

## Filmmaking as a transformative urban research tool

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### Abstract

The paper reports on the “Border[scape]s” research-action experience, conducted with young residents from second-generation or migrant backgrounds in Naples, and the ensuing collective documentary *lo non vedo il mare* about the invisible and visible borders of the city seen from their perspective. Reflecting on the intense and articulated process put in place, involving heterogeneous urban actors afferent to the worlds of academia, contemporary art, the third sector, and the audiovisual one, the contribution reflects critically on the performativity of documentary filmmaking as well as on the relevance of building literacy and competences about the production of ethically and politically grounded images and imaginaries.

It thus demonstrates the need to more and more structurally incorporate filmmaking not only as a method for research in urban studies and urban planning but also as a tool for city-making, meant as the collective construction of spaces and futures of inclusive citizenship.

Il paper restituisce l'esperienza di ricerca-azione “Border[scape]s”, condotta con giovani residenti di Napoli di seconda generazione o a background migratorio, e del documentario collettivo che ne è derivato, *lo non vedo il mare*, sui confini invisibili e visibili della città raccontati dalla loro prospettiva. Riflettendo sull'intenso e articolato processo messo in campo, coinvolgendo attori urbani eterogenei afferenti ai mondi dell'università, dell'arte contemporanea, del terzo settore e dell'audiovisivo, il contributo riflette in modo critico sulla performatività del documentario e sull'importanza di costruire competenze legate alla produzione di immagini e d'immaginari eticamente e politicamente fondati.

Si dimostra così la necessità di incorporare in maniera sempre più strutturata il filmmaking non solo come metodo per la ricerca negli studi urbani e nell'urbanistica ma anche come strumento per il city-making, quale costruzione collettiva di spazi e futuri di cittadinanza inclusiva.

**Keywords:** filmmaking; city-making; borders.

**Parole Chiave:** cinema; city-making; confine.

### Undisciplinary the ground: applying the notion of *sentipensar* to urban research

As numerous authors in various fields of research, going from philosophy (Popper, 1975; Nussbaum, 2001) and psychology (Gardner, 1985) to sociology (Lupton, 1998; Williams, 2001; Barbalet, 2002; Latour, 2018), cultural studies (Sedgwick,

2003; Berlant, 2004), and feminist (standpoint) theory (DeVault, 1999; Harding, 1987, 2004a, 2004c, 2015, 2017; Crasnow, 2013, 2014; Haraway, 1992, 1995) have long demonstrated, science is anything but a purely objective pursuit as implied by words like “fact”, “proof”, or “evidence” at the basis of the scientific method, which leave no place for emotions or more subjective aspects. The past 30 years of research in cognitive neuroscience and neurobiology (LeDoux, 1998; Damasio, 2000 2003; Gerhardt, 2004), political science (Nolan, 1998), neurofeminism (Bluhm, Jacobson and Maibom, 2012; Fine, 2010; Pitts-Taylor, 2016a; Jordan-Young, 2010), decolonial studies (Anzaldúa, 1991; Fanon 2021), pedagogy (Hooks, 1989), and humanistic and non-representational geographies (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Rose, 1993, 1995; Kingsbury, 2003) have uncovered a very tight connection between reason and emotion. Emotions determine the perspective and the framework for the explanation of the world perceived in science (Feuer, 1963) and can also change it, as long as the virtuous circle between wonder and science keep running. Science needs feelings and imagination as much as observation, analysis, and logic.

Latin American decolonial geography has a word for this: *sentipensar* (translatable as “feeling-thinking”), a notion that refers to “acting with the heart using the head” (Fals-Borda, 1986: 25), by aligning feelings and reason, aspirations and knowledge to restore a deep connection between territories and who inhabits them, and to write the grammar of “another possible world” (Fals-Borda, 2008: 60).

In the face of an increasingly polarised and inequitable urban territories, conceiving and carrying on research on urban spaces as a collective *sentipensar* practice in the interstices of conventional academic knowledge can innovate urban studies and turn city making into something more than urban planning. “Unconventional methodologies” (Schiavo, 2022, 2004; Belli, 2004; Bruno, 2015) with an intrinsic constant feedback mechanism between emotions and reflections are thence much needed as they are crucial to understand in an inter-/trans-disciplinary and inclusive manner urban places as spaces of experience, feeling, and sensing. (Documentary) filmmaking can particularly help to this purpose. Indeed, stories can be a powerful tool to understand ourselves

and the world without dismissing emotions but rather incorporating them in our learning process and knowledge production (Reamy, 2002; Mitchell, 2005).

The use of stories as a methodology has recently gained relevance in a “hard” science such as urban planning, weakened by the crisis of techno-scientific knowledge and its own results, and at the same time expressing the narrative turn at the centre of various disciplinary fields, such as sociology, because of its being a “science of synthesis” (Schiavo, 2005). Several urban planners have begun to recognize the instrumental use of stories to understand and govern dynamics of urban transformation (Attili, 2008; Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003; Decandia, 2004, 2008; Mandelbaum, 1991; Sandercock, 2003, 2004; Sandercock and Attili, 2010; Schiavo, 2022, 2004; Scandurra *et al.*, 2007) and deal with the continuous conversational process of making sense together, on which planning should draw (Forester, 1989). In such a process, space for interaction can be made through stories, that connect complex forms of ordinary and expert knowledge to the plurality of embodied experiences populating the city (Giuliani and Piscitelli, 2021; Gallese and Guerra, 2015).

Following the postmodern spatial turn (Soja, 1989), that overturns the topographic idea of space as a surface in favor of a topological one of relationally interlinked spatialities, stories allow to go beyond Flatland, the fictional two-dimensional reality of Edward Abbott’s novel (1882) in which houses, trees and inhabitants are straight lines and geometric figures, terribly resembling the cartographic representations of the urban space by traditional urban planning (Sandercock and Attili, 2010). In the bird’s eye perspective, many dimensions tend to disappear, together with the plural worlds of those who live in cities, their lives made up of feelings and memories, their voices and experiences that determine the quality of urbanity as an eminently relational dimension (La Cecla, 2015).

Urban maps, especially when more traditional and less open to recent, counter-hegemonic approaches such as collective mapping, have a weak impetus for change and dynamism, and struggle to represent what elusively pulsates in the city, which, on the other hand, cinematic stories innately can do.

This paper argues for the value of documentary filmmaking

as a methodology for urban research, an interstice in which to develop practices of communal *feeling-thinking* with generative and transformative potential, so to harness the ability to aspire to different urban futures even in the face of entrapping presents of life and knowledge production.

### **Stories as actions: filmmaking as a performative method**

Over recent decades, a solid body of works using filmmaking as research method has become available, especially from anglophone contexts. The book *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* by Smith and Dean (2009) draws on a number of contributors from the UK and Australia about filmmaking as creative practice, whose most comprehensive definition is something that «can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); re-search conducted in the process of shaping an artwork; or research which is the documentation, theorization and contextualization of an artwork – and the process of making it – by its creator» (Smith and Dean, 2009: 3).

This important legitimisation, though, overshadows the concrete impact that a film can have in redefining ways of doing research (Banks, 2011; Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane, 2017; Rose, 2022), especially in those disciplines that already have a practical tension and scope, such as urban planning and urban studies (Shiel and Fitzmaurice, 2009; Schiavo, 2022). Here is one aspect of the documentary that always remains in the background: namely, its transformative capacity.

Common understanding of documentary filmmaking seems to be condemned by the term it contains, *dokument*, that being close to supposed certification of acts makes people see documentaries as ideal collectors of instances from a perfectly reproduced reality and documentaries as the documentation of the visible. Documentary filmmaking, however, does not document what it shows. It shows the reality it mediates, allowing to re-see it in other forms, from other angles. It opens up a space in-the-making, able to project new imaginaries and bringing out the non-verbalizable essence of things, in so creating an interstice for the circulation of ideas in the face-to-face confrontation

with our emotions, knowledges, and truths, both individual and social, as well as private and public.

In this sense, documentary is a performative art. Drawing on the elaboration of what performative can be, as provided by the philosopher of language J. L. Austin, for whom language is performative when it does not only describe but perform actions generating ideas, characters, and gestures – such as when one says “I swear” and seals a promise – Stella Bruzzi argues that documentary films are performative by setting because they are »inevitably the result of the director’s intrusion into the filmed situation» (Bruzzi, 2000: 11), which, by choosing a point of view to show, ask the viewer to do the same and investigating realities through emotions and stories.

Consistently, I claim that documentary filmmaking does not merely represent reality as we see it in the blow-ups of ordinary people glued to urban buildings in *Visages Villages* by Agnès Varda and JR (2017); in the reconstruction of contemporary Portugal between myth and unemployment made by Miguel Gomes in *Arabian Nights (As Mil e uma Noites)* (2015); in the nightmare journey from pride to remorse through the crimes committed and re-enacted following their favorite cinematographic genres by the responsible for the Indonesian anti-communist purge of *The Act of Killing* by Josua Hoppenheimer (2012); in Agostino Ferrente’s *L’Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio* (2006), where the director rides a Vespa around Rome in search of foreign musicians to make up a multi-ethnic orchestra that will resist the filming time, becoming the main Italian orchestra of migrants. Documentary filmmaking can also act on reality, and even endure and transform it.

This transformative capacity is inherent in the aggression potentially implicit in cinema. As Sontag (1997) wrote, there can be something violent about the act of filming someone, as evoked by the same words of photography and filmmaking, such as “to shoot” or “a take”, reminding almost a sublimation of the gun. Yet, burying cameras is not a solution (Sontag, 1997). The camera roots one to the spot and the moment, forcing to constantly ask oneself: “What am I looking at?” (Osborne, 2000). And to look should above all mean *to look after* (*garder*, in French, *warten* in German), *to guard*, to protect. In other words, to take care and to worry.

As such, cameras can cease to be defense shields and become pivots for real encounters (Sontag, 1997). This is why “What do I (and the spectator with me) see?” is always a political question (Osborne, 2000), which must be founded on a solid ethical basis. In the contemporary era of widespread access to shooting and hyper-production of images, it is even more urgent to reflect on the politics of capturing images, be they still or in motion, so to make it not a random, infertile act, but an opportunity to give life to precious representation and necessary narrations. This usually happens with those images and stories that insist on asking questions rather than claiming for answers (Berger, 1982), precisely because they have a tension to perpetuate the relationship that is created at the moment of shooting. In the very moment in which we compose a scene on the camera’s monitor, choosing what to put inside the frame, we are not only establishing a relation between ourselves, the scene and the medium in-between, that is to say, between ourselves and the world, with an amplifier in the way. We are asking a question: what do we need to see of/in the world? The camera’s frame permits, orchestrates, and mediates this relation of/and questioning the world, thus circumscribing our vision of reality. The documentary filmmakers who have shaped my gaze, such as Leonardo Di Costanzo, Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Pietro Marcello, have in common, despite the huge diversity of styles, a mode of filmmaking in which the encounter with the world appear to come first and be shaping the film. In this attitude integrating the rational component with the emotional one and defined by Dario Zonta (2017) as the “politics of method”, the method influences the aesthetics, the path establishes the result, and the latter changes depending on what must be narrated.

### **Border[scape]s: notes from a filmic endeavor**

Sticking to the ‘politics of method’ as a belief, I approached my last documentary film *Io non vedo il mare*<sup>1</sup> (*I don’t see the sea*) (2022), which brought me to look back at my same city of origin, Naples, with other eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> The film can be watched at this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLz0PMG\\_Tf0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLz0PMG_Tf0)



Fig.1 Some of the participants in the project "Border[s]capels" and co-authors of *Io non vedo il mare* (2022).

The Neapolitan metropolitan area has become an area of settlement for immigrants only in the last years. According to the last data available referring to the beginning of 2014, more than 43 thousand foreigners reside in Naples, representing over 4% of the population, 14% of whom are minors (Strozza, 2016). Differently from other metropolitan areas in Italy, their presence composes a scenario characterized by a smaller number of immigrants and a more recent process of settlement, but also by a high fragmentation of origins and localization on the metropolitan territory. More than 20 different nationalities reside in the municipality of Naples (*Ibidem*).

Similarly, it is registered a progressive increase of immigrants' children in Naples with the same great variety of origins and settlement models (De Filippo and Strozza, 2011) and a marked prevalence of second generations (i.e. those born in Italy during the migration experience of their parents or mother), to which belong 3 out of 4 children.

All this occurs in a young city, with the average age lower than any other Italian metropolises, but also with residential segregation indices among the highest of the country, an asphyxial labour market, widespread poverty and extensive precariousness (Pfirsch and Semi, 2016).

Worrying episodes that occurred at the end of last decade, such as the massacre in Castel Volturno in 2008, the violence against Africans in Pianura in 2009, or the Roma hunt in Ponticelli

in 2011, bear the signal of a latent xenophobia in Naples and Campania (Amato, 2016), resonating the national spirit, which make it necessary to continuously and thoroughly monitor the phenomenon (Strozza, 2016).

These events call into question the rhetoric of “Naples as a hospitable and welcoming city”, and recall the need for a careful observation of how the city is perceived and represented in relation to migration (Amato, 2016), and what it expresses in terms of conflict, and counted/contested space. Conversely, it encourages the exchange of experiences and the sharing of practices to bring out urban inner boundaries.

Young migrants are confronted every day with a multiplicity of visible and invisible borders in cities resulting from political, bureaucratic, racial and socio-economic factors, become even stronger with the containment and confinement measures due to the past Covid-19 pandemic.

Notwithstanding, in the debate on racism that has finally been taking place also in Italy, the lives and places, stories and emotions of those who have been and are in various ways put at the margin keep being off the map of urban research, practices and policies. An entire generation of young people, constituting a growing part of the population which today accounts for about 10% of Italian national population (ISTAT, 2020), eludes appropriate public discourses and urban agendas, with the effect of invisibilization.

Be it the result of strategies and practices of oppression masking the very processes that produce “invisibility” itself, or of not entirely intentional forms of removal, invisibilization can get contrasted by cinema and documentaries, which, as unconventional sources, often freed from the narrow meshes of power, reveal and make visible subjects, stories, and phenomena. Life stories are the tool to combat invisibilization resulting in forms of dehumanisation, slow violence (Nixon, 2013) and racism (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Leogrande, 2017), and to look lucidly at what urban society has become in Italy.

“[Q]uestioning the future of young people of foreign origin means questioning the future of our country” (Ambrosini, 2005) as much as exploring the present of cities as it is experienced by younger populations with different backgrounds through their



stories discloses the possibility to imagine more open spaces for more inclusive living and another possible story for us all. The project “Border[scape]s” which led to the medium-length documentary film *Io non vedo il mare* chose to put visible and invisible urban borders as experienced by new urban generations in Naples at its core.

Whereas geopolitical borders have codified a field of study, that of border studies, that has accumulated and sedimented reflections and cases over time, a theory of the urban border is more fragmented and elusive (Gaeta, 2018; Petrillo, 2015; Sernini, 1996). Yet we are confronted every day with a multiplicity of boundaries, visible and invisible, resulting from ancient demarcations or produced by more recent separations, in cities increasingly divided by the economic, political, and ecological, critical transition in which we are wedged. “The contemporary triumph of the urban boundary” (Petrillo, 2015) represents the threshold at which conflict is expressed in our cities today. Conceivable as denied or inaccessible places, as perimeters that protect or barriers that divide, urban borders recount authoritarian and exclusionary policies as well as forms of resistance and counteraction in cities. Therefore, they paradoxically deserve to be explored as fertile places for knowledge, as the places where the future of cities is at stake.

However, due to their elusive and ever-changing character marked by an irreducible complexity, a “right distance” is needed to observe the border. This can be found through proximity and immersion in the practices of everyday life, where both the material and the social border blend. Studying borders by focusing on everyday practices, assuming that the border is “the horizon of a person’s multiple habitual practices, as well as of multiple collective practices” (Gaeta, 2018, my translation) means working not so much on what the border “is” but on what the border “does”. On both how it limits, isolates, and endangers, and on how it gets crossed, subverted, and navigated.

Observing borders through everyday life, by setting up a process of action-research rooted in it, equates to the attempt to combat racism and counter the tendency to eliminate it as a theme from public discourse (Briata, 2019) going to reveal the places and forms of slow violence and everyday racism where it lurks.

Subverting the order generally followed by the social sciences in

investigating the foreign presence in cities, whereby it is studied within a delimited zone such as an area or a neighborhood – the border delimiting the field, the ethnic community as the object of observation (Attili, 2008) – the border's definition and analysis have been placed at the core and start of the project "Border[scape]s", to focus on its different configurations with the help of the chosen participants, marginalized youngsters of the new urban generations with a migratory background identified among the most capable interpreters of urban borders.

"Border[scape]s" has adopted the border as its positioning and method (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), as the space where to stand and develop the action research orienting the project, to open up new forms of understanding on the effects of borders as well as the different forms of citizenship they produce and the horizons of future they unfold.

To this purpose, I designed and implemented a methodology inspired by Ash Amin's (2002, 2019) "ecology of encounter", by which urban conviviality is encouraged as the reversal of ephemeral social encounters usually occurring in urban spaces, with place's atmosphere consuming social contact rather than building it, to construct pro-longed and repeated occasions of relation to otherness, mutual exchange and "cultural destabilisation" that allows those taking part to break predetermined interaction patterns and learn new ways of relating (Briata, 2019), all of which can occur mainly by working together (Amin, 2002; Amin and Thrift 2002; Valentine, 2008).

The creation of spaces for collaboration on shared objectives can generate a "politics of connection/connectivity" (Amin, 2004), in which pre-established patterns of action are modified and adjusted through the confrontation with co-built aims in newly created meaningful encounters (Valentine, 2008). Any politics of connectivity can bring to further openings only when welded with a "politics of difference" (Young, 1996), capable of breaking the frames of community and alleged homogeneous society, to consciously meet the risk of conflict, as a component constitutive of any encounter.

«The border is a line or zone of contact between two or more surfaces. It is a place and a time.

It can be between four walls and in growth.

My boundary begins when I left as a child because of the war and ended

up in a beautiful and dangerous city»  
 (Excerpt from Mariko's Story in *Io non vedo il mare*).

Taking up this urge to “ecologies of encounters” as a field of relationships to be (re)constructed, the project “Border[s]capes” created a space of creative collaboration articulated in weekly workshops with 23 teenagers and young participants (16-22 years old) from a dozen of different countries and living in different neighborhoods in Naples, including two boys in custody.



Fig. 2 A partial representation of the group of project participants. Polaroids by Filippo Romano.

In their support, I put together a group of heterogeneous subjects and a series of video-operators, artists and researchers under my direction<sup>2</sup>. Hosted from time to time in the spaces

<sup>2</sup> The ecosystem of stakeholders I put together was composed by the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the University of Naples Federico II, under the supervision of Prof. G. Laino; the Museum of contemporary arte MADRE - Museo d'arte contemporanea Donnaregina; the two main local associations working with refugees and Roma people, respectively Less Onlus and “Chi rom... e chi no”; and a pastoral headquarters in the Sanità district in the city center, hosting young migrant in detention. The extended multidisciplinary and trans-local community gathered with the aim of listening and watching through the youngsters' eyes included the scholar and film director Ludovica Fales, the narrators and writers Nadeesha

of the university (the Faculty of Architecture of the Federico II University of Naples), the Madre Museum and the involved third sector associations (dislocated in different neighborhoods, such as Scampia and the historic center of Naples), we confronted each other along a path that lasted several months (December 2020-March 2021), and was structured in 5 different alternating modules, corresponding to as many working methodologies: theatrical exercises; emotional mapping; self-narratives; urban explorations; and filmmaking.

After presenting the project to the young participants, they themselves were involved in a series of theatre games to break the ice and get to know each other, which were followed by an online meeting with Nadeesha Uyangonda – later become famous as a second-generation Italian author with the book *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* (2021). The confrontation with a writer who has experienced hardships linked to denied citizenship, integration and self-assertion into Italian society, similar to those of the young people involved in the project, was fundamental to set our space of encounter and collaboration as a safe one, based on care, respect and consideration for each and all participants. This enabled a free flow of exchange among everybody: the young participants get gradually to know each other and recognized themselves in the others, beyond their apparent differences.

«Rossana. Roxana. Roxi. Rudi. They called me many things, but they never got my name right.

My name is Oksana, spelled like that.

If you change your name, you change your identity. [...]

It happened that they got my name wrong at the post office, at the police station, at the municipality, and even at the ASL, where I even had a double identity, one Ukrainian and one Italian [...]

In high school something changed: I met kids like me, the ones you call “second-generation”. [...]

I felt part of a family, a community, and above all not a foreigner, not different from the others.

No longer excluded, alone.

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Uyangonda and Alessandra S. Cappelletti, both based in Milan, the Naples-based “educ-actor” Nicola Laieta, the German geographer Paul Schweizer, the Italian, Milan-based photographer Filippo Romano, the Naples-based video operator Rosa Maietta and sound technician Rosalia Cerere, and the Italian editor, Berlin-based Giovanni Pannico.

We come from many different countries, we speak different languages, but we strive to call each other by our names. And you? Why do you always mispronounce foreign names and not even make an effort to pronounce them as they are?».  
(Excerpt from Oxana's Story in *Io non vedo il mare*).

The next step was a series of emotional mapping workshops. Through the use of the visual collaboration platform Miro, the participants mapped the places of their emotions in the city and the inner boundaries insurmountable to them. An archipelago of spots emerged from the mapping, with little space for the color of freedom.

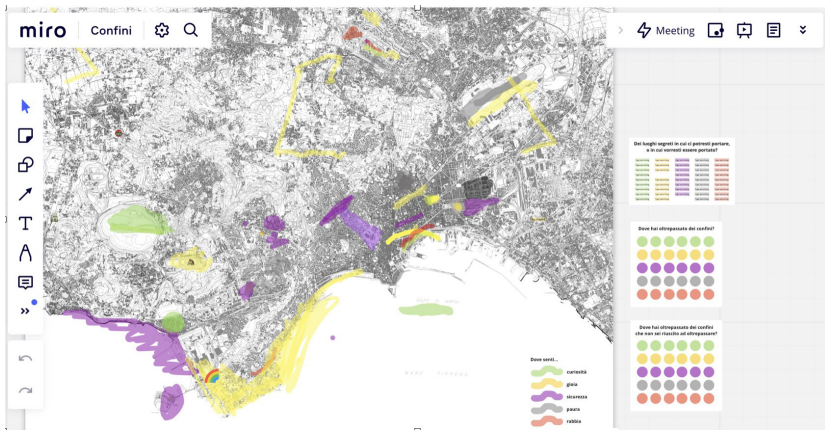


Fig. 3 First emotional mapping on the invisible borders of Naples by the “Border[scape]s” participants.

The spots corresponded to the different areas in which they were confined, that are the peripheries, shelters, and camps where they lived: the fringe areas, inside and outside Naples, located in the neighbourhoods of Scampia, Pianura, Sanità, Forcella (Porta Nolana) and the so-called “Latin Quarter” (the area around Porta Capuana). These neighborhoods were charged with conflicting emotions: anger and security, the desire to get out and the fear to leave, while dreaming of faraway places like Milan or Germany more than other neighborhoods in Naples where to move to. The waterfront and the airport, in particular, were painted in the colors of joy and sadness. When I asked the youngsters why, they told me that those were the coveted places of freedom and the beauty, but also the most inaccessible to

them for the same barriers to free mobility relative to their conditions.

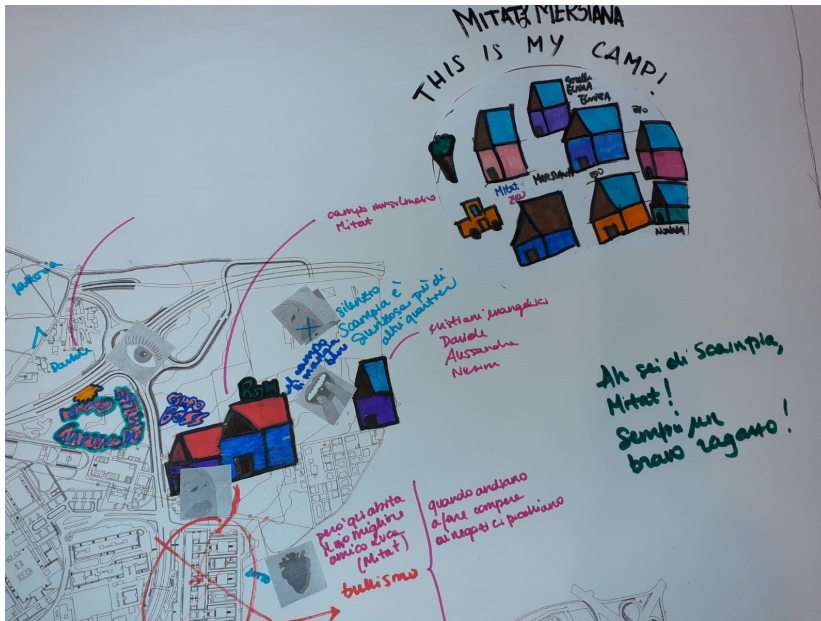


Fig. 4 Emotional mapping of Scampia by some of the project participants.

«I am Iman and I have been studying languages for several years. My ambitious dream is to become an air hostess. Nothing wrong so far, right? Well... no!

Unfortunately, not being born in Italy, I don't have citizenship and consequently I cannot participate in various public competitions to become a flight attendant. [...]

Fortunately, our minds have no restrictions, controls, laws or boundaries that forbid us to go where we want, when we want.

I am lying if I tell you that I am happy as I am...

I would love to be able to travel and visit every corner of the world, talk to people, eat their food, take advantage of the different languages I can speak. To be able to take the plane without worrying about having the wrong or expired papers.

Getting up in the morning and not being afraid to go to the police station or the consulate.

To travel with my friends without worrying about the validity of my residence permit».

(Excerpt from Iman's Story in *Io non vedo il mare*).

The emotional mapping reflected an insular geography, one belonging to youngsters who, although more prone than their

peers to urban wandering (whether due to logistical issues such as moving independently on foot or by public transport, to reach the places of study, work and meeting – or to malaises to be vented) yet are confined by virtue of their socio-economic, racial, and biographical conditions.

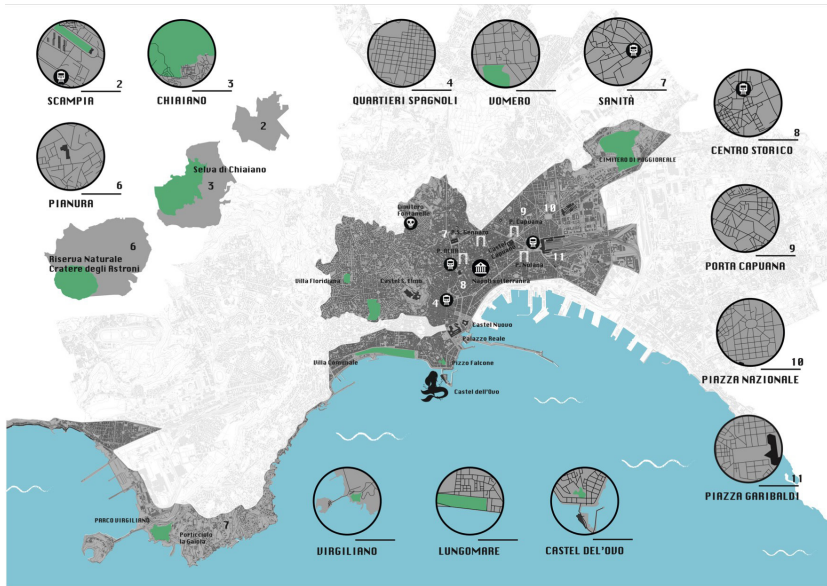


Fig. 5 Graphic elaboration of “Border[scape]s” participants’ emotional mapping.

Upon the nodal places emerged from the emotional map, corresponding to the young participants’s daily lives, I constructed a new map that I used first as the basis for the self-narrative workshop and then to construct the itinerary of the urban exploration.

For the first, I placed on one side a series of sentences spoken by the same participants during the workshops and printed on paper as headings, and on the other side I wrote their names on post-its.

Around this “paper mat” we formed our “*círculo de Palabra*” (translatable as “Talking Circle”). Inspired to traditional ritual and ancestral space of life of Colombian indigenous communities, in particular the Yanakuna ethnic group<sup>3</sup> (Majín-

3 Pre-Columbian ethnic group, currently present in the Colombian department of Cauca, in the cities of Sotar, La Vega, Almaguer, San Sebastin.

Melenje, 2018), in which community members dialogue and reflect in a set space on relevant issues, the “*círculos de la Palabra*” are recently gaining translation doing dissemination in pedagogical practices and qualitative de/post-colonial research (Álvarez Valencia and Norbella Miranda, 2022; Ahenakew, 2016; Arévalo Robles, 2013).

Exchanging a baton – suggestively presented as a “rain stick” – the participants had so their say on what was laying at their feet, the emotional map of Naples coupled with incipits of their stories. Many recognized themselves in the little phrases, even when spoken by someone else in the group, someone else wanted to modify them slightly or replace them. Each then chose their own, the one that was to serve as the trigger for the story they wanted to tell. Through a writing workshop that lasted a couple of weeks, articulated both in collective and individual meetings, the participants wrote their stories, telling about episodes of racism, bullying, discrimination as well as self-discovery, emancipation, growth, and dreams.



Fig. 6 The youngsters “on the map”.

I took great care not to betray them in any way in the transcription, remaining as close as possible to the language used by the youngsters even when not correct or ungrammatical in Italian, and helping them in a couple of cases to find the words to conclude their stories. Since I let them express themselves in the language they preferred, I kept the words and phrases



from the different languages spoken by the group members (including French, Polish, Italian, Neapolitan, and a mix of the same languages) as the original to make room for the richness of the linguistic mixture they possess.

Almost all the stories concern past or everyday episodes except one, that of Mersiana, who chose to recount her dream, as it was today: herself returning to the Roma camp in Scampia after graduating in law to open a centre for “her people” (“both Romas and neapolitans”).

«With my return to Naples, I realized my dream, not only because I returned as a lawyer but because I spend my days seeing how people from different cultures react together.

My dream was to see Scampia without racism and prejudice.

For me, this is Scampia. Have you ever seen such a story in Gomorrah?»  
(Excerpt from Mersiana’s Story in *Io non vedo il mare*).

Afterwards, the participants chose a place where to set each story, and after a basic filmmaking literacy workshop<sup>4</sup>, they “re-staged” them. They did so in some cases autonomously, using a handy-cam purchased as a sort of group torch; in others, where required, with our help. These filmed stories, together with excerpts from the workshops that I also filmed in full but included to a lesser extent – to give as much space as possible to the stories chosen, told and filmed by the participants and just the suggestion of the process behind it – built the film.

*Io non vedo il mare* has so the form of a mosaic of micro-stories, a letter in images to the city and the inhabitants who have full citizenship from those who are variously excluded from it, little heroes who discover allies through individual and mutual trespassing. Not only the narration and the filming are collective, but the editing, too, notoriously the very moment in which the film comes into the world. This was mainly achieved through a fundamental intermediate meeting after the film

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4 This consisted of a two-day intensive module in which I first gave them basic notions on framing, composition, and photographic lighting; then I asked them to first take individual shots of the place that was hosting us (the Museum Madre of Naples) with their mobile phones and then to split into two groups and make two small microfilms based on a story they had decided on together and set in the same space using a handy-cam I had purchased for the whole group; finally, we watched, analyzed and compared all that they had done together.

rough-cut completion, to make room for discussion with the on the way I was telling their stories and our adventure and ensure we all shared it.



Fig. 7 Explaining the direct sound recording to Mitat.

When during this intermediate screening I asked the young participants what the film they had seen was about, they replied: "It's about each of us and the group we have become, which would have never happened if we hadn't made this film together!". As proof of the transformative power of cinema (especially documentary), which changes places, viewers and even the filmmakers themselves, they youngsters so revealed the deeper meaning of what we were doing: becoming a "we".

### **Filmmaking as citymaking**

In *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), Arjun Appadurai calls for „research as a human right“. In a world of unequal distribution of possibilities, where knowledge is shrinking, research should be a fundamental right for the daily survival of all, especially those less well endowed, to increase the stock of knowledge vital to them as human beings and to their claims as citizens (Appadurai, 2013: 270). In this sense, «[r]esearch is not only the

production of original ideas and new knowledge but something simpler and deeper» as the capacity to systematically increase one's knowledge in relation to aspiration (Ivi, 282).

This appeal to a more elementary and universal, evolutionary, and ongoing idea of research highlights both the prevailing tendency towards hyper-specialization and content sectorialism of academic knowledge production contributing to escalating inequalities and precariousness in the knowledge system, and the narrowness of its field of action, which makes it little impacting on the exercise or the pursuit of citizenship for those who are not full citizens (Ivi, 270). To make research an improvable capacity for everybody, its same ideas should be deparochialized on a rights-based perspective, that is outdistanced from the normal, professionalized view and open to a wide range of people and, thus, possibilities, to make the future. The future has to be a cultural fact to be place at the center of an ethically and politically grounded intellectual project in which it is tightly bound to research (*Ibidem*). Such a project implies opening and walking on new, steep, and yet untrodden paths to let air and light into the closed shell of academic research, clamped by stratifications of written and unwritten rules in a system of concentrated, close, and not always meritocratic power. That is, to learn to inhabit the interstices.

From its very root, the word "interstice", which derives from the Latin terms *inter* – "between" – and *stare* – "to stay between" – encompasses a paradoxical dimension: whereas the first part of the term evokes something that is fluid and subject to movement, the second part of the phoneme alludes to the stability and solidity of something, as well as to a permanence in a defined reality. The *interstitium* is etymologically an oxymoron, that evokes firmness alongside movement and providing for stabilization of what blossoms from new, interstitial phenomena. In anatomy, it refers to the tissue acting as the interspace where exchanges of molecules fundamental for the physiological maintenance of some basic organic functions take place, such as the passage of oxygen from the blood to the lungs through the pulmonary alveoli. For decades mistakenly considered as a connective tissue with branches throughout the body, the recent discovery of a group of medical researchers has restored its dignity as a proper organ acting as a real shock absorber preventing body's

tissues from tearing, so protecting what is vital from the most violent and disruptive lashings (Benias, Wells, Sackey-Aboagye, *et al.*, 2018).

A function reflected by Bourriaud's citation about "artwork as social interstice" (Bourriaud 2002: 14), as a space of human relations that, while fitting more or less harmoniously and openly into the global system, suggests other possibilities of exchange than those in force in the system itself. The interstice is thence a real "misplaced" place, where possibilities of movement and change are generated in non-adherence to sluggish or blocked systems. To inhabit them means to create and stay in those spurious and dispersed spaces where communal practices are generated beyond communities because the self is perceived as a plural noun, able to change reality and make the future in the direction of something felt-thought-aspired-to together with others by pursuing a collective right to re-search.

Collective filmmaking applied to research on and in cities can be a lever to inhabit and enlarge such interstices, thus becoming a real tool for not only representing city but also for city-making, meant as a common endeavour.

This can happen in at least three ways.

First of all, cinema is an adventure into the urban worlds on the wave of sight. Just as medieval artists illuminated parchments and, in the Baroque era, painters illuminated interiors with landscapes, it can illuminate fragments of urban worlds like a magic lantern. While producing perceptual relocations, cinema injects cultural and ethical lines into the space of ocularity (Resina, 2009), which produce critical and multiple orientation in space and into the world.

Secondly, cinema builds relationships that are both contextual and imperishable with the places and people it shows. The camera is an essentially locative device, which (re)locates the viewer within the specific coordinates of a given representation. In this way, the film builds a relationship between the beholder and who/what is seen, between the eye and the space with its embodied relationships, untying the latter from the contingent times of shooting and immersing it in the flow of long time, somehow forever.

Thirdly, cinema makes "the city feel" and can make it feel as others do. A well-constructed cinematic experience that addresses

urban spaces senses and makes perceivable the plurality of bodies, rhythms, and intertwined stories, not only because it shows them from the most hidden folds, but also because it insinuates the vision of the others. Cinematic storytelling shows in inclusive terms (Schiavo, 2022) the intertwined histories and the relationships of stories and places. Putting affects at the centre of the same understanding and knowledge production about urban environments, pursuing awareness of emotions and their impact and intertwinements with everyday life, it allows to both govern the power of conscious thoughts and unconscious feelings and to innovate the ways research on cities and city-making are implemented.

Making a film can be equated to city-making as it implies going through countless difficulties, use a lot of dedication, patience, navigation, and willingness to go out of one's comfort zones. It can also save life, though, as happened to me and the project participants just while the world was showing clear signs of malaise and despair. I learned a lot about my own city from the young men and women who took part into the project and we borrowed a lot from each other about life, multiplying the multitudes that each of us is by setting filmmaking as our method of and for research (in the city). Producing audio-visual work in collective terms, where the word "collective" refers to a human aggregate in deep relationship, amplifies the political value, the transformative vis and consciousness of both individuals and the group (Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane, 2017).

However complex, delicate, difficult it may be, developing a collective documentary practice as a methodology for social research in the urban field is exactly about staying in the interstices, between human, disciplinary, and professional worlds to affirm research as a universal right looking for transformative practices and building that space of exchange of vital material for the complex spaces, organisms and ecologies that we are. As Lugones (2016) says, interstice can appear very small at the beginning or from the outside, until one starts inhabiting it and realizes that it is actually huge because there live all those who go beyond the *status quo* to connecting with the creative, generative and vital other margins of the world and found practice of feeling-thinking together to aspire to better futures.



Fig. 8 Last shot of the collective documentary *Io non vedo il mare* (by Paola Piscitelli, 2022).

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