



“Where does this image take you?” A visual tale from a workshop on geographical imaginations

School AGeI Cesarea Terme collective¹

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Abstract

This work is authored by a group of Ph.D. students and academics who attended a workshop on visual methodologies in the framework of the *Scuola di alta formazione in geografia* organised by AGeI (Association of Italian Geographers), 2022 edition. By visually reporting the workshop activities we aim at reflecting on the creative power of images in expanding geographical imaginations and its potential in the teaching of geography.

The paper is shaped as a visual essay in which images and text do not refer directly to each other but rather aim at creating an imaginative reading flow.

Keywords: Photographs, Geographical Imaginations, Visual Essay, Teaching of Geography

¹ This paper is authored by a wide ranging group of Ph.D. students and academics who took part in the workshop on visual methodologies in the framework of the *Scuola di alta formazione in geografia* organised by AGeI (Association of Italian Geographers), 2022 edition. The list of names is the following: Elisa Bignante and Matteo Puttilli (chairs), Pietro Agnoletto, Giovanni Agostoni, Fabio Amato, Annachiara Autiero, Ettore Asoni, Giovanni Baiocchetti Stefania Benetti, Noemi Bergesio, Andrea Cerasuolo, Benedetta Cesarini, Ornella D’Alessio, Claudio Sossio De Simone, Livia Jessica Dell’Anna, Laura Eccher, Giulia Fiorentino, Caroline Fornasari, Andrea Gallo, Costanza Gasparo, Maria Laura Gasparini, Sara Giovansana, Roberta Mingo, Erica Neri, Giulia Oddi, Daniele Pangaro, Davide Papotti, Cecilia Pasini, Marco Picone, Ginevra Pierucci, Marta Rodeschini, Francesca Sabatini, Valerio Salvini, Lisa Scafa, Enrico Squarcina, Giacomo Spanu, Massimiliano Tabusi, Cristiana Zorzi. The author of the photographs in the article, unless otherwise noted, is Elisa Bignante.



The authors (photo courtesy of Massimiliano Tabusi).

1. Crafting with images and visuality: a workshop

Where does this image take you? This was the question asked during the session on visual methodologies to a group of over thirty Ph.D.

students and academics meeting at the annual *Scuola di alta formazione in Geografia* (High Level training school in geography), organised by the AGeI (Association of Italian Geographers).



The *Scuola*, currently at its third edition, is an intensive course targeted at a selection of Ph.D. students specializing in different geographical branches². The aim of the school is to explore a

² In 2022, the school was hosted in Santa Cesarea Terme (Lecce) from the 3rd to 7th September.

common topic through lectures and workshop activities. The theme of the 2022 edition was “geographical narrations”, and one workshop was dedicated to visual methods in fieldwork research. The visual methods workshop was held on the third day of the school; consequently, it had

been anticipated by groups of lectures and activities focused on the multiple contaminations between geography and narrative(s), imagination(s), and creativity. Contributions by Italian colleagues had approached the intrinsic narratology of geographical representations in different media, such as TV series and movies, song writing, literary texts, and so on. Thus, the terrain was already prepared for a practical activity based on the role of images in geographical narrations, on the field and beyond.

The session on visual methodologies was conceived as an occasion to navigate the creative power of images in expanding the limits of

geographical imaginations. Indeed, geographical imaginations have always been profoundly visual and the gaze has constantly dominated, among other senses, geographical descriptions. However, while in the past images (maps, drawings, photographs) were often used to provide encyclopaedic, all-encompassing descriptions of the world – thus favouring a “scientific” control over reality and places – today, as geographers, we are well aware of the fact that every gaze produces, in time and space, its own description of a place or a phenomenon, not necessarily coinciding with previous, subsequent or contemporary descriptions of the same place.



Moreover, images have a creative, imaginative, and evocative potential which makes them powerful tools in the building of new forms of knowledge, as they induce the creation of scenarios, the exploration of

possibilities and the negotiation of meanings and values. The imaginative potential of images also lies in their intrinsic relationality: images are never an end in themselves.



Looking at and commenting on an image means building a relationship with it (with its

materiality, with its contents and the reflections it arouses in us). And, when there are two or

more people shooting or commenting on an image, new relational dynamics and new ways of looking are generated and geographical

imaginations are expanded towards new – and possibly unexpected – directions and spaces.



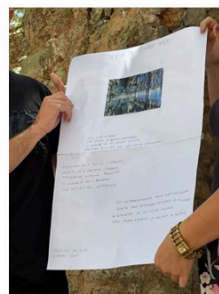
Building on these ideas, the participants were asked to work in pairs. Each couple was randomly given one artistic photograph, previously selected by the session chairs. The selection of photographs was guided by some basic criteria: i) all images belonged to the same source, that is clippings from a weekly Italian newspaper reporting on international affairs (titled “Internazionale”); ii) all the pictures had been taken by professional photographers, and belonged to wider photo-reportages; iii) images

were delinked from the original context, so as to liberate them from the title and the texts of the articles they were originally related to; iv) images were selected to cover a broad range of topics (some were more easily connectable to events and/or places, others were chosen for being evocative but not fully understandable).



Participants were asked to reflect individually on the images for a few minutes; afterwards, working in pairs, they were encouraged to start a dialogue exchanging with their partners what the

picture had prompted in terms of spontaneous associations, personal feelings, and open reflections, letting the image take them somewhere else.



Finally, participants were asked to narrate on a poster the stories generated by the exchange, using whatever means they wanted: text, poetry, drawings, mental maps, and so on.

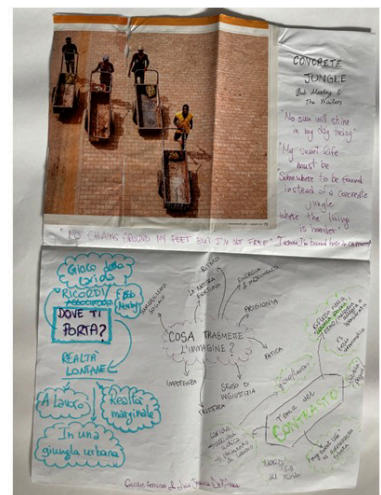
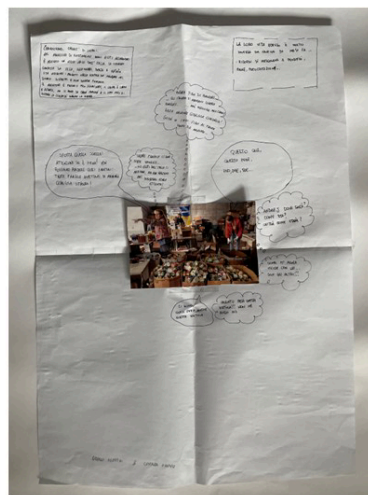
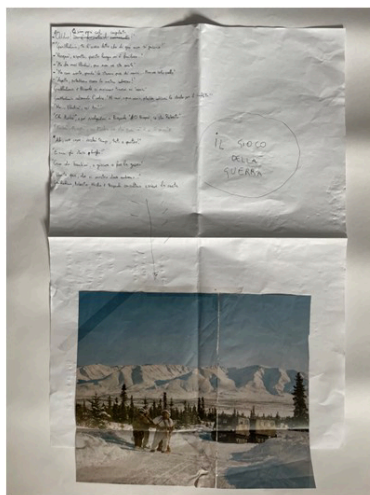
The activity was then followed by a collective restitution of the works, which proved to be a moment as generative and creative as the previous phase. In fact, the presentation of the works took the form of real performances, in which texts and images were mixed with sounds, music, acting, poetry, and so on. It was also a very pleasant and engaging moment, often accompanied by emotions and laughter, sometimes bitter when the works dealt with dramatic or satirical topics. In the next paragraph, this restitution is rendered through a visual tale, made up of the posters and some quotes performed during the presentations.

2. Stretching the boundaries of geographical imaginations: a visual tale

“We spent a lot of time thinking, and in the end we didn't know how to tell our story. Then we thought that after all, even the photo is a narration, and we built our narration of a narration”.

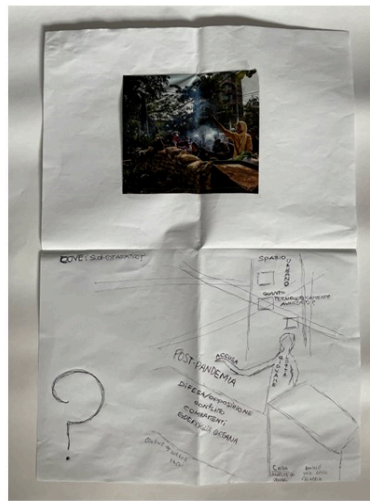
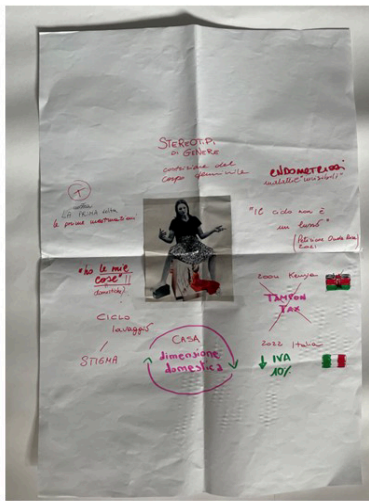
“Our dialogue revolving around the image has turned into poetry, [...]”.

“The image brought us back to our research experiences on migration and to how communicating migrants' different ways of experiencing space (mobility) and time was mediated by images: when people, unable to explain themselves, showed us photos of themselves, of their bodies, of their past, of their relatives and friends at home”.



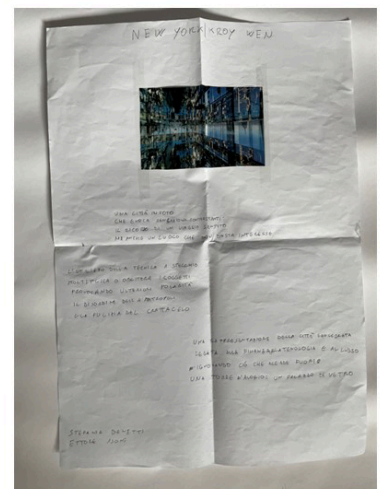
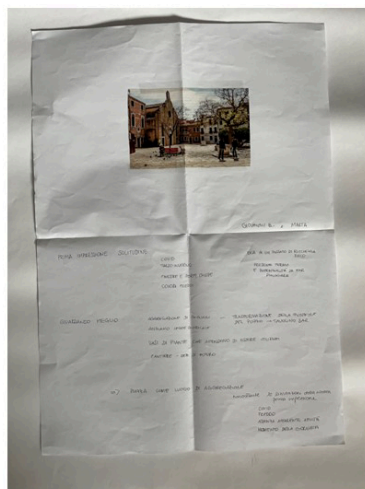
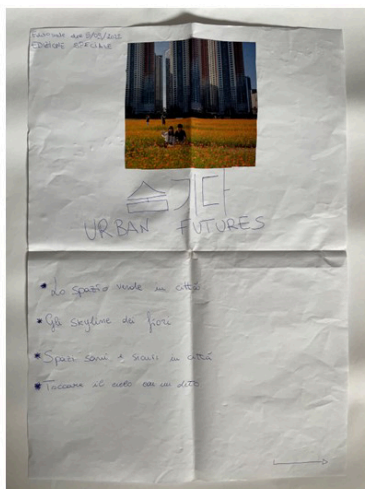
“The place where this image took us is inside our dream imaginary, and we started seeing binaries and dualisms in this image: it has two sections, crossed by trajectories and connections,

and we started to imagine, each one of us in its own way, the various possible relationships that this image suggests ...”.



“The photo spoke to us, and we have tried to speak back to the photo. And what came to the

surface, in the very end, was the metaphor of the inhabited earth ...”.

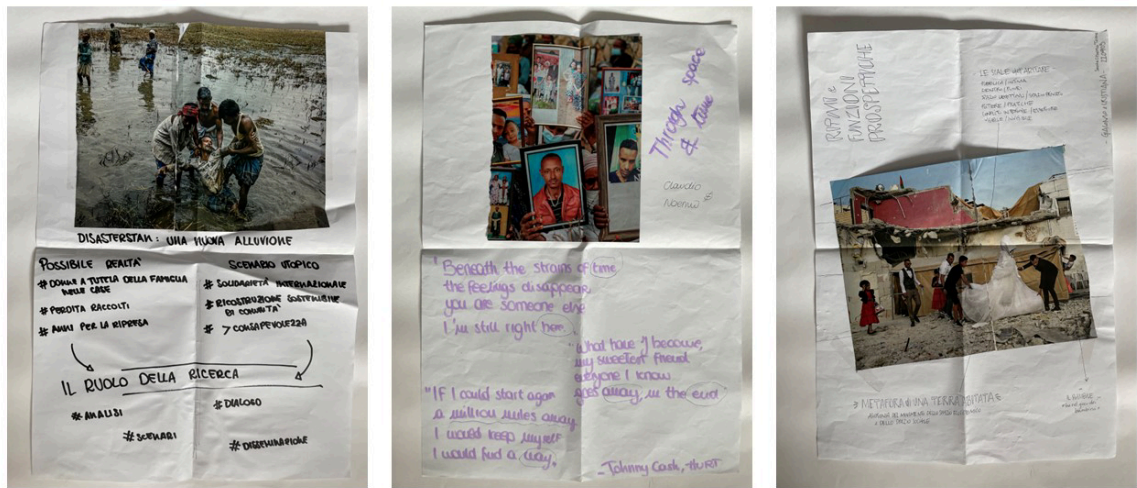


“We found several different layers in this image, that we have interpreted in a scalar perspective, also discussions among us revolved around dichotomies: public / intimate, inside / outside, legitimate space / deprivation of space, power / practices, internal conflict / external conflict, visible / invisible [...]”

around, and outside of this photo, and what happens in the lives of these people ...”

“We also tried to imagine what happens

“Our process of looking at the photo was intense: the image immediately recalled memories, we found ourselves telling stories from our past, the emotional engagement was strong ...”.

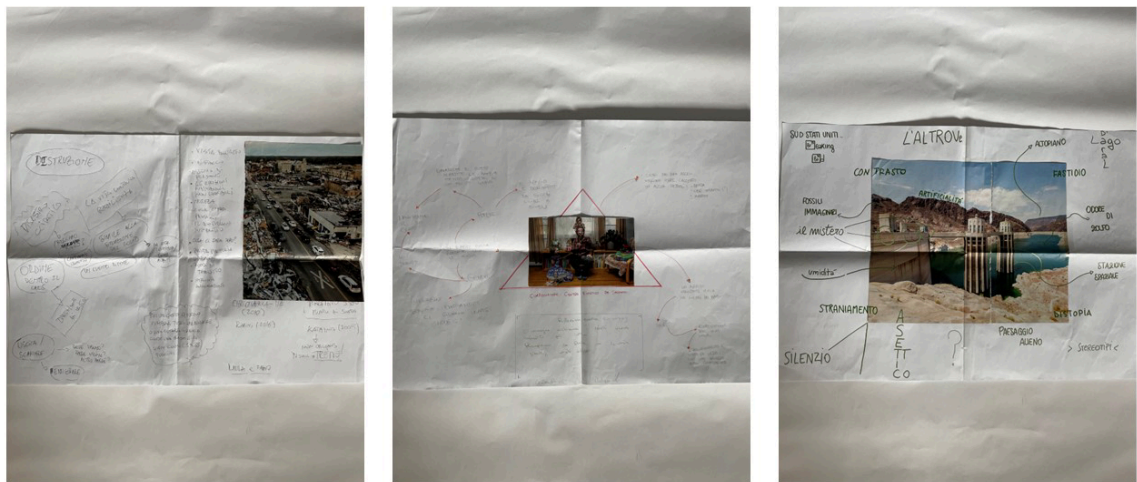


“I find that the power and limit of the image is precisely in what we see: looking at this image we immediately said to ourselves ‘South of the world, poverty, a distant context’, then you look at the image again and start making connections, and I thought I live in L'Aquila and this image is not so far from what is happening near us”.

Cash came to mind, it's called Earth, ...”.

“Working together, the two of us, was very fruitful because Marta offered me a new interpretation of the photo and by going deeper into our reflection we came to a different interpretation of the loneliness we initially found in the image”.

“Looking at the image, this song by Johnny

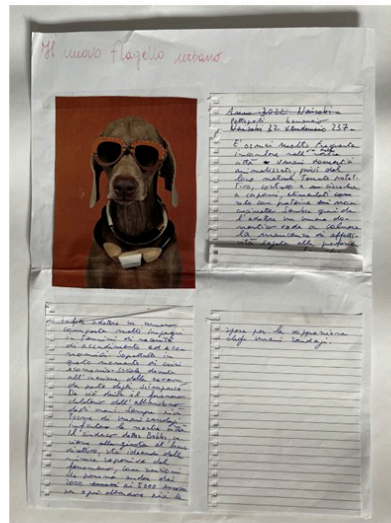
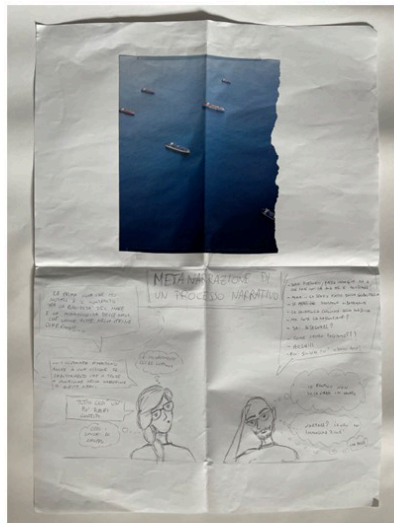


“We don't know where [this photo] comes from, what magazine it was in, because it was printed on this kind of paper, what audience it was intended for. This photo told us a story, to someone else it will tell another”

“To us, the room in the photo was a place we too could have access to... with our memories, our past, our stories, in a context that can be playful but can be emotionally charging in various ways”

“We thought of building an alternative world based on the feelings the image evoked in us, trying through a stream of consciousness to

bring out our thoughts, hypothesizing an alternative world here”



3. Where images have taken us

Images have the power to take people somewhere else, and to explore, generate and assemble worlds, registers and spaces. In the context of our workshop, images were first used to create new narrative contexts, spanning from real to fictional worlds and places. Lived and everyday spaces have overlapped and been contaminated by imaginative situations, spaces of utopias and dystopias. In so doing, rationality left room for creativity, intuition, and spontaneity. In other words, images worked as powerful injectors of geographical imaginations.

Secondly, images took the participants into that space of liminality where the boundaries between different representational registers no longer exist. Poetic, descriptive, allusive, evocative, imaginative, symbolic, metaphorical, and yet satirical, dramatic, ironic registers coexisted within the same presentation and between different restitutions. Geographical

imaginations, when mediated by images, lead us to challenge the conventionality of the ways in which we express ourselves and describe the world.

Finally, working with images took us to a safe, secure, relaxed and joyful place where sharing and building together something new becomes not only possible, but also desirable. This state of openness and creative thinking made it possible to break boundaries, fostering unexpected insights and sharing one's own perspective with less fear (and more facets). These aspects are particularly valuable in the teaching of geography. How we learn (i.e. the process through which we learn), is just as important as what we learn. And how we learn is strictly connected to what we are able and allowed to see, and to how open our minds and bodies are to welcome, elaborate and create new forms of knowledge, taking us to different places and different ways of practicing, performing, and sharing geography.