 2015 ; McDougall 2005), sur l'importance de la prise en compte des rapports filmeur·se/filmé·e et de la subjectivité assumée de l'image (Lallier 2009 ; Papinot 2012). Ces anthropologues des techniques s'intéressent plus particulièrement aux interactions entre acteurs dans les situations de travail et à l'acte filmique comme enregistrement de ces paroles en situation. Le travail est désormais filmé dans sa triple dimension : gestuelle (Buob 2009 et 2020 ; Gowland 2015 et 2020), au sein de relations sociales (Lallier 2009 ; Marchand 2010b, 2021) et au cœur de la subjectivité de l'acteur (Géhin 2013).

Les années 2000 ouvrent aussi à des échanges pluridisciplinaires permettant à chacun·e, spécialistes des études audiovisuelles et chercheur·ses en sciences sociales, d'analyser les images du travail depuis leurs paradigmes disciplinaires (Géhin 2013 : 29). Ainsi, à partir des années 2010, les sociologues du travail mettent beaucoup en avant la co-production entre chercheurs et acteurs, la réflexivité sur les rapports sociaux engendrés et ce que les images font à l'enquête (Meyer et Papinot 2017) et s'intéressent aux habitus qu'on ne peut décrire par les mots (Dant 2004). De façon un peu caricaturale sûrement, nous dirions que les anthropologues des techniques français se concentrent sur les façons de saisir par l'image (et le langage) les savoirs et les savoir-faire, alors que les collègues anglo-saxons, dans la filiation de Lave et Wengler (1991), cherchent à saisir le savoir-faire situé et sensoriel (Wood 2006), la transmission non-verbale, les apprentissages par corps, l'éducation à l'attention (Gowland 2018). Que révèlent ou cachent les images, qu'est-ce qui leur échappe mais peut réapparaître lors d'échanges verbaux autour du film (Gowland 2020) ?

Dans le même temps, les recherches sur la culture visuelle ne s'arrêtent pas aux films ou aux photos : les esquisses qui jusqu'au XIXe siècle était une trace intime de l'ethnographe sur le terrain et trouvaient place dans les carnets (Malinowski 1922 ; Boas 1927 ; Mead 1975) sont désormais prises en compte non seulement comme données, mais comme corpus de la restitution des résultats de l'enquête et dispositif de co-construction du savoir avec les interlocuteur·rices. Aujourd'hui, la recherche en sciences sociales s'est enrichie d'autres formes visuelles comme les collages, les dessins, les bandes dessinées (Hendrickson 2008 ; Taussig 2011 ; Sopranzetti 2019 ; Fassin et al. 2020 ; Kusk 2020 ; Barancourt 2023 ; Theodossopoulos, Bonanno 2025 ; D'Onofrio 2025). Compte tenu des expériences professionnelles respectives des deux autrices de cette introduction, il nous semble intéressant de rappeler les influences qui ont opéré entre les recherches françaises et italiennes sur les cultures matérielles, dont l'histoire a été retracée par un article de Pietro Meloni (2024), et quelques approches italiennes récentes de leurs traitements (audio)visuels.

En Italie, Alberto Mario Cirese est précurseur en se saisissant des travaux d'André Leroi-Gourhan³. Anthropologue, il fonde une école formant des étudiants comme Giulio Angioni, Pier Giorgio Solinas ou Pietro Clemente, centrée sur l'étude des techniques et de la culture matérielle, d'abord à Cagliari (Sardaigne), puis à Sienne (Toscane), où il s'installe dans les années 1970. Tous intègrent immédiatement le dessin pour représenter les techniques et les gestes du travail (Solinas 1989) sur les terrains de production agricole et artisanale. En Sardaigne, Angioni s'intéresse au monde rural, en développant une approche matérialiste plus marxiste, liée aux séquences techniques du travail agricole (1986). Par ailleurs, il réexamine une autre thématique de Leroi-Gourhan, l'esthétique fonctionnelle, qu'il analyse avec une entrée par les classes sociales. D'autres recherches sardes portent sur l'analyse du travail artisanal, comme celui des tisseuses (Caoci 2005 ; Tiragallo 2013), ou le travail des mineurs avec une articulation du dire et du faire (Paola Azteni 2007). A Sienne, Clemente et Solinas se focalisent sur les techniques traditionnelles à partir des objets du monde rural, et en milieu urbain sur l'artisanat en voie de disparition, comme celui du fer. Ils se rendent régulièrement dans les ateliers des forgerons avec leurs étudiant·ses en anthropologie afin de transmettre les méthodologies de recherche sur les cultures matérielles.

Les traditions françaises et italiennes se lient à partir des années 1980 grâce à des séjours de recherche co-organisés par l'Université d'Aix-en-Provence et l'Université de Sienne, dans la Val Germanasca par exemple, durant plusieurs années consécutives (Porcellana, Viazzo 2014). Les ethnographies portaient sur les traditions populaires, le plurilinguisme, les structures familiales, les techniques de chasse et celle de l'artisanat, en se centrant sur les cultures matérielles. Ces recherches ont impliqué plusieurs enseignant·es, dont Giulio Angioni, Pietro Clemente, Pier Giorgio Solinas, Hélène Balfet (alors directrice du Musée de l'Homme), Christian Bromberger et Georges Ravis-Giordani. La particularité du projet était qu'il impliquait aussi de jeunes diplômé·ses – aujourd'hui anthropologues reconnu·ses – comme Rita Astuti, Sergio dalla Bernardina, Duccio Canestrini, Fabio Dei, Simonetta Grilli, Giovanni Kezich, Fabio Mugnaini, Silvia Stefanoni et Fabio Viti. Jusqu'à la fin du 20ème siècle, ces échanges entre les universités françaises et italiennes donnent lieu à des ouvrages et articles dans des revues comme *Technique & Culture*, *Terrain* ou *Ethnologie Française*.

À partir des années 2000, des auteur·rices comme Fabio Dei, Matteo Aria, Pietro Meloni et Valentina Lusini maintiennent et transmettent l'intérêt pour la culture matérielle, dialoguant avec les travaux francophones (Mauss, Baudrillard, Bromberger, Warnier, Chevallier, Monjaret, Chevalier, Julien, Rosselin) et anglophones (Appadurai, Kopytoff, Miller, Löfgren), en les appliquant au contexte italien (espace domestique, don, art, consommation). Meloni, par exemple, s'intéresse beaucoup au rapport entre culture matérielle et anthropologie visuelle, en utilisant la photo dans l'observation des consommations, dans l'analyse de l'imaginaire lié à l'espace rural contemporain et dans la réflexion sur des thèmes plus classiques comme la chasse ou l'habiter (Meloni 2018 ;

³ Dont d'une première traduction en italien en 1977.

2023b). Dans son sillage, Denise Pettinato travaille plus particulièrement le rapport entre la sensori-motricité et les objets dans l'espace d'un café à travers le collage (2025).

Pour conclure cette première partie de mise en contexte du numéro, une explication sur notre choix de couverture. Cette photographie, prise au cours d'un entretien d'élicitation mené avec un forgeron sur son travail de fabrication d'un peigne à tisser (Anti-Atlas marocain, juin 2023) par Marie-Pierre Julien, condense des éléments qui traversent ce numéro. Ainsi, les mains respectives de l'interlocuteur et de l'anthropologue témoignent de la co-action pour produire du savoir scientifique, rappelant aussi combien ce savoir s'ancre dans la matérialité des corps et des matières, ici l'objet produit mais aussi l'ordinateur sur lequel la chercheuse montre les extraits de film mis en discussion. La proximité des mains suggère deux axes développés par les auteur·rices du numéro à propos de l'usage de l'(audio)visuel sur leur terrain : la proximité des corps et leurs ajustements, apprentissages et transformations sensorimotrices des anthropologues comme des interlocuteur·rices ; les conséquences épistémologiques de ces méthodologies d'enquêtes.

Les thématiques abordées par les auteur·rices de ce numéro sont nombreuses, nous n'aborderons ici que quatre grandes thématiques pour les faire dialoguer. Ainsi, tous les textes décrivent méticuleusement leurs dispositifs méthodologiques et analysent la façon dont l'(audio)visuel permet de montrer et de faire dire ce qui est pour les acteur·ices de l'ordre de l'évidence, difficilement verbalisables, voire même pensable. Ce faisant, ils et elles s'intéressent à ce que ces méthodologies révèlent des rapports entre chercheur·ses et personnes rencontrées. Ensuite, les textes analysent la sensori-motricité spécifique des chercheur·ses et des interlocuteur·rices lors de l'usage des méthodes audiovisuelles. Par ailleurs, les auteur·rices interrogent l'accès ouvert par les mises en images (photos, vidéos, dessins), et les mises en mots qui les accompagnent, à la dimension socioculturelle de ce que certain·es appellent l'identité ou l'identification, d'autres la subjectivité ou la subjectivation, tant des personnes rencontrées que des chercheur·ses. Enfin, tous les textes donnent à penser les transformations épistémologiques de l'anthropologie proposées par une participation plus affirmée des personnes rencontrées à la réflexion scientifique, engageant une réflexivité sur les injustices épistémiques.

1. Révéler le non-dit ou l'indicible

Tous les textes proposés partent du constat de la difficulté éprouvée par les acteurs sociaux et les anthropologues à verbaliser la sensori-motricité développée dans les "actions quotidiennes qui se produisent spontanément et échappent à la pensée consciente, et qui sont souvent impossibles à expliquer" (Mohan, Douny 2020 : 17). Dans ce numéro, les textes abordent la pratique du skate à Tijuana (Buchetti), la pratique religieuse de l'habillage et de la procession de la Vierge de Cocharcas dans les faubourgs de Rome (Buonvino et De Grazia), la pratique de la danse entre un danseur professionnel et des robots (Rosselin-Bareille et Gamet), la pratique circassienne (Agostinucci et Andrieu), la vie quotidienne de zonard·es en France, à Nancy (Turri-Hoelken), le travail d'un forgeron dans l'Anti-Atlas marocain (Naji et Julien), la transformation de la vie

quotidienne auprès des sargasses échouées sur certaines plage des îles caribéennes françaises (Ménez), la culture de l'arbre alerce au sud du Chili et de l'Argentine (Freddi et González), le travail journalistique dans la presse culturelle (Koenig).

La question du traitement non-verbal de ce qui est observé se pose à l'anthropologie depuis sa création. Mais, les auteur·rices de ce numéro s'intéressent à la façon dont les images (photos, vidéo et dessins) permettent aux personnes rencontrées de mettre des mots sur ce qu'ils ou elles ressentent ou analysent d'une situation, et la façon dont ces ressentis corporels participent à régir leurs actions. Dans ce corpus de textes écrits, visuels et verbalisation s'articulent toujours puisque les chercheur·ses produisent un savoir principalement verbalisé sur ce que vivent les personnes rencontrées. Mais la place du visuel est différente selon les protocoles méthodologiques et l'analyse de ces protocoles produit une réflexivité sur les rapports sociaux mis en lumière et induits par la recherche.

Dans son texte, Andrea Buchetti interroge la façon de rendre compte de la pratique de skate à Tijuana par le texte et par le film, dans un contexte où l'image est consubstantielle de cette pratique urbaine. Aussi, filmer les personnes rencontrées n'est pas une démarche a priori difficile, plutôt une évidence. D'ailleurs, Tony, un skateur de Tijuana, lui demande de faire un film sur " eux " c'est-à-dire leur pratique spécifique du skate dans une grande ville mexicaine, qu'il compare à une religion au regard de la façon dont elle organise leur quotidien. Pour autant, ce n'est pas en filmant que l'auteur a accès à l'expertise urbaine de ses interlocuteurs. Si des skateurs locaux l'ont sollicité pour un film, c'est en regardant des films de skateurs californiens et en nommant explicitement les différences avec leurs propres pratiques : leur capacité à éviter " les nids-de-poule, fissures dans le béton et surfaces rugueuses, [...] la circulation, le chiens errants et le rues bondées " est une pratique qui " rend les skateurs de Tijuana *más mañosos* (obsessionnels, résolu), mais aussi *más suaves* (doux, gracieux) comparée aux skateurs américains, avec leur architecture et leur style épurés ". Finalement les skateurs ne donnent pas suite à leur demande renvoyant Buchetti à ses compétences scripturaires et verbales d'intellectuel européen car un film aurait demandé des compétences en pratiques locales du skate, pour les suivre dans les rues de Tijuana, qu'il n'a manifestement pas (parce qu'ayant pratiqué le skate à l'adolescence en Europe). Pourtant, les vidéos produisent de la connaissance lorsque chercheur et skateurs analysent ensemble le skating américain mais, également lorsque le projet du film échoue, interrogeant le chercheur sur les raisons de cette annulation et l'amenant à réfléchir sur sa place sur le terrain.

Dans le texte présenté en suivant, l'acte de filmer est au cœur de la démarche d'ethnographie visuelle de Michela Buonvino et Daria De Grazia et façonne l'ensemble du processus de production de connaissances et des relations engagées avec les interlocuteur·rices. Leur travail porte sur l'accompagnement au long cours d'une communauté catholique péruvienne dans la banlieue de Rome, à travers le culte qu'elle voue à la Vierge de Cocharcas, culte médiatisé depuis quelques années par une statue importée depuis le Pérou. La migration est l'élément biographique qui lie la statue et des migrant·es péruvien·nes au sein d'une religion partagée avec la population italienne

autochtone, et la procession annuelle de cet objet est un moment important pour l'ensemble de la communauté. La caméra a été non pas, comme beaucoup le redoute, un frein à l'entrée sur le terrain mais un facilitateur donnant un rôle aux anthropologues dans la communauté. Elle leur a permis d'observer et de témoigner du lien entre les corps des fidèles et la statue et d'enregistrer les témoignages des migrant·es pour comprendre la façon dont ce vécu spécifique de la religion catholique leur permet de trouver une place en Italie. Le texte produit une réflexivité sur la place des chercheuses et des migrant·es dans la recherche du fait de la centralité de l'audiovisuel.

Le travail de Céline Rosselin-Bareille et David Gamet porte sur un protocole complètement différent. Les caméras sont aussi le média principal d'enregistrement des données pour comprendre le couplage et les " ratés, hésitations, mouvements de reculs, sursauts, voire réactions de peur et imprévisibilité " entre un danseur et trois types de robots qu'il ne connaît pas et qu'il n'a donc pas encore intégré à sa sensori-motricité. C'est justement parce que le sujet ici n'a pas encore " fait corps " avec ces objets, qui ne sont pas encore ses objets, qu'il est possible de questionner le rapport entre leurs deux matérialités. En filmant et en questionnant ensuite le danseur et les ingénieurs sur ce qui a été filmé, les deux chercheurs veulent saisir l'apport de ce dispositif méthodologique dans la compréhension des techniques d'objet. Comment penser l'inclusion de la caméra et du cinéaste dans ce couplage ? Comment garder la réflexivité anthropologique à l'intérieur du processus ?

Le travail de Marie Agostinucci et Bernard Andrieu mobilise un autre média visuel, le dessin, pour comprendre la sensori-motricité des circassiens enchâssée sur leurs agrès. Dans la tradition médicale de l'identification par le dessin de la douleur, les auteur·rices mobilisent l'esquisse comme moyen d'exprimer ce qui est difficile à percevoir et à verbaliser dans le travail corporel. L'article interroge l'indicible des gestes quotidiens de l'expert, l'invisibilisation des liens entre les corps en mouvement et leurs cultures matérielles et la transformation des corps et des objets incorporés (Julien, Rosselin 2009 ; Nourrit, Rosselin-Bareille 2017). Ce qui distingue un expert d'un apprenti est l'acquisition d'un savoir-faire auquel on ne prête plus attention (Warnier 1999). Le dessin est utilisé ici comme une pratique d'excorporation, qui permet aux circassiens de prendre conscience et d'interroger leurs performances autrement que dans la sensori-motricité. Les esquisses, produites par les circassiens elles et eux-mêmes, montrent ce qui est invisible : la connexion entre les émotions et la fatigue, l'attention portée aux différentes parties du corps pendant la performance, l'entrelacement entre les aspects sensoriels, émotionnels, cognitifs et moteurs et la place laissée à l'imaginaire.

Dans leur contribution, Myriem Naji et Marie-Pierre Julien s'attachent à un moment particulier d'une recherche qui s'étale sur une vingtaine d'années, menée par Myriem Naji, auprès d'un forgeron de l'Anti-Atlas marocain. Afin de comprendre sa subjectivation de forgeron, en 2023, les chercheuses ont filmé un entretien d'éllicitation au cours duquel l'artisan dialoguait avec les anthropologues autour d'extraits vidéo de son travail, confrontant leurs lectures respectives des images filmées. Les chercheuses mettent en évidence trois dispositifs sociotechniques dans cette recherche - le dispositif filmique qui prend place au sein de celui de la forge pendant la journée de tournage et celui de

l'entretien d'éllicitation –, dont l'articulation permet différents types de verbalisation. Cette étude de cas, permet aux deux anthropologues de travailler les apports spécifiques de chacune des méthodes (la vidéo, l'entretien d'éllicitation et les entretiens et observations ethnographiques réalisés depuis 20 ans) dans l'établissement du dialogue entre l'artisan et les anthropologues pour faire émerger la connaissance scientifique fondée sur une forme de verbalisation particulière au sein de rapports postcoloniaux.

Le travail d'Amandine Turri Hoelken rend compte également de la mobilisation de plusieurs méthodes dans une enquête au long cours sur le quotidien d'une quinzaine de zonard·es à Nancy. Après une période d'observation ethnographique sans médiation audiovisuelle, des photos ont été prises par la chercheuse pour servir de support aux échanges verbaux sur les pratiques quotidiennes du groupe puis, des photos ont été produites par les personnes rencontrées elles-mêmes. Ces différents usages de la photo ont alimenté non seulement le dialogue avec la chercheuse et la production de connaissances sur le quotidien des zonard·es, mais aussi la diffusion des résultats de l'enquête au grand public lors de deux scénographies concertées, qui articulent visuels et verbalisations (vidéo-projection, tirages photos et sons) ainsi que la présence de certain·es zonard·es. L'article reposant sur deux registres d'écriture, narratif et analytique, interroge comment la scénographie transforme les modes narratifs et reconfigure les rapports entre chercheur·ses, participant·es et spectateur·rices.

La contribution de Florence Ménez porte sur un terrain en cours : la souffrance des habitant·s de certains quartiers des îles caribéennes aux prises avec l'odeur de décomposition et la toxicité des sargasses, une algue à l'échouage invasif. Deux méthodes visuelles sont utilisées pour rendre compte de ce qui est pénible à dire. Les photos prises par la chercheuse permettent soit de documenter l'avancée de l'échouage des sargasses sur la côte, soit de montrer les effets corrosifs du gaz sur les objets du quotidien. Des dessins produits par deux membres de l'équipe de recherche permettent de rendre compte des effets corporels de ces gaz sur les interlocuteur·rices. Photos, dessins et commentaires alimentent ainsi en triangulation la verbalisation des sensations et des émotions des individus, ce qu'ils craignent et ressentent : les fortes odeurs qui imprègnent l'air les jours de prolifération des algues sur le littoral, la fatigue permanente des habitants, leur frustration et leurs angoisses face à la perception physique de cet air contaminé et sa pénétration dans le corps. Cette méthodologie permet d'explorer les conséquences de cette contamination qui sont encore médicalement et biologiquement peu connues. Ménez utilise l'ethnographie visuelle pour illustrer et verbaliser l'articulation entre visible et invisible.

Le photo-essay de Andrea Freddi et Lucaz González aborde aussi la question de l'exposition du résultat de la recherche grâce aux photographies mais, à l'inverse du texte de Turri Hoelken, les photographies d'alerce font émerger des souvenirs précis chez les spectateur·rices, liés à des lieux ou à des moments de vie passé (parfois l'enfance). L'exposition débute par un malentendu qui interroge les conséquences inattendues de cette restitution par les images. Tandis que certain·es visiteur·ses souhaitent s'appropriier les photographies, allant jusqu'à confier aux auteurs leur désir de les voler, d'autres croient y reconnaître les maisons de leur enfance, de leurs vacances ou les lieux de leur

jeunesse. Les images finissent ainsi par devenir des projections d'un passé idéalisé - en lien avec les récentes revalorisations touristiques de ce matériel. Pourtant, pour les auteurs, les photographies reflètent une relation différente, bien plus ambivalente avec l'alerce, une relation profondément enracinée dans l'histoire locale, liée aux dynamiques de la colonisation et de la modernisation ouvrant sur les relations entre arbres et humains.

Enfin, le photo-essay de Léa Koenig, porte sur l'observation et les photographies argentiques prises à côté des entretiens menés avec des journalistes culturels sur leur lieu de travail. Ce terrain est particulier du fait de la proximité d'une partie du travail des journalistes et des sociologues : enquête de terrain et méthodologie d'enquête (photos, dessins, observations, entretiens) où les journalistes ont une attitude parfois paternaliste avec la jeune chercheuse sur la réalisation de son terrain. Or, ses photographies déplacent l'échange, rendant compte de la matérialité des corps des journalistes, qui circulent dans les espaces des rédactions composés principalement d'espace partagés, ou de la coexistence de plusieurs matérialités de la presse : papier (journaux, photos) et numérique (la présence des ordinateurs). Elle provoque ainsi la réflexivité des journalistes qui remarquent les brouillons qui doivent être vérifiés avant la parution des journaux ou l'importance de la mise en espace des pages de journaux (par exemple, lors de la pratique du "mur"). Support à l'échange entre la chercheuse et ses interlocuteur·rices pourtant facilement bavard·es, le visuel change surtout ici les rapports sociaux hiérarchiques qui se sont établis au sein de l'enquête auprès de personnes qui sont des intervieweur·ses professionnel·les.

2. Transformer la sensori-motricité des anthropologues

Des techniques d'objet spécifiques sont à l'œuvre dans l'usage de l'enregistrement visuel sur le terrain ethnographique : la caméra sur un trépied ou à l'épaule, le smartphone, l'appareil argentique, le crayon, la tablette graphique, l'ordinateur, les panneaux d'exposition, le papier photo. Les auteur·rices de ce numéro se sont également intéressé·es à l'implication corporelle des chercheurs·ses dans les méthodologies visuelles et donc à la mobilisation spécifique de leurs sensori-motricités au cours de l'observation filmante, photographiante ou dessinante. À la suite de Rouch (1973) et de Pink (2006) les auteur·rices de ce volume abordent la transformation de la sensori-motricité de l'anthropologue par l'usage des appareils audiovisuels et la transformation de sa subjectivation. Mais cette sensori-motricité ne s'arrête pas au couplage de son corps avec son matériel, car l'usage de ce dernier lui donne un accès différent aux vécus des personnes rencontrées et à leurs propres liens avec leurs cultures matérielles.

Ainsi Buchetti, bien que skateur lui-même, n'arrive pas à suivre les skateurs de Tijuana dans les rues de leur ville qui disparaissent en le laissant seul derrière eux. Il doute alors d'avoir les compétences pour les filmer dans leur périple urbain, sentiment qui sera partagé par les skateurs locaux qui ne réitéreront pas leur demande qu'il les filme en action dans les rues mexicaines.

Buonvino et De Grazia sont immergées avec leur caméra dans la procession et les images témoignent de la proximité des corps dans ce moment paroxystique. Les chercheuses bougent dans un espace de réflexion partagé, qui se traduit par une

rencontre entre leurs corps et les corps d'autrui à travers la matérialité du dispositif audiovisuel. Grâce à ce corps-caméra, elles capturent des prières murmurées, des fragments de mains et de corps qui se placent devant l'objectif, et développent une sensorimotricité qui oriente leur présence, permet leur intégration dans le groupe, leur perception du sentiment d'appartenance et des imaginaires que la procession anime et mobilise.

Dans la recherche de Rosselin-Bareille et Gamet, le caméraman, au contraire, a besoin de "trouver sa place de cinéaste, un volume dans l'espace, qui assume, en outre, une distance et un point de vue". L'anthropologue filmant est alors un corps-caméra-trépied plus lourd que lorsque la caméra est à l'épaule, au déplacement plus bruyant, mais qui permet aussi au danseur d'identifier la place du caméraman dans l'espace de l'expérimentation. Ainsi se construit une synchronie entre robot, danseur et anthropologue-caméra-trépied qui modifie la sensorimotricité des deux acteurs humains.

Naji et Julien analysent une situation un peu différente. Les anthropologues et le forgeron sont tous·tes dans une activité professionnelle qui leur est propre : le forgeron forge et les anthropologues filment. Mais pour que le film soit réussi, il et elles doivent coopérer et intégrer réciproquement leurs activités. Le forgeron doit intégrer à sa sensorimotricité le matériel audiovisuel fragile et les corps des chercheuses, du traducteur et du caméraman. Ces derniers doivent tenir compte de la spécificité de la forge (chaleur, poussière, bruit) et du travail du forgeron (déplacements, accélération de la forge, interactions avec son adjoint).

Pour sa part, Turri Hoelken et quelques personnes de son terrain proposent aux spectateur·rices de deux expositions de s'immerger dans le quotidien des zonard·es en déambulant entre les photos, les sons et un montage vidéo aléatoire, ainsi que de personnes de la présence ponctuelle d'objets et de personnes rencontrées pendant la recherche et volontaire pour échanger. Elle propose ainsi de partager la confrontation entre ses perceptions d'anthropologue photographiante et des sons de la vie des zonard·es enregistrés, avec les photographies prises par ces dernier·es. En mobilisant plusieurs sens (vue, écoute, toucher, interaction humaine) elle propose aux spectateur·rices de passer outre leur jugement moral pour entrer dans un mode de vie qu'ils croisent mais qui leur est étranger.

Les méthodes (audio)visuelles développent d'autres expériences sensorielles (Pink 2009) : se placer parmi les objets et les corps d'autrui, dans les interstices entre ces corps, signifie voir, écouter, sentir, percevoir, mais aussi se revoir, se sentir, s'écouter, se percevoir. Le travail de découverte de l'autre aux prises avec ses cultures matérielles est ainsi aussi un travail de redécouverte de soi, nécessite de nombreux ajustements (Buonvino & De Grazia, Turri Hoelken) qui révèlent des hésitations (Rosselin-Bareille & Gamet) ou des échecs (Buchetti) mais aussi les freins auxquels se heurte l'observation filmante du fait des limites corporelles des anthropologues à supporter l'ambiance de la forge (Julien & Naji) ou les odeurs nauséabondes des sargasses échouées (Ménez).

3. Donner accès aux identifications et aux subjectivations

Si l'on considère les identités des sujets ou leur subjectivation comme des processus qui sont, en partie, le résultat de la socialisation des individus par les cultures matérielles, la façon dont les méthodes audiovisuelles peuvent en rendre compte traversent les différentes recherches présentées dans ce volume.

Dans la contribution d'Agostinucci et Andrieu, les dessins permettent de révéler des sensations sur lesquelles le patient ou le circassien ne sont habituellement pas incité à s'arrêter et à commenter, car ces sentiments ne trouvent souvent pas leur place dans la relation médecin-patient, fondée sur l'asymétrie et la distance, ni dans la performance du cirque qui prévoit une représentation où le public ne doit pas voir ce qui advient derrière les coulisses. La pratique experte invisibilise une subjectivation qui se révèle ici dans le dessin libre, permettant aussi aux interlocuteur·rices de réfléchir à partir de la représentation de leur corps en action sur leur propre subjectivation.

Pour Naji et Julien, l'enregistrement vidéo de l'action experte et sa mise en discussion lors d'entretien d'éllicitation avec le protagoniste ouvre un accès privilégié à la subjectivation de l'artisan. L'entretien permet à ce dernier de réfléchir sur sa position, prenant appui ou esquivant les questions des chercheuses, mais également en répondant aux remarques et questionnements des autres membres de la parenté qui assistent à l'entretien. L'entretien de vidéo-éllicitation donne accès à une description de sa perspective sur son artisanat et les rapports sociaux engendrés, la subjectivation se révélant comme un processus complexe. Ici le réseau des actions sur les actions des autres montre comment tout positionnement influence celui des autres membres, les sujets se co-construisent à travers des relations sociales, d'un travail sur soi, d'attentes, de stratégies, de tensions, d'ambiguïtés. Les autrices abordent d'ailleurs la façon dont elles font partie de ce réseau d'action et comment leur propre subjectivation de chercheuses est questionnée, et finalement renforcée, par l'usage de l'audiovisuel sur ce terrain.

Cette question est également traitée dans la contribution de Buchetti, dont les capacités de skateur sont questionnées à l'inverse de celles d'anthropologue : l'expertise se déploie dans le même espace et ici croise celle des interlocuteurs mais les deux savoir-faire sont bien distingués. Par ailleurs, les discussions autour des subjectivations des skateurs de Tijuana constituent le cœur des échanges du chercheur avec ses interlocuteurs : en quoi se distinguent-ils des skateurs états-uniens, mexicains ou européens, la place de la pratique dans leur quotidien et dans leur ethos. Mais ces échanges sont beaucoup plus informels que dans la recherche précédente et sont faits de sollicitations, de refus, de périodes de séparation, voire de conflits. En outre, à la différence des autres recherches, le(s) film(s) n'est (ne sont) pas un moyen d'enregistrement de ces interactions, ils en sont les supports comme le décrivait MacDougall (1998 : 89).

Enfin, dans son article, Ménez analyse comment les dessins permettent de saisir des processus de subjectivation des personnes affectées par ce danger - présent et reconnu par les institutions publiques mais dont les effets restent incertains. Les dessins produits par deux membres de l'équipe permettent de montrer la façon dont les personnes rencontrées ressentent leur corps contaminé par le gaz émis par les algues.

En revanche, les photographies montrent des objets du quotidien oxydés qui ne fonctionnent plus et finissent au rebut, témoignant du dérèglement des manières d'habiter le monde de leurs propriétaires. Comme traces de ce qui est en train de se passer (Ginzburg 1980), ces objets donnent accès au processus de subjectivation qui doit désormais intégrer une gestion de l'inquiétude écologique.

4. Transformer les épistémologies

Enfin, une dernière thématique traverse les textes est la question des déplacements épistémiques engagés par les méthodes visuelles : lorsque le savoir scientifique ne passe plus seulement par l'écrit, le savoir des personnes rencontrées prend une place différente dans la recherche. MacDougall distinguait déjà en 1989 deux types de réflexivité : une réflexivité " profonde " rendue possible par le médium visuel (la vidéo en ce qui le concerne) qui met en lumière les relations mêmes qui constituent le travail ethnographique. Et, une réflexivité " explicative ", plus caractéristique de l'ethnographie écrite qui implique une réflexion rétrospective sur ces relations (MacDougall 1998 : 89) en général opérée par le ou la chercheur·se. La première forme de réflexivité est la conséquence du fait que les méthodes audiovisuelles, en sortant de l'écrit, peuvent plus facilement prendre en compte la réflexivité des interlocuteur·rices qui participent à la recherche. Ces dernier·es ne sont plus alors considéré·es seulement comme des enquêté·es mais ont la possibilité de participer à l'analyse, d'autant que tou·te praticien·ne est réflexif·ve quant à ses actions. Les méthodes audiovisuelles engagent donc souvent les recherches à développer une épistémologie plus collaborative. La question éthique liée à l'usage des images et des sons et la question de la numérisation des données entraînent les chercheur·ses à questionner la recherche extractive (prendre les données sans rendre compte de leurs usages aux personnes concernées) et à mettre en place une recherche plus participative⁴.

Buonvino et De Grazia insistent beaucoup dans leur texte sur la façon dont la place de la caméra tout au long de leur enquête leur a permis d'adopter une épistémologie plus participative. Cela a commencé par l'écoute des personnes rencontrées pour choisir les cadrages des images de l'habillement de la statue de la Vierge, par exemple. En suivant les conseils de Manuel sur les façons de filmer l'habillement, pour tenir compte de la pudeur de la statue et des dévots qui en prennent soin, De Grazia ajuste son cadrage en reconnaissant l'expertise et le ressenti de son interlocuteur. Les autrices seront aussi particulièrement attentives à la présence à l'écran de tous les protagonistes dans la version finale, cette exigence transformant le processus de co-editing, le résultat final du montage et sa réception par les interlocuteurs·rices, qui voient l'inclusion de leurs expériences personnelles.

La co-production du savoir semble plus évidente dans la recherche de Rosselin-Bareille et Gamet puisque les protagonistes du film sont tous des chercheurs dont l'expertise respective permet d'alimenter les résultats de la recherche collective : le

⁴ Le dialogue sur cette question spécifique va se prolonger dans un atelier coordonné par M.-P. Julien, D. Pettinato et M. Naji, au congrès 2026 de l'AFEA (Association Française d'Ethnologie et d'Anthropologie) - Marseille du 28 au 30 octobre.

danseur, les ingénieurs qui ont fabriqués les trois types de robots et les deux anthropologues dont l'un est spécialiste des méthodologies filmiques et l'autre de l'anthropologie des cultures matérielles. Même si les deux anthropologues sont à l'initiative du protocole méthodologique, chacun·e co-produit par son savoir les résultats de la recherche.

Dans la recherche de Julien et Naji, la participation se retrouve à plusieurs niveaux. Lors de l'observation filmante, elle est dans l'attention portée par l'artisan aux chercheuses filmantes et à leurs matériels. Lors des discussions engendrées par l'entretien d'explicitation, le forgeron change de statut en livrant sa lecture de ses logiques d'action et de la façon dont son expertise prend place dans un réseau d'actions plus large, voire de choisir ce qu'il va expliquer et ce qu'il va taire. Enfin, le fils de l'artisan va récupérer le film des anthropologues sur le travail de son père pour en mettre des parties sur les réseaux sociaux, devenant acteur de sa réputation.

Dans les deux recherches qui mobilisent le dessin, le rôle de dessinateur·rices n'est pas assigné à la même personne. Si la recherche d'Agostinucci et Andrieu confie cette tâche aux sujets eux-mêmes, de façon libre, dans celle de Ménez, ce sont deux graphistes de l'équipe qui les produisent en écoutant, puis en discutant avec les interlocuteur·rices. Agostinucci et Andrieu valorisent la complémentarité entre l'écriture et le dessin, la première complétant le deuxième sans le dominer. Ménez met en avant la collaboration entre la chercheuse, les graphistes et les interlocuteur·rices pour saisir les effets du gaz invisible et montrer les nouveaux rapports des corps des habitants avec leurs cultures matérielles (les objets, le littoral, la maison, l'air), jusqu'à imaginer ce qui se passe dans la dimension, microscopique, d'une cellule humaine. En outre, comme le soulignent Agostinucci et Andrieu " le processus de dessin a permis de mettre en lumière la dimension émotionnelle et imaginaire (espoirs et craintes) liée à l'expérience de la maladie ", tandis que Ménez montre le dessin comme dispositif capable de donner voix et écoute aux craintes des habitant·es aux prises avec la toxicité des Sargasses qui les assujettit.

La recherche qui aboutit le plus sur cette question de la co-production est sans nul doute celle de Turri Hoelken car une partie des zonard·es ont participé à la production des données photographiques, à leurs choix et à leurs analyses. Par ailleurs, ils et elles ont collaboré aux deux scénographies. La recherche de Turri Hoelken est pensée épistémologiquement dans une perspective participative pour rétablir une justice épistémique envers ces personnes marginalisées. Mais, la chercheuse va plus loin en proposant par ses scénographies une participation des spectateur·rices, lors de la présentation des résultats de la recherche dans les deux scénographies. Celles et ceux-ci peuvent organiser leur visite comme ils et elles le souhaitent en circulant entre les photographies, audios et le montage vidéo proposés. Enfin, l'exposition est envisagée comme un lieu de prolongement du terrain ethnographique de négociation entre les participant·es à l'enquête, les spectateur·rices et les institutions.

D'autres thématiques transversales pourraient être développées mais il est temps de laisser les lecteur·rices se saisir à leur façon des textes proposés dans ce numéro.

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Abstract

This article explores the multisensory role of visual culture in articulating the embodied and material dimensions of an informal sport within a youth community in Tijuana, Mexico. Drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how young sportsmen use visual production to represent and share the material entanglements of their practice, made of a dynamic synthesis of bodies, material culture, and urban spaces. By analysing the failed “implication” in a collaborative visual project with a local interlocutor, I reflect on the methodological challenges of “observant participation” in sport ethnography, where bodily “implication” through a domestication of local material culture is essential yet inherently limited for the researcher. The discrepancy between visual languages for self-representation and textual languages for etic description explains both the failure of collaboration in the local visual project and the possibility of deriving ethnographic knowledge from it. The study argues that the distinction between narrative languages and forms is ultimately rooted in varying degrees of incorporation between bodies in motion and specific regimes of materiality, considering the latter as typical traits in the subjectification of the young sportsmen in Tijuana.

Keywords

Material culture; body, space; sport; ethnography

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Introduction

It was a sultry afternoon in August 2023 when, after finishing an interview with an informant, I was walking through an alley in downtown Tijuana (Mexico), home to a group of young street artists, writers and skateboarders with whom I had developed close relationships on the field. I had no intention of lingering. The previous months had taught me that this place of coexistence, idleness, work and conviviality could very easily engulf one in moments of collective 'doing nothing', the ending of which was impossible to predict in advance. However, as often happened, as I passed by, someone hurried to approach me, blocking my way. Tony (a local skateboard videographer) was not one of the members I was most familiar with; in fact, we had only got to know each other the previous month. Nevertheless, halfway between excited and nervous, he skipped the pleasantries and proposed what he called a "once-in-a-lifetime" idea for his next video: *"Not the usual skateboard video with tricks. A video that makes people understand what skateboarding means to us here, as something religioso"*¹. I was perplexed, to say the least. Whether it is the boldness of the proposal or the reference to a spiritual dimension of sport that practitioners rarely express outside their intimate or academic circles (O'Connor 2021), I wonder, and I ask him, *"why me?"*. Why the rush to tell the only outsider in the group, when so many more experienced and 'devoted' people were sitting on the pavements of the alleyway during our conversation? *"Because you come from the Pope's city, we need you"* Tony replied bluntly, further complicating my understanding of the matter, at least until our subsequent meetings.

In this article, I draw inspiration from the encounter and "implication" (Fava 2013)² in Tony's proposal to engage in an exercise of "reflexivity" (Davies 1998) about the "multisensory" role of the visual (Grasseni 2022) in communicating, sharing and reproducing the material entanglements of a motor culture composed of bodies and a specific material culture. Retracing the failure of such implication, I then extend the discussion to the possibilities, dilemmas and methodological short circuits typical of the ethnography of sport - or what can cacophonously be called physical practices - by virtue of the role that specific materialities play in subjectivising the moving bodies of interlocutors, to which the researcher can only have partial access.

Since the social sciences became concerned with physical practices, all the limitations of a "meta-sociological approach" (Miller and Woodward 2007) to understanding shared knowledge, minute folklore and micro-politics that develop within playful or sporting "frames" (Bateson 1972) of action have emerged. This methodological and cognitive embarrassment derives largely from the role of bodies as means and arenas for the collective negotiation of cultural values, boundaries and meanings. Hence the punctual rescue of an anthropological sensibility through a "carnal approach" (Wacquant 2004) according to which, to acquire phenomenological, experiential and

¹ Interviews were conducted in Spanish, while field notes were taken in both Italian and Spanish. I have translated both into English for the purposes of this article.

² I have translated all the quotations from the Italian and French editions for the purposes of this article.

social knowledge of a sporting phenomenon, researchers must actively pursue it by acquiring a certain degree of practical competence. Elevating the body and its modifications to an instrument of investigation has therefore often led anthropology to re-examine some of its fundamental causal chains. Those interested in sport often refer to “observant participation” to describe an “involved” stance in motor practices through which physical and somatic states are experienced and shared, leading to the development of specific body cultures and their movements in the social environment. Halfway between a hermeneutic challenge and an easy rhetorical device that preserves the “oxymoron” (Pavanello 2007: 231) of the anthropological method, the ethnographic approach to sport nevertheless has the merit of extending, on both a physical and – I would add – material level, the general assumption that “ethnographers attempt to be both emotionally engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of the others” (Tedlock 1991: 69). However, based on my fieldwork, I argue that the profound articulation between bodies and materiality is a little-discussed intertwining not only in anthropology in general (Diasio 2009), but especially in its sports version. Attention to the visual culture of practitioners compensates partly for this omission on a phenomenological level, without however resolving the challenges of access to the “corporal synthesis” (Warnier 2005) that sportspeople construct in accordance with their material culture.

In the article, I elucidate these two dimensions leveraging fifteen months of ethnographic research – September 2022 to December 2023, with returns over the following two years – on the western border between Mexico and the United States about the “social biographies” (Kopytoff 1986) of the material culture central to a particular informal sport: skateboarding. Having practised this activity as a teenager, I abandoned it for a long time before rediscovering it in Mexico through an ethnographic lens. This led me to familiarise myself with local “body techniques” (Mauss 2017), which in turn allowed me to critically contextualise the supposed universal “internal logics” (Parlebas 1999) of skateboarding within the “body” (Brownell, 1995) and “material” (Miller 2010) cultures that define what my informants call the “Mexican skater”. By tracing the cross-border social lives of skateboards, which are produced by the U.S. industry in Tijuana (Mexico) following the mid-1990s liberalisation of the border, I adopted a multi-sited approach. This led me to work with grassroots practitioners, producers and traders in northern Mexico, as well as skaters, artists and directors of skateboard museums in California, namely between San Diego and Simi Valley.

I approached all the spaces of practice, production, consumption and exchange that I encountered from the perspective of the materiality of the objects that guided me, and from its role in defining the values of a local motor culture that was always measured to a certain extent on *el otro lado* [the other side of the border].

Skateboarding is a practice that originated in California in the 1950s and 1960s. The same California that is just a few kilometres away from Tijuana, but which remains inaccessible to almost all local youth due to the immobility imposed by the border regime and migration policies over the last three decades (Alarcón 2011; Durand 2016). This is therefore a unique condition of distance and proximity not only to the United States as a

geopolitical 'other', but particularly to California as the cultural core of their chosen physical practice. The border status of my interlocutors resonates with what Yeh (2016) defines a state of "intimacy and separation" (67) with northern culture, where the first element is represented precisely by easy access to the material culture necessary for skateboarding (boards), hijacked daily from U.S. factories to local popular markets (Buchetti 2025). Considering these movements in northern Mexico as a regional "systems of provision" (Fine and Leopold 2002), I was able to analyse the articulation between the patterns of object circulation, the people who interact with them, and the resulting knowledge. Indeed, in my case, the supply infrastructure is not just a backdrop to the social context, rather it profoundly determines the choices and values of those who use the material culture it puts into circulation. Choices that, in the case of a sporting activity, always have a starting point or destination in the practitioners' bodies (Buchetti 2024). By moving through these networks, I analysed the human economies underlying this scene. Specifically, I examined the circulation networks that link local youth with the industry producing skateboards for the global market. I also sought to familiarise myself with the ways in which the body is used and conceived in relation to local regimes of materiality, through a slow process of apprenticeship to the local skaters movements and practices in accordance with urban built spaces and so-called 'smuggled' skateboards. This latter dimension – bodily, sensory and material – was characterised by the most misunderstandings and failures, but also by critical and reflective insights, precisely because it was composed of "daily actions which take place spontaneously and bypass conscious thinking, and are also often impossible to explain" (Douny and Mohan 2020: 17).

The article elaborates on some of these critical points based on unstructured interviews, field notes transcribed daily in diaries, informal conversations and, above all, long-term practical participation focused on the socialisation of my body according to techniques, values and stances considered "typical" of the local context. The participants in the research are presented under pseudonyms unless they have expressed a desire to be identified by the nicknames by which they are known in their community of practice.

The body, the space... and the object

Since the 1980s, the revitalisation of the anthropology of material culture has emphasised the mutual processes of externalisation and re-incorporation between subjects and matter – in the British case (Miller 2010) – and an integration of Marcel Mauss's famous essay *Les techniques du corps* (1934) starting from the role of objects in constructing bodies in motion in specific cultural environments – in the French tradition (Warnier 2005; Julien and Warnier 1999). Without dismissing the former's insights, this second strand and its emphasis on "movement" as the organiser of the synthesis between bodies, environments and objects has often called into question practices that we could generically define as sporting. Warnier himself opens his *Construire les cultures matérielles* (1999) with examples of sailors, motorists and skiers, in which they "make body" with rudders, steering wheels, skis, "sailing boards" and paragliders (Warnier 2005: 15), developing bodily automatisms with which to "navigate" their equally material

environments. Furthermore, his proposal for a “praxeological” approach to material culture – which goes beyond Mauss's biological body to consider it as a “dynamic synthesis of sensomotricity in a given materiality” (Warnier 2001: 7) – has its roots in some famous sociological studies on sports and athletic games (Parlebas 1999).

However, despite these fortunate coincidences, research on sport has often struggled to integrate both these theoretical invitations and the numerous ethnographic studies carried out by the *Matière à Penser* research group on material culture (of which Warnier is one of the founders) (Gowlland 2011). In the latter, the dynamic articulation between bodies and objects as a site for the construction of “sensory-motor conducts” (Warnier 2005) offers great inspiration for sporting practices. Nevertheless, many studies on sport seem to have remained more adherent to Mauss's famous example of the Kabyle shepherd who inexplicably manages to run down a rocky slope without losing his slippers (Mauss 2017). Mauss offers a sophisticated response to his amazement, analysing the construction of a “body technique” in the relationship between the socio-material environment of the Algerian region and the physical body of the agile shepherd. Yet what about those slippers? Are they nothing more than inert objects, or do they play a role in the processes of incorporation and disincorporation through which an individual subjectivises themselves in their material and cultural environment? We could pose the same question to many studies on physical activities. Although there are ethnographies of sport in which the role of objects – especially ritual ones (Fanoli 2020) – is recognised, they remain marginal and often relegated to a performative dimension, excluding their minute functions in creating the “body schemas” (Schilder 1935) with which practitioners subjectify themselves in their material environments.

My object of study is emblematic of this critique. For the past twenty-five years, Anglo-Saxon social sciences have regarded skateboarding as an unparalleled form of engagement with the urban environment. Researchers have identified its potential to redefine urban architecture (Borden 2001) and offer new ways to engage with metropolitan “grey spaces” (O'Connor et al. 2025; Glenney et al. 2024). Of the three macro-approaches to material culture – semiological-structuralist, technological, and Foucauldian (Pettinato 2024) – social scientists interested in this informal sport have undoubtedly favoured the first. Furthermore, the sole regime of materiality considered is typically the architecture of generic urban contexts. As in Mauss's example, sophisticated analyses have been produced on the – semantic, sensory, gender, spiritual, and ethnic – interaction between the bodies of skateboarders and the city (Bäckstöröm and Sand 2019). However, the social role of the objects that allow skateboarders to move around urban surfaces has been overlooked. As the body-space interaction has gradually adapted to *specific* cultural spaces (McDuie-Ra 2021a; Holskens 2021) and bodies (Yochim 2010), the relationship with objects has remained understudied.

However, some Latin American works constitute an exception. They are heirs to an intellectual tradition on so-called “physical education” that has little to do with the Euro-American understanding of the term (Varea and Galak 2013). Starting with the *Asociación Internacional en Praxeología Motriz* (AIPRAM) research group and the *Seminarios Latinoamericanos de Praxeología Motriz* (Bortoleto et al. 2020), anthropologists,

sociologists, and sports scientists have provided interesting insights into the “internal logics” (Parlebas 1999) through which practitioners organise their physical activities in relation to their peers, the surrounding space, time, and materials. Contemporary board sports, surfing in particular, have paved the way for discussion in this context (Cibeyra and Saravì 2020). However, although attentive to material culture, these studies remain partially didactic. Coherently with their main theoretical references, they use to reconstruct the “universal” (Parlebas 2020) logics structuring specific sport and the bodies of their practitioners in transcultural ways. Such first steps toward the social roles of materiality in sports leave several questions unanswered about the minute processes of incorporation through which precise motor schemas are constructed in relation to the material environments of practice, as well as the cultural gap between researcher and actors, which often plays out on the same bodily layer.

Unfortunately, the two theoretical domains – Anglophone and Latin American – remain isolated from each other. However, when considering the visual productions and sensibilities with which practitioners of so-called urban, informal and “lifestyle” (Wheaton 2013) sports represent their motor practices, signs of continuity in the respective relationships between bodies and materiality – spatial in one case, objectual in the other – emerge. To grasp the convergences between spaces, objects and bodies, it is necessary to consider these sports as subjectivation universes that are not only limited to athletic moments. From the practitioner's perspective, every physical activity constitutes a sensory and motor universe, both during performance and in those ‘minor’ everyday, domestic, leisure and work moments when one continues to interact with the materiality of sport or to reproduce its movements. This blurring of boundaries is particularly evident in urban informal sports, whose ‘informality’ actually often builds on the absence of designated athletic spaces, as I will discuss in more detail later. Contexts for practice are often everyday environments, and technical objects are used for everyday purposes, notably for locomotion as seen in mountain biking, parkour, free running and skateboarding.

Visualizing sporting synthesis

In lifestyle sports that romanticise a connection with nature (Nardini 2022), as well as in the informal ones that idealistically claim a link with the urban environment (Glenney 2023), the senses are often privileged vehicles for experiencing and representing not-verbalizable practice, emotions and incorporate knowledges. Numerous studies have examined the sensory processes through which skateboarders develop a synthesis with urban spaces (Hölsger and Glenney 2025; Maier 2016), as well their visual representations of such spatial interactions (McDuie-Ra 2021b; Vivoni 2009). Vivoni (2009) notably discusses a “below-the-knees method” through which skateboarders mark, embody and represent urban space “on the ground”. A sort of “skater's eye” (Borden 2001), through which urban materiality is read and incorporated by learning how to move one's body among the minute, superficial, and concrete details that usually dissolve in the two-dimensional cartographic image of the city. It is a kind of intimate gaze at practitioners that makes skateboarding something “pre-reflectively interlocked with its

spaces, motoric skills, and shared experiences" (O'Connor et al. 2025: 334), which functions both as a process of bodily enskilment in urban materiality and as a channel for representing it to the outside world.

However, the emphasis on a particular 'skater eye' in literature raises two issues, the same ones that I faced with the visual project proposed by Tony. On the one hand, such oculo-centric sensitivity suggests a quick and "prominent association of skateboarding as a visual culture" (O'Connor et al. 2025: 333). While it is undoubtedly true that an informal sport practised in accidental urban spaces requires constant vigilance and visual alertness in order to interpret the surrounding environment and respond to it physically, this does not mean that the 'skater's eye' is divorced from the other senses. On the contrary, such gaze in motion in the city is based on the decoding of sounds (Maier 2016), balances, tactile sensations derived from surfaces and technical objects, and even "smell and taste contribute to this multisensory array, including bodily fluids such as sweat and blood" (Hölsgens and Glenney 2025: 22). However, in this urban motor culture, it remains the case that the visual is the preferred channel of self-representation. Nevertheless, as evidenced by various ethnographies (Hölsgens 2021; McDuié-Ra 2021b), it emerges that visual channels serve as both amplifiers and as an arena for presenting a multisensory domestication of the city's material fabric. Therefore, to understand how practitioners live and communicate the somatic experience of urban materiality, it is possible to consider the skater's eye as a form of "skilled vision" that exceeds visual perception through "plural, embodied, and socially embedded processes of enskillment" (Grasseni 2020: 1–2) in daily, collective, and multisensory contact with the city and its material culture.

Framing the role of the visual in practices and cultural productions in terms of 'skilled vision' allows us to articulate the second critical element evoked by the metaphor of the 'skater's eye'. Overcoming this enables us to see more clearly how the subjectivation of practitioners goes beyond the general "internal logics" (Parlebas 1999) of skateboarding, being instead embedded in bodily movements and techniques developed in relation to specific materialities. Grasseni (2007) explains the development of any system of skilled vision as "the result of concrete processes of attention training, within situated practices and cultural ecologies" (7). Therefore, rather than referring to a "skater's eye" as a universal device for the semiotic decoding of built space (Borden, 2001), we should speak of as many 'skaters' eyes' as there are environments and material cultures in which skaters develop their movements. Each of these sits within its respective ethnic, gender, class, age and positional characteristics within a global context (Hölsgens & Glenney 2025).

Given this necessary degree of 'relativism' inherent in the somatic-sensory modes through which athletes learn to move, observe, perceive and conceive of themselves within their cultural environments, a connection can be drawn with the discussion in the previous section. As mentioned, every sporting universe is the result of an interplay between movements, environments, and specific material cultures. The body that participants develop, and which they use to communicate with one another and the outside world, is the social outcome of this "dynamic synthesis" (Warnier 2001). In the case

of an informal urban sport such as skateboarding, practitioners' multisensory 'skilled vision' is a somatic-cultural processing mechanism that enables them to understand and navigate accidental spaces and material objects. However, the movements that emerge from this synthesis are not limited to the 'superficiality' of the physical body – even if the antinomy between 'superficial bodies' and 'deep selves' were ever acceptable (Miller 2010). Conversely, athletes engage with the spaces and physical objects of their everyday lives through these embodied motor activities. Through repeatedly performing these movements, they develop a sense of self, as well as the techniques and practices that allow them to recognise themselves and interact within their social environment. Therefore, ultimately, the sensorimotor chain through which skilled vision gives rise to bodily techniques within specific material frameworks is a series of “techniques of the self” (Foucault 1984), whereby subjects in reciprocal motion can perceive themselves and correspond with each other within a specific material environment. Although this process of motor “subjectivation” (Warnier 2001) represents the culmination of the sequence, it is nevertheless important to observe how this socio-motor production of individuals cannot be separated from the practices that specific subjects share, incorporating the very same material elements of their sporting daily lives in comparable forms.

Visual encounters with the “Mexican skater”

It was the same Tony who provided me with an example of this subtle convergence between multisensory visual decoding, material incorporation, and the production of related subjects in motion, which took me months to decipher – perhaps precisely because of its excessive clarity. A few days after we met by chance, he arranged to meet me again in the alleyway. On that occasion, and on subsequent ones, I finally had the opportunity to learn more about his bizarre and emphatic proposal. This time, he calmly began to explain the project to me in detail.

Well, as I was saying, it's not a skateboarding video like the classic *gabachos* [U.S. ones]. I want to make a video that shows what skateboarding means to us. Because, in my opinion, skateboarding is a kind of religion for those who do it. Look around [pointing to the informal skateboard workshop overlooking the alley and the youngsters pushing on their boards next to us], we all work for skateboarding here, in one way or another: *aquí se desayuna, se almuerza y se cena patineta* [here we eat skateboarding for breakfast, lunch and dinner]. So we must shoot some scenes that make that clear [...] One scene has to show someone hurtling down one of the slopes here, as we always do, for example in *Calle Segunda*, where you can see the asphalt full of potholes and cracks typical of Tijuana, zigzagging among speeding cars, *calafias* [shared taxis] and *carritos* [street food vendors]. Another one has to capture the sound... that sound when you reach the top of one of our swimming pools [abandoned and used for skateboarding] with your board and you hear that *crààààà*, without even understanding what's happening, and your senses are suspended for a moment, as if it were just you and the board [...] Then another, showing our work [he points to Ramón, the workshop leader, busy sawing a rectangular sheet of pressed wood smuggled out of one of the local factories to extract a usable board], the dust and fumes from the paint we use to cut and paint our boards. Finally, perhaps another one, in which, again on our rough roads, we show a fall, when you hurt yourself, you

remove the small stones left in your flesh, you suck the blood away and the taste remains in your mouth all day long. (Conversations noted in the field diary, Tijuana, 22-28/08/2023).

I acknowledged that it was an ambitious project, given the complexity of the film work, the sensory emotions to be visually conveyed, and the large number of people involved. In this regard, I asked again for clarification about my role, as considering my limited athletic abilities compared to the locals, I would not be able to play any of the parts described.

Well, it's pretty clear... because these scenes are a story. This is the story you tell someone who doesn't know anything about skateboarding. You're the only one from outside, right? In the video, you'll try to explain all these moments in Italian, moments that are *religiosos* to us skaters. Every time you try to explain it with words, it'll be a scene. But the other person won't understand you, partly because they're not a skater, and partly because you're speaking to them in Italian. It's like skateboarding is another language, right? So, after all that, you just give up and leave, maybe to go skateboarding... because only those who practise it can understand our religion. Do you understand?" (Tijuana, 28/08/2023)

I was not at all sure I wanted to participate in the project. The goal was to create a representation of the essence of local skateboarding, and it was clear that my presence would serve as an alterity counterpoint to emphasise this identity through linguistic metaphor. I did not feel I was the right person for the occasion and feared that exposure, given the importance skateboarders attach to visual media for subcultural identification (McDui-Ra 2021b), would compromise my research perspective and relationships with skaters, both in and outside the alley. However, I also thought that refusing Tony's proposal would sour our nascent relationship. Therefore, after a few explanatory meetings and clarifying that I would not be performing any sporting feats, I agreed to take part.

Even before the concrete project, however, I was impressed by the clarity with which Tony intended to convey a collective sensory feeling so pervasive and immaterial that it could be described as *religioso*. The secular sacred elements of skateboarding subcultures have been the subject of detailed analyses (O'Connor 2020), focusing on cases of architectural pilgrimage (O'Connor 2017), ethnic memory (Buchetti and O'Connor 2024), and the articulation between "risk-taking, emotional processing [and] connecting with an urban environment" (Shoemaker and Bernal 2024: 2). Tony's *religioso* probably fitted into the latter category. Indeed, just as we can talk about a "religious movement" within the global surfing community, consisting of "soul surfers who have distinguished themselves from competitive surfers since the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Corte 2022: 22), something similar has happened in skateboarding. Here, street skaters have distanced themselves from those dedicated to competitions and training in skate parks, in order to embrace a specific sporting "lifestyle" (Wheaton 2013) shaped in symbiosis with "informal" architecture (Lebreton et al. 2012). So, in a sense, returning to the previous vignette, the difference between 'devotees' and 'profane' would be between

those who are accustomed to “remove the small stones left in the flesh” and experiencing the thrill of skateboarding amid urban adversity, and those who wear knee pads and protective gear in designated competitive arenas. Nevertheless, despite my questions, Tony offered only tautological explanations of that *religioso*.

However, after hearing the explanation of the film project and its screenwriting tactics, it seemed as though there was more to it than mere general subcultural ‘spirituality’. The emphasis on the *religioso* term and the clever linguistic play between Italian and Spanish seemed too deliberate to be a coincidence. On the contrary, in this case, the elusiveness of the *religioso* served to describe all the listed features of a sensory-motor relationship with the material environment that could not be otherwise verbalized. This ‘esoteric’ relationship – which “the other person won’t understand [...] because they’re not a skater” – evoked two fundamental aspects of the bodily techniques and movements that skaters develop in relation to the local material environment. On the one hand, it explicitly echoes Warnier’s (2005) argument when he states that “the bodily schema mobilises the use of the seven senses, which function in a regime of multisensoriality” (35). On the other hand, the fact that it can only be discussed in religious terms and understood by initiates is one of the distinctive – and methodologically critical – features of studies on embodiment. This is the difficulty of de-naturalising bodily techniques and cultural systems of sensory perception for those who construct their daily practices through them. The very practices that render them socially and mutually intelligible “subjects” (Mauss 2017; Warnier 2005, 83–112; Douny and Mohan 2020). On closer inspection, most of these practices engage directly with various features that characterise the material culture of Tijuana skaters, both in themselves and in a relation with *el otro lado*.

It is no coincidence that Tony immediately specifies that this is not a “classic” video; whereby “classic” explicitly meant “Anglo-American”. The adrenaline-fuelled risk of downhill racing is enriched in terms of courage and technique by a focus on Tijuana’s roads and their rough surfaces, which contrast with those of Californian neighbours. It is also enriched by elements typical of chaotic local traffic, such as *calafias* and street vendors. These were all traits often evoked by locals when they attempted the complex task of verbally translating the motor, bodily and somatic postures typical of the “Mexican skater”, at my request. The same material elements – potholes, cracks in the concrete and rough surfaces – and socio-environmental elements – traffic, stray dogs and crowded streets – were those that, according to local common sense, made Tijuana skaters *más mañosos* [obsessive, resolute], while also *más suaves* [soft, graceful] compared to U.S. skaters with their clean architecture and style. During one of my returns to the field in 2025, I realised how these two apparently contradictory dimensions are synthesised through the skaters’ bodies and movements, extending well beyond mere subcultural belonging. It was then that I met Gabriel, who had just applied for, and received, a tourist visa for the U.S. after thirty years since his last crossing. While celebrating this incredible achievement given the political climate at the time, Gabriel’s first way of conveying his amazement to me was through his bodily puzzledness.

I had never crossed the border before, only when I was a child, but I didn't know how to skateboard yet. And I couldn't believe it... the first few times I went to *el otro lado*, how steady I felt on my board, how smooth and fluid everything was. Here, on the other hand, here in Tijuana, to skateboard you first have to learn to *flotar* [float], to be light, and also determined, but light with your feet on the board because it's full of cracks, holes, different types of asphalt, and as soon as you put too much weight on the board, it get stuck on the ground and you're sure to hurt yourself (Tijuana 29/10/2025).

This suggests that, even before any consideration of representation or belonging, practitioners experienced the differences imposed by the border on their sporting materialities primarily through their bodies, movements and the accompanying disorientation when crossing between the two regimes for the first time. An embodied difference expressed in practice and immediately recognisable among peers. Some of my English-speaking skater scholar colleagues pointed this out to me in October 2025 – during a conference at San Diego State University – when they followed me into the Tijuana alley where we had organised a documentary screening and skate session as part of the event. The following day, Paul (English) commented on the initiative, repeatedly emphasising his amazement at what he described as the 'unique' nature of the movements of the Tijuana skaters. Specifically, Paul remarked on the delicate balance between the control of the body over the board and the board's control over the skaters' bodies, which adapted to the physical conditions of the local terrain. Something very similar to what Gabriel described.

Ultimately, the focus on daily work in the film project was representative, and celebratory, of the social and material conditions that characterise Tijuana skateboarding community. In fact, as trivial as it may seem, the shaping activity Ramón was performing during our conversation is not easily found elsewhere. Access to incomplete skateboards – in the form of seven-layer boards of industrially pressed and glued wood that are not yet cut to shape – is a consequence of Tijuana's economic and geographical position in relation to the global skateboarding industry. Informal workshops such as the one in the alley, where young people meet, work, produce, buy, resell boards and live together, only exist because of U.S. skateboard *maquiladoras*³. Since the late 1990s and the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), these factories have produced most of the skateboards in circulation in the global market. The work that Ramón was doing at the time – and the knowledge and techniques involved – are the most minute and widespread material consequence of Tijuana's political and economic specificity within the global geography of skateboarding. Ramón is well aware of this, as he showed me one afternoon in the workshop. He had just received a delivery of about

³ The *maquiladora* industry is a special production system based on the Mexican border that has existed since 1965. *Maquiladoras* are production lines that have been relocated by foreign companies (usually U.S.-based) to northern Mexico in order to take advantage of low-cost labour and permissive environmental regulations. These companies import raw materials under favourable customs tariffs, transform them into finished goods, and then re-export them to their countries of origin for distribution worldwide. The sale of finished products to individuals at *maquiladora* production sites is prohibited by law, although they often find their way into local areas thanks to informal commercial networks.

thirty boards from an informal middleman. To ensure he was getting a good deal, he first placed a wad of cash on the table in front of the seller and then began inspecting the items one by one using a combination of multisensory evaluations. He observed them lengthwise with one eye closed to assess their curvature and touched them all over with the back of his hand to detect any imperfections. Others do it with their palm, he told me, but that way you cannot feel the grain of the wood properly. He taps them with his knuckles and listens carefully to the resonance – a dull sound is good, while a vibrant sound is a sign of internal cracks. Finally, he checked the small, barely legible incisions in the centre of each board. Once the deal is done, he reveals that those carvings are alphanumeric codes indicating the length, width and shape of each item. However, each *maquiladora* uses different combinations, and understanding what one is is the first step in assessing the quality of a board. In addition, workers sometimes make mistakes when printing them, and sensory reading – embodied through years of practical and work experience – is used to ensure that the code and the object match. *“If you ask any skater outside Tijuana, I bet no one knows. When they buy a board, they choose the shape just because it's written on the packaging, but you can only tell if it's really that shape if you're from here”* (Tijuana, 14/03/2023).

Bringing together and contextualising the scenes that underpin Tony's project clarifies which elements constitute the image, and above all the subjectivity, of the “Mexican skater” that I had often heard about, and whom Tony himself sought to portray. On the one hand, it evokes a sense of identity and belonging that is semantically constructed around the relationship between practices, 'rough' – yet authentic – urban spaces, and contact with the world's largest mass of technical objects from one's own urban sport. Thus, it revolves around a kind of “subcultural capital” that is used to construct a sense of “authenticity” (Thornton 1995). However it is not built around a hermetic idea of 'subculture', but rather in relation to an 'elsewhere' that actualises the 'hegemonic' image of one's own practice within a network of global exchanges. In this sense, the case of the Tijuana skateboarding prompts us to synthesise the long-standing debate (Bennett 2011) between Cultural Studies – which excessively essentialise the idea of 'subculture', yet remain attentive to power differentials (Hall and Jefferson 1976) – and post-subcultural studies (Thornton 1995) – which instead focus on the fluidity of codes of distinction reworked within global networks of exchange. However, according to Tony and his colleagues, this sense of 'us' is fully expressed only through an unspeakable relationship between bodies, movements, local knowledge, and materiality. This relationship has often gone unnoticed within the aforementioned schools of thought, yet it is particularly evident to an ethnographic gaze attentive to cultural nuances. Thus, the religious dimension discussed earlier helps us to recognise the dual nature of the subjectivation underlying the so-called “Mexican skater” in its relationality. This is not a matter of giving precedence to one perspective over another, but rather of recognising the relationship between semantic and praxeological elements in the complex socio-motor processes of subjectivation (Warnier 2005) among local skaters. Recognising oneself as a member of a community of sporting practices involves an identity-based affiliation with ordinary material elements – slippery streets and smuggled skateboards –

as well as the development of a body and senses in relation to them – calibrating movements in relation to concrete spaces and developing knowledge and techniques by incorporating those very skateboards, beyond universal and equivalent systems of measurement.

It would seem, then, that the “Mexican skater”, as a subject to be described and represented, is the result of a body domesticated within specific material regimes and their subsequent symbolic belongings. Therefore, that *religioso* is an umbrella term that links the movements of subjects, architectural volumes and technical objects, which, together with an identity shaped around risk, spaces and dedication, act as a matrix of subjectivation for local young people by constructing daily motor schemas. While recalling Mauss's (2017) argument that the relationship between body techniques and magical-religious dimensions is always mediated by a certain materiality, the “Mexican skater” that Tony wanted to depict using me as an 'exotic' counterpoint always emerges as a “nebula to be taken as a whole” (Warnier 2005: 26). That is, a subject made of objects, spaces and representations, harmonised and embodied through movements and techniques.

On failure and on the drama of an ethnography of sport

After at least three planning meetings in the alley, it was time to shoot the various scenes with a group of local skaters selected by Tony. I waited a week, aware of the local times, without receiving any reminders. Two weeks passed, and still there was no reaction. I then decided to take the initiative and contact Tony, but I received no reply. Tony had not been to the alley for over two weeks, but I thought this was just a coincidence. However, I realised that something was amiss when, after bumping into him one evening, he barely spoke to me. His usual cheerfulness had turned into an inexplicable coldness, with looks and responses bordering on distrust. Despite my efforts to empathise, I could not understand what had damaged our relationship. The only thing I could think of was my initial hesitation, but it had not bothered Tony in previous encounters and, in any case, it would not have warranted such a categorical rejection. I thought that some rumours about me might have been circulating within the community, but while I had no way of verifying this, I was reassured by the fact that many people who were more highly regarded than Tony had confirmed my respectability, at least in words. After several face-to-face meetings and online exchanges that ended in monosyllables, I decided to express my concern about our changed relationship when I ran into Tony alone. Initially, he blamed the other local skater-actors, whom he described as *huevones* [lazy] and unreliable for such an ambitious project. However, the evasiveness with which he avoided my gaze suggested otherwise. Eventually, he admitted that he had thought about it for a long time and that I was not the right person for the project because: “Yes, you speak Italian, but you're too involved, you've been living with us for a long time”, but at the same time also because “You skateboard, but you're not really like us. And then you're already telling our story, how we live here, when you write and take photos. We know... Do you think you can represent who we are?”. The last question is almost provocative. I reply that I did not think so at all, which is why I was hesitant from the beginning about getting

involved in such an intimate community project. As if offended, Tony changes the topic, mentions unspecified “other commitments” and leaves.

In the weeks that followed, he still seemed to resent me. I cannot rule out the possibility that I missed some details in the logic that led Tony from a desperate search for collaboration to such sharp distancing. However, the fact that everything stemmed from that project, coupled with the two contradictory phrases he used to distance himself from me, made me reflect on a methodological issue that the ethnographic report had highlighted, but not resolved.

Tony emphasised the ambivalence of my position within the local community. On the one hand, I was a stranger, furthermore outside the binary of citizenship with which one usually thinks of the relationship with alterity at the border. Yet perhaps I was not quite a stranger, as I had already spent more than a year living closely with the community in the alley behind me at the time of our meetings. Conversely, it might have seemed that I was well integrated into the group. Together we skateboarded every day, I worked in the workshop and participated in all the community’s daily activities. However, this certainly did not make me “one of them”. I was not in many obvious ways: due to ethnicity, citizenship, class, language, cultural capital, etc. Nevertheless, the alleyway community was quite diverse, with people from different social backgrounds living together. It was accustomed to diversity and hospitality, and to the passage of strangers. The traits that divided us did not seem to be primarily a question of “habitus”, that is, of how class status and power were inscribed in my bodily movements. The gestures, postures, and uses of the body with which my interlocutors reminded me of our differences, both in and out of practice, could not be explained in Bourdieusian terms as the explicit link between “physical attributes of [a] particular sport activity” (or a variant thereof) and a “class habitus” (Besnier and Brownell 2012: 449). In terms of both practice and representation, what united the alleyway group seemed to be a “body culture” (Brownell 1995) and its movements around a series of “sensory-motor-affective conducts” (Bayart and Warnier 2004) that were difficult to enumerate or describe but were all linked to the local materiality.

On various occasions when my inability to perform local bodily movements had been pointed out to me, the boundary was always established at the intersection of physical actions and embodied knowledge linked to specific material elements. One evening, I was put to the test by following a group of skaters downhill from the *La Bandera* skate park to the alley. I kept up with them for most of the way, but when I had to avoid one of the many open manholes in the uneven asphalt, I veered off a few meters. I lost ground and missed the yellow traffic light at the intersection, which the others sped through at full power. Afraid to cross the four-lane road on red, I stopped and definitively lost the group. When I arrived at the alley a few minutes later, I found no one there. Everyone had already left. When I called Germán (skater of the caravan) to explain what had happened, he laughed heartily, saying that I should have known before leaving that here, open manholes are jumped over, not avoided: “*It's natural*”, he told me, “*and it's also less dangerous*”. Even when he could have resorted to risk or courage to explain my difference – “you could have crossed on a red light” – Germán chose to direct my attention

to natural motor patterns relative to the local physical environment instead. Similar references were useful in opposite situations as well. For instance, thanks to Ramón's teachings, I once recognized by touch the mismatch between a board and its code, which temporarily earned me the title of "true Mexican". It was never one or the other – neither inclusion nor absolute estrangement – but rather a constant process of learning and socio-motor testing in accordance with local material conditions, punctuated by many failures and some successes. Tony's perception of my ambivalence highlighted this ongoing process, which he linked to other critical dimensions of our ethnographic relationship in a sporting context strongly structured by materiality.

If the anthropology of sports is a "modern" (Appadurai 1995) and "global" (Besnier and Brownell 2012) discipline, it is largely because the physical activities it investigates now span many different cultural contexts. The coincidence between people, place and practice in 20th-century ethnography seems to be increasingly rare when it comes to sport. In fact, sports disciplines are embedded in a "tension between universalism, as they draw their significance from abilities shared by all [...] human bodies, and particularism, as those abilities are not interpreted and shaped in the same way in all places and at all times" (Besnier et al. 2018: 3). Skateboarding is a clear example of this tension. From an identity perspective – belonging to the same global imagined community of skaters (McDuie-Ra 2021b) – and a technical one – the basic motor skills required to balance on a board on a generic surface – my interlocutors recognized that they had something in common with me. However, when it was necessary to emphasise distance, this was always in relation to skills and knowledge built around local materiality. The project and my relationship with Tony suggested that a classical approach to that sport – consisting of training and reflection on bodily states through which a general motor culture is constructed (Wacquant 2004) – was insufficient and needed to be complemented by experimentation with the "praxeological relationships between sensomotricity and materiality" (Fanoli 2022: 29) that are typical of the context. Put simply, I could not just know "the code of the festival in order to find my place as a subject in it". Tony confronted me with the ambiguity between "my role as an ethnographer taking notes and photographs" and "that of someone who has been adopted and, for better or worse, starts dancing in the circle, clumsily trying to follow the rhythm with their legs and hips" (Warnier 2005: 88). In the previous months, I had made every effort to "start dancing in the circle" of the alley, slowly adapting to the local material regimes. However, this work was certainly not enough to soften my "clumsiness". Indeed, given that "the incorporation of the dynamics of the object [...] appears at its best by defect [...] when the athlete falls badly and everyone expends considerable energy for a mediocre result" (ivi: 18), the more I tried to dance with the local materials, the more the ambivalence showed up in its contradictions. Despite being completely *adoptado* – a term commonly used by my interlocutors when referring to me – and demonstrating dedication to physical activity, the domestication of objects and spaces revealed obvious discrepancies.

These sensory-motor divergences fully represented the "drama" (Pavanello 2007) of my experience in the field. The way I presented myself through my movements on "the stage of the research field" was always a balance between the reality of my personal

involvement – my identity and techniques as a generic sportsman – and the fiction of “the non-spontaneity of participation that stems from methodological extraneousness” (238) to local materiality. These two dimensions became increasingly intertwined as the ethnographic relationship unfolded. Furthermore, unlike Tony's project, the role of the anthropologist is not merely a performance with a director and script; it is a network of “emerging bonds” (Fava 2013) between the researcher and their audience of interlocutors. From this “implication” – understood as a reflexive investment (Davies 1999) at the heart of which “lies neither the anthropologist's self nor the intrapsychic experience of their interlocutor, but rather the act of entering into a relationship within the dialogue” (Fava 2013: 49) – my field took shape, “composed of social relationships, understood as anchored bonds” (ivi: 50). Consequently, my every action and self-representation implied – and was reflected upon – reactions from the other side. This is because, while my field did not follow the orthodox unity of people, place and practice from an etic perspective, according to an emic view – clearly explained by Tony – the meaning of the body culture of local youth could only be represented by the coincidence of the materiality of the local context, a social group and its motor practice. The uniqueness and qualities of their community of practices and their identity as a web of differences and similarities with their U.S. neighbours could only be expressed through the interplay of moving bodies, specific places and materials. In me, in my daily efforts at bodily objectification through that materiality, the locals saw both a genuine interest and, in some cases, a desire to know (or rather to know-how) that was risky for the “professionals” of local self-representation. Tony – a skateboard photographer and videomaker for at least ten years – was one of them. The provocative question “*Do you think you can represent us?*” highlighted both my ambivalent position in relation to my interlocutors and a limitation on my rights to describe what the “Mexican skater” was. While I had been collectively granted permission to describe it using words, visual language – essential among skaters everywhere – had to remain in the hands of local specialists. My ambiguous position therefore raised legitimate concerns about the validity and content of self-representation.

Conclusions. Learning from failure

Although I was relieved by Tony's unexpected refusal, I believe that my relationship with him (which developed over almost two months) reveals something about the heuristic potential, but also the limitations, of an ethnography of sport where material, bodily and sensory “implication” (Fava 2013) on the ground is as essential as it is impossible to achieve in full, thus exacerbating some of the classic tensions of fieldwork.

In the article, I centred my argument around a relationship that developed and failed within the field in order to explore three interconnected reflections. As the physical practice in question always involves the body in motion at every level of participation, I considered how this is often treated in literature, underestimating the subjectivising role of material culture in favour of interaction with space. Consequently, I noted how skateboarders' visual (but not visual-centric) cultures always imply multisensory enskillment processes where the technical objects play a pivotal yet rarely recognised role in the construction of a sensory-motor synthesis between bodies and spaces.

Referring to a visual project I was initially involved in in Tijuana, I presented and discussed these ideas in the context of my own research to demonstrate that the synthesis of bodies, objects, and environments does not occur in an abstract sense, but rather in relation to a specific material culture and spaces that are characteristic of the local context. Through their constant praxeological interaction with such material regimes, Tijuana skaters develop specific bodies and subjectivities that can be attributed to the socio-physical nebula that they themselves call the “Mexican skater”. Ultimately, I analysed why and how the inevitable discrepancy between my technical and identity-based involvement in the sport and local motor schemas led to the failure of my implication in the visual project.

To conclude, however, it is necessary to return to the difference – already mentioned by Tony – between my involvement in the emic representation of a local body culture and my role as an ethnographer interested in cultural difference. Anthropology is born out of the paradox between practical participation in “other” cultures and reflexive detachment (Pavanello 2007). This paradox becomes even more complex when the body – by choice or necessity – represents both the object of cultural knowledge and the means for achieving it, as in the variously termed “experiential” (Turner and Bruner 1986) or “phenomenological” (Csordas 2003) anthropology. When dealing with bodies in motion, I believe that this fragile balance reveals all the contradictions that constitute its knowledge potential. It is in these cases, in fact, that the physical activities at the centre of scientific attention cannot be explored outside of a ‘body-to-body’ interaction between researcher and interlocutor. In Tijuana, this close encounter revealed both the obstacles to involvement in emic self-representation and the related potential for constructing an ethnographic analysis. It is therefore from this same close encounter that Tony's suspicion and the conditions from which I was able to write these pages can be explained at once.

It would be naive – not to say ethnographically unacceptable – to assume that being brought into close contact with research subjects implies an increasing overlap in how they perceive and move through the material world. While attempting to “be-in-the-world” (Csordas 2003) by following the interlocutors’ socio-motor paths can help in understanding aspects of their practices that would otherwise be inaccessible (Sands 2002), it should be remembered that the ethnographer does not perceive, cannot perceive, and sometimes must not force themselves to perceive as their informants perceive (Geertz 1977). For Tony and his group – who were interested in presenting themselves as a community of practice through their relationship with specific spaces and material objects – this lack of overlap was a substantial limitation and even a threat to the validity of their representation. At the same time, the same avoidance of the risk of ‘going bodily native’ with the alley community – a risk initially perceived by me and then prevented by Tony's rejection – enabled me to achieve a sense of restitution in this writing. I doubt that I could have remained both intellectually attentive and indissolubly involved in both fields.

Finally, the cultural gap that plays out through bodies – an obstacle to participation in emic self-representation and a *conditio sine qua non* for its investigation – is circularly explained in the two reflections from the first half of the article. The cultural difference between me and my interlocutors, summarised as different ‘bodies’, is actually the

product of dissimilar syntheses between physical movements and material objects and spaces. At the same time, as Tony provocatively explains, the aforementioned difference between emic self-representation and reflexive description also manifests as a shift in languages. As I have demonstrated, visual narrative forms remain the sole domain of the skateboarding community, consistent with skateboarders' general preference for images. These images are perceived as more intimate and cannot risk being contaminated by protagonists who do not fully reflect the local body culture – that is the subject and condition of authenticity in self-representation. Conversely, in textual narration, which are experienced as more distant, even an outsider can be granted the right to describe following the establishment of mutual trust.

In short, in the case discussed, visual language remains the one in which local bodies can only be narrated by themselves, showing themselves to the outside world in their essence; just as written language has represented the agreed terrain for developing knowledge based on cultural differences between diverse syntheses of bodies, spaces and objects in an ethnography of sport.

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**Filming the 'Limbo of Interchange' of/from the Bodies.
Visual Anthropology and Sensory Engagement in Ethnographic
Filmmaking with the Peruvian Religious Cultural Association
Virgen de Cocharcas**

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Abstract

This paper is the result of intermittent fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2024 with the Peruvian religious and cultural association Virgen de Cocharcas in Rome, in the framework of the project "Le statue da vestire dell'area metropolitana di Roma", promoted by the Soprintendenza ABAP for the metropolitan area of Rome, the province of Viterbo, and Southern Etruria. Audiovisual media decisively shaped our ethnographic engagement, both legitimising our presence in the field and enabling a collaborative project with the Association—thus delineating the contours of what may be understood as a "shared epistemology." The camera emerged not merely as a device of documentation but as a constitutive instrument of encounter, fostering reflexive processes of knowledge co-production ('enskilment') entangled with gestures, sensory experience, and the materiality of devotional practices. Filming illuminated the performative dimensions of faith, foregrounding the body as an active medium of ritual and social significance. The intimate relational proximities cultivated during the ethnographic filmmaking experience profoundly shaped processes of filming, selection, and editing, generating tensions between affective involvement and narrative efficacy. Rather than restitution, our research experience suggests an ongoing reconstruction unfolding within a "limbo of interchange," a contrapuntal space where heterogeneous perspectives and power relations converge, and where visual anthropology not only records but actively reconfigures embodied practices.

Keywords

Shared epistemology; embodiment; Peruvian diaspora; visual anthropology; religious materiality; sensory ethnography

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Encountering the Ritual World of the Peruvian Diaspora¹

We first encountered the Religious and Cultural Association 'Virgen de Cocharcas' in 2018, in the context of a project on clothed simulacra in the province of Rome². This encounter gave rise to an at-home ethnographic research project, carried out intermittently and still ongoing today, in which film was adopted as a medium from the outset. In this paper, we reflect on the epistemological implications emerging from one of the outcomes of the research: an ethnographic documentary completed in 2021, entitled *Nuestra Señora de los Migrantes* (20'). The use of a "video camera" – a small digital SLR with an APS-C sensor – enabled us to undertake an experiment that evolved into a collective endeavour, shaping the entire process of knowledge production and co-construction of meanings in the field, as well as the attitudes and relationships of the actors involved (cf. Banks and Morphy 1997).

The Religious and Cultural Association 'Virgen de Cocharcas', formally established in 2008, currently counts an average membership ranging between 110 and 150 individuals. Its headquarters are located in Fonte Nuova (RM), a municipality of approximately 30,000 inhabitants situated in the hinterland of the Italian capital, within a semi-urban area that forms part of Rome's broader metropolitan fabric. At the core of the Association's devotional activities stands the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas – a clothed simulacrum that serves as the principal focus of the group's cultural and ritual practices. This statue is kept in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, located in Casali, a hamlet of the municipality of Mentana, approximately five kilometres from Fonte Nuova. Casali thus functions as the 'spiritual centre' of the Association. Monthly Masses dedicated to the Virgen are celebrated there, and every 8 September, the statue is carried in a solemn procession through the local streets.

¹ Paragraphs one and three were written by Daria De Grazia, while paragraphs two and four were written by Michela Buonvino. The attribution, however, is purely conventional, as the article was conceived and developed jointly by both authors. All translations were produced by the authors. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful comments, which improved this paper. They also thank the volume editors for their support and editorial work.

² This research was carried out as part of the project "Le statue da vestire dell'area metropolitana di Roma" promoted by the Soprintendenza ABAP for the Metropolitan Area of Rome, the Province of Viterbo and southern Etruria. As part of this ongoing ethnographic work, in addition to a master's thesis and several articles, we have produced an ethnographic documentary entitled *Nuestra Señora de los Migrantes* (20'), in close collaboration with the members of the Association's executive committee.



Figure 1 The procession. Photo by Michela Buonvino, 2019.

The Association's activities are primarily centred along Via Nomentana, one of the main arterial roads linking Rome to its provincial hinterland. Beginning in Casali di Mentana and extending towards the capital, one finds - just beyond the Grande Raccordo Anulare (Rome's ring road) - La Balera Romana, a venue that has long served as a key site for many of the Association's festive events. Upon entering Rome and moving beyond Via Nomentana, the spatial network of places frequented by the Association broadens across the north-eastern sector of the city. Within the area situated between Via Tiburtina and Via Prenestina are located several social centres where the *junta directiva* (the Association's governing committee) regularly carries out its *actividades* (organisational activities). The Association's members, all of Peruvian origin, migrated to Italy during the 1990s and the early 2000s. Their migration narratives reveal that, alongside the economic factors prompting their departure from Peru, the existence of established family and friendship networks in Italy played a decisive role in facilitating their relocation. Such social ties significantly influenced both the paths of migration and the strategies of mobility adopted, shaping the cultural and practical resources mobilised by migrants before departure, throughout the journey, and after their settlement in the host country.

In the late 1990s, a small group of newly arrived Peruvian families began to gather around a painted image of the *Virgen de Cocharcas*, which had been brought from Peru to Italy by the H. family. This moment marked the formation of an initial associative nucleus around which the community's devotional practices gradually took shape. Shortly

thereafter, the cult evolved into a *mayordomía*³, adopting the traditional organisational form that characterises many Peruvian religious celebrations. The subsequent transition from a *mayordomía* to a formally established association represented a turning point in the material expressions of devotion: the painted icon was replaced by a sculpted statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas. This statue followed a transnational migratory route—travelling from Sapallanga (Huancayo) to Lima, and from Lima onwards to Rome—before ultimately being enshrined in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where it remains today as the central subject/object of veneration for the Association.

As several members of the Association recounted during ethnographic interviews, the simulacrum is understood as embodying the experience of a migrant. In their accounts, the statue metaphorically and materially retraces the same migratory trajectory as the devotees themselves. Much like its followers, it is described as having to pass through border controls and “prove its identity” to the authorities in order to successfully cross international frontiers and eventually reach Rome (De Grazia 2024)⁴.

In Rome, the events surrounding the formation and subsequent consolidation of the Association reflect the broader processes through which individuals, by cultivating their relationship with the Virgen, continuously renegotiate their sense of self and articulate transnational identity poetics within the specific context of their arrival and settlement in Italy. From this analytical perspective, the clothed simulacrum emerges as a genuine “body of memory” (Rak 2017): an object-person (cf. Severi 2018) around which life histories, personal memories, collective nostalgia, and shared imaginaries among devotees are intricately articulated (cf. Buonvino 2021). At the same time, the simulacrum acts as a powerful symbolic agent, endowed with the capacity to organise, mediate, and integrate personal experiences into a collective project of faith and belonging. In this sense, the sacred device plays an active role in structuring community spaces, behavioural patterns, and social relations within the devotional network (Dei 2017: 153). It is precisely

³ The *mayordomía* is a common hierarchical system for organizing festivals in Central and Latin America. It forms part of the broader *cargo* system and involves couples who voluntarily take charge of the logistical and financial responsibilities of a religious or civic celebration, sometimes retaining leadership roles beyond their term. Scholarly debates have focused on its function in managing community resources and on possible syncretisms between pre-Hispanic and Christian institutions. Wolf (1959) and Nash (1958) describe the *cargo* system as a protective institution within closed corporate communities that redistributes wealth internally, whereas Harris (1964) sees it as a colonial mechanism that channels resources outward, notably to the Church. Chance and Taylor (1985) outline the main historical and ethnographic models, and Ortega Olivares and Mora Rosales (2014) provide detailed Mexican case studies. Later works examine exchanges and social dynamics within the system: Monaghan (1990) focuses on reciprocity and redistribution during *fiestas*, while Mathews (1985) highlights gendered divisions between men’s public roles and women’s less visible but crucial contributions. Uribe (2012) defines *mayordomía* as part of a dense network of reciprocal obligations that make rituals possible. Urban adaptations are discussed by Portal (1996) and by Guillet and Whiteford (1974). Cannada Bartoli (2004) identifies parallels between these systems and devotional practices surrounding the “santo in casa” tradition in parts of Lazio, Italy.

⁴ The narratives surrounding the journey of sacred icons from Peru to host countries often take on legendary or miraculous qualities. The images are frequently described as concealing their true identity from border authorities or overcoming obstacles through faith and divine intervention. One example concerns the statue of the Mamacha Cocharcas brought to Rome by Silvia H.’s mother. After purchasing the statue in Sapallanga, she encountered difficulties at the airport, where officials attempted to seize and x-ray it. By embracing the image and pleading with the authorities, she ultimately succeeded in bringing it to Italy. In Silvia’s account, the Virgin’s statue mirrors the trajectory of migrants themselves: it travels along the same routes, undergoes identity checks, and faces border controls. The icon is thus anthropomorphized, embodying both the vulnerability and perseverance of migration.

through the exchanges and interactions between devotees and the simulacrum that an identity perimeter is traced and reinforced over time. One emblematic example of this dynamic is the attempt to organise a festival in honour of the Mamacha Cocharcas in Rome. By recreating a ritual structure that mirrors the festivities celebrated annually in Huancayo, this initiative enables participants to learn, rehearse, and perform an imagined Peruvian identity. This can be understood as a process of “becoming Peruvian” (Berg 2011), in which community members actively imagine, select, and outline the essential features of a homeland to be preserved in a foreign context—thereby nurturing and strengthening their collective bonds.



Figure 2 The *Virgen de Cocharcas*’ statue looking at the fireworks. Photo by Daria De Grazia, 2024.

The processes through which this imagined Peruvian identity is constructed unfold simultaneously on several fronts; the religious-associative sphere represents only one of the multiple social and cultural arenas in which such identity negotiations and practices take shape. This broader set of transnational actions (Datta and Brickell 2011) is composed of a range of practices in which what Sebastiano Ceschi (2011: 147) describes

as a “game of belonging” is constantly at play. It can be conceptualised as a process of cultural interweaving that generates hybrid configurations, “stretching [...] into an intermediate space” (Simonicca 2015: 32)⁵. Within this case study, devotional practices have been strategically employed over time to transform and re-signify urban spaces, making them habitable, familiar, and socially accessible for the community (cf. Giorgianni 2022). In doing so, they delineate an alternative “cartography of belonging” (Levitt 2003: 853), overlaying the existing urban landscape with new layers of meaning and affective attachment. By integrating ethnographic accounts with the life histories of participants, this study makes it possible to explore the complex dynamics of territorialisation and re-semantisation of the cult “from Huancayo to Rome.” This analysis sheds light on the mechanisms through which Peruvian identity is constructed and articulated in a migratory context, emerging through practices of appropriation and negotiation of unfamiliar urban spaces within the setting of arrival. These practices ultimately aim to legitimise the community’s presence within the territory and to “claim forms of spatial justice” (Parbuono 2016: 172), in a dynamic encounter—sometimes dialogical, sometimes conflictual—with host groups.

The employment of audiovisual media significantly influenced the modes of engagement, perception, and mutual observation that characterised our experience in the ethnographic field. On one level, the presence of the camera operated as a legitimising device, affirming our role and visibility as researchers in the eyes of participants. At the same time, it created both the practical and symbolic framework necessary for developing a collaborative project with the Association. Throughout the research process, we made systematic use of a video camera, especially during the first three years of fieldwork, when its employment was most sustained. The camera can therefore be conceived, drawing on Francesco Marano (2015: 59), as “an integral part of the filmmaker’s body,” a kind of prosthetic extension that “becomes part of the environment, sensitive to the flow of reality, which, rather than a specific point of view, conveys one experience among many possible ones” (ibid.). This conceptualisation resonates with Brent Luvaas’s (2019) account of the distributed agency of the camera,

⁵ In this sense, it is of fundamental importance to take into account the transformative dimension of the social production and construction of space, at the centre of which we clearly find the subject who embodies it. Here, we understand “embodiment” following Csordas (1994: 12) as an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world.” Through this embodied relationship, the subject acts upon, defines, narrates, and constructs space. In short, what is at stake is the observation of how individuals create meaningful relationships with the places they inhabit, thereby transforming abstract spaces into lived and meaningful places – “attach meaning to space and transform ‘space’ into ‘place’” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 13). This involves investigating how experience becomes inscribed in places and, conversely, how places themselves come to embody memories that are intertwined with people, events, and histories. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 38), “in this culture-play of diaspora, familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there’, centre and periphery, colony and metropole, become blurred.” As the boundaries of territories and places become increasingly fluid and indistinct, imagined communities (cf. Anderson 1991) acquire growing significance. These communities, through the “work of the imagination” (Appadurai 1996), actively invest spaces with meaning, producing, tracing, and unravelling networks of connection. The transnational space is thus conceived as a space of social relations and practices: a lived, practised space that is never ontologically given, but is instead continuously mapped discursively and enacted through bodily practices and movements (de Certeau 2001; Clifford 1997; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).

whereby camera and anthropologist form a co-agentive pair, with the camera actively shaping perception and movement within the field (Luvaas 2019: 76-78, 94).

In this sense, the camera was not simply a recording instrument, but an active participant in the field situation - mediating interactions and co-producing the conditions of ethnographic knowledge. Through the situated learning process that Tim Ingold describes as 'enskilment', "the filmmaker learns to observe, know and film in a sort of conversation with the elements present in the environment in which he moves" (Marano 2015). As we will see, this process unfolded gradually, as our bodily and perceptual engagement with the field became increasingly intertwined with the camera's presence. During the initial two years of research in particular, the intricate web of reciprocal gazes between ourselves and the interlocutors was consistently mediated by the video camera. This mediation facilitated the construction of what Katia Ballacchino (2015) has called a "meeting space": a shared, negotiated space of interaction and co-presence. The camera thus served as a relational device through which a tacit pact of collaboration took shape, grounded in a shared objective—to envision, construct, and narrate a story collectively. This story was, on one level, a narrative reconstruction of the Association's events, rituals, and cultural practices; yet, at the same time, it also represented the story of our encounter and gradual integration into the group - ultimately reflecting the unfolding of a shared cognitive and ethnographic process.

Sensing Knowledge and Shaping Epistemologies through the Skin of the Image

Ethnographic engagement in religious contexts frequently entails a deeply participatory experience that is simultaneously physical, cognitive, and emotional, involving a close interaction with the ritual and devotional practices of the people concerned (Groisman and Pierini 2016: 3). In this regard, Emily Pierini proposes an understanding of "belief" as a "territory of contested categories," in which the practices enacted by social actors are conceived as a distinct "way of knowing" (ibid.). This perspective invites us to interpret fieldwork not merely as a process of observation and description, but rather as an active and relational "project of knowing" that brings into play a multiplicity of actors and positionalities with whom the ethnographer interacts and co-produces knowledge. As Pierini and Groisman argue, this project of knowing involves, firstly, the "other" selves encountered in the field, with whom researchers engage in situated projects of shared understanding during ethnographic encounters. Secondly, it involves our own "otherness," that is, the reflexive awareness of the transformations we undergo as subjects through the experience of "becoming" in the field. This process does not rely on imitation or naïve identification with the native point of view; rather, it constitutes "a movement by which a subject leaves her own condition through a relation of affections that she can establish with another condition" (Groisman and Pierini 2016: 3).

Within this framework, the processes of "knowing" are understood as forms of "acting in company" (Pierini 2016: 43). Fieldwork is therefore conceived as a mode of knowledge production expressed through both intellectual engagement and bodily practice (ibid.),

where learning, perception, and affect are inseparably intertwined. Following Francesco Faeta (2011: 46), we adopt here a conception of the ethnographic gaze as:

Completely far from any hypothesis of objectivity, firmly rooted in a peculiar subjectivity; subjectivity shaped, however, through the inescapable centrality of the body, the inescapable relationship that the body maintains with the social context, the inescapable reflective attitude that vision and its cultural elaboration entail.

In recent years, visual anthropology has offered several critiques of 'disembodied' epistemologies in ethnographic research, moving towards methodologies that foreground the body, affect, and co-presence as central to knowledge production. Our approach embraces this shift, engaging with the camera as a non-neutral, reflexive actor within ethnographic encounters. Following David MacDougall's (2006) conceptualisation of the camera as a participant-observer capable of engaging with the corporeality of both subjects and researchers, we fully share the opinion that visual ethnography gives rise to a mode of relational knowing grounded in co-presence and shared embodiment. This position has an important precedent in Jean Rouch's concept of *shared ciné-anthropology* (Rouch 1974), which conceived of ethnographic filmmaking as structurally entailing what Yanai (2025: 698) calls a "subjective-objective" relation: in order to film aptly, the ethnographer must be continually affected by what is being filmed, such that the boundary between observer and observed becomes operationally unstable. The lens thus becomes a site of encounter—a mediator of affects, temporalities, and meanings that fosters new ways of understanding the process of anthropological knowledge production.

This perspective was further developed by Sarah Pink (2009), who introduced the conceptualization of what has come to be known as sensory ethnography, which argues that ethnographic practice is more about the cultivation of sensory and affective 'adjustment' than about the cognitive accumulation of data and concepts. According to Pink, knowing through the body in space – via touch, movement, smell, rhythm – is not supplemental to ethnographic understanding but constitutive of it, allowing the ethnographer to access new perceptual domains, in a mode of "being-and-living-with". As we try to demonstrate in this article, our own fieldwork practices reflect this insight, seeking moments of collaborative filming based on shared viewing experiences. Moreover, the editing process carried out together with interlocutors illustrates how audiovisual tools can foster forms of epistemic proximity grounded in co-experience. This means that all these practices participate in shaping the so-called 'reality', moving beyond the representationalist and vision-centred models of ethnographic filmmaking and understanding.

More generally, ethnographic knowledge is co-constructed in what Vincent Crapanzano (1980) described as the "limbo of interchange". With this expression, he referred to a space of dialogic ambiguity and epistemic indeterminacy proper to the *limen*, where multiple perspectives and affective registers converge and interact. Indeed, Crapanzano's notion is central to the epistemological and methodological tensions at the

heart of ethnographic inquiry itself. In *Tuhami. Portrait of a Moroccan*, this "limbo" becomes a space where the boundaries between ethnographer and subject, self and other, blur. The encounters between Crapanzano and Tuhami, an illiterate Moroccan tilemaker, are emotionally charged exchanges that defy straightforward interpretation: meanings are continuously deferred, and understanding is always partial, mediated, and unstable. In Crapanzano's written yet strongly body-focused restitution, this liminal zone is most evident in the way Tuhami narrates his life, particularly his sexual and spiritual experiences, such as his marriage to a she-demon. These stories challenge the limits of ethnographic comprehension. They are deeply symbolic, affectively charged, and rooted in a cosmology foreign to the Western rationalist framework within which Crapanzano operates. Yet rather than reducing these elements to cultural tropes or psychoanalytic case studies, Crapanzano situates them within the limbo where neither he nor Tuhami holds absolute epistemic authority. Their dialogues – fragmented, evasive, and deeply intimate – also reveal the tensions that characterise the production of meaning and representation, both imbued with power relations⁶. In this liminal zone, meanings are always subject to renegotiation and reinterpretation. The notion of "shared epistemology" (see Silverstein 2013) emerges from this dynamic, referring to the process by which knowledge is collaboratively produced through co-presence, co-experience, and co-interpretation, and in this case is mediated by the camera's gaze.

For example, during our visual ethnographic fieldwork, we were granted permission to film the intimate ritual of dressing the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas in preparation for Her annual celebration. The event took place behind the apse of the church where the statue is located. Manuel V., a long-standing devotee and one of the founders of the Association, guided us through the process, both logistically and affectively. As Daria began to position her camera, he gently intervened, guiding her practice towards a specific epistemic and affective register. A particular concern for Manuel was the statue's nudity; he was attentive to ensuring that its vulnerability was approached with respect. He communicated through gestures and positioning, which Daria intuitively perceived; she therefore adjusted her framing, letting herself be guided into a specific epistemic register that mediated between devotion, propriety, and her ethnographic gaze. In other words, Daria's role as researcher and filmmaker was refracted through Manuel's devotional lens, and the camera entered what we may call a 'relational dimension of care'⁷.

⁶ While Crapanzano acknowledges his role in shaping the narrative and recognizes the impossibility of full access to Tuhami's interior world, he also implicates himself in the ambiguities of the ethnographic process. His reflexive stance does not dissolve the asymmetry but instead lays it bare as part of the ethnographic condition.

⁷ This resonates with Roger Canals' analysis of the cult of María Lionza, in which visual creativity and ritual co-performance are active engagements in the making of divine presence. As Canals (2022) argues, images in Afro-Venezuelan religious contexts are not passive objects of veneration, but dynamic agents that both mediate and materialise the sacred. The image, in his terms, is a being that acts, transforms, and reveals through its interaction with practitioners and observers alike. Moreover, like the Virgen de Cocharcas in Rome, María Lionza's travelling image in diasporic Venezuelan contexts is transformative: as Canals notes, the material and visual dynamics of ritual practice abroad often give rise to new configurations of sacred presence. In our fieldwork, we similarly observed how the dressing, dancing, and touching of the Virgen's statue became sites where diasporic identity and religious intimacy were co-constituted.

Now, rather than viewing this as a methodological liability or as a lack of epistemic clarity, the instability of roles opens critical reflexive spaces for thinking about the politics of representation, the ethics of visibility, and the distribution of interpretive authority (cf. Dietrich 2023). Thomas Csordas' (1994) theory of embodiment further supports this orientation by asserting that all perception is inherently embodied, and that culture is not simply encoded in language or symbols but enacted through the body's continuous engagement with the world. According to these considerations, the camera becomes embedded within the lived experience of fieldwork, entangled with the movements, affects, and perspectives of those involved.

From this perspective, the use of the camera itself invites researchers to inhabit uncertainty, rather than to seek immediate resolution: filming a ritual or gestures alongside community members has often been for us an act of mutual learning, wherein both the ethnographer and the participants engage in processes of framing, interpreting, and emotionally responding. The post-production process, including debating interpretations, further exemplifies how audiovisual media can mediate co-authorship and co-theorisation, giving rise to what can be defined as an epistemic intimacy; this intimacy is shaped by differences in access, agency, and narrative control.

Religious practices within the Virgen de Cocharcas association offer a compelling site to explore the merging of the visual and sensory domains as modalities of embodied knowledge, but also, in a broader sense, to examine the relationships between religion and material culture. From the tactile devotion of dressing the statue and carrying it in procession to the intricately choreographed dances during celebrations, until the moment dedicated to the *baile de despedida* with the final ritual touching practices, the Virgen de Cocharcas worship is saturated with sensory 'layers', making visible what we call "the skin of the image": a surface of contact where gesture, devotion, and affect transform into visual traces that exceed representational containment. In filming these rituals, the camera 'felt' ritual expressions, becoming a site of sensory apprenticeship, a medium of immersive, embodied attention. This sensorial dimension reached a heightened intensity during the *baile de despedida*, when the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas, positioned on the *anda* (a wooden processional litter adorned with flowers and garments), was made to dance one last time. As the musicians played the final songs, the *cargadores* swayed the *anda* rhythmically, gently rocking Her body in an intensely affective farewell. The Virgin danced through the collective motion of bodies beneath Her. The interplay between the dancing body of the statue, the devotees, and the camera reveals a deeply entangled corporeal coordination of religious materiality and perception, where movement becomes constitutive of devotion. The statue's dance itself enacts a profound interdependence between the sacred and the somatic: the Virgin's swaying body, suspended on the *anda*, becomes a sort of kinetic icon. The sculpted statue comes alive in ritual action, mediating divine presence through motion and touch.

The camera entered this web of relations. During moments like the *baile de despedida*, the camera's movements absorbed and transmitted the emotional crescendo of the final moments spent with the Virgin, before saying goodbye. Together, the statue, the devotees, and the camera formed a triangular structure of devotion. As the music

faded and the statue's swaying slowed to stillness, a new form of contact began, and devotees surged forward with reverent urgency. They gathered around the *anda* to enact their final gestures of proximity: hands reached up to touch the Virgin's robe, her cloak, her crown, her face and her hand, while others brushed their fingers across the flowers adorning the platform, plucking one to carry home. The camera was immersed in the density of these moments: Daria filmed while surrounded by moving bodies, arms and murmured prayers. At times, the lens was partially obstructed—a hand brushing across the frame, a burst of colour from a bouquet. These weren't disruptions but tactile traces of proximity, signals that the camera was not outside the scene but within its intimate choreography, which motivated the choice to include these scenes in the final film.

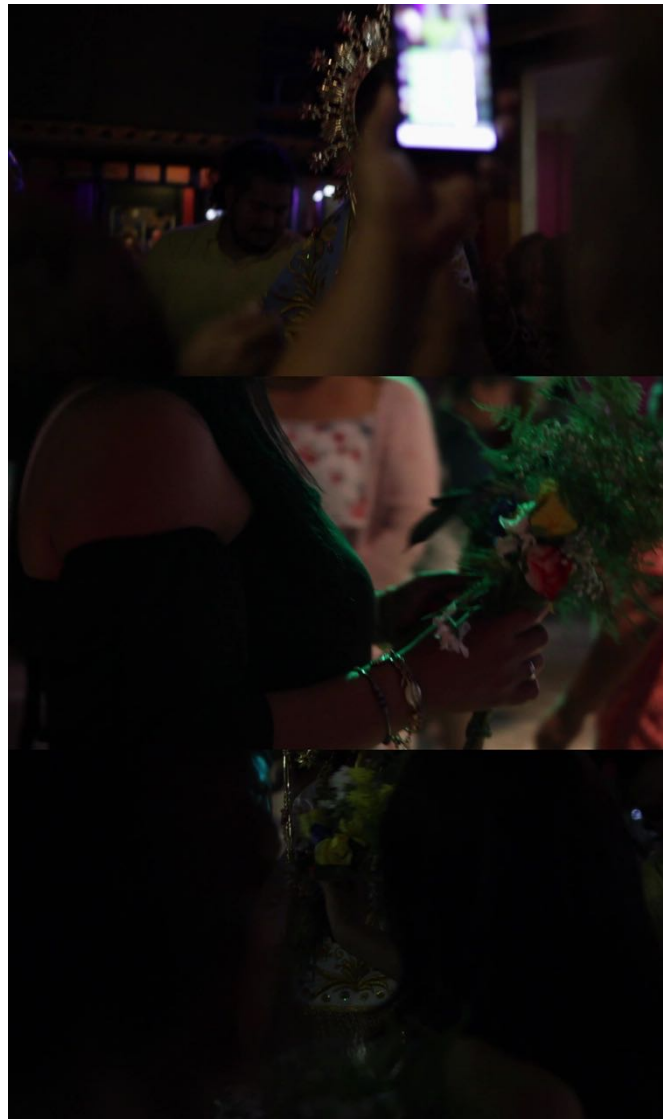


Figure 3 *The camera immersed in the baile de despedida. Frames by Daria De Grazia.*



Figure 4 *Paola offers the camera - and us - the last flowers of the year in an almost empty room. Frames by Daria De Grazia.*

Here, the camera becomes a surface of contact. In this closing sequence, a liminal space - after the dance, before the departure - the image becomes porous, sensate, and ethically entangled. This dynamic highlights the central role played by material culture in shaping and sustaining religious experience, which functions as an active participant in the (re)enactment of devotion. Objects—including religious icons, altars, and other ritual paraphernalia—possess agency: they influence human behaviour, rearticulate social relationships, and participate in the creation of meaning (Gell 1998). From this perspective, religious practice emerges as an embodied, sensorial negotiation with material culture: the sacred is enacted, transmitted, and felt through objects, revealing devotion as a relational, multisensory, mediated phenomenon. Complementary to this, Carlo Severi's notion of "object-person" mentioned above emphasizes that objects involved in ritual or devotional contexts can assume qualities of personhood. This means that the statue's agency is relational: it comes into being as an active interlocutor through the practices and devotion of the community.

Co-editing Intimacy, Looking Together

Participating in and filming devotional activities required a sensitive attunement to the affective rhythms of devotees' ritual life. As we engaged with community members in shared acts of filming and viewing, a reflexive and relational process gradually took shape. This co-presence generated what we conceive as a living and continuous ethnography—an affective, co-produced mode of inquiry extending beyond the immediate field encounter into the collaborative spaces of post-production, exhibition, and interpretation. These collective practices of witnessing and editing fostered new forms of mutual recognition, as participants assumed the role of co-authors in the making of the audiovisual narrative.

As mentioned earlier, by filming ritual gestures in ways that highlight their material density and temporal complexity, we attend to the politics of embodiment and to the ways in which ritual operates as a form of historical and epistemological practice, one that orders and classifies the world. This reframing of audiovisual ethnography entails significant theoretical and political implications: it calls for an epistemology grounded in co-experience and enables a methodological ethics based on relational presence and reciprocal recognition.

More broadly, articulating what we may call 'a living ethnography of the senses' underscores the open-endedness of fieldwork. Rather than producing a fixed account, this perspective understands visual-sensory research as inherently processual and always in the making. In this view, the image is not a final product but a provocation—a fragment within a longer, evolving dialogue between researcher and interlocutors. Methodologically, the construction of the video itself constitutes a crucial analytical and collaborative phase within the broader ethnographic process. As Sarah Pink (2001) has observed, editing and assembling images should not be regarded as merely technical procedures but as key moments of reflexive engagement, collaborative theorisation, and methodological innovation. In this regard, the importance of reflexivity within visual anthropology has been extensively discussed. Jay Ruby has long maintained that reflexivity lies at the core of the discipline, framing it as a foundational aspect of ethical practice and identifying it with the pursuit of "proper" anthropology (Ruby 1980; 2000). David MacDougall further develops this debate by distinguishing between "deep" and "explanatory" reflexivity. The former, made possible by the medium of film or video, renders visible the very relationships that constitute ethnographic work; the latter, more typical of written ethnography, involves a retrospective reflection on those relationships (MacDougall 1998: 89).

Returning to our fieldwork experience, once we considered the collected material sufficiently substantial, we began to envision presenting a proposal to the members of the Association for editing the film around the thematic nodes that had gradually emerged and been negotiated across the various phases and temporalities of the research. Throughout the delicate process of selection, scripting, and editing, it became necessary to make a series of critical decisions and exclusions, thereby shaping the film's

final narrative form. Within this context, the emotional proximity that had developed over time, along with the sharing of multiple intimate relational spaces with the film's protagonists, played a significant—and in many respects decisive—role. This became particularly evident in discussions concerning the “visibility” of all participants within the final work, even when certain inclusions proved narratively weak or ineffective, and not entirely consistent with the film's overall structure or communicative coherence. Furthermore, the expectations of our interlocutors significantly informed our decision to produce a filmic reflection that deliberately avoided addressing the internal frictions within the group. These were regarded by many as irrelevant or even inappropriate to include in the collectively constructed representation. Consequently, the narrative composition underwent substantial revisions, reflecting the complex attempt to respond to the Association's expectations, to allocate meaningful space to all the individual life stories that inevitably intersected with the collective story of the Virgen, and to acknowledge and give value to the shared ‘journey’ that we had undertaken over the preceding years. Narratives are, in fact, simultaneously part of individual experience and agents in shaping that experience. They serve as fundamental resources through which events are structured into one or more meaningful frameworks, allowing for the emergence of aspects of the self that are partial, previously unexplored, or otherwise marginal (cf. Good 1994; Crapanzano 1980). Through the careful assemblage of discursive narratives, we sought to convey and give meaning to the complexity of the experiential events that had been lived and shared. During the structuring and editing phase of the documentary, we repeatedly found ourselves faced with a series of questions. We reflected on whether the interpretations we proposed, the selections we made, and the narrative trajectories we envisioned would yield representations that could be genuinely shared. We also questioned whether these representations could adequately convey what is, at once, a cultural universe of devotional practice and a universe of sacrifice and hardship that accompanies transnational life, within the broader collective attempt to *salir adelante*⁸. We were thus confronted with problems related to the socio-cultural dimension of empowerment connected to storytelling, defined by Michael Jackson as:

a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own

⁸ According to Pren and Takenaka, who have worked with Peruvian migrants in Japan and the United States, the expression ‘*salir adelante*’ “denotes two types of movements – social (up the socioeconomic ladder) and geographical (to another place). The underlying meaning is leaving the country to move ahead in life” (Takenaka and Pren 2010: 29). In our context, however, it does not seem that the concept is used to refer to a change in social status. Rather, it implies an ethic of sacrifice aimed at overcoming difficulties and at not allowing oneself to be defeated by the obstacles encountered along the way; it refers to the capacity to tactically channel pain by integrating it into a divine moral universe, thereby enabling it to acquire a sense and a comprehensible meaning. *Salir adelante* means precisely to keep going, in any case, at any cost, despite everything. It is only by observing intimate experiences and personal stories that it becomes possible to understand the nuanced and discontinuous paths through which individuals manage to mobilise nostalgia, orienting it towards action in the present, with their gaze turned towards the future, *para seguir adelante*.

imagination [...] a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experience of the world (2002: 15-18).

The individual and collective empowerment associated with the act of storytelling arises precisely from its transformative potential—from its capacity to reimagine the world agentively and to domesticate time through narrative practice. Yet this also raises critical questions: who has the right to tell a story, what can legitimately be told, and for whom is it narrated? It became necessary to reflect carefully on the power dynamics embedded in the right to narrate—the issue of story ownership (Shuman 2015).

We first viewed the edited version of the documentary—which at that stage had an initial running time of eighty minutes – together with the members of the Association's executive committee and their families. The screening took place in 2021, in a darkened room within a small shop in Mentana (RM), which we had specially arranged and equipped for the occasion. The mixture of expectation, anticipation, and shared anxiety generated a tangible tension in the space. During the opening minutes, a dense silence filled the room; then, quite unexpectedly, laughter erupted. At first, someone laughed in response to a humorous line in the film; gradually, others joined in—commenting, joking, and engaging in dialogue about what we were watching together. They laughed again, and then, at a certain point, someone began to cry.

Following that significant moment of collective viewing (Pink 2001: 90), we began to reflect on the imaginative spaces that were produced during and after the ethnographic work. In what ways do the “etically” proposed narratives of anthropologists intersect with the “emic” self-representations of the subjects involved in the research? Shortly after the first screening of the edited version of the documentary, a particularly meaningful episode occurred. At the conclusion of the collective viewing, Pilar, the Association's spiritual secretary, contacted us by telephone. During the conversation, she expressed gratitude for the care we had devoted to selecting the most significant material through which to tell both the story of the Association and her own personal trajectory. She also confided that she had felt deeply unsettled by the intimacy of the encounter, especially by the projection of her dream narratives—stories she had herself chosen to share and had encouraged us to include in the film.

We report here an excerpt from her testimony:

The Virgin—ever since I have been here—the Virgin has given me so many things, as I was saying. I have learned to be strong because, day after day, up until now, I have asked her to give me the strength to carry on. I have asked her for so much for my family, and for me the Virgin is something immense; there are no words to describe her. When my mother died, my life changed so much. When my mother was very ill, I prayed to be strong, that whatever might happen, I would not cry. But... a mother is a mother. The months went by, and I was always sad; I cried. Then I had a dream. A dream in which I was walking with my sister through a field. My sister was walking ahead of me, I was following her, and behind us was my mother. Then, at a certain point, we turned around, and she was no longer there. So, I said, “I have to go and see where my mom stopped!” I looked for her, and I found her. I found her cooking, because she was a mother who loved to

cook all the time. But next to her there was a person, dressed in a white robe, with long hair and a beard. I said to my mother: "Mom, let's go! Let's go! What are you doing here? Let's go! We have to leave, we have to go back home!" And she replied: "No. I will not come with you because my place is here, by his side." I looked at him... I looked at this person... And for me this person was God, because he wore the white robe, had long hair, and a beard. "I must stay here," my mother said. And then I woke up. It was the only time I ever dreamed about my mother. And in that way, I understood that my mother had earned her place in paradise.

Despite her natural reserve, Pilar thanked us for giving form to her strong desire to express herself and to share emotionally meaningful content, while at the same time displaying an ambivalent emotional reaction, as she felt almost destabilised. This episode highlights how co-editing extends into the realm of emotional feedback, shared reflection, and narrative negotiation. Moreover, collaborative storytelling practices, as has already been emphasised, constitute genuine tools of empowerment and can enable some individuals to reclaim their lived experiences, to rework them in an agentic way, and to structure their personal histories within shared frameworks of meaning. Furthermore, Pilar's case illustrates how the process of collaborative narration can generate complex emotional tensions, arising from the interaction between the desire for visibility and the need for self-protection, thereby requiring an ethical and narrative care that goes far beyond any considerations regarding the filmic product itself.

In conclusion, it seems to us that, at least in part, we succeeded in "looking together," or, at the very least, in glimpsing shared imaginative spaces as our trajectories converged along a common stretch of path. This shared act of 'looking together' resonates deeply with the very meanings inscribed in the language through which we describe these collaborative processes. Following Alessandra Broccolini:

The verb *restituire* ("to restore") has a beautiful etymology: from the Latin *restituere*, meaning "to re-establish." It evokes the idea of restoring a balance, restoring a relationship, restoring something; but that prefix *ri-* suggests the need to act out of some sense of guilt, the need to repair something that has been broken. By contrast, the verb *condividere* ("to share") has a more interesting etymology, one that leads to a single certainty: that of *videre*—"to see"—"to see with," to see together. It conveys the idea of looking (and acting) together (Broccolini 2020: 28).





Figure 5, 6, 7, 8 Assemblages of frames from the editing process. Frames by Daria De Grazia.

Beyond the Filming Process: On the Uses of Anthropological Knowledge

For about a year now, the Association—following an initiative by the *junta directiva* to open up to second generations—has begun to make substantial use, for self-promotional purposes, of the materials that we researchers have produced and shared over the years. Through a process of selection, creative appropriation, and reworking of the materials produced by the researchers, the group is literally rewriting the history of the Association, redefining the identity boundaries of the “Peruvianness” that is expressed within it, and collectively reimagining and reframing what is perceived and experienced as a ‘tradition’. This represents an interesting creative process of enhancing what they perceive as their own heritage - a process of becoming a heritage community (Padiglione and Broccolini 2016)⁹ - which employs anthropological knowledge as a means of acquiring greater legitimacy in the public religious sphere. In fact, in the last five years, the landscape of Peruvian cultural and religious associations around Rome has been populated by other “competitors”; in particular, another group devoted to the cult of the Virgen de Cocharcas has been formed, some of whose founders came from a split with the current members of the cultural and religious Association “Virgen de Cocharcas”. This other group has already obtained recognition from the Holy See, a fact that has significantly shaped the dynamics of legitimacy in the field. Precisely for this reason, the members of the Association explicitly asked us to help them reuse and reframe the ethnographic materials, in order to support their own request for official recognition from the Vatican.

In our case, assimilation within the Association’s group took place over time, and when other Peruvian religious groups in Rome and its surroundings invited us to attend other festivities, our ‘belonging’ clearly emerged, a tacit pact according to which we would not carry out the same work elsewhere. Nevertheless, these invisible boundaries were always very fluid and porous, and we often took part in other Peruvian celebrations, though these usually amounted to brief incursions. This highlights not only the centrality of ethnographic positioning and the process of *encliquage* (Olivier de Sardan 1995) but also the broader implications of anthropological research as a social and cultural resource. The ways in which knowledge is appropriated, mobilised, and re-signified by interlocutors remind us that ethnography can confer forms of legitimacy, and it can become a tool in local struggles for recognition. This challenges us, as researchers, to reflect on our responsibilities in co-producing knowledge that may subsequently be employed for political, religious, or institutional ends. The choices of the ethnographer inevitably

⁹ The heritage dimension of the Association’s practices—encompassing its strategies of heritagization, its negotiations with institutional actors, and its processes of collective identity formation—constitutes a significant analytical thread throughout this research. However, a comprehensive engagement with heritage theory, as well as with broader questions of belonging and legitimacy, lies beyond the scope of the present article, which instead focuses primarily on the methodological and epistemological implications of ethnographic filmmaking. The processes of heritage-making observable within the Association are examined in greater detail in Buonvino (2021) and De Grazia (2024), to which the reader is referred for a more sustained discussion of these issues.

generate consequences that extend beyond the research itself, shaping the very social realities he/she seeks to describe. In this sense, the case of the Association reveals how anthropological knowledge, once disseminated and re-appropriated, becomes part of the repertoire of actors who negotiate identity, authority, and belonging in transnational religious contexts. As Lassiter (2005: 96-97) argues, collaborative ethnographic practice is inherently also a public act, in which the knowledge co-produced in the field circulates beyond the research encounter and becomes entangled with the representational and political agendas of the communities involved.

The new stance adopted by the new members of the *junta directiva* primarily responds to the emergence of new internal needs within the Association and should therefore be situated within a broader transforming social and cultural framework. In fact, the assumption of the *cargo* by members of the second generation—young people who have spent most of their lives in Italy—necessarily softens and reshapes what, until recently, were the prerogatives of first-generation immigrant members (cf. Buonvino 2021; De Grazia 2024). Owing to their greater emotional distance and their different perception of migratory and transnational life experiences, these younger members enable the emergence of new communal and devotional practices and new narratives that reinterpret the group's memory. In doing so, they creatively transform into heritage a painful past that had previously been 'too present', through new gazes and alternative ways of inhabiting the heterogeneous social space of associative life. One element that suggested a first perspectival shift was the presence, during the festival in honour of the Virgen de Cocharcas on 8 September 2024, of an Italian flag accompanying the Peruvian flag and the Association's banner. In this sense, these new festive and devotional practices become part of a broader cultural weaving process, represented by the entire ensemble of transnational actions that constitute what has been described as a "game of belongings" (Ceschi 2011: 147). Over the years, this 'game' has acquired increasingly well-defined contours through the remembrance and (re)construction of the migratory memories and practices of the first generations.

The experience carried out with the Association confirms that the impact of anthropological research can never be exhausted by the practices of documentation, nor by the production and dissemination of research "results." This becomes particularly evident when the very process of interaction, sharing, and enhancement of community knowledge entails the prolonged presence of the researcher. This presence itself, and the constant dialogue with the community, can have lasting effects on the group—effects that are not always, and not entirely, predictable or controllable. At times, the group begins to reflect on its own history and to rework it in new ways. We can observe the coexistence of different tensions, where generational transmission unfolds through moments of rupture as well as continuity. The re-elaboration of memory becomes a site of negotiation in which conflict, divergence of perspectives, and competing claims over what should be preserved or reinvented intersect with the desire to ensure the persistence of tradition across generations.

Sometimes this process takes shape as a true act of identity rewriting, in which the Association's history is reinterpreted, the boundaries of "Peruvianness" are redefined, and

traditional practices are transformed or reinvented. The assumption of the *cargo* by second-generation members appears to be the paradigmatic moment of this renewal. It thus becomes interesting to explore which stories survive this process; which are lost along the way; and which internal frictions emerge when certain stories are enhanced, and others are marginalised. What long-term effects will all this have on group cohesion and on the continuity of the cult? The issue of legitimacy proves to be central here: internal legitimacy, which is articulated through the confirmation of shared roles and practices, and external legitimacy, which raises the “problem” of visibility and social recognition.

In this context, the research process itself constitutes a privileged lens through which to observe the dynamics of the production of communal meaning and value. At the same time, it invites us to continuously question the role of anthropology in mediating heritage and memories, and therefore in reimagining the future of the groups with whom we work.



Figure 9 The *Junta Directiva*. Photo by Daria De Grazia, 2025.

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**Corps dansant avec robots et corps filmant avec caméra.
Ou comment filmer interroge les techniques d'objets**

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Abstract

Dans nos gestes quotidiens, la relation d'évidence avec les matières nous permet de devenir expert.e en incorporant les objets (Nourrit et Rosselin-Bareille 2017), d'advenir comme sujet (Julien et Rosselin 2009 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025; Warnier 1999), de s'identifier comme femme, homme, citoyen.ne ou cinéaste en faisant corps avec sa caméra à l'image de "Rouch, homme-caméra" (Marchiori 2011 : 47). Comment accéder par l'image à ces incorporations ? Comment les couplages du cinéaste avec son matériel pourraient-ils favoriser cet accès ? Voilà deux questions que nous avons explorées dans le cadre d'un Programme et équipement prioritaire de recherche (Pepr) de Robotique organique. Nous avons sollicité un danseur pour observer sa rencontre avec des matières robotiques et tenter de saisir le couplage aux objets *en train de se faire* ou d'échouer. Il s'agira ici de montrer comment filmer interroge des "techniques d'objets" (Julien et Warnier 1999) tant du point de vue d'un corps dansant avec des robots, que du point de vue du corps filmant avec une caméra, et d'évaluer, pour le cinéaste-anthropologue, la façon dont la démarche filmique alors mise en œuvre invite à "assumer différemment les opérations du regard qui sont au fondement de l'activité d'un ethnographe" (Mottier 2016 : 4).

Keywords

Danse avec les robots; couplage à la technique; homme-trépied-caméra; anthropologie visuelle

The author

David Gamet s'intéresse au cinéma comme méthode de recherche en sociologie et en anthropologie et à la façon dont la perception visuelle engagée sur un terrain dialogue avec les concepts et approches écrites de nos terrains de recherche. Réalisateur de films documentaires, ses travaux explorent les questions liées à la mémoire technique et au patrimoine immatériel.

Membre fondatrice du groupe de recherche Matière à Penser, **Céline Rosselin-Bareille** s'intéresse à la façon dont la culture matérielle articule construction des sujets et fabrication du monde, à partir de la rencontre des corps et des matières (avec J.-P. Warnier, *Faire Corps*, Karthala, 2025; ed. « Matières à former », *Socio-anthropologie*, 2017). Ses recherches la conduisent à réévaluer les frontières de la discipline à travers des dialogues pluridisciplinaires.

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"Ça doit marcher"

Dans nos gestes quotidiens, la relation d'évidence avec les matières qui nous entourent permet de "vivre", c'est-à-dire de "passer d'un espace à un autre en essayant le plus possible de ne pas se cogner" (Perec 1985 : 14), de devenir expert.e en incorporant les objets (Nourrit et Rosselin-Bareille 2017), d'advenir comme sujet (Julien et Rosselin 2009 ; Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier 2025 ; Warnier 1999), de s'identifier comme femme, homme, adolescent.e, citoyen.ne, cadet bamiléké, cinéaste en ne faisant plus qu'un avec sa caméra à l'image de "Rouch, homme-caméra" (Marchiori 2011 : 47) ; d'habiter un environnement donné. Les enjeux sont tels qu'entre nos corps et nos culturelles matérielles : ça *doit* marcher. Evidemment, cela ne marche ni instantanément ni pour tous types d'objets, comme nous avons pu le constater avec des "objets à comportements" (Quinz 2021) que sont les robots.

Lors d'une phase exploratoire, nous avons observé et filmé une variété d'objets, de contextes de fabrication, d'usage ou de "mise en rapport" (Rosenthal 2021) avec les robots et constaté un fort écart entre la promesse technologique (Barcellini et al. 2023) et les relations effectives, physiques, entre humains (roboticien.nes compris) et robots. Ratés, hésitations, mouvements de reculs, sursauts, voire réactions de peur et imprévisibilité, sont monnaie courante et détonnent là où dominant le vocabulaire de la "métrique"¹, de la "robustesse"², de la "transparence"³ et où les matières sont jugées comme facteur négligeable⁴ de la variété-instabilité gestuelle, quand elles ne sont pas tout simplement ignorées⁵. Nous avons ainsi expérimenté "l'effet démo"⁶, la panne, les bugs que Grimaud et Paré (2011) avaient déjà relevés lors de leur enquête sur un Geminoid - un robot androïde. L'intérêt de cet effet n'a pas été pour nous de souligner que cela ne fonctionne pas, ou pas comme on le voudrait, mais bien de pouvoir questionner, avec des collègues de Sciences Humaines et Sociales, ces "oscillations" (Grimaud 2015), dans le domaine des techniques (Balfet 1991 ; Jamard 2009) ou dans la production des savoirs scientifiques (Catellin et Loty 2013), et l'"indétermination des relations" qu'elles engendrent (Grimaud et Vidal 2012).

¹ Indispensable pour pouvoir programmer les robots, apprendrons-nous sur le terrain.

² La capacité d'un robot à réaliser ce pour quoi il est programmé en maintenant sa performance, voire en s'adaptant à une situation nouvelle. Les roboticien.nes ne s'illusionnent pas pour autant sur l'existence de ces ratés considérés par l'un d'entre eux comme des "mauvais comportements" ; des "comportements étranges ou dysfonctionnels" (notes de terrain, 31 octobre 2024).

³ La double idée que les relations entre corps et techniques sont évidentes, que les deuxièmes ne sauraient empêcher, contraindre les premiers et se glissent aisément dans les gestes et mouvements quotidiens ; que les robots fonctionnent en circuit fermé quasiment en autonomie (les infrastructures, câbles, énergies, terminaux, etc. deviennent transparents). Il s'agit de contribuer ainsi à un discours sur la "dématérialisation" et de l'objet technique et, par contre coup, de la relation. Selon Horst et Miller (2012) cette dématérialisation est illusoire et sert les discours visant une acceptation sans condition notamment du numérique.

⁴ Du point de vue de la biomécanique classique, la question des effets de la matière sur les mouvements est ignorée. Par exemple, lorsque l'anthropologue demande : "Et le mouvement, le geste, la posture avec différentes matières, différents objets ?", la réponse est hésitante : "c'est la matière qui change, non ? On ne sait pas".

⁵ Si nous récapitulons : nous voilà immergé.es à la croisée de trois façons de regarder le monde qui privilégient le lissé aux aspérités du réel : le rituel filmé, la chaîne opératoire, le mouvement mesurable et donc normé de la robotique.

⁶ L'expression, qui fait pourtant partie du vocabulaire des roboticien.nes, est prononcée avec tout à la fois des airs de fatalité, d'amusement, de déception et de curiosité quand, à l'ambition de (nous) présenter leur travail, répondaient le silence ou "l'indiscipline" des machines.

Loin de devenir un problème, si ce n'est celui de limiter les situations où observer les relations humains-robot – nous y reviendrons –, ces non-évidences sont tout à notre avantage. L'une d'entre nous a, en effet, montré à quel point les incorporations d'objets et dilatations des corps aux objets et aux environnements, sont difficilement observables une fois ces processus finalisés (Rosselin 1999). Les objets sont intégrés aux gestes et aux mouvements qui ne se réfléchissent plus vraiment, installés dans une relation, telle que nous l'avons caractérisée plus haut, d'évidence⁷. Nous sommes loin de cohabiter avec les robots et, à l'échelle des sujets, de "faire systématiquement corps" avec. Il y avait donc, à ces occasions perturbées, un espace où entrer dans l'analyse, afin de laisser place à ce qui se passe effectivement dans la rencontre entre les objets et les sujets sans présager de la réussite d'une action, de la "bonne" position d'un pied, du "bon" dosage d'une force, de la pertinence d'une accélération ou du couplage entre objet et sujet, avant que ne s'installe une possible relation d'évidence. C'est inviter à dénormaliser et déritualiser les gestes pour mieux les laisser advenir et les filmer. Mais où et comment poser⁸ judicieusement sa caméra pour observer la rencontre entre corps du danseur et matières robotiques et tenter d'accéder au couplage aux objets *en train de se faire* ou d'échouer ?

Cet article se propose de revenir sur une expérimentation mise en œuvre dans le cadre du Programme et équipement prioritaire de recherche (Pepr) 02R - Robotique organique à visée pluridisciplinaire (Robotique-SHS), plus précisément, dans un axe consacré au mouvement⁹. Il s'agira ici de montrer comment filmer interroge ce que nous pouvons appeler avec Julien et Warnier (1999) des "techniques d'objets" tant du point de vue d'un corps dansant avec des robots, que du point de vue du corps filmant avec une caméra et d'évaluer, pour le cinéaste-anthropologue, la façon dont la démarche filmique mise en œuvre dans ce contexte "expérimental" permet "d'assumer différemment les opérations du regard qui sont au fondement de l'activité d'un ethnographe" (Mottier 2016 : 4).

1. Proposer un cadre où filmer la rencontre des matières: expérimenter en laboratoire

De nombreux travaux de sciences sociales s'intéressent aux signaux sociaux échangés dans l'interaction, à la "sociabilité minimale" du robot pour qu'un lien social entre un robot et une personne soit possible (Becker, 2021), notamment à partir de la robotique humanoïde. Que soit soutenue, réfutée ou nuancée la thèse d'un processus d'anthropomorphisation (Becker 2020 ; Tondu 2023 ; Vidal 2014) ou celle de la vallée de l'étrange¹⁰ (Mori 2012 ; Grimaud et Paré 2011), il y est question d'aborder la dimension sociale de l'interaction à partir des représentations sociales et des possibles communications entre entités humaine et robotique. Notre travail vise, cependant, moins

⁷ D'aucuns parleront alors de ritualisation du quotidien, de routinisation, d'automatisme, nous préférons ici le modèle analytique de Schilder (1968) qui inclut les trois dimensions bio-psycho-sociales du schéma corporel favorisant le processus d'incorporation des objets-dilatation des corps. Voir plus loin.

⁸ Voir plus loin les choix techniques du cinéaste.

⁹ Ce travail a été soutenu par l'AS2 (ANR-22-EXOD-0006).

¹⁰ "[...] des robots dérangeants parce qu'ils flirtent de trop près avec l'impression d'humanité" (Grimaud et Paré 2011 : 14).

à rechercher les représentations ou le sens donné à un robot, que le "sens du mouvement" (pour reprendre le titre du livre d'Alain Berthoz) avec le robot ; moins la communication entre deux entités que la possibilité physique, technique, de *faire avec* ; moins ce que la personne ressent pour le robot, que ce qu'elle ressent en faisant avec le robot. Qu'est-ce que cela fait à l'être humain que d'agir avec un objet à comportements (voire à comportements potentiels), un "artefact relationnel" (Borelle 2018), d'un point de vue sensori-affectivo-cognitivo-moteur ? Comment le corps est-il affecté ? Est-ce que cela peut "faire corps", au sens de, à la fois, faire "système" et transformer le corps humain ?

Ce qui émerge des rencontres entre humains et robots¹¹ observées sur le terrain nous a très rapidement posés trois ordres de problèmes méthodologiques. Tout d'abord, les situations les plus éclairantes sur les engagements corporels volontaires et involontaires se sont produits sous des formes difficilement saisissables par le film. Selon Comolli (1994), certains objets anthropologiques, comme les apprentissages techniques, sont des processus uniques et irréversibles, voire constants, qui demanderaient une présence (filmante) également constante sur le terrain. Se posait la question de l'inclusion de l'imprévisible, que nous avons repéré lors de nos premières observations, dans le film ethnographique : comment filmer l'émergence et comment lui donner un sens par le film, alors qu'un scénario, qui participe à définir les manières de filmer du cinéaste, ne pouvait être anticipé ? Enfin, comment, dans le même temps, conserver un regard réflexif qui intègre la façon dont le film lui-même participe de la construction de l'imprévisible ? L'inattendu et les hasards provoqués par cette relation incertaine entre humain et robot pouvaient être observés et restitués depuis plusieurs angles et types de perceptions.

Nous avons, dans un premier temps, choisi de multiplier les terrains pour filmer des situations diversifiées où corps (y compris ceux des roboticien.nes) et cultures matérielles se rencontrent, et ceci dans un double mouvement : aller dans le monde "sauvage" (test d'un robot agricole, robotique chirurgicale, robot de service) et faire rentrer celui-ci dans l'espace du laboratoire. Dans un deuxième temps, nous avons mis en œuvre une expérimentation¹², que nous qualifierons de "faible". Afin de saisir des gestes, des mouvements, des postures que contribuent à éclairer des situations de rencontres avec des robots dans le cadre (social et matériel) "maîtrisé" d'un laboratoire de robotique, nous avons sollicité un collègue pour danser avec des robots. Cette observation provoquée a été co-construite par une anthropologue (Céline Rosselin-Bareille), un cinéaste-anthropologue (David Gamet), deux roboticiens (Jean-Pierre Gazeau et Pascal Seguin), une psychologue expérimentale (Kathleen Belhassein), une biomécanicienne (Camille Arnault) – ces quatre collègues appartenant à l'équipe

¹¹ Nous avons écarté les robots "encagés", comme ceux utilisés dans l'industrie, qui remplacent le travail humain. Notre intérêt s'est porté sur des robots manipulables (soit à l'étape de leur conception en laboratoire, soit à l'étape de leur utilisation dans le travail ou la vie quotidienne) quelle que soit leur forme (ce qui ne signifie pas que leur forme n'ait pas d'impact sur les relations entre les corps et les objets). Sous condition d'adaptation des termes, il aurait été possible d'intégrer les "robots ménagers" à la réflexion, mais nous avons choisi ici de privilégier les robots tels qu'ils sont entendus par les roboticien.nes du projet. Voir plus loin les robots choisis pour le danseur.

¹² Malgré les choix méthodologiques qui caractérisent la discipline anthropologique, l'expérimentation est souvent une solution à laquelle recourent les anthropologues de la robotique (Becker, André et Dutech 2019), tant la rencontre entre robots et humains reste encore relativement anecdotique.

RoBioSS (Institut Pprime-CNRS, Université de Poitiers) – et un danseur (Marceau Chenault¹³).

Proche du travail de Villard et Lapeyre qui, à travers la danse, ont cherché à rendre compte de "qui se trame au sujet du mouvement entre l'usager et Poppy [un robot humanoïde]" (2016 : 194), notre démarche s'en distingue cependant à plusieurs égards : il ne s'agissait ni d'une recherche-crédation, ni de produire d'abord une expérience esthétique, ni de s'intéresser au "mouvoir pour le mouvoir" (*Ibid.*), mais bien de considérer le corps du danseur comme un "super capteur" (sans pour autant retirer au danseur son point de vue d'artiste) ; les robots choisis par les membres de l'équipe RoBioSS ne sont pas exclusivement des robots humanoïdes : ont été sélectionnés ORHRO, un humanoïde des années 2000 – un tronc avec "jambes" –, un "bras" articulé monté sur une table (Kuka LWR pour *lightweight robot*, du nom de son constructeur) et un exosquelette de main.

La place manque ici pour s'attarder sur les critères de choix des robots, de la salle dans laquelle a dansé Marceau, de ses vêtements, de l'installation des robots par les collègues de l'équipe RoBioSS. Mentionnons, cependant, l'importance de leur contribution à la mise en œuvre de cette expérimentation, la prise en compte de contraintes techniques (en lien avec la salle, le robot, mais aussi "les types de danse", nous a-t-il été demandé), l'expression de dimensions affectives en lien à leurs productions robotiques (leurs "bébés" ou "Madeleine de Proust"), un souci esthétique. L'installation des trois robots, à laquelle nous avons assisté, a illustré la recherche de compromis entre les contraintes techniques et de mises en scène telles qu'elles importaient pour nos collègues et qui interviendront dans la façon de filmer.

L'usage d'une plateforme d'analyse du mouvement (*motion capture technology*) pour la biomécanicienne, les capteurs et les vêtements près du corps du danseur lui qui ne revêt pour la danse que des tenues très amples ; le mouvement qui doit rester suspendu toutes les deux minutes pour le recalage du dispositif de mesure, ont au moins partiellement contribué à "expérialiser" le corps¹⁴, mais pas au point que ce serait le sujet qui serait progressivement "habilité" "à interagir avec le robot" (Marpot 2014). Nous avons donc essayé autant que faire se pouvait d'accéder à la singularité des mouvements de ce danseur, en minimisant le contrôle de ses actions par le dispositif expérimental, et ceci grâce à une démarche inductive doublée d'une triangulation de méthodes.

¹³ Marceau Chenault (Université Claude Bernard, Lyon 1) est anthropologue, pratiquant de Qi Gong et danseur.

¹⁴ Des auteurs ont montré à quel point la "réussite" de l'interaction entre robot et humain est le fait d'un véritable travail créatif de la part des humains pour s'ajuster au mieux (que ce soit un choix de l'interactant, Velkovska, Zouinar et Veyrier 2020 ; ou le fait des expérimentateurs en laboratoire, Marpot 2014).



Fig. 1¹⁵ Une expérimentation d'interactions entre un danseur et trois robots (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).

Notre méthodologie s'est orientée vers un triple accès aux matériaux issus de la rencontre entre corps et objets à comportement : par l'observation directe, par le film et par l'entretien d'explicitation. Nous pourrions dire qu'il y avait ainsi trois niveaux de regards. 1. L'observation embrassait à l'ensemble de la "scène". 2. L'observation filmante, lors de l'expérimentation, était centrée sur l'espace resserré de la rencontre physique du danseur – habitué à être filmé – avec les robots ; sans exclure la préparation du danseur (pour lui et par les roboticiens pour pouvoir l'observer). 3. L'entretien d'explicitation mobilisé, enfin, vise, pour son initiateur Vermersch (2019 [1994]), à accéder à la remémoration détaillée du vécu passé ; faire décrire de façon détaillée et non inductive l'action passée, autrement dit à la rendre verbalement explicite. L'explicitation du danseur – choisi pour la maîtrise et la connaissance de son corps ainsi que son aisance à verbaliser ses expériences sensori-affectivo-cognitivo-motrices – nous permettait ainsi d'entrer, à une granularité très fine, dans *un faire avec des robots* racontée en première personne. Les entretiens d'explicitation, enregistrés, venaient compléter les images en nous donnant accès, par la parole du danseur, à son vécu. Quand les aléas de la recherche nous ont empêché.es de respecter un temps raisonnable entre l'action et son explicitation, les images ont pu (re)donner, au danseur, l'accès à ses gestes. Parallèlement, le cinéaste-anthropologue s'est également soumis à l'exercice de l'explicitation de sa propre activité¹⁶ dont nous verrons l'apport pour comprendre les choix techniques réalisés lors du tournage et leurs effets sur l'image.

L'ensemble du processus a été filmé : un entretien où les représentations *a priori* des robots et de ce qui pouvait se passer lors de cette expérimentation ont été évoquées par le danseur ; les réunions des "expérimentateur.ice.s" (i.e l'équipe pluridisciplinaire) pré- et post-expérimentation ; l'installation de la salle, l'achat de vêtements adaptés pour le danseur ; la danse avec les robots ; le travail d'évocation du danseur lors de deux entretiens d'explicitation, réalisés dans la foulée, et d'un nouvel entretien, six mois plus tard. Nous avons ainsi réalisé six jours de tournage.

¹⁵ Les figures proposées dans ce qui suit ont le seul objectif de situer les actions. Des extraits de films, plus loin, sont eux au cœur de la discussion.

¹⁶ Les entretiens d'explicitation ont été réalisés par Noëlla Gageot (formatrice au GREX2, <https://www.expliciter.org/>).

Le film a participé à cette recherche sous différentes formes.

Comme projet commun, il a servi la mise en œuvre de la pluridisciplinarité. En effet, mobiliser de concert le cinéma-carrefour (Colleyn 2012) et la danse (avec des robots) a contribué à construire d'abord un terrain d'entente, puis un espace d'émergence des savoirs et savoir-faire ensemble qui "ne sépare pas le savoir de l'expérience" (Bationo-Tillon, Cozzolino, Krier et Nova 2024 : 9). Il s'agissait ainsi d'échapper à la division scientifique du travail et d'éviter une posture de "surplomb" ("notre démarche est scientifique"/ "la science est une construction sociale") – " n'être que ce point voyant, c'est la fiction du savoir ", écrivait de Certeau (1990) – ou complexée ; de contourner les stéréotypes de sciences où les SHS seraient dans le dire, pour ne pas dire le verbiage, et la robotique dans le faire, tandis que le danseur danse et le cinéaste filme. L'altérité, plus radicale pour les roboticiens que pour les anthropologues, de ces deux techniques-arts-approches du corps (cinéma et danse) et, en même temps, leur capacité à assurer " à l'artiste et au savant un contact permanent avec les manifestations concrètes des phénomènes qui les intéressent " (le mouvement avec des matières) (Arnheim 1997), a participé à mettre en mouvement une équipe pluridisciplinaire.

Comme livrable, nous avons aujourd'hui un film *De fer et de faire* de 57 minutes¹⁷ qui rend compte du travail réalisé – dont l'expérimentation.

Comme outil méthodologique, il a contribué à la collecte et l'archivage des matériaux de l'enquête, mais aussi au travail de remémoration du danseur lorsque celui-ci en a exprimé le besoin. L'expérimentation offrait ainsi non seulement les moyens d'observer la rencontre, dans le mouvement, des matières (des corps et des robots) pour interroger les couplages et découplages aux objets *en acte*, mais aussi, très pragmatiquement, un espace-temps à la caméra.

2. Trouver sa place : danseur et cinéaste-anthropologue

Le 22 avril 2025, Marceau pénètre dans la salle réservée à la mesure des corps ; au sol, une plateforme de forces, tout autour, à 50 centimètres du plafond, s'alignent des caméras qui enregistrent les mouvements grâce aux capteurs qui seront collés sur le corps du danseur alors revêtu d'une tenue adaptée, proche du corps. Nous sommes dans le royaume de la biomécanique, la salle ressemblant pourtant étrangement à une salle de danse. Cette étape est celle de la découverte des robots ; le danseur n'est pas encore équipé pour la mesure de ses mouvements.

Pour Marceau, qui n'avait pas d'idées préconçues quant aux "machines", "bidules", "engins", "entités" que nous avons projeté de lui faire rencontrer – ni de forme, ni de taille, mais qu'il s'imaginait de "ferraille", "peut-être anguleux" – danser avec les robots et trouver sa place ce sera "trouver des points de saisie", "de contact", "d'appuis". Il se questionne d'abord sur les "capacités" de "déplacement", de "réaction", de "connexion" ("animer" et "être animé" par le robot) (entretien préalable du 22 mars 2025).

En entrant dans la salle, Marceau découvre le bipède suspendu pour être maintenu en équilibre : il est le premier robot visible dans la pièce, le plus imposant et le seul qui

¹⁷ Pour visionner le long métrage : <https://extra.u-picardie.fr/nextcloud/index.php/s/kwZtya4MWa4niqG>

ne peut bouger. Marceau reste à plus d'un mètre du bipède, en fait le tour les bras croisés : "ah ouais !...", lâche-t-il d'un ton sceptique mais non dénué de curiosité. Plus tard, il demandera s'il a un nom : c'est ORHRO.

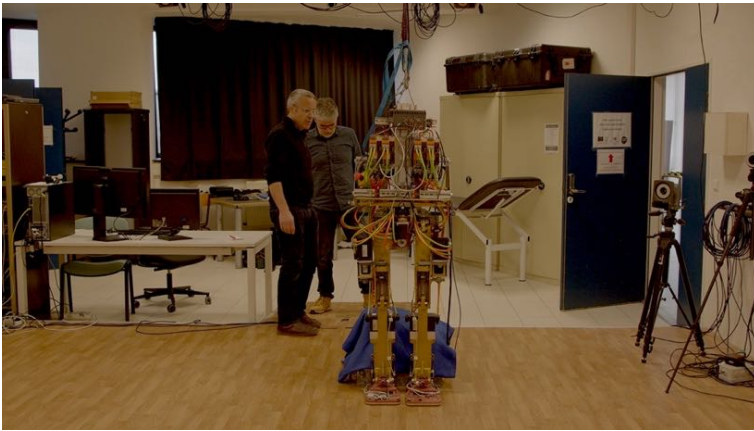


Fig. 2 ORHRO. (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).

Le deuxième robot, Kuka, appartient à la famille des cobots¹⁸ (des robots collaboratifs), conçus pour être manipulés par les humains et accompagner leur mouvement que ce soit pour "gagner" en précision ou être allégé du poids d'un outil ; il est "fait pour pouvoir autoriser l'humain à pénétrer l'espace de travail", nous aura expliqué Jean-Pierre (roboticien). Ce "bras", posé sur une table roulante et contenant le dispositif électronique nécessaire à son fonctionnement, dispose de sept degrés de liberté programmés avec des limites d'angles, de raideur, de vitesse. Il a la caractéristique de pouvoir reproduire un mouvement que le roboticien, puis le danseur, auront configuré par manipulation directe de ses différents segments. En cas de positions impossibles au regard de cette programmation, le robot se bloque en émettant un *clac* !. Avec Jean-Pierre, Marceau apprendra à l'utiliser, à en régler la commande entre phase d'apprentissage et phase de reproduction du mouvement "appris".

¹⁸ "Des machines automatiques, dotées d'un système 'intelligent' leur permettant d'opérer dans le même espace qu'un homme sans risques pour la sécurité" (Saraceno 2020 : 37).



Fig. 3 Kuka sur sa base, Marceau à sa commande (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).

L'exosquelette de main ne s'enfile pas vraiment comme un gant : il faut d'abord glisser sa main dans une armature métallique qui maintient l'ensemble de la structure, l'attacher au poignet grâce à une lanière de cuir et glisser les doigts, à l'exception de l'auriculaire, dans des embouts métalliques qui viennent coiffer leur extrémité. Marceau suivra les conseils de Pascal (roboticien) la première fois qu'il l'essaiera. L'exosquelette n'est pas animé, tant qu'une main ne l'a pas enfilé et lui donne un mouvement. Lors de la préparation de la salle, il a été posé par Pascal sur un tabouret, élément qui jouera un rôle important et pour le danseur et pour le cinéaste.



Fig. 4 Dernier geste de Marceau lors de l'expérimentation avec l'exosquelette (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 24 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).

Cette première journée a donc été l'occasion pour Marceau d'apprendre les différents objets robotiques, d'expérimenter et de trouver sa place (des places) et dans l'espace et dans l'interaction à travers des engagements corporels majoritairement contraints par ces matières inconnues du danseur.

Selon Lallier (2011 : 2), "savoir filmer", c'est "savoir être là", c'est-à-dire être aussi dans un "engagement" à essayer de percevoir ce qui se passe dans l'action du filmé (*Ibid.*) en construisant une relation avec elle ou lui. Plus techniquement, pour Mottier (2016 : 4),

filmer est d'abord "un art du placement", "savoir se placer pour forger cinématographiquement son regard et le formaliser en mettant en scène la distance sociale d'observation dans un geste semi-conscient" (*Ibid.*). En somme, pouvoir filmer, c'est trouver physiquement sa place d'autant plus quand les conditions de tournage contraignent le recours aux outils habituels comme l'écriture préalable (une note d'intention, de réalisation, un scénario) qui concourent pourtant à définir une place sur le lieu du tournage. Ainsi, dans sa pratique courante, David choisit de s'appuyer sur un ensemble de questions : que va signifier cette séquence dans le film et l'histoire qu'il construit ? Quels sont les personnages qui vont y prendre part ? Que représentent ces personnages dans le film ? Quels vont être leurs rapports dans cette scène ? Posées en amont, elles motivent le choix de ce qui va être à filmer (et l'élimination de ce qui ne le sera pas), orientent la façon de filmer ses personnages (au niveau des cadrages, des réglages techniques comme la profondeur de champ ou l'exposition de l'image) et présagent des bases du montage. Ces questions, (presque) sans fin, sont en général présentes, qu'elles soient formalisées ou non, pour aider à déterminer le placement de la caméra, le réglage et la gestion des déplacements.

Filmer dans le cadre de notre expérimentation – définie comme inductive afin de saisir, sans *a priori*, ce qui émerge de la situation – supprimait toute anticipation ("personnage" ou "chaîne opératoire"). Ceci a eu deux conséquences pour le cinéaste-anthropologue. Premièrement, David a écarté son premier appui préalable : l'écrit. Deuxièmement, être à l'écoute et à la recherche des émergences du terrain, redoublait cet abandon de toute préconception de ce qu'il avait à filmer et comment le filmer. David ne savait pas si le danseur allait s'approprier ou pas les robots, de quelles manières, à quels moments. Il n'avait donc pour filmer que son matériel et ses habitudes, son savoir-faire de cinéaste ; une occasion de laisser le "corps-qui-sait-avec-sa-caméra" s'exprimer et de mettre à jour ses choix.

Un élément de construction de ces choix, sur lequel s'appuyer, était son trépied, objet central dans sa manière de filmer. Même s'il sait que c'est parfois moins efficace, que ce trépied le ralentit dans l'enchaînement des plans, qu'il fait du bruit, qu'il est lourd et prend de la place là où, parfois, il n'y en a pas, le trépied soutient pourtant une action fondamentale : trouver sa place de cinéaste, un volume dans l'espace, qui assume, en outre, une distance et un point de vue. Le trépied est l'étayage matériel de son point de vue, à la fois cinématographique et théorique. Avec ce trépied, le point d'où le cinéaste regarde, extérieur, est constamment rappelé au spectateur, à la différence des tenants du cinéma direct qui semblent ambitionner un effacement de la position du cinéaste, où celui qui filme devient le miroir de ce que provoquerait l'interaction filmée, abandonnant, de façon illusoire, l'idée même d'un point de vue.

La place-distance du corps "qui fait avec une caméra" (nous y reviendrons) est d'être, non pas ce qui se joue, mais avec ce qui se joue devant le regard du cinéaste. Aussi, la caméra n'a pas été fixée dans un coin "pour ne pas trop déranger"¹⁹. Il lui est, en effet, impossible de ne pas être dans le même espace que ce qu'il filme, même si cet espace

¹⁹ Dans le même ordre d'idée, David refuse de filmer au téléobjectif, de voler des images, de filmer de manière semi-cachée.

Corps dansant avec robots et corps filmant avec caméra

est très contraint. Lorsque Céline lui a demandé si ce n'était pas grave de le voir dans le champ filmé de la seconde caméra qu'il avait posée pour s'assurer des plans de coupe, sa réponse fut sans équivoque : "je fais partie de l'expérimentation". Il peut (doit ?) donc être aussi à l'image. La quasi-totalité du tournage des séquences avec les robots, il l'a passée sur la plateforme, dans l'espace d'expérimentation ; il a suivi de la même manière le corps du danseur dans les autres phases et espaces d'expérimentation (poses des capteurs, réglages et calibrages du système de captation, discussions avant et après les expérimentations). Marceau savait les moments où David filmait et demandait, lorsqu'il performait : "c'est bon pour toi ?" (s'il était prêt ou en train de filmer). Le "corps-caméra" est lisible pour le danseur, mais il ne s'agit pas d'être *dans* le mouvement de celui-ci, comme l'invite de Hasque (2014). Au contraire, le trépied permet d'assumer une distance aux mouvements du danseur lors de la prise de vue.

Meyer et Papinot (2017) soulignent que les distances (de prise de vue) correspondent à des positionnements théoriques et des rapports à l'Autre divers allant du positivisme au post-modernisme. David choisit de filmer une relation, contrairement au travail de Georges (2024) qui souhaite "effacer" sa présence et toute notion de profilémie, pourtant bien documentée (de France 2010), par peur d'influencer l'interaction (verbale), considérée comme "donnée", qu'elle étudie entre deux cuisiniers. Pour sa part, David a réglé sa distance en fonction de la place disponible sur la plateforme des robots, des dispositifs présents pour reconstruire informatiquement, *via* des capteurs posés sur le corps du danseur, ses gestes. Il ne lui fallait absolument pas toucher et faire bouger les caméras de mesure (biomécanique), sous peine de devoir refaire l'ensemble de leur calibrage, tandis qu'il ressentait dans son dos leur présence continue.

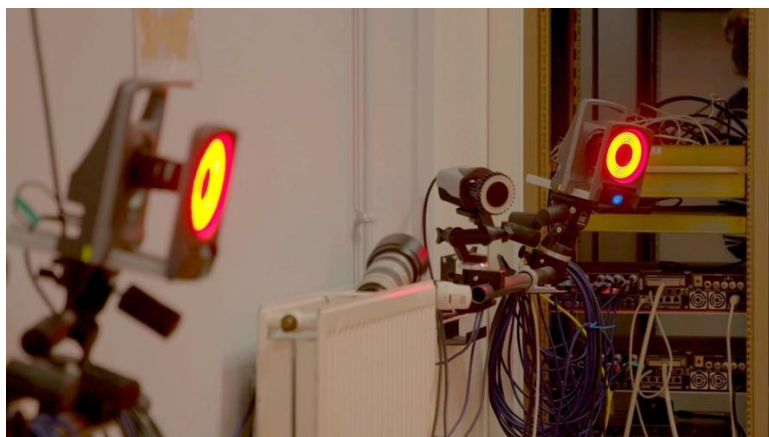


Fig. 5 Deux caméras du dispositif de captation des mouvements (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).



Fig. 6 Vue d'ensemble de la plateforme d'expérimentation et place des robots (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogramme David Gamet).

La position du cinéaste trouvée, restait à engager les actions techniques régulières : régler sa caméra sur son trépied, à plat pour garantir l'horizontalité du plan filmé, après avoir décidé de la hauteur à partir de laquelle filmer. Cette hauteur décide aussi de la manière de qualifier la personne (plongée, contre-plongée, "neutralité" du regard) et le point de vue qu'il est en train de construire *via* l'arrangement de son matériel. Le pied réglé, il peut alors s'occuper de la caméra : le choix du cadre, de la valeur du plan et les détails techniques de l'image. Dans le contexte de l'expérimentation, ces choix, tributaires de la place, étaient soumis à une nouvelle contrainte : déplacer la caméra sur le parquet faisait énormément de bruit ; chaque déplacement de caméra impliquerait donc des rushes inutilisables et l'élimination de la situation au montage. Les interactions filmées n'étant pas découpées dans le temps, sans temps de pause suffisants et sans *a priori* sur ce qui faisait plus sens ou pas, si ce n'est la rencontre entre le danseur et les robots, le mouvement de caméra était donc globalement évité. L'importance de trouver une place est bien cruciale.

Ainsi, le cinéaste réalise des choix grâce à son trépied ; il valide, dans l'espace et par la position de son corps-sa-caméra, son point de vue, c'est-à-dire sa place dans la scène (sociale), celle qu'il donne au danseur, leur relation, et la place du spectateur. Ce dernier est avec le cinéaste lorsqu'il filme, par-dessus son épaule : le cinéaste (n') est (que) le premier spectateur de la scène. Cet ensemble de choix donne, "pour qui sait les lire, les coordonnées du regard, [...] les conditions dans lesquelles ce point de vue a été élaboré" (Mottier 2016 : 7). Au cours de l'expérimentation, ses choix sont apparus à nu, pour la première fois, à David, lui offrant ainsi la possibilité d'y accéder, de les identifier comme d'abord techniques et les mettre au service d'un "être là sans être là" pour filmer la danse avec les robots.

3. Danser avec les robots

Marceau ne s'engage pas véritablement avec ORHRO, "plein d'arêtes vives" (Jean-Pierre) ; il tourne autour du robot, à distance dès le premier contact, cherche des points d'appui en posant ses coudes sur la plateforme située au niveau du tronc du bipède ou en

appuyant son corps sur ses "flancs" ; il tourne autour du pot en essayant de décrire, six mois plus tard²⁰, cette danse avec/contre/sans ORHRO.

Je viens quand même titiller un peu l'équilibre de l'engin, mais c'est un jeu typique, c'est un peu un mécanisme de danse-contact²¹, tu vas jouer avec le poids, l'équilibre du partenaire. Pour moi, c'est vraiment une manière de jauger, évaluer, cette présence, cet objet, de sentir... tu vas chercher ce truc, d'équilibre commun, lui comme il a pas de réaction, enfin voilà, c'est ce que je trouve intéressant quand je vais vers lui, je cours, ...je peux pas m'empêcher de penser qu'il y a une réaction ; en tout cas, il est immobile, mais il se passe un petit quelque chose, en tout cas en moi. Il y a un moment où le jeu (de la distance) s'épuise, quand je l'ai senti plusieurs fois, ce jeu de l'affect, ça s'émousse, je suis moins surpris quoi, voilà ! [...] là je vais tester les contacts, je vais tester un autre seuil, je vais aller le contacter ; là on rentre pour moi dans une autre forme d'affect... poser les coudes et s'appuyer dans le corps, c'est vachement intéressant, c'est très marrant de pouvoir aller jouer avec les appuis, ça ressemble à rien quand tu regardes mais... les coudes c'est un appui fiable, les autres appuis, j'en sais rien du tout, je suis vachement plus précautionneux, je tâtonne, je pousse un peu sur le côté... je crois que c'est ça, je teste les appuis et il y a un moment où je sens, pour une raison ou une autre, je ne peux pas aller jusqu'au bout, peut-être parce qu'il y a les fils, parce que... en faisant ça, moi, je suis vraiment en train de connaître et découvrir la machine, je suis en train de la saisir, en train de oui, cadrer notre relation, de voir où je peux m'appuyer dans notre relation, et pour moi c'est une source d'information hyper intéressante, moi ça m'informe, enrichi, mais je ne sais pas si je verrai d'autres choses intéressantes au-delà de ça...

Le robot est ici une ressource dont la condition du "faire avec" est soumise à la possibilité de pouvoir prendre appui, en confiance. Mais, face aux images tournées il y a six mois, Marceau voit d'abord son accoutrement, ses vêtements trop près du corps, les boules brillantes des capteurs. Il n'arrive à se relier ni à l'expérience passée, ni au robot. Il est en boucle sur lui-même, constatons-nous ensemble.

En revanche, la rencontre avec l'exosquelette fournit un matériau important lors de l'explicitation réalisée le soir même. Elle nous conduit de la tension de la main, ressentie dans la colonne vertébrale du danseur, jusqu'au devenir gant ; de l'exosquelette à la "main en fer".

L'objet prend d'abord le dessus, parce qu'enfiler le gant :

ça m'a réduit beaucoup mes libertés. Je ne peux pas complètement ouvrir la main. [...] Mais il y a une espèce, ça crée euh...une tension toujours latente quoi. [...] il y a une image d'armure partout dans le corps, le gant, il est là, mais en fait, je vois bien que juste de faire cet effort-là, ça m'invite à..., à chercher l'effort dans le dos, dans la poitrine, ça me creuse la

²⁰ Cet entretien a mis en exergue la difficulté rencontrée par Marceau de "faire avec" le bipède. Il n'est pas étonnant donc que, à l'issue de la danse réalisée en avril, il n'ait pas choisi d'explicitier son expérience avec ORHRO, privilégiant les deux autres robots.

²¹ Marceau fait référence ici de la danse-contact-improvisation qui "se focalise sur l'épreuve de la gravité et celle des forces par lesquelles [le danseur] ressent la gravité de l'autre autant qu'il le touche" (C. Leroy 2013 :78) ; "elle est technique et expérimentation" (ivi : 79). Elle nous intéresse ici en tant que, loin de se contenter d'un engagement corporel du danseur, elle repose sur le contact avec d'autres danseurs ou, dans la situation qui nous occupe, avec des matières robotiques.

poitrine, plein de trucs comme ça [...] L'objet en soi est très visible. Il est visible tout le temps, il est palpable... Il est objectivable, je le sens.

Le poids de l'exosquelette et la tension qu'il provoque – les expressions d'“armure”, de “serres” de rapace, de “gant de fer” utilisées par le danseur sont éloquentes – entraînent Marceau dans une danse où la main est premièrement dominante. L'exosquelette irradie dans tout le corps. Le corps bouge autour de la main, puis le corps bouge avec la main. Marceau évoque alors un moment de bascule, la “frontière”, dans les sensations qui se répercute dans sa danse.



Fig. 7 La prise (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photographie Céline Rosselin-Bareille).

Mais il y a un moment où il y a, à force de jouer, effectivement, il y a une petite frontière qui est... Comment dire ? Pour aller direct... de manière un peu radicale, ben j'ai un côté, une main en fer et l'autre pas. Voilà ! Du coup, il y a un moment où je ne dissocie plus que c'est une main avec un gant, c'est juste une main en fer et une autre main sans fer, donc voilà !

Nous assistons ici à ce que toute une tradition de recherche – de la neurologie du début de 20^e siècle aux neurosciences du 21^e siècle, en passant par la psychologie, la psychiatrie, la philosophie et la paléontologie – a pu montrer concernant l'incorporation des objets et la dilatation des corps, processus qui donne alors naissance à une nouvelle entité “corps humain-objets” ; que cet objet soit une canne d'aveugle, une raquette de tennis, un avion, un robot ou un trépied-caméra. Ce couplage fluidifie le mouvement, les objets devenant ponctuellement “transparents”, et intervient dans le niveau d'expertise²². Nous sommes loin du fantasme du cyborg devenu tel grâce à la robotique ou aux “nouvelles” technologies : l'être humain est un être de prothèse, étayé par les objets

²² Pour un point sur cette littérature, voir notamment Rosselin-Bareille et Warnier (2025).

matériels comme l'illustrent aussi bien le processus d'hominisation que celui de subjectivation des êtres humains. *Dans le même temps*, les engagements corporels produisent des imaginaires (ici, guerriers, animaux) à l'articulation de projections et des effets de la contrainte physique. Dans le cadre de l'expérimentation proposée, la rapidité avec laquelle le couplage a pu se faire et se défaire nous a étonné.es. L'exosquelette reposé sur le tabouret, Marceau retrouve pleinement sa main après, toutefois, avoir bougé ses doigts nouvellement dégagés de l'armature métallique.

Apprendre les potentialités de Kuka a été la première tâche du danseur face à ce cobot. Marceau a dû éviter le *clac !*, anticiper la "butée", pour ne pas bloquer le robot "limité en force et en vitesse" (Jean-Pierre) et réaliser un mouvement continu. Il ne lui est venu ni à l'idée, ni au corps qu'il pourrait faire quelque chose des interruptions du mouvement. Il lui faut de la fluidité, en apprenant la machine, le danseur s'enjoint : "il faut que je l'apprivoise ; il faut que j'apprenne comment je module la vitesse". À de nombreuses reprises, le cobot claqué : "ah ! j'ai capté : j'ai mis trop de complexité dans le mouvement des angles et j'avais senti que j'approchais des butées", explique-t-il en direct. L'enchaînement des *clac !*, qui à chaque fois empêche l'enchaînement des mouvements, questionne Marceau : "je pense que j'ai pris confiance et que je le fais bouger dans plus d'angles. C'est pas naturel. J'ai l'impression qu'il se bloque quand il pourrait se toucher ; mais je ne sens pas encore assez". Le visage du danseur se ferme ; les mouvements qu'il donne au robot sont saccadés. Le lendemain tout sera plus souple : le roboticien nous apprendra qu'il a "relibéré les contraintes. J'ai modifié un peu la raideur d'amortissement, pour que tu aies moins de... pour que tu aies plus de fluidité quoi !" (Jean-Pierre).

Le danseur, au cours de l'entretien d'explicitation réalisé le jour même, raconte un nouveau moment de bascule :

Oui, je pense que le vertige, c'est vraiment le mot, la clé. Enfin, le... ou une espèce d'apesanteur, quoi, qui disparaît, quoi. Voilà. En fait, c'est un moment... c'était un petit moment de convergence où il se trouve que le moment... [...] Mais, le moment où le robot..., ce bras se fait prendre par sa propre pesanteur, parce que c'est ce qui se passe, en fait, il arrive à un point où il se fait prendre par sa pesanteur²³. Et moi, j'arrive à un moment où j'ai fini de subir ma pesanteur de redressement, quoi. Donc, il y a un double effet, quoi ! L'objet... Je sens que l'objet est pris par la pesanteur et je sens que moi, je me libère de ma pesanteur. Enfin, je peux, en tout cas, en jouer, quoi. Donc, il y a aussi ce truc-là, c'est euh ... qui crée ce "oups !", quoi. C'est-à-dire qu'il y a... Je pense que si ça avait été que le bras ou que moi, ça aurait été... mais là, il y a les deux en même temps, pouf. Et donc, il y a vraiment une... ouais, un petit... un petit... une sensation de, de... un truc qui lâche, quoi. Bon, je pourrais dire comme ça : "ça lâche". Ça lâche, et voilà. C'est un vertige, c'est un truc qui... Il y a un truc qui lâche. [...] Et ça me donne cette sensation de... pfff... Je lâche le poids vers l'avant, quoi. Pouf, tout simplement. Et il se trouve que... il se trouve que le bras robotique, il a, il se... il se fait prendre aussi par son poids, donc on est tous les deux aussi, il y a une espèce de synchronie,

²³ Jean-Pierre apprendra à Marceau qu'il n'a pas pensé renseigner le poids de l'organe terminal, laissant le robot subir sa propre gravité, sans compensation, pourtant possible et programmable (Voir figure 3, l'organe est à la "tête" du cobot).

quoi ! De jeu, de poids, quoi. Parce qu'on est tous les deux dans un lâcher de poids, en fait, si je peux dire.

Selon Marceau, il se crée une "force autonome" imputable ni au robot ni au danseur, mais à leur interaction : "c'est un moment où il y a un truc qui se désamorce et qui part tout seul" ; "il y a un truc qui se joue, carrément, qui n'est plus de..., qui n'est plus volontaire ! Clairement, il y a un truc qui n'est plus volontaire". Alors que toute la phase d'apprentissage des mouvements du robot a été ponctuée de *clac !*, comme nous l'avons écrit plus haut, ce moment est jubilatoire pour Marceau. Après avoir essayé pour la première fois d'imprimer des mouvements au robot avec son corps et non plus de le contrôler avec les mains, Marceau évoque le robot qui "s'échappe" : "non, mais c'est bien là, il y a un petit peu, il y a un flou artistique là [rires], j'aime bien ! ça me plaît !".

Nous sommes ici bien au-delà de l'interaction entre un humain et un robot ; au-delà aussi d'un simple outillage : nous assistons à des couplages, fruits d'ajustements et de lâcher-prise, dans lesquels interviendra aussi le roboticien qui a relibéré des contraintes ; couplage que nous avons déjà trouvé sous une autre forme avec la main exosquelette ; couplage que l'on va retrouver du côté du cinéaste dans son rapport à la culture matérielle du cinéma. Le tournage vient alors illustrer ce que produit la rencontre entre le danseur-avec-les-robots et le filmeur-avec-la-caméra²⁴.

4. Faire émerger l'image

"Être là sans être là" est sans doute une posture favorisée en grande partie par l'incorporation des objets de sa pratique, comme le suggérait Epelboin en 2004 (communication lors d'un séminaire du Groupe de recherche Matière à Penser) : maîtriser l'outil afin que le corps de l'ethnologue l'oublie (ou en tout cas oublie la technique), et ainsi, que l'autre l'oublie également. Nous enrichissons ici cette approche en émettant l'hypothèse d'un écho entre les vécus sensori-affectivo-cognitivo-moteurs du cinéaste-sa-caméra et ceux du danseur avec les robots, écho participant à la production d'images.

Les réglages techniques faits et un équilibrage de l'image trouvé (celui des lignes et des masses de ce qui est dans la cadre de la caméra), il n'y a plus d'actions nécessaires au cadrage, à la netteté, à la balance des blancs, à l'ouverture du diaphragme. Les sensations en lien avec le portage du pied-caméra ou la manipulation de l'objectif vont peu à peu laisser place à une sensation d'équilibre, objectivée dans la position du cinéaste (voir figure 8). La main de David en suspens montre la validation de ce qu'il est en train de filmer, le fait de laisser se "dérouler" ; le trépied, la caméra, le casque, le micro sur Marceau, etc. sont devenus des extensions de son corps qui se dilate, ainsi couplé, pour "rentrer" dans l'image. Son regard n'est plus à l'observation de la scène, mais "absorbé dans l'image", comme David le précisera au cours d'un entretien d'explicitation. "Je suis dans l'image", "je n'ai plus besoin de regarder [la scène sociale]", "c'est comme si j'étais avec l'autre" ; "pour moi, il y a quelque chose de très beau, c'est comme si on touchait, en fait". Ce faisant David se rend disponible à ce qui est *en train de se faire*. Un

²⁴ Au regard de ce qui a été écrit plus haut, la caméra est une métonymie pour mentionner l'intégralité des objets techniques choisis par le cinéaste.

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déséquilibre du corps du cinéaste accompagne le changement de plan ; le corps se réanime, la main vient rechercher l'objectif de la caméra pour construire un autre plan.



Fig. 8 Le couplage homme-caméra (Laboratoire RoBioSS, Institut P', Université de Poitiers, 23 avril 2025. Photogrammes Céline Rosselin-Bareille).

Lallier (2008 : 3) parle de "corps-filmant" ainsi que d'incorporation de la caméra. Pour lui, filmer est un apprentissage de techniques du corps spécifiques, où les mouvements du corps du cinéaste sont une perception et sa trace. L'auteur évoque également la nécessité de "se maintenir dans un fragile équilibre", de "filmer par le ventre", ce qui "correspondrait ainsi à une perception neuromusculaire de la caméra". Il fait ensuite sienne la formule de Rouch (1979 : 63) : "le caméraman réalisateur pénètre réellement dans son sujet, précède ou suit le danseur, le prêtre ou l'artisan, il n'est plus lui-même, mais un 'œil mécanique' accompagné d'une 'oreille électronique'". Et si notre propos croise à certains égards les propositions de la ciné-transe, notamment décrites et synthétisées par Buob (2017), nous nous en écartons aussi : filmer est une technique d'objets ; le trépied et la caméra des prolongements du corps-filmant. Le cinéaste est dans une disponibilité de regard et de perception autre, permise *par* l'incorporation de la culture matérielle du cinéma ainsi que ses contraintes de langage au service de la réalisation de l'image. Il peut ainsi suivre le plus justement possible, sans pour autant que ne disparaisse son point de vue, le danseur et les aspérités de sa rencontre avec les robots. Les trois exemples qui suivent l'illustreront.

Video 1: <https://youtube.com/shorts/hEe9uW9HyJg>

Revoir ces images invite David de lire la perception ("nue"), qu'il a eue lors du tournage et du rapport de Marceau aux robots. Ces plans donnent à voir explicitement ses choix filmiques. Au début, il filme Marceau presque uniquement en plans fixes, larges, d'autres personnes sont visibles. Tous et toutes sont dans le même type d'action : elles et ils cherchent, règlent, observent, prennent la mesure, des mesures. En somme, elles et ils testent. Il n'y a pas de mouvement. Quelque chose se cherche. Cette lecture est renforcée par les images qui suivent les 30 premières secondes de la séquence. Marceau est alors dans le deuxième jour de l'expérimentation (repérable aux capteurs sur ses vêtements). David suit ses mouvements (lorsqu'il recule ou avance vers ORHRO), mais pas

totale : l'image ne rend pas compte du couplage, du faire ensemble, entre Marceau et ORHRO. Si les mouvements de la caméra semblent suivre le danseur, dans les faits, ils sont définis par le regard qu'a le cinéaste sur Marceau : la caméra s'arrête sur la présence de l'exosquelette posé sur le tabouret (à 0'52 s.). De même, quand Marceau revient vers ORHRO, la caméra reste sur le bipède alors que Marceau recule. "Je viens chercher des impressions intérieures", nous dira le danseur, comme le montre le plan qui commence à 1'30 s., en plan serré. David va ainsi chercher ce qui est lisible, sur son corps, son visage, les praxèmes²⁵ du danseur dans son interaction avec le robot. ORHRO est toujours filmé de manière passive, comme objet. La caméra ne s'arrête sur lui que lorsque le corps du danseur le fait trembler. Marceau a souligné, dans l'entretien postérieur, que ce serait peut-être le seul moment où il y aurait eu quelque chose qui s'est passé.

Video 2: <https://youtube.com/shorts/GOPREOpGRNw>

Selon le même principe qu'avec ORHRO, les choix de cadrages et les mouvements de caméra sont visibles au moment de filmer l'exosquelette de main. Soulignons d'abord que le (son du) tabouret a joué un rôle important dans cette séquence. Le son validait chaque mouvement du corps de Marceau pas forcément visible depuis la caméra et a bien aidé David à "rentre" dans la manière de filmer la séquence d'appropriation de l'exosquelette par le danseur. Ceci a sans doute aussi amené à réduire le corps du danseur à différentes parties : il est une main, des jambes, un visage qui regarde et réfléchit, mais pas d'emblée une unité. Comme pour ORHRO, la caméra ne suit pas et ne s'arrête pas totalement avec le mouvement de Marceau, jusqu'à 1'27 s., où tout bascule dans la manière de filmer. Le mouvement de Marceau emporte la caméra qui est pleinement prise, dominée, dans le suivi de ces/ses mouvements. David a même la sensation de pouvoir presque les deviner, les anticiper en termes de direction, d'ampleur, de vitesse et de rythme. La caméra n'est que très peu ou pas prise en défaut par les mouvements du danseur. C'est même ce mouvement, un équilibre (perçu lors du tournage) qui est filmé, et non plus Marceau et un robot : un "acte", aurait écrit Mendel (1998). Nous sommes ici pleinement dans l'incorporation filmée et perçue au moment du tournage. Même si le cinéaste-anthropologue ne le verbalise pas sur le moment, il profitera de l'entretien d'explicitation de Marceau pour l'évoquer. La fin de la séquence capte quelque chose du découplage : le corps est à nouveau saisi en parties distinctes (notamment main /tête).

Video 3: <https://youtube.com/shorts/-jflMeZtkyo>

Essentiellement focalisé sur Marceau au début, David a essayé de filmer Kuka comme un personnage, mais il a très vite abandonné. Si Kuka pouvait donner l'impression d'une certaine forme d'autonomie – il bougeait seul et Marceau dansait avec lui – ses mouvements étaient bien programmés par le danseur lors d'une première phase (voir

25 Pour P. Parlebas (1981), le praxème est une conduite motrice pouvant être interprétée comme le signe de l'intention de l'autre : regards, orientation des appuis, de la tête, des épaules, etc.

plus haut). Personnifier le cobot n'a, très rapidement, pas fait sens pour le cinéaste. Les images montrent que la caméra oscille de l'un à l'autre ; ce qui est filmé réside dans l'interaction perçue entre les deux entités. Les dernières images sont proches de celles de la danse avec l'exosquelette : un mouvement d'ensemble, notamment lorsque le danseur engage son corps et non seulement ses mains pour manipuler Kuka, puis les images sont plus précises et situées dans le mouvement créé par Marceau. Il nous dira que ce sont ces moments-là où il se passe quelque chose avec le cobot.

Pour le cinéaste-anthropologue également, *quelque chose*, validé par les montages et dont rendent compte les images, s'est passé. Lallier (2008 : 6) évoque, à juste titre, un sentiment d'extase ou un état de félicité, lorsqu'il parvient à une forme d'harmonie, de *synchronie*, avec le rythme des interactions sociales filmées. Et l'idée centrale est bien celle de synchronie : c'est elle qui fonde ce *quelque chose*. Il n'en est pas autrement lorsque le danseur se couple aux robots. Sebag et Durand (2020) parlent d'homothétie augmentée entre sociologie et cinéma documentaire. Pour eux, la sociologie visuelle et filmique, en mettant au centre de la démarche l'interaction filmeur/filmé, apporte un plus par rapport à la sociologie textuelle. Nous pouvons nous approprier cette idée d'homothétie augmentée pour évoquer notre démarche d'anthropologie visuelle expérimentale dans laquelle la perception, soutenue et mise en place grâce aux objets techniques cinématographiques incorporés, est à même de saisir les mises en relations entre corps et objets inhérentes à l'étude des cultures matérielles.

Couplages et découplages du danseur aux robots résonnent ainsi avec le corps-caméra du cinéaste-anthropologue. L'utilisation du cinéma accompagne une anthropologie du geste et des techniques, une anthropologie des cultures sensori-affectivo-cognitivo-motrices et des cultures matérielles ; en retour, les cultures matérielles du cinéma questionnent autrement l'observation filmante.

Cette expérience ici rapportée relate une véritable prise de conscience structurante pour la démarche : le film est d'abord une technique, fruit d'apprentissages et d'incorporations, et c'est ce qui reste quand les points de repères habituellement utilisés ne peuvent être mobilisés. Le film, comme technique cinématographique, favorise une autre manière d'aborder le terrain de recherche à travers une connaissance par corps – une perception non verbalisée et non directement verbalisable – et des techniques incorporées de prises de vue (la caméra et le trépied dans l'espace). La perception visuelle propre au cinéma est de pouvoir penser, filmer et rendre compte des mises en relations (Péquignot 2008 ; de France 1982 [1989] ; Arnheim 1997) : faire avec, faire contre, faire ensemble, dominer, être dominé, faire système.

Le cadre, les mouvements de caméra et le rapport de la caméra au danseur et au robot accompagnent la réalisation de l'image cinématographique qui a été construite au moment du tournage, "en direct", de façon non anticipée. Les extraits de vidéo associés à cet article montrent ainsi que la caméra suit tantôt le danseur, le regarde (le couplage ne se réalise pas) ou est emportée par le danseur (le couplage se réalise). Contrairement au verbe qui sépare, le cinéma, *via* la culture matérielle incorporée, est sans doute un vecteur essentiel dans la saisie des incorporations et des apprentissages en train de se faire, car

nous touchons au cœur même des cultures matérielles qui sont la mise en relation des corps et des objets, et l'étude de ce que cela produit, de ce qui en émerge.

Si filmer le corps dansant se nourrit d'un calage perceptif entre l'homme-caméra et le danseur avec les robots, pour autant, mais cela devra faire l'objet d'un autre article, la démarche d'anthropologie visuelle est tout à fait formalisable, notamment en ce qui concerne la construction de relations de distance et de point de vue (Voir Guéronnet 1987). Le processus expérimental que nous avons élaboré a rendu possible l'accès aux choix techniques et matériels essentiels à l'acte de filmer du cinéaste. Rarement pensé, le cinéaste-caméra (caméraman) offre pourtant une dimension supérieure au seul œil de l'Homme à la caméra de Dziga Vertov.

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Abstract

Across the history of bodily representation, one form continues to pose numerous methodological challenges when exploring the culture of bodily experience: the awareness drawing. When a conscious subject draws their own body, it prompts a number of questions about the understanding of the living body constructed by the individual based on their habitus and the disclosive value of the act of drawing.

This article presents a methodological analysis, grounded in the historical evolution of different visual methodologies for perceiving the living body through the lived body: from anatomical silhouettes to freehand drawing, and from projective methods to expressive practices. The unique features of each method reveal specific limitations and potentials, while also probing the conscious and unconscious dynamics that underpin embodiment.

In freehand drawing method, participants comment on their own drawings, thereby analysing the embodied practices in a more integrated, contextualized language. Based on field research with performers in a circus and patients, the anthropological relationship to the living body appears as a narrative in the first person.

Keywords

Awareness; phenomenology; body image; embodiment

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Introduction

Across the history of bodily representation, one form of self-representation continues to pose numerous methodological challenges when exploring the culture of bodily experience. When a conscious subject draws their own body, it prompts a number of questions about the understanding of the living body constructed by the individual based on their habitus and what is revealed through the act of drawing.

The living body refers to the material and biological embodiment of culture, a concept first articulated by Marcel Mauss in 1934 in his work on the techniques of the body. The activity of the living body deploys its material culture primarily (Rosselin-Bareille and Warnier, 2025) beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. A part of this culture, however, can be brought into consciousness, even if perception distorts its material in the lived body, which in this instance refers only to the subjective experience (in the first person) we have of our body.

The material culture of the living body is invisible to the subject since it is embodied directly and progressively in the formation of the habits and techniques of the body. These movements, once they have become unreflective automatisms, operate within us and on our behalf beyond the reach of our awareness to facilitate optimal adaptation. As an expression of the lived environment, social class and gender identity, these automatisms do not deconstruct themselves. A specific method is required to bring them into conscious awareness.

In phenomenology, this first-person body has been framed as a way of describing how the information produced by the material culture of the living body disturbs the perception of the lived body (Klinke and Fernandez 2023). As Donna Haraway (2016) argues, living with this perceptual disruption defines an epistemology of the hybridity between the data of the living body and their perception by the lived body. There is, in fact, a phenomenon of unconscious emergence that allows information from the living body to reach the conscious awareness of the lived body, similar to a process of awakening. Nevertheless, perception still acts as a filter that distorts and delays direct contact with the lived reality (Andrieu 2013).

We will demonstrate that a visual culture of the self can emerge through awareness drawings, uncovering both the habitus and the representations of the living body. First, we review the history of body drawings and how they have been used in health and artistic fields. Next, we provide a more detailed analysis of the methods associated with awareness drawings, highlighting the unique nature of this tool. Finally, we demonstrate how body awareness drawings can be used as a contemporary research methodology to study the body's internal activity among a group of circus performers.

1. Historical overview of the visual culture of awareness drawings

Through a historical overview of the development of drawing in the arts and medicine, the aim is to show how drawing is used to reveal both the physical nature of the body and our perception of its internal processes.

1.1 From the historical case of anatomical drawing to the first awareness drawing

Depictions of the body's internal structure are a common motif in anatomical illustrations. In these drawings, the dissected subjects strike poses and invite the viewer in a close-up view of their internal organs. A representative example is the Bartoloméo Eustachi's *Otto*

Tavole Anatomiche (published in Rome in 1750). In some drawings, the subject may also present themselves self-dissecting and parting their own flesh or is shown observing its own dissection, as we see in *A flayed man holding his own skin* in Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano*, or in the *Dissected female figure* by Pietro Berrettini (published in Rome in 1618). We see the same scopic doubling in the *Tabulae anatomicae* by Pietro da Cortona and Cajetano Petrioli (published in Rome in 1741), where the magnifying glass becomes a hypertext revealing the *infans* changing the flayed woman into a pregnant woman. Eve Keller contextualises this work within "the contemporary configuration of the relationship between the anatomy and the self" (Keller 2007: 65). The portrayal of the bodily self is in this instance no longer anonymous, objective and static; it is presented through the male gaze, personalised, subjective and dynamic. The subject appropriates their own skin, reversing the gaze of the male anatomist in an "autoptic" vision of the woman's body (Sawday 1996: 13). Nevertheless, the male gaze behind this third-person view of women's bodies remains a form of male domination over inner body (Sappol 2024).

In some cases, it is the author's own body that is depicted. Such is the case Albrecht Dürer drawing. While corresponding with his physician in 1520, Albrecht Dürer produced what art historians regard as one of the earliest awareness drawings. Dürer depicts himself bare-chested, gesturing with his hand to an area circled in yellow on his abdomen to indicate to his physician the source of his pain. While the anatomical representation of dissection was widespread at this time, this particular image stands out for its portrayal of self-dissection and self-diagnosis. The difference is that, whereas anatomical culture (Andrieu 2015) depicted dissection to lay bare the internal structures, here it is the subject who paints his own affliction.

The historian George Didi-Huberman (2024) has advanced hypotheses about Dürer's visual and symbolic culture in this drawing. The different shades of yellow, which was also used in other self-portraits, are thought to reflect the artist's physical condition: "In addition to the yellow of glory, there is the more sadly yellowish – *proprios colouribus* – complexion of a skin that is already undergoing the ordeal of its own withering" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 201). It is the pointing gesture more than the yellow hue that is reproduced in the 1515 drawing *Man of Sorrows*. In contrast to the pointing index finger in the self-portrait, the image of the suffering Christ in the series *Christ as Man of Sorrows* gestures away from the wounds. As in his 1493 self-portrait, "the visual clue" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 208) serves Dürer, "in common with his *Man of Sorrows*, as a tool for observing his own body, his emptying as an artist, his hand as a creator... As though he were probing symptomatic surfaces" (Didi-Huberman 2024: 207).

By depicting himself, the artist creates a self-portrait and an imagined view (Vial Kayser 2023) of the body beneath the skin.

1.2 Birth and developpement of the chart method

Dürer instead invented a means of self-designation that Schott (2004) understood would later become the prototype of Palmer's 1949 pain chart. The common thread is inviting the subject to self-designate by using their own words to show and talk about their pain. The difference lies in the fact that it was Dürer himself who decided to represent himself in a drawing, whereas Palmer was later only to ask the subject to check off parts of an outline of the human body and name them.

In 1949, Harold Palmer suggested that his patients visualise their experience of pain by drawing it on outlines of the human body: "*The technique is capable of many*

degrees of elaboration and it is suggested that some value might accrue from the acquisition of a series of charts depicting the visual presentation of organic syndromes. Whereas the majority of organic syndromes are associated with asymmetrical charts, functional nervous disorders exhibit a characteristic symmetry" (Palmer 1949: 196).

The patient is handed a pencil and "invited to mark in on the charts wherever he experiences pain, particular emphasis being placed on the requirement that he marks on the charts the site of every single pain to which he is liable" (Palmer 1949: 187). Two versions of the outlines of the human body are presented, front and back, with attention paid to the difference between the right and left sides, as the sheet is mirrored by the subject's own body. The following instruction is given: "We have a plenty of time, plenty of paper; plenty of lead in the pencil, now, just take your time and try and do what I have asked you to" (Palmer 1949: 187).

In this way, Palmer collected a considerable number of outline diagrams completed by his patients. He set out a methodology on these cards to visually demonstrate the orthodoxy of functional lesions. The paradox is that the pain remains invisible but not unfelt for the subject. Words alone cannot describe the location, scope and shifts in intensity in the body. Prior to this proposition, diagnostic methods were not able to distinguish psychological pain from organic pain. Palmer thus observed that the mental representation that the subject constructs of the topography of their lived body should be aligned with physio-anatomical codifications. If we take the example of the back, Palmer explains as follows: "The patient's mental concept of 'my back' commences about the fourth dorsal segment and extends down to the ilias crests" (Palmer 1949: 190). The mental extension of the physical area of the back is so physiologically vague that it reveals the perception of the body itself.

Palmer identified distinctions in the various severity pain using five distinct approaches within the clinical interview. First, he put questions to the patient to distinguish between marks that represent similar versus dissimilar types of pain. Secondly, the patient constructs a chronological framework, and is then able to establish relationships between a pain in the head and a different one in their back (Palmer 1949: 187). During the interview, Palmer himself colours in and annotates the features marked by the patient: "I then mark in over the patient's pencilled diagrams, with different coloured inks, the separate varieties of pain as described by the patient, and in corresponding colours I make marginal notes concerning the type of pain and its relationships" (Palmer 1959: 187). In this procedure, Palmer only asked the patient to rank the pain from strongest to weakest in order to prioritise certain pains over others, which gave them a secondary status. Last of all, Palmer interpreted the patient's diagram in conjunction with a physical examination. In some cases, he suggests additional tests (e.g. a scan) prior to giving the patient his final interpretation. Their file would then be comprehensive, "a permanent record of the patient's symptoms" (Palmer 1949: 188).

Even nowadays, the pain chart method is still used in clinical practice and medical research to define typical pain profiles or to measure responses to analgesic treatments (Bernhoff and al. 2016; 2022). In particular, it was updated in the 21st century with a color version that was also annotated by the patient (Masferrer, Prendergast and Hagell 2003). These charts are investigative tools currently being developed in various health and psychology fields. The techniques have subsequently become more diverse, colourful and digitised with the adoption of tablets and connected pens. The most sophisticated have progressed from 2D to 3D scanning (Shaballout, Neubert, Boudreau and Beissner 2019).

In addition, charts continue to be used alongside clinical or research interviews. For example, in a study on sports injuries, researchers used a chart to gather information about elite athletes' personal injury histories prior to an interview (Cocqueret, Eugene, Legendre and Andrieu 2025). New versions are also contributing to a broader exploration of body awareness beyond the pain clinic, such as the Awareness-Body Chart (ABC; Danner and al. 2017).

In other field of application, chart can be used to to invastigate the acceptability of touch in physical education settings. In her study Juliette Vincent uses the body outline drawing to assess how students locate the parts of their body that their classmates and teacher have permission to touch (Vincent and al. 2023). Charts remain a valuable tool in the health sciences and are now being applied to a wide range of topics in social and psychological researches.

1.3 Emergence of projective and expressive methods in psychology

During the 20th century, significant developments in psychology occurred, particularly in the study of the unconscious mind and imagination. In response to these developments, two types of graphic method emerged: projective and expressive.

Projection is a technique that uses images to foreground unconscious content. The subject interprets shapes and colours. The inkblot projective technique was invented by Kerner (1857), Binet-Henri (1895), Hens (1917) and Rorschach (1921). The method was initially used as a source of inspiration for the creative imagination and later for projection. The drawing takes shape via the random projection of ink. Justinus Kerner, a German physician and Romantic poet, would turn to a game from his childhood to spark his imagination. He would make inkblots on a sheet of paper, fold it in half, and draw poetic inspiration from the shapes that emerged. In 1857, Kerner produced a collection of 50 inkblots and poems – called *Die Klecksographie*, *Klecks* meaning "blot" or "smudge" – which were published posthumously in 1890.¹

It is likely that Alfred Binet and Victor Henri were the first to have the idea of using inkblots as a psychological test (Binet and Henri 1895), in 1895, to assess an individual's imaginative capabilities. In 1917, the Polish medical student Szymon Hens presented his doctoral thesis "Testing the Imagination with Formless Inkblots" on schoolchildren, healthy adults, and people with mental health problems. These inkblots are "inner images" (Anzieu 1961: 43) whose realisation emerges in the inkblot. It follows that the blot is not a drawing: it is the subject who reveals or "draws themselves" in the blot by recognising shapes from their imagination.

Hermann Rorschach (Teles Filo 2020) began his work on inkblots in 1911, presenting his medical thesis *Reflex Hallucinations and Symbolism* at the University of Zurich in 1912. Rorschach adopted and transformed a childhood game, *Klecksographie*, where ink is dropped onto piece of paper, then folded to create figures. He designed his test as "a method for interpreting random shapes". The material consists of inkblot cards with symmetrical spots on them, half of which are coloured. The subject must say what they see in these shapes. Rorschach, however, refused to allow the test subjects to believe that the projective experience was simply a "test of the imagination" (Rorschach 1947: 3). He took his cue from Bleuler, who argued that perception is rooted in three processes: sensation, memory and association. Accordingly, Rorschach defined

¹ <https://www.axelleviannay.com/single-post/2017/05/29/la-klecksographie-lart-des-taches>

the interpretation of random shapes as “a perception whereby the work of assimilation of the complex of sensations and the engram is so intense that it is perceived internally as a process of assimilation” (Rorschach 1947: 4).

Regardless of how projective inkblots may be, they are drawings born from the chance diffusion of ink along the crease of the paper. The randomness of the fold produces figures whose symbolic meaning will only have been acquired, particularly in the Rorschach test, from the perceptions of the subjects. The limits of this projective method have now been established, particularly with regard to body perception. Individuals tended to comment more frequently on certain parts of the inkblots where there was the greatest difference in colour intensity (Matousek, Skobrtal and Badosek 2025). This visual emphasis draws the eye to certain areas, thereby influencing the imagination.

In the field of the expressive method, the draw-a-person test has been used for many years to evaluate a child's mental development. The test was developed by Florence Goodenough in 1926 and revised by Henri-Marcel Fay in 1936 (Fay 1934), then by Jacqueline Royer in 1963 (Royer 1977). It based on a simple principle: the child is asked to depict a person on a sheet of paper. The clinician then applies a scoring system based on the presence or absence of observable features, which provides an estimate of the individual's developmental level. The test was to undergo several revisions and modifications to not just measuring a child's mental age but also their emotional development. Although the psychometric properties of the drawing are no longer considered sufficiently robust for assessing intelligence, due to too high a risk of false positives and false negatives results, ceiling effect and others bias such as artistic skills and motivation (Troncone and al. 2020). From now on the draw-a-person test is developed into more of a broad personality test than an intelligence test, as it remains relevant to provides valuable insight into how the relationship to the body is conceptualised in a clinical context.

In psychoanalysis, the drawing is linked to the unconscious image of the body, first investigated by Sophie Morgenstern in 1927, and broadly developed by her successor Françoise Dolto (1948). In 1949, Karen Machover recognised a new dimension in the drawing, which Ada Abraham developed further in 1963 on the theme of identification (Abraham 1976), seeing it as an intimate image of the drawer – their needs, bodily conflicts, and more specifically, their bodily identification.

On the one hand, techniques and tools based on outline figures (Rorschach, pain charts, pain drawing scored) invite the subject to indicate what they recognise in the drawings and figures, to check parts of the body and to verbalise what they perceive. The language used in these projections expresses the visual culture of subject by the bodily imagination. On the other hand, drawing techniques (children's drawings, body drawings, awareness drawings and blind drawings) produce a representation of the body accompanied by captions to express the experience of internal sensations. The uniqueness of creating figures shows how the subject represents their own body mentally.

2. Revisiting/rethinking drawing as a research method

The use of drawing in social science research has a long history and raises questions about the subjectivity of the researcher. For example, upon his return from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition in 1928–1934, Marcel Griaule (1934) used free drawing in the anthropology of the body as a means of presenting the visual cultures of the Abyssinians. Levi-Strauss himself sketched bodily techniques in his field journal among the Nambikwara between 1935 and 1939 (Desveaux 2025). Sketches, as a visual method, more so than photography, describe the movement of the living body based on the anthropologist's perceptual observation, while avoiding as much as possible the projection of his own culture into the drawing. In the field of psychology, the role of subjectivity in drawing has emerged as a key theme. The difference between projection and expression has been studied in depth, particularly by Didier Anzieu.

2.1 Freehand drawing as awareness drawing

In psychology, Didier Anzieu examined this question of projection in drawing (1961). He explained this enduring difference between expression and projection when employing these visual methodologies: "In a projective test, the subject is free to say yes and do as they please with the material presented to them... as in psychoanalysis, what matters is what spontaneously comes to consciousness" (Anzieu 1961: 15). Accordingly, even if the material has minimal structure, the projection of affective and fantasy structures is facilitated by a projective technique shaped by the defined material. On the other hand, notes Anzieu: "Freehand drawing, free storytelling and improvised dramatic play obviously 'express' the personality of the person who engages in them" (Anzieu 1961: 22).

In other words, freehand awareness drawings are to be distinguished from awareness drawings based on outlines since their complete freedom in terms of instructions and material positions them as expressive techniques. Once somebody is invited to name an outline, fill or colour it in, the technique is projective since the response is still shaped by defined, standardised material even if the subject remains free to respond as they wish. With these tools, technical rationalisation and the quantified assessment of pain across different regions of the body imply not only that there is a correct answer but also that there is a certain rigour in the data processing (Anzieu 1961: 22).

The challenge of freehand drawing – as we develop it in awareness drawings without a pre-existing template – lies in expressing the unconscious image of the body that the subject has of themselves. It may also reflect the preconscious body schema that organises motor action – as, for example, balance. It is "the body's point of view on things" (Anzieu 1961: 301). These drawings anticipate a personalisation of the body schema, such as depicting one leg shorter than the other due to an imbalance caused by a limp.

The risk of awareness drawings as an image of the body is idealisation, as Anzieu points out: "Childish drawings, whether of a tree, house or person, bear the insignia [...] of narcissism and its wounds" (Anzieu 1961: 306). The drawing may then mask the weaknesses of the personality behind a conscious idealisation but in parallel bear the marks of traumas, wounds and absences. "This type of drawing can be deciphered like a dream" (Anzieu 1961: 306) where "the symbolic disguises, the condensations, displacements and work of secondary elaboration" (Anzieu 1961: 306) have to be identified and unravelled.

Awareness drawing belongs to what Anzieu calls a “poïétique” in the way that the body is *at work* rather than *in the work*. Drawing is a living, individual reality: it is “living, because it is linked to the body, real and imaginary, and to its drives, its functions, the representations – firstly sensorimotor, secondarily verbal – that certain parts of the psychic apparatus make of it” (Anzieu 1981: 11). So long as the drawing is truly free and expressive, it originates in “a motor activity, a rhythmic exercise, a postural experience, and the ‘tonic dialogue’ of the body itself with other animate and inanimate bodies” (Anzieu 1981: 111).

2.2 Typology of awareness drawings

Like pictures, awareness drawings convey the culture of the body: on the one hand, the purging of humours and passions (cathartic drawing); and, on the other, bodily memory (mnemosys drawing) and, finally, the theory that the body forges itself (paradigmatic drawing).

Didi-Huberman distinguishes three types of image: the ghost image, the pathos image and the symptom image (Didi-Huberman 2002: 27). The image is understood here as “a body, an organic meeting of objects... a *corpus* of knowledge, an *organon* of principles. Or even a body of doctrine” (Didi-Huberman 2002: 14). Drawing, like the image, conveys what flows from the body: the purging of humours and passions (cathartic drawing), bodily memory (mnemosys drawing) and the theory that the body forges itself (paradigmatic drawing).

We can now make the following distinctions:

- Cathartic drawing is the release of the contents of conscious awareness. It is a channel for expressing what has been repressed in one’s self-representation in order to show what is truly experienced from within (emotions, burning, inflammation, hinterland).
- Mnemosys drawing in this context is consistent with a drawing in chronogenesis. It lays bare details about the subject’s personal, intimate and emotional life through the body’s memory (wounds, scars, fear, dizziness).
- Paradigmatic drawing presents the theory of the body within the body-brain-mind relationship through models of body image, body schema, posture, emotional matrices and temporal learning patterns.

Are awareness drawings extracted from consciousness or do they suspend it by moving through repression? Here we need to distinguish three levels of expression through awareness drawings, ranging from cerebral unconscious awareness to intentional consciousness:

1. The drawing of **(awareness)** by which conscious awareness is absent from the production of the drawing as though the body and its brain had produced it without the subject’s knowledge. Jean-Philippe Lachaux argues that it is the brain that expresses itself directly through the automatic act of drawing. On the subject of elite athletes, he writes: “As the ball begins to rise in the air, they spontaneously see in their mind the small arc that it is going to describe until it falls back to the ground” (Lachaux 2024: 35). In this way, a spontaneous drawing takes shape within and through the brain.

2. The drawing **(of)** awareness is associated with surprise, in the meaning attributed to it by Natalie Depraz (2016). The conscious awareness of one's own body is not entirely recognised in the drawing: it is as though the drawing has overridden the consciousness, as though the former knew more than the latter about the actions of the living body. Consequently, the act of drawing may deepen the field of awareness of the subject's bodily culture.
3. The **(drawing)** of awareness is intentional and voluntary. It faithfully traces the contours of the idea, and proves to be consistent with the mental image that the subject has of their gestures, postures and movements. Here it presents the most accurate representation possible.

2.3. Freehand awareness drawings as an anthropology of the internal visualisation

In the framework of freehand awareness drawings, the instructions and interventions of a third party in the drawing process are typically more infrequent. Existing charts restrict how people express themselves by setting a particular standard for the human body, as determined by the doctor's diagnosis. In contrast, free drawing based on the perception of internal sensations gives rise to more subjective configurations. The subject can present their body as they imagine it to be. Free drawing thus provides a means of revealing an invisible materiality experienced from within in a non-discursive manner, which nevertheless warrants further exploration through an interview. This is because anatomical semantisation reveals how the subject constructs a theory of how their body functions (Andrieu and al. 2022).

In this configuration, the subject draws their own body without an outline diagram or pre-defined template. Only one thematic instruction is issued. For example: "Draw however you want, using colours and your inner sensations (pains, injuries, marks, and so forth)." In other words, the subject can use colours to indicate the variations and chronogenesis of their sensations. They then interpret their drawing themselves by presenting it and adding a caption.

The freehand drawing of the human figure may have therapeutic effects since it enables a different description of the experience. *Les Dessins de Patrick* (Le Bohec and Le Guillou 1980: 151) – a pedagogical study that follows the analysis of a child's drawings – shows how imaginary productions have their source in the lived body. For children, the expressive value has even more importance since it helps them not only materialise the imaginary but also express traumatic experiences or what they cannot put into words. In a more recent study, researchers used drawing as a means of accessing the representations of children aged 5 to 11 suffering from sleep disorders (Filhol and al. 2020). The process of drawing made it possible to highlight the emotional and imaginary dimension (hopes and fears) tied to the experience of the illness. The artistic medium uncovers the imagination that is sometimes difficult to bring into consciousness and verbalise for young subjects.

In the field of health, drawing is employed to describe the visual culture of internal organs. For example, patients suffering from heart or kidney conditions may be encouraged to represent the functioning of their organs in a diagram to describe the mechanisms and effects of their illness (Broadbent and al. 2019). In 1980, Philippe-Jean Parquet and Georges Delcambre also asked pregnant women to draw what they imagined their child's body would look like during pregnancy. This allowed them to gain insight into the future mother's conception of her child. The drawings reveal that the

placenta is rarely depicted, but the umbilical cord connecting the child and mother in the womb is always imagined. The uterus, however, is never depicted.

Drawing the inside of the body can also be leveraged to reveal contrasts in lived experience. For example, cancer patients taking part in a study were invited to draw themselves prior to and post chemotherapy, a process that uncovered a shift in the pain of their lived internal activity (Bouak and Bouteyre 2010).

In terms of theme and methodology, it is also possible to draw on the auto-phenomenography developed by Maree Grupetta (2024), which builds on the auto-ethnography of Ellis and Bochner, and of Jacqueline Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2001). It contributes to a movement that charts the ethnography of the interior and intimate body in physical exercise (Giardina and Donnelly 2018). In our research, we likewise embrace the value of self-exploration, according the subjects' beliefs and representations credibility, which, though subjective, is not illusory.

Today, the study of the awareness of embodied gestures (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2009) in bodily practices focuses more on excorporation through drawings rather than incorporation.

The methodological hybridity between the visual and the verbal creates new perspectives for researchers since the design of this study is more flexible and evolving. This opens the door to research into embodied sensory anthropology. Cross-disciplinary collaborations between the arts and body-centred approaches may provide a new frame of reference for studying physical culture.

In phenomenology, some researchers are adopting the drawing method to capture the lived experience in physical activities. In a yoga experiment (Stewart and al. 2020), researchers elected to explore a methodology focusing on the graphic production of participants. The phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited to the conceptual framework of the mind-body-world relationship that informs the practice of yoga and the act of drawing as an embodied gesture. The researchers put forward visual interpretations of the drawings created by participants post-yoga, together with composition strategies and related verbal explanations. The analysis of the drawing acts as a bridge between first-person phenomenology and the art of drawing. The methodological hybridity between the visual and the verbal creates new perspectives for researchers since the design of this study is more flexible and evolving. This opens the door to research into embodied sensory anthropology. Cross-disciplinary collaborations between the arts and body-centred approaches may provide a new frame of reference for studying physical culture.

Another contemporary research in phenomenology explores the use of drawing to enhance methodology of embodiment in a pedagogical context (Emond and Venant, 2025). In that action-research study, researchers combine drawing with body awareness exercises as part of a training program for teachers. Their objective is to examine the role of the body in higher education teachers. In their method, drawing complements a phenomenological approach from a learning perspective, with drawings introduced at three stages of the program.

Therefore, contemporary researchers are exploring the use of drawing to understand embodiment, both in the context of sports and in professional settings.

3. Freehand drawing in contemporary research: example of circus

In social sciences, drawing has long been relegated to the researcher's private sphere (field notebooks and diaries) rather than being recognized as a formal methodology.

However, contemporary anthropologists are encouraging researchers to move beyond the realist paradigm and recognise the value of drawing in providing emotional context to traditional methods (Geismar, 2025). This study is part of an ongoing effort to treat drawing as both a subject in its own right and an integral part of the experience. Between 2013 and 2022, Bernard Andrieu (2023) interviewed circus performers about their bodies. They demonstrated their expertise by describing their bodily knowledge based on internal sensations, such as exertion, fatigue, injury, and emotions.

3.1. Draw as awareness process

The main advantage of freehand drawing is that it does not restrict how the subject is represented. This approach mirrors practices in the social sciences, where drawing is employed in narrative studies. In these studies, drawing is used for one of its methodological characteristics: it does not impose a hierarchical order on ideas, but instead conveys experience in visual and spatial terms (Barberis and Grüning 2021). In graphic narration, the strength of drawing lies in its ability to depict an experience in a spatialized way. This is particularly relevant in our case, as the physical experience of circus performers is inherently spatialized.

In addition, freehand drawing is similar to the “unrestrained” method used by anthropologists, as opposed to the sequential method commonly used in comic books (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno 2025). Yet despite the open-ended nature of the task, some participants spontaneously opt for a sequential format to explore how their bodies function.

In this study, the drawing process unfolds in three stages:

1. A theme is presented (e.g., pain, fatigue, areas of comfort or discomfort, emotions)
2. The subject freely draws their body without a silhouette template and may or may not use colors
3. They add legends and comments to their drawings to describe their perceptions in their own words.

Drawing and the thoughts that arise during the process are used as an introspective method to awaken internal sensations. In order to produce the drawing, the subject must become attuned to their internal sensations and revisit a memory. This constitutes the first step in a process that culminates in a interview orientred on the drawing. The drawing is therefore not a data, but viewed as an experimental process.

Other contemporary researchers have also utilised the creative process as a means of introspection and as a catalyst for bodily memory. In D’Onofrio and Cogni's (2025) ethnographic study of migration trajectories, graphic design (animation without a storyboard) is used for this purpose. This approach is particularly useful for addressing intimate and unspeakable subjects and for revealing bodily states and the invisible. Like us, these researchers use participants' image production as a method to expand upon traditional methods, such as interviews.

For example, in the study about the circus, some drawings reveal inner representations that are usually invisible. In her drawing titled “energy bubble,” Anouk illustrates the link between her emotional experience and her physical fatigue (fig. 1). She depicts in orange what she calls her energy bubble, which expands or contracts depending on her fatigue statut. In this way, the drawing helps to visualize an internal experience that is both invisible and dynamic.

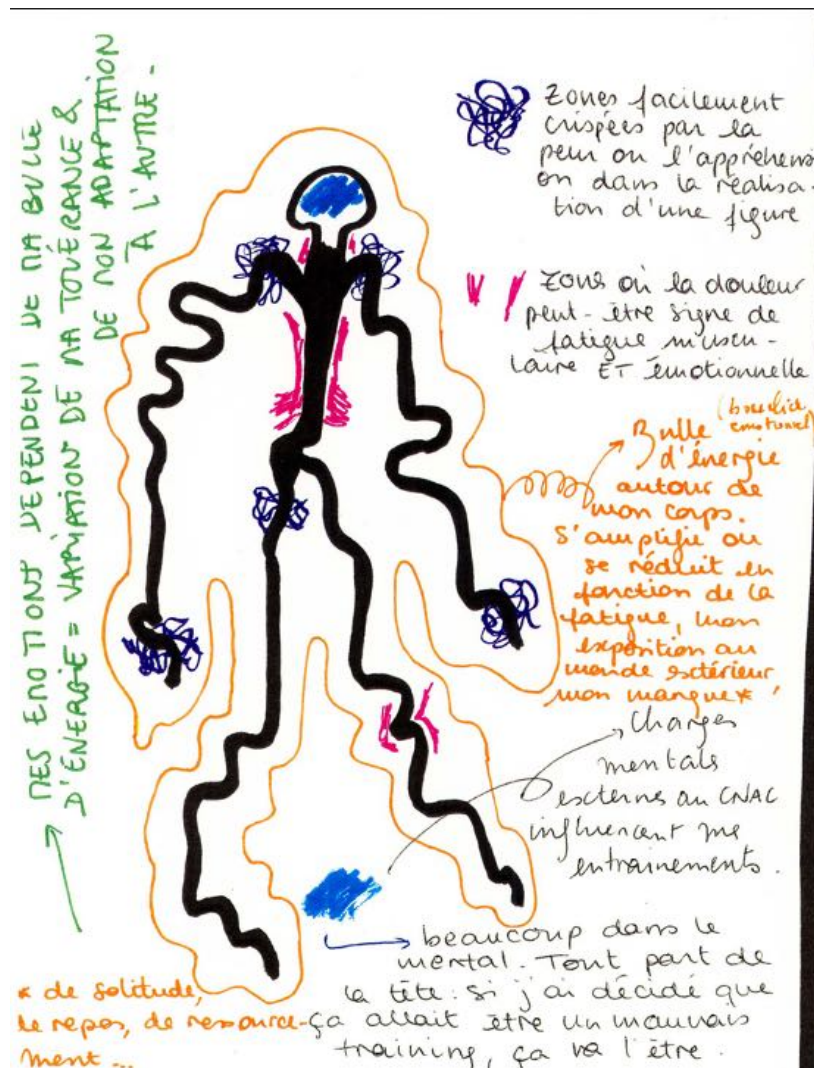


Figure 1 "energy bubble," Anouk, 2022

Although the drawing is presented without constraints in the first step, some participants spontaneously choose a sequential pattern. This approach is recommended for representing a temporal aspect (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025). Pablo made this choice when mapping the shift in his attention to different parts of his body during a performance (fig. 2). He depicts the body's positions, as well as the areas of focus at each stage of the performance in green.

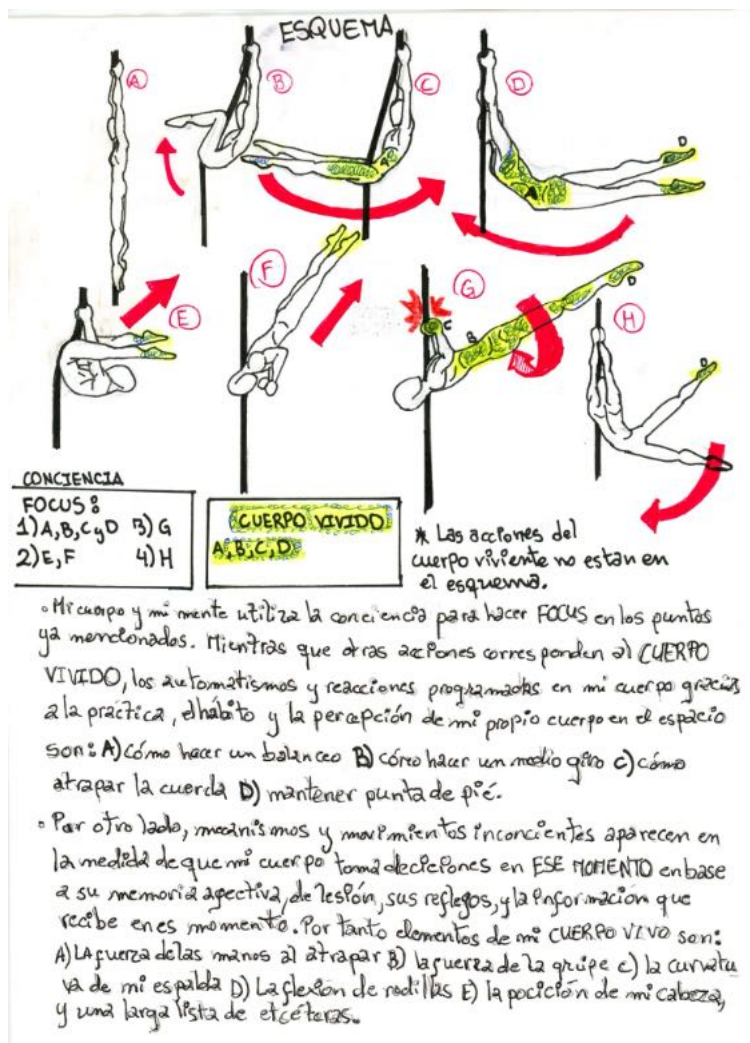


Figure 2 Pablo, "smooth rope"

3.2. Coproduction between drawing and language

In their article on the use of comics and graphic novels in social science research, Barberis and Grüning (2021) emphasise the importance of not relegating the drawing to a secondary role in favour of the accompanying text. In our method, the text supports the graphic representation without replacing it. During the final stage of the drawing process, the participant adds a caption to their work. For instance, they indicate areas of importance, sensory intensities coursing through their body, and how they label their internal states. They use colour scales, highlighting techniques and framing to emphasise the most significant parts. The drawing thus elicits imagination that is then supplemented by a more literal narrative in the legend.

During the interview that follows the production of the drawing, participants explain their ideas and conceptualisations. The drawing serves here as an explanatory tool in the communication between the circus performer, expert in their body and techniques, and the researcher. In line with recommendations for using drawing as an anthropological method (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025), we view the two media (drawing and language) as being in a relation of coproduction. The aim is therefore not to isolate the drawing and the verbatim, but to combine them to produce meaning.

The drawing does not replace the interview, but provides a structure for it. For example, when Mat creates his drawing titled 'Chronogenesis' (fig. 3), he illustrates in 2D the variations in his motor behaviours and performance depending on his emotional state, ranging from feeling well on the right to feeling distressed on the left. He depicts different curves for risk-taking, risk of injury or performance failure. Consequently, the drawing and its caption enable a complex state to be modelled as a continuum of experience. In this way, the drawing serves a pedagogical purpose, enabling the dialogue with the researcher.

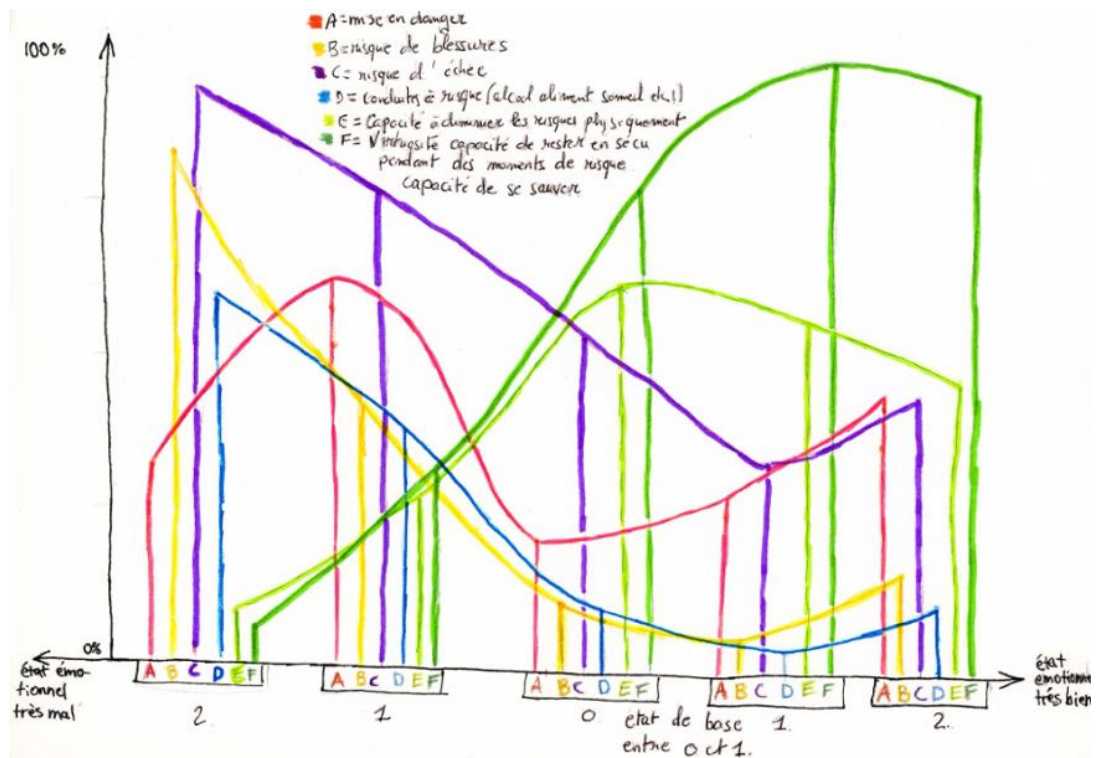


Figure 3 Mat "Chronogenesis"

3.2. Drawing a theory of the body

Our research focuses on the phenomenological experience of embodiment in physical practices. This kind of thematic concern has already been raised by Mary Grupetta (2024) with the use of drawing in the auto-phenomenography. This theoretical framework was developed and builds on the auto-ethnography of Ellis and Bochner, and of Jacqueline Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2001). It contributes to a movement that charts the ethnography of the interior and intimate body in physical exercise (Giardina and Donnelly 2018). In our research, we likewise embrace the value of self-exploration, according the subjects' beliefs and representations credibility, which, though subjective, is not illusory. However, our method is less restrictive than the chart method because it does not require framework and is more adaptative to the imaginary conceptualization.

What sets the circus performers' drawings in our study apart, is that we focus not just on sensations, but on developing a comprehensive understanding of how the body functions. It is not just about visualizing sensations, but also about articulating the beliefs associated with them. With drawing method, we aim to reveal the theories that circus performers develop about their bodies: the theory of the body (ToB). Unrestrained

drawing is advantageous for supporting theoretical reflection, as it becomes a tool for theorising (Theodossopoulos and Bonanno, 2025). Freehand drawing turned out to be particularly well-suited to our purpose.

TOB derived from the concept of the theory of the mind (ToM) applied to the bodily experience. TOB refers to the mental capacity to infer not just mental states but also bodily states in oneself or others in order to understand them. Although bodily states by definition cannot be objectively observed, they can be made visible through verbatim accounts, drawings and body language. The basic principle behind ToM is to attribute or infer the bodily and emotional states of other people. In ToB theory (Andrieu and al. 2022), the emergence within oneself of qualitative or quantitative data is deduced on the basis of their emotional expressions, demeanour or assumed knowledge of the internal reality of the living body.

Body theory is a form of conceptualization that reveals circus performers' expertise. The drawings sometimes take forms that evoke the sciences; for example, Mat's "Chronogenesis" (Figure 2) features coloured curves that are reminiscent of mathematics or physiology. Others, like Vassiliki (fig. 4), label their sketches in the manner of the life sciences, using arrows, hatching and technical terms in the legend. During the interview, Vassiliki describes her "body-brain" theory, which she uses to explain the attentional and sensorimotor modulations she employs in her jute jarret technique. In her drawing, she depicts an internal phenomenon that lasts only a few milliseconds, yet which is crucial to her performance. In the interview, she defines the 'brain consciousness zone' shown in the drawing. She defines this as a transition zone between the conscious control of movement and more automated gestures, which she refers to as the 'body (sensory) consciousness zone'.

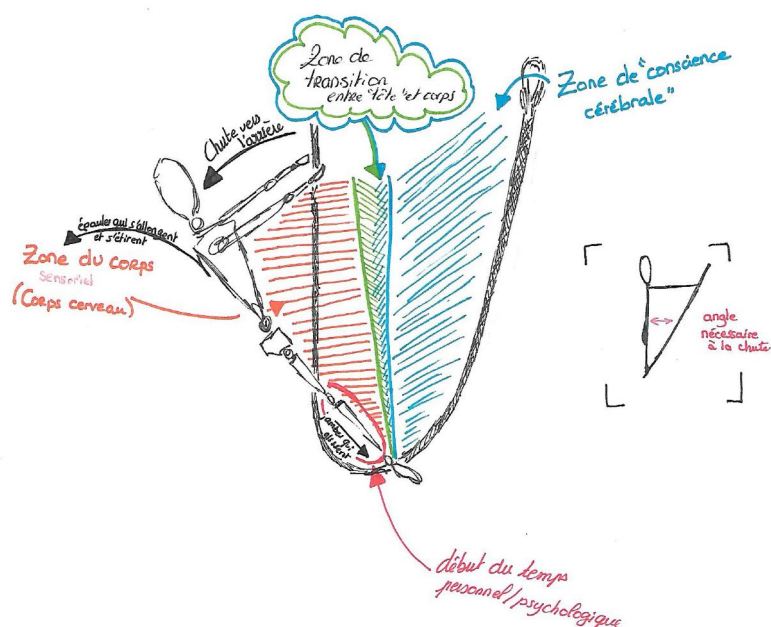


Figure 4 "jute jarret technique" Vassiliki.

These academic-sounding terms form part of the neo-language individuals create for themselves. The explanations seem academics but remain mostly anatomically and scientifically inaccurate. However, this study reveals that these beliefs even imaginary enable these performers to master complex techniques. Thus, the drawing depicts the

phenomenon as perceived in the body, while the caption reveals the associated linguistic imagination. The theory of the body emerges at the intersection of sensations and interpretation. The drawing therefore enables the structuring of an internal expertise, partially borrowing the structural codes of drawing and scientific diagrams.

Conclusion

The history of body drawing highlights its distinctive role in visual culture at the interface of art and medicine. The drawing of the flayed figure lays bare the interior of the body, first of the other, as seen through the eyes of the artist-cum-anatomist, and then through one's own eyes, as with Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait. Drawing in its various forms carries both a diagnostic and a phenomenological value since it opens the door onto a lived bodily experience, so intimate and invisible. Even though the use of this tool is still limited in research, it paves the way for methodologies to evolve by introducing an emerging dimension. In this way, drawing opens up opportunities for developing an embodied sensory anthropology at the intersection of the arts and physical culture.

Drawing has a long history in clinical settings and remains relevant today, although it is most often used in the form of charts. Despite the advantages it offers, freehand drawing is still relatively underutilised in the human and social sciences.

However, free drawing is an effective method for studying the body and its inner workings, enabling the creation of a personal and subjective body map. This method encourages an introspective approach to visualise bodily activity. This unconstrained method also offers a way to model learning processes or techniques schematically or sequentially. Awareness drawing goes beyond simply sketching a silhouette, allowing participants to develop and illustrate their own theory about how their bodies function. Awareness drawing is not merely a supplementary element or a visual expression of the imagination, but rather an expansive method of co-creation between the visual and the linguistic.

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**Why methods matter: how to capture the process of
subjectivation of an expert blacksmith?**

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Abstract

What methods are available to anthropologists to research the subjectivation (or processes of identity formation) of craftspeople? This article offers a methodological reflection on two video methods used to understand the professional subjectivation of Mohammed, an expert blacksmith in the south of Morocco : (1) filming observation, a way of filming that is both embodied and reflexive and (2) video-elicitation a method that shows participants video clips of themselves at work as a means of accessing their verbalized reflexivity. We argue that these methods are powerful research tools to overcome some of the limits of the semi-structured interview, to encourage the reflexive engagement of participants and to grasp the complexity of the subjectivation processes of craftsmen.

Résumé

Quelles méthodes les anthropologues peuvent-ils utiliser pour étudier la subjectivation (ou les processus de formation de l'identité) des artisans ? Cet article propose une réflexion méthodologique sur l'utilisation de deux méthodes vidéo mobilisées pour comprendre la subjectivation professionnelle de Mohammed, un forgeron expert du sud du Maroc : (1) l'observation filmante, une manière de filmer à la fois incarnée et réflexive, et (2) l'entretien d'éllicitation vidéo, une méthode qui consiste à montrer aux participants des extraits de vidéo d'eux-mêmes au travail afin d'accéder à leur réflexivité verbale. Nous montrerons que ces méthodes sont des outils de recherche puissants pour surmonter certaines limites de l'entretien semi-directif, encourager l'engagement réflexif des participants et saisir la complexité des processus de subjectivation des artisans.

Keywords

Subjectivation; research method; materiality; embodied knowledge; skills; cognition; socio-technical dispositive

Mots clés

Subjectivation; méthodologie; matérialité; connaissance incarnée; savoir-faire; cognition; dispositif socio-technique

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How can ethnographers grasp the process of identity formation (subjectivation) within the limited time they spend with their interlocutors? How can they gain insights on professional practices, habits, practices of the self and ethical conduct that engage material cultures when these are the outcome of a socialisation that is long, and to a large extent embodied and unconscious? This article approaches video methods and video elicitation interviews as socio-technical dispositives and therefore as research tools. It offers a methodological insight into a long-term research that led to an article (2023) on the professional subjectivation of Mohammed, an expert blacksmith who lives in a small village in the Sirwa mountains, Morocco. By subjectivation we mean the process by which Mohammed developed a blacksmith's professional identity, ethos and hexis, within specific governmentalities. Building upon Foucault's theories (2001 II: 720 et 1401), governmentalities can be defined as the norms, categorisations, social relations and institutions, that target the body¹ (Harvey and Rail 1995) and generate relationships of the subject with herself and with others – humans and non-humans (materials, tools, the smithy, fire and jnûn or spirits). Foucault did not take the body as an object of enquiry in itself but as a mediator of relations of power (both actions on the self and on others). We draw inspiration from his theoretical hypothesis that an approach through the body offers a fruitful avenue for an anthropological analysis of subjectivations (analysis focusing on actors) and governmentalities (analysis focusing on social relations). Thus, we postulate that all embodied human practices (motor, sensory, affective and cognitive) engages material cultures, and that forms of subjectivation emerge through this negotiation with it. Subjectivation is therefore a dynamic process that results not only from governmentalities but also from a personal process of appropriation and individualised transformation.

Sub-Saharan blacksmiths have fascinated anthropologists at least since 1872 (Topenard)². A recent conference organised at the Quai Branly Museum³ (4th and 5th March 2020) attests to the actuality of the topic of blacksmithing. In this extensive literature, we found two approaches particularly pertinent. Martinelli (1996) analyses the transformation of traditional learning values within a capitalist and liberal context through a focus on the observation of technical practice and the social dimension of learning among Moose metallurgists in Burkina Faso. Warnier is the only anthropologist who has focused his attention on the subjectivation of a blacksmith. He describes how Tom Cham, a Cameroonian in the Grassfields, learnt to control his breathing and developed specific embodied practices and perceptions adapted to metallurgy (Warnier 2004; 2012).

¹ Foucault considers that through the body, the mind is also involved and affected. We have chosen to use the term organism as it covers both the body and mind.

² Unlike the vast literature (both francophone and anglophone) on blacksmiths in sub-Saharan Africa, the blacksmiths of the Maghreb have not interested anthropologists, perhaps because of their inferior status within their own societies. Most of the recent studies are based on colonial research, itself very limited (Paris & Perriol 1932) for Morocco. Thus Agabi (1998) refers to Hanoteau & Letourneau (1893) *La Kabylie et les coutumes kabyles*; two exceptions are C. Fortier (2002) and C. Hinker (C. Agabi & C. Hinker 1998) who both work in Mauritania.

³ Anthropologie et archéologie du fer <https://www.quaibrany.fr/fr/recherche-scientifique/activites/colloques-et-enseignements/conferences-et-colloques/details-de-levenement/e/anthropologie-et-archeologie-du-fer-38688>.

Through forging metal objects, the blacksmiths in Cameroon transform their bodies, subjectivities and their relationalities according to a conception of metallurgic materials that, according to Warnier, is very close to the idea we have of the nuclear industry today. To this end, the author drew on traditional ethnographic approaches combining interviews with Tom Chan and observation of collective work sessions in the smithy, which took place over several days. Although Mohammed, the Moroccan blacksmith, shares with his Cameroonian counterpart practices (or techniques) of the self specific to the work of iron⁴ his subjectivation differs due to a number of socio-economic, cultural and historic factors, a specific environment and a different conception of materials (Naji and Ait El Housseine 2023). In addition, like the Moose Blacksmith of Yatenga, his work is inscribed in a social space that is capitalist and liberal.

Since the 1990s, video making has been used in the social sciences as a research tool to explore both the subjectivities of research participants in their workplace and the intersubjectivity between participants and researchers within the research process⁵. In order to grasp the process through which Mohammed is subjectivised into a blacksmith, as well as his embodied and cognitive skills, and his social positioning, we employed video-elicitation interviews, a more collaborative methodology of co-production of knowledge drawing on video clips and the blacksmith's reflexivity on his practice. Our fieldwork involves three socio-technical dispositives that interact and interlink different activities. The first dispositive is the smithy itself, embedded within various governmentalities: locally, it is connected to the village and weekly market; nationally, it relates to female clients who are weavers and institutions such as the Department of Craft and Moroccan museums; and internationally, it is linked to the EMKP website (see below), itself integrated to that of the British Museum; this article in a European journal constitutes another international governmentality. Methodologically, we have chosen two dispositives that seemed relevant to a study of a practitioner's subjectivation: the recording of the making of a weft beater and video elicitation interviews, which we will triangulate with other, more traditional methods of long-term observation and semi-structured interviews (since 2002). Having set out the context of the research, we define how we use the concepts of socio-technical dispositive, governmentalities and subjectivation; we present the relationship between the dispositive of the smithy and that of the video methods, and the subjectivations they engender. Next, we demonstrate the value of the video-elicitation interviews, which enable Mohammed to express himself,

⁴ In Cameroon, the origin of metal needed to be traced in order to ensure that it did not contain a 'type of violence' foreign to the village and therefore likely to bring conflict or even war in the village. In southern Morocco, since the colonial era (1930s), the metal worked by blacksmiths has been recycled and is therefore untraceable. Furthermore, the French colonial authorities revoked the blacksmiths' entitlement to produce weapons.

⁵ In France and the UK, anthropologists and sociologists use film to reflect on the intersubjectivity between researchers and their research participants in the co-construction of the film/video (Claudine de France in Buob 2017: 8; Giglio-Jacquemont and Géhin 2012; Gowlland 2015; 2018, Piaux 2000; Pink 2003; MacDougall 2005, Lallier 2009; Papinot 2012, Meyer and Papinot 2017; de Hasque 2017). Some colleagues use film to study skills and work as a situated activity (Collas 1996: 19), the singular-collective dialectic relationship in the workplace (Torturat 2024), learning processes (Comolli 1995), the habitus of car mechanics (Dant 2004), the nature of situated and cognitive know-how (Gowlland 2015), or education in attentiveness (Gowlland 2015; Grasseni 2004; Torturat 2020). For their part, geographers are exploring the relationships of practitioners with plant and animal matters (Ernwein 2022; Patchett 2015).

something not possible when he works in the smithy. Finally, we will show how these various methodological dispositives give us access to his subjectivation as a blacksmith. This will involve examining his decision-making process and strategies during the production process, the governmentalities that affect his actions, and the networks of actions within which he works.

1. Articulating two socio-technical dispositives: the smithy and the video shooting

After setting out the general context of our research, we will outline the concepts that have helped us examine the value of the elicitation interview within an anthropology of subjectivations.

1.1 Research context

This research is part of a broader participatory heritage preservation research project funded by the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP), which aims to document the textile practices of craftspeople in southern Morocco, from the High Atlas to the Anti-Atlas. These digital, textual and audio-visual archives produced in collaboration with the craftspeople of several rural communities will be accessible on the site of the EMKP. A short film reconstituting the steps of the production of a weaving tool (weft beater, *tazzut* or *taska*) by Mohammed, blacksmith of the Sirwa mountains, was produced for archival and museological purposes. One article on the subjectivation of this blacksmith was published (Naji, Ait El Housseine 2023); the current article provides methodological insight into this.

Research funded by EMKP presupposes long-standing relationships with participating communities and, therefore, in-depth ethnographic knowledge of the field. As such, since 2002 Myriem Naji (2008) has carried out a large number of observations in the smithy, the family house, the shop-workshop and in the village of Mohammed and his family. Initial filming took place at the end of 2002, but one tape was damaged. On the 21 May 2022 she filmed with her assistant Amine Ouchahoua the making of a weft beater and a pair of shears. A second visit took place a week after, with Marie-Pierre Julien, Amine and Hamza Ait El Housseine to conduct elicitation interviews based on film clips and to do a second round of filming. Myriem Naji has since returned on several occasions and interviewed Mohammed's father-in-law, an octogenarian blacksmith who died at the end of 2024.

1.2 The socio-technical dispositive of video shooting: an embodied, cognitive and distributed filming observation

Lacking the opportunity to acquire blacksmithing skills, we started with the following EMKP methodological guidelines: prior to recording, commence by observing the making of the object. Then, to access the practitioner's reflexive emic perspective in his mother tongue, request and record audio-visually an account of the various stages of production (or chaîne opératoire, cf. Coupaye 2009 and 2022) through a semi-structured

interview; this approach may be repeated after the completion of the process. Additionally, consider using video, photo or object (Ryder and Miller 2026) elicitation interviews.

In 2002, we had already filmed in their smithy Mohammed, his father, and his brother Abdallah making a weft beater. Abdallah's sons then aged between two or three, were busy imitating the adults there. In May 2022, we attempted to conduct a semi-structured interview with Mohammed. This method seemed appropriate to us, as the noise, stress, speed of action and sequence of events can be incompatible with discursive practices. During the production of the tool, however, whenever we tried to ask for an explanation, Mohammed was forced to interrupt his work and stop the electric bellows to listen to us and give us his answers, often very concise. Moreover, Mohammed only exchanges very short words with his assistant. The blacksmith declined the proposition of an interview, deeming it irrelevant, since his conceptions of work and pedagogy imply an engagement and understanding through the body. He does not reject the use of words, but he suggests that, in order to understand his craft, one should first observe and film (which he considers to be similar) before asking questions: "You will see in the smithy", he informs us.

We have used the method of "filming observation" (Lallier 2011) (or video shadowing Torterat 2024a&b), which we develop through a praxeological, material and cognitive approach. When she is filming the anthropologist is engaged corporally, cognitively and emotionally in the dispositive of the smithy. If for MacDougall this mental and corporeal reflexivity leaves: "the imprint [...] of our being as well as the meanings we intend to convey" (MacDougall 2005: 3) in the image, here, we are interested in film/video as a research process rather than as a product. The process of image-making becomes an act of thinking through filming that implies a keen, active and attentive sensitivity and awareness that "extends [...] the continuity between gesture, observation, and description" (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015: 270). The body-in-action-with-its-camera (and other tools: tripods, notebook and pens...) is heuristic and analytic. Filming observation constitutes therefore a situated, embodied and distributed cognition: with and through the camera, we think by focusing our attention, by selecting where to look, by anticipating (or failing to anticipate) the blacksmith's movements, by choosing to abandon the tripod in favour of holding the camera up to our eye, to incorporate it (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Lammer 2007⁶; MacDougall 2005; Rouch quoted by Buob 2020) more intimately to our corporeal schema and to 'touch' more closely what we are observing from a distance.

In addition, filming observation is multimodal, involving not only the five senses, but also the vestibular sense (spatial orientation and balance) and proprioception (sense of one's movements and body position through muscles and joints); thus we multiply the perspectives and framings of Mohammed at work as suggested by the EMKP: from above, from below, from the sides, or very close up. This requires us to get closer to the hearth and the fire, despite the heat and sparks, to crouch down, lean over, and find stable

⁶ Lammer (2007) writes about camera (or screen) protheses, in her 'somatic' embodied and material research on radiologists and their patients.

positions when filming while standing. In addition, in order to accomplish their work effectively all the protagonists (the blacksmiths but also the researchers) must incorporate each other's body into their body schema. Thus, filming is not only a subjective and reflexive activity (Pink 2009; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Rouch quoted by Buob 2020; Ernwein 2022), it is also a social one. Pink (2009) reminds us that this engagement in a material, sensorial and social environment – what we call the technical dispositive – creates an intersubjective relationship between researchers and their interlocutors and transforms them.



Figure 1 In the smithy. At the back right-hand corner, Abderrahman, Mohammed's assistant, is resting. Hamza and Myriem face Mohammed. Marie-Pierre and Amine (in the blue cap), who cannot bear the nocif air are at the threshold of the smithy. Facing Amine, Abdallah, Mohammed's brother works on a knife. The young man on the left of Amine is Lahsen, one of Mohammed's sons. Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

The filming observation of the smithy is a laborious experience in a hostile, cramped, dark, stifling, extremely hot and noisy space. Yet, Mohammed and the researchers do not share the same experience of working in this smithy, nor the same sensory and cognitive behaviours⁷. Amine, who is asthmatic frequently goes out. Marie-Pierre cannot bear the heat, she feels she may faint, the dry, harmful air burns her throat and she worries about its effect on her health. The relief she feels when she drinks a little water disappears as soon as she swallows it. We do not approach the situation with the same bodily capabilities as Mohammed, who has learnt before he was 7 to live in his dangerous environment and has developed appropriate techniques of the body and practices of the self. He alternates blacksmithing with other activities: agricultural work, shepherding, travelling to weekly and annual markets; praying five times a day also constitutes moments of respite.

⁷ Indeed, the work that we do with our cameras justifies our presence in the smithy; in contrast, Cant (2023) mentions her ambivalent position and the critical view Mexican craftspeople take of her when she is not busy with an activity (painting wooden objects, taking notes).

We share the practice of professional technical actions in this dangerous space, but it is not the same task. We are bound by a contract: making and filming the making of a *tazzut/taska* within a deadline. For our part, these videos had two objectives: to document and record an endangered knowledge and to compile a body of data for scientific analysis. We experience the stress of failing to capture an important step or not to grasp what is going on. But there is a difference of responsibility and of emotional and cognitive cost between him and us: in the smithy, Mohammed is responsible for our safety, in addition to his own, that of his assistant and that of his brother. Not only are we numerous but we are also ignorant of the dangers and on several occasions he has to tell us to move away with our tools. Thus, this video dispositive in the smithy brings together all participants, each engaged in laborious work on their own materials and tools, and each from their diverse subjectivities working on themselves to endure the hostility of the environment. More specifically, we are dependent on each other here, for our safety and to achieve our common goal.

Filming observation highlights our diverse sensory-motor experiences inside the smithy: our respiratory problems, the sweat running down our clothes, the sensation of sharp burns on our skins. As 'mapist' researchers⁸, our filming observations are guided by a sensitivity to movements that incorporate tools and the material environment, by an active identification of the perceptual and cognitive processes that engage materiality. But they only partially inform us about the relationship that Mohammed establishes with the smithy, and which appears in the images; for example the effects of the proximity to the hearth on Mohammed can be noticed on his face glistening with sweat; his body's reaction to the hammer blows is visible when he grits his teeth or squeezes his eyes shut. This method enables us to formulate some hypotheses on the fact that his skills and embodied and distributed cognition are inherent to his subjectivation, on his work on himself to control his organism and materials, on his decision-making processes and strategies⁹. To verify and explore these hypotheses by comparing them with his verbalised reflexivity, we therefore combined filming observation with the elicitation interview.

⁸ The Matière à Penser (MàP) group was founded in 1994, bringing together Master's and DEA students around Jean-Pierre Warnier, Professor of Anthropology at Sorbonne Paris V-René Descartes, to reflect on the relationships between humans and their material cultures at a time when semiological epistemology reigned supreme. The name was chosen in January 1995. The group has published six collective works. The two authors of this article played an active role in its founding or running. Their respective doctoral theses reflect the theoretical reflections developed within this group. The two main contributions of this group encompass the examination of the political and ethical dimensions of material culture through the analytical framework of Foucault's later work, as well as the centrality of the body and its material cultures in human beings' relationship to the world. In particular, extending Mauss' techniques of the body, and drawing on insights from cognitive and neurosciences, they have shown that the active, moving body - and thus the perceptive, sensory, visceral and emotional organism - incorporates material cultures via the body schema, a dynamic and extended model of the moving body in the brain (cf. Holmes & Spencer 2004; Nourrit, & Rosselin-Bareille 2017; Rosselin-Bareille & Warnier 2025).

⁹ In French the expression 'logique d'action' (logic of action) covers the idea of decision-making and strategies. This concept stems from Max Weber's theory of action, which, in *Economy and Society* (1921/2019), defines four types of action (rational-instrumental, rational-value, affective and traditional). It was later developed in sociology, notably in the early issues of the journal *Raisons Pratiques*, published from 1990 onwards, and in Dubet's *Sociology of Experience* (1994).

1.3 Dispositives, governmentalities and subjectivation process

Mohammed absorbed his knowledge and skills from a young age through observation and imitation. This form of learning values doing over talking and contrasts with the formalisation of skills in contemporary Euro-American craft institutions (Marchand 2021). While there is no doubt that all practitioners are reflexive, moments of personal deliberation are not necessarily expressed verbally and publicised. Embodied, situated and distributed knowledge and cognition are all the more irreducible to language because they transcend and elude it (Harris 2007; Marchand 2010). In addition, discursive production and reflexivity can interfere with technical efficiency, which requires thinking quickly and with the body (Faure 2000; Warnier 2011)¹⁰.

Studying expert practice involves an examination of the diachronic elusiveness of embodied and cognitive knowledge, acquired over a long period of time. On the one hand, there are embodied and pre-reflexive practices, routines and habitus that are certainly intelligent and cognitive but are not verbalised. On the other hand, reflexivity and creativity can emerge when confronted with problems that invite an objectivation of practices in order to find a solution (Faubion 2001; 2011; Marchand 2016). For the ethnographer, one method is to observe learning situations. An alternative is to become a blacksmith (Keller and Keller 1996), weaver (Dilley 1989; Naji 2008), boxer (Wacquant 2006), tailor (Prentice 2015), builder and woodworker (Marchand 2001; 2021), potter, wood and slate worker (Gowlland 2015 ; 2020), capoeirist (Downey 2005) or watchmaker (Muntz 2020). By objectifying their subjective and embodied experiences of materials through analytical writing and comparing their interpretations with those of their interlocutors, researchers can gain some insight into emic pedagogical norms, representations of knowledge, cognitive processes¹¹, and even the nature of this cognition.

We started from the hypothesis that all expert professional subjectivation is a formation of bodily intelligence, in line with studies in skilled practice, and situated, embodied and distributed knowledge and cognition (Marchand 2010b; Lave 1991). Our analysis draws on the anthropology of work and professional identities, craft, techniques, knowledge and subjectivations.

Mohammed is in his sixties and has more than 50 years of experience behind him: he defines himself and is considered as an expert. The aim here is to understand how 'doing' and making is at the centre of the process of subjectivation through the transformation of the 'being' (Rosselin-Bareille 2017) that it engenders. The making of the weft beater requires from the blacksmith a work on himself that transforms his organism (body and mind) as he negotiates and manages the resistances and affordances of tools and materials mobilised in this production within the smithy. Our methodology adds two

¹⁰ In addition, anthropologists show that there is often cognitive dissonance between discursive practices and procedural practices. Certain representations or conceptions may be unconscious or un verbalised, even if they are problematised in other forms in everyday life and socialisation (Warnier 2004; 2012).

¹¹ For a discussion of the subjective gap between the ethnographer and her interlocutors see Warnier 2011 and Gowlland 2021.

sociotechnical dispositives to that of the smithy: the video shooting in the smithy and the elicitation interview in Mohammed's house.

From Leroi-Gourhan's 'operational syntaxe' (1964: 164) to Levi-Strauss' 'bricolage' (1962), the concept of socio-technical dispositive (also described as assemblage, systems, apparatus, milieu¹²) has been explored not only in anthropology but also in sociology (Dodier and Barbot 2016), philosophy of techniques (Simondon 2006), political philosophy (Foucault 2001: 1588), history of image/art and cinema (Aumont 2020; Albera and Tortajada 2015). The value of this concept lies in its holistic, non-dualistic nature, and in its recognition of the transformative and generative effects of humans, materials and objects, and their relationships. Aumont (2020: 101-154) identifies four qualities present in all socio-technical (mediatic) dispositives, each of which is unique: 1) all closely link the material dimensions (devices, materials, space/time, bodies) and cognitive dimensions (thoughts and emotions) of human activities. 2) All involve an organisation of space and time. 3) They are not static but dynamic, leading to the interplay of the accumulation of socialisations and knowledge until their actualisation, sometimes generating creativity (Deleuze 1988; Berten 1999). 4) All aim for a result. We share these observations but, from an anthropological perspective, we are also interested in subjectivities, governmentalities, forms of power, and networks of actions that emerge differently within each socio-technical dispositive.

This dynamic of the dispositive and its governmentalities generates specific subjectivations (Julien 2015) which, in Foucault's work, encompass three distinct but overlapping processes: ontological, identificatory and historical. The ontological aspect (1994: 632) stems from the fact that human children are born incomplete and become fully human through their relationships with others and their reflexivity about their own actions. This slow biological and psychological process is eminently social (Kaufmann and Skuza 2008). The identificatory dimension (1994: 134) stems from the fact that a subject adopts various behaviours, skills, emotions and language patterns that other people offer to them as models, in different contexts. These identifications (Cuche 1996) can be multiple (Lahire 1998) and shape the history of each subject. Mohammed is a father and grandfather, he is the eldest son, he inherited the family smithy as well as the male blacksmithing skills, and is also a farmer, muezzin and veterinarian. Finally, the historical dimension of subjectivation (Foucault 1963; 1975)¹³ focuses on the socio-technical dispositives and governmentalities that enable the emergence of a particular form of subjectivation. This political process means that a subject, born in Morocco in a rural area of the Anti-Atlas in the 1960s and having never attended school, differs from a young Amazigh doctor in history, originating from the Telouet region in Morocco and born in the 1990s, from a female Franco-Moroccan researcher who has spent the first 15 years of her life in Morocco or a female researcher who grew in the 1970s, on a housing estate with nine buildings, 20 detached houses and 3,000 inhabitants in the Paris suburbs. They

¹² This conception of the dispositive is very similar to that of 'milieu' developed by the members of the Centre for the Anthropology of Technics and Technodiversity (CATT) at UCL. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/social-historical-sciences/anthropology/research/centre-anthropology-technics-and-technodiversity-catt>.

¹³ In this sense, Foucault is not concerned with the origins of forms of subjectivation.

have not developed the same perceptions, emotions, cognition, sensory-motricity, they do not grasp situations and the world in the same way and have not developed the same tastes and skills (Julien 2004; Julien and Rosselin 2009; Rosselin-Bareille and Warnier 2025). But there is also a history and a geography of blacksmith subjectivities, which mean that Mohammed is not a blacksmith like those studies by Martinelli, Warnier or Dieterlen (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965) or even the father of Lala Fadma Lhaddadi who practiced his trade in the Iggherm area between the 1930s and 1960s.



Figure 2 *Mohammed focused on his task, his face glistening with sweat.* Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

One of the advantages of this definition of subjectivation is that it combines both the constraint of socialisation and the subject's agency through her reflexivity. Her agency is perceptible in the practices of self through which the subject transforms herself by problematising the events and contingencies she encounters. Within the dispositive, the subject constructs an ethic (Faubion 2001; 2011, Moore 2011), that is, her situated version of morality, embedded in specific governmentalities. This ethical self-construction (Mahmood 2006) demands that the subject works on her own resistances to physical or cognitive effort, to transformation and change. In other words, she negotiates the constraints and affordances that society imposes on her agency through the materiality of her organism and her environment¹⁴. The Foucauldian theory of subjectivation offers us a heuristic entry via the body and its governmentalities (Julien 1999; Warnier 2001; 2011). Furthermore, this negotiation between the human organism and material cultures

¹⁴ Mahmood highlights how the Foucauldian perspective enables us to move away from a dualistic, Eurocentric and liberal conception of identity formation that opposes constraints and freedom. It should be added that constraints themselves can constitute affordances or possibilities for action, particularly in terms of learning. Mahmood (2006: 29) and Warnier (2004: 182-3) refer to the self-discipline to which musicians submit.

engenders skills and knowledge (Marchand 2008; 2010b; 2021; 2024) which construct subjectivities. To gain access to this subjectivation process, we have put in place another dispositive: the video-elicitation interview.

2. Elicitation interview: a way of verbalising, participating and making social relations visible

Despite the irreducibility to language of experts' know-how, and to a certain extent of subjectivation, the task of the anthropologist is to offer in a discursive and textual form, a translation of the embodied experience and cognitive processes of her interlocutors. The video elicitation interview is a means of access, albeit limited and incomplete, to the professional subjectivation of Mohammed, by confronting our respective experience of the dispositive of the smithy. After defining the method, we will explain how we implemented it in the field and the benefits it has yielded.

2.1 The video elicitation interviews: a methodology to access embodied subjectivities

We use the term 'video elicitation interview' (VEI) to describe a method that is also known, depending on the specific discipline, author, and language¹⁵ as: *video-elicitation*, *video-cued ethnographic research*, *video reflexive ethnography*, *elicitation strategy of self-confrontation* (Gore et al. 2012: 131). All these methods have in common the fact that they elicit participants' words based on viewing video recordings of an activity. They differ in terms of content and who performs the recordings.

The pioneer was Germaine Dieterlen who, in 1964, suggested to use the film as an 'interview' guide with her interlocutors during fieldwork (de France, 1989 [1982]: 305 quoted by Buob 2009; Toreterat 2024), but from 1957, Collier initiated this method using photographs; it was later taken up by Harper (2002), who distinguished between 'photo feedback'/'photo interview' (elicitation) and the 'photo essay' (ibid.). In fact, Rouch used the term 'feedback' in 1952 to describe the methodology used in his film 'Bataille sur le grand Fleuve' (1952). VEI was adopted in cognitive anthropology, sociology, psychology and ergonomics to circumvent the pitfalls of semi-structured interviews, which can be heavily influenced by researchers' emic categories (Cahour, Salembier and Ziounar 2016). Its purpose is to facilitate participants' verbalization of their lived experiences. In particular, it enables them to explain their reasoning, decisions, strategies and solutions deployed in action, as well as their emotions (Torterat 2024). While the self-confrontation method developed by Theureau and his colleagues does not necessarily aim to change the behaviour of those involved, VEI can also be used to improve working practices in medical or organisational research. In France, from the 1980s, with this transformative goal in mind, Vermersh, an occupational psychologist interested in subjectivities, developed the 'explicitation interview' to stimulate workers' reflexive verbalisation of their

¹⁵ In French these include: *re-situ subjectif mobilisant la vidéo* (Rix et Biache 2004; Rix-Lièvre, Cahour et Guibourdenche, 2024), *entretiens d'explicitation avec présentation d'un support vidéo en amont* (Mouchet 2011), *entretien de remise en situation par les traces matérielles vidéo* (Theureau 2010).

ongoing cognitive processes by placing them in specific situational contexts - using photographs rather than videos (Vermersh 2015). In addition, VEI is used to capture the personal experiences of marginalised actors, counterbalancing power asymmetries by enabling participants to be included in a more collaborative manner (Liebenger 2009). Despite the importance given to participants' subjectivity, the process of professional subjectivation is not regarded as a research topic in its own right by these scholars. Cuomo (2026) is one of the few anthropologists using the video elicitation method to analyse the subjectivation of Congolese immigrants as musicians. Two other researchers, even if they do not claim to do so, seem to be concerned with the subjectivation of their participants: Sanou (2026) on the trances of Burkinabe teenage girls and Groud (2026) on amputees.

2.2 Implementing the VEI socio-technical dispositive to access Mohammed's subjectivation

As soon as we arrive at around 8.30 in the morning, we set up the technical dispositive in the bright courtyard of Mohammed's house. He lays a knotted carpet and a low table for our laptop. Hamza and Myriem sit next to Mohammed to watch the selected images together. The camera is not pointed at the screen but at the three people talking, and Mohammed faces Amine's static camera. Marie-Pierre, with another camera, moves around freely, filming and taking photos. Thanks to the camera's flip-up screen, Amine can maintain eye contact with Mohammed, who himself sometimes chooses to look directly into the camera rather than at the screen or at Hamza and Myriem. Mohammed seems at ease in front of the camera, perhaps because this is the fourth time, we have filmed him. Hamza translates into *tashalhit*, Mohammed's mother tongue, the questions prepared by Myriem or asks questions that seem relevant. In order to encourage subtle and detailed descriptions of metallurgic motor actions and sensory perceptions we ask him: "How do you know that? What are you doing during this stage? How do you manage to do that? Here, you seem to be thinking deeply. What are you thinking about?" We ask him about his relationship with the materials and elements (air, fire, water) of the smithy: "How do you manage to withstand the heat and breathe this harmful air?" We also ask very specific technical questions such as: "When and how do you know when to remove the iron from the hearth? Why do you sprinkle water on the embers? How hard should you strike the hot iron, when and where exactly? Why is the iron cold at this stage? Why do you work alone here and with someone else there?" Regarding the coordination of the strikes with his assistant: "Does the assistant strike in a different place? Why are the outer tines and the middle tine of the *tazzut/taska* thicker?" We also asked him about technical terms¹⁶ and the sources of his materials.

¹⁶ From a technical point of view, seeking linguistic clarification can be highly heuristic: Hamza's explanation of the term *ifard*, (which is not specific to the smithy's basin) gives Mohammed the time or inclination to talk about the function of this basin in a context that we have not observed: forging an agricultural tool. Similarly, unexpected additional elements emerge from the VEI that demonstrate the significance of examining terms even if, in his or our eyes, such an endeavour initially appears to be of little utility. For example, our questions to verify the names of the different parts of the *tazzut/taska* led him to describe a partial operational chain of its production that we had not been able to obtain in the



Figure 3-4 *Our video elicitation interview dispositive.* Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

Despite its potential to encourage discursive production about expert technical skills and practices, VEI is rarely used by anthropologists studying craft, techniques and expert embodied knowledge. This is evidenced by a recent special issue of the French journal *Méthodes Visuelles* (Hamus Vallée ed. 2026), which reviews the contribution of elicitation interviews to recent sociological and anthropological research across a wide variety of fields¹⁷, but none on craft. One reason identified by Buob (2009) in his study of Moroccan brass or coppersmiths in Fez is that confronting them with their own images highlights the hardship of their profession and contradicts the narrative of valorisation they endeavour to construct. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, this method is more commonly employed by researchers, not anthropologists, who are interested in the creative decision-making and/or cognitive processes of craftspeople, artists or designers (Wood 2006; Harper 2013, Patchett 2015).

By focusing on specific moments in the manufacturing process that we wished to discuss with Mohammed, the elicitation interview facilitated a more precise exchange, enabling us to clarify misunderstandings through a process of double distancing: first through the filming itself, and second through the interview that followed (Delbos 2026). To this end, the video method enables us to capture the technical process in a more dynamic, temporal and physical manner (rhythms and sequences of action, sounds, interactions) than photo elicitation. Furthermore, with the VEI, there is no need to interrupt the technical performance which, requiring concentration, can be disrupted and altered when the practitioner reflects (Gore et al. 2012: 138) on matters not directly connected with his actions. Thus, Mohammed is more inclined to speak outside the smithy (see below). VEI offers the possibility of reliving past activities at a later time, of

pre-filming discussion (MVI_2591). Finally, although we had asked him during the production of the patterns whether each punch had a different name, the question was clearly inadequate, since during the VEI he offered the names of the patterns corresponding to each type of punch without being asked (MVI_2593; MVI_2594).

¹⁷ This issue, edited by R. Hamus Vallée (2026), includes articles on the reorganisation of the self-managed cinema *La Clé* (Delbos), the Sisa epidemic (Cesaro), seduction in the post-MeToo era (Dinelli), the use of digital self-presentation by young Japanese athletes (Duteil-Ogata), the use of mobile phones whilst driving (Louveau de la Guinera), amputee patients (Groud), elderly people in France (Grosperin Legrand), the trances of Burkinabe teenage girls (Sanou) and Congolese rappers living in France (Cuomo).

objectifying them through verbalisation; it addresses the fact that it is often impossible to speak and act at the same time; it allows for pauses, rewinds, checks or comparisons with other clips.

Reviewing the films several times allows us to make connections between observed actions and transformed materials¹⁸, identify technical aspects that were not noticed during filming¹⁹, or revise erroneous hypotheses²⁰. Thus, whilst film prompted us to explore in greater depth our questions regarding the blacksmith's cognitive and decision-making processes, academic writings required us to conduct an explicit and reflexive discussion with Mohammed for validation. Furthermore, the use of language and its validation became essential for us to fulfil our role as mediators or translators (Asad 1993; Feder-Nadoff 2022; Geertz 1973) between his world and the worlds of academia and the general public. Our utilisation of VEI is founded both upon established practices within the anthropology of work and craft and upon our own questions. What we find particularly relevant to the study of professional subjectivation is not so much the recollection or confrontation of past actions, but rather the creation of a situation in which the expert can shed light on their thought processes, their conception of materials, and their relationship to themselves and to other actors and entities. We postulated that by asking technical questions about certain stages, actions and technical choices, we would bring out data that is not directly related to the practice observed in the clips shown. In other words, that an understanding of technique as situated, embodied and distributed action and cognition would provide us with information about the ethical values that contribute to Mohammed's decision-making and his effectiveness as an expert, his representations of the smithy and his subjectivation.

3. The video-elicitation interview: verbalising decision-making processes and gaining access to subjectivation processes

In this final section, we will explain how the VEI enabled us to gain some insight into the process of subjectivation, the dynamics of social relations that shape Mohammed's professional practice, as well as some of his worldviews.

3.1 Discussing the blacksmith's cognitive processes, strategies and worldviews

Whilst logo-centrism within the social sciences and humanities has obscured the significance of the organism-engaged-with-its-material-cultures in understanding the world (Warnier 1999 and 2009, Rosselin-Bareille and Warnier 2025), VEI can foster a dialectic between action and language by enabling the participant to elaborate on his

¹⁸ Thus, Mohammed remains crouched or seated when his striking is relatively weak, whereas he stands upright for more vigorous percussion and swinging motions when, in collaboration with his assistant, he handles hot and thick iron.

¹⁹ For example, once the base of the tool has been forged, what previously appeared to be the top is turned over during the forging of the handle and becomes the bottom part of the weft beater.

²⁰ Thus, the pattern on the central tine is engraved with a file whilst in the smithy, and not, as initially thought, at the same time as the rest of the decorations which are made using punches outside the smithy.

embodied knowledge gained through practice (or, to use his word through “experience”).

Thus, when asked, “What are you thinking about here?”, the blacksmith explains that he is anticipating a future step and wondering whether he has sharpened his tool (MVI_2593). When asked why he did not use the ring he made in front of us, he explains that it was too narrow, indicating that even at this level of expertise, a blacksmith can make mistakes or fail (MVI_2592). We also obtained some data on his multisensory or multimodal categories (Pink 2015; Howes and Classens 2013; Sanou 2026) that would be worth exploring further. Thus, his professional vision (Goodwin 1994; Grasseni, 2004) is also haptic. He tells us that to assess whether the iron is ready to be immersed, he uses his eyes, but also his sense of touch via the filing tool. The file, incorporated into his body schema, becomes a perceptive extension of the nerve endings in his fingers, which gauge the texture, density and limitations of the material. Similarly, his expert vision allows him to identify when it is time (thanks to specific types of sparks) to remove the tool from the hearth (MVI_2590). This capability to gauge quickly, accurately and subtly through the body also applies to the processing of iron, which, depending on its thickness or density, is assessed in the initial stage of cutting the iron²¹ (MVI_2591).

While filming observation gave us an immediate and diachronic access to his work on both himself and materials, VEI encourages him to be reflexive about his technical practice but also demonstrates his pedagogical efforts towards us. Thus, during the VEI, Mohammed, aware of the gap in knowledge and perception that exists between his experience and ours, strives to translate the concept of ‘good measure’ and ‘temperance’ by evoking the metaphor of the ‘scale’²². When viewing the clips (MVI_2588, 2590), he mentions the accuracy with which the two blacksmiths judge the hardness and density of the type of iron in order to adjust the degree of striking force ‘neither too strong nor too weak’ (MVI_2587). Through this threshold concept²³, he helps us to better understand the complexity of his sensory knowledge, which is at once embodied evaluation, action and anticipation. Furthermore, he corrects our assumptions about the violence of the strike: strength and muscles matter less than subtle haptic, visual and kinaesthetic accuracy, which engages the vestibular sense and proprioception as he adapts to the metal’s various degrees of hardness, thickness or heat. In doing so, by transforming our understanding and perspective on his work, he alters our relationship to him. In fact, he should be recognised here as a co-producer of the analysis of temperance in the 2023 article. We found this metaphor of the scales so effective that we reviewed our observed and filmed data in light of this concept, placing it at the heart of our analysis of the blacksmith’s subjectivation. His cognitive sensibilities²⁴ are also exercised in the

²¹ This assessment also takes place when purchasing recycled iron.

²² Mohammed makes these tools to measure weight himself. In the region a common saying is: ‘ayn al-mizan’, the eye is the scale, or in Arabic ‘Aynak mizane’, your eye is your scale. The term scale is used in the sense of a practical or embodied (visual) assessment.

²³ Meyer and Land’s (2005) ‘threshold concept’ refers to a concept that may be problematic and difficult to grasp but is fundamental to understanding and mastering a subject. A good teacher focuses on threshold concepts rather than overwhelming their students with too much information.

²⁴ Marchand uses the term mathematical perceptual sensibilities (2018).

embodied assessment of temporality and volume when he quenches the metal in water or exposes it to fire: Mohammed explains that the forged tool must be left “not too long, but long enough to retain the shape we want to give it”. This sense of measure also serves to assess the potential risks of injury and to ensure the successful completion of the final object (MVI_2591). Without Mohammed's pedagogical work that the VEI encouraged, the importance of this question of measure would have escaped us, not only because of its elusiveness and conspicuousness to the expert and invisibility to the lay person, but also because it corresponds to a complex ethical behaviour that underlies the acquisition of skills and the subjectivation process. In a social context where ‘heroism’ and ‘technical ego’ are not cultivated because it is frowned upon to show off, the self-discipline that Mohammed displays on a daily basis is minimised by formal or normative phrases: “that's just how it is”; “it's part of my job”; “I've been doing this since I was a child”. However, this work on himself shapes him as a responsible family man and good Muslim, with a sense of duty and engaged in a network of actions on the self: “you have to earn a living”.

Like anthropology, image-making is fundamentally relational and collaborative, since filmed participants play an important role in the production of knowledge. It is not only a question of recognising the agency of the technical visual dispositive (which includes our presence) on the participants. In line with artists and art theorists (Aumont 2020) and anthropologists who use visual approaches (Ramssusen 2015; Gowlland 2018) it is important to highlight the agency and gaze of the people filmed or photographed as they act on photographers and viewers, expressing intentions and feelings, even in catastrophic or hegemonic situations (Azoulay 2008; 2016).

During the video shooting in the smithy, Mohammed sometimes watches us out of the corner of his eye, but he is too focused and preoccupied to think about anything other than the different stages of production and our disruptive presence. At home, in the calm domestic space where the responsibility for hosting guests falls mostly on the women, he is more relaxed. In addition, the implementation of the technical dispositive has prepared him for the interview, during which, smiling, perhaps flattered to be the centre of our attention, happy to have an audience that appreciates his work, but also proud of his craft and expertise, he happily plays along. Far from being problematic or artificial because it is foreign to his daily experience, by placing him in the rewarding position of a teacher, the VEI gives Mohammed legitimacy in speaking in a space-time created by the technical dispositive. Indeed, in other situations without a camera and with only Myriem and Amine as his audience, he does not seem as motivated. Furthermore, here, Mohammed controls and chooses what he wishes to talk about.

This becomes clear during the VEI, when we return to a few snippets of religious and cosmological information that had emerged during breaks in the smithy. His refusal or lack of interest in these questions reminds us of the limitations of the VEI and of any recorded or public interviews²⁵: certain information, including professional secrets, cannot be disclosed publicly, or is disclosed differently depending on the audience (Martinelli 1996). His silence on the jnûn and his medicinal knowledge could also be a

²⁵ A semi-structured interview, based on a questionnaire sent by Myriem, was also conducted by Hamza in a Taznakht café.

response to the taboo of naming non-humans or to the pressure exerted by national religious orthodoxy on so-called “non-Muslim” beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, Mohammed reminds us that the Prophet Dawud (David) gave human beings the tools of the smithy (tongs). His conclusion is enlightening: “it is God's will to have given blacksmiths this source of income and this profession” (MVI_2591). He repeatedly points out that his expertise (his mastery of fire) depends on his moral conduct and therefore on God's will (MVI_2590). He does not claim to be the sole master of the smithy and its art. He suggests that he shares this power with other entities that participate in the manufacturing process. The agency of fire, in particular, is significant. When asked about the importance of physical strength (MVI_2594) or effort (MVI_2591), he replies that what matters are skills (*snaat*) or the fire: “Strength lies in fire; it is fire that controls” (MVI_2591). According to him, the blacksmith's ethics involve respecting the rules: “every profession has its rules, and becoming an expert requires respect for [the fire and its demands] and piety (*tslim ness*)”. This respect is evident in his refusal to speak pejoratively about the fire when our question suggests that it is a difficult element or material. “Fire is a blessing from the Prophet Dawud, who enabled humans to control it. The proof is that fire heals, and its sparks only burn superficially.” Indeed, the back of his left hand, the closest to the hearth, is marked with burns. But the incorporation of smoke, air and heat when he forges also transforms his senses and his emotions. He does not feel the pain of burns, which he interprets as divine benedictions, a perspective that is in line with the medical-magical practices of the women of the region. It should be noted that, unlike him, his younger brother, also a blacksmith, protects himself from burns by wearing protective clothing, including gloves, which indicates a different relationship to fire and his profession.

These examples demonstrate the heuristic value of the VEI for studying the processes of subjectivation of a blacksmith based on his discursive reflections on his expert practices, practices that transform iron as well as himself. This method gives us access to a rich description of his perspective on his relationship with the dispositive of the smithy, complicating our understanding of the governmentalities that frame the processes of subjectivation, far from a dualistic vision opposing control over/submission to the materials.

3.2 The blacksmith's involvement in various networks of actions

In order to highlight how power relations constrain bodies not in a global way but in terms of possibilities and impediments to action, Foucault suggests that we focus on networks of actions. He shows that all human actions are not only socialised (responding to norms) but also social (dependent on other members of the group) and that power relations are always situated and contingent. In this sub-section, we analyse information obtained through both traditional observation and VEI to reveal the gendered, generational, professional, racial and class power relations that exist in Mohammed's society, as well as those that emerge from the postcolonial relations that bind us to him.

The long period of time spent during fieldwork and the successive visits allow us to reconsider our ethnographic data in light of new information gleaned in the field,

sometimes by chance, in order to understand the social dynamics within which the socio-technical dispositive of the smithy is embedded. These social relationships may escape researchers or be misinterpreted when viewing the film alone, since the film is always coloured by the filmmaker's analytical perspective. Thus, after the publication of the first article on the smithy, a visit to film the making of a pair of carpet scissors forced us to reconsider our conception of the blacksmith's expertise, which we had confused with the power he exercised over his assistant's performance. Mohammed had chosen the wrong day for our visit, which turned out to be the day when his younger brother was in charge of the hearth. Depending on the day, the positions of head blacksmith and assistant are interchangeable. In this case, both Mohammed and ourselves needed to solicit Abdallah's cooperation, and it was Mohammed who took on the role of assistant. This incident highlighted the fact that the assistant can also be an expert: the prerogative of controlling the hearth and the assistant's work is temporary and not linked to technical superiority but, as we discovered, to economic power: the ownership (even shared) of a smithy. The assistant, who often remains outside the framework of the camera and who we had only filmed when he helped and was resting, acquires a certain significance. In this position, he works on himself to adapt to the head of the smithy of the day. He focuses his attention (MVI_2591) to respond appropriately and accurately (MVI_2588) to the blacksmith's embodied performance and his interjections, but he also anticipates his needs and is responsible for preparing some important stages in the manufacturing process. Above all, as Mohammed recalls with emotion during the VEI, an inattentive or clumsy assistant can ruin several hours of work, committing an irreparable mistake. His emotion informs us about relationships of sociability, collaboration, trust and dependence. This situation shows how power circulates between the actors²⁶ (Foucault 2001) and how power dynamics are redefined in action.

²⁶ Michel Foucault suggests viewing power "as something that circulates [...which] is never located here or there, is never in the hands of certain people, is never appropriated like wealth or property. [...] In other words, power passes through individuals; it does not act upon them'. A little further on, he clarifies: 'the individual is not the counterpart of power; he is, I believe, one of its primary effects' (Foucault 2001:180).



Figure 5 *Abderrahman, Mohammed's assistant on that day, checks one of the bellows' engines.* Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

Furthermore, each subject inscribes their performances in different networks of actions, as shown in the following anecdote, which tells us about gender relations in Mohammed's family. Although he had previously downplayed the importance of physical strength (emphasising instead the power of fire and the importance of technical skill), when his older sister, who was present during part of the VEI, tells us that she helped her father until Mohammed was old enough to take over, he invokes "the necessary physical strength" to explain why women are not blacksmiths. His father-in-law, more diplomatic with regard to the gender of the researcher asking the question, considers them "too busy with other activities to be able to devote themselves to blacksmith work".

Finally, Mohammed's production of *tazzut/taska* is embedded in a supply chain that connects makers and consumers. During the VEI, Mohamed showed us the *tazzut/taska* that his father had made. It was a very heavy tool, unlike the ones he makes today. He explained that he responds to requests from local weavers who prefer lighter tools. In recent years, he has added a bar perpendicular to the tines. Weavers requested this modification to replace the leather or thread straps they used to add to keep a regular spacing between the tines. In addition, Mohammed's methods of forging and selling are part of a wider network that includes other competitors, 'the welders'²⁷, mentioned several times in the interview. They represent a foil that demonstrates the value of the work of blacksmiths, who make solid tools that can withstand wear and tear for a long period of time (MVI_2590). Indeed, unlike planned obsolescence, durability and repair are included in the ethical design of the *tazzut/taska*: fifty years on, weavers can bring

²⁷ Their name, 'soudeurs', borrowed from the French, refers to a more recent profession using a post-colonial technique/technology.

their tools back to him, and once the tines have been shortened, they are as good as new. Unlike Mohammed, welders make weft beaters that are cheaper but less sturdy. Instead of a single forged piece, the elements are welded together, which is a less solid join. We were able to gauge the value of Mohammed's work from the admiration and envy of the weavers of Taznakht-Qazba, who pass down their forged tazzut/taska from generation to generation. Despite the competition they represent, Mohammed has never criticised the welders. He simply says that their tools are cheap and that "everything has its place and its price", demonstrating a moral behaviour dictated by a local norm that combines honour and modesty, politeness and restraint.



Figure 6 *The tazzut/taska forged by Mohammed's father. The burn marks on Mohammed's left hand are visible. Photo by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.*

Obviously, the ethnographic situation, centred on the making of the tazzut/taska, also involves social power relations specific to the village. Our presence creates a particular situation, conditioned by our identities as researchers foreign to the village and for one of us even to the country, purchasing an object and paying for a service. The subject, a blacksmith in his sixties, father, husband, older brother, grandfather, muezzin, shepherd, farmer, dealer, and veterinarian, is also subjectivised in this temporary relationship with these outsiders who come to film him. Furthermore, the ethnographic filming situation is both somewhat extraordinary, because we are filming his work in a single day (whereas he may make the beater over several days), and mundane for Mohammed. For our part, through the eye of the camera or while watching the film, we are captivated by his technical skills and expertise, the beauty of the tools used and made, the aesthetics of bodies in action, the red-hot iron and the glowing fire. We also think of the viewers with whom we share a cinematic imagination derived from Hollywood

cinema: the film magnifies bodies and technical gestures (Skvirsky 2020) in dangerous spaces that include hostile materials. Or we may be enchanted by the charisma and eros that O'Connor (2025) evokes in relation to glassblowers. We also wish to celebrate these expert craftsmen who are marginalised in local, national and global social hierarchies. And within a postcolonial and capitalist framework, our European perspective is undoubtedly coloured by the romantic - or, in this case, even orientalist - aura associated with craftsmanship and artistic expertise, and with the decline of craft skills.

In this network of actions, which we form with Mohammed, his assistant, his family and, potentially, the other blacksmiths in the village through the attention we pay to one of them, we are affecting local social relations. Our presence with cameras and a French woman gives Mohammed a certain status, or at least a distinction, in his relations with the other villagers. And this may be part of the reason why he is willing to play along. Our academic requests (to verbalise his work, to preserve his heritage) are at odds with his habits: our visits are concentrated into a single day and therefore require him to work quickly. Mohammed sees his actions as part of a contractual relationship of paid work in which he must deliver a finished object of the highest quality for posterity and for the film.

He creatively influences the filmic relationship, revealing a new dimension of his personality as a craftsman. He draws on the generative aspects of the VEI to construct a strategic image of himself. By manipulating elements of the interview dispositif and their affordances (his image, the filmmakers/researchers, the camera, the *tazzut/taska*, the research, his community, and the audience), he contributes to creating a technical dispositif for self-promotion. He presents himself as a representative of his village and region, an expert blacksmith but also a goldsmith who takes pain in decorating and finishing his works with art and care. He claims a place in the narrative of Morocco's national heritage. When choosing his answers, he probably has in mind the gaze of members of his community, but also the potential relationships he is creating with the wider audience of the film we will produce. Thus, his performance as a professional expert, which he executes in front of us, is also potentially aimed at an audience of buyers reachable on social media.

Finally, let us not forget that the camera can be an instrument of observation and surveillance of one another, contributing to the co-constitution of subjects through these social relationships, a work on oneself, where everyone temporarily accepts these constraints. Our intersubjective relationships are therefore a mixture of diverse expectations, economic strategies, social positions, future hopes, tensions and ambiguities.



Figure 7-8 *Mohammed enjoying his pedagogical role.* Photos by Marie-Pierre Julien, 2022.

To conclude on social relations surrounding the blacksmith profession in the Sirwa, we should add that Mohammed's sons, who attended secondary school, refused to continue in this thankless, difficult and little-recognised profession in contemporary Morocco. They are pursuing their professional ambitions in various Moroccan cities. One of them, in contact with representatives of the Ministry of Handicrafts in Casablanca, in a subordinate position (ethnic, racial, rural) in relation to them, sold them the beater forged by his grandfather and the 1980s carpet featured in the film, without realising their monetary value. Furthermore, we do not yet know what the consequences of the EMKP's intervention will be on the production of consumer desire in an internationally oriented heritage economy.

In conclusion

What can the socio-technical dispositives of filmed observation and video elicitation interview (VEI) bring to our understanding of the subjectivation of an expert blacksmith in southern Morocco? Video methods are well suited to the study of embodied motor skills, but we argue that they provide powerful ways of investigating subjectivation, both diachronically and synchronically. The video shooting dispositive, which involves filmed observation, in line with the tradition of Jean Rouch's filmic anthropology, is subjective, embodied and cognitive, and therefore inherently analytical. This analysis is grounded in the ethnographers' embodied, cognitive and social experiences, their specific anthropological subjectivities, and diverse identifications and histories. At the intersection of our objective scientific observation and subjective experiences in the smithy, our hypotheses regarding Mohammed's pre-reflexive as well as reflexive professional and cognitive habitus needed to be tested against the blacksmith's own verbal reflections. The VEI, because it fosters a higher engagement of our interlocutor, gave us insights into his ethical practices of the self within the governmentalities that organise the smithy. It revealed Mohammed's agency, his pleasure in engaging with this project, his pedagogical, analytical and communicative endeavour. It also gives us access to his vernacular conceptions of materials and non-humans. This socio-technical dispositive enabled Mohammed to control the narrative surrounding his expertise and his history, to build a more nuanced image of himself, or even to help create a self-

promotion strategy based on his expertise. This method is particularly suited to fostering the intersubjectivity and collaboration required between researchers and participants in order to co-construct scientific knowledge. Finally, by combining the VEI with long-term conventional field observation, we have shed light on the social relationships that govern the blacksmith's professional activity and subjectivation, within his village and beyond. In sum, this method enabled us to not reduce the study of Mohammed's subjectivation to professional skills and knowledge alone. Through a political approach to subjectivation that encompasses governmentalities and ethics, we were able to extend the potentialities of VEI to gain insight about power dynamics beyond the dispositive of the workplace/research.

But to what extent could the study of subjectivation enrich visual anthropology, or the anthropology of technology/technics, craftsmanship and knowledge? We argue that these branches of anthropology could benefit from an approach that explores subjectivities as processual, continuously negotiated, political, ethical, situated and historicised – hence the term 'subjectivation' – and as emerging from the socio-technical dispositive within which subjects operate. Thus, research dispositives, because they engage organisms-together-with-their-material cultures, subjectivise those being filmed and the filmmakers-researchers differently, leading them to think about and perform their work in distinct ways. This was shown by researchers who have been using video methods and the VEI since the 1990s (or even the 1960s in the case of Rouch and Dieterlen) to study (inter)subjectivities and identities in work practices, whether craft-based or not. Furthermore, beyond the research/workplace dispositive, visual methods when combined with other methods, open up the scope of study of power dynamics to encompass the wider context (local, national and global).

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"As napalm": illustrating embodied and sensitive experiences of a slow disaster**Abstract**

Since 2011, massive strandings of Sargassum seaweed have had a significant impact on the lives of coastal communities in the wider Caribbean and West Africa. The SaRiMed project is an interdisciplinary academic study examining the emerging relationships between the environment and the ontologies resulting from the proliferation and decomposition of the seaweed. The study focuses in particular on the adverse impact of gaseous emissions on the material life and psychological well-being of local residents. One of the questions addressed in the research project concerned the translation of embodied and sensory experiences of this slow-onset environmental disaster (Nixon, 2011). The aim of this study is to make visible the narratives of pain, the lack of well-being and the loss of habitability, in order to bring them to the attention of a wider audience. To this end, it incorporates photographs of damaged landscapes and objects, as well as drawings and comic strips, created during and after the subjects' participation in semi-structured interviews conducted with two students, Alexia Carbeti and Lucas Pernock, during fieldwork in Martinique and Marie-Galante in 2021 and 2022. This presentation of the research field explains the photographic and graphic process employed and the significance it acquired in the dialogic relationship with the inhabitants of the affected areas.

Keywords

Sargassum, Inhabitants of the coastal caribbean, Environmental Health, Photographs, Drawing process, Body

The author

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Context

Since 2011, rafts of holopelagic brown algae have been drifting with the currents and crossing the Atlantic Ocean in such vast quantities that scientists have dubbed this phenomenon the GASB, for Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt (Wang, 2019). The causes of this Sargassum bloom are multifactorial and global in scale (Johns, 2020): it began in 2009 and 2010 due to powerful surface winds over the Sargasso Sea, which pushed a small portion of it away from the gyre—a marine vortex—in which it had been contained until that point. Now, large quantities of this seaweed are washing up along the coasts of the Greater Caribbean and West Africa, causing a wide range of problems at the micro-local level, whether ecological, economic, political, social or health-related. If it cannot be collected within approximately 48 hours, the Sargassum decomposes and releases several gases, two of which have been identified as being neurotoxic: H_2S (hydrogen sulphide) and NH_3 (ammonia). This abundance and decomposition of Sargassum have had a significant impact on the daily lives and health of coastal communities living in the Greater Caribbean and West African regions. The emergence and subsequent study of chronic environmental diseases have begun to be documented (Resiere D. et al., 2021; Banydeen R. et al., 2024). Indeed, physical and psychological symptoms emerged, including breathing difficulties, shortness of breath, a feeling of suffocation and sleep apnoea. For the SaRiMed research, on which this presentation is based, we considered health in the complex sense of the World Health Organization (WHO) definition, that is, as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Indeed, the impact of these gases extends beyond human beings to encompass non-humans and the more-than-human. These emissions not only spread through space but also influence daily life and social relations, revealing the relationship that individuals have with spaces. It has been shown that they also have a deleterious effect on electronics and metal, walls, jewellery, decorative objects, etc. Furthermore, leachate, a liquid produced by the exudation of Sargassum, pollutes the soil and emits foul odours that provoke revulsion and nausea. Thus, the arrival and accumulation of Sargassum and the consequences of its decomposition transform this mundane phenomenon into something extraordinary, owing to the constant focus on the dangers and risks involved – dangers and risks that we aim to highlight more effectively through a multi-modal approach utilising photography and graphic design.

Methodological framework

SaRiMed (Health issues related to Sargassum seaweed for coastal residents and medical mediation) (2021-2023) and SaRiMed 2 (2025-2027), funded by the Fondation de France (call for projects ‘The future of coastal and marine environments’), is an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary project (social and medical sciences, art & science). The SaRiMed project was designed with the explicit aim of facilitating collaborative exploration and the dissemination of experiential knowledge regarding the abundance of Sargassum and the nuisance caused by its decomposition. All the islands and mainland territories of the Greater Caribbean are affected by this new and sudden phenomenon, which cannot yet

be categorised or quantified. This text focuses on the areas where the SaRiMed surveys were conducted. In Martinique, out of a population of 390,000, around 20,000 people across 11 municipalities are directly affected. In Marie-Galante (a French island in the Guadeloupe archipelago, also located in the Lesser Antilles), around 2,000 people, out of a population of 9,000 permanent residents, are directly or indirectly affected, particularly in the municipality of Capesterre-de-Marie-Galante (Ménez, Ranély Vergé-Depré & Béchacq, 2023). Also very close to Guadeloupe, the island of La Désirade is similarly hard affected: along 11 kilometres of coastline, almost half of the 1,300 permanent residents are directly impacted. Coastal development is extensive in Martinique, Marie-Galante and La Désirade, as in many island locations. It is heterogeneous in terms of the origins and socio-professional backgrounds of its inhabitants, as well as in terms of geography. The interplay of social classes in these coastal geographical areas is key to understanding how Sargassum, a physical and ecological phenomenon, becomes a political and social phenomenon, disrupting daily life in ways that are socially unequal.

What epistemologies and methodologies can help bring personal histories into the public sphere through research in the humanities and social sciences? Our research questions lie within the field of environmental health, impacted by potential chronic poisoning from neurotoxic gases: what are their trajectories, their flow, their behaviour, from the coastline to inside homes and car interiors? How do they alter the lives of residents? How can we observe the influence of these neurotoxic gases on our daily lives, our well-being, our health, and on our system of representations and relationships with our environment and our bodies within this slowly deteriorating environment? All of these questions lie at the core of the research project, which aims to assess the impacts and experiences of these gases on residents' daily lives from the perspective of the anthropology of disasters. We start to observe the development of a lay or popular epidemiology (Brown, 1997), the perception of a low-profile disaster (Dupuy, 2022) and the emergence of heightened intersecting vulnerabilities due to the abundance and decomposition of Sargassum, leading to environmental injustice (Nixon, 2011). The aim of the anthropological research is to capture the elusive nature of these ephemeral disasters (Ferrier, 2015), and this resistance to disorder (Haraway, 2016). This "crisis", which has occurred suddenly and repeatedly, in a relatively random manner depending on the commonly known as "seasons" of the Sargassum, acts as both a catalyst and a revelation.

The central theme of this paper will be the interplay between the visible and the invisible, beginning with the measurement of Sargassum masses and traces of gas on objects, and finally turning to the invisible - what is happening inside the body - and revealing contextualised knowledge through the lens of questions regarding the correlations between physical symptoms and damaged objects, as expressed traces of a global dysfunction. In the interviews, those participants highlight the measures they have had to implement due to the disruption, redistribution or disappearance of customary practices in the region. Avoidance strategies are put in place, as if one were living in an

area contaminated by industrial chemical pollution. As the philosopher M. Murphy writes (2017), « the ubiquitous condition of chemically altered living-being, a condition that is shared, but unevenly so, and which divides us as much as binds us »¹. These practices can either bring people together or drive them apart. They can facilitate social interaction around these avoidance practices by setting up citizens' groups or by sharing the results of lay experiences or contextualised expertise on gas. This text outlines empirical aspects of the research field and the "infra-ordinary of life" (Pérec, 1989): the banality of daily existence in its entirety of attachments to people, places and objects, and the "possibilities of life" (Tsing, 2017) despite the damage caused by the abundance of Sargassum on coastlines. The observation of risk measures requires also the application of phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and co-construction of data. These highlight our intrinsic links with the environment and our bodily experiences through an objectified representation. However, this is not a matter of seeking to aestheticise the catastrophe (Ferrier, 2015), but rather a desire to represent and reflect the lives of the inhabitants as faithfully as possible.

How can we make the invisible effects on the body and on people's lives tangible, translatable and expressible? How can we represent gases, which are volatile yet present through the traces they leave on the material world and the smells, atmospheres and sensations they create? The question of visual representation that concerns us here moves from the degradation of landscapes and coastal developments—which is a matter of visual evidence— but we will follow the leads provided by the interviewees during the fieldwork in order to move from the overly visible to the invisible, namely 1/ what appears obvious and is visible from the outside, and which the ethnographer's regular returns allow to be situated in time; 2/ that which relates to attention to domestic objects, and which are shown by the inhabitants; 3/ that which relates to harm to the body and organs, and in this case the visual imagery generated by the inhabitants' narratives will be the method employed.

During the early phases of the SaRiMed project and throughout the first few months of the qualitative research, the alliance between art and science was still in its infancy; or rather, whilst this aspect of the work had been theorised through discussions with artists, it had not yet been put into practice. This alliance raised epistemological questions (what modes of knowledge are at stake?) and methodological ones, particularly regarding the media and artistic choices that support or condition alternative forms of research writing (printed books, online publications, photography, exhibition spaces, comic books, theatre, podcasts, performing arts, sensory mapping, dance, multimodality, etc.).

The methodologies employed for this research were devised and developed in three phases: the first phase involved the conceptualisation and drafting of the project; the second phase involved rethinking the research in light of the legal constraints

¹ Murphy adds that these new living conditions are determined not only by external sources of pollution – chemical pollution in the cases she is studying – but also by colonial capitalism and racism, a structural injustice that is also evident in the Sargassum phenomenon and which will be the subject of another article.

imposed by the GDPR, which necessitated a reconsideration of how the research would be presented and discussed in the public sphere; the third stage involved the unexpected contribution of graphic design to the research field, with the weight of an empiricism that subsequently took shape as a qualitative methodology. After several experiments, including dance, the decision was made to focus on dramatised readings, dubbed *Prolivariation*, and on photography. The decision to incorporate graphic representation as a form of creation and dissemination was made on the spot during the project. Its short- and long-term relational and aesthetic impacts would reorient this perspective on understanding and acknowledging the social impacts of Sargassum strandings, the main objective of the SaRiMed project, components 1 and 2. Indeed, the work carried out with Alexia Carbeti and Lucas Pernock during their student placement, which will be detailed in the second part of this text, enabled a reorientation of this perspective on understanding and acknowledging the social impacts of Sargassum strandings, by observing the relational dynamics that the creative works helped to foster in the moment, as well as in the short and long term. It was therefore through this research with local residents and the collaboration with visual arts graduates that the methodology was refined and expanded within the transdisciplinary work, particularly to interpret and convey what cannot be said or seen: situated knowledges, embodied experiences, and imagined projections regarding the impact on physical health, which still constitute a blind spot in public policy regarding this problem.

This presentation is based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and photographic and graphic work carried out on three islands in the Lesser Antilles, situated in the southern part of the Caribbean arc, between the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Caribbean Sea to the west. These have been French departments and regions since 1948. This research has been conducted since 2017, and primarily as part of the SaRiMed research project from 2021 onwards, enabling more than 300 meetings to be held with a wide range of stakeholders in Martinique and the Guadeloupe archipelago, on the islands of Marie-Galante (2022) and La Désirade (2025, 2026), resulting in a total of over 250 semi-structured interviews that were recorded, transcribed and analysed, as well as around a hundred informal conversations, exploratory interviews, and over 200 responses to questionnaires concerning the impact of Sargassum on daily life. primarily involves semi-structured interviews and participant observation, as well as the use of photography and graphic design. The methodology employed by the social sciences and humanities team (the project coordinator and, since 2018, four student interns in their first and second years of their Master's degree, and two students studying for a Bachelor's degree in visual communication and graphic design) primarily involves semi-structured interviews and participant observation, as well as the use of photography and graphic design.

Our text is divided into two parts corresponding to the two visual anthropological approaches employed in this research project: firstly, the ethnographer's photographic work on the transformation of landscapes; and secondly, in a more substantial and intimate section, on the transformation of objects. In the second part, we will explain how

an ethnographic and graphic collaboration enabled the development of an artistic and scientific project, to highlight the contribution of visual anthropology in translating the inexpressible into images. Both practices drew on the experiential knowledge of local residents in order to make this contextualised knowledge—this lay epidemiology—visible.

Evidence from the trial: photographic practices exploring the Sargassum crisis

In our SaRiMed 1 and 2 studies, photographs are used for two purposes: firstly, as evidence, and secondly, as a tool to facilitate dialogue between interviewees and researchers during fieldwork, thereby enabling a two-way engagement:

“In addition to this ‘ethnographic engagement’, there is also a photographic engagement, which involves paying particular attention to the way in which images are taken and then shared by the anthropologist with the people involved in the research.” (Leon-Quijano, 2024)

To date, the photographs taken have focused solely on objects and the environment, and not on bodies or body parts (apart from hands resting on corroded objects), in order to respect the principles of anonymity. In employing visual practices, the aim here is to help build a body of evidence for the local residents: not to trace a past, but a present. The resulting visual testimony seeks to inscribe within the landscape—both physical and symbolic—the traces of the change brought about by the Sargassum, beginning with the materiality of that change, and contributes to an ongoing history. An implicit—and sometimes explicit—agreement is quickly established with the interviewees, whereby the ethnographer will enrich the findings and provide evidence through photographs of various forms of degradation, whether public—such as the degraded landscape—or private, such as houses or domestic objects. In this case, the photographs do not serve an aesthetic purpose, but rather act as a medium for a metric logic (Houdart, 2017) and the establishment of evidence (without intervening as legal evidence), at work in this display and photographic capture of degraded materiality.

From sudden disasters to slow-onset disasters, objects serve as witnesses to the event, and the black marks on taps, structural timber and PVC ceilings act as physical clues. These witness objects speak to those around them through their weathered, blackened, bluish appearance and their pitted surfaces. To convey their meaning beyond the domestic environment contaminated by gas, they call for the creation of a ‘subtle repertoire’ (Houdart, 2017) to reveal the breadth of the body of evidence pointing to the illness, and to distinguish between materials damaged by proximity to the seaside and the presence of the gas. The witness is thus engaged in a mode of expression that records, in a present-day context, what they have seen and wish to convey, whilst remaining wary of framing and fiction, but by striving to recreate a reality, confirmed by the interviewee’s gaze and their responses, as a testimony both at the time the image was taken and in the time that followed.

We will start with documentary landscape photography, which allows us to grasp

the physical scale of the problem. As regards the measurement of time, we can see that the suddenness of the event must be measured, as well as its transience—that is to say, its changing and unpredictable nature. This involves a shift from the macro (fig. 1) to the micro, through the accounts of those interviewed and the embodied, sensory experiences of residents affected by prolonged crises caused by Sargassum drift. ù



Fig. 1 View of the coast. Pointe Faula, Martinique. Photo by Florence Ménez, april 2021. DOI: 10.34847/NKLE.E5AA8201.

The documentation of the coastline through systematic photographs taken by local residents and shared on social media has made it possible to preserve a complete record of the brutality and unpredictability of this uncontrollable event. The coastal landscape can be observed from several vantage points: captured from ground-level perspectives and from a zenithal perspective using drone imagery. The most common viewpoint is that of the coastline looking out to sea. Thousands of photographs are shared on social media, particularly on Facebook, by those affected. These photographs serve as a medium for capturing the phenomenon, thereby documenting the continuity of the strandings and situating them within a regional Caribbean history; they provide evidence of its impact whilst expressing a sense of powerlessness in the face of it; and they also serve to challenge public authorities and ask what obstacles are preventing them from taking radical and swift action to prevent these strandings (Ménez, 2021). Allies are documenting and publicising the phenomenon: since 2018, a French sailor living in Mexico has set up a page where she voluntarily collects these various photographs from social media and dedicated satellite imagery websites, with the aim of creating a crowdsourced map of Sargassum strandings across the wider Caribbean (<https://sargassummonitoring.com/fr/>). These records have evolved from simple snapshots of a situation at a given moment to long-term documentation of an ongoing disaster (Dupuy, 2022) and calls for political action (Ménez, 2021). A significant proportion of the coastal views show the abundance of Sargassum that has washed up on the shoreline, as well as the continuous influx of this phenomenon. It seemed important for the project to also engage with these photographic practices of

documenting the unfolding event, through the uniformity of the landscapes covered in Sargassum and the various practices that persist and adapt within them (fig. 2). In order to provide as broad an overview as possible of brown algae strandings in terms of space and time, it is important to document and archive the various stages of the Sargassum's arrival, collection and decomposition (figs. 3 et 4).



Fig. 2 View of the coast. To practise his sport, a man crosses the Sargassum border. Pointe Faula, Le Vauclin, Martinique. Photo by Florence Ménez, 2019. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.aa6drm40.



Fig. 3 View of the coast. Collection of seaweed in the centre of Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe. Photo by Florence Ménez, 2022. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.f4af06n6.



Fig. 4 What used to be the sea: the coastline covered in dried algae behind our interviewee's house in Le François, Martinique. Photo Florence Ménéz, June 2021. DOI: 10.34847/NKL.799C51NY.

A "clue paradigm" (Ginzburg, 1980: 25) is adopted by all the residents interviewed: this indexical model is held up as material evidence of the 'dead' object. For the residents, photographing it was part of a process of transferring this evidence into the public sphere, just as the residents who posted on social media were doing themselves. Ginzburg distinguishes between "inanimate or living" indices provided by nature (animal tracks, for example) and those provided by "culture" (writing, for example). In this instance, the aim is to transform these clues of degradation—clues that are not static but in a state of constant transformation.

Evidence from the field: sharing a sensorial perception of the Sargassum crisis

This type of knowledge involves what Ginzburg calls "imponderable elements: smell, a glance, intuition" (Ginzburg, 1980: 32). We will start with smell as a volatile cue, one that is difficult to capture through photography or graphic representation. As for the odours emitted by Sargassum, different experiments can be conducted, but there is no particularly heated olfactory controversy. The smell of decomposing brown algae bears no resemblance to that of durian, the fruit that 'divides the world in two', studied by the anthropologist L. Mariani (2022). It does, however, offer a spectrum of what is bearable and what is not: for some residents interviewed, Sargassum may evoke the smell of low tide or the slightly sulphurous scent of mangroves, attributed by some to having become accustomed to the foul odour, and by others to the impossibility and incomprehension that a healthy life could exist with this smell / or a healthy relationship with one's environment. It is more a smell of 'rotten eggs', 'decomposing carrion' and 'corpses'. Odours fluctuate and can be present at any time of day. Sometimes, the fumes of toxic gases can be detected even before dawn, when the dew awakens the sense of smell.

Thus, to photograph or illustrate these clues, we must ourselves engage with a phenomenology of perception and share a community of experiences that is also reflected in this community of physical traces or in its life journey. Lucas Pernock, the

young graphic designer, 'grew up with Sargassum'; he is familiar with this experience, and this is evident in the way he reports not only on the responses of those interviewed during the study but also on his own reactions. Ethnographic research, particularly through the method of participant observation, relies on the sharing of experiences, including sensory experiences and the sensations and reactions triggered by smells. This constitutes a "sensory landscape" (Wathelet & Candau, 2013) that is constantly at our disposal, which we experience as residents, whether we like it or not, according to our own olfactory sensibilities and physical conditions. The aim is to put the researcher's body to the test, temporarily and in a protected manner, in order to interpret this landscape, whilst also attempting to escape it using the same strategies employed by the residents (for example, perfuming one's home, inhaling essential oils or seeking temporary refuge elsewhere). At the beginning, the interviewees ask us if we have ever had this kind of experience: "Have you ever found yourself unable to stand the smell?". It is indeed the case that the smell of Sargassum can be unbearable, causing nausea and immediate symptoms such as headaches. Our interviews took place in locations that best suited the interviewee's wishes and comfort; some wanted to conduct interviews "in the Sargassum", so that we could experience the physical strain, whilst others preferred to draw us into their ritual of escaping the unbreathable. We therefore sometimes conducted interviews in Marie-Galante, notably far from the strandings. Such was the case with the interviewee who wished to hold the discussion on the beach, in a spot sheltered from the sea breeze, where he retreats to relax and escape the confinement of his home, and thus escape the harmful effects of the gas on his domestic environment. The participant reports suffering from this odour, which causes him respiratory problems:

"I put a towel over my head so I could breathe normally, as if I had a sheet over my head. It was a towel to try and filter out some of the smell. A sheet isn't enough; it's too thin. The towel is thicker, made of terry cloth, so it filtered out some of the smell, and I didn't notice the smell as much, you see? I put a towel over my head. Sometimes it annoyed me too, so I'd take it off and I could smell it again. It was sickening. I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stay there. But little by little, I got used to it. Now I sleep there, and when I'm asleep, I don't even notice the smell anymore²."

At first glance, this clue about the smell seems to be a digression from the presentation's main aim, which is to highlight photographic and graphic representations of the slow-moving disaster. Yet smell influences the way we document the phenomenon. Indeed, the researcher's body is also put to the test, all the more so as we are not seeking to escape the Sargassum, but rather to live 'in the Sargassum' and to meet the people who live there³.

² Lucas sketched these strategies in his notebook while we were conducting the interview. These sketches will be the subject of another article.

³ I believe this involvement is necessary to achieve the most symmetrical relationships and experiences possible, even though – as I do not live there permanently, nor do the students on work-study programs – this short-term involvement may invite criticism. I am aware that it is much easier for us to leave the affected

Momentous events that will go down in contemporary history

We will continue with the 'glance', put forward by Ginzburg as a second intangible element: the issue at hand goes beyond the mere degradation of coastal landscapes and developments. The aim of this study is to view landscapes and objects as clues, and to explore the potential communicative function of the photographs, as presented in the interviews. For this perspective of the 'glance', we shall focus primarily on photographs of dilapidated objects. Firstly, it seems clear to us that the materiality of these objects presented to us crystallises a life, a history, a heritage and a daily existence that bind us and attach us to our everyday space, thus representing our habitability. Secondly, and here the third intangible element, 'intuition', comes into play: the presence of these objects serves as a testimony, as proof, that 'something is happening', and that 'when we see what is happening to the objects, we wonder what is happening inside our bodies'. The first material traces providing a 'clue paradigm' inscribed on the object are those of corrosion caused by gases. By observing the corrosion of pipes, jewellery, coins and household appliance parts, each resident creates their own 'natural home sensor', as it was described to us. A system for measuring environmental degradation is in place in almost every household, notably through an experiment involving placing coins on a table and checking how dark they have become: how many days does it take for the coin to oxidise? The demonstration is also carried out on personal items worn in contact with the body: several interviewees wore silver bracelets or rings and, thanks to the variation in their tarnishing, they could see the dangers they believed they were facing, which became a sort of barometer of danger. These marks are visible on jewellery and woodwork, and they can disappear even without cleaning, when the Sargassum no longer washes ashore for a few weeks (particularly on PVC ceilings, usually installed on terraces).

Most interviews begin with a list of damaged items, which the interviewee lists in a virtually systematic order, from the outside in. The list covers all parts of the building, from household appliances to more personal items, such as ceilings stained with black marks, taps (fig. 5) and tarnished mirrors, faulty televisions and air conditioners, unusable jewellery and decorative objects that people no longer wish to display. The objects are therefore discarded, hidden away in a drawer, and a sense of shame sets in. The ethnographer's intervention makes it possible to remove this object and place it in a space where discussion can be prompted. The object is no longer dirty, 'unclean' and useless; it regains a social purpose.

areas than it is for the local residents. Strategies shared along the coast are put into practice, on the advice of local residents, particularly the use of electronic devices, in order to bear witness to their living conditions. These possibilities raise moral and ethical questions, which can be resolved in part pragmatically through documentation and mediation work carried out outside the territory in question.



Fig. 5 In La Désirade, this tap, photographed here on the table on the interviewee's terrace during our conversation, will be placed in a transparent box and displayed at various events. Photo by Florence Ménez, August 2025. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.6154ztn6.

This tap has an unusual history: it had been dismantled by the local resident when I came to carry out an interview. He had just replaced it with a new tap. After photographing it (fig. 5), I asked him if I could take it away so that I could display it in a different context. He packed it into a plastic bag. You can see in the photograph that black marks are seeping out of it. I took this plastic bag back to my research laboratory in mainland France and bought a transparent Plexiglas box. The FaBlab (Open Factory) at the University of Brest then placed this tap (along with another oxidised tap, donated by a contact in Martinique) inside the box. At that point, the tap, weakened by oxidation and handling during transport, split into two parts. This evidence will be presented outside the context in which the problem arises. But also not just the object in 2D but in 3D. Indeed, the photographic process offers the possibility of sharing the effects of strandings outside the territorial context. The list of damaged property, as recounted by residents of the affected areas, draws on a tragic discourse, as evidenced by references to 'dead jewellery' or the 'dead television' (Ménez, 2019), or even in a summary and definitive conclusion about the situation: 'everything is dead', usually followed by the reflection already mentioned above: "when we see this, we wonder what is happening inside us". The damaged object, characterised by its state of deterioration due to oxidation, offers a subject of engagement that is both visual and discursive. Thanks to the focus that the camera or recorder applies to the object, it becomes a witness to a story in the process of being constructed, or rather of unravelling. The attention paid to the object, as a sensory and visual witness, then establishes a dialogic link between the ethnographer and the resident. This attention also serves to establish a channel for the dissemination of embodied experiences, situating the ethnographer within a domestic context that is likewise influenced, despite their relatively brief exposure to the sargassum and the possibility of disengaging (through their geographical mobility) from this experience. The intensity of the traces on her body will be reduced, but her task will be to bear witness to the traces of others' lives through photography and speech. This evidence will be presented beyond the context in which the problem arises.

Relational Ecologies and Attachments

As gases pass through homes and leave traces of their flowing or stagnant passage, measuring the effects of these gases on objects could, according to the residents' understanding, provide an insight into how these gases pass through the body. Residents interpret these traces as signs of oxidation, in addition to oxidation caused by salinity, which leaves traces of rust rather than black, volatile marks (Bérard & Ménez, 2024). Numerous clues are detected by the residents. Other clues are created by them: the experiment with coins, for example. The clues give rise to temporal markers, correlating with the arrivals of sargassum. However, this is also evident in the domestic environment, where it manifests as the deterioration of precious items through the oxidation process. A typical example is a decorative object in the home of a respondent in Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe, which was used to illustrate the degradation of these ubiquitous items. The resident cleaned one of the three spice jars (fig. 6) to show how the gases had oxidised the inscriptions 'nutmeg', 'cinnamon' and 'thyme' as well as the floral decoration. This phenomenon is due to the presence of a metallic component in the decoration.



Fig. 6 Small spice jars. Behind these three spice jars, you can see a teapot with an oxidised metal lid, a bottle of champagne with a once-golden label, also oxidised, and on the left, the cleaning product used. Capesterre-de-Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe. Photo by Florence Ménez, April 2022.
DOI: 10.34847/NKL.CDEBKIL3.

Traces to erase

The experience of 'seeing' was important in establishing the evidence. On several occasions during the interviews, we observed that the damaged objects were staged by the interviewees for the photograph. Not only did they arrange them in a particular way on a table, under suitable lighting, but they also offered to clean them to remove some of the traces, in a process that was performative here, for the purposes of photography and ethnography, whereas outside the interview setting it is a restorative act. This can be seen in the photograph showing a cymbal: the musician had no need to use his

instrument that day but nevertheless carried out the cleaning process in detail and to some extent. For smaller objects, such as spice jars, the cleaned object is placed in contrast to the uncleaned one, in a before-and-after arrangement, which also demonstrates the act of cleaning as a means of restoring the object's appearance and functionality, and as a symbolic erasure of the shame and fear of being regarded as 'unclean', because one does not take care of one's everyday objects, and is therefore not open to sociability. The sudden appearance of damage caused by algae in everyday life is reshaping the way we keep our homes clean and tidy. The opportunity to try cleaning was offered to me spontaneously, without my having to ask for it explicitly, accompanied by an almost ritualistic phrase: "You'll see the difference". The act of cleaning was accompanied by a discussion of the steps to be taken, the actions involved, the practices to follow, the products to use, how long the cleanliness would last, or the impossibility of restoring the object to its previous condition—and thus the necessity of abandoning the cleaning. The object was then stowed away at the back of a cupboard or left in plain sight. It was rarely thrown away, with the exception of electrical appliances, which have a different, non-emotional status. Televisions, fridges and air conditioners were therefore left outside, awaiting removal to the tip and replacement, generating not only material pollution but also a significant cost for residents (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Alexia Carbeti created this other comic strip. It illustrates the difficulty residents told us about during interviews in keeping their electronic devices in good working order, as well as retailers' refusal to process these purchases when they are informed, at the point of finalising the purchase and providing their address, that the buyers live in neighbourhoods affected by Sargassum. Illustration by Alexia Carbeti, June 2021. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.1646wkvy.

This event also provided an opportunity to discuss strategies for protecting these objects. Whenever the interviewees offered to show me how and with what product they

cleaned their belongings, I asked to photograph this act of cleaning, which, taken out of context, would have seemed a mundane task. In this particular context, it is a battle against fumes, a battle for the territory of the home, the maintenance of domestic order and the elimination of dirt, regarded as an unwelcome presence, as something that does not belong here (Douglas 1966). Thus, I observed and photographed residents cleaning their jewellery (figs. 8 and 9), as well as a musician cleaning his cymbals (fig. 10) with various products, some of which were toxic. The three photographs presented here offer a series of visual testimonies.



Fig. 8 This participant shows us how she cleans her jewellery with a silver polish. Photo by Florence Ménez, April 2021. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.ffb200ah.



Fig. 9 To protect them as much as possible from corrosion, her jewellery is wrapped in cotton, then in a second layer of protection (tissue paper), and finally packed in a paper bag. Despite these protective measures, she notes: 'The jewellery is dead. We can no longer wear it.' Photo by Florence Ménez, April 2021. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.d9b86fco.



Fig. 10 On the island of La Désirade (Guadeloupe), a musician uses hydrochloric acid to clean his cymbals, which have been oxidised by gas emissions from Sargassum seaweed. La Désirade, Guadeloupe. Photo by Florence Ménez, August 2025. [DOI :10.34847/NKL.68CC110Y](https://doi.org/10.34847/NKL.68CC110Y).

As can be seen in the photograph showing a cymbal, the musician did not need to use his instrument that day, but he went through the cleaning process in detail and carried out part of it.

Epidemiology and situated knowledge: illustrating the discomfort

To introduce the second part, which focuses on visual anthropology with an emphasis on graphic design, I would like to share a second excerpt from the ethnographic research. In May 2021, a meeting was arranged at the Lycée Victor Anicet in Saint-Pierre, a town in northern Martinique on the Caribbean coast, spared by the strandings. In collaboration with a member of the College, a project was made for a class of students enrolled on a national diploma in fine arts, specialising in visual communication and graphic design. The aim of this emerging collaboration is to create the SaRiMed project logo. After the students presented various logos they had designed, Alexia and Lucas approached me to discuss the possibility of undertaking an internship on the project⁴. They have two differing perceptions of the nuisance caused by Sargassum, due to their life experiences. Alexia has been spared the presence of the seaweed as she lives in a town in the south of Martinique, but Lucas 'grew up with Sargassum', as mentioned earlier, in a town on the Atlantic coast.

The phenomenon began in 2011, coinciding with Lucas's tenth birthday, when a large build-up started to form in front of the family home, a house situated closer to the mangrove swamp, where the Sargassum became trapped and began to decompose. When concentrations of hydrogen sulphide and ammonia were high, his school was forced to close on certain days. On the first day of the course, a Monday morning in June 2021, we arrived at the seaside. Sargassum seaweed had accumulated in this highly urbanised neighbourhood, in a row of houses wedged between the bay and a hill. A lady

⁴ The graphic methodology was put into practice during a longer placement the following year, as part of the second phase of the qualitative surveys, which were conducted on the island of Marie-Galante, in the Guadeloupe archipelago, in June 2022, followed by a role as engineering assistant for Lucas Pernock, responsible for the project's graphic coordination. Alexia Carbeti was working on a project outside the scope of the main project.

called out to us and asked us to come up onto her terrace. She said to us: "When I see this sargassum, it kills me," using the same rhetorical register we had discussed in relation to 'dead objects'. I took out my notebook and Lucas took out his tablet. The lady had a lot to say about the impact of the seaweed on her life. She told us that her daily life had become a struggle, with symptoms such as nausea, palpitations and sleep disturbances. Like thousands of other coastal residents, she uses avoidance strategies, including relocating: she leaves her home for several hours a day, seeking hospitality from family members living far from the Sargassum, and using various tricks to protect herself (using essential oils, closing doors and windows, wearing face masks). Sometimes she feels discouraged and gives up; at other times, she perseveres and collects her oxidised belongings to clean them. I listen to this now all-too-common story, taking notes in my notebook and occasionally glancing at Lucas, who is also taking notes on his tablet. Then the lady feels she has nothing more to say. The conversation ends and Lucas turns his tablet screen towards us. We then see a portrait of the woman we've been speaking to.



Fig. 11 Portrait of an interviewer. Le François, Martinique, Lucas Pernock, June 2021. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.6d4f6qqg.

We are both surprised and delighted, in different ways: she, at seeing herself depicted in a drawing, and I, at being a direct witness to Lucas's artistic talent and insight. The drawing technique used by Lucas Pernock is known as 'character design', which involves taking one or more key elements of a character to highlight a particular trait of their personality. He also draws on cartoon-style illustration in his work. The drawing will reignite the conversation. This situation of simultaneous drawing and dialogic process forms the starting point for adjustments made to the interactions between the different techniques used in the descriptive, reflective and dissemination phases. It also explores the potential influence of these practices on the perceptions and knowledge of residents in areas affected by Sargassum. When it comes to measuring the effects on the body, we find ourselves at an impasse, as we are dealing with the inaccessible interior of the body—the unknown. We must therefore draw on our imagination to envisage how the gases might affect the inside of the body. The following ethnographic sequence will illustrate the issues we face when meeting people living near the coast, who must constantly strike a balance between their private lives and their immediate surroundings, where the sea once was. A few days into his placement, Lucas Pernock and I visit another affected

neighbourhood: the home of a retired teacher who had already welcomed me a few weeks earlier. Her garden surrounds her 1950s concrete house, which has four rooms on a single level. The garden borders a mangrove that gives off a strong smell of ammonia. The brackish water is greenish, dotted with unappetising white puddles and decomposing Sargassum. Previously, the sea reached the edge of our host's garden. During our visit, the sea is several dozen metres away, pushed back by a mass of Sargassum that has been washed ashore for weeks, fossilised into blocks with a mouldy surface (fig. 4). As usual, I took some photos to document the phenomenon. When I return in the coming years, I will take more photos and print them out at our contact's request so that she can see how things have changed. For example, by August 2025, the sea had regained ground and the clumps of Sargassum had been replaced by the flowing water. The only positive aspect of this scene is the growth of mangroves breaking through the surface. Near the mangrove, our contact points out what she perceives as a smell of carrion. The portable sensor we are holding indicates high levels of hydrogen sulphide. To grasp this altered landscape, we must mentally take note of all the things and beings that inhabit these places, either by noticing them ourselves or by having them pointed out to us. In this case, our interlocutor points out that her dog's eyes are red due to irritation caused by the brown algae. In another neighbourhood, a woman tells us about her cat's sensitive sense of smell and explains that it takes refuge in a safe spot in the house when the smell of Sargassum is present in the morning, when she wakes up and leaves the house. We do the same: we retreat to a safe spot. Our companion invites us in. She then repeats a scene she has already acted out with me. Here is the sequence of movements and postures she asks us to follow: she points to the armchair to the left of the door. She sits on the sofa almost opposite. She points to the armchair on the right for Lucas. The seating arrangement is by no means random. I told Lucas that when I first came here, our hostess had already tried this with me, so I was in Lucas's place. That day, the recorder was on the floor between us. I'm facing the corridor leading to the garden and the sea... which is no longer there. The wind carries the smell of rotten eggs. I feel as though I'm holding my breath. I breathe in that smell. And soon, I feel nauseous. I had to ask to sit on the chair to the left of the door. My reaction of disgust and my request to move proved to our hostess that her experiment was conclusive: she had created a virtual map of the gas dynamics in her house, and I had just proved her right. After the second experiment, which was identical to the first except for the presence of Lucas, who was to sit in the seat I had been assigned the first time, Lucas drew a map of the living room showing the flow of air, illustrating this by personifying it as a ghost and giving it the shape of a question mark (fig. 12).

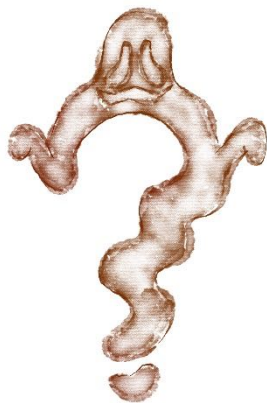


Fig. 12. What exactly are these gases? How do they spread? What effects do they have? Based on their observations, many participants now believe that they are heavy gases which circulate or linger at ground level, which is scientifically accurate. Lucas Pernock, June 2022. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.8f674a1t.

This sequence of gestures and postures serves a purpose: our interviewee is conducting an experiment in her living room so that her visitors can describe the effects of Sargassum on the body and how they gauge 'what is happening', much like the residents of Fukushima interviewed by the anthropologist S. Houdart (2017). We can also observe what the Sargassum drives people to do, and how they conduct experiments and generate knowledge in their homes, which have become laboratories for experimentation. Our interviewee describes her experimental protocol involving coins, a practice shared by other residents and one that I myself follow when staying in the affected areas: the coins are placed in the direction of the Sargassum drift, some in a small dish, others in a sealed plastic tube that previously contained tablets, and still others in a corner of the sofa. After several days, or sometimes even several hours, the result is the same for all the residents conducting this experiment: the coin shows black discolouration on the side exposed to the wind. Initially, she began a process of cleaning it, but subsequently, as is often the case, she gave up, either throwing it away or keeping it as evidence.

For those who experience it daily, these are not insignificant traces; they are the traces of a catastrophe that is neither radical nor spectacular because of its low intensity, but which is nonetheless a catastrophe. As we saw earlier, these signs make the consequences of the gas visible, and this aspect is captured in photographs. In contrast, accounts of the gas's effect on organs follow a narrative structure and a correlation between damaged object and damaged organs (Ménez, 2019). Thus, our interviewee tells us that one night, she didn't smell the gas, but felt it go down into her stomach. During this part of the interview, she mimes the gas rushing rapidly from her mouth along her digestive tract to her stomach and punctuates her gesture with a loud "bigidim." She also shared her fear of learning, after a follow-up chest X-ray, that the image would reveal a state of organ deterioration, which she imagined as blackened and damaged "like those of a smoker, even though [she] has never smoked." Lucas extrapolated an image of the

body's interior from our interviewee's description and drew lungs oozing Sargassum seaweed like blood.

The illustration that Lucas imagines based on this story echoes the opening lines of Aimé Césaire's poem "Dit D'errance," included in the collection *Cadastre : Ile de sang de sargassses* (Césaire, 1961). Lucas will use the same ghostly figure as the one used to represent what could be called the "gas issue" (fig. 12), a ghost that symbolizes the insidious and still unknown effects on the body (fig. 13).



Fig. 13 "I think about my lungs, they are the lungs that breathe and I think about smokers, for example, who smoke, who smoke and then when they go to the X-ray, the lung is all black." Design by Lucas Pernock, june 2022. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.bb0c3n1r.

Although the effects on the body remain uncertain, the region's inhabitants assess the future in relation to the present and other environmental pollution phenomena. This projection into the future (using intuition as a clue) includes the premonition that, as with the effects of the Kepone pesticide on human health, the effects of the gases will be measured over a much longer period than their actual occurrence.

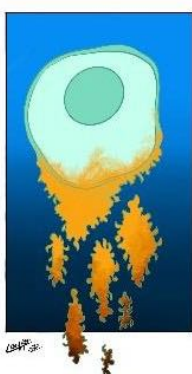


Fig. 14 "Sargassum destroys cells", says one interviewee in Marie-Galante, who fears that the gases emitted by Sargassum could affect cells. The illustrator decides to depict a cell, imagining it in the colour of the sea, from which seaweed oozes. Design by Lucas Pernock, june 2022. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.b857kamw.



Fig. 15 This illustration, created after an interview with a resident of Marie-Galante, provides the title for this text. Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe. Illustration by Lucas Pernock, june 2022. DOI: 10.34847/nkl.219c3m7h.

About thirty drawings have been made so far by Lucas Pernock, and 3 strips by Alexia Carbeti during her 15-day internship. Among these drawings, I chose one that to date best represented the imagined effects of bodily experiences. The title of this presentation 'like napalm', reflects the emphasis we wished to place on the descriptions of the gases, the dangers and the measures taken by the residents (fig. 15). This verbatim account struck us, as much for its historical significance as for the circumstances in which it was spoken: at the end of a semi-structured interview, when Lucas Pernock asked her his usual question ("what does this gas remind you of?"), the interviewee remarked with an ironic laugh that the gases released by the brown algae reminded her of napalm ("it was like napalm"), a chemical agent used by the United States during the Vietnam War with the aim of total destruction. She adds that the difference between the hydrogen sulphide released by the decomposition of Sargassum and napalm is the time it takes to cause death: on the one hand, chronic toxicity; on the other, an immediately lethal substance. She was herself surprised by her statement. She is not the only one to have been struck by the analogies that came to mind. A destructive, pervasive, harmful gas; a presence that is hard to bear. A whole range of imposed proximity and imposed control emerged during the interviews. The answer to the simple question posed by Lucas Pernock at the end of the semi-structured interview, which lasted about an hour, allowed for a sense of spontaneity to emerge on a foundation that had already been stirred up, explored and described during the hour preceding that question. Although asked by someone other than the person who had conducted the interview, it was nonetheless not detached from the rest of the conversation.

Conclusion for an epistemological opening

The aspect of the research focuses on different measures of risk, in particular the way in which empirical knowledge is formed and recounted. We have sought to describe this gas contamination and the resilience of bodies through various means: through

descriptive writing during a participatory ethnographic study, through interviews with residents, through documentary photography, and through this graphic approach to revealing the invisible by giving it form, so that it becomes almost tangible, translatable, and part of a narrative. We have employed photography and graphic design such as possible methods for revealing visible and invisible traces of damage to personal belongings and bodies.

The empiricism of this qualitative research, aimed at making visible bodily damage that is at first glance subtle, has produced an epistemological opening towards visual anthropology and its various ways of interpreting images co-produced in the field (Becker, 2007; Conord, 2007; Le Meur & Petit, 2023; Leon-Quijano, 2024; Pink, 2001; de L'Estoile, 2005). For the design part of our epistemological framework, we are thus following the example of others ethnologists who have formed fruitful partnerships with graphic designers, describing it as “anthropographism” (Doublier, 2017; Horiguchi et al., 2021; Roussel & Guitard, 2021), which enables “access to sensitive information and its representation” (Borsus, 2024). The functions of this drawing are often to reveal, in the truest sense of the word: “To reveal to someone something that was unknown, hidden or secret”, “To make something clear or obvious”, but also, in relation to photography, “To bring out the latent image on a photographic plate, film or paper”⁵.

In terms of the reception of these photographic and graphic documents, we have distinguished between the short and long term: in the short term, our relationship with our interviewees shows us that drawings, even more so than photographs, establish a dialogic relationship during the elicitation phase, by revisiting the interviewees to give them a large-format print (A3) or prints in the form of postcards, published in February 2026. This methodology, which functions here as a sensory translation, has been endorsed by local residents, some of whom told us that it helped them overcome the problem by creating visual representations of their unease. One woman told me, upon seeing the drawings: “I’m no longer afraid of the Sargassum because it has been personalised; I can now see it in a different light.” In 2025, during phase 2 of the SaRiMed project, we will continue this combination of ethnography, dramatised readings and graphic design—all of which are ways of capturing the world in detail—by focusing on ordinary interactions and seemingly mundane ways of life, part of everyday existence, yet an everyday existence transformed by environmental degradation. The co-creation of these means of narrating and conveying these embodied sensory experiences, through this mediation, was incorporated into the project’s design and its presentation to the funders: the Fondation de France, RESSAC and the UBO Foundation.

⁵ Definition of the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRTL) online : <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/r%C3%A9v%C3%A9ler>.

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"Can I steal it?" Affective involvement with images of alerce trees in Chilean PatagoniaVOLUME 15 | No 1 | 2026
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2026.1-205**Abstract**

The paper is inspired by a photographic record of the culture surrounding the alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*), a long-lived tree endemic to the Valdivian rainforest, whose wood is used as a building material for houses in the border region between Chilean and Argentine Patagonia. The photographs were exhibited at several locations in southern Chile and Argentina, including universities, rural schools, and community festivals, among others. Paradoxically, the audiences seemed more interested in purchasing the photographs than in the actual history they depicted. We attribute this to the evocative power of the images of old alerce houses, ancient forests, and tools—without human presence—which triggered memories of an archetypal place tied to peasant roots and childhood. These memories were expressed through sudden emotional reactions, accompanied by a sense of nostalgia for the loss of communal bonds. These reactions resemble the ambivalent nature of the alerce tree itself, which emerges throughout the region's history: its wood is both a valuable commodity and a use value central to practices of reciprocity. Drawing on the history of alerce culture and the audience's reactions to the photographic exhibitions, this paper aims to reflect on the possibilities of communicating subaltern stories through photography.

Keywords

Fitzroya cupressoides; alerce; Chilean Patagonia; value; peasant economy; community; photographic record.

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Introduction

"When you've finished, you will go home, but I'll still be here. So, watch out! Some photos might suddenly disappear." A cleaning assistant jokes about stealing the photographs that we are hanging on the walls of a central corridor at the University of Los Lagos in Osorno, in the Los Lagos Region of Chile. These images were taken during our ethnographic research in the municipality of Cochamó, a border area of Chilean Norpatagonia that belongs to the same region. The photographs mainly depict houses made of alerce wood (*fitzroya cupressoides*), a thousand-year-old tree that grows only in this part of the southern Andes. The photographs were intended as a tool for disseminating the scientific results of the research. Through them, we aim to explore the transformation of environmental values in the Valdivian rainforest among rural populations living in isolated mountain communities, using an accessible record to reach audiences beyond restricted academic circles. The cleaning assistant's comment showed us that the dissemination strategy was working, albeit perhaps not in the way we had expected.

"They're so beautiful! Can I steal them?" adds another university official mockingly. Alongside the houses, the photos depict rural mountain landscapes, ancient forests, winding fjords and snow-capped volcanoes. There are no human beings in any of the photos, the skies are often cloudy, and the houses show signs of deterioration and neglect. "I know this house. It's in the San Pablo area, right?", a student asks us. We have to tell her that it is actually in the Las Hualas area, in the lower part of the Puelo River valley. She looks at us disappointedly as she was sure it was a country house in the village where she had spent her childhood summers. Another elderly gentleman thinks he recognises an old barn from San Juan de La Costa, where he grew up.

Although the photographs' aesthetic qualities and evocative power capture the audience's attention, this does not necessarily lead to dialogue with the public about the history and social issues of the portrayed border territory. The images are familiar and do not inspire a desire for further information. The photos trigger people's desire to possess what they perceive as valuable, hidden behind jokes about theft. At the same time, they convey nostalgia for a primal space and time. The houses and their landscapes embody memories and projections of an idealised past linked to rural life: an unquestioned, stable society, deeply rooted and proud of its natural landmarks. Domestic wooden spaces and lichens covering shingles that have been exposed to the harsh Patagonian climate for decades give shape to what Vincent Crapanzano (2004), quoting the poet Yves Bonnefoy, has termed the *arrière pays*. This is an imagined construction of an irrecoverable time, an ideal of social bonding and a sensory and emotional hinterland that casts its shadow over the present, highlighting the absences and fractures of the society that imagines it. The *arrière pays* is partly what José Bengoa (1996) evokes when he speaks of the 'lost community': the nostalgic memory of a time before the damage caused by the dictatorship, which permeates Chilean society with a sense of insecurity due to broken bonds and the impossibility of recovering a collective horizon. The desire to possess the photographs indicates their immediate intelligibility as a valued *arrière pays*.

The audience's reaction to the photo exhibition has enabled us to refine our perspective on the relationship between humans and alerce trees in the border region of the North Patagonian mountain range. The apparent contradiction between nostalgia for a bygone era and the desire for ownership is, in fact, a historical dialectic unfolding in a region on the periphery of nation-state formation processes, cut off from the country's economic centres. This illustrates the relationship between humans and non-humans, shaped by colonisation and failed modernisation processes. In this context, the alerce tree has played a pivotal role, serving as a highly prized commodity and forming the basis of peasant cultures. Lacking state services and isolated, these communities have developed a way of inhabiting the Andean environment based on coexisting with the vital forces of the Valdivian forest. Alerce wood embodies the ethos of settlers creating a human order in the face of wild nature and the multispecies reciprocities of life on the margins¹. Through photographs and the words of people living in Cochamó's mountainous regions, we aim to reveal the ambivalent narratives surrounding alerce wood.



Figure 1 Alerce Trees in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

¹ It is important to emphasize that, in the Chilean context, many peasants have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry. They have also been relegated to peripheral economic positions, often associated with stigmatized identities, and possess ecological knowledge that transcends the rigid dichotomies frequently attributed to Western colonists. For this reason, when we use the term "settler," we do so in reference to the specific Chilean context that we have described in previous work as colonos ("settlers"), a term that many families themselves employ as an emic category.

The alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*), known as *lahuan* or *lahual* in Mapudungún (Mapuche language), is a conifer endemic to the temperate rainforest in southern Chile and Argentina. This area currently comprises parts of the Andes and the Coastal Range, spanning approximately 40 to 43 degrees of southern latitude. This species can live for over 4,000 years and grow to heights of more than 50 metres. Its wood is highly valued for the manufacture of shingles, boards, and other everyday objects thanks to its workability, light weight, and extraordinary resistance to moisture. Over the centuries, this has resulted in a variety of relationships between the species and human groups, leading to the development of an 'alerce culture'. Due to the exceptional longevity of its specimens and the durability of its wood, the alerce tree can be considered a guardian of ecosystems and social memories.



Figure 2 Renewal of alerce in Las Hualas, Coochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Intense commercial exploitation, fires and habitat degradation have reduced the range of alerce forests to only about half of its original size, and the species is now considered endangered. Since the 1970s, the felling of living trees has been prohibited and the species has been legally protected. Most of the remaining alerces are now located in the upper parts of the mountain range, which are often difficult to access. This has enabled secondary forest growth, as one inhabitant of Las Hualas explained to us while we were observing a small alerce: “Today, I saw five alerces between one and two metres tall. Everything is green now compared to years ago when there was no regeneration.”



Figure 3 Alerce forest in Contao, Hualaihué. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The isolation, low population density, and lack of infrastructure in Cochamó might conceal the complex and rich economic history of this region of Chile. Cochamó was initially settled by “woodcutters” or “boarders” from Chiloé archipelago, whose livelihoods depended on the extraction and export of alerce wood. During the 17th and 18th centuries, alerce wood became highly valuable, both as a building material and as a form of currency, thanks to its durability and the difficulty of transporting silver from the Viceroyalty of Peru (Urbina 2011). From that period until the 20th century, alerce wood remained a key component of the regional economy. This is exemplified by the construction in the 1950s of what was then the largest sawmill in Latin America, built in the neighboring district of Contao by the North American company Simpson Timber Co., in partnership with Bosques e Industrias Madereras S.A. (BIMA). Logging operations employed highly destructive methods to exploit the alerce, including the use of bulldozers, clear-cutting, and logging towers (Veblen et al. 1976).



Figure 4 "The oldest house in Cochamó". Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The house in the photo was built in the early 20th century. In local memory, it represents the founding of the town. It was constructed by Sociedad Agrícola y Frigorífica de Cochamó, a company that was granted large tracts of land in the Chile-Argentina border region. The company established its headquarters in the coastal area and began managing a lucrative cattle trade from the Argentine steppe to the Pacific. Thus, the Chilean state colonised the Patagonian territories using a strategy of 'delegated sovereignty' (Harambour 2019), whereby land was granted to companies capable of exercising territorial control. However, the company went bankrupt in 1916, leaving the farmers who had settled in the area, attracted by the prospect of cattle trading, isolated and without basic services. Local historical memory identifies several cases of frustrated modernisation processes. In the 1950s, the same house became the headquarters of Mosso, a forestry company interested in exploiting the alerce forests. This ultimately failed due to the difficulty of transporting the wood downstream because of the rugged geography of the Cochamó river valley.



Figure 5 Alerce shingles on the Binational House, Paso El León. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

The shingles shown in this image are made of cypress (*Austrocedrus chilensis*). The wall belongs to the Binational House, a building that symbolises the border status of the territory. There is a border marker in the house's courtyard indicating the international boundary, meaning the property occupies both Chilean and Argentinian soil. The house is located near the El León/El Manso international crossing. This territory was settled by peasant families from southern Chile at the end of the 19th century, before the boundaries between the two countries were defined. The border has divided a territory where family and social ties continue to this day. The prevalence of cypress trees in this area is emblematic of this liminal condition. Moving away from the influence of the Pacific Ocean, the ecosystem transitions from dense, exuberant rainforest vegetation to sparse, orderly forest. Alerce trees become scarce and cypress trees become the preferred building material on the eastern slope of the Andes due to their abundance.



Figure 6 Alerce trees in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The isolation and rugged geography of the Cochamó foothills made it difficult for commercial enterprises to establish themselves there in the early 20th century. Consequently, settlement in Cochamó remained highly limited. Those who overcame these challenges by using their own physical strength to tame what was then perceived as untamed nature are often celebrated by our interlocutors as having performed an epic feat. One example is the settlers who cleared the forest by felling large trees to make way for cropland. As one interviewee told us, 'There was a man who was very small, but he had a strong will to survive. He tried to make a home up there all by himself. He wasn't skilled, but he was determined. In the past, it was normal and prestigious for a person to clear a field.'



Figure 7 Alerce barn in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The photo shows an old barn that once housed livestock belonging to one of the first pioneer families in the Llanada Grande area of the Puelo River valley. Although the construction of this building and the surrounding landscape required strenuous manual labour from the pioneers, this work was highly valued and respected. However, what might appear to be a Promethean and masculine form of subjecting nature to human domination deserves a more nuanced interpretation. “Clearing fields” or “creating pampas” (burning parts of the forest and sawing grass to allow cattle to graze) was not seen as a triumph over nature, but rather as a means of establishing a home and a sense of domesticity amidst the forest, offering shelter to those who had been dispossessed. Many of Cochamó’s first settlers were poor peasant families continually displaced from lands recently incorporated into the nascent Chilean republic in favour of the agricultural production of European colonisers. Therefore, clearing the forest was a way of asserting their contribution to ‘making a homeland’, thereby integrating the nation as an imagined community (Anderson 2006).



Figure 8 Alerce house in Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Thus, individual and epic deeds merely scratch the surface of a much more complex network referring to the unique conditions of 'alerce culture'. Personal effort formed part of broader networks of sociability involving a far more permeable relationship between human and non-human activity. According to Ingold (2000), landscapes are shaped by the dynamic interplay between ecological conditions and human activity, in harmony with their respective temporalities. Thus, expeditions in search of alerce wood were typically carried out in summer, ideally very early in the morning, to avoid mosquitoes. The alerce woodworkers often viewed their efforts and sacrifices as opportunities for camaraderie and fellowship, drawing on their profound knowledge of the forest and its climatic conditions to their advantage. When asked about the construction techniques involved, the owner of the house depicted in this image recalls the journeys associated with alerce logging. 'Friends and brothers from here would get together and go up into the mountains to collect alerce wood. They would leave for two weeks to work up there because the route is long and steep, which helped them move faster. It's easier to go downhill quickly anyway. They cleared their paths and pulled the logs with ropes.'



Figure 9 Alerce shingles with yellow and red lichens in Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

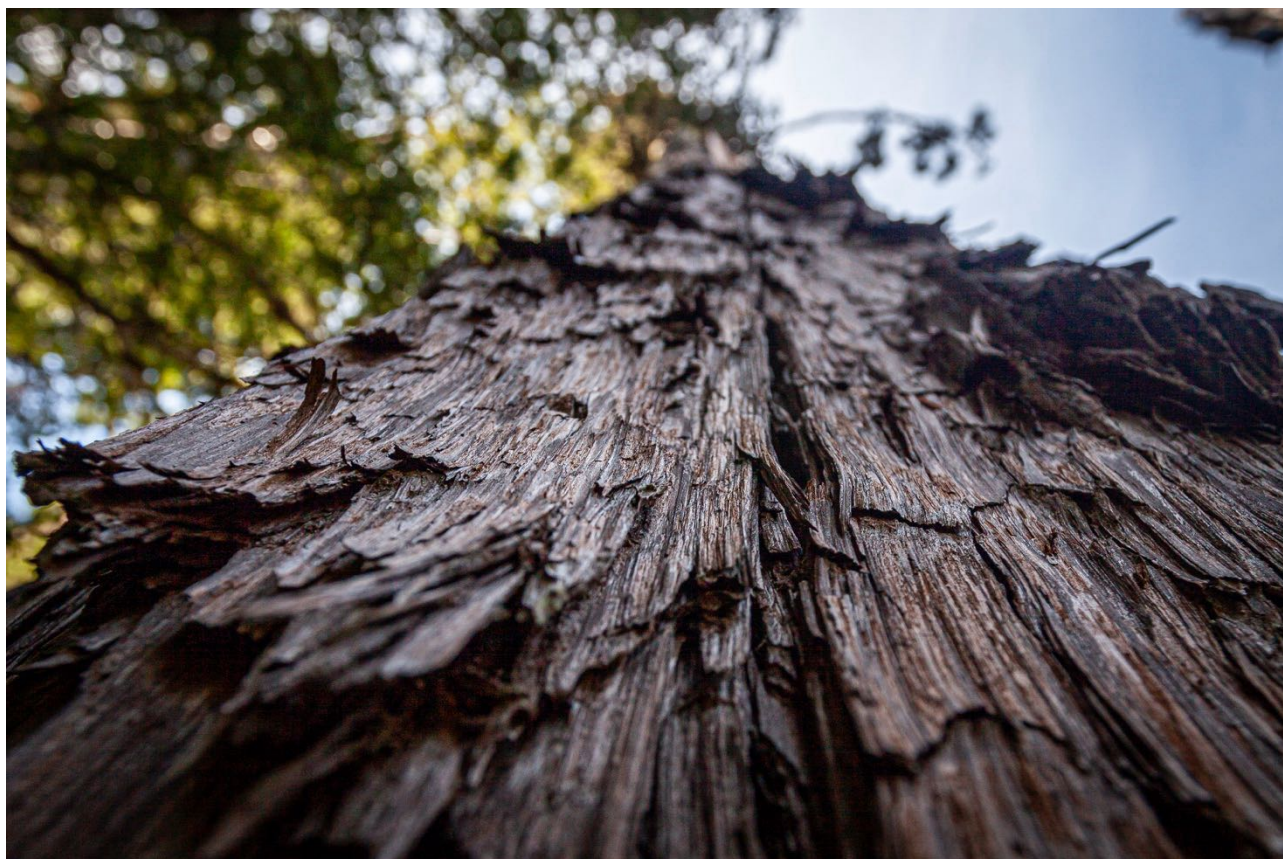


Figure 10 Bark of an alerce tree in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

As Ingold (2000) points out, this knowledge was not mechanically transmitted, but rather acquired through daily practice. During expeditions in search of alerce, novices closely observed their surroundings and the techniques used by more experienced woodworkers, receiving a genuine 'education of attention' (Ingold 2000) and learning to recognise the 'affordances' of materials through sensory experience and practical knowledge of the forest. The fibrous bark, grain and moisture content of the trees are among the attributes identified by alcereros to determine which trees would produce the best results while allowing the forest to regenerate. 'You can achieve great things with alerce, but you need a good eye for it.' The elders were experts in this respect. They would arrive, examine the tree, remove some of the bark from the base with a machete, and then cut from the bottom up. Once they had cut two or three metres up, they would say, 'Yes, this is the ideal alerce.' They didn't just arrive and cut indiscriminately."



Figure 11 Old 'chelleve' shingles with a knife in El Valle, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.



Figure 12 'Huichacón' shingle in Paso El León, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

Alerce workers were recognised as artists. Producing shingles required a specific technique and delicate handling to ensure the wood was of the highest quality. This traditional knowledge formed a technical language that referred to the different phases and types of shingle that had been identified since at least the 19th century (Gunkel, 1979; Urbina, 2011). This language is still used by our interlocutors today. Once the tree had been felled with a saw, the trunk was cut into rectangular sections known as 'metanes' to facilitate subsequent handling with a 'macheta' and axes. The alerceros then made two types of shingle from these sections. One of these is the 'huichacón', which is used for roofing houses due to its great durability. To produce this type of shingle, the machete was positioned perpendicular to the grain of the alerce, enabling the shingle to be extracted with a single blow of the mallet. Another type of shingle, the 'chelleve', was frequently used for cladding houses; however, it was distinctive in that it was extracted from the 'metanes' according to the radial orientation of the alerce grain. "We called them 'metanes'; they lined them up carefully, looking for the grain so that they wouldn't split. These men were artists. They positioned the metán correctly and made the shingle. It was so easy... with one blow of the mallet, it would come off like a page from a book. But that man could make 100 or 200 shingles in no time at all."



Figure 13 Alerce constructions in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The shingles later became part of people's homes, being used for roofing and cladding as well as for making household items such as barrels for alcoholic beverages, kneading troughs and other tools. This all took place in the context of a marginal region with no industries or stable sources of employment, where subsistence activities were fundamental to the peasant economy. Consequently, exchanges were largely based on bartering and reciprocity. While some people cut down alerce trees, others slaughtered their cows or sheep in order to trade goods and services. One of our interviewees described it as follows: 'If you asked someone to make you a shingle, you had to provide them with food for three or four days in return. They earned no money because everything was based on bartering. They would work the fields one day here and another day there, and the oxen would move back and forth from one property to another.'



Figure 14 Alerce logs in Contao, Hualaihué. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Despite its everyday use and value in Cochamó, the alerce species was declared a natural monument in 1976 due to large-scale exploitation, which imposed serious restrictions on logging activities. Since then, its commercialisation has largely been confined to the restoration of heritage sites, such as the churches of Chiloé. Thus, alerce wood, traditionally associated with manual labour and the peasant economy, has gradually become a commodity identified by its high price and export by large commercial companies. 'They deliver to Puerto Montt; suddenly, Chiloé needs shingles.' But more shingles are going to Chiloé. For churches and all that stuff. However, the biggest source of shingle sales today is between Hornopirén and Contao."



Figure 15 Abandoned alerce house in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The growing popularity of this heritage-driven vision has sparked a surge of interest in promoting houses in Cochamó as Patagonian tourist attractions. Consequently, several outsiders have purchased land and properties with the intention of converting them into tourist lodges. Local residents view this development with great ambivalence. This is due not only to the influx of strangers into the community, but also because the community's materiality, domestic life and history seem to have been reduced to aesthetic aspects. Only the architecture of the houses is valued, not the effort and sacrifice of those who built them. Conversely, some tourism entrepreneurs question the alleged negligence of local residents towards the area's architectural heritage, despite the region experiencing high levels of poverty and limited employment opportunities. "That house next door wasn't restored and it collapsed. They are losing heritage that is important for the area, the region and tourism. We bought this property. It was a lodge. An Italian bought it in the nineties. He kept the façade and restored the interior."



Figure 16 Alerce house in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Despite the commercialisation of their culture, tourism can provide local people with a source of income and a way to honour the work of their ancestors. Rather than migrating from Cochamó in search of salaried employment, some families are optimistic about generating income through tourism activities. This enables them to remain in the district while retaining the freedom associated with their connection to the forest. The story of a young man from Las Hualas illustrates this. He lives in the 90-year-old house shown in the photograph and returned to his homeland after studying and working in Puerto Montt for many years. While trekking, he realised the value of both tourism and nature, as well as his ancestors' efforts to inhabit Cochamó. Inspired by the majestic alerce trees in the upper part of the valley, he decided to start a tourism activity based around these trees that would value the local environment, history and cultural heritage. "I did my first trek in the Cochamó Council three years ago. That was like my first reunion with my land. The alerces are amazing. I came to this immense field in search of freedom. I heard the story of how my grandfather arrived, and that's when I knew I had to retrace his steps."



Figure 17 Abandoned alerce house in Factoría, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The ambivalence surrounding tourism is similar to our experience with the photographic exhibition. It forces us to reflect on the material resources we use as researchers to communicate our findings and the effects they have on the relationship between our study participants and a wider audience. The interest and value attributed to photographs partly stems from nostalgia for a 'lost community' and rests on an idealisation and mythologisation of the rural past (Bengoa 1996). However, this idealisation is challenged by the material culture depicted in the photographs. Contrary to the bucolic image of the countryside that our audience perceives, the photographs actually depict stories of transhumance and marginalisation with specific historical significance in Chile. Their frontier condition excluded them from economic integration, resulting in life stories characterised by an itinerant existence across Patagonia, on both the Chilean and Argentinian sides, as they searched for work as peasants or labourers that might provide some stability.



Figure 18 Inhabited house in El León Alto, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

In this context, the artisanal exploitation of alerce wood is particularly significant. References to 'making a homeland' and calling the alerce woodworkers 'artists' recognise the value of the people who have shaped their landscapes. However, the aura surrounding alerce shingles and the cult-like nature of their creation as part of community rituals and rites of passage within local society (Benjamin 1968) seems somewhat perverted by the viewers of our photographic exhibition. As Walter Benjamin suggests, one of the dilemmas of the mechanical reproduction of art, particularly through cinema and photography, is that: "The contemporary masses desire to bring things closer spatially and humanly is just as ardent as their tendency to overcome the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day, the urge to possess an object at close range through its likeness or reproduction grows stronger" (Benjamin 1968: 222). The loss of the aura and uniqueness of alerce shingles may be a consequence of the increasing influence of mass society and the commercialisation of art and heritage. This is made evident by people's obsession with possessing photographs that resemble their idealized memories of the past, images of landscapes or houses that hold meaning only for their aesthetic enjoyment, yet are completely disconnected from their lives and from the traces of the artisan who produced them. Precisely, these are the elements that define the singularity of alerce works of art. Nevertheless, this loss also opens up new possibilities for our study participants. Just as tourism offers the hope of improving their economic future while reducing local history to a commercialised aesthetic aspect of architecture, the photographs present a similar conundrum. Despite the transient nature

of all material things, including alerce shingles, perhaps our exhibition can provide historical evidence of these Northern Patagonian societies, even if it means sacrificing the significance they once held for local people, as they are detached from the traditions that gave birth to them.

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Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism fieldVOLUME 15 | No 1 | 2026
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2026.1-206**Abstract**

The annotated portfolio presented here will focus on analogue photography as a complementary methodological tool in a sociological study of the cultural press in print, audiovisual and online formats. This study is part of PhD research on the production and circulation of literary information in French-speaking Europe, providing an overview of this specific sector of journalism and, in particular, its international stakes. In this particular field, the relationship between social science researchers and cultural journalists is characterized by a high degree of similarity in their approach and intellectual tools, systematically leading the journalists surveyed to adopt a reflexive stance during interviews. Although extremely valuable for analysis, it can confine the data to idealism, with the study of representations taking precedence over the analysis of practices. Certain material conditions of the survey can then bring journalists closer to their practices, where photography plays a particular role.

Keywords

Photo-reporting; cultural journalism; literary press; French-speaking Europe; photo-journalism

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This annotated portfolio focuses on analogue photography as a complementary methodological tool in a sociological study of the cultural press in print, audiovisual and online media. My research is a part of a PhD research on the production and circulation of literary information in French-speaking Europe (Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland) and secondarily in Canada, providing an overview of this specific sector of journalism and, in particular, of its international stakes. In other words, it involves studying the processes of cultural internationalization or nationalization and the conditions for the production of literary and editorial actuality based on an analysis of specialized publications in literature (print and digital press and radio), and the literary sections of general news media in French-speaking Europe. The comparative and relational survey is based on prosopographic statistics and discourse analysis through interviews with journalists, some publishers and press officers, and through the studying of sample texts from books reviews.

As the fieldwork progressed, the agents I questioned led me to put greater emphasis on ethnographic observation outside of interviews. However, in this professional space, the relationship between the social science researcher and cultural journalists is characterized by a high degree of similarity in their approaches and intellectual tools (society issues, microphone interviews, photo-reporting, documentation, fieldwork and investigative writing). Howard Becker already discussed this issue addressing the work of sociological photographers and photojournalists, questioning what makes a photograph sociological or journalistic material¹. This proximity between the work of sociologists and journalists systematically leads the journalists surveyed to adopt a reflective posture while being interviewed. Although extremely valuable for analysis, this posture can confine data to a rather idealistic role, since studying representations might prevail over analyzing practices. Journalists find themselves in the situation of being interviewer interviewee. Certain material conditions of the investigation can thus bring interviewed journalists closer to their practices (advice given on the use of microphones during interviews, etc.), and photography has a special role to play in this.

One can take inspiration from the words of Raymond Aron: "*Dans l'action, chacun adhère au monde de telle manière qu'il ne reste plus de place pour le redoublement réflexif*"² in order to produce a genuine *photographic act*, which opens the way to a more ethnographic approach³. While my initial choice of visual tools was drawing and digital photography, the commitment required to photograph the field, the exposure time and the sensory nature of analogue photography, the films selection, the lighting conditions needing further work, the shutter click, revealed new aspects of the investigation, particularly with regard to intergenerational social relations and the evolution of techniques. The survey then enters a different time frame. If practices are becoming

¹ Becker, Howard S. Sociologie visuelle, photographie documentaire et photojournalisme, *Communications*, n° 71, *Le parti pris du document*, 2001: 333-335. On this subject, we may also consult: Maresca, Sylvain and Meyer, Michaël 2013, *Précis de photographie à l'usage des sociologues*. Rennes: PUR.

² We translate: "In the action, everyone adheres to the world in such a way that there is no longer any scope for reflexive redoubling" (Raymond 1948:64).

³ This methodological shift also inspired us from Pierre Bourdieu as an ethnologist photographer in Kabylie, Algeria.

standardized with the globalization and digitization of journalism, the materiality of the work remains specific to each national and local context, which is not apparent at first glance.

By stepping outside the framework of interviews, the ethnographic approach employed by analogue photography brings about a discourse and a subjectivity specified by journalism in the process of being done. Respondents then choose the objects and situations to photograph, move around the editorial offices, react to the use of photographic equipment by recalling their memories of reporting, their choices of equipment and their evolution, or situations of solidarity among journalists when equipment fails. They also comment on their surprise to see that a young person would use such equipment nowadays. Their discourse can approach a testimonial account of their equipment and practices of yesteryear. The sociologist and literary journalist thus share an emic practice: photo-reporting. From the perspective of both sociological photography and field journalism, it is a matter of thinking while making, just as pointed out by the anthropologist Tim Ingold⁴.

As a significant part of cultural journalists have been educated in social sciences, they are keen to advance the investigation and offer their analysis of the situation of the profession, which is under serious threat. In this way, where the sociologist Gilles Bastin actually sees symmetry as a reversal of roles in this specific survey relationship⁵, it is rather the imbalance between idealism and materialism that has emerged in my work. Analogue photography then changes the discourse of the subjects who become less reflective and more engaged in the materiality of the work by rebalancing the survey relationship and the importance given to practices in relation to representations and by setting bodies in motion into workspaces, rather than remaining confined to a recording studio for the interview. It also allows me, as a researcher, to engage in another kind of ethnographic observation and to be otherwise reflexive about the data collected in the field and the preconceptions related to the digitisation of journalism. It also prompts me to reflect on the relationship between writing and images in the profession of journalism as well as in my own work, the critical tension between analytical discourse and aesthetic discourse being a characteristic of this literary journalism. It should therefore be specified that, while the selection of shots for this portfolio was initially based rather more on aesthetic criteria, it was the articulation with the analytic writing in this essay that led me to rework the choices and sets of images.

All the photographs have been taken by the author Léa Kœnig with the permission of the respondents and editors in chief, between September 2024 and June 2025, in Switzerland and Luxembourg.

⁴ Ingold, Tim, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, London, Routledge, 2013.

⁵ Bastin, Gilles. « Le 'cas Mathieu' Ou l'entretien Renversé », *Sur le journalisme*, vol 1.1, 2012, p. 40-51.



Fig. 1, 2, 3 Various journalists' departments in Switzerland. Photo by Léa Koenig.

The journalists at the Swiss daily newspaper *La Liberté* are pleased to invite me to photograph their historic headquarters, which will soon be converted into an open-space office, as has been the case for most Swiss newspapers (which is also the case in many European countries). This aspect of their workspace was not discussed in interviews, but in reality, it is a decisive factor in their practices. In their final weeks working in these offices, they commented on my photographs as an essential historical document, then developed further on the threat of the disappearing print newspapers.

On the left (fig. 1), we can see the main corridor of the editorial office of *La Liberté* in Fribourg, with the editor-in-chief's office in the foreground. Next are the various offices assigned to each rubric, each with a permanent workstation.

On the right (fig. 2 and 3), the new headquarters of *Le Temps* daily newspaper in Geneva. In the foreground at the top (fig. 2) is the editor-in-chief's office, which has a permanent workstation in the open-space general office. The other journalists have interchangeable workstations, which most of them dislike, especially when it comes to storing the books they are working on. In these new offices, a television broadcasts a French news channel continuously (fig.3).



Fig. 4 and 5 Cultural section offices, *La Liberté*, Fribourg. Photo by Léa Koenig.

These two photographs were taken in the editorial office of the culture rubric of the daily newspaper *La Liberté* in Fribourg. On the right (fig. 5), the office of a permanent journalist with an article currently being written about pop culture in Paris. On the left (fig. 4), the desk where books received from publishers are placed for literary journalists to work on. The sign reads: 'Please do not serve yourself. These books are not decorative items or for free use. They are used to write literary critics.'

Fribourg, Bd de Pérolles, 2024

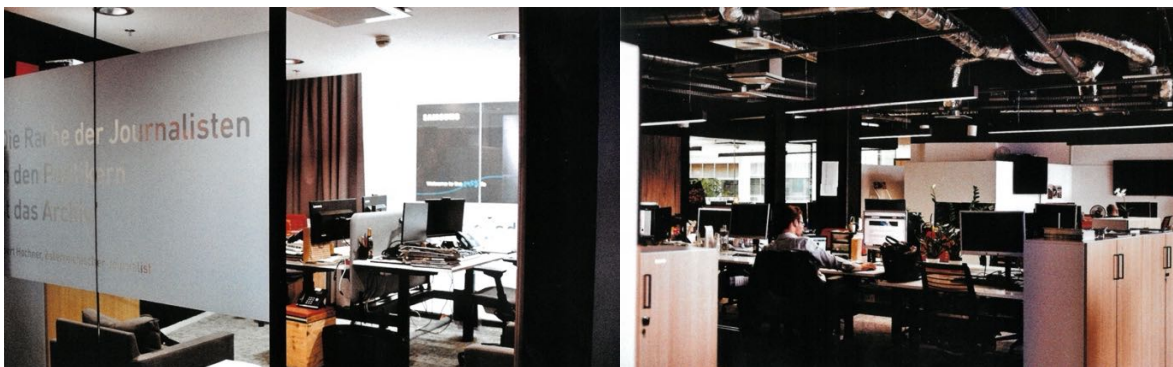


Fig. 6, 7 The hierarchy within the team is still visible in the spatial arrangement. Photo by Léa Koenig.

In Luxembourg, most offices are also open-space, but the offices of the publishing director and editors-in-chief remain separate. This seems to be the prevailing configuration today (AFP, *Le Monde*, etc.).

On the left (fig. 6), the office of the directors and editor-in-chief of the *Tageblatt*; on the right (fig. 7), a journalist works in the open-space office.

Edipress Luxembourg S.A., 2025

Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism field



Fig. 8, 9, 10 Coexistence of paper and digital media. Photo by Léa Kœnig.

These colour photographs were taken in the headquarters of the Luxembourg daily newspaper *Tageblatt*, which is shared with another French-language newspaper, *Le Quotidien*, in Esch-sur-Alzette city. Thus, French-speaking and German-speaking journalists work alongside each other in the same offices, a multilingualism that is unique to Luxembourg. Although both newspapers are published in print, the editorial work is carried out exclusively on digital equipment. However, we can clearly see the coexistence of paper and digital formats here.

Edipress Luxembourg S.A., 2025

In contrast, in the following black and white photographs, we can see a practice called “Le mur” (the wall). While I was conducting my interviews in Geneva in the morning,

I met with the editor-in-chief to request permission to photograph the offices. They then suggested that I return in the afternoon for what they considered to be more interesting photographs. Indeed, the editorial team at the daily newspaper *Le Temps* meets every day at 4 p.m. to assemble and make final adjustments to the next day's edition, using a paper layout pinned to a dedicated wall. For the time being, I have only observed this practice in Switzerland.

Le Temps headquarters, Geneva, 2024



Fig. 11, 12, 13 Editorial meeting and assembly of the newspaper on the wall, 4 p.m. Photo by Léa Koenig.

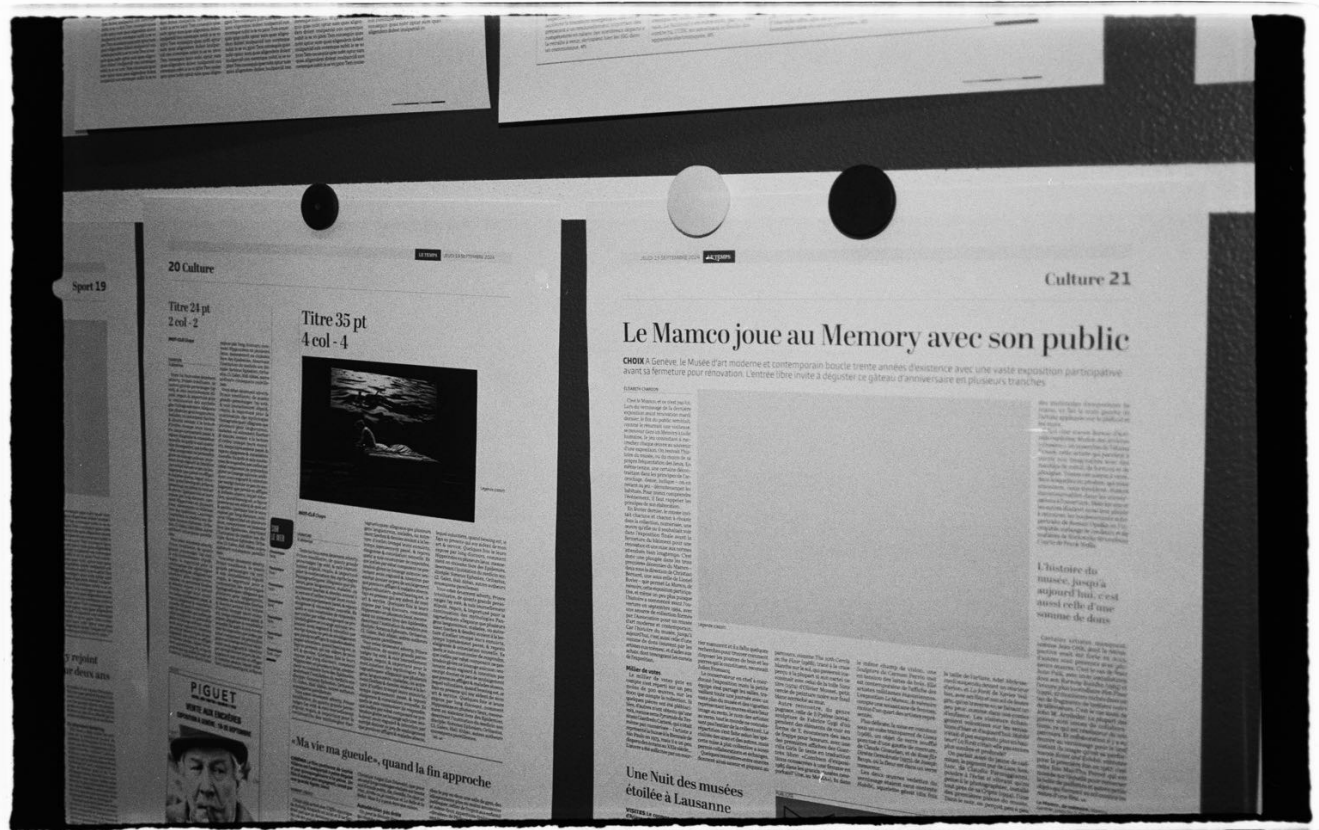


Fig. 14 Pages from the culture section at 4 p.m., Photo by Léa Kœnig.

The layout and editing have been completed and are awaiting the addition of illustrations and some last titles. The importance of the 'Wall' and therefore the prestige that the paper version seems to retain internally with its 'layout' offering a relatively stable page hierarchy.

Le Temps headquarters, Geneva, 2024

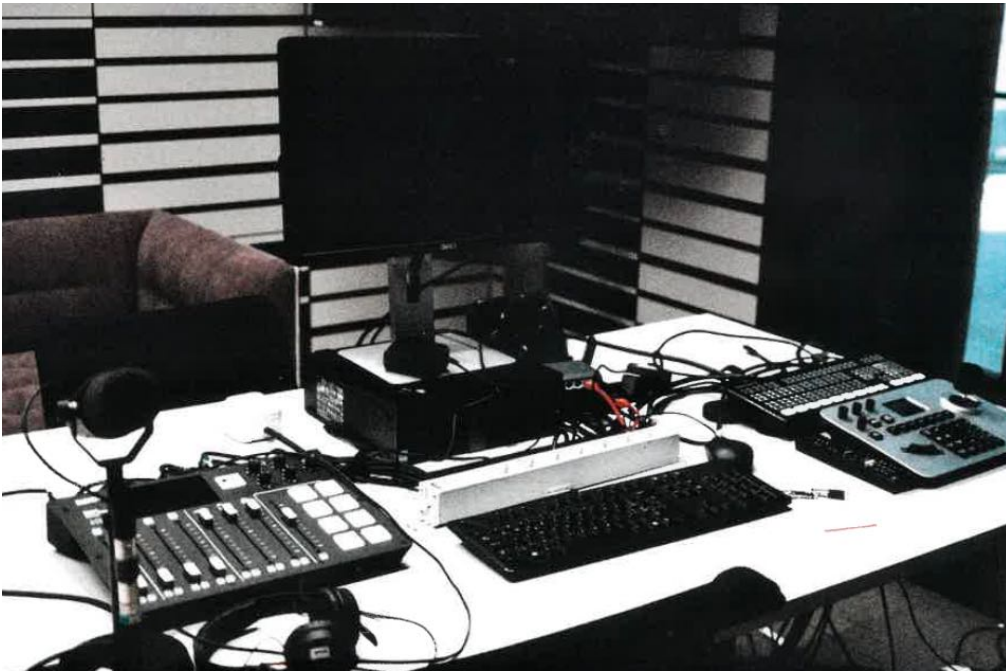


Fig. 15, 16 Specific interview conditions aimed at radio journalists, Photo by Léa Koenig.

Here are the studios of RTL (Radio Télévision Luxembourg), where I conducted two interviews. The first photo (fig. 15) shows a recording studio with a mixing desk, which allows journalists to produce their reports and interviews. The second photo (fig. 16) is a live broadcast control room.

Most radio journalists spontaneously suggest conducting my interviews in the studio to ensure better sound quality, which surprised me at first. The interview situation shows how important audio technology, particularly good sound quality, is to them, unlike perhaps

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some researchers. While sociologists learn to 'make respondents forget about the microphone,' journalists here constantly advise me on how to use it. In the middle of the interview, a journalist who is watching his screen suddenly interrupts me, asking me to be quiet. He goes in live to make an announcement, then cuts his microphone and returns to our conversation.

RTL Studios, Boulevard Pierre Frieden, Luxembourg, 2025

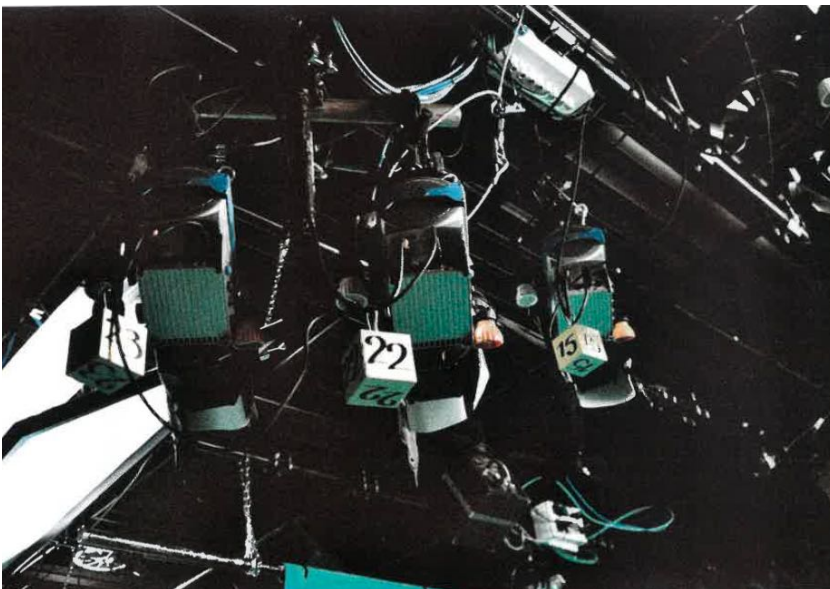


Fig. 17, 18 RTL Studios, Boulevard Pierre Frieden, Luxembourg. Photo by Léa Koenig, 2025.

Finally, while I was working with the radio journalists, one of them suggested visiting and photographing the television studios. At that point, I considered my interview to be over. But the discussion thus continues. I have to balance juggling the camera and taking notes, and I obtain some information that I would not necessarily have gathered

on my own. We can see in the photos the television broadcast daily news studio in Luxembourg and the equipment being adjusted, especially the lighting, for the evening news programme.

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Abstract

Cet article explore comment la scénographie peut devenir un outil de recherche anthropologique, à partir de deux expositions issues du projet *ZONE 54*, une ethnographie dialogique menée entre 2012 et 2017 avec des zonard·es à Nancy. *I Love You Fuck Off* (triple vidéoprojection, tirages, objets, sons) et *Unrestricted Area* (150 tirages) proposent deux régimes d'expérience distincts d'un même terrain.

L'analyse porte sur quatre dimensions. Elle montre d'abord que la scénographie peut transformer les conditions mêmes de la restitution en donnant forme à une connaissance située, partielle et inachevée. Elle examine ensuite le rôle des médiums qui orientent les régimes d'attention et les possibilités de co-construction. La narration, organisée en séquences, séquences extensives et fils narratifs, apparaît alors comme une manière de produire un récit polyphonique, ouvert aux circulations et aux recompositions. Enfin, l'exposition est envisagée comme un lieu ethnographique : un espace où le terrain se prolonge, se rejoue et se négocie avec les participant·es, les spectateur·ices et les institutions.

Le dispositif formel de l'article articule un texte narratif décrivant l'expérience sensorielle de l'exposition et un texte théorique analysant ses enjeux anthropologiques. Cette double écriture assume l'impossibilité de transcrire pleinement une expérience visuelle tout en tentant d'en restituer la complexité.

Keywords

scenography - sensory ethnography - multimodality - marges urbaines - photography - exhibition

The author

Amandine Turri Hoelken est artiste-chercheuse en anthropologie. Formée aux beaux-arts Nancy puis docteure en anthropologie à l'Université de Strasbourg, elle développe une pratique documentaire dialogique, engagée et située. Ses projets interrogent les représentations des marges et les dynamiques de co-construction des récits. Elle enseigne l'anthropologie visuelle à l'université et contribue activement à la diffusion des approches transdisciplinaires mêlant art et sciences sociales, notamment à travers la co-création du festival Locomotion, la direction de publications scientifiques et l'organisation d'événements autour de la recherche-création. Sa thèse a reçu le prix Tillion-Rivière de l'AFEA en 2025, récompensant une recherche impliquée.

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Introduction

L'art devrait être considéré comme une discipline qui partage avec l'anthropologie le souci de réveiller nos sens et de permettre à la connaissance de croître de l'intérieur, en s'inscrivant dans le déploiement de la vie (Ingold 2013 : 34).

Cette proposition d'une anthropologie avec l'art s'inscrit dans le développement d'approches multimodales (Collins et al. 2017) et sensorielles (Laplantine 2013 ; Pink 2015) qui réintroduisent le corps, la perception et la sensibilité comme dimensions actives de la recherche. Elle résonne directement avec mon positionnement, à l'intersection des arts visuels et de l'anthropologie, où la pratique artistique constitue un mode de recherche et de production de connaissance. C'est dans cette perspective que cet article s'intéresse à la scénographie comme dispositif de restitution anthropologique – non dans son acception muséale institutionnelle, mais telle qu'elle est pratiquée par des artistes et des chercheur·es qui font de l'exposition un espace d'écriture spécifique, où les images, les objets et les présences humaines participent ensemble à la production du sens.

Cette réflexion s'appuie sur *ZONE 54*, un projet documentaire photographique et sonore dialogique mené avec une quinzaine de zonard·es à Nancy. S'appuyant sur la typologie de Pimor (2012), qui distingue quatre catégories – satellites, zonard·es intermittent·es (ZI), zonard·es expert·es (ZE) et voyageurs –, mon terrain s'est concentré sur une sous-catégorie de ZE, que j'ai qualifiée dans ma recherche de "zonard·es mobiles" (2024a). Le projet s'est déployé sur cinq années, en privilégiant dans un premier temps l'écoute et la relation. Ce n'est qu'après une année que j'ai commencé à photographier leur quotidien avec un moyen format argentique (Pentax 67). Une fois les films développés, je montrais régulièrement mes images aux participant·es. Ces échanges ont nourri une réflexion collective. Progressivement, certain·es ont commencé à documenter eux-mêmes leur quotidien avec des appareils jetables, et nous avons choisi les images à exposer et réfléchi à la scénographie¹. Depuis 2017, le terrain se poursuit à travers des collaborations liées à la restitution et à la diffusion du projet. Ces prolongements, menés notamment avec Emy, s'inscrivent dans la continuité du processus dialogique engagé sur le terrain, en déplaçant les échanges vers d'autres espaces de production et de circulation des images.

Deux expositions, qui proposent deux régimes d'expérience distincts d'un même terrain, en sont issues : *I Love You Fuck Off* (triple vidéoprojection, tirages, sons) et *Unrestricted Area* (150 tirages, sons). Leur description permet d'interroger ce que la scénographie peut apporter à la restitution anthropologique : de quelles manières elle transforme les modes narratifs et reconfigure les rapports entre chercheur·es, participant·es et spectateur·ices.

La forme de cet article reflète cette démarche. Elle repose sur deux registres d'écriture complémentaires – narratif et analytique – qui s'entremêlent tout au long du

¹ Le terrain et la collaboration construite tout au long du projet sont détaillés ailleurs (Turri Hoelken, 2026; 2024a).

texte². Le texte narratif rend compte de l'expérience sensible de l'exposition *I Love You Fuck Off*, en plaçant les lecteur·ices en position de spectateur·ices qui découvrent progressivement le dispositif. Ces descriptions ont été reconstruites à partir de notes de terrain, de documents d'exposition et d'analyse du montage. L'enjeu est de proposer une écriture sensible et critique, dans la continuité des propositions de Pink (2015) pour qui les formes sensorielles ont un rôle propre dans la production de connaissance ethnographique.

L'article s'organise en quatre parties. La première examine la scénographie comme dispositif de traduction du terrain. La deuxième analyse le rôle des médiums dans la construction de l'expérience et dans les possibilités de co-construction. La troisième s'intéresse aux formes narratives produites par ces dispositifs. Enfin, la quatrième envisage l'exposition comme un lieu ethnographique, où se rejouent les relations entre participant·es, institutions et chercheuse.

La scénographie comme écriture située

Définir la scénographie : dispositif, écriture, espace

La scénographie est un objet difficile à définir : elle est mobilisée dans différents champs et disciplines et ne se limite pas à un corps de métier (Schmitt 2010 ; Davallon 2010). À cela s'ajoute sa proximité avec d'autres termes – muséographie, expographie ou installation – qui recouvrent des usages et des traditions disciplinaires parfois différentes³. Plutôt que de chercher à en stabiliser une définition, je propose de la considérer ici en son sens large : comme un dispositif d'organisation et d'écriture de l'espace.

Dans cette perspective, elle peut être envisagée comme un dispositif au sens proposé par Aumont (2020). Un dispositif articule une dimension physique – appareils, matériaux, lieux – et une dimension mentale – sensations, émotions, affects – dans un espace organisé et dynamique qui vise à placer les spectateur·ices⁴ dans des dispositions particulières de corps et d'esprit. Ce que le terme de scénographie précise, c'est la mise en relation de plusieurs images, ainsi que la dimension d'écriture et d'intention qui préside à cette organisation.

² Dans sa version originale, le texte était conçu pour être lu en double page : à gauche, le récit sensible de l'exposition ; à droite, les encarts analytiques correspondants. Cette disposition permettait d'échapper à la linéarité du discours académique en favorisant une lecture simultanée, non hiérarchique, des registres d'écriture. Pour répondre aux contraintes éditoriales de la revue, la présente version adopte une forme continue. Si elle respecte la structure scientifique attendue, elle conserve toutefois l'esprit de l'expérimentation initiale, qui cherchait à élargir les modes de restitution de la recherche en anthropologie visuelle.

³ La muséographie est généralement associée à l'organisation globale du musée (Merleau-Ponty 2010), tandis que l'expographie désigne plus spécifiquement la mise en forme des expositions, mais le terme reste insuffisamment répandu (Davallon 2010). Le terme d'installation, parfois mobilisé en anthropologie visuelle (Schneider et Wright 2013 ; Montazami 2016), reste quant à lui plus large et moins précis quant aux dimensions organisationnelles et narratives.

⁴ Selon les auteurs, les termes utilisés sont visiteurs (Davallon 2003 ; 2010 ; Merleau-Ponty 2010), spectateurs (Lahuerta 2013 ; 2010 ; Schmitt 2010 ; Morsillo 2010 ; Aumont 2020) ; ou les deux (Méaux 2010). De ce point de vue, je me range du côté de Céline Schmitt, quand elle écrit que "pour que la représentation ait lieu, l'espace doit être activé en tant que *skènè* et c'est à un spectateur qu'il a affaire, non à un simple passant avide de se repaître de quelques curiosités" (2010 : 206)

La scénographie peut alors être comprise comme une "main cachée" qui oriente les parcours et les interprétations, et "qui articule les questions : Quoi ? comment ? où ? et à qui ? faire voir" (Schmitt 2010 : 202). Cette double dimension – organisation de l'espace d'un côté, écriture de l'espace de l'autre – est soulignée dans les travaux de Davallon (2010) et Merleau-Ponty (2010), pour qui la scénographie constitue un dispositif sémiotique : c'est-à-dire un dispositif qui est porteur de sens et qui a pour but de créer un espace entre les significations souhaitées par son concepteur et l'interprétation que peuvent en faire les spectateur·ices. La scénographie construit ainsi des conditions de perception en organisant des temporalités, des circulations et des effets de sens (Méaux 2010), tout en laissant place à des appropriations, des détours et des résistances – dimension largement soulignée dans les travaux ici cités.

Dans le cadre d'une anthropologie visuelle et sensorielle, la scénographie constitue un espace où peuvent se rejouer, sous d'autres formes, les relations et les expériences du terrain. En créant une atmosphère (Merleau-Ponty, 2010), elle rend le public réceptif au propos et, comme le souligne Lahuerta, "réhabilite la sensibilité et parvient à concilier l'objet et le sujet par le pragmatisme de sa pluralité d'action et par sa propension à dialoguer" en instaurant une médiation active entre œuvre, espace et spectateur·ices (2013 : 1).

C'est dans cette perspective que j'aborde les dispositifs scénographiques de ZONE 54, en examinant à la fois leur capacité à transposer certaines logiques du terrain et à mettre en forme une anthropologie polyphonique et inachevée.

Traduire le terrain : la culture et le bricolage

Avant même d'entrer dans la salle d'exposition, une présence capte l'attention dans le couloir : Emy. Fine, les cheveux courts, quelques tatouages sur les bras, la voix légèrement éraillée. Elle ne tient pas en place. Elle tripote ses bagues, rit fort, interpelle les visiteur·euses, parfois en les provoquant avec tendresse et ironie. Tout chez elle attire le regard. Habillée tout en nuances de bleu électrique, casquette à large visière, pantalon rayé bleu et noir, Dr. Martens, bijoux massifs bricolés à partir d'outils récupérés. Elle se présente comme une "hackeruse artistique" qui "cherche les fractures des objets pour les renforcer". Elle explique qu'elle crée "pour mieux naviguer sur les fléaux de [son] passé bien trop compliqué". À ses côtés, son chien Merguez, un bouledogue français affublé d'un veston en cuir, où scintille en lettres dorées "I love you fuck off", le nom de l'exposition (Fig. 1). Derrière eux, deux tables, l'une recouverte d'un drapeau breton et l'autre d'un drapeau pirate. Dessus, toutes sortes d'objets bien rangés : bijoux créés à partir d'objets de récupération, frippes, vêtements floqués du titre de l'exposition (Fig. 2). Un tableau sur lequel est inscrit "le monde de l'art n'est pas celui de l'immortalité mais de la métamorphose", complète cet univers punk et festif. Tout est à prix libre. Devant l'entrée de la salle d'exposition, deux grandes bâches tendues accueillent les spectateur·ices. Recouvertes de pochoirs – "fokof", "j'men balek", couteaux – elles rappellent à la fois le graffiti et le bricolage (Fig. 3). Les couleurs vives, les superpositions leur donnent une allure presque festive, légère malgré la rudesse des mots et des symboles. Elles posent d'emblée le ton de l'exposition : bricolée, joyeuse, et un peu provocante.

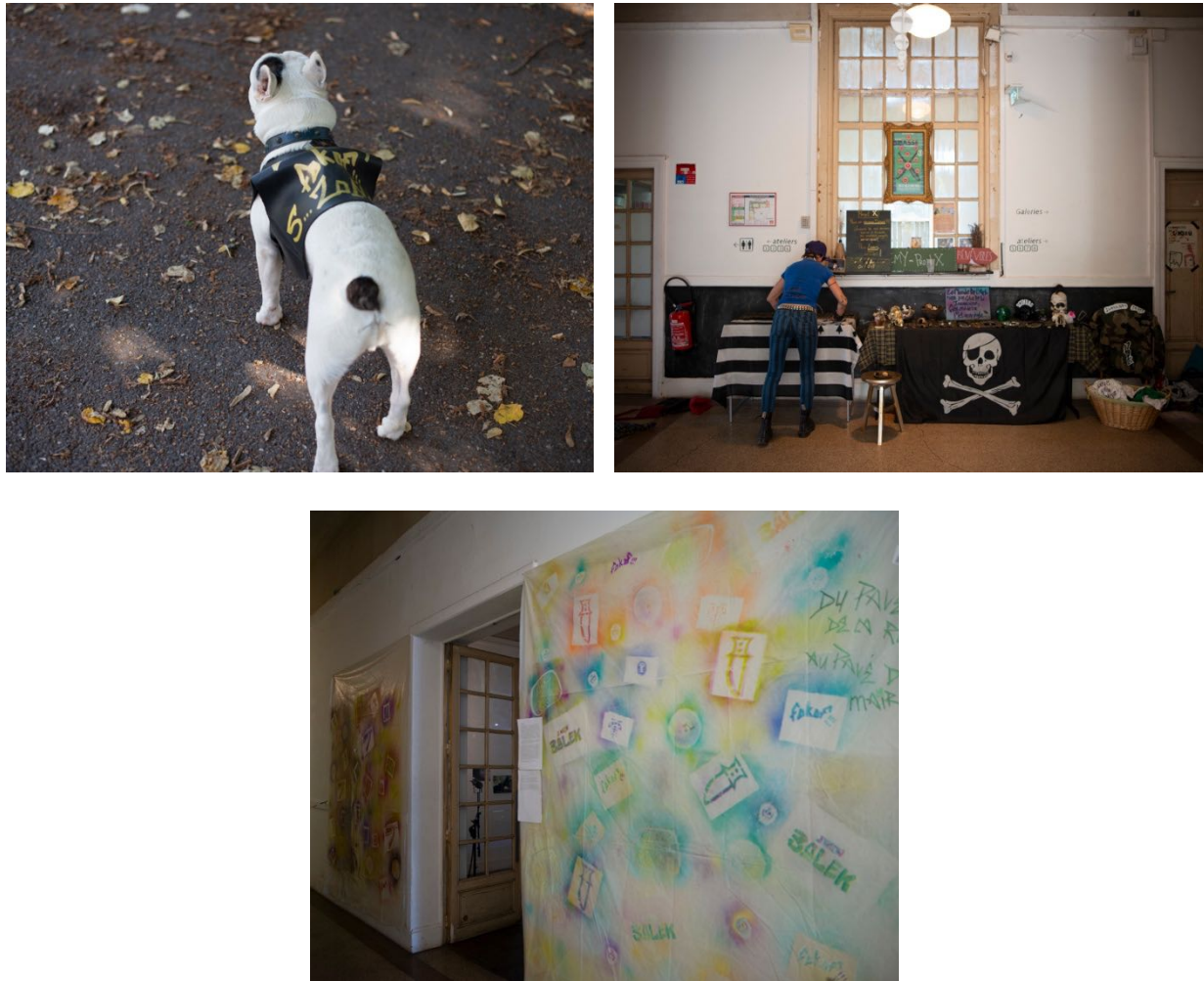


Figure 1-2-3 : Festival Barlos, ZONE 54 : *I Love You Fuck Off*, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

La scénographie de ZONE 54 a été pensée pour traduire certaines dynamiques de la Zone dans l'espace d'exposition – non pour en présenter une reproduction, mais pour en faire résonner des modes d'organisation et de relation. Je propose ici de mettre en avant les deux dimensions principales : la culture comme production et le bricolage comme intelligence pratique.

Le stand tenu par Emy, les vêtements floqués, les bijoux fabriqués à partir d'objets récupérés ou encore les bâches peintes à la bombe ne relèvent pas d'un simple décor : ils s'inscrivent dans une économie de production et de circulation déjà à l'œuvre sur le terrain. Chez les zonard·es, la culture est consommée (concerts, festivals, fêtes) et produite (bijoux fabriqués à partir d'objets récupérés, vêtements customisés, performances de rue). La scénographie en reprend certaines modalités : mise en vente à prix libre, absence de vitrine, objets qui conservent leur fonction et leur circulation. Le jonglage, les pancartes humoristiques, l'interpellation des passant·es relèvent d'une culture performative tournée vers l'interaction avec les passant·es, ce qui n'est pas sans rappeler la présence d'Emy.

Lorsque l'on rentre dans la salle d'exposition (Fig. 4), la pièce est plongée dans la pénombre. Un grand rideau noir recouvre les fenêtres. La lumière émane de trois vidéoprojecteurs et de deux petites lampes qui éclairent des photographies accrochées de part et d'autre de l'entrée. Les projections se déploient sur trois surfaces : une au fond, directement sur le mur, et deux autres suspendues plus en avant, sur un tissu léger. L'image ne s'y arrête pas : elle traverse la matière et se prolonge sur le mur derrière. Ce jeu de transparence, accentué par les mouvements du tissu au gré de l'air, donne une impression de flottement. Dans la pièce, deux personnes discutent autour d'une table ; trois autres sont confortablement installées sur des poufs, face aux projections.

Sur le mur à gauche de la porte d'entrée, deux vieilles cagettes en bois servent d'étagères (Fig. 5). Un gilet gris marqué au pochoir "j'men balek", ainsi que deux disques de coupe ornés de dessins sont posés dessus. Tout autour de ces cagettes, les murs sont recouverts de photographies prises par les participant·es. On y retrouve souvent Emy – parfois blonde, parfois brune –, signe que les images s'échelonnent sur plusieurs années. Elle y apparaît entourée d'ami·es ou aux côtés de son compagnon, un homme mince, blond, coiffé d'une petite crête. Les chiens y tiennent une place centrale : cadrés de près, photographiés avec tendresse, ils révèlent une relation qui dépasse la simple compagnie, une forme d'attachement familial. Ces images brouillent les pistes : le mur ressemble moins à une exposition documentaire qu'à un album intime, effaçant la frontière entre celui qui regarde et ceux qui sont regardés. L'ensemble évoque la chambre d'un adolescent ou d'un jeune adulte, tapissée de souvenirs personnels épinglés au fil du temps.

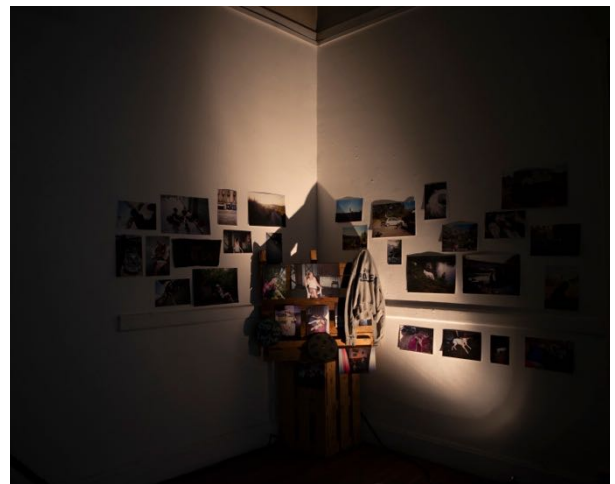


Figure 4-5 : Festival Barlos, ZONE 54 : I Love You Fuck Off, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Ces cagettes, Emy et moi les avons trouvées ensemble dans la cave du lieu d'exposition – une solution élaborée sur place, à partir des ressources disponibles. La scénographie, telle que je la conçois dans ce projet, ne procède pas d'un plan strictement préétabli : elle se construit aussi dans la situation, au croisement des contraintes du lieu et des compétences de chacun·e.

À la mairie de Nancy, les contraintes institutionnelles ont joué un rôle décisif dans la fabrication de certains éléments scénographiques. Nous souhaitions initialement floquer directement des supports textiles, mais cela n'a pas été autorisé. Par ailleurs,

l'accrochage imposé sur des grilles caddie limitait fortement les possibilités d'intervention. C'est de la combinaison de ces contraintes qu'est née la solution des bâches : réalisées à partir des pochoirs d'Emy, elles ont permis de contourner ces restrictions tout en introduisant dans l'espace d'exposition une esthétique plus proche des pratiques de la Zone (Fig. 6 et 7).



Figure 6-7 : Mairie de Nancy, ZONE 54 : *Unrestricted Area*, janvier 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Cet exemple – parmi d'autres – ne témoigne pas seulement d'une co-construction des expositions, mais met en évidence une manière de faire fondée sur le bricolage. Ces ajustements traduisent une négociation entre les normes du lieu et les pratiques du terrain. Le bricolage, au sens où l'entend Lévi-Strauss (1962), renvoie à une pensée attentive aux ressources disponibles et capable de composer avec l'existant. Dans le prolongement de ces approches, Golsenne propose de relier explicitement bricolage et pratique artistique par le concept de bricologie. Pour lui, "l'artiste bricoleur crée dans l'écart entre son idée de départ et le résultat final. Cet écart est produit par la contingence des matériaux qu'il récupère" (2015 : 25). Faire avec les moyens du bord ne relève donc pas d'un défaut, mais d'un choix. Toujours selon lui, dans un contexte marqué par la société de consommation, ce choix prend une portée éthique, esthétique et politique : il participe à des formes de résistance aux logiques néolibérales, en valorisant des pratiques de récupération, de détournement et d'autonomie. Cette logique entre en résonance avec les pratiques des zonard·es, pour qui le bricolage constitue à la fois une nécessité matérielle (ouvrir un squat, réparer un camion), une pratique culturelle et une forme d'affirmation face aux normes dominantes. C'est précisément dans cette articulation entre invention située et portée politique que s'inscrit l'analyse de Dick Hebdige (2008), pour qui, dans la culture punk, le bricolage implique un travail de détournement qui reconfigure les usages et les significations des objets. En déplaçant des éléments d'un contexte à un autre, le bricoleur produit des formes situées et potentiellement subversives. C'est précisément ce qui se joue ici : les bâches, nées de refus et de contraintes, ne constituent pas de simples compromis, mais des formes qui déplacent les codes institutionnels.

Cette lecture rejoint celle d'Emy, pour qui ces agencements renvoient directement à l'univers de la Zone : "Les objets que j'ai glanés. L'agencement, ça faisait penser à un squat, les poufs par terre, avec le peu de matériaux récupérés à droite à gauche"⁵. Le bricolage ne relève donc pas seulement d'une contrainte ou d'une méthode, mais également d'une manière d'habiter et de représenter l'espace, que la scénographie vient prolonger dans l'exposition.

Un fond sonore emplit l'espace. Trois voix se mêlent. Une femme raconte : " Ça a été trois, quatre jours horribles la manche". Au loin, on les entend interpeller les passant·es : " Bonsoir, vous n'auriez pas un brin de monnaie ?". L'autre femme poursuit : " Je crois que je vais rentrer, je ne me suis pas assez équipée aujourd'hui". " Ça caille, hein", répond la première, et son compagnon ajoute : " Tant que tu marches, ça va... mais quand tu restes assis, le froid t'épuise". L'ambiance sonore témoigne de la fatigue et de la rudesse de l'hiver. Derrière leurs paroles résonnent les bruits de la ville : bus qui passent, flot des passant·es, circulation continue. Sur les écrans, une autre scène se déroule : un événement festif sur la place Stanislas. Des lits, des chaises et des tables sont disposés, avec un réchaud à gaz, du thé, du café et des gobelets. Les zonard·es y sont attablé·es, partageant ce moment collectif avec d'autres habitant·es, assis·es à d'autres tables. Plus tard, les images les montrent jonglant dans la nuit, des bolas en feu traçant des cercles de lumière autour d'eux, entouré·es d'une foule rassemblée.

Cette capacité à bricoler s'est construite progressivement. En 2015, jeune photographe, je m'inscrivais davantage dans les attentes institutionnelles. Au fil des expositions, et à mesure que la relation avec les participant·es se consolidait, d'autres manières de faire se sont imposées, plus ouvertes, plus négociées. Le terrain a ainsi transformé ma pratique et a contribué à déplacer mon rapport aux institutions et à la pratique artistique – non en les rejetant, mais en les abordant comme des espaces avec lesquels il est possible de composer en *bricolant* avec les normes.

Donner forme à un savoir partiel et polyphonique

La perception des images vidéoprojetées varie selon l'endroit où l'on se tient. Depuis l'entrée, située sur la gauche de la pièce, l'écran du fond est partiellement masqué par celui suspendu le plus à gauche (Fig. 8). En avançant vers le centre, les trois écrans apparaissent alignés, mais le recul manque pour les embrasser d'un seul regard. Plus on s'approche de l'image centrale, plus les images suspendues s'effacent, ne laissant subsister que la projection murale, comme un point d'aboutissement. L'espace se transforme alors en un parcours visuel, un jeu de distances et de transparences. Deux personnes se tiennent au centre de la salle. Leurs regards explorent l'espace, comme s'ils cherchaient quelque chose. Elles semblent amusées : elles se déplacent à droite, à gauche, reviennent sur place. À un endroit précis de la salle, les trois projections s'alignent. Ce sont maintenant les photographies d'un festival qui sont projetées. Une anamorphose apparaît : une caravane occupe l'écran du centre, les deux autres prolongent le paysage (Fig. 9).

⁵ Les citations d'Emy sont issues d'un entretien réalisé au cours de la rédaction de cet article (en 2026), ainsi que d'une présentation du projet ZONE 54 au festival Barlos en 2024.

Les écrans ne s'animent pas toujours ensemble. Parfois une seule image change, parfois deux, parfois les trois, comme un film en pièces détachées. Les trois projections montrent souvent un même moment, vu sous des angles différents, ou prolongé par de petits écarts : un détail qui apparaît ici, un geste ou un visage qui se dévoile là. Sur l'un, un terrain vague, une caravane au loin. Sur un autre, un couple fait la manche en centre-ville : elle en pantalon cargo, lui en treillis kaki, entourés de plusieurs grands chiens. Leurs looks mêlent esthétiques punk et militaires.



Figure 8 : Festival Barlos, ZONE 54 : *I Love You Fuck Off*, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Figure 9 : CCGP, ZONE 54 : *I Love You Fuck Off*, octobre 2015. Amandine Turri Hoelken

La scénographie de *ZONE 54 : I Love You Fuck Off* s'organise autour de trois écrans synchrones, de tirages photographiques réalisés par les zonard·es, d'objets fabriqués par Emy et d'une pièce sonore composée de cinq ambiances distinctes. Ce choix n'est pas seulement esthétique : il engage une conception de la connaissance anthropologique comme située, partielle et relationnelle⁶. Ce que ce dispositif rend perceptible, c'est l'impossibilité d'un point de vue totalisant. Aucun emplacement dans la salle ne permet de saisir l'ensemble des images simultanément : ce qui se donne à voir n'est toujours qu'un fragment, susceptible d'être déplacé, complété ou contredit par un autre angle. Comme l'a montré Donna Haraway (1988), toute connaissance est produite depuis une position située. Le dispositif scénographique en donne une traduction sensible : il donne à voir et à ressentir le caractère partiel du regard, lié à la place occupée dans l'espace.

Derrière les écrans, une constellation de petites photographies tapisse l'angle du mur (Fig. 10). Il faut s'approcher pour en distinguer les détails : une journée sortie en canoë-kayak, des concerts punk, des caravanes garées dans la nature, des scènes d'été. Ces images dévoilent un autre versant de leur quotidien : elles évoquent la mobilité, rythmée par les saisons, les festivals ou la fermeture d'un squat. Les déplacements apparaissent moins comme une errance que comme une série de relais – un squat, un festival, une ville – où l'on s'arrête, puis dont on repart. Non pas l'obligation de bouger, mais la possibilité toujours présente de le faire, avec les chiens, les sacs et

⁶ De nombreux anthropologues soulignent que la connaissance est inachevée et située. C'est précisément cette incomplétude qui ouvre à une approche sensible, attentive aux relations, aux voix multiples et aux conditions concrètes de production du savoir (voir notamment Cozzolino & Solomoukha 2021 ; Pink, 2021 ; Lowenhaupt Tsing 2017 ; Ingold, 2017 ; Laplantine 2013)

les compagnons de route. La mobilité n'est pas qu'un mouvement, elle est une manière d'habiter l'espace, de tisser des liens et de composer un quotidien à la fois précaire et ouvert. En se déplaçant derrière les écrans suspendus, la perception se transforme encore. Les projections se devinent à l'envers, filtrées par la transparence du tissu (Fig. 11). Les images se superposent, se reflètent, se brouillent, comme des couches qui se chevauchent. La pénombre renforce cette impression d'intimité. Les photographies ne se révèlent pas d'un seul coup, mais au fil des pas.

L'ambiance sonore, jusque-là marquée par le froid et la fatigue, glisse vers quelque chose de plus léger : des voix, des rires, un homme qui interpelle les passant-es avec humour. Le son donne aux scènes représentées une connotation plus joyeuse.

La femme de tout à l'heure, celle qui faisait la manche, regarde de petites photographies imprimées avec plusieurs hommes (Fig. 12). Plus tard, l'un d'eux tient un appareil photo jetable. Sur les écrans, on voit ces photos circuler entre les participant-es : elles sont commentées, appropriées, parfois produites directement par eux. Les projections ne montrent donc pas seulement leur quotidien, elles donnent aussi à voir le documentaire en train de se construire. Ce jeu de circulation crée une mise en abîme qui souligne le rôle du dialogue dans le projet. Les photos prises par les zonard-es prolongent cette logique, en révélant leur propre manière de raconter. L'exposition rend ainsi perceptible que le récit ne se limite pas au regard du photographe, mais se tisse à plusieurs voix, dans un va-et-vient constant entre images produites et images regardées.



Figure 10-11-12 : Festival Barlos, ZONE 54 : I Love You Fuck Off, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Les images, les sons et les objets produisent une polyphonie qui fait apparaître des écarts, des interférences et parfois des contradictions. Les photographies réalisées par les

participant·es apportent parfois d'autres manières de voir – dans les cadrages, les moments choisis ou l'attention portée aux choses – que celles que je produis. Les objets d'Emy introduisent des logiques d'usage et de circulation qui brouillent la séparation entre regard esthétique et pratiques ordinaires. La désynchronisation entre image et son accentue ces décalages : une même séquence visuelle peut évoquer la dureté de la manche par grand froid ou, au contraire, se charger d'une intensité presque euphorique au rythme d'une musique punk saturée.

Ces décalages invitent les spectateur·ices à prendre conscience de leur propre subjectivité. En percevant que leurs interprétations varient selon leurs perceptions, iels deviennent, selon les termes de Pink (2015 : 59), des publics réflexifs, attentifs à leur propre subjectivité. La polyphonie ne consiste alors pas à multiplier les voix pour les additionner, mais à créer les conditions d'une expérience où aucune interprétation ne peut se clore sur elle-même. Comme le soulignent Schneider et Wright :

The relationship of the multiple narratives made possible through multiscreen installations brings about a simultaneous shift in the relation of the work to truth. It draws attention to the multiplicity of truth in a way that even a single-screen, linear narrative film that contains many voices does not. The installation allows for a literal overlapping of narratives. (2013 : 19-20)

La scénographie, qui articule ici projections multi-écrans, sons, tirages et objets, ouvre ainsi un espace permettant de repenser les enjeux éthiques de la représentation documentaire et anthropologique. Elle propose une vision lacunaire et plurielle de la Zone, plutôt qu'une compréhension exhaustive, et cherche à déjouer les catégories souvent assignées à ces personnes – déviance, précarité, nomadisme – pour restituer la complexité de leurs expériences.

L'importance des médiums

Image, médium, corps

L'écran central montre un terrain vague désert, bordé d'un mur fraîchement repeint. Sur les écrans latéraux apparaît ensuite ce même mur, à une autre période : recouvert cette fois de graffitis humoristiques et antifascistes. La projection fragmente le mur : le centre et les côtés appartiennent à des temporalités différentes. Puis l'image centrale change pour rejoindre la période des graffitis : les trois écrans composent alors une nouvelle anamorphose, le mur se reconstitue dans sa totalité (Fig. 13). Fin d'une boucle, la vidéo recommence. Plutôt que de suivre une chronologie linéaire, le dispositif met en avant une lecture synchronique : passé et présent se superposent, se confrontent et coexistent dans un même espace visuel. Ce passage invite à penser le monde de la Zone non comme une succession d'événements, mais comme un tissu de relations et de continuités.

Devant ce mur, sur lequel est tagué en gros "mito" deux personnes se tiennent face à l'appareil. Leur style teufeur tranche avec l'univers punk qui dominait jusque-là : t-shirts sobres, vestes sportswear, chaussures de randonnée ou baskets Vans, casquettes et bobs vissés sur la tête. Image après image, la vie du terrain vague se déploie. Un homme au style skinhead apparaît : crâne rasé, t-shirt noir à slogan antifasciste, jean retroussé, Dr Martens et veste Lonsdale. Des chiens courent sur le terrain vague, par terre quelques détrit

arrière-plan la ville. On y retrouve des visages déjà croisés dans les squats, mais aussi d'autres figures, aux styles variés : jeans et t-shirts simples, dreadlocks, couleurs reggae. Peu à peu, le terrain vague se révèle comme un lieu de rassemblement où se croisent des appartenances diverses et où s'inventent des formes de vie commune à la marge.



Figure 13 : Festival Barlos, ZONE 54 : *I Love You Fuck Off*, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

L'image photographique donne souvent l'illusion d'une forme immatérielle, purement visuelle. Or, comme le rappelle Belting :

Toutes les images que nous voyons, individuellement et dans l'espace collectif, se forment par l'entremise des médiums qui leur confèrent la visibilité. Toute image visible est donc nécessairement inscrite dans un médium de support ou de transmission (2004 : 7-8).

Pour Aumont (2020) et Belting (2004), les images se présentent toujours dans des circonstances physiques, sociales, culturelles et psychologiques spécifiques, qui en déterminent en partie la réception et la compréhension. Par ses qualités matérielles, culturelles et symboliques, le médium ne peut être considéré comme neutre : il organise les conditions de la perception, engage des postures, module l'attention et infléchit les effets produits sur celui ou celle qui regarde :

L'ambivalence entre image et médium dérive de la variété infinie selon laquelle leur rapport se module à chaque occurrence particulière. C'est à travers le médium et en jouant sur ses attraits que ceux qui en disposent peuvent exploiter les pouvoirs de l'image : grâce au médium, on dirige et on renforce l'effet de l'image sur son destinataire (Belting 2004 : 33).

Dans cette perspective, "quand on aborde les images sous l'angle de leur médium, on voit bientôt le corps humain revenir au centre du débat" (Belting 2004 : 22). Une analyse anthropologique des médiums suppose ainsi une triangulation entre image, médium et corps : la perception ne se réduit pas à une opération visuelle, mais engage des postures, des déplacements et des gestes d'attention qui participent activement à la production du sens. Aucune image ne se donne indépendamment d'un regard situé.

Aumont prolonge cette approche en montrant que le médium ne se contente pas de porter l'image : il en configure les conditions d'apparition. En lui donnant "sa tonalité sensationnelle et expressive particulière" (2020 : 102), il inscrit l'image dans une matérialité qui oriente l'expérience des spectateur·ices, en les plaçant dans des dispositions spécifiques de perception, d'attention et d'engagement. Cette dimension matérielle et corporelle apparaît notamment dans la distinction qu'il propose entre deux régimes d'images : les images opaques et les images-lumière. Les premières – tirages, impressions – résultent d'un dépôt sur un support dont elles sont indissociables. Elles se présentent comme des objets stables, "sans équivoque, devant nous, sous nos yeux" (2020 : 109), offrant au regard une relative maîtrise de leur temporalité. À l'inverse, les images-lumière – telles que les vidéoprojections – relèvent de "la présence plus ou moins fugitive d'une lumière sur une surface" (2020 : 109). Elles sont intrinsèquement temporelles, "de passage", et imposent leur rythme aux spectateur·ices. Cette distinction ne se limite pas à une différence de nature technique : elle engage des modes d'expérience distincts. Là où le tirage permet l'arrêt, le retour et la comparaison, la projection inscrit les spectateur·ices dans une temporalité continue, orientant leurs déplacements, leurs attentions et leurs manières d'habiter l'espace. Ces propriétés matérielles ne conditionnent pas seulement la réception des images : elles conditionnent aussi les possibilités de collaboration. Ce que le médium permet ou empêche comme co-construction avec les interlocuteur·ices est une question épistémologique autant que pratique : elle engage différentes manières de produire et de partager la connaissance ethnographique. Ce sont ces deux aspects que j'examinerai à travers les deux formes d'expositions de ZONE 54.

Les images Lumières : I Love You Fuck Off

La projection défile. Le flux continu retient l'attention, happant le regard dans un mouvement ininterrompu. La vidéo organise le temps : son flux continu enchaîne les images, impose un rythme, et entraîne le spectateur dans sa durée. Ici, le regard ne choisit plus : il suit. Aujourd'hui, l'exposition se tient dans le cadre d'un festival de travailleurs sociaux, un événement où se croisent réflexion, échanges et fête. La scénographie, avec ses chaises, ses tables et sa lumière tamisée, inverse la logique du "white cube" : elle privilégie l'immersion sur la distance, la conversation sur la contemplation.

La vidéoprojection engage le corps des spectateur·ices dans un régime sensoriel spécifique. Comme le souligne Aumont (2020), l'image-lumière est intrinsèquement temporelle : sa temporalité est davantage du côté du médium que des spectateur·ices. La boucle de seize minutes s'impose sans possibilité de revenir en arrière ni de choisir l'ordre de visionnage – il faut rester pour "tout voir". L'obscurité et le son qui enveloppent l'espace produisent une atmosphère où les spectateur·ices sont physiquement et psychologiquement engagé·es dans ce qu'ils perçoivent. Je rejoins ici l'analyse de Pink pour qui la multisensorialité de la vidéo doit être comprise en relation avec les conditions dans lesquelles elle est vue. Autrement dit, elle se construit dans des environnements de réception eux-mêmes multisensoriels, où la vidéo engage une participation sensible des

spectateur·ices, produit une forme d'intimité avec les situations filmées et ouvre à des modes de connaissance différents de ceux de l'écrit (2015 : 171-173).

Le choix du médium a également des implications directes sur les formes de collaboration. Le montage vidéo – technique, chronophage, nécessitant des outils et des compétences spécifiques – a limité les possibilités d'intervention des participant·es. Cette configuration a recentré de fait l'autorité sur l'ethnographe en instaurant un régime d'autorité technique. Le choix de la vidéoprojection répond ainsi moins à une logique de co-construction qu'à ses potentialités anthropologiques propres : il permet de montrer davantage d'images, de travailler le rythme et les enchaînements, de construire une temporalité et de produire une atmosphère. Elle ouvre également à des modalités de diffusion élargies – notamment en ligne – où la vidéo conserve sa structure temporelle et son montage, tandis que les photographies, une fois mises en ligne, ne sont plus perçues dans leur accrochage : elles perdent les effets d'échelle, de proximité et de circulation dans l'espace, qui participaient à leur sens.

Les deux formes d'exposition ont été pensées conjointement, précisément pour articuler ces régimes complémentaires. Toutefois, si le montage vidéo repose sur un travail réalisé seule – et se traduit par la présence exclusive de mes images dans la projection –, le choix des images et des séquences s'est construit dans le dialogue avec les participant·es tout au long du projet.

Les images-opaques : Unrestricted Area

En s'attardant sur les photographies accrochées au mur, près des cagettes, deux ensembles se dessinent : d'un côté la ville, de l'autre la nature. Une image retient particulièrement l'attention : Emy et son compagnon posent devant les gorges du Verdon (Fig. 14). Le cadrage et la manière de poser rappellent les codes de la photographie familiale. Malgré leurs vêtements punk, la composition évoque un souvenir de vacances ordinaire. Cette image déplace la perception de l'ensemble. L'esthétique des appareils jetables, les cadrages et la disposition murale produisent un effet d'intimité, comme si l'on feuilletait un album de famille. Ces photos brouillent les repères : elles oscillent entre archives intimes et récit de marge, entre souvenirs personnels et mémoire collective.



Figure 14 : Emy et son compagnon devant les gorges du Verdon, 2016. Photographie réalisée par Gaetan, ZONE 54.

La présence des tirages introduit un second régime d'expérience au sein même de l'exposition. Cette coexistence fait apparaître des régimes différenciés, à la fois du point de vue de l'expérience des spectateur·ices et des modalités de collaboration. La vidéoprojection, nous l'avons vu, limite les possibilités de négociation : si son installation dans l'espace peut faire l'objet d'ajustements, les séquences projetées restent difficilement modifiables. À l'inverse, les tirages donnent lieu à un travail d'accrochage mené en dialogue avec Emy. Nous discutons de leur disposition, de leurs relations et de leur circulation dans l'espace, ce qui ouvre à une forme de co-construction plus directe. Cette différence ne relève pas d'un choix de principe, mais des contraintes et des potentialités propres à chaque médium.

Ce déplacement est encore plus marqué dans *Unrestricted Area* (Fig. 15-16-17-18), une exposition composée d'une centaine de tirages. Les tirages permettent la simultanéité : plusieurs images coexistent dans le champ visuel. Les spectateur·ices peuvent composer leurs propres parcours, revenir en arrière, comparer, établir des connexions. Cette liberté repose sur une mobilité du corps : se déplacer, s'accroupir pour observer les petits formats, reculer pour embrasser un mur entier, circuler entre les cloisons. Ces mouvements participent activement à la production du savoir, construit dans et par l'expérience spatiale.



Figures 15-16-17-18 : MCL Metz, ZONE 54 : *Unrestricted Area*, 2017. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Dans cette exposition, les tirages sont accrochés directement au mur, maintenus par de gros clous ou de larges ficelles – clin d’œil à l’esthétique punk. Les images des zonard·es se mêlent aux miennes, sans hiérarchie. Le travail du sens passe par un agencement spatial : taille des tirages, rapprochements, écarts, accumulations, séries, orientent les lectures possibles.

Les tirages ouvrent également d’autres possibilités de collaboration. L’accrochage est accessible : il ne nécessite pas d’outils spécifiques ni de compétences techniques exclusives. À la mairie de Nancy, Emy accroche seule certaines séries ; à Spray Lab, elle et son compagnon participent directement à la sélection et à la disposition de leurs images. Le tirage rend possible une négociation concrète de l’exposition. Toutefois, si ces expériences ont ouvert des possibilités de co-construction, elles ont également révélé leurs limites. L’accrochage ne relève pas d’une simple opération matérielle : il suppose un ensemble de savoir-faire – sélectionner, agencer, mettre en relation des images – qui n’étaient pas immédiatement partagées. Dans ce contexte, la co-construction ne peut être pensée comme immédiatement donnée par l’accessibilité du médium. Elle se construit dans le temps, à travers l’expérience, les échanges et la transmission de savoir-faire. Les tirages ouvrent des marges d’intervention, mais celles-ci restent conditionnées par des apprentissages, qui redistribuent autrement – sans les supprimer – les asymétries entre les participant·es et l’ethnographe.

La question des médiums ne relève donc pas uniquement d’un choix esthétique : elle engage des manières de voir, de faire et de partager la connaissance ethnographique⁷.

Construire une narration

Si la scénographie et les médiums organisent les conditions sensibles de l’expérience, ils n’épuisent pas pour autant les modalités de production du sens. Celui-ci se joue également à un autre niveau, celui des relations entre les images : leur agencement, leurs enchaînements, leurs échos.

Sekula (2013) et Mayer (2007) montrent que les photographies acquièrent une profondeur supplémentaire lorsqu’elles sont présentées en séquences, permettant ainsi de mieux les inscrire dans des contextes. Dans une séquence, le sens émerge des relations entre les images : chaque photographie n’est plus pensée comme autosuffisante sur le plan sémantique. Ce sont les voisinages, les connexions, les écarts et les intervalles qui sont privilégiés, ouvrant ainsi un espace d’interprétation élargi (Cozzolino, Solomoukha 2021). Cette dimension narrative – à la fois spatiale et temporelle – qui organise *ZONE 54* a été créée grâce à trois modalités : les séquences

⁷ En anthropologie le numérique a, par exemple, été mobilisé pour favoriser davantage d’interactivité avec les interlocuteur·ices ou le public. Glowczewski (2009) a conçu un CD-ROM pour créer une cartographie cognitive interactive Warlpiri. Pourchez (2008) a utilisé le CD-ROM comme outil de consultation et de transmission des savoirs pour ses interlocuteur·ices. Cozzolino & Solomoukha (2021) ont développé un atlas visuel "zoomable" en constellations, autour de l’iconographie zapatiste. Ces expériences montrent que le médium transforme les modalités d’appropriation et de circulation des connaissances.

narratives, les séquences extensives et les fils narratifs.

Les séquences narratives

L'un des hommes aperçus sur le terrain vague réapparaît torse nu, une bière à la main, derrière une porte coulissante bleue entrouverte. Derrière lui, le sol est jonché de gravats. Les images suivantes dévoilent l'intérieur d'un ancien local : vitrine brisée, plafond effondré, palettes et cartons abandonnés (Fig. 19). À l'arrière, une maison dissimulée par la végétation, avec terrasse et jardin. On entre dans le squat. Le matelas est posé à même le sol, une petite table basse est encombrée de canettes, de briquets et d'un ordinateur portable. Quelques posters et des autocollants antifas sur la cheminée. L'homme, le skinhead, et une femme avec un débardeur bleu ciel sont assis dans la pièce. Leurs gestes simples – fumer, discuter, ranger – donnent vie à l'espace. Le désordre familial – vêtements sur une chaise, bouteilles vides, sacs posés au sol – crée l'impression d'un lieu habité, approprié, malgré l'absence visible d'eau ou d'électricité. Le squat apparaît moins comme un abri de fortune que comme un "chez-soi précaire", bricolé, réinvesti, où l'on peut poser ses affaires, inviter, partager un quotidien. Puis l'image bascule : le même squat vidé, abandonné. Sur l'écran central, la femme range leurs affaires dans de grands sacs de randonnée et des cabas de supermarché. La séquence suivante les montre dans une ancienne caserne militaire : une immense pièce sombre, vitres arrachées, courants d'air. Le sol est jonché de débris, les murs couverts de graffitis, et dans un couloir, des centaines de flyers forment un tapis fragile. Les trois personnes apparaissent debout près d'une fenêtre sans vitre, leurs affaires autour d'eux. Le contraste est saisissant : de la maison-jardin bricolée au refuge froid et délabré. Les images soulignent à quel point ces lieux, investis comme des espaces domestiques, restent toujours menacés par l'instabilité et l'expulsion, suspendus entre appropriation et fragilité.



Figure 19 : Festival Barlos, *ZONE 54 : I Love You Fuck Off*, septembre 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Une séquence narrative regroupe des photographies qui, par leur enchaînement, produisent un effet proche du cinéma. Sekula (2013) parle de "disassembled movies" pour désigner ces ensembles photographiques empruntant à la logique cinématographique. La description du squat s'ouvrant sur l'homme torse nu illustre ce principe : vues d'ensemble du bâtiment, déambulation dans les pièces, fragments de

vie quotidienne, puis fermeture du lieu et départ vers un autre squat. Cette clôture prépare la séquence suivante, créant une continuité narrative. *ZONE 54* est ainsi pensée comme une succession de séquences : lieux de vie, pratiques quotidiennes, moments collectifs, et séquences réflexives montrant les conditions de production du documentaire. Ces dernières sont importantes d'un point de vue anthropologique : en rendant visible la méthode (zonard·es regardant les photos, utilisant des appareils jetables, discutant des images), elles inscrivent la réflexivité au cœur de la narration. Alors que j'ai privilégié une organisation séquentielle, les zonard·es ont choisi de présenter leurs images selon une logique différente : des séries thématiques – vie urbaine, nature, voyages. Ce mode de narration, sériel et éclaté, privilégie moins la continuité que l'accumulation d'instantanés significatifs, révélant une manière propre de raconter leur quotidien.

Les séquences narratives extensives

La projection se concentre maintenant sur l'histoire du skinhead. On le retrouve à Paris, dans un autre squat où vivent aussi Emy et son compagnon. Le décor tranche avec les lieux précédents : une grande maison en pierre, entourée d'un jardin, des pièces encore meublées : un buffet, une table en marqueterie, un fauteuil. On les voit cuisiner, partager un repas ; tout indique la présence d'eau et d'électricité. L'atmosphère semble presque ordinaire. Quelques objets détournés et un peu de désordre rappellent malgré tout qu'il s'agit d'un squat. Le récit glisse alors vers le couple : on les suit dans leur quotidien, puis de retour à Nancy. Sur deux écrans, on les retrouve en train de faire la manche au même endroit que d'autres tout à l'heure. Sur l'une de ces images, Emy et son compagnon regardent une pile de photographies (Fig. 20). Celle du dessus montre une femme jonglant avec des bolas lors de l'événement festif vu plus tôt.

L'image ouvre plusieurs pistes de lecture : elle renvoie à la fête, mais aussi aux autres photographies où les zonard·es discutent des photos ou en prennent. La comparaison se fait également avec d'autres scènes de manche. On comprend qu'Emy et son compagnon ne mendent pas toujours au même endroit, et que parfois, iels partagent leurs places avec d'autres, notamment le skinhead. Ces photographies laissent entrevoir que la manche n'est pas laissée au hasard : certains semblent avoir leur emplacement attitré, d'autres partagent des places plus convoitées, souvent situées dans les rues centrales ou à proximité des supermarchés. Les images détaillent aussi les accessoires de cette pratique : un béret, une boîte en métal, parfois une pancarte humoristique ou des balles de jonglage. Les chiens, presque toujours présents, sont installés à côté, enveloppés dans une couverture ou allongés à même le sol. Un véritable rituel accompagne la manche : disposer les affaires, sortir la gamelle d'eau, saluer les passant·es, répéter inlassablement quelques formules de politesse. À travers les images et les sons, se révèlent alors les compétences relationnelles nécessaires pour tenir ces places jour après jour.



Figure 20 : Emy et son compagnon en train de regarder les nouveaux tirages de lecture, Nancy. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Les séquences narratives extensives fonctionnent différemment : le sens ne se construit plus dans l'unité d'une séquence, mais dans des ensembles ouverts où les images se renvoient mutuellement (Sekula 2013). Le passage montrant Emy et son compagnon regardant une photographie illustre ce principe. Cette image résonne simultanément avec : la photographie qu'ils tiennent (le moment festif place Stanislas), d'autres scènes de manche (avec le skinhead, à différents endroits de la ville), et d'autres moments du quotidien du couple (dans les squats, en voyage). Ces connexions créent des échos qui transforment le sens des images précédentes. Elles permettent une connaissance par comparaison : en reliant différentes scènes de manche, moments festifs ou squats, les spectateur·ices peuvent saisir à la fois les régularités (des places attitrées, des rituels d'installation) et les variations (selon les lieux, les saisons). Cette approche comparative révèle la complexité d'un quotidien irréductible à une image unique, les spectateur·ices découvrent la diversité des situations là où les représentations dominantes tendent à les homogénéiser. Les séquences extensives sont ouvertes et inachevées : elles proposent des embranchements qui laissent aux spectateur·ices le soin de recomposer leurs parcours. Elles sont accessibles différemment selon les expositions. Dans *Unrestricted Area*, la matérialité des tirages et leur disposition spatiale facilitent les circulations physiques des spectateur·ices entre les différentes images. Dans *I Love You Fuck Off*, ce sont les cycles répétés de la boucle vidéo et les allers-retours entre projections, tirages muraux et objets d'Emy qui créent ces connexions.

Les fils narratifs

Les fils narratifs traversent *ZONE 54* en reliant des séquences distinctes par la récurrence de figures, d'espaces ou de situations. Ce sont d'abord les personnes qui constituent ces vecteurs. Leur réapparition dans différents contextes compose une cartographie relationnelle, révélant les liens sociaux, les cohabitations temporaires et les lieux partagés. On retrouve ainsi Emy, son compagnon, le skinhead (et d'autres), chacun·e tissant un fil à travers les séquences. Ces fils narratifs se déploient également différemment selon les expositions. Dans *I Love You Fuck Off*, le fil se suit

chronologiquement à travers la succession des images : on rencontre d'abord le skinhead, on le suit dans son quotidien jusqu'à sa rencontre avec Emy, puis on continue sur le quotidien de cette dernière, et ainsi de suite. Dans *Unrestricted Area*, la logique est similaire, mais le fil narratif s'effectue spatialement : en suivant le mur de droite depuis l'entrée, en contournant l'espace pour revenir au point de départ. Un autre fil narratif est créé dans *Unrestricted Area* par la lecture du quotidien de la Zone à travers quatre espaces distincts : les squats, la manche, les tiers-lieux et les activités collectives. Chaque mur thématique ouvre une perspective sur un pan du monde des zonard·es, tout en laissant aux spectateur·ices la liberté de circuler, de comparer et de tisser leurs propres liens.

Sur les écrans latéraux les photos qu'ils tiennent en mains, se matérialisent, comme si leur regard devenait celui du spectateur·ice. L'événement place Stanislas apparaît : les images sont exactement les mêmes que celles vues au début, mais l'ambiance modifie la perception : la manche joyeuse d'un homme leur donne une tonalité plus légère, presque euphorique. Ces circulations d'une image à l'autre produisent une sensation de boucle. Les mêmes lieux, les mêmes visages reviennent, mais autrement, reliés à de nouveaux fragments de vie. Rien n'est clos : chaque photographie semble porter plusieurs histoires, que l'on recompose en avançant dans l'exposition. Quelques minutes plus tard, le son bascule encore : une foule, le déclic de l'appareil, puis une guitare saturée, un chanteur à la voix rauque. La salle se remplit d'une énergie punk, "Hardcore jusqu'à la mort" résonne comme un slogan de vie. Les mêmes images se chargent alors d'une intensité nouvelle. L'atmosphère de l'exposition se transforme : les spectateur·ices redressent le dos, certain·es rient, d'autres échangent un regard. Ce passage entre sons et visuels fait apparaître la polyphonie du projet : un récit mouvant, où chaque reprise transforme ce qui a déjà été vu, où les images ne livrent jamais une vérité unique. Rien n'est clos : chaque boucle ouvre un autre possible, comme si les images elles-mêmes refusaient la fixité, laissant aux personnes photographiées la liberté d'apparaître dans la multiplicité et la complexité de leurs existences.

Cette architecture narrative vise à échapper aux représentations univoques de la Zone. Le récit n'est pas livré clé en main : il demande aux spectateur·ices d'accepter l'effort d'exploration, de comparaison et de recomposition. Cette ouverture narrative, pensée pour multiplier les interprétations, peut aussi déstabiliser : la polyphonie se traduit parfois en confusion. Si certain·es spectateur·ices s'investissent pour tisser les fils narratifs, d'autres ne captent que des fragments éclatés.

La narration devient ainsi un espace de négociation entre intention anthropologique et appropriations spectatorielles, dont l'ethnographe ne maîtrise que partiellement les effets. Cette incertitude n'est pas un échec mais la condition d'une anthropologie qui reconnaît la nuance et la complexité des vécus sans prétendre les épuiser.

L'exposition comme lieu ethnographique

L'exposition comme prolongement du terrain

Souvent envisagée comme l'aboutissement d'un projet, l'exposition peut être pensée comme un prolongement du terrain. Dans cette perspective, elle peut être envisagée

comme un lieu ethnographique au sens de Pink :

Ethnographic places are thus not the same actual real experienced places ethnographers participate in when they do fieldwork. Rather, they are the places that we as ethnographers make when communicating about our research to others. Whatever medium is involved, ethnographic representation involves the combining, connecting and interweaving of theory, experience, reflection, discourse, memory and imagination. (2015: 48)

Dans ZONE 54, lorsque les participant·es sont présent·es, les expositions prolongent les échanges initiés sur le terrain. Comme l'ont montré Pink (2021) et Langewiesche, Pourcel et Attané (2008), inviter les interlocuteur·ices à découvrir les images produites ouvre un espace de réflexion partagée : iels commentent, complètent, contestent les représentations proposées. Ces moments transforment l'exposition en un lieu de co-construction des récits⁸, replaçant les participant·es au cœur du processus interprétatif, produisant à la fois de la réflexivité et de nouveaux matériaux ethnographiques. Au fil du temps, les expositions sont ainsi devenues des rendez-vous récurrents – moments de retrouvailles, d'actualisation et de circulation d'informations.

L'exposition peut également être pensée comme un espace de rencontre entre participant·es et publics, dans lequel les premier·es ne sont pas seulement représenté·es, mais interviennent activement dans la production et la circulation des récits. Elle ouvre ainsi un espace où les personnes concernées peuvent agir sur la manière dont leur quotidien est donné à voir et interprété. Les jours précédant le vernissage de la première exposition, les zonard·es avaient distribué des tirages photographiques à leurs connaissances et aux travailleurs sociaux pour les inviter. Lors du vernissage, ces derniers découvraient des dimensions du quotidien des zonard·es absentes de leur pratique professionnelle – squat, créations d'objets, festivals. Par la suite, plusieurs participant·es m'ont accompagnée durant les jours d'ouverture pour accueillir les spectateur·ices. Cette implication se prolonge au fil des expositions, comme en 2024, lorsqu'Emy installe un stand à l'entrée, participant à l'accueil et aux échanges avec le public. L'exposition devient ainsi un lieu où savoirs professionnels, savoirs expérientiels et savoirs anthropologiques se confrontent et se transforment mutuellement.

L'exposition comme espace de négociation

Si l'exposition prolonge le terrain, elle constitue également un espace de négociation où différentes logiques s'y enchevêtrent : celles des participant·es, des institutions et des lieux.

Du côté des participant·es, l'exposition engage des enjeux qui ne recoupent pas entièrement ceux de la recherche. Là où le projet anthropologique vise à produire une

⁸ Ce principe est au cœur de la photographie documentaire dialogique – portée notamment par des artistes tels qu'Allan Sekula, Susan Meiselas, Marc Pataut ou Gilles Saussier –, où les premières expositions se tiennent souvent in situ et où les interlocuteur·ices en sont les premiers spectateur·ices (voir Turri Hoelken, 2024b)

connaissance située et réflexive, les attentes exprimées par Emy sont parfois plus personnelles et relèvent de la reconnaissance et de la visibilité : "Montrer que la rue ce n'est pas que des pauvres gens, que c'est des gens créateurs, les gens de la rue sont des personnes à part entière, ce n'est pas rien du tout, bien au contraire", ou encore "Ça me permet d'apporter ma pierre à l'édifice, ça me prouve que je ne suis pas rien du tout. J'ai tendance à me rabaisser, j'ai été quelqu'un et j'ai construit des choses par rapport à ce projet, et on en construit encore". Ce déplacement est particulièrement visible lors de l'exposition à la mairie de Nancy en 2024. Emy décrit ce moment comme un franchissement de frontière : "La mairie c'était du pavé de la rue, au pavé de la mairie, je me suis introduite dans un lieu où on n'avait jamais le droit le faire la manche. Ça m'a fait le sentiment que j'avais réussi à dépasser les frontières, le front de la rue était enfin entré à la mairie". Cette parole est matérialisée dans l'exposition (Fig.21), où Emy l'inscrit sur l'une des bâches, participant ainsi à sa mise en circulation et à sa visibilité. Ainsi, être exposée dans un lieu institutionnel, où sa présence n'est habituellement pas permise, transforme les rapports de légitimité et de visibilité.



Figure 21: Mairie de Nancy, ZONE 54 : *Unrestricted Area*, janvier 2024. Amandine Turri Hoelken

Cette négociation se joue également avec les institutions qui accueillent les expositions. Celles-ci imposent des contraintes – explicites ou implicites – sur ce qui peut être montré et sur la manière de le présenter. Dans le cas de ZONE 54, ces tensions ont été particulièrement visibles dans les premières expositions, où certaines institutions culturelles ne souhaitaient pas intégrer les images produites par les zonard·es, jugées insuffisamment professionnelles et artistiques. Si ces réticences n'ont pas disparu, elles tendent aujourd'hui à être moins marquées, dans un contexte où les pratiques participatives et collaboratives sont davantage légitimées institutionnellement⁹. Mais ces négociations ne concernent pas uniquement les contenus : elles portent aussi sur des aspects matériels – temps d'installation, budget, conditions techniques, lieu – qui

⁹ Cette évolution peut être mise en relation avec la montée en puissance de l'éducation artistique et culturelle (EAC), l'inscription des droits culturels dans la loi en 2015 et, plus largement, la valorisation institutionnelle des pratiques participatives. La multiplication des résidences en milieu scolaire et des projets de co-création contribuent à légitimer des formes où les participant·es produisent eux-mêmes des images destinées à être montrées – sans que ces images ne soient pour autant pleinement reconnues comme légitimes aujourd'hui dans le champ institutionnel artistique.

influencent directement la scénographie. Ces contraintes se traduisent concrètement dans les lieux d'exposition, où chaque présentation se reconfigure en fonction des espaces, des usages et des possibilités d'intervention – par exemple dans des choix d'accrochage ou de supports, comme l'usage de bâches ou de grilles caddie à la mairie.

Le bricolage en constitue l'un des vecteurs principaux. L'exposition n'est ainsi jamais identique à elle-même : elle se transforme au contact des lieux et contraintes qu'elle rencontre, "ni tout à fait la même, ni tout à fait une autre" écrivait Verlaine. Ces variations participent à la manière dont le projet prend forme et fait sens. Cette plasticité est constitutive d'une approche dialogique et créative : les dispositifs sont pensés pour s'adapter. L'enjeu est double : concevoir un dispositif où fond et forme dialoguent, tout en restant assez souple pour s'adapter à chaque lieu d'exposition.

En ce sens, penser l'exposition comme lieu ethnographique implique de reconnaître qu'elle est aussi un lieu politique, où se jouent des enjeux de visibilité, de légitimité et de pouvoir. La connaissance qui s'y produit est dépendante de ces conditions. Loin d'être un simple support de diffusion, l'exposition participe ainsi à la fabrication même du savoir anthropologique, en rendant sensibles les processus – relationnels, matériels et institutionnels – qui le structurent.

Conclusion

Cet article propose de déplier la scénographie à partir de sa fabrication : comme un processus situé, construit au contact du terrain, des matériaux et des contraintes. La scénographie ne précède pas les images – elle se construit avec elles, dans un dialogue continu entre contenus, médiums et conditions de monstration. Les choix ne relèvent pas d'une application formelle, mais d'ajustements successifs, où s'entremêlent intentions, contraintes et possibilités.

Envisagée ainsi, la scénographie peut constituer une modalité de production du savoir anthropologique. Elle organise les relations entre images, corps et espaces, et module des formes de narration. Les médiums qui la constituent orientent également les possibilités de collaboration avec les interlocuteur-ices. Ces derniers reposent sur des savoir-faire spécifiques qui ne sont pas également partagés. Si certaines dimensions donnent lieu à des formes de co-construction, d'autres restent plus difficilement accessibles, reproduisant certaines formes d'asymétrie, notamment lorsque les médiums mobilisés impliquent des compétences ou des outils spécifiques.

L'anthropologie visuelle ouvre, dans certaines de ses configurations, des espaces capables de produire des récits alternatifs sur les mondes qu'elle documente. C'est ce que Pink formule en ces termes :

Of most significance for contemporary visual ethnography are the spaces where ethnographic and arts practice are engaged to create interventional projects that seek to disrupt dominant narratives or power relations, invite people to think differently, or have a particular focus towards alterities or futures that disrupt thinking and feeling (2021 : 146).

La scénographie, telle qu'elle est pensée dans ZONE 54, peut constituer l'une de ces configurations. Le dispositif donne aux participant-es une présence matérielle dans l'espace – leurs images, les objets d'Emy, parfois leurs propres corps – qui trouble la séparation entre sujets représentés et espace d'exposition, tout en engageant les spectateur-ices dans une expérience sensorielle et située qui rompt avec une position d'observation distante. Là où la photographie documentaire et ethnographique a parfois contribué à produire des images de la marginalité qui assignent les personnes à des figures de vulnérabilité (Azoulay 2018 ; Ferret 2021), l'enjeu de la scénographie n'est pas seulement de montrer autrement, mais de transformer les conditions mêmes de cette visibilité.

Cette portée reste cependant difficile à évaluer. L'absence d'une enquête de réception constitue une limite de cette recherche : si l'article s'attache à décrire les conditions de production et l'intention de la scénographie, il ne peut rendre compte qu'indirectement de ses effets sur les publics, qui demeurent en partie ouverts et situés. Ce que l'analyse permet de documenter, en revanche, c'est la transformation du dispositif lui-même : chaque nouvelle présentation de ZONE 54 a redistribué les rôles, les présences, les contraintes – et cette plasticité est elle-même constitutive de la démarche.

C'est en ce sens que la scénographie, telle qu'elle est pratiquée ici, s'inscrit dans un mouvement plus large où anthropologie visuelle et pratiques artistiques explorent ensemble des formes de restitution qui passent par l'expérience sensible, le corps et la perception. Non comme un modèle transposable, mais comme une invitation à inventer, dans chaque terrain et chaque collaboration, des formes ajustées – en assumant, comme le suggère Laplantine (2013), le droit à l'essai, à l'esquisse, à l'expérimentation dans les sciences sociales.

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**The Khotons of Tarialan, Western Mongolia:
Ethnicisation, Belonging and the Politics of Difference**VOLUME 15 | No 1 | 2026
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2026.1-208**Abstract**

The article critically examines the fluid and complex processes of ethnicisation among the Khotons of Tarialan, in the Ulaangom region of western Mongolia, a minority historically associated with agriculture, Islam, and Turkic origins within a predominantly Mongol pastoral context. Methodologically, it draws upon a plurality of historical, comparative, documentary, and ethnographic sources to trace the historical construction of Khoton ethnicity, approaching it as an ethnic assemblage in Anna Tsing's sense – an open-ended and historically contingent configuration – and to examine its emergence, the ways in which it is reenacted through everyday interactions, narratives, and myths, and how it is experienced and shaped through practices of belonging. The ethnographic approach is further strengthened by the use of photography as a means of exploration, interpretation, and collaborative engagement with the people encountered during fieldwork. The analysis explores majority-minority dynamics across multiple scales, demonstrating that contemporary forms of recognition produce visibility while simultaneously operating through essentialising logics that reify difference.

Keywords

Khoton, Western Mongolia, Ethnicisation, Assemblage, Belonging, Majority-Minority relations, Ritual and Memory.

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What did I miss in this field research?

For the first time, I was not sleeping with the families, nor living (even for a short time) with them. The base was a hotel in the city, the capital of the UVS region.

When I fell asleep, I was not wrapped in the circle of the ger, a living envelope that protects and warms, that draws a temporary line between the inside and the outside.

An outside that incessantly enters in through the air, that passes into the felt and through any chink, that keeps making you feel in all of the steppe.

I get out of bed... I move quietly so that no one will hear me. I leave the door ajar. I go downstairs for a moment. But I do not find "my" air, I do not find "my" silence.

I close my eyes and do not find "my" scent. I do not feel what my body is desperately searching for.

The difficulty this year [2024] was not being with the families in their gers.

Notes from the Field Journal, August 2024

From this discomfort, from this slippery terrain enclosed in the field notes, begins my reflection.

In 2023, while I was in Ulaanbaatar, I was struck by the narratives I encountered about the Khotons¹, who were described as a minority of non-Mongol origin, sedentary and devoted to agriculture for centuries, within a world of nomadic pastoralists. This clearly dichotomizing perspective, reinforced by strongly essentializing arguments such as the alleged presence of differentiating phenotypical traits (in particular eye and skin colour, and the shape of the nose), resonated with my own long-standing research on relations between majorities – self-defined as “sedentary” – and itinerant minorities, more commonly labelled as “nomadic,” in the European context (Okely 1983; Stewart 1997; Tosi Cambini 2023). These narratives therefore appeared to me almost as an “upside-down” world, in which it was the majority – defining itself, in some sense, as “nomadic” – that constructed and labelled the Other, represented by a minority described as “sedentary.” Accordingly, when David Bellatalla – a scholar of Mongolia who has been based in the capital since the early 1990s – asked me to join the research team that would work on the Khotons the following year, I accepted the invitation².

Focusing on the Khotons of Tarialan, Western Mongolia, this article argues that they are the product of an ongoing process of ethnicisation, enacted through narratives of

¹ The transliteration of Mongolian terms follows the standard adopted by the International Association for Mongol Studies (IAMS), except in direct quotations, where I retain the transliteration used by the original author.

² The research team comprised, in addition to myself and Bellatalla, his wife Ganaa, originally from the capital of Uvs, where her family resides, and Nadia Breda, with whom I have shared other fieldwork experiences in Mongolia and with whom I co-direct the naMec Center. The fieldwork was conducted during the summer of 2024, a period in which we carried out unstructured interviews (including some audio recordings), visited cultivated fields and other places and sites accompanied by Khoton individuals, and spent entire days or parts of days with Khoton families. We designed the fieldwork so as to avoid becoming acquainted with people and families through channels that might have imparted an imprint on the relationship (for example, by contacting them through local authorities). For this reason, relationships with Khoton people developed through chance encounters and by using a snowball sampling method. Ganaa's linguistic competencies proved invaluable at all stages of the research, as did the assistance of her family members in locating certain sources. The team worked in a highly collaborative manner, sharing notes, reflections, and materials, and bringing into dialogue the specific skills and perspectives of each of us, as elicited by our interactions with the Khotons. The same spirit of sharing was applied to the visual material, which – as in previous fieldwork conducted together with Breda – is collectively attributed to the naMec Center.

origin, ritual practices, and post-socialist policies of heritage and minority governance. It is organized into two parts. The first analyzes the process of ethnicisation, trying to interweave the scientific literature with the legends of the Khotons and the material collected during the fieldwork. The second part focuses on one of the traits of this process, that of the ambiguous, power-asymmetric relationship between a majority and a minority, the latter retaining in its collective memory the historical persecution it has endured. An interesting trait that complexifies the relationship between majority and minority is also found in the major occult power attributed to the Khotons. Practices of divination and ritual mediation with invisible forces are deeply embedded in Mongolian cosmological traditions (Hamayon 1990; Humphrey & Onon 1996; Delaplace 2023). Within this broader context, however, the Khotons are acknowledged to have more powerful declinations of this practice, which could be used against the majority, in particular the capacity to “curse”. The fear of an evil that backfires, of the violence inflicted that can turn into negative energy, is found very frequently, one need only think, in other contexts, of similar accusations against “Gypsies” or “Afro-descendants” (Bogdal 2023; Stewart 1997; Taussig 1980). We will see interpenetrations at different scales between the groups and their members, which particularly in the first decade of the 2000s were also epitomised by post-socialist policies related to minorities and territorial “strategies” of productive-economic “development”, within which processes of heritagization through UNESCO categories and essentializing perspectives likewise emerge.

Alongside participant observation, unstructured interviews, and collaborative field exploration, photography constituted an important complementary ethnographic tool in this research. The visual dimension made it possible to document the material and spatial configurations through which Khoton belonging is enacted in everyday life: cultivated fields, irrigation systems, pastoral mobility, ritual sites, and traces of socialist and post-socialist transformations. The photographs also generated conversations and memories during fieldwork, eliciting narratives that often expanded or complicated verbal accounts. In this sense, the visual material offers an additional perspective on the historical sedimentations, territorial practices, and affective dimensions through which processes of ethnicisation are materially experienced and negotiated.

1. The Ethnicization of the Khotons of Tarialan as an Assemblage Process

1.1. Exploring the land of the Khotons and moving in-between agriculture and pastoralism

The Khotons are a small ethnic group, primarily residing in Uvs *aimag* (province), with a population of just over 11,500 people³. Our fieldwork took place in the Ulaangom area, specifically in Tarialan *sum* (district). The very name of the district, already opens up to the particularity and discontinuity revealed by the landscape before our eyes: the word *tarialan* in fact means “cultivated field” / “arable land”. And it is, in fact, farmland that begins to open up in front of us, as we leave the city behind and approach the capital of the district (fig. 1). Fields, barns, hay bales, tractors appear...and then we discover, with the guidance of some Khotons, the ancient irrigation system built largely at the time of Galdan Boshugtu Khan (1644–1697), and the Russian one, which we are told dates back to 1976.

These rural landscapes embody historical trajectories, political transformations, and everyday negotiations. The persistence of infrastructures, traces, and spatial practices sedimented over time renders the environment ethnographically meaningful, as an active repository of memory and belonging.

As Martínez suggests, material environments preserve layered temporalities and “persistent presences and haunting absences” through which neglected histories continue to shape contemporary social experience and everyday spatial practices (Martínez 2018: 1, 8–10). Within this perspective, photographing past, abandoned, and contemporary cultivation infrastructures, together with cultivated fields and ger camps, made it possible to trace the material intersections of settlement, mobility, ecology, and memory, situating everyday agricultural and pastoral practices within their broader historical and cosmological landscape. As Heng notes, attention to wider ritual and environmental contexts enables the researcher to “create a portrait of that space,” making visible the broader social and cosmological relations embedded within everyday environments (Heng 2017: 98).

Impressed by this landscape, at times punctuated by abandoned buildings from the socialist period – a regime that had strongly promoted the agricultural sector by relying precisely on the Khotons in this area – and dominated by former silos and remnants of former agri-food facilities (fig. 2), the attention of the entire research team is drawn to the agricultural expertise immediately displayed by the family and other farm laborers whom we encounter at work in the fields.

³ National statistics of Mongolia, Census of Population, <https://www.1212.mn/en/statistic>. 5,000 of Khotons live in Tarialan district, Uvs province, where we carried out the research.



Figure 1 The landscape approaching Tarialan. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 2 Abandoned buildings and former silos. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The ways of thinking of these farmers living in a mobile pastoralist environment occupy a significant place in my reflections. As the fieldwork extends over time, I am afforded the opportunity to become more deeply acquainted with the territory and, above all, to experience forms of hybridization at multiple levels – cultural, religious, familial, and also occupational – through the simultaneous management of agricultural and pastoral work. My inquiry thus does not seek what “visibly” distinguishes them, but rather traces of more complex processes, which encompass the capacity – on the part of the Khotons – to mix, to reshape, and to move beyond the identity categories imposed upon them.

The focus on their agricultural activity – so strongly emphasized in the various written and oral sources we collected during fieldwork – is shaped by several intersecting factors. First, the adoption of Russian forms of farming during the Soviet era – when, as is well known, agriculture, crop cultivation, and also mining were extensively promoted – followed by the more recent adoption of Western models of agriculture. These economic policies directly affected the Khotons, whose agricultural knowledge and practices were fully exploited by the Soviet government. Subsequently, with the advent of neo-capitalist policies, the Khotons were once again incorporated into political programs framed as so-called development strategies and into the expanding agricultural business, both as wage laborers and as entrepreneurs. In this process, they also adopted a range of technologies – above all those related to irrigation systems – which we observed in

operation during fieldwork and which contribute to a strong external “visibilization” and emphasis on their occupational specialization⁴.

In our fieldwork, this intertwining of agriculture and pastoralism emerges as very much alive. During the explorations of the territory, we encounter around forty *gers* (Mongolian tents) very close together, where cows are grazing. We approach one and ask to enter: the lady welcomes us with *suutei tsai* (a savory salted milk tea). She tells us that they are a Khoton family but that she is Dörvöd (Cl. Mo. Dörbet), her husband is Khoton. On the north side is the sacred area, with photos of her father and her son, who is a judo champion.

This family, like all the others nearby, engages in both farming and herding. Here we can see how the coexistence of the needs of agriculture and those of animal husbandry is managed, including the need to keep cultivated fields out of reach of livestock. In this family, the Khoton husband, Bold⁵, works exclusively as a farmer, his Dörvöd mother-in-law is solely engaged in herding; and his Dörvöd wife, Sarangerel, combines both farming and herding activities. The latter told us that she became Muslim through marriage. The family owns 20 hectares of land and grows barley, potatoes, carrots, onions, watermelons and *manjin* (a type of beet), as well as leaving some land for hay for the animals. The lady tells us that with the end of the *negdel*, the livestock was divided up, while the land they cultivated was given as property according to the number of family members. They sow in May/June and in the Summer they manage to have two harvests⁶. In December, they return to live near the cultivated fields, put the animals in pens and feed them until April, when they move on. In the valley/steppe, about 20 km away from the centre of the district, towards the mountains, live those who mainly raise cows, like them. They move twice a year, but some move five times a year. This number probably varies with the number of animals they own. Those who raise sheep and goats move further away, even closer to the mountains. The *gers* around theirs are inhabited by relatives (see figs. 3-4).

⁴ “In Mongolia the policy of agricultural development has been one of the means of socialist modernization. In the first phase (1940s and 1950s), state farms were constructed and performed well. During the second phase (after 1976) new state farms constructed closer to the urban markets did perform well economically but at a considerable ecological cost. After the end of the socialist regime, because of the lack of financial support, the state farms began to collapse. Therefore, in 2008 the government again began to give financial support to agricultural business” (Konagaya 2013: 266). For a discussion of agriculture among the Khotons, see Breda (in preparation).

⁵ All names of the people encountered in the field are pseudonyms. It should be added, moreover, that the issue of the pronunciation of the name of a Khoton person - as we shall see - is still today perceived as a risk, linked to a curse.

⁶ The territory of Ulaangom is characterised by an extremely cold continental semi-arid climate <https://weatherspark.com/y/112127/Average-Weather-in-Ulaangom-Mongolia-Year-Round>

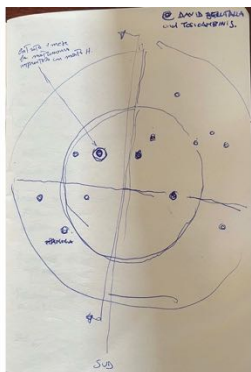


Figure 3 Sketch of the spatial organization of the gers of Bold's family and his relatives, Drawn by David Bellatalla and Sabrina Tosi Cambini. Field journal, 2024.



Figure 4 Ger camp. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The wife's mother is 84 years old: when she arrives at her daughter's *ger*, where we are, she takes over the conversation. She starts asking us questions, which makes the young woman more open towards us. David tells the two women that Nadia comes from a family of farmers, which intrigues them, and they start asking specific questions to compare: in particular, when they sow and if there are greenhouses. The mother has 10 children in total, five of whom live there, in the *gers* around us, and the other five, we understand, in the village. The elderly woman shows us the handmade pasta her daughter is preparing, as she does every day. Outside, they are drying *Aaruul* (cheese made from drained sour milk drying on the sun) like the one they offered us. Other children arrive from nearby *gers*, curious about our presence. Ganaa asks to Sarangerel's young son if he wants to go and live in the capital when he grows up, and the boy replies that no, he wants to stay here and be a carpenter.

Within this dialogical framework, the family explains to us how field irrigation works. The water they use to irrigate the fields is supplied in rotation every two weeks. We ask if they can show us their fields the next day and the young woman replies that her husband is on his way back from Ulaangom and that, if we wait for him, they can take us there right away.

The man (a Khoton) arrives shortly afterwards. He tells us that he has been selling his agricultural produce to the scattered shepherds, while those from the city come directly there to buy. They do not go to the markets to sell; the vegetable trucks we saw in Ulaangom belong to people who buy their produce and resell it to people in the city.

The man does a few chores, exchanges a few words with his wife, and the conversation with us inevitably dies down a little. Then, over a cup of tea shared with us, and continuing the conversation on production and trade, he explains that livestock numbers have increased over the past decade and adds that he would like to open a slaughterhouse to sell meat as well. We leave the *ger* together and the couple accompanies us to see their cultivated fields: we follow them in our car. Bold shows us the irrigation system: the water comes from a pipe connected to the central system (which we had already visited). He turns on the water, which flows into a channel, and gradually inserts metal plates, like small manual sluices, to make the water flow sideways. To explain better, he draws a diagram on the ground, which he immediately erases.

He explains that there is no one responsible for turning on the water for the fields, but rather a schedule that everyone decides together, so that when it is their turn, each person goes to turn on their own central pipe to irrigate their own cultivated land. We say goodbye and arrange to meet the next day in the late morning, as it is his turn (figs. 5-6).



Figure 5 The pipe connected to the central system. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The next day, we also learn that they have about ten horses, but above all 200 sheep and goats, which are with the Khoton herder who takes the animals to the green mountain pastures for everyone. There is a mixture of non-specialisation and specialisation, which flows smoothly through these family and “ethnic” environments.



Figure 6 Bold picks the golden ears of grain, offering them to us as a symbol of abundance. Photo by naMec, 2024.

While it is well established that the relationship between agriculture and pastoralism always calls for a deep and contextualized perspective, this is particularly true in the case of the Khotons where it must necessarily be situated historically and

approached through a flexible analytical lens capable of bringing out its dynamism over time and the changes associated with multiple factors. These processes can also be traced at the level of linguistic terminology. Discussing the origins of the Khotons and referring to various sources, Tatár Fosse (1979: 9-10) notes that cultivation in the Ili Valley appears to have been introduced primarily to sustain military needs: under the supremacy of the Züünger Khans, agricultural production was already carried out by prisoners of war from Kashgar, pointing to an early system in which coerced or displaced populations played a key role in food provisioning. A Chinese source, cited by the author, notes that in the 18th century the agricultural practices of the Kirghis closely resembled those of the Oirats, as both were adapted to a nomadic mode of life rather than to fully sedentary farming. Chinese accounts further describe extensive cultivated areas in the Kashgar region, from which the Oirats relocated individuals engaged in agriculture to other territories. The Mongols themselves practiced forms of nomadic cultivation and, in areas where land was not farmed, relied on the gathering of wild plants as substitutes for cereals and vegetables. Although the origins of these cultivation practices remain unclear, it is likely that Turkic-speaking populations within the Züünger Khanate influenced Mongolian agricultural knowledge. According to Tatár Fosse, this interpretation is supported by a Russian source from 1731-1732, which reports that the Oirats compelled the so-called “people of Bukhara,” that is, Eastern Turkestani populations, to cultivate the Ili Valley and other areas through irrigation. Over time, these cultivated plots were subsequently taken over and farmed by the Oirats themselves. The author also states that sowing was called “*‘alban tarialan’* (official, state sowing) and the working persons *‘tariany cêrêg, tariačîn cêrêg’* (soldier of sowing, agricultural soldier)” (*ibid.*) *Tariachin* [tariačîn] is the key term. While during the period of the Khanates, the *tariachin* could be described as a soldier-farmer – that is, a man who cultivated the land while at the same time taking part in the defense or expansion of territory – in the Mongolian context more generally, characterized by a predominantly pastoral local economy, *tariachin* refers to one who cultivates the land. However, what must be borne in mind is that this semantic marking (foregrounding a minority activity distinct from that practiced by the majority) contains a degree of fluidity that keeps socio-cultural and ecological categorization open. It does not exclude the possibility that such a person may also engage in pastoralism and mobility. It is a term that is shaped by meanings whose emphases shift differently across distinct periods of local and broader history. To grasp this fuzzy quality – which is often lost in translations into European languages, such as, for example, the term *farmer* – it is useful to compare it with the Mongolian term *fermer*, borrowed into Mongolian through Russian from the international lexicon of market agriculture, is widely used in contemporary policy discourse, development programmes, and legal frameworks to designate the figure of the commercial agricultural producer. It evokes a socio-economic model based on private or household-based management of land, market-oriented production, access to credit and mechanization, and integration into commercial value chains. While partially overlapping with *tariachin*, the two terms are not fully interchangeable. Unlike the latter, whose semantic field encompasses broader historical, social, and moral understandings of cultivation and agrarian belonging, *fermer*

foregrounds entrepreneurship, commercial production, and economic efficiency. Its contemporary usage thus reflects broader post-socialist transformations through which agriculture has increasingly been reconfigured as an economic enterprise and land as a productive asset.

1.2. Navigating the literature on Khotons

From our fieldwork and the literature, the Khotons seem to embody the fluidity of ethnicisation processes as well as the risk of reification and essentialisation inherent in ethnic relations between different human groups and, in particular, between a majority and a minority.

In much of the scholarly literature, the ethnonym Khoton conventionally evokes a set of characteristics associated with the group, including a settled lifestyle, agricultural practices, and a historical connection with Islam. These associations, however, reflect historically produced representations that have contributed to constructing a homogenising and stereotyped image of the group, obscuring its internal diversity and the complexity of its historical and cultural trajectories. Beyond the importance of taking into account the different periods, attitudes, and objectives of the scholars who have written about them, the multiple historical narratives and reconstructions concerning the Khotons also attest to the internal heterogeneities of the group, whose origins are complex and multifaceted. In this regard, Ha *et al.* (2023) from the Institute for Western Frontier of China, Shaanxi Normal University, highlight the complexity of ethnic identity formation and the role of historical, cultural, and linguistic factors in shaping the Khoton community in Mongolia. The Khotons are descendants of various ethnic groups who migrated to Mongolia during the Züünger Khanate – the powerful Oirat Mongol empire formed in the 17th century – and Qing dynasty, following prolonged warfare and above all the widespread massacres of the Züünger Oirat people, brought about the destruction of that polity in 1759. They were primarily settled as farmers in regions like Hovd, Uvs, and Bayan-Ölgii (Badamkhatan 1996). Their migration involved people from the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang, China, and various ethnic groups from Central Asia (*ibidem*). Among recent studies, Yunusijiang Aili – specialising in the history and historical geography of Xinjiang – argues, in his research on settlements along the Ili River during the Züünger period, – that the Züünger people used the term “Khoton” to denote village-like organisations composed of individuals linked by close kinship ties, in order to collect grain taxes (2017, cit. in Ha *et al.* 2023).

Birtalan (2012), in the introduction to the volume bringing together the essays resulting from the fieldwork conducted among the Oirats by a research team she coordinated, suggests that the term “Khoton” alludes “to their being ‘town-dwellers’ (xot)” (ivi: 21) and she defines them as “an agrarian people of Turkic origin coming from Turkestan. They were moved to the territory of Mongolia in the time of the Jungar Empire” (*Ibid.*).

Early notes by the very famous investigator-traveler G.N. Potanin (1881) – who conducted research on the Oirats in Western Mongolia – and B. Vladimirtsov (1916) – who compared the linguistic and lexical materials collected by Potanin with those collected by himself in the Ulaangom province – linked the Khotons to Altaic-speaking communities, mainly Sart

clans and Black Kyrgyz tribes. The Russian Orientalist A.N. Samoilovich, taking up and comparing these two authors, concludes his analysis by stating that the Khotons belong to ancient Altaic-speaking peoples from southern Xinjiang (1916). Three distinct terminological perspectives regarding the Khotons emerge in the works of Potanin, Vladimirtsov, and Samoilovich, each encoding a different semantic priority. Potanin's account, based on his 1876–1877 journey, is exploratory and narrative in character: he consistently employs the ethnonym *Khotoni* and frames the group through historical process rather than through either economic function or stabilized ethnic typology, explaining their formation as the result of capture and displacement: “they were formed from various groups, to a considerable extent from war captives”; and emphasizing memories of Central Asian origins such as Oš and Bukhara (Potanin 1881: 1-12). By contrast, Vladimirtsov adopts a functional ethnographic perspective and introduces a technical, activity-based classification: he states that “the principal occupation of the Khoton is livestock breeding and agriculture” and, more pointedly, that “the Khotons are regarded as the best *zemledělcy* of north-western Mongolia”, thereby defining the group primarily through the neutral occupational term *zemledělec*, which denotes the practice of cultivation without invoking ethnic origin or historical status (Vladimirtsov 1916: 267). Samoilovich, finally, reorients the discussion through philological and historiographical critique, refusing to ground classification in economic activity and instead framing the Khoton in ethnic-historical terms as *osēdlye türki* (“sedentary Turks”), a designation that encodes sedentariness (*osēdlye*) and Turkic linguistic affiliation (*türki*) rather than livelihood; his analysis repeatedly foregrounds origin, language, and religion - treating Islam as a comparatively thin layer over earlier beliefs and stressing the advanced Mongolization of speech - so that the group is defined by what they are and where they come from, not by what they do (Samoilovich 1916: esp. 279–281). Taken together, these lexical choices are methodological: Potanin's *Khotoni* constructs a historical-narrative identity grounded in displacement and composite origins, Vladimirtsov's *zemledělec* constructs a functional-economic identity centered on cultivation, and Samoilovich's *osēdlye türki* constructs a historical-ethnic identity grounded in sedentariness and Turkic affiliation. The different perspective orientation of the three authors produces non-overlapping semantic constructions of the Khotons. During the same period, the traveler, historian, and social geographer, G.E. Grumm Grzhimailo, who devoted a number of works to the history of Central Asia, suggested that the term Khoton referred to settled Mongolian Muslims - distinguishing them from nomads - emphasising their urbanised lifestyle and Islamic faith (1926). As recalled by Lkhagvasuren, the first director of the National Museum of Mongolia after democratization, and by Konagaya, an ethologist who lived in socialist Mongolia and is now emeritus at the same institution,

During the socialist period in Mongolia, disciplines such as history and ethnography were heavily influenced by official Communist ideology. Mainly for this reason, few serious scientific works were published on topics relating to the Oirat in particular or even to Mongol history and culture more generally.[...]. A collection of monographs called

Ethnography of Mongolia was published in Mongolian in 1996 (Badamkhatan 1996), and the second volume of this fundamental work focused on the Oirat (2014: iv).

Badamkhatan linked the Khotons to intermarriage between Oirats and Uzbeks, as well as Altaic-speaking peoples captured during the Züünger Khanate and Qing Dynasty. In particular, according to him, the Oirats used "Khoton" to refer to people from Little Bukhara or the six cities in southern Xinjiang, China.

The post-socialist context broadened scholarly horizons by removing previous constraints and restrictions on research.

According to historian Oyunjargal (2024), who uses Volumes XCII-XCIII of the *Bibliotheca Oiratica* – a new series appeared in 2006 –, the migration and political integration of the Khotons into western Mongolia in the eighteenth century reflect their resilience and their contribution to the agricultural and administrative development of the region, rather than any association with slavery. The Khotons already possessed considerable agricultural experience under Züünger rule and continued these practices under the Qing, thereby contributing both to the regional tax system and to agricultural expansion. Oyunjargal argues that the Dörvöd played a crucial role in the migration, resettlement, and integration of the Khotons in Ulaangom: their leadership, in conjunction with Qing administrative policies and the Khotons' capacity to participate effectively in agricultural production and taxation, facilitated the group's stable incorporation into the region. From this perspective, while the migration was initially prompted by political instability, it ultimately evolved into a process of integration and community consolidation, rendering the Khotons a fundamental component of the social and economic fabric of western Mongolia within the imperial framework.

Ha's reconstruction (2025) differs in part from Oyunjargal's, yet remains clearly complementary, as it places particular emphasis on the relationship between the Khotons and Qing modes of territorial governance. Ha situates the settlement of the Khotons within the broader context of Qing military-agricultural colonisation. From this standpoint, their relocation and agricultural activities are closely linked to the state-organised *túntián* system, a form of military-agricultural land organisation in which cultivation functioned as a key instrument of frontier administration, population management, and imperial control⁷.

Within this framework, the agricultural practices of the Khotons are interpreted as the result of their incorporation into a structured regime of land use and settlement. Their labour, access to land, and patterns of residence were shaped by administrative planning and imperial strategies of frontier consolidation. Taken together, these two reconstructions highlight contrasting yet useful complementary perspectives: one emphasising agency, continuity, and mediated integration, the other foregrounding coercion, state power, and institutional frameworks of frontier governance.

Precisely because the Khotons emerged through the historical articulation of diverse populations from Central Asia and China, shaped by migration, displacement, imperial

⁷ The Chinese term *túntián* is composed of *tún*, meaning "to station or encamp (troops)" and *tián*, meaning "field" or "cultivated land".

and state interventions, intermarriage, and cultural adaptation, while their ethnonym and collective identity have also been produced through external categorizations and representations of their distinctive way of life, their ethnicization may be approached as an assemblage in Tsing's sense (2005, 2015): an open-ended and historically contingent configuration continuously reassembled through the interplay of historical memories, religious affiliations, agricultural practices, state classifications, everyday interactions, and practices of belonging. This perspective foregrounds the relational and processual character of identity formation and ethnic differentiation, moving beyond any understanding of the Khotons as a homogeneous community. This pluralism and capacity for adaptation and transformation over time also emerge clearly from Tatár Fosse's (1979) study, based on fieldwork conducted in the early 1970s among the Khotons of Tarialan, the same area where the present research was carried out. Summarising and comparing the main contributions (up to the years in which she is writing) concerning the historical facts that led to their arrival in Mongolia, the author concludes:

it seems to be apparent that the population designated by the Khoton collective name consists of several factions (*Jös, Búrúd, Xasnūd*), which have their counterparts in other Mongolian-speaking clans with similar names, apparently of Turkish origin, living in western Mongolia. Although the origin of some of their tribal names is unknown, judging by certain ones, four main components seem to emerge: 1. Kirghiz (*Burud, Šalbav, Xoc* tribes; 2. Uzbek (*Özbök - Üdzübük*); 3. Kazak (*Xasnūd, Jös*); 4. Altaic (*Šawaā*). This is reflected in their own legends of origin, which reveal a northern and a southern migration (1979: 5).

As shown in different ways by the sources discussed above, such migration involved exile, capture, or voluntary relocation. In this sense, the settlement of the Khotons can be understood as being closely tied to imperial geopolitical shifts, the urgent need in Mongolia to introduce cultivation in order to supply the army, and Qing administrative policies. In the memories of the Khotons we met – as we will see – captivity, forced labour, and discrimination are deeply felt and condensed into a violent legend: that of the “Valley of the Thousand”.

Drawing both on the literature and on our fieldwork, I argue that the Khotons can be considered a *border people* (Wilson & Donnan 1998): a group historically situated between cultural worlds, that does not fully belong to a single social order, and lives at the intersections of language, religion, economy, and mobility. Situated between (historical) Turkic and Mongol worlds, Islam and Shamanism, mobility/migration and settlement; agriculture and pastoralism, their story is one of cultural resilience through selective adaptation: the ethnogenesis Khotons of Western Mongolia reflects multiethnic origins, complex migrations, and adaptive cultural retention, maintaining some distinctiveness amid a dominant Mongol-pastoralism society.

The multiplicity of historical reconstructions, origin narratives, linguistic traces, religious practices, occupational specializations, and political classifications discussed so far suggests that the contemporary configuration of the Khotons is the outcome of an ongoing process through which heterogeneous elements have been progressively brought into relation and made socially meaningful.

In this sense, Anna Tsing's notion of assemblage, introduced above, offers a productive analytical perspective (Tsing 2005, 2015). Assemblages are open-ended and historically contingent formations emerging through unstable articulations among actors, practices, institutions, material environments, and regimes of power. From this perspective, the ethnicization of the Khotons can be understood as an assemblage process, produced through the intersection of imperial displacements, agricultural colonization projects, pastoral mobility, religious transformations, kinship networks, local memories of violence, socialist modernization policies, and contemporary heritage-making practices.

The Khoton case illustrates the processual character of ethnicity. Historical sources variously define them as sedentary Turks, Muslim farmers, descendants of prisoners of war, agricultural specialists, frontier settlers, or descendants of multiple Central Asian populations, while contemporary narratives emphasize clan affiliations, memories of suffering, agricultural expertise, and religious particularities. It is through the contingent articulation of these heterogeneous elements that forms of commonality, connectedness, and shared fate become socially salient (Brubaker 2004). What persists over time is therefore a dynamic field of relationships, continuously reshaped through the interaction between external categorizations and internal narratives, state classifications and everyday practices, memories of displacement and territorial attachments. In this sense, ethnicization temporarily stabilizes a field of relations through which memories, origin narratives, ritual practices, territorial attachments, and experiences of marginality become articulated as markers of collective difference.

1.3. (Re)building the sense of belonging and of the homeland, woven into the sense of minority

While being identified as Muslims and, at times, identifying themselves as such, the Khotons we met during our fieldwork have abandoned formal Islamic rituals, blending shamanistic practices with residual Turkic elements. Practices such as circumcision, the use of amulets, and reverence for river spirits illustrate forms of religious syncretism and cultural retention under conditions of assimilation pressure. Many of their customs and linguistic remnants reveal Turkic roots, although their current spoken language is Mongolian. As the linguists Zhakupov *et al.* (2024) highlight, in fact, the Khoton language became extinct as a result of social pressures and the adoption of the Dörvöd dialect of the Oirat language; however, elements of Turkic origin – particularly Kyrgyz – remain embedded in the language, mostly in the ritualistic one. Despite this language loss, some Turkic personal names and ritual terms persist, as we also observed during our fieldwork. The disappearance of Arabic-script readers by the 1930s (Zhamtsarano 1967) symbolizes the quiet vanishing of a distinct intellectual and religious tradition. During fieldwork, we were able to observe how Khoton burial practices, such as in-ground burial facing west and the use of coffins, starkly contrast with Mongol customs. These funerary rites point to a vestigial Islamic influence – now more ritualistic than theological – yet the maintenance of a distinct mortuary logic continues to reinforce community boundaries.

In the field, we also encountered one of the *molda* present in the area, a religious figure *sui generis* who resonates with the figure described by Stépanoff and Zarcone as “un personnage hybride à la fois soufi et chaman, mais également barde, devin et guérisseur” (2011: 27). Even in the words of the *molda*, the repetitive prayer commemorating God becomes “une incantation à caractère purement magique et perd sa fonction d’exercice mystique” (*ibid.*). This figure is attributed divinatory capacities and the ability to influence the weather through magical rituals, particularly rain-making practices.

The *molda* received us after we had waited for nearly two hours, as he had been engaged with a family; indeed – as we were told – he performs rituals for people who call upon him for a wide range of needs, in addition to presiding over the celebration of births and deaths. He possesses sacred books, which he refers to as *Šaskal*, containing prayers and divinations – especially those aimed at influencing the weather – and carries with him, enclosed in a small pouch, 21 small stones collected from areas considered sacred, often characterized by the presence of rivers or springs. According to the *molda*, there are currently 6 or 7 *moldas* in the area and 27 across the entire district.

The sense of belonging among Khotons is reinforced through a common tracing back to seven clans (*elkhen*). The fluidity and variation of clans names across time and observers (Potanin with his research, conducted between 1876 and 1877; Vladimirtsov in 1911; Badamkhatan in 1958; and Tatár Fosse in 1971) emphasize the constructed and changing character of ethnic “identity”. In a recent publication, others report: “it is said that the seven families that first arrived became the seven clans of the Khotons: Shaavai, Shalabag, Burdag, Holdog, Hochi, Holden, and Has” (see Möngöntsetseg 2024: 230). In the first days at Ulaangom, with the research team we walk on the Ulaan-Uul (Red Mountain), which majestically towers above the human construct. At its sacred water spring we encounter a man, Bayar, who immediately identifies us as foreigners and addresses us with a clear pleasure in speaking English (in fact, few people speak it). In our conversation we share with him the fact that we are interested in understanding certain aspects of the Khotons' lives. The man looks at us enthusiastically and exclaims: “I am a Khoton!”.

Without hesitation, he invites us the next day to go and visit him at his home. The family lives on a small fenced plot of land, on the edge of town (the other houses on the surrounding streets are like this too), towards the mountain. Within the fenced compound are three permanent gers and several horticultural greenhouses: three in full regimen plus others under construction. Along with this type of cultivation, there are several parts of the property used as vegetable gardens. In the greenhouses we find mainly courgettes, lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes and cabbage (fig. 7).



Figure 7 One of the greenhouses on Bayar's property. Photo by naMec, 2024

The entrance to the main ger features an additional covered structure with a cemented base. Bayar is a Khoton from this area, while his wife is Khalkha from UB, where his parents emigrated. Their way of speaking is very different. Together with them is their little boy, about 2-3 years old, who has the so-called “Mongolian spot”. They welcome us with hospitality and offer us food: for us, it is a great novelty to eat dishes cooked with those freshly picked vegetables, paired with barley, in the Mongolian countryside. One of the gers is used as an evangelical church (Pentecostal): he is a pastor. There are books and religious material in the Mongolian language, and an interesting map that shows us the “evangelical” Mongolia (see fig. 8).



Figure 8 The Ger used as an Evangelical church. Photo by naMec, 2024.

Bayar tells us that because of his beliefs he has no problem with his neighbours, while the ten Khotons living in the village do. He says that in all, there are about thirty “Christians” (as the Pentecostals call themselves) in Ulaangom, about 10 in each ethnic group. In 2021, American pastors came to visit him in Ulaanbaatar. Bayar gives us the gift of the story of his conversion⁸.

⁸ There is no opportunity here to elaborate on this theme, but it is worth remembering that the conversion narrative is central to the biography of every evangelical believer (at least when it presents itself in this aspect). Bayar uses strongly communicative facial and body expressions, along with a remarkable linguistic richness. The ethnographic work of

After continuing our lunch and conversation in the shade, we ask Bayar about the origins of the Khotons and he replies: “we are the descendants of Turkish prisoners-of-war”, without however placing this forced displacement in time.

We then show him the page of Tatar Fosse's article where the names of the tribes are listed, divided by author: he recognises those collected by Badamkhatan, (in particular: Bürd, Šava, Holidog, Šalavai, Ogotor) and claims to be descended from Ogotor⁹. Bayar argues that these groups were formed to avoid unions (interbreeding).

The next day, while visiting the Cultural Centre with the Mayor and the Head of the Culture Sector of the Tarialan district administration, we were told that the Khotons were formed from three “peoples”: 1. Turkic Peoples, 2. Kyrgyz, 3. Noyon Chagatai. The third claim, left us – the members of the research team – somewhat surprised¹⁰.

This link with India is also recalled by the Deputy Mayor, whom we met for the first time the following day at the district centre, where he welcomed us into his *ger*, set within a courtyard surrounded by wooden and masonry house. During this initial encounter, as soon as we began to share our interest in the Khotons with him, he immediately stated that the Khotons are “different people,” adding that with the end of socialism they were able to meet with the Khotons of Inner Mongolia.

Regarding the seven tribes, he states that they have different origins: the Ogotor were hunters rather than farmers, the Bayads were also originally hunters, while the Dörvöd are herders. Furthermore, according to the Mayor, the issue of the seven tribes concerns the maintenance of distinct lineages. Like Bayar, he also mentions the legend of the 40 young women, by contrast the *molda* – the religious figure we met – makes no reference to this narrative and states that the seven tribes relate to the seven men who arrived to this territory as slaves.

This aspect of “slavery,” which recurs in many of the authors cited above, remains vivid in the memories of the Khotons we met and is concretized in the legend of the “Valley of the Thousand.” In the literature, I found only one account that can be linked to this narrative, as reported by Otgon:

In 1683, these Khoton farmers were brought to Hovd by Galdan Boshugtu and started farming. In 1685, when he chose Ulaangom as a stronghold to stop the Manchurian invasion, Ilies started large-scale irrigated agriculture by attracting the Khotons he had planted in

Wood (2023) explores the emergence of the Evangelical church in Mongolia, with particular attention to the experience and perspective of pastors and leaders.

⁹ “*Ogdār*: Badamxatan’s (1958: 38) supposition, that it might be the Mongol equivalent of the Turkish *Özbök* is not proved. His *Ogotor* may have been derived from the analogy of the Mongol *ogotor* which also appears as a clean name, although similar clean names can also be found among the Kirghiz. The *-dar* element of the name can be a Turkish affix standing for plurality” (Tatar Fosse 1979: 4).

¹⁰ The historian and former ambassador of Mongolia to India, O. Nyamandavaa (2020, 2021), traces a long-term Mongol-Indian connection forged through warfare, captivity, and forced conversion under the Delhi Sultanate (14th-15th centuries), when large numbers of Mongol soldiers were taken to northern India, converted to Islam, and partially settled there, while other contingents remained along the Indo-Afghan frontier. Led by non-Chinggisid commanders linked to the Chagatai ulus (that is, the political domain allotted to Chagatai Khan), these groups formed enduring Mongol communities in Afghanistan and the Indian borderlands, preserving western Mongolian linguistic features and giving rise to hybrid populations shaped by mobility, Islamization, and imperial military networks.

Hovdo. These Khotons still live in this area and are part of the Mongolian nation. [...] In the summer of 1749, 12 families who came to Ust-Kamenogorsk in Eastern Kazakhstan reported to Russia that: "The soldiers of Oirat Dugar and Sandag came and took more *than 1000 of them by force and took them to the East Hand region*" / 20.t.28/, the number of the population is shocking (2024: 16-17, my italics).

It is essential to take up the issue evoked in the last passage of the above-mentioned text, highlighted using italics: among the Khotons with whom we have interacted, this painful and dramatic passage in their history has been reworked through the legend of the "Valley of the thousand".

In Tarialan district, in fact, there is a place known as Myangany Denzh, "The Mound or Hilltop of a Thousand" literally, or "Plateau of a Thousand", associated with a legend from the time of Galdan Boshugtu. As the director of the Uvs province Museum recounted, legend has it that "around a thousand Khoton people were gathered there. They were driven up the hill, and those who became exhausted or fell behind were killed, while only the strong and quick-witted who managed to reach the top survived. It is said that the survivors were chosen to work in agriculture, as they were considered capable and strong".

This story belongs to oral tradition, for which I have not yet found other written sources; however, together with the other members of the research team, I was able to hear it in a more dramatic version directly from Bat, who guided us to Myangany Denzh. In the days that followed, we set out in search of the path leading to the valley where, according to the Mayor's account, a heart-shaped stone lies hidden. But in that vast expanse – boundless and hushed – finding our way becomes an almost impossible task. After several attempts, we return to the village, and there, in the stillness of the square, we encounter a man in his forties, astride a motorcycle with his three children. We ask him for directions. He tries to help, but explaining the route proves difficult – for him as well for us, despite the presence of Ganaa in our team.

The man, named Bat, agrees to guide us. He explains that he needs to change vehicles – to switch to a more suitable motorbike – and signals for us to follow. He stops briefly to see his wife at one of the small shops lining the central square, close to the town hall. He changes his jacket, then rides off again, stopping once more to speak with a few people gathered near a stadium built through top-down funding between 2019 and 2020. After one final stop to refuel, we follow him in our four-wheel-drive vehicle. The road quickly dissolves into a raw, winding trail. I jot down notes in my notebook: the turns we take, the landmarks we pass, power lines, trickling streams. At one point, we cross a brook that, Bat explains, in his grandfather's time – the first mayor of the district – was so wide that no caravan could cross it. And then, the trail vanishes, becoming the dry bed of a river that snakes between two sheer rock faces. We follow it, inching forward, until we reach the great stone (figs. 9-10).



Figure 9 The dry riverbed reaching “The Mound of a Thousand”. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 10 The great stone of “The Mound of a Thousand”. Photo by naMec, 2024.

We climb down from the vehicles, approach the boulder with reverence, and begin a deep and resonant conversation with the man. He tells us that he brought here an American who has been visiting them for 20 years, and about a dozen years ago, a group of Koreans.

Ganaa: So, do you work as a tour guide?

Bat: No. [...] So those Korean people, they were from different religions. Christians, you know, they don't believe in superstitions and such things. I helped and served them out of kindness. I have 10 younger siblings, so I need money for the calves. ... Then those people ran down from the Zürhen had (Heart Rock). [...] When she [one of the Korean woman of the group] went in, she started crying. I asked, “What happened, sister?” and she said, “This is a terrifying place”. We don't believe in superstitions. prayed, and there were different shamans and religious people there. And then they said, “There is blood of people all over this place”. I was shocked. So those people sensed that many Khoton people had been killed here. I hadn't said anything about it. I hadn't said anything about how 1,000 Khoton people were killed, and that they killed a pregnant woman to make it 1,001. Those people just sensed it when they left from here.

G.: Where were people running to? Or were they running down, cut off from the mountain?

B.: They were running from here.

G.: Probably from down below, right? And then were cut off at the Zürhen had (Heart Rock), weren't they?

B.: That's what I heard.

Legend tells of a time when, each year, the Khoton were led to that dry riverbed...for a trial between life and death. A desperate race.

Only the first thousand to reach the great stone would be spared. The rest, sacrificed on the spot.

This cruel ritual endured through the years... until one day, a mother, braver than fear, hid her child beneath her skirts... and crossed the stone.

And so, the myth of the thousand shattered. The saved became a thousand and one. A quiet rebellion, a whisper of hope carved forever into memory.

The valley appeared as a landscape marked simultaneously by presence and absence, where historical violence and social marginalization persisted not only through narrative memory but also through the affective texture of the environment itself.

The Valley of the Thousand emerged as a visually charged landscape where memory, suffering, and marginality become materially anchored: photographing the valley therefore involved engaging with the tension between visibility and opacity, between what can be visually rendered and what remains affectively or historically unspoken.

B.: Do you see that corner of the rock that sticks out? That's natural.

Ganaa: Over there, there are seven trees. People consider them a symbol of the clan. And there's an oasis (Mo. *burd*) too.

G.: Everyone talks differently about the seven *elkhen* (clans, relatives, or lineages). What's your version? Is it true that the people were divided into seven clans? When we came to meet director Tsolmon, we were people from different places. Some were Turkic, some were herders, some were from hunting lineages. So the idea that there are seven *elkhen* came from that. But when I met a man [...], a *molda*, he said seven men came first and formed the seven clans. There are many different versions.

B.: You can't trust the current *molda* men. They just make up stories and record them however they like. But the seven *elkhen* are actually the seven ancestral tribes meaning brothers, kin. If you study their customs, it's very strict. It's not just about seven people coming and founding something. It's about seven brothers, seven ancestral Khoton clans. And a person from one clan cannot marry someone from the same clan. So, they are kin.

B.: But brothers can't marry each other. So, originally, they must have been completely different people, right?

Man: They are seven different brothers. And they cannot marry within their own group like, same clan can't marry same clan.

B.: Exactly. For example, if you and I were siblings, our children couldn't marry. So they must be completely different people, unrelated, no blood connection. Otherwise, if they were actual brothers, their descendants wouldn't be allowed to marry.

The seven *elkhen* offer us a glimpse into a constant and dynamic process of reshaping social boundaries and group identity in response to new contacts and bonds formed between families and communities. As is well known, origin myths are not only cosmogonic narratives but also symbolic resources through which collective identities are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized over time (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995; Smith 1999). They provide shared interpretative frameworks that connect memory, territory, ancestry, and belonging, allowing communities to articulate meaningful relationships with the past and with the places they inhabit. In this sense, founding narratives operate as

cultural devices through which social boundaries are produced and reproduced, delineating significant differences, especially in contexts of interethnic contact, political transformation, and historical displacement. From a perspective of political history of collective identities, founding myths can also be reread as *strategies of historicization*: they not only narrate a sacred origin but make it present and relevant by incorporating it into ongoing processes of identity negotiation.

This is precisely the case with the legend of the 40 young women, a myth that goes beyond explaining the genesis of a people to construct a symbolic legitimization of their alterity vis-à-vis the surrounding Mongols and to establish a privileged connection with the Turkic-Altaic universe. It is a myth that several Khotons told us during one of our trips along the Harhiraa River, and which also appears in the literature. According to tradition, the Khotons trace their origins back to a group of forty young women expelled from a royal court, who conceived not through men but by “mystical” or cosmic means, through water, a sacred and recurring element in Central Asian mythology. This mode of conception, reported by Potanin and compared by Tatár Fosse with Kirghiz variants (1979), highlights how the Khoton myth preserves a more “archaic” version of shared motifs. A distinctive detail, also emphasized by our Khoton narrators, is that only the son of the noble woman, aided by water, is destined to rule, while the children of the serving maids are not considered relatives of the future ruler. Moreover, in some variants, abandoned children are suckled by wild animals such as sheep or dogs, a motif widespread throughout Eurasia (Tatár Fosse 1979: 6). In the Khoton myth, the figure of the child suckled by a birch branch (*Urgo modon êxitej, child with a wooden mother*) stands out: not fed at the mother’s breast, the princess’s son is given a bent birch branch to suck a potent symbol that evokes notions of purity and shamanistic elements (also found elsewhere in western Mongolia and Central Asia). The noble woman, their ancestral forebear, became pregnant as a result of a stream of blood that sprang up beside a river, and later, when her son became ruler, she was cast into the water; thus sealing the kinship of the Khoton people with water. Another element of this Khoton legend is particularly noteworthy: the children of the serving maids were said to have stones as their fathers. This powerful narrative, intertwining shamanistic elements, and Turkic-Altaic mythic structures, can be regarded as an “ethnic charter”, a symbolic identity charter that situates the Khotons within a *symbolic genealogy* as a people chosen by nature and sanctioned by the divine, distinct from the surrounding Mongols and connected to Turkic-Altaic cosmologies. As such, the myth functions as an instrument of historical and cultural legitimization, reinforcing their belonging and their right to a place of dignity and equality within the Mongols.

The place of female figures and water thus appears to be central. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to consider what Ha *et al.* propose as an additional interpretation of the name Khoton : “Some scholars believe that the word ‘Khoton’ is derived from the word ‘Haton’ (“lady”, “queen”) and say that the Khotons disguised themselves as women to protect their lives and escaped persecution in history” (2023: 356).

The kinship bond with water is renewed each spring through the ritual of immersion in the Harhiraa River, linking it to agriculture in order that an abundant harvest may be

ensured. The exact date of the ritual is determined by the *molda* in accordance with the astrological calendar. It is to the sacred site where the ceremony takes place that our Khoton interlocutors brought us, recounting all of this to us on site.

The point of the river where the immersion occurs lies opposite two ovoos, one male and one female, where the first part of the ritual – the owoo worship – takes place. Participants (men only) feed the owoo deities with food and drink while circumambulating them three times in a counterclockwise direction (opposite to the direction usually practiced).

Stones are also involved in this ceremony and are thrown into the river to propitiate rain. The ritual culminates in its most important moment: the immersion of one or more young Khoton men into the waters of the river. The exclusion of women from the ritual is not justified by our interlocutors with any specific explanation, but is instead presented as a traditional rule that everyone is expected to observe.

Agricultural fertility emerges from the continuous reactivation of relationships between the Khotons and sacred entities. Within this framework, the presence of the ovoos (fig. 11) – of which we were able to collect just fragments of their story – is fundamental to understanding the connection to the land to which they were brought (or to which they migrated), a land that has become their homeland (*nutag*), linked both to their genesis (the legend of the forty women) and to the activity they were compelled to engage in, yet which has become their source of wealth: agriculture. In this regard, the observations put forward by Delaplace and Legrain – albeit for a different context of analysis – are particularly pertinent:

The fact that a collective comes to constitute a community around the owoo that marks the core of a given “homeland” (*nutag*) – and most of all the fact that it will continue to do so for the year to come, in harmony with the *nutag* itself – is not something that is granted a priori; it is the result of some harmonizing work [...] Owoo festivals indeed appear as “points of transition”, points in both a geographical and temporal sense, whereby the community’s fortune comes to depend on its proper and harmonious composition and positioning within the intense and intensely changing complexity of the cosmos (2021: 15).

As with various Tungus and Mongol peoples studied by Dumont (2017), who migrated into Northeast China (the Hulun Buir area) between the mid-18th and the 1930s and are today classified as “ethnic minorities”, ovoos affirm the territorial anchorage of the Khotons. As Charleux and Smith (2021) remind, Humphrey argues the ovoos are a way of saying “We are here” (1995: 146).

Under a visual attention, ovoos emerged as spatial nodes through which landscape, memory, and collective belonging became materially articulated. The ritual landscape appeared as a condensation of intersecting temporalities in which ancestral memory, present-day practices, and future-oriented forms of territorial continuity coexisted materially within the same environment.

Following Martínez (2018), such landscapes may be understood through the coexistence of “plural intersecting temporalities” sedimented within space and material life.



Figure 11 Ovoos. Photo by naMec, 2024.

2. Ambiguity and relational multiscalarity: construction of otherness, reification and institutional instrumentalisation

"Have you found people with dark skin?"
 "Are you anthropologists? Then here you must go to the Khotons!"
 "Did you see? They have light-coloured eyes, different, straight noses and they are dark"
 "If someone works badly or something similar, you say them, 'You are a Khoton!'"
 Notes from the Field Journal, August 2024

As we have seen, the Khotons can be considered the contingent outcome of historical changing contacts among different population groups and shifting political regimes and policies across empires and states (from the Züünger Khanate to the Qing dynasty, from the socialist era to today's neoliberalism and democracy). However, I have observed that this long and varied process may completely disappear at several relational levels: in everyday interactions among people, as well as in local or national policies, where the demarcation of an irreducible and "naturalised" difference that follows the traces of visible phenotypes is often emphasised. The words quoted at the beginning are those of a Mongolian woman from Ulaangom (the first line), two employees of the Park Authority whom we met during a meeting for our research¹¹, and Ganaa, a member of our team, who tells us about the perception of a certain widespread feeling of discrimination towards the Khotons when she lived in the capital of the province.

When asked this question for the first time during a conversation, I was a little embarrassed. Not only had I not noticed any difference in "colour", but I also sensed why I had been asked this question. The following week, during a meeting with the Deputy Mayor of Tarialan, I happened to overhear a conversation between him and Ganaa about physical features, starting with the deputy mayor saying he was very proud to be 100% Khoton. Well, looking at our companion, he asked her if she was also Khoton or had some Khoton ancestry, and when she said no, he insisted, asking her if she was sure. Other

¹¹ 3 August and 8 August 2024.

episodes related to this kind of “bodily inscription” of difference were repeated during our fieldwork. As is well known, the search for and emphasis on finding this type of evidence of difference, making it visible and materialising it through the body, are classic aspects of a historicised relationship of power imbalance between two (or more) groups sharing the same space, and are obviously present in relations between a majority and a minority¹². The same applies to the incorporation and ambiguities underlying it on the part of the members of the minority themselves, which emerge when they in turn mark these phenotypes.

Bat: There are many prominent scholars, doctors, and professors who are Khoton. But they don't identify as Khoton anymore. They change their clan names to Dörvöd or Bayad. My brother said the same 10 years ago “Brother, I want to change my ovog [“surname” literally, but here it could mean ethnic or clan name]. I don't want to be Khoton anymore.” I asked why. He said, “I want to rise up, but being Khoton holds me back”. Even someone at the level of parliament or president wouldn't go by the name Khoton. Famous wrestlers, singers who are originally Khoton now use other ovog names. That's why I wonder if your research will have any impact.

[...]

Bat: Let me say something. The reason Khoton people are like this is because of a belief, they think we are cursed. One guy even held a microphone and sang a song announcing he was Khoton in Tarialan district, and then he died after being hit by a camel.

[...] When someone declares I am Khoton during their peak [height of their success], it feels like a curse follows.

Bat tells us this while we are in the Valley of the Thousand, connecting the violence and the different value of human lives contained in the legend to current discrimination. A profound sense of minority emerges, which is also expressed through the curse, the latter also surfacing in the meeting with the Deputy Mayor of Tarialan and at other moments in the field: a curse that the Khotons would also be capable of directing at others and to which they would link particular skills/powers/energies both in rain rituals and in divination. The theme of the curse deserves particular attention.

In fact, as is well established, symbolic beliefs such as curses play a critical role in defining and maintaining social boundaries between majority and minority groups. The attribution of a curse functions as a potent cultural symbol embedded in broader systems of ethnic differentiation and power. Practices and narratives involving curses could operate as tools of exclusion and markers of ethnic identity, reinforcing the marginal status of groups like, in our case, the Khoton. These spiritual beliefs are transmitted through oral traditions and ritual practices that associate misfortune and spiritual pollution with minority groups, thus legitimizing their social distance and exclusion. Pedersen (2011) – also worked with an ethnic minority – offers a compelling account of

¹² It is important to recall here the concept of “colour of line” developed in the early 1900s by W.E.B. Du Bois (2015). The colour line is a construction, a mobile frontier, whose historical dynamics, simultaneously material and symbolic, define and “make” “whiteness” and “blackness” as well as the relational meanings of these constructions. It therefore requires a reversal of perspective: it is generated by the asymmetrical distribution of power and material and symbolic resources.

how a new generation of disillusioned shamans and laypeople in Ulaan-Uul, in Northeastern Mongolia, navigated the intensifying post-socialist crisis through volatile and unpredictable spiritual encounters, manifestations of an “occult excess” that came to dominate social life on the geopolitical margins of the Mongolian state. He further explicates how spiritual afflictions, including curses, act as explanations for both individual and communal misfortune, simultaneously maintaining social order and ethnic boundaries.

The conceptual framework provided by Douglas (1966) on purity, pollution, and taboo is especially useful for understanding these dynamics: the metaphor of curse can be seen as a form of symbolic pollution that marks minority groups as impure or dangerous, which in turn justifies their marginalization and exclusion from dominant cultural and social spheres. This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic violence, wherein dominant groups impose stigmatizing narratives that sustain social hierarchies and inequalities. Spiritual beliefs, including curses, regulate behavior and uphold ethnic hierarchies by positioning minorities as morally or spiritually “other”. The fear of curses thus functions not only as a cultural explanation of misfortune but as a mechanism of social control within the complex matrix of ethnic relations. The belief in curses among cannot be dismissed as mere superstition but must be understood as an integral aspect of cultural identity formation and social stratification. These beliefs both reflect and reproduce historical patterns of marginalization, serving as symbolic markers that maintain ethnic boundaries and perpetuate social exclusion, contributing to the very process of racialization of the Khotons¹³.

Scientific thinking, with a long history dating back more than 100 years, also plays a role in the construction of “naturalised” and “essentialised” differences, which, once transformed into “things”, can be used in various ways by both the majority and the minority. The description provided by Vladimirtsov, later taken up by Zhamtsarano (1967)¹⁴ echoes in contemporary works by some Mongolian ethnologists who continue along lines of thought established during the socialist era, which emphasized ethnic identity as central objects of research:

The physical appearance and physiognomy of the Khotons are quite different from the Mongols according to the report of the scholar Vladimirtsov, who wrote “The Turkic Minority Group Called Khoton”, after having investigated them in 1911, and according to the second chapter of the work called “North-west Mongolia”, which describes the travels of Potanin from 1876 to 1877, and also the observations of the student Ceringdorji who went there in 1924 and 1925. The eyes are deep-set and large; the nose, straight and long; the hair of

¹³ Racism can in fact be defined as the naturalisation of bodily difference and – starting from this – race is understood as the “racialised” naturalisation of the social, cultural, gender and class position assigned to the subject.

¹⁴ The 1967 publication consists of the translation of several pages concerning the Khotons (ivi: 62–70) from Zhamtsarano's book on the minorities of Mongolia, originally published in 1934. He was a Buryat Mongolist and ethnographer operating within the intellectual and institutional circuits of the early Soviet sphere, where scholarship was closely entangled with projects of state formation and social reorganization. His 1934 study was conceived not simply as descriptive ethnography but as a systematic, classificatory account of minority populations, their “origins and conditions,” designed to render them legible for administration, enumeration, and governance while standardizing knowledge on language, ritual, and social life.

the beard is plentiful, and so forth. This are characteristics of the Turkic race (Zhamtsarano 1967: 12).

In contemporary texts, such descriptions are reproduced, together with an emphasis on other characteristics that come to be essentialised, such as: “Khoton people different than Mongolians in anthropology; they have green cavernous eyes, higher roman nose. [...]. The Khoton Mongolian population is a small and relatively isolated ethnic group [...]” (Erkhembayar *et al.* 2024) and “The Khotons, who live in Tarialan district of Uvs Province, are considered to be part of the Western Mongolians of Mongolia, or Oirad Province, but they are an independent ethnic group that still maintains its unique cultural heritage” (Otgon 2024:15), and further on:

The Khoton people are anthropologically distinct from the Mongols. In the past, they had large eyes, a high nose, a long beard, and a Turkic-like appearance and physique. Today, they have changed to resemble the Mongols of neighboring regions. The Khoton people are very talented in singing, dancing, and playing the *khur*, which shows that they have inherited the cultural heritage of the peoples of Central Asia (ivi: 18).

The attribution of stable bodily features and inherited cultural dispositions to the Khotons illustrates how processes of ethnicisation can slide into forms of racialization. Such representations risk transforming contingent historical trajectories into essential properties of the group itself, reinforcing the perception of ethnicity as an immutable condition rather than as a relational and historically situated process. This link between a “classic” representation of a group as an “ethnicity” characterised by a specific language, culture and “physicality”, and the supposed preservation over time (centuries) of a unique cultural heritage, clearly illustrates the risk of treating local knowledge as “essentialising” folklore. As we shall see, by setting them apart, a difference has been institutionalised in their regard after having been naturalised.

Qinfu Ha, in his study on the ethnic designation of the Khoton (2025) highlights how in the course of Mongolia’s modern nation-state building formation, processes of cultural integration and identity reconfiguration gradually transformed “Khoton” from an externally imposed label (exonym) into a term of self-designation (autonym). This transformation reveals that the delineation of ethnic identity involves both self-perception construction and external sociopolitical shaping, ultimately emerging as a dialectical negotiation through historical intergroup dynamics between the in-group and out-group.

During our visits to the village of Tarialan, we encountered what we might describe as the “remains” of a “reifying” heritage process originally oriented toward foreign tourism: the closed hotel and the small museum with English captions inside the Cultural Centre (figs. 12-13). This was accompanied by the frequent reiteration, in our conversations with Khoton interlocutors, of the inscription of the *bii biyelgèè* dance on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. While this insistence can be understood as an expression of local pride, it also highlights how this form of recognition has neither generated nor sustained over time the kinds of effects

that many Khoton interlocutors had hoped for, such as increased visibility, popularity, tourism, or economic return. Balanchier (2023) offers a critical reading of the UNESCO heritagisation process through which this dance was recognised, noting that the inscription of the *bii biyelgèè* at UNESCO took place in a context marked by intense heritage effervescence, as part of a broader movement aimed at protecting and promoting Mongolian national identity.

Within this process, one can observe the full ambiguity of a valorisation of the Other that is grounded in its essentialisation, operating within a problematic relationship between the majority and the minority, in which processes of marginalisation are simultaneously at work. This is by no means an isolated case: aspects of a discriminated minority frequently enter into the dynamics of national identity construction, and, in the realm of dance, the case of Romani flamenco in Spain is emblematic.



Figure 12 Some artifacts displayed in the Tarialan museum. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 13 Main square of Tarialan. Photo by naMec, 2024.

Have contested their stigmatisation by adopting the discourse of local heritage protection to defend novel, globally-circulating conceptions of heritage, it seems that for a certain years, some opportunities were given, but it also seems that a top-down approach quickly prevailed, which at times was completely detached from the context. This top-down process was driven by the government and supported by wealthy individuals – some of whom also held political positions at the district level – during an initial period, when funding and formal forms of recognition, including that associated with the dance, were provided. However, these individuals gradually began to withdraw their support once they realised that their power within the village and their decision-making autonomy were being threatened by external actors endowed with greater political and economic authority.

In this regard, the case that stands out most in our view, and which represents a clear example in this respect, is that of the mosque, which we find not only abandoned because it is no longer used, but also partly reused by residents as a storage facility (figs. 14-15).



Figure 14 Overview of the Mosque complex. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 15 Sign and entrance door of the Mosque complex. Photo by naMec, 2024.

We are told that this mosque was built in 2008 and that a Mulla came from outside, a Kazakh, belonging neither to the community nor to the territory. Initially, it had about ten followers, who gradually stopped attending. By 2013, attendance had completely ceased, and the mosque was closed permanently in 2021. It appears that some of the villagers intend to build a new mosque (although we do not understand whether this is a popular initiative or one promoted by the local authorities/Khoton élites): the land is just on our right where we are sitting talking to our Khoton interlocutor, waiting for the *molda*. The years of the mosque's construction, the application for and granting of UNESCO recognition for "folk dancing", the museum exhibition and the construction of the hotel are all the same: all in the second half of the 2010s.

Being free, together with colleagues from the research team, to consult the library of the Tarialan Cultural Centre, I came across a range of texts, ranging from "grey" literature on the "traditions" and "customs" of the Khotons to publications on the district and various reports. Some of these texts particularly attracted my attention, among them a book entitled *Khoton Türkleri*, published in Ankara in 2015 by TİKA - Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, which operates under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, founded in 1992 with the aim of establishing strong collaborations with the countries of Central Asia in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics (USSR). The book, which is written in a reportage style (it is edited by a journalist-writer and his team, with a remarkable collection of photographs), is an extremely interesting “political” product, which gives us the opportunity to see what a minority can become within a landscape of relations between states, which bring with them economic interests and the assertion of wide-ranging political, religious and cultural influences. In this sense, the presentation of the work by the president of TIKA exemplifies how history and culture can be strategically mobilized as instruments of political rhetoric, intertwining an ancestral “kinship” still considered present between Turks and Mongols, and invoking a claimed responsibility: elements used as a “natural” motivational basis for Turkey’s operations in Mongolia.

Within the materials consulted in the library, I found further evidence of the intertwining of institutional attention and the involvement of foreign actors, in particular in the book *Sum Economic Development Strategy 2007-2015* written in English by the Tarialan district administration and the Tarialan district core team (Munkhsoyol *et al.* 2007), which mixes the issue of recognition and improvement of the Khoton minority, including cultural heritage, with the economic development of the territory, in the undefined period of the so-called “transition economies”. In this case, the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Open Society Forum (OSF) are directly involved, as well as the Centre for Policy Research¹⁵. A major strategic focus identified by the *Strategy* is the cultural and tourism potential linked to the “Khoton ethnic group”, which – it is claimed – “has preserved their indigenous customs, cultural practices, and historical heritage over centuries” (pp. 67-68). Though tourism is not yet developed – the text specifies – Tarialan has high potential due to its natural landscapes – such as the Harhiraa-Turgen mountains and Uvs Nuur basin – and unique ethnic traditions (ivi: 32).

It is here that we find traces of the project for the construction of the local mosque – conceived as a “safeguard of the Khoton’s religious and cultural identity” – which was subsequently implemented and ultimately failed, as we observed during fieldwork. Alongside this essentializing reading, on which a top-down interpretation and implementation of a presumed form of “cultural valorization” is based, the expected outcomes of the Strategy also include the reduction of social issues such as alcohol use and crime (ivi: 78). Additional strategic projects further aim to improve education – through school and kindergarten reconstruction – and healthcare, through hospital upgrades (ibid.). These latter aspects also appear in the Education Quality Reform Project Indigenous People Planning Framework (2013), a plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Mongolia implemented with support from the World Bank. In this governmental document, the Khotons, together with other minority groups (including Kazakh, Tsaatan, Tuva, and Dukha), are defined as “Indigenous Peoples”. According to the World Bank’s definition, the term “Indigenous Peoples” is used in a generic sense to refer to a distinct, vulnerable social and cultural group possessing certain characteristics to varying degrees¹⁶.

¹⁵ We cannot delve into the complex and intricate role of donors in Mongolia since the end of socialism here. For a critical view on the subject, see Ichinkhorloo 2021.

¹⁶ See <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/833801468053412190>

The Khoton's relationship with surrounding actors – be they other Mongolian groups, the central state, or foreign institutions or foundations, such as TIKA or the Open Society – reveals a continuous tension between visibility and invisibility, between recognition and marginalization, between pride and disavowal. The case of the Khoton people exemplifies the complex processes through which minority identities are shaped, negotiated, and often marginalized across multiple levels: from everyday interactions to political rhetoric, from local narratives to international agendas.

What might appear as a “simple” ethnic belonging is, in fact, a multilayered construct, charged with historical, symbolic, and material significance, a space where social hierarchies are reproduced, cultural boundaries are reinforced, and political and economic roles are constantly redefined.

The so-called “cultural valorizations” highlight the ambivalence of external interventions, which may create opportunities but also risk essentializing identities or imposing top-down visions disconnected from local realities. Our fieldwork has clearly shown that knowledge and rituals – especially those related to water – continue to play an active role in the contemporary context, but their symbolic significance in the dynamics of political and “ethnic” recognition seems to have been sucked dry by mainstream “development” logic and practices and by internal dynamics that have seen the role of the Khoton élites prevail as privileged interlocutors in the political initiatives implemented.

Conclusion

Khotons display a historically deep and distinctive intertwining of agricultural and pastoral activities. This configuration unsettles conventional oppositions between sedentariness and mobility, revealing livelihoods forged through long-term adaptation to shifting political regimes, ecological constraints, and social hierarchies. These lines and “knots” (Ingold 2015) formed through the stratification of events and generations constitute useful interpretive tools for understanding the contemporary context. Their identity emerges as a negotiated practice, shaped across multiple scales of recognition and within unequal relations of power.

The Khoton emerge as the “product” of connections, displacements and mobilities, classifications, memories, ritual practices, and public policies. For this reason, the Tsing's concept of assemblage provides particularly appropriate analytical lens for understanding the contingent, relational, and historically situated processes through which they are continually constituted.

The legends the Khotons of Tarialan pass down – of the Valley of the Thousand, of the Forty Women – operate as performative narratives that mediate their relationship with territory, suffering, and state power.

The complexity of Khoton religious practices further illustrates this processual understanding of identity. Islamic references, shamanic and animist elements, divination, and rituals coexist within the same families and individuals, keeping classificatory boundaries open. This is not to overlook the early stages of Pentecostal influence, marked by the conversion of ten families, an emerging phenomenon that deserves further

analytical attention. These embodied practices sacralize space, anchor belonging in a symbolic geography of displacement, and mediate political visibility, enabling forms of autonomy within regimes that tend to reify ethnic difference. Yet belonging remains a field of tension, where everyday practices reveal multiscale negotiations of identity.

The analysis also highlights the ambiguity of contemporary recognition itself. Processes of valorization that seek to acknowledge cultural difference also operate through essentializing logics that fix and reify it. Within a problematic majority-minority relationship, visibility becomes inseparable from categorization.

By tracing identity through embodied interactions with landscape, history, and knowledge, this study conceptualizes ethnicity as a relational “choreography,” continuously reshaped by context and by the micropolitics of belonging. This approach brings to the fore the invisible work of becoming and feeling one is a Khoton. Finally, within this framework, photography contributed to tracing the material, spatial, and sensory dimensions of ethnicization, following how belonging is continuously negotiated also through landscapes, infrastructures and ritual spaces. The images produced during fieldwork should therefore be understood as a way to engaging with the fragility and ongoing transformation of everyday social worlds. In fact, some of the spaces, practices, and material configurations documented during fieldwork were already in the process of changing, disappearing, or being reconfigured. Martínez describes this condition as an “anthropology of a vanishing object,” in which ethnography confronts environments and forms of life that exist within processes of rapid transformation and disappearance (2018: 8).

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Shining Bright? Gallery Hopping through the Ambivalent Radiance of the
Gem Trade

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Abstract

While “gems” have identical underlying physical properties to rocks, gems have commodity status as art objects. This essay synthesizes experiences investigating these “geological freaks” and their culture(s) at the point of sale. “Gallery hopping” through a large show in Arizona, I visually explored the labor(s) involved in this ambivalent field, which permitted theoretical contemplation on the importance of what I discuss as the *ecstatic dimensions of capitalist aesthetic experience*. Thus, the essay provides greater purchase on the social meaning of gems and the cultural import of the multiple facets of the industry’s intersections with the economy, art markets, the built environment, and everyday life.

Keywords

Gem and Mineral Industry; Atmospheres and Ecstasy; Production of Space; Visual Ethnography; Arizona, USA; Emotions and Space

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"Conceived as ecstasies...Aesthetic work in all its dimensions come into view...one can see that precisely speaking an artist is not concerned with giving a thing - whether a block of marble or a canvas-certain qualities, formed or coloured in such and such a fashion, but in allowing it to go forth from itself in a certain fashion and thereby make the presence of something perceptible."

Gernot Böhme (1993: 122)

"Oh my god! One is thirsty in the desert, and what to drink, but Coke. The perfect commodity. Why?... A commodity is an object that is full of theological, even metaphysical niceties. Its presence always reflects an invisible transcendence. And the classical publicity for Coke refers to this absent, invisible quality. Coke is the real thing. Or, Coke that's it. What is that *it* - *the real thing*? It's not just another positive property of Coke - something that can be described, pinpointed through chemical analysis. It is *that mysterious something more*. The indescribable excess that is the cause of my desire."

Slavoj Žižek (2012)

"Geological Freaks" and their Ecstasies

How does one study gems ethnographically? To put it more precisely, what is culturally interesting about rocks? Estimated at more than \$30 billion, the global gemstone market is robust, with a long, if problematic, history. Yet, while gems may have identical underlying physical properties to rocks and minerals, gems have a commodity status approximating that of art objects, thus further differentiating them from stock resources that are widely mined around the world, like copper or gold.

Many factors influence gem value. There is no single dimension that determines price. For example, an important variable is the processing of the specimens. High profile, professional gem dealers will have special machines or even specific people they engage on a regular basis to provide the finishing touches, like polishing, so as to present the gems in the best possible light - to transform and therefore to distinguish gems from rocks, making them into, as my interlocutors often mentioned: *objets d'art*.

As part of a larger project into notions of beauty and their connection to mining and the gem industry, I became attentive - through my interlocutors at the 2025 Tucson Gem and Mineral Showcase - to the fact that it is in the rather metaphysical dimensions that one creates the gem as a commodity. The culture surrounding gems therefore revolves around what, aesthetically and therefore socially, designates its "value" beyond the labor of the miners, of the maritime labor involved in global shipping, and that of the prospector, the cutter, and the lapidarist. Indeed, the distinction about gems, rocks, and minerals is made clear in innumerable beginner level prospecting books:

- "Minerals are homogenous inorganic solids composed of either a single element or chemical compound. Most important, minerals have a definite crystalline structure resulting from an orderly spatial arrangement of atoms."
- "Rocks are aggregations of minerals similar to concrete, a man-made rock, composed of a variety of minerals cemented together."

- "'Gem' is a term of art, not science. Both rocks and minerals can qualify as gems. Gems are the best examples of species judged according to their beauty, durability, and rarity. As such they are geological freaks because their size, color, hardness, or other attributes are so unusually rare as to make them rocks to kill for" (Bearce 1999: 7).

Thus, the gem trade presents itself, on an ethnographic level, as a point of interest due to the (potentially violent) distinctions between art and commodities, and the types of variable labor involved in what can be seen and unseen in these processes. These first indications also show how intimately visual gems are. They are thoroughly connected to sight. Such issues can be a useful point of departure for a social and cultural analysis of *the becoming of gems*, that is, about how a "rock" undergoes its transformation into a "gem," which marks its designation as, no longer just another piece of "rough," but as a piece of "art," something beautiful to behold. In this way, I have utilized visual ethnography as a means to begin an inquiry into the aesthetics of a particular field of material culture.

To study gems, I have found the growing field of research and philosophy concerning atmospheres as essential to my analysis. In my view, atmospheres are always tied to aesthetic concerns and therefore much work remains to be done at the intersections of the literatures on the sociology of art and broader concerns in philosophy, anthropology, and cultural geography. Some of this work has already begun as scholars have investigated the social meaning of light. For instance, *prizing* the possibilities for a cultural anthropology of light, Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen discuss how visible wavelengths and their interaction with "things," i.e., the inanimate world, afford opportunities for multiple social practices and for understanding the interconnectedness of a multiplicity of actions (Bille and Sørensen 2007). They argue these may include intimacy, inclusivity, exclusion, hospitality, and other means of orchestrating movement in a variety of settings from the banal to the grand. "Lightscapes," as they call them, are thus shaped by social priorities and contingencies across a variety of spatio-temporal realms and objects. Within Bille and Sørensen's program for developing ethnographic perspectives on light, they point to a key underlying principle: *ecstasy*. Light has certain *ecstatic qualities*, a notion they explore that emerges from German philosopher Gernot Böhme's work. In other words, what is distinctive about light is its quasi-absence. In fact, this points to shadow. The so called 'play of light' is always about a relationship, or a dialectic, of 'light' and 'dark,' of seen and unseen. Such an interpretation of light and its impact on the non-kin sociality afforded by architectures and objects thus builds on Böhme's theory of atmospheres (Böhme and Thibaud 2016). For Böhme, and those scholars working at the intersections of emotion and society, light is a productive, if always in-between force, such that light's interactions with spaces and things has a *spilling-over-effect* that generates sensuous experiences. As the opening quotation to this essay indicated, Böhme argues that even in the realm of fine art itself, the author of the work of art is never so much concerned with the art object in and of itself as they are with what he calls the going forth of the art, thus its spilling out into the world as a kind of force predictive of something beyond the thing itself, that is, an atmosphere. The atmospheres

of places can then inform how people react to those spaces as 'cosy', as 'cold,' 'uninviting,' etc. Put differently, Böhme and others implore us to consider how a thing's presence is always imposing itself, through a form of articulation with the social, on other nearby, or even seemingly distant, places, or geographies. This "tincturing" of social life (Bille, Bjerregaard, and Sørensen 2015: 60) is, I argue, a productive starting point for thinking through the cultures and labors surrounding gems. Take, for example, some illustrative encounters from the 2025 Tucson Gem and Mineral Showcase.

Gallery Hopping through Mineral City

It's February and I am in the middle of what is called 'Mineral City' on the edges of downtown Tucson, Arizona. This location was founded in 2020 to provide a permanent storage and business solution for gem and mineral dealers. Here, while not specifying its discourse around gems as 'art,' per se, there is still an emphasis on minerals as art objects and a certain degree of presentation. A main difference I observe, compared to many other locations across the showcase, is in how people engage with the space – it is intended largely to be either a kind of museum for the public, emphasizing a pedagogical dimension (one stated mission for the Tucson Gem and Mineral Society), or for serious mineral and gem collectors who are looking for very specific 'pieces.' As one commentor on a Tucson Gem and Mineral Showcase Reddit (a free to access, online discussion board) thread proclaims: "Mineral City is like the *Louvre* at this point, you need more than a day to see it all!" (emphasis added).¹

This kind of elite notion, demarcating Tucson as the Paris of the American West, when it comes to gems anyway, is interesting to note. I was told by several dealers that it was their desire to eventually have a location in Mineral City. It is considered one of the best locations to do business, hosting 150 dealers and 13 warehouses located just outside of the central downtown district: "People do business out of these warehouses year-round. There's truly nothing like it in the world" (Hicks 2025: 18).

Furthermore, Tucson is considered a unique destination for its other atmospheric qualities in terms of weather and the time of year when the event is held: "another part of it is just everybody wants to come to Tucson. It's a great time of year weather-wise. Another factor is that many buyers need to see and feel rocks that they want to purchase" (Hicks 2025: 21). Thus, the sensory experience at the level of the buyers is vitally important. This issue is something that the proprietors of Mineral City have spoken about in their interview with the trade publication Tucson EZ Guide:

"what are we, as basically older brick-and-mortar guys, doing to facilitate these guys in their business? We are trying to do just that at Mineral City. We're providing a room here that we allow people to use at any time. We're having concerts and outdoor stuff to draw people in after dark. And my feedback from that idea was

¹ The thread of this post can be found online here:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Minerals/comments/1i52gth/any_firsttimers_headed_to_the_tucson_gem_mineral/?rdt=52010

that wow, you know, there weren't that many people in the parking lot, but when you walk through the halls, everybody's rooms had people in them. They came to listen to music and to eat some barbecue, but they came to do business" (Hicks 2025: 19-20).

And so, having just made the rounds at a number of the brick-and-mortar warehouse structures as I move through Mineral City, I notice a space that is very 'in-between.' It is neither brick, nor mortar, nor a location that was the ubiquitous white tent, modular environment also taking up huge swaths of the city to protect tourists and gem dealers from the sun and elements. The outward appearance of this location I happened-upon actually approximated the white tent locations but was made of foldable metal panels. I decide to head into it.

Inside, it is a small bazaar like scenario. There is a hodge-podge of minerals from the U.S., Japan, Eastern Europe and more. Here I meet a miner who is new to the game, having sold another business a few years before to finally follow his dream of prospecting. As I talked to him, he told me that his motivation was as follows: "I wanted to invest in something that had a history to it." As he quickly discovered though, it was not all about being in the field digging, but to a great degree about *performance*, about going to events, and keeping spreadsheets to track and project earnings and losses. Having just been to the Phoenix, Arizona area shows in the central part of the state, he made his way with his haul to Tucson. He brought with him a "new find," specimens from a fluorite mine discovered near Tombstone, Arizona.

Talking with him and his business partner, I discussed some of the dynamics and hierarchies of the showcase, and we discussed distinctions between "gem people" and exhibits from "the mineral side."

Fluorite Miner 1: "Yeah, the mineral side is (pauses) more earthy. Real people. You know? The other seems to be (pauses)."

Author: "Business people?"

Fluorite Miner 1: "Yeah, high end or think more highly of themselves than they should, ya know?"

As I keep talking, I also notice that these miners have copious imagery, using visuals throughout their exhibit. Although, it is unlike the more formal gallery spaces present elsewhere, these almost all look to be wide-angle, low-resolution images of the actual mining process. I ask them why I do not see more images like this rather than the carefully crafted art prints in the gem galleries:

Fluorite Miner 2: "Yeah, people like to keep that really close to the vest."

Author: "Is that for ethical reasons or because they are afraid somebody is going to exploit it and find out about it?"

Fluorite Miner 2: "I think it's more the latter. People are afraid it's going to get exploited. I don't really care, you know what I mean. I don't want people to exploit it obviously, but I like being able to share stories and information about what's goin' on. Because it was only a year and half ago that I got into mining. And before that, I would

have given anything to just sit here and talk to somebody that is actually doing it. So, it's nice to be able to share that...This [event] is helping us fund our next trip...If I can get it [this show] to pay for itself and maybe make my initial investment back then, you know, I'd be happy."

In the course of the conversation, and as a result of making the digital images and being able to quickly review them, I observed how the light from the surrounding area was spilling into this location, further underlining questions at the intersections of ambiance and distinction. Indeed, the images from this locale all had a noticeable pink hue. Why? Looking into the finer details of the images, I finally saw the reason - the adjacent building. This structure is called The Arkenstone, and it is painted in bright pink. As the sunlight reflected off the building's surface, the light diffused, quite literally spilling into the adjoining building where I was talking with the miners. I asked the fluorite miners about how they felt about their place within the show and the market compared to the garish pink building, which specializes in selling very highly regarded gems.

Fluorite Miner 2: "Oh yeah, It's totally different [there] Yeah. They are big money. I mean, maybe that's the difference between a company like that that can have ten plus employees or whatever."



Figure 1 February 5, 2025 - Fluorite Miner with his quarries. Notice the reflection in the glass and the white surfaces of the structure that take on the pink hue of the adjacent building - a "gem gallery," that spills into the surroundings of this structure and its environment. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.

But, as I would learn, the proprietor of the ecstatic pink building and his success in no way can be boiled down to a technical interpretation - the early adoption of the internet to sell gems. Instead, this was a project of decades of inspired work.

Named after a mythical gem from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, The Arkenstone is one of the largest free standing gem gallery spaces that is privately owned and operated year-round that is connected to the gem show, although the main base of operations for The Arkenstone company is in Dallas, Texas. While the building itself is a former restaurant, it has now been entirely painted in pink, with graffiti art by New York City based artist Tim Goodman.² Throughout the past three decades of activity, it, and its founder, a former biochemistry scholar, have been active at the Tucson Showcase. And the online dimension of his work has long been under the name "irocks.com." The promotional material from when the pink mural was made described it as follows:

"The new mural on the side of The Arkenstone's location incorporates the culture of the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, featuring mining imagery, species names, and some Tucson flare with cacti and nods to the mountains and desert... and even Gollum, as an acknowledgement of the origin of The Arkenstone's name."³



Figure 2 February 5, 2025 - The exterior of The Arkenstone in Tucson. A postmodern wonder and palimpsest in Mineral City. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.

² <https://www.tgoodman.com>

³ https://www.irocks.com/artist-creates-a-mural-for-the-arkenstone?srsId=AfmBOorDMDq56Pga6uc9HsZuafdWEpuN-agZilQSsFuqc_nk-eq5OM97

Indeed, the reference to Tolkien, persistently mentioned in the promotional material for the site, is surprisingly relevant in the context of thinking about “gems” as opposed to minerals. A large part of the context for the *Lord of the Rings* in fact deals in resource struggles, specifically around the desire of elves and men to extract and exploit the resources of dwarves, who mine from their mountain dwellings. It is thus both an apt, yet paradoxical name for a business predicated on the mining and curation of specific products of earthly and human labor, as contemporary readings of Tolkien take his themes to be a critical social and even geopolitical commentary (Santra 2021). Indeed, even Goodman’s choice to include the Gollum figure is a strange celebration of a character whose existence was ruined by allowing life to be ruled and overcome by a lustful allure of mineral derived objects and their power. As opposed to *silma*, the main mineral resource in question as part of the underlying backstory to the famous *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as it produces the famous “rings” around which much of the story revolves, The Arkenstone is rather distinguished by Tolkien as a thing that *radiates* certain qualities linked to specifically atmospheric notions. In other words, it is a gem:

“...But fairest of all was the great white gem, which the dwarves had found beneath the roots of the Mountain, the Heart of the Mountain, the Arkenstone of Thrain... ‘The Arkenstone! The Arkenstone!’ murmured Thorin in the dark, half dreaming with his chin upon his knees. ‘It was like a globe with a thousand facets; it shone like silver in the firelight, like water in the sun, like snow under the stars, like rain upon the Moon!’ (Tolkien 2012: 212 and 243).

The Tolkienian inspiration here is further interesting because of the deployment of light in creating *silmarils*, which are three jewels created by Fëanor the elf, which were especially significant because they contained the light of the elf gods (the Valar), from two trees of Valinor (elf heaven), the original source of middle-earth’s light, according to the story. And so, like the Arkenstone of Tolkien’s tales, the structure at the Tucson Showcase radiated and tintured the experience of the event along multiple dimensions, a product of elite craftsmanship.



Figure 3 February 2, 2025 - Inside the China Collection at The Arkenstone. Polished malachite in the foreground. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.

And so, in this photo-essay, utilizing my method of layering images and text together into a larger sequence to expand interpretive possibilities (O'Neill 2025), I explore some of these underlying conceptual and material concerns, such as tincturing, and the issues about what goes seen and unseen in the context of the gem trade.

The showcase takes place from the end of January and runs through the second week of February on an annual basis. 2025 was the 70th anniversary. The event is widely regarded as the single most important such event, not only in the U.S., but in the world, particularly from a professional perspective in terms of access to materials, networking, and business to business gem and mineral practices (Rambo 2020). As one flier I collected during the event stated in bold letters, it is: "THE LARGEST, OLDEST and MOST PRESTIGIOUS GEM AND MINERAL SHOW IN THE WORLD." As a large and prestigious event, there has been consistent news media attention, often repeatedly fascinated by the spectacle of the showcase and its size given the fact that it is not in a location that is geographically nor culturally central within the American economy or art worlds. For example, *The New York Times* has called the show, an

"emporium for almost every variety of gem in the world, from \$10 slabs of rough amazonite to \$100,000 specimens of faceted zircon...world class jewelers from houses such as Boucheron and Tiffany and Company and newcomers just getting started on Etsy cruise the aisles looking for one-of-a-kind stones" (Gomelsky and Noble 2023).

Here the notion of an emporium obviously recalls the bazaar notion of many tourist places and spaces, places brimming with atmosphere – the recreation of a bazaar being an ideal, although always in a sanitized, watered-down manner (Edensor 2007). Concerning the Tucson Showcase, the city, and the tourism companies connected to it, report that the event is “Tucson’s most valuable event” with a 2019 assessment estimating attendance at 65,000 visitors with 4,882 exhibitors from 44 countries and 44 states. The economic impact has been estimated at \$131 million in direct spending and \$13 million in tax revenue garnered by the city (Gomelsky and Noble 2023).

But, what does this event reveal, as well as hide? What labors does it involve, and what stories does it tell us about the work involved in making value from rocks? Here, I offer that a visual ethnographic essay is a uniquely suited starting point for the task of unpacking these questions.



Figure 4 February 8, 2025 - A display in the HABITS exhibit at the Tucson Fine Mineral Gallery complete with specific light to reflect through the gems and props that are to invoke the natural elemental nature of the gems. Notice too, the white display case and the specific acrylic base mounting the pyrite on Quartz from Peru in the top-center of the image. Almost all the other cases seen in the showcase were black, but here the white further allows for the articulation of color and use of spotlights. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 5 February 1, 2025 – A large geode (often conspicuous and given pride of place in open air shows like this one situated on a parking lot along the highway) is split in half and displayed, being sold by a company from Uruguay. In the shade, taking some time off from carting around stock, a worker has a cigarette and sits on some packing boxes. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 6 February 1, 2025, inside a hotel situated along a nearby highway. The seller is new to the job, but it is a family business. From Amsterdam, the family mines this specimen of dark blue beryl from Afghanistan: "Look, you don't come across it normally. It has color shift...it is published in some magazines and my uncle discovered it actually...*They* were mining, and they just found a pocket of this dark blue beryl...But it is the color shift(ing) that makes them really *one of a kind*." Throughout the presentation, he shines the light through it for to see the color shift and its qualities better. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 7 February 2, 2025. Another show - one that was reportedly “hidden” and “unofficial” taking place in a hotel along the highway outside of downtown. Theft is a major issue, but experienced buyers know to handle wrapping and shipping their purchases and product on their own and using intermediaries they trust. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O’Neill, 2025.



Figure 8 February 2, 2025, inside one of the showcases in the Mineral City complex, where the seller specializes in African specimens. A collector from Taiwan makes a purchase and has the material sent home - a fluorite piece. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O’Neill, 2025.



Figure 9 February 2, 2025, inside another stall at the Mineral City Complex. Iconography, like this miner hewn from minerals itself, is ever-present, further emphasizing the habit-forming quality of mineral and gem collecting and the passion for the materials that many collectors hold. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 10 February 4, 2025, on the outskirts of Tucson and on the outer edges of the Kino Show, a place labelled by journalists as the “scruffiest” of the shows at the whole event. Here, the proprietor, who drives in his RV across the country from the Midwest was thrilled to show off his collection of copper and other specimens, all self-collected, and displayed using materials at hand. During the night, he was hired by a larger seller to be the security guard for several stalls in the area. Coming to the show for decades, he reports his love of the materials, but also pedagogy: It’s all passion. I love it. It’s not work. I love to do it, you know? I love to see the people – their reactions to stuff because they’ve never seen it. And I love to explain it to ‘em and then they say, ‘wow I didn’t know that!’” Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 11 February 4, 2025 - Serious and Casual collectors alike wander the Kino Show on peripheries of the city of Tucson amidst open air containers and tent structures, all laid out on an enormous tarmac parking lot. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 12 February 4, 2025 - On the edges of the Kino Show, a huge number of medium sized geodes stand for sale and workers clean up in the hot sun. The seller intends to offload these geodes, not as single items, but in bulk amounts, hoping to make sales to, for example, the many gem and mineral dealers all around the American Southwest who own rock and spiritualist shops. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 13 February 5, 2025 - a military veteran who has found work manning one of the “showcase” rooms along the highway surveys a room full of Turkish purple (lavender) jade - *Ketaya* (from the Bursa region, as it was reported to me). “My boss owns the only mine of purple jade. If you see anybody else with purple jade, it’s because they bought it from him. Sometimes they will buy it rough and create their own, or sometimes they’ll buy here and then resell.” New to the business, he finds the gems beautiful “I’ve been learning as I go, but if I keep in this business, I’m sure I’ll end up getting some.” Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O’Neill, 2025.



Figure 14 February 7, 2025 - On the peripheries of the city, a large indoor complex houses the JOGS Show. JOGS is a company that runs these types of events all over the country throughout the year. Unlike the highly curated gallery spaces near the center of the city, much is makeshift here, and there is no attempt made to balance warm and cool light temperatures for displays and workers are attempting to sell by

marketing their materials at apparently steep discounts. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 15 February 7, 2025 - Inside the large JOGS Show complex. A French prospector has taken his family through the entirety of the Americas on a three-year roadtrip. Collecting as they go, he found the JOGS show online and attempts to sell a variety of items, from mineral specimens to gems and even artifacts that he has come across along the way. However, he hopes to get into one of the shows that is more central to downtown to be able to sell more material as he has been a bit disappointed by the clientele here. Additionally, and partly because the U.S. leg of the trip has been so expensive, he is considering returning to South America, where a mining company has made him a standing offer to help them mine as a kind of consultant. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 16 February 16, 2025 - Inside the 22nd street show complex. Promoted as “the oldest show” amidst the event, it draws large crowds and diverse buyers and sellers. One can get anything from rugs and baskets

to Jade from China. The interest in gems stemming from Tolkein's stories can start at a young age - the boy in this image sports a Lord of the Rings t-shirt with a map of Middle -earth on the front. Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 17 February 16, 2025, at the Miner's Coop show. Particularly in love with Smoky Quartz and Zambian Emeralds, this miner from Colorado has been coming to this show for years. He prefers the Miner's coop, because nobody wears suits there. He has tried to make prospecting his sole source of income, but that has proven difficult over the years, but he still loves it: "We do a lotta digging up in Colorado and I have a few claims up there to dig, and I spent quite a few years doin' it full time. But as my son got older, it's like, okay, I need to do something else. I always have been a home builder. Did it for a while and got burned out. Played for a while and then I watched my savings account just go like (points down) that and so I said, 'it's time to get back to work.'...but I have hit some pretty significant pockets. But they're far and few between. If that happened regularly, I would make more than building." Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.



Figure 18 March 21, 2025, inside the The Alfie Norville Gem and Mineral Museum in downtown Tucson, Arizona. Amidst a variety of gem and mineral specimens, this wall features the Phelps Dodge company's commissioned (in 1923) paintings and organized around the theme of illustrating mining life in Bisbee Arizona. William D. White is the artist, who was commissioned by general Manager of the company Percy Gordon Beckett. Reportedly, "White toured the Copper Queen mine and the Sacramento Pit mine in Bisbee, a bustling town of 20,000 inhabitants. He then traveled to the Pilares de Nacozari mine in northern Mexico. White returned home and created 20 paintings from 1923-1924. Beckett selected 17 paintings for his office and home, and in 1958 donated the collection to the University of Arizona in Tucson."⁴ Tucson, Arizona, USA. Photo by Brian F. O'Neill, 2025.

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