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Introduction: Exploring new perspectives in the study of social and environmental change

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Introduction

The scientific and technological achievements of the past century and the increasing pervasiveness of images have not only influenced deeply the relationship between humankind and nature, but have also introduced new kinds of awareness of human's responsibilities on vulnerabilities never experienced before, which have serious- if not irreversible- cascades of consequences on the stability, livability and reproduction of social and natural contexts. As a matter of fact, in several cases, the threats produced by the current system have already neared the end of their latency (Beck, 1992): we are increasingly more affected by their effects and also visually more exposed to them. This happens not just because disasters, either man-made or natural, occur more frequently, and the multiplicity of their damages are wider, but also because individuals and communities can increasingly experience them, in several ways, directly and indirectly, and in several ways. Media shrink time and space distances and augment the capacity of our senses to acknowledge them and this also encourages the emergence of new social processes.

Nonetheless, in the early stages of studies on these issues, in front of the complexity of the phenomena that were dramatically unfolding, the theories and methods of social sciences (as well as of others) have proven to be weak and running behind. Just to give an idea, environmental sociology began to gain its own autonomy and disciplinary recognition only at the end of the '70s[1], and it took a while to have as its main domains of research central aspects of ecological problems which have negative impacts on humans and whose solutions requires collective action and the societal recognition of them as "problems". But currently "the bulk of environmental sociology can be seen as focusing on the social construction of environmental problems or analyses of their causes, impacts, and potential solutions" (Dunlap, 2015, p. 796). Environmental science itself is also a very recent discipline. Born between the '60s and the '70s, its intention was that of establishing an interdisciplinary synthesis of all the sciences that could contribute to understand the complex dynamics of the ecosystems and to tackle environmental problems. But just alike social scientists, also researchers of this discipline encountered many methodological difficulties and theoretical gaps. Some have been addressed by complex systems theories which have been applied to emerging issues, such as ecological communication or the social perception of the environment. A work like *Ecological Communication* (Luhmann, 1986), regardless of many limitations, has certainly represented a milestone for this new area of study, and some of its major claims – such as that there is no "social resonance" of environmental problems if there's no communication about them[2] - are still crucial and very actual.

There is no doubt that, especially in the last decade, the rapid modernization of developing countries, globalization and massive migrations from rural to urban areas, and the emergence of environmental justice movements have provided countless topics which have fueled theoretical and methodological debates. Their relevance requires extensive research that has also shown, once again, the impossibility to simply transfer concepts from one domain to another and the difficulty of inter-disciplinary research.

"The linkages between biophysical systems and social systems have grown to the point where we routinely speak of human dominated ecosystems and realize the critical need to understand the dynamics of socio-ecological systems (SESs). Simultaneously, social and economic globalization has led to increased flows of goods, resources, people, and information and ideas across greater distances with interactions operating at various scales from local to global. Thus, biophysical systems need to be seen as interacting with social and economic systems, while social processes like globalization need to be seen as being coupled to the dynamics and constraints imposed by biophysical systems" (Young et al. 2016, p.314).

Shifting paradigms and the expansion of research practices

This special issue is the result of a dialogue initiated during the ISA World Congresses and Forums within the joint-sessions organized by two ISA Research Committees - Visual Sociology (RC57)[3] and Environment and Society (RC24) – to discuss and tackle issues one can encounter while studying and trying to unveil the assumptions, discourses, politics and representations that have been developed to inform and transform our natural and built environments. Dealing with these topics introduces complex practical, theoretical and methodological issues that question the particular forms of representation and visuality (re)produced by specific scopic regimes (Jay, 1988). These regimes are intimately bound into social power relations (Rose, 2007)[4], and also within the nature of the image itself which, as stated by Nathanshon and Zuev, has "an agency which extricates it from the confining status of a mere representation to-be-interpreted. It is also an active force directed both at the audience and at the producer, but also at institutions which are involved in circulating it (…). [And] the visual sphere—where images are produced, circulated, interpreted, reproduced, and re-imagined—is an active social force in both regulating human relationships as well as in subverting it." (2013, p. 2).

Connected to these latter considerations was also the acknowledgment of the powerfulness and variety of audiovisual and multimedia devices that make increasingly significant and easier for a large number of agents to produce, elaborate and share different kinds of information on the above mentioned issues. Either in the form of images, videos, texts and hypertexts, different media can populate private and public arenas and contexts, even instantaneously and/or simultaneously, and these possibilities are now also at researchers' hands.

Nonetheless, the aim of this special issue is not so much to discuss the content of this kind of information (as research data and outcomes) or the different use

made of these tools to target different purposes and audiences, but to reflect on how they affect research opportunities and knowledge production, the practices of their collection and and analysis, as well as the implications they have for the overall research design. This potential and these trends are increasingly recognized and "normalized" within different disciplines and they entail a new turn, a shift towards an increasingly extended and expanded research whereby the researcher's positioning is embedded in an ever-growing net of relationships resulting also from the aforementioned changes, where his/her "notebook" can rely on the use of multiple devices and applications, and on his/her access to additional sources of information and contexts that facilitate the engagement of different publics and collaborators. Any experience has to be understood as embedded in social and cultural practices, but what make their inquiry really challenging is that the hyper-visuality of contemporary everyday life makes the research field itself increasingly expand far beyond the boundaries of what can be experienced and perceived by the researchers' and the participants' senses.

These new conditions, therefore, open up new opportunities which demand an integration of multiple competencies, as well as to develop knowledge about other languages and the use of different tools. At the same time, they lead us to expect some kind of interactivity with those texts and images (Anzoise et al. 2017) which also entail acknowledging the emergence of new responsibilites for researchers who are including them in their studies.

In fact, if the foregoing is part of several turns (visual, practice, narrative, performative etc.) - connected to the argument that the social sciences are an expression of – and a reflexive moment in – the continuing elaboration and enactment of social life[5], nonetheless, the models of knowledge production and the different degrees of reflexivity that these turns incorporate and are consequences of, are in continuous evolution but not necessarily cumulative.

Additionally, this 'feed-in' of sociological notions and knowledges - even though it has an enormous practical impact, and its concepts and findings are constitutively involved in the very essence of modern social life - cannot be readily channeled (Giddens, 1990). Therefore, the way knowledges on social and environmental changes are produced, reproduced and shared continue to open up to questions and new challenges (not just for the academy) which need – I believe – to be addressed through approaches that make research engage and commit its immanent reflexivity into the generation of a more multi-sensory, open and public research[6]. Toward this, is what Stewart Lockie – former President of RC24 – wrote in a recent editorial (2016) where he pointed his attention to what he called "the emotional enterprise of environmental sociology" and the need to develop approaches and methods that facilitate a broader kind of societal reflexivity and consequently a more productive dialogue. This could be done, in his opinion, by the identification and sharing of affected interest groups' aspirations, as well as of their knowledge and values in relation to a particular issue or project, and of the perspectives of otherwise marginalized groups. As Lockie puts it "the more such research can be undertaken iteratively in relation to cycles of dialogue and decision making – activities in which stakeholder perceptions and alliances are likely to change – the more robust and useful it is likely to be (Lockie, 2016, p. 235).

Following on that, and also another primary source of inspiration for this special issue, are the reflections proposed by Law and Urry in their brilliant essay on the enactment of social sciences and the perfomativity of methods. Even though – say Law and Urry - "the social sciences have always been embedded in, produced by, and productive of the social" (2004, p. 392), its complexity demands radical shifts in paradigms, methodological approaches and also research agendas. In their view, social research methodology has been for too long ill-equipped to deal with the visual, sensory, emotional, fleeting or mobile phenomena which, indeed, characterize contemporary societies and the pace and scale of the changes they face. Therefore, the social sciences need to embrace complexity theory, and thoroughly re-imagine themselves, their methods, and their 'worlds', because "the social-and-physical changes in the world are – and need to be – paralleled by changes in the methods of social inquiry" (2004: 390).

To achieve these changes imply also to redefine the relationship between the observer and the field, and also to critically reconsider the emphasis on human experience, which – as claimed also by Natali & McClanahan (2017) referring to (Green) Criminology – fails to understand empathically nonhuman life and ecosystems, while there is a need to consider harms to broader ecological worlds. But to imagine how a mountain, a river or a forest feel "requires additional ways of knowing, experiencing, understanding, and communicating harms to nature, brought about by industrial practice(s). (…)[and the] visual communication can help to meet that need because we relate to and understand the environment through these intensely visual means" (Natali and McClanahan, 2017, p. 201). In fact, in research conducted adopting audiovisual methods "a continuous exercise of osmosis is demanded between the need for reproducible knowledge and the presence of sensitive images that are not immediately ready for placement within a predetermined cognitive grid, but which return the deep meaning of the fieldwork. The specific, primary scope of the audiovisual researcher is born from this clash (…) [and] generating audiovisual data and using audiovisual tools has both a heuristic potential and an enabling one" (Anzoise et al., 2017, p. 185).

Main questions and contributions

Given these premises, the main questions addressed in this collection of papers are:

- What kind of data can visual methodologies collect and analyse, and what is the specific function visual methods, techniques and tools can play, at any stage

of the research process, to challenge and push forward research on social and environmental change?

- To what extent can audiovisual and multimedia tools and sources foster, on one hand, knowledge and literacy on our natural and built environments and, on the other, support policy making as well as citizen engagement, participation and action?

- And, connected to these first two questions: are visual methodologies in fact more democratic and horizontal, prosthesis of our senses, augmenting and deeping our gaze and comprehension of phenomena, or are they de facto reproducing dominant representations and imaginaries, as well as reproducing scopic regimes and the power relations embedded in them?

The authors, by referring to their direct research experiences, have tried to unpack concepts and approaches used in their attempts to advance research on these topics.

The first contribution, by Cécilia Claeys, Sandrine Ruitton, Noémie Frachon, Patrick Bonhomme, Mireille Harmelin-Vivien, Dominique Ami and Carole Barthélémy, illustrates a case study at the crossroads between environmental sociology and marine biology. The creation of the Calanques National Park (April 2012), next to Marseille (France), has fueled debate over the increasing impact of widespread leisure activities on the conservation of biodiversity. To study this peculiar context, the authors have developed a visual and interdisciplinary methodology to critically analyse the notion of overuse in Sormiou Bay, using qualitative and quantitative field surveys, interval photography over a 19-month period, and historical aerial photographs. The analysis revealed the existence of a gap between the environmental awareness of boaters, and their actual behaviour and impact on the Bay ecosystem but also between the actual and the perceived levels of use.

The second contribution, by Kerstin Rosenow-Williams, parallels the first one, as it analyses how humanitarian and development organizations aim to make environmental changes visible while trying to meet local needs and demands for sustainable livelihoods. The research presents a case study in southern Thailand, and analyses the use of visualization tools to foster environmental knowledge and literacy on Climate Change while supporting both policymaking as well as citizen engagement. It also discusses the organizational reasons for the use of visualization tools, outlining the underlying coercive, mimetic and normative pressures that facilitate their proliferation in the context of environmental communication. The author discusses the emancipatory motive behind the use of visualization tools, examining the extent to which organizations employ them in an interactive or self-mobilizing participatory manner, as well as the level of their institutionalization in the context of humanitarian and development aid.

Following the latter consideration, in the third contribution, Katherine Foo, discusses how technology is changing social and environmental perceptions by allowing people, potentially everyday, to "see" themselves and their environments in powerful ways. At the same time, the question raised by the author is whether visual methodologies are reproducing or, conversely, challenging dominant scopic regimes. In particular, since civic organizations play an important role in challenging dominant perceptions of social and environmental issues, and they have begun applying digital location-based visualization methods in pursuit of their social justice goals, the author critically analyses how three organizations in the USA have strategically adopted visual methods in order to address questions of social perception, identity and meaning-making in three different urban environments.

Both the fourth contribution, by Mauricio Mejía and Bernadette Longo, and the fifth, by Soledad Bouzo, propose reflections, enriched by several case studies, on the potential of video to challenge public opinion on social and environmental issues. In particular, Mejía and Longo discuss how the use of rich media content available online on different social media, has created multiple opportunities for low-investment campaigns. The authors in particular analyse the rhetorical appeals of some web-based and visually rich viral videos – i.e. *The Story of Stuff*, Naomi Klein's *Thought Bubble: Ethical Oil?*, RSA Animate: *The Crisis of Capitalism*, and *Protect IP Act Breaks the Internet* - that aim to increase people's social awareness of complex global issues, and their potential to impact on attitudes and behaviors relating to them. Bouzo, addresses videos and audiovisual production from a completely different standpoint, by considering the emergence of documentary productions in Argentina. More specifically she analyses those dedicated to environmental issues which have been realized by university groups along with local communities. The author illustrates the audiovisual narrative analysis conducted on two productions, which served both to reveal the visual and narrative choices made in the process of image and sound construction, and to reflect on the dynamics triggered by social mobilizations which are paralleled by the co-production and circulation of audiovisual images.

The last contribution, by Valentina Anzoise and Luca Ghirotto, presents an ongoing research on the perception of the transition landscapes produced by the implementation of high tech zones in China. Through this research the authors' attempt is to broaden the fields of application of Grounded Theory (GT), to embrace urban and environmental issues, and also to carry on a Visual GT and a GT with visual data that can explore urbanization-related processes using data that pertain to their visual dimension. In particular, the authors highlight what they call "transitions' framing strategies", in which seeing and the visual – considered in an

ecological perspective – couple with attitudes and other senses, thus generating and mediating different kind of knowledge(s).

Going through these research experiences, we can clearly see how the proliferation of production and use of audiovisual and multimedia information (can) contribute, as never before, to the (social) construction of natural and built environments. The case studies discussed show different agents affected by and/or taking action in complex processes which entail dramatic social and environmental changes and institutions and policy-makers more and more subject to the pressure of public opinion for the negative (social, cultural, economic, etc.) consequences that the "bad" management of these manifold environments could have.

The authors reflect on the role visual research played (or could play) in these processes and raise further questions, relevant also for other disciplines and sectors, as a part of their outcomes. In fact, they highlight the transversality of the environment and the complexity of ecological worlds, together with the need for a general re-thinking of the approaches to knowledge production, and of the methods and tools that could support research and collective understanding and actions about them. Even if we are well aware that the case studies and methodologies presented here cannot be exhaustive, we wish that these experiences will enrich the debate on these issues and will contribute to advancing practices and theories about them.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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(Endnotes)

1 In this Special Issue, we refer to the "environment" in a broad acception which includes all entities by which an individual, or an artifact, a collective etc. is surrounded by, as well as the networks and systems of relationship they influence and by which they are influenced (including both living and non-living components).

2 For some scholars such as Achille Ardigò, who wrote an introductory essay for the Italian version of the book, the weakness of the pars costruens of Luhmann's reflection and the limitedness of the answers to foster a radical cultural and social transformation (also within science) made his work rich for its system analysis but weak in terms of proposals to face the ecological crisis (Ardigò, 1989).

3 Which at that time was still a Working Group (WG03)

4 For Rose (2012) both visuality and scopic regimes concern the ways in which what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed.

5 In this regard, Giddens speaks of "double hermeneutic" (1984, 1990) and refers to the fact that the development of sociological knowledge is parasitical upon lay agents' concepts and, conversely, the notions coined in the meta-languages of the social sciences routinely reenter the universe of actions they were initially formulated to describe or account for.

6 In this regard see also Back and Puwar and their Manifesto for Live Methods [2013].

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