

Grades of Visibility: Human Body Questions Digital Representation

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Grades of Visibility: Human Body Questions Digital Representation

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Abstract

This paper explores the hypothesis that visual representation of space through the use of visual arts, particularly short films, can be used as a digital ethnographic technique (Leonie Sandercock, *Changing the Lens: Film as Action Research and Therapeutic Planning*, 2014) to be integrated into the practice of spatial planning.

Surfing in the era of digitalisation, artificial intelligence and remote working, on-site human perception of place tends to vanish as a secondary aspect. Spatial planning and geospatial data eventually refer to different grades of visibility: what is visually represented and how that place is perceived throughout the body in time and space, sounding and points of view.

Contemporary dancer and choreographer Virgilio Sieni highlights the urge for the human body to rediscover itself as the very first space of inhabitation (Virgilio Sieni, *Progettare Scalzi*, 2021). Already in the past century, Italian novelist Italo Calvino underlined the multiplicity of different perceptions that human beings experience in time and space (Italo Calvino, *Ipotesi per la descrizione di un paesaggio*, 1995). Today, Danish visual artist Olafur Eliasson centres his work around the concept of perceptive representation. Starting from these assumptions, how can we represent space? How can we visualise something that is not objective and yet represents something that involves everyone?

Working in the context of digital twins and geospatial data, the current academic research aims to investigate the fragilities of these digital models where human presence is quite evanescent. Real perception eventually differs from what is digitally represented. Within this frame, the current study aims to explore visual arts, namely short films and documentaries, as powerful tools to enhance the practice of spatial planning and provide a parallel, although complementary, methodological tool.

Keywords: Digital ethnography, film and community engagement, interdisciplinary design, collaborative film-making design.

1. Introduction

Spatial representation is a concept embedded in all forms of art. Visual arts can indeed be considered the main emblematic technique for exploring inquiries into visual representation.

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Following prior academic research in the context of geospatial representation, satellite imagery, and digital modelling, the author has often encountered a lack of human sense of place, human perception of a specific environment, feeling, and willingness. In this sense, the first question arose over how to depict these spaces when designed for humans and yet not humanly sensed. Have you ever actually stayed in a space and questioned its nature, your connection with it, and if so, have you ever experienced a change in the perception of this space? Why? What changed? All these questions unfold with no doubt a series of broader questions that canvass major arguments over the essence of living; but to frame them within the spectrum of spatial perception and how this feeling can influence both filmmaking as well as spatial planning is this research's deal.

Starting from the investigation of contemporary choreographer Virgilio Sieni and his artistic approach to more technical disciplines, namely architecture and urban planning, the author of this paper decided to engage in a performative class whose teaching and philosophy are the Virgilio Sieni method as a way to experiment and experience the investigation of space personally. The aim is to approach this empirical method and to apply this knowledge, hence a new way of observing in the practice of filmmaking. More in detail, the survey will present an initial selection of documentaries whose point of observation, human presence in the place, has been a pivotal aspect leading to a different spatial planning approach.

The final objective would eventually show the need to rethink the current urban planning perspective, supporting the current plan-view approach with an on-site visual contribution and, most importantly, human experience. This interdisciplinary approach aims to finalise a more comprehensive spatial design that takes into consideration human experience, considering the city «more than a place in space, but as a drama in time» (Patrick Geddes, *Spokesman for man and the environment: a selection* - ed. 1972).

2. The Visual Experience in Virgilio Sieni's Art

"I would like to see you engage in an architectural project, throughout the study of a choreographic action, shared with the inhabitants. This would already denote a way of living that space, a sort of initiation rite of that place" (Virgilio Sieni, *Progettare Scalzi*, pag. 29, 2021). Digital visual representation tends to transfer geospatial data and information that are tangibly there. That we can see. What Virgilio Sieni is proposing throughout its contemporary dance classes in collaboration with universities, municipalities and professionals is the rediscovery of an emotional and poetic map that starts from the investigation of the body, the memory and the shape of the body's movement to the creation of new urban geographies.

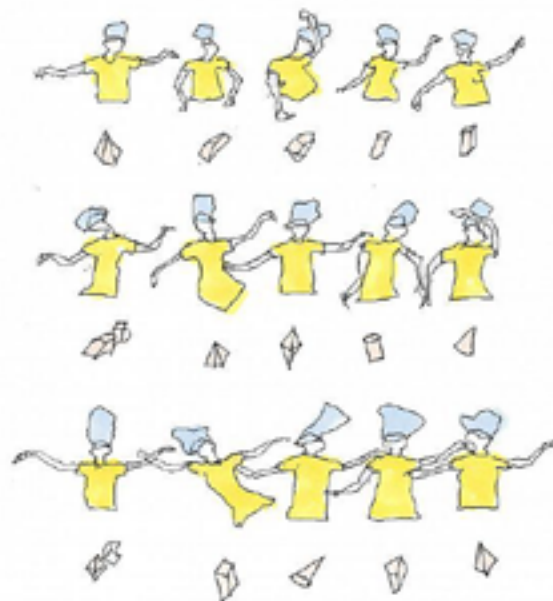


Figure 1. Activation of the imagery sensory system of the body. Source: Sieni V., *Progettare Scalzi*, 2021.

One of the most famous exercises that Sieni employs in its work is the creation of place through one's own body. What he suggests is the identification of the gesture and the presence in that space as the home for the time, the duration and the space of the movement per se. This movement generates an architecture that embraces this gesture and opens up the histories from the past that this space dearly preserves; it eventually creates a dialogue between the past and the present time of that space. The shapes generated by this movement define new ways of living that environment.

The study of the body as a space of inhabitation activates the imagery sensory system of the body self (Figure 1) and transfers this knowledge to the outside world, enhancing the richness of details that can be perceived and bringing subjective perception within a space that is going to be used by ourselves and others.

Two important aspects of Sieni's methodology indeed consist in listening to the surroundings and sharing personal experience along with the community that shares or is going to share that space with us. These two points are essential in the understanding of a place; first, they enable spatial awareness of the environment, support co-living and multiple experiences of the place, and eventually highlight which features can be positive or negative for us. Taking the time to go to a place, stay in it and breathe that air challenges today's rapid, although stationary, way of living and often, way of designing a place with no actual perception of it. The perception in between finite and infinite space, that Sieni defines Apeiron in its early stage of being, is what we then perceive as substance and the narrative between our body and the surrounding space starts defining new movements, new gestures and actually draw new spaces within it. This new approach to spatial design enables more creative and sensible visual representations that are not limited to distant visualisation of the place, although they bring a subjective and possibly collective view to it. This approach is crucial in spatial studies and consequently in the visual representation of places.

2.1. Framework and Aims

The need to change perspective is directly linked to the fact that today's cities are showing spatial inconsistency, highlighting social injustices and struggles in facing climate change challenges. All these acknowledgements must be addressed in architectural and urban planning practices. New designing processes should be better investigated, and a new way of observing things is urgent.

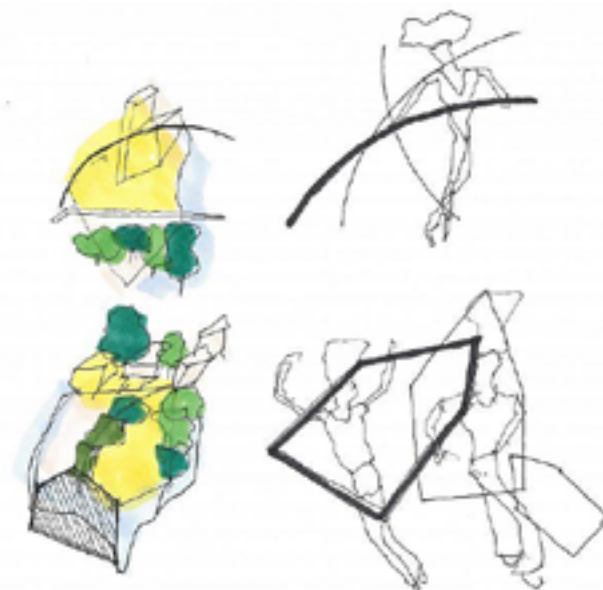


Figure 2. Visualisation of space throughout body. source: Sieni V., Progettare Scalzi, 2021.

The application of Virgilio Sieni method could be extremely beneficial for planning practices as his work in Marseille also proves (Sieni V., *Trois Agoras Marseille. Art du geste dans la Méditerranée*, 2013), where in collaboration with the city of Marseille and its citizens, he collaborates on a requalification project that unifies three areas of the harbour that were not in a dialogue: the Carli Palais, the MuCEM museum of European and Mediterranean civilization and the Esplanade of Fort Saint-Jean. The physical presence in the space is then needed; nevertheless, this presence needs to be visualised and represented. Virgilio Sieni's drawings (Figures 1 and 2) are very simple, although magnetic and very efficient. But how can these emotions and spatial awareness be somehow registered and shared with others? Drawings are, without a doubt, a powerful technique. In this specific survey, the author proposes filmmaking as a possible technique.

The current research indeed supports the use of filmmaking, more specifically documentaries, as a way to visualise and represent spatial perception and the actual way of living in a place. The following chapter will present two examples of documentaries that embody the sense of place and how that space is inhabited, along with their strengths and weaknesses.

3. Documentaries as Visual Tools for Spatial Planning

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak" (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pag. 7, 2008). Art critic and painter John Berger states and adds "but there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*).



Figure 3. Chris Temple preparing food in the house in Pena Blanca during the making of *Living on One Dollar* (2013).

The 2020 *Cosas Que No Hacemos* documentary by Bruno Santamaría Razo magnificently represents the everyday life of Arturo, a teenager dancing, running and playing with the free spirit of a small kid, together with the children of its village by the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The documentary shows moments of collective work, family, and leisure time. The filmmaker's ability to blend so fully within the community allows the spectator an immersive experience in those spaces. The soundscape and the colours merge with the spatial measurement of the protagonist's body, who feels part of that natural environment, while struggling to find its own space within the village, and its own housing space. This visual method also highlights these feelings by highlighting the spatial relationship between the protagonist's distinctive body, apparently in contrast with the smaller ones of the kids playing with him. The sense of place is

there in every scene and provides a great visualisation of it, in that time and from that perspective. Moreover, multiple scenes present Arturo dancing, alone, with his friends, near the sea. This slow-moving that gradually becomes faster and then moves, changing spatial dimensions – probably – unconsciously applies Virgilio Sieni's technique of perceiving the space through body movement and dance.

A few years before, another intense documentary was being made by four young American students at the time: Chris Temple, Zach Ingrasci, Sean Leonard and Sean Kusanagi. The film, *Living on One Dollar*, depicts the journey of these four students who decided to spend two months in rural Guatemala, applying a very specific rule: living on 1 dollar a day (Figure 3). Because of an unjust economic system, the inhabitants of these areas normally must live on one dollar a day; as Temple, Ingrasci, Leonard and Kusanagi were willing to better understand the microeconomic structures of these areas, their decision was unavoidable. As a result, the documentary not only showed the world power dynamics of rural Guatemala, made a huge impact on the lives of the American students, but mostly gave voice to the people inhabiting that place. More specifically, the documentary tells the story of Rosa, a 20-year-old woman and Chino, a 12-year-old boy, who constantly help and inspire the group by sharing personal knowledge and teaching the American young men local habits and everyday know-how.

This visual technique allowed the group to focus more on the details they were showing, aware of the potential risks of exposing the image of these people and letting them be the face and voice, the leaders in the gestures of everyday life activities and of that environment. This sensibility enabled an authentic immersive experience within that space and became a great example of positive communication tools, as these people, spaces, and stories finally became visible.

3.1. Participatory Documentary in Spatial Planning

Participatory video applied to the practice of spatial planning can be extremely effective in addressing today's lack of perception of space in spatial design. The question of visualisation and digital methods of representing the world can be as triggering as challenging, in the sense that it is always subjective and visual representation can also cause harm even when that is not the intent. As explained by Sarah Pink, Professor of Design and Media Ethnography "there are culturally different ways of understanding harm and causing it with images" and further adds "in order to prevent harm being caused, a researcher needs a good understanding of local notions of harm and anxiety, how these may be experienced by different people, and how they relate to images in that specific context" (Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, pag.63, 2013).

The potentialities of filmmaking within the practice of architecture and urban planning are very wide and should always take into consideration the participation of those who live or have lived in that place, with respect for their persona and acknowledged approval. This approach, together with open and attentive listening as indicated by Virgilio Sieni, can make a positive impact and improve the quality of planning and design practices.

4. Conclusion

The presented study intends to be a primary investigation into the integration of Virgilio Sieni's philosophy and filmmaking practice within the process of urban planning and architectural design. The aim is to provide a broader perspective that goes beyond ordinary design practices and adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines contemporary dance and body knowledge with the documentation and storytelling of these emotions, perceptions, and ways of looking.

The current research is clearly intended to be limited to specific case studies, although it intends to pursue further investigations that include the perceptions of space by all individuals, taking into high consideration people's needs and perceptions when different physical or mental abilities are involved. Within this experience-based framework, the goal is to enhance visual tools in order to be more comprehensive and complete, elaborating new cognitive maps and visual products that can allow not only a more qualitative process of planning and design, but also more qualitative spaces. This new perspective is highly needed in urban planning and architectural design, to recognise space, broaden personal perception, include citizens within the process, and create safer, higher-quality, and more humanly sensed spaces.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Biographical notes on authors

Jessica Comino is a PhD candidate in Urban and Regional Development at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), Politecnico di Torino, Italy. Her research explores urban representation, audiovisual methodologies, cultural heritage, and place-based narratives, with a particular focus on participatory and interdisciplinary approaches. She has contributed to research on heritage documentation, urban filmmaking, and spatial planning, and has collaborated in teaching within architecture, urban planning, and environmental programmes at Politecnico di Torino.

Endnotes

This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2023 on Visualisation in Architecture and Urban Planning

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