Chiara Pilotto, Bruno Riccio
Department of Education Studies "G.M. Bertin", University of Bologna, Italy

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Introduction. Moving images across borders: technology, visuality and (im)mobility in anthropological inquiry

Abstract

The encounter with the subjective experiences of borders and mobility in the world we live in has highlighted how central the practices of image production and circulation are in shaping those experiences and their ordinariness. With this special issue we want to shape a perspective that attempts to grasp the mutual embedding of human mobility and the mobility of images. The centrality of mobility as a heuristic concept invites us, on the one side, to embrace an historical perspective in the anthropological study of media and visuality, and on the other, to avoid limiting it to the realm of "migrations" and migration studies. Furthermore, this issue questions visuality, (im)mobility and inequality from a temporal perspective that seeks to connect past to future: if images are, in many ways, incontrovertible outputs of history, they are also a powerful ground for political imagination and rising ideas of future. Which is the specific weight of visuality in all of this? And how is this linked to media practices and new technologies? The contributions to this issue address these questions in different ways. Beyond the variety of approaches, however, a special attention is given to the affective dimension of images, that is what they convey through – but also beyond – representation.

Keywords

Ethnography, technology, images, (im)mobility, affect

The author

Chiara Pilotto (PhD Anthropology Univ. Milano-Bicocca, EHESS-Paris) is a research fellow at the University of Bologna. She has conducted ethnographic research in Europe and in Palestine/Israel, on which she has published several articles and essays. She has worked on issues such as migration, sex work, asylum, racisms, and how these topics intersect with public policies in various institutional contexts. In recent years, she has explored the link of digital technology, visuality and racism, focusing on regimes of (im)mobility in Italy and Palestine.

Bruno Riccio (Laurea Politics Bologna; MA DPhil Social Anthropology Sussex) is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and the director of the research centre MODI (Mobility Diversity social Inclusion) at the Department of Education Studies of the University of Bologna, where he teaches Anthropology of Migration. He is co-founder of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology (SIAA). He undertook fieldwork in Senegal, Italy and, in a minor extent, Cambodia. His research interests include West African transnational migration, co-development, citizenship, tourism, mobility, diversity, migration policies, Italian multiculturalism and racism.

e-mail: chiara.pilotto5@unibo.it, bruno.riccio@unibo.it

ORCID: Bruno Riccio: 0000-0002-9532-4678, Chiara Pilotto: 0009-0006-8197-1440

The focus of this special issue stems from our research interests and ethnographic work on migrations, asylum policies, mobility regimes, and racisms. Ethnography both as a research practice and a mode of reflecting on (anthropological) representation, has led us to combine these research interests with the issue of images: the encounter with the daily life and the subjective experiences of borders and mobility in the world we live in, has highlighted how central the practices of image production and circulation are in shaping those experiences and their ordinariness. Initially, our aim was to explore the multiple connections between African diasporas, digital technologies and images going beyond the compartimentalisation of research, and rather intersecting the perspectives of political anthropology, anthropology of migrations, visual and digital anthropology.[1] In this special issue the purpose of this analysis broadened to go further and enhance a perspective that attempts to grasp the mutual embedding of human mobility and the mobility of images. Simultaneously, our focus on media practices as social practices for producing, circulating and receiving visual or audiovisual contents has not been limited to the so-called "digital age", but has embraced traditional media and mass media as well as the internet and social media. Although our reflections are certainly situated in the recent and growing anthropological interest on media and "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996; Bargna 2018; Biscaldi and Matera 2019, 2022, 2024; Ginsburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002; Mangiameli and Zito 2021; Miller et alii 2016) as essential dimensions of modernization and globalization, we believe that the centrality of mobility as a heuristic concept invites us, on the one side, to embrace an historical perspective in the anthropological study of media and visuality, and on the other, to avoid limiting it to the realm of "migrations" and migration studies.

In this sense, this special issue is certainly inspired by the "mobility turn" that has influenced the social sciences in recent decades (Scheller and Urry 2006; Riccio 2019) to avoid treating stability as the natural state of affairs and criticising the idea that sedentarism represents normality while mobility represents deviance and therefore some kind of problem. This more comprehensive approach includes not only geographical movement in time but also social and existential mobility (Hage 2009, 2021). Indeed, migrants' subjectivities and movement are closely connected to imaginaries, hopes and fantasies about social becoming. Secondly, mobility is conceived as a fundamental dimension of human experience, which as an analytic category embraces different phenomena such as labour migrations, forced displacement, colonial settlements, and so on. Our attempt is thinking together different kinds of human mobility (Salazar 2020) through the shared ground of their visual dimension and media practices: images move with people, and people make images move. Like the social studies of media and social media have shown in last decades, human mobility and cultural flows have been more

[1] The project of this special issue stems from the ethnographic work our research team conducted at the University of Bologna within the national project PRIN 2017 *GAF-Genealogies of African Freedoms*, led by Alice Bellagamba from the University of Milan "Bicocca". Most of the authors who have contributed to this issue also participated to the workshop "Imaginaries of freedom and resonance of images. Digital technologies, subjectivities, and politics of the everyday in the online life of the African diaspora and beyond", which we organized in June 2023 in Bologna.

and more interlinked thanks to the circulation of images in the global space (Appadurai 1996; Mazzarella 2004; Morley 2000). Moreover, digital technology and the access to internet and social media have played a crucial role in the production, circulation and reception of images globally (Matera and Biscaldi 2022; Miller et al. 2016). Anthropological research has shown how the use of new media re-produces social and cultural diversity, multiplying their uses rather than homogenizing their effects. At the same time ethnographic studies have shown the different ways images get embedded in local contexts and particular historical trajectories, while also bringing transformative power to social practices and collective imaginaries (Ginzburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002).

Starting from these premises, this special issue also attempts to undermine a simplified idea of mobility linked to global flows, of which the increased movement of people would be one of the main expressions. Its aim is rather to analyse the circulation of people and images without neglecting the power asymmetries that inform people's experiences of (im)mobility. In this sense, the question of violence and inequality has been central to our thinking. Arguing that there can be no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility, Sheller and Urry (2006) themselves have sought to analytically include both liquidity, connectivity, centrality and empowerment as well as disconnection, social exclusion and blockages in their seminal work. The main assumption is that, especially today, the world is on the move through diverse and intersecting forms of mobility that accelerate for some, while at the same time exacerbating immobility for others (Marabello and Riccio 2018; Cingolani, Lofranco, Tarabusi 2025). In other words, mobility as a resource is differentially accessed. Indeed, recent socio-anthropological work has demonstrated that, for many individuals, mobility is primarily experienced in terms of its absence, as the unavailability of opportunities for departure (Gaibazzi 2015). Immobility at home, a feeling of being stuck or the concrete inability to move (due to economic, social or political factors), may provide the initial force driving individuals to move away. For many, however, a scarcity of resources or lack of opportunity may prevent the actual move from ever taking place.

Indeed, migrants face hostile new forms of migration governance that exclude more and more people from the global circuits of legal mobility and promises of globalization. In light of this development, various migration scholars have recently argued that we need new perspectives to grasp the ways in which today's restricted border regimes curb migration and intersect with the growing migration industry and privatization of border control (Andersson 2014; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012). Going beyond a naïve equivalence between mobility and "freedom", the so-called "mobility turn" in social sciences rather stressed the social, economic and political conditions that shape and intertwine people's movements and their sedentarization, forced settlement and/or confinement (Heil et al. 2017). At the same time, enquiring into media practices through the perspective of (im)mobility helps us to question a further premise, which assumes a direct relationship between internet access, digitalization, and the democratization of the public sphere. Despite internet access having reached a global scale – blurring the lines between online and offline life, hence the concept of *onlife*

(Floridi 2015) – the distribution of "digital rights" (AbuShanab 2018) remains profoundly conditioned by social, political, and economic conditions, thereby reinforcing what Didier Fassin (2018) describes as the inequality of lives.

Thus, the concept of (im)mobility reveals to be a heuristic theoretical tool, able to highlight the power relations that constitutes *both* mobility and images. In this sense, this special issue overtly addresses the question of state and border violence, (post)colonial relations, racialization and memory construction as key research issues (Altin 2024; Ciabarri 2020; De Genova 2013, Favell 2022; Lombardi Diop-Romeo 2012). From this perspective, critical analysis compels us to delve deeper into the processes of human differentiation and hierarchization, which unfold within uneven transnational spaces and are significantly shaped by the global economy of colonial-derived racial capitalism (Robinson 2019) and digital economy (Kassem 2023, Mezzadra et al. 2024, Srnicek 2019), as well as their contemporary intersections (Benjamin 2019, Couldry and Mejias 2019, Noble 2018). Ultimately, this issue questions visuality, (im)mobility and inequality from a temporal perspective that seeks to connect past to future: if images are, in many ways, incontrovertible outputs of history, they are also a powerful ground for political imagination and rising ideas of future (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Mullings, Sobers, Thomas 2021).

Which is the specific weight of visuality in all of this? And how is this linked to media practices and new technologies? The contributions to this issue address these questions in different ways. Beyond the variety of approaches, however, a special attention is given to the affective dimension of images, that is what they convey through – but also beyond – representation. In the history of visual studies, research has indeed focused on the content of images and the forms of representation they generate (Pennacini 2005, Poole 1997, 2005). The decolonial approach has more recently highlighted how such visual "constructions" reveal the specific positioning of the gaze, the production of otherness through the objectification of the subject of the image, and the reproduction of power relations that images can sustain (Bajorek 2020, Gill 2021, Mirzoeff 2011, Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022, Raheja 2010). The critique of representation has led to the need to deconstruct images, and integrate knowledge and history with the voice and visions of those who have been marginalized in hegemonic narratives and visualities. Counter-representations have accompanied counter-narratives.

Starting from these reflections, this issue draws on a conception of affects as the unconscious and non-linguistic dimension (that is, non-representational) of media practices (Shouse 2005). In this sense, a particular source of inspiration has been the work of feminist visual theorist Tina Campt on the African diaspora's photography, and her invitation to "listen to images" and grasp their "law frequencies" in the everyday (Campt 2012, 2017). Our interest in focusing on affects more than on "contents" and "meanings" has been important for many reasons. First, it has included opacity and the unspoken (cfr. Cavatorta and Pilotto 2021) as intrinsic dimensions of visual and audio-visual productions in contexts marked by violence and inequality. Second, it has given relevance to aesthetics both as normative frames but also strategies to act into the world. Third, it has allowed us to look at political action not so much in search of clear identities, formed subjectivities,

or organized movements, but rather by analysing the formation of "affective economies" (Ahmed 2004, 2014) and collective sensitivities at the intersection of embodied memory, media practices, and visuality (Pilotto 2023, 2025).

The articles are heterogeneous in the way they deal with different kinds of mobilities, images and technologies. Photography remains an important focus of research, both as an analogic technology and as a digital product. The same can be said for audio-visual contents, which appear as cinematic productions or as videos filmed by smartphones and shared through social media. Although the contemporary world of the internet and digital media is predominant in the contributions to this issue, this heterogeneity does not seem to be an analytical limitation. The study of visual productions, alongside the means through which they are created and disseminated, reminds us of the concept of affordance (Gillespie, Osseiran, Cheesman 2018, Hutchby 2001), which media studies have introduced to highlight the limitations and possibilities that different technologies open up in light of specific contexts and social practices. Moreover, this approach makes it possible to continue along the path already outlined by visual and digital anthropology, bringing together the study of the creation, circulation, and reception of images (Ginzburg, Abu Lughod and Larkin 2002).

As a matter of fact, from a theoretical and methodological point of view, images and media are not necessarily distinct objects of inquiry, but can also overlap and intersect. In Chiara Scardozzi's article, for example, photography becomes a mobile medium through postcards sent from Argentina to Europe between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Printed photographs are also a means for self-representation within a public competition for young people with a migrant background in Italy (Cingolani). Furthermore, images are not only ethnographic materials – visual contents produced by others and subsequently analysed by social scientists – but also constitute ethnographic practices in themselves: visual methods and collaborative research underpin some of the films discussed in this issue (D'Onofrio, Tilche and Khanna), as well as images can constitute the main basis for the ethnographic encounter and reflections on its asymmetric reciprocity (Keita and Pilotto). Similarly, the digital realm challenges traditional methods such as participant observation: digital ethnography involves using new media – smartphones, internet platforms, and social networks – as tools to engage in ethnographic relationships in novel ways (Bachis, Manoukian, Pilotto, Santanera). The ethnographer's online life makes it possible to study images and their movement while "staying at home".

In this sense, the very notion of the "archive" should be reconsidered in light of new forms of visual media production and dissemination: some authors talk about "living archives" to stress the continuous collection of digital images that are generated throughout daily experience, especially in contexts of political violence (Tilche and Khanna, Pilotto). If social media and digital platforms are used in these contexts to circulate news and images in the virtual space, that very space becomes a spontaneous archive that bears witness to both violence and presence. These "living archives" – insofar as they pertain to ongoing processes of memory construction that resist erasure – are connected to the purpose of archival research, which aims to uncover traces of forgotten

or silenced presences and contribute to the rewriting of history (Jedlowski, cf. Gribaldo 2023, 2024). From postcards and films to videos and images shared on social networks, the various articles in this issue invite us to reflect not only theoretically, but also methodologically, on the extent of the transformations that has reshaped the relationship between mobility and images.

The main aspiration of this issue is to think about the mutual constituency of visuality, media practices and (im)mobility. As a matter of fact, all articles deal with images generated through experiences of (im)mobility and by people on the move. Many contributions stress the creative dimensions that are part of migrations and diasporic stories while facing border violence and boundary-making. Thanks to co-creative research through filmmaking, theatre performance and animation, Alexandra D'Onofrio shows how Egyptian migrants re-appropriate the border regime's visual framing, in which they had been entrapped since their arrival in Italy. Focusing on image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Italy, Giovanna Santanera analyses the painful and precarious relation between migrants' invisibility and hypervisibility, which nonetheless inscribes Blackness into the European history. Through archival research Alessandro Jedlowski gives historical depth to such visual traces of the African presence in Europe: the movie *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma* testifies to the Eritrean diaspora's marginalization in the 70s, but also to Eritrean filmmakers' cultural production in the context of the film school "Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia" in Rome.

The effort to "de-migranticize" (Dahinden 2016) mobilities is particularly evident in visual and digital research on so-called "New Italians" or "New Italian Generations" (Grimaldi and Vicini 2024). Pietro Cingolani offers a critical perspective on photographic essays produced in 2021 and 2024 as part of the *Sguardi Plurali* competition for young photographers with a migrant background. The plurality of images and gazes stresses the conflicting relation between mainstream processes of othering and representation, and self-representation as a creative process to articulate complex experiences and situated memories. In Francesco Bachis' article, this tension is analysed thanks to a digital ethnography of TikTok among "New Italians". The anthropological analysis of "What-people-think-I-do/What-I-really-do" video meme shows how intergenerational relationships and cultural expectations are reshaped in the digital sphere, questioning transnational positionalities as sites for irony and cultural critique.

Like this young people creatively and ironically inhabit transnational spaces and affects through photography, video production, and social media, Setrag Manoukian highlights the ambiguity of diasporic imageries and self-construction in the age of platform capitalism. Manoukian's analysis takes into account the videos of Nasim Aghdam, a youtuber of Iranian origin based in California who attacked employees and died at Google's headquarters in 2018. Although through different approaches (and maybe differing conclusions), both Bachis and Manoukian underline how cultural productions circulated via social media are embedded within the neoliberal economy of digital labor, which combines content creation, visibility, self-entrepreneurship, and data extraction. New forms of control are thus embedded in the supposed "freedom" granted by new technologies, encompassing both labor relations and new mechanisms of

surveillance and control within platform capitalism (see also Pilotto in this issue). Even from this perspective, the concept of human (im)mobility is intertwined with the circulation of images, insofar as digital borders shape circuits of communication and exchange value as well as processes of silencing and exclusion.

The relation between (im)mobility and images is further explored through the lens of colonialism and political violence in specific contexts, where processes of othering concern forced settlement of criminalized groups in India (Tilche and Khanna), colonial and post-colonial immigration in Argentina (Scardozzi), and settler colonialism in Palestine/Israel (Pilotto). The tension between indigeneity and mobility is here a compelling line of research, which includes the contributions of indigenous studies. Chiara Scardozzi's article focusses on postcards sent by European immigrants in Latin America to their families and friends in Europe. These postcards – collected as "ethnographic" images in nowadays' digitalized archives – aimed to depict native societies in Argentina between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The anthropological analysis of these postcards as an assemblage of images and words shows, on the one hand, how photography visibilised indigenous people through their exotic representation in the very moment of their physical or symbolic invisibilisation, and, on the other hand, how affective ties based on white supremacy were built through the materiality of images travelling across the Atlantic. Indigenous movies and performance are instead at the core of Alice Tilche and Akshay Khanna's reflections on the political subjectivation of India's "ex-criminal" De-Notified Tribes (DNTs). Notified as "born criminal" by the colonial British rule that forced their settlement despite their nomadic history, today these indigenous communities organize in collectives of artists and filmmakers such as the Budhan Theatre, whose cultural production aims to contest their ongoing stigmatization and marginalization. Hanging between presence and absence, the quest for visibility and the desire for opacity, Tilche and Khanna conceive indigenous art and filmed stories as "survivance" (Vizenor 2008), a way to affirm the presence and life of unruly subjects within an "intimate community". The interminglement of intimacy and violence, life and death, is also at the core of Chiara Pilotto's article on images circulating during Israel's ongoing war on Gaza and the "plausible genocide" of the Palestinian people. From the Palestinians' images of their own suffering and death, to the Israeli soldiers and influencers' trends on social media, Pilotto inquiries into the ways the Palestinian grief becomes a contested visual field in the context of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonization of Gaza and the West Bank. Once again, the circulation of photographs and videos leaves traces of Indigenous presence, as well as of its ongoing destruction.

Two key themes run through the contributions in this issue: the opacity of visibility and the sensitivity of the gaze. On the one hand, many authors highlight the seemingly paradoxical relationship between what is shown and what is hidden in the circulation of images. The implications of mobility regimes – and the related processes of stigmatization and criminalization – play a crucial role in the pursuit of opacity, even when visibility is the goal. On the other hand, the movement of images affects people differently, revealing a diversity of sensibilities and positionalities that come together and drift apart. It is here

that the issue of "sensitive content" is at stake, just as the control of images comes into play.

Between these two poles – the opacity and sensitivity of images – we can identify a relationship, or rather, multiple relationships that connect those who construct visual frames, those who mediate them, and those who are affected by them, even though these three positions may overlap. In various ways, all the contributions explore these relationships and the ways in which they are inherently unstable and potentially ambiguous. Finally, as the concluding exchange (Keita and Pilotto) of this issue shows, to explore and discuss images that have their intentionality and audience in mind not only allows anthropologists to re-think the responsibility of "giving voice" but also engage them into a terrain in which their interpretative tools have to dialogue with those of their interlocutors and the forms and modes of cultural critique they elaborate (Castellano, Riccio 2023, Riccio 2023). This is why, alongside "sensitive contents", the anthropologists' own sensibility is also at stake.

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