Tracks and Traces.
Exploring the World of Graffiti Writing trough Visual Methods Book review

Pedro Soares Neves, Executive Director AP2/ Urbancreativity
Research colaborator of: University of Lisbon Faculty of Fine Arts / Artistic Studies Research Centre (CIEBA/FBAUL);
Associate Laboratory of Robotics and Engineering Systems / Interactive Technologies Institute (ITI/LARSyS/IST);
Interdisciplinary Centre for History, Culture and Societies (CIDEHUS/UE)

Abstract

This review examines Peter Bengtsen's Tracks and Traces, a noteworthy exploration of graffiti writing through visual methods. The book presents a compelling perspective on graffiti as a form of personal expression, delving into its intricate unique details. Bengtsen's work stands out for its exceptional publication quality, for example with pages that unfold for big sized images, providing readers with a visually rich and engaging experience.

The strength of the book lies in its well-referenced content, firmly grounded in experimental applied research. Bengtsen builds his arguments on a solid foundation, making the publication a valuable resource for those seeking a comprehensive understanding of graffiti from the visual methods point of view. Moreover, the book introduces transferable methodological approaches that contribute to its broader relevance beyond the immediate subject matter.

A paramount hypothesis explored in the book revolves around the refined attentiveness of graffiti practitioners to the city environment. Bengtsen posits that individuals engaged in graffiti develop a heightened awareness of and connection to the urban landscape. This hypothesis adds a significant layer to the discourse on graffiti, shedding light on the symbiotic relationship between graffiti and the city.

One of the commendable aspects of Tracks and Traces is its accessibility to readers new to graffiti as a subject. Bengtsen effectively navigates the intricacies of graffiti culture, making the book approachable without compromising on depth. The inclusion of visual methods enhances comprehension, allowing readers to grasp the essence of graffiti writing even if they are unfamiliar with the topic.

In summary, Tracks and Traces by Peter Bengtsen emerges as a valuable contribution to the study of graffiti writing. Its focus on personal expression, high publication quality, rigorous research methodology, and accessible presentation makes it a recommended read for both scholars and newcomers interested in exploring the world of graffiti through a visual lens.

1 – Book Preface

Within these pages lies a personal narrative—a reworked collection of field notes detailing acts of trespassing. The narrative unfolds against a backdrop of intense tension arising from the ever-present risk of being apprehended. Wazte, a graffiti writer, is acknowledged both as the observed content and as a participant in the creation of the cover illustrations featured on both the front and back of the book. The narrative introduces the verbal expression "action - invisible; traces - explicit," a phrase that serves as a profound inspiration for Peter Bengtsen and serves as the entry point for the application of visual methods in graffiti research. The author elucidates this verbal expression by highlighting the prevalent invisibility of graffiti authors, contrasting it with the often-sought-after visibility of the resulting graffiti. The book explicitly declares the utilization of visual methods as essential for accessing the otherwise challenging realm of Malmo's graffiti writing scene. It is pertinent to note, however, that while Malmo serves as a

Fig. 1 Book cover. Image retreived from https://skissernasmuseum.se/en/calendar/book-release-tracks-and-traces-exploring-the-world-of-graffiti-writing-through-visual-methods/ (on 1/2024)

focal point, the author repeatedly illustrates that this is just one example. In fact, the author's intention extends beyond the confines of Malmo's graffiti world and encompasses a broader perspective on graffiti culture.

In the Preface, two central ideas are presented:
a) Visual expressions serve as conveyors of information about the world in which they are produced.
b) Visual methods can offer supplementary knowledge to other research approaches, such as person-focused fieldwork.

Three objectives are outlined in relation to research methodology:

1 - Visual material from graffiti allows outsiders to gain understanding of a difficult-to-access field (not as a substitution for other fieldwork methods but as a supplementary approach).

2 - Videographic exploration serves as a visual method for collecting and reflecting on empirical material, utilizing video to convey the research processes and findings.

3 - The exploration of unfamiliar methods and media is discussed in terms of expanding the researcher's methodological toolkit. Experimental research methods, such as graffiti zines, physical scavenger hunts, and social media posts, are presented as examples.

2 - Diving into Chapter 1: Background and reflections on visual methods:

The Malmo graffiti world is portrayed as an object of study, serving as a vehicle for methodological discussions on visual methods in graffiti research, enriched with seminal references. The author keenly observes a noticeable absence of methodological exploration of visual methods in scholarly publications since the 1980s.

This study aligns itself with a tradition of visual methods and methodology, emphasizing the practical application of visual research methods. The chapter delves into the developments in visual anthropology from the 1970s onwards, underscoring references used by the author. Furthermore, it highlights the enduring tradition of visually documenting graffiti, substantiated with recent examples.

For readers unfamiliar with graffiti, this chapter provides valuable support for key terms related to both graffiti and visual anthropology.

It is emphasized that the book is not centered around theory; instead, it concentrates on explorations and methodological discussions related to visual methods and their application in graffiti and graffiti writing research. The exploration of the relationship between images and words establishes the relevance of this topic within the realm of publishing activities.

For example, a reference to sociologist Les Back on page 23 emphasizes that visual materials in academic publications are primarily employed as a complement to written accounts. James Elkins, in connection with Art History, notes that images are utilized in a manner that ensures the text "remains in control." Contrary to behaving as if devoid of meaning or logic, images effectively possess meaning, logic, or theory. Darren Newbury, former editor of Visual Studies journal, shares a similar opinion, asserting that images are not concealed ideas; they are intellectual propositions in themselves. Visual researchers should be attentive to utilizing images to accomplish tasks rather than merely illustrating written arguments. Gillian Rose suggests that images are valuable in evoking affect. Similarly, David MacDougall asserts that images possess the power to directly tap into emotional experiences, bypassing intellectual understanding.

These references, among numerous others, proved beneficial for the author in approaching the object of study, examining graffiti, and producing image-based artifacts for interaction with the graffiti world.

In the section "Notes on Research Methods," the author reveals a decade-long practical engagement with these methodologies. The adopted methodologies, initially emerging without conscious efforts, eventually evolved into a cohesive collection of methods that unified the study.

In terms of ethics, a notable challenge involves ensuring anonymity when employing visual methods. Drawing on references to Luc Pauwels and Rose, the author deems the identification of people and places problematic, especially in the case of the mostly-hidden world of graffiti writing. The author illustrates this dilemma using an example of a post and message on Instagram, underscoring the complexities related to identifying identities and spaces, and the potential consequences for the authors of the graffiti or even the researcher, serving as evidence of trespassing.

3 - Diving into Chapter 2: Using visual methods to access and understand the graffiti world

In the sub-chapter, "Approaching Malmo's graffiti world as an outsider", the author offers a personal insight into Malmö's world of graffiti, starting from the year 2010. A crucial distinction is made clear: unlike researchers who directly engage with graffiti writers, the author's primary approach, as discussed in Chapter 1, has been to study the visual expressions left behind – the "tracks and traces" – as explicit indexical signs of the actions that have transpired. The author concludes that this type of study and dissemination of visual expressions can yield valuable information about a field and provide the researcher with credibility and a recognized position.

This personal account is rich with details of how a visual researcher transitioned from street art to graffiti as a research topic, undergoing a shift from a conveniently spontaneous approach to a documentary and geographically expansive operation. Initially not done as part of a formal research process, the author gradually began to extract visual and identity-related information about participants in Malmö's graffiti world. The author guides readers through insights derived from various visual analyses, placing the process in relation to the works of prominent researchers in street art, such as Lachlan MacDowall, Susan Philips, and Nancy Macdonald.

The text also revisits the author's personal experiences, highlighting instances of trespassing and the intense tension arising from the potential of getting caught. Additionally, the relevance of a photo archive is mentioned; as the author's knowledge of the graffiti world in Malmö organically expanded, the archive became useful for reinterpreting previously collected visual material.

In the sub-chapter "On the outside, looking in: Instagram as a window to the graffiti world", the mediation between the researcher and the object of research is observed, referencing Erik Hannerz and other authors. The work of Lachlan MacDowall, especially the 2019 book Instafame, holds significance as the author narrates interactions on Instagram that evolved from the research exploration using this platform.

The detailed account provides insights into how interactions occurred and their relation to the ongoing research. It explores the implications of how the photographic work was influenced by the platform and the acquisition of a recognized position as a chronicler of the Malmö graffiti world. The text also emphasizes that the platform serves as a less intrusive method of interaction with the community, keeping in mind that Instagram is not a "true" mirror of the street-based reality. This discussion underscores the complexities and nuances associated with using social media platforms as a window into the world of graffiti.

4 - Chapter 3: Exploring videography and video as means of conducting research, communicating findings, and gaining new insights

In this chapter, the author delves into the realm of videography and video as powerful tools for capturing and conveying the intricate experience of studying the tracks and traces of graffiti writing and their surroundings.

Videography is discussed as a method for documenting the research process, utilizing the editing process for reflection purposes. Video, on the other hand, emerges as a medium for effectively communicating not only the research processes but also the findings to a wider audience.

A pivotal insight shared in this chapter is the notion that working with unfamiliar methods and media can prompt researchers to reassess previously-collected empirical material and ponder its influence on subsequent research endeavours. This insight is underscored by the citation of Darren Newbury, a professor of Photographic History, who elucidates that visual material in publications serves three distinct purposes: illustration, analysis, and argument.

The author appears to push the boundaries of method and medium within the context of academic research, employing words and still images, but also providing access to videos , shared through a QR code or hyperlink.

The focal point of this chapter is the video titled Tracing Kegr, documenting the search for tags by graffiti writer Kegr on the outskirts of Malmö. The chapter details the process and considerations regarding the outcome, emphasizing the informative and relevant aspects of videography and video in achieving a deeper understanding of the research process. Drawing on the work of Andrea Mubi Brighenti, who views the tag as a serial entity, the author argues that video is better suited for conveying this reality compared to a sequence of still images, capturing the essence of time and the physicality of the body in space.

This case study is employed as an unprecedented exploration of the relationship between videography, video, and the research purpose. However, the author does not shy away from self-criticism, acknowledging the lack of professional knowledge, suitable equipment, and technical experience. This acknowledgment is considered in the context of the overall research outcome.

Within this exploration, the author articulates the primary reasons for undertaking this exercise, supported by references such as Gilian Rose and Lotta Granbom, who contend that video, as a medium, reaches a broader audience.

Interpolating the Tracing Kegr case study with reflections on the purpose of sound, reception, and content analysis, among other aspects, the author concludes this sub-chapter by emphasizing the growing conviction that words and visuals are not adversaries but supplementary means

of effectively conveying a point.

In the subsequent sub-chapter, "The benefits of not knowing what you are doing: developing new methods and methodological insights," the author delves deeper into the process. Ethnographic filmmaking is championed as a challenging craft, referencing Gillian Rose and Sarah Pink. The author expands on how technical obstacles were overcome, emphasizing a learning-by-doing logic. The absence of prior experience with videography is embraced, highlighting the playful aspect of applying methods, whether they are familiar or not.

5 - Chapter 4: Follow me! Reflections on an ongoing experiment:

This chapter delves into an endeavour aimed at capturing the attention of graffiti writers and enthusiasts, employing the author's photographic and videographic practices, along with a strong social media presence, to encourage the exploration of the urban environment.

The initial focus of this chapter revolves around the delineation between chroniclers – those who solely document graffiti – and the individuals actively involved in graffiti writing, positioning chroniclers at the periphery, seemingly less integral to the art form. The author draws on a quote from Bryson Chin, an American graffiti chronicler, to exemplify a sentiment shared within the graffiti chronicler community.

Acknowledging the hierarchical placement, the chapter reflects on exceptions to this rule, citing figures such as John Naar, Martha Cooper, and Henry Chalfant, who are generally revered by graffiti writers. The author also highlights other relevant examples, including podcasters, as identified by sociologist Malcolm Jacobson.

In response to the challenge posed by this hierarchical positioning, the author undertakes the creation of a zine, seeking to challenge the perceived status within the graffiti world of Malmö. Crafted by hand and featuring image stills from the video Tracing Kegr, the zine serves as a tangible

expression of the author's engagement.

On the sub-chapter "Graffiti Zines: Creating Objects of Desire", homemade zines, aligning seamlessly with the DIY culture mentality of graffiti, are aptly described as fitting perfectly within this subculture, a sentiment attributed to @dutch_graffiti_library (on Instagram). The production process and motivations behind the zine are meticulously documented, accompanied by images and links to videos on YouTube and Instagram. The zine serves as a printed counterpart to the previously created video.

The section "Leaving Tracks and Traces: Scavenger Hunts in Malmö" outlines the rationale behind selecting specific locations for placing the zine and detailing the strategy employed to communicate the scavenger hunt. The author explores an intriguing game with compelling results, offering valuable insights from a methodological research perspective. Dialogues through social networks were the primary method of engagement, supplemented in a few instances by echoes in the production of new graffiti.

In the concluding remarks of the chapter, the author notes that the scavenger hunts not only demonstrated interest among members of Malmo's graffiti world in the author's handmade zines as collectible objects of desire but were also identified as playful, humorous, and creative methods of dialogue with the graffiti community.

Perhaps one of the most compelling takeaways from this chapter is the shared hypothesis between the author and the reader: individuals who write or take an interest in graffiti may develop a refined attentiveness to the city. This insight adds a layer of depth to the exploration of graffiti culture and its profound impact on the perception of urban spaces.

6 - Epilogue

Within the Epilogue, we encounter yet another application for the methodologies extensively explored throughout the book.

Commencing with what can be deemed a conclusive summary, it reaffirms the book's overarching purpose, emphasizing its connection with visual methods. Importantly, it reiteratesmentions that the intention is not to supplant other methods but to offer valuable additions to the researcher's toolkit. Moreover, the Epilogue underlines that videography and video, as methods of research and dissemination of results, serve specific purposes that complement text and still-image-based academic production, recognizing the inherent value of diverse mediums.

The author further conveys that while the study concentrates on the specific realities of Malmö, the methodological insights presented are not confined to this locale alone. Instead, they retain applicability across various empirical cases and contexts, extending the reach and relevance of the book's contributions to a broader spectrum of research endeavours. This acknowledgment reinforces the versatility and transferability of the methodologies, encouraging their adoption and adaptation in diverse academic and research settings.

In the exploration of future opportunities and challenges within the realm of graffiti, the author examines the impact of emerging technologies, particularly unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and artificial intelligence (AI). Drones, equipped with spray cans and cameras, offer groundbreaking possibilities in creating and documenting graffiti imagery from unprecedented perspectives. However, the author notes the concurrent increase in risks associated with surveillance capabilities, raising concerns about privacy and authorities' control over graffiti-related activities.

The narrative then shifts towards the role of AI, acknowledging the transformative effects of digital technologies on recording, editing, and circulating images. The author reflects on their personal experience, gained through digital photography and videography, as well as the use of platforms like Instagram and YouTube. The scepticism within the graffiti community towards the increasing digital mediatisation is discussed, particularly the detachment of fame from the physical efforts of placing and circulating visual monikers.

The author conducts experiments with an AI image generator, Nightcafe Creator, providing insights into the current limitations and crude aspects of AI-generated images. While acknowledging the potential advancements in AI technology, the author anticipates the future transposition of graffiti into the digital and virtual realm, potentially rendering physical graffiti-making skills obsolete. The text introduces concerns about the detachment of fame from physical efforts and the potential impact on social media dynamics.

The author compares AI image generators with existing digital tools for drawing graffiti, highlighting their fundamental differences. AI generators, unlike previous tools, can be used irrespective of the user's drawing skills, allowing individuals with no prior experience in graffiti to generate and share images on social media. The implications of these changes on researchers, who rely on visual records to acquire knowledge about the graffiti world, are discussed. Potential issues, such as the fabrication of visual records through AI, are highlighted, emphasizing the need for continuous critical reflection on the use of visual methods.

In conclusion, the author underscores that while visual expressions offer meaningful insights, the rise of AI-generated images necessitates ongoing critical reflection. The text reinforces the idea that visual methods should not replace other research approaches but should be used in conjunction to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving – and increasingly visually-oriented – world we inhabit.

Reference

Bengtsen, P. (2023). Tracks and Traces: Exploring the World of Graffiti Writing through Visual Methods. Almendros de Granada Press.