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LA LINEA DELL'ORIZZONTE, A FIRST ETHNO-GRAPHIC EXPERIENCE: THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF COMICS FOR ETHNOGRAPHY**

Abstract. The aim of the article is to reflect on the process of disseminating ethnographic research via the language of comics, drawing on the author's experience as a (co-)author of *La linea dell'orizzonte*. An ethnographic novel on migration between Bangladesh, Italy, and London. The mentioned experience helped to identify certain advantages of conveying ethnography through comic books: effective communication of the research process; a precise depiction of the spatial and environmental context in which the social phenomenon examined occurs; a suitable rendering of the emotional atmosphere; and a deep exploration of the researcher's reflexive processes. Accordingly, in this article these opportunities and limitations are investigated along with other possibilities and constraints encountered by the author in the process of composing an 'ethnographic novel'.

Keywords: Comics; Ethnography; Ethnographic Novel; Migrations.

INTRODUCTION

The author has always believed that literary, cinematic, theatrical and photographic works – and artistic production more broadly – can sometimes convey the reality of social life with greater clarity than many sociological or anthropological essays. Namely, the arts often succeed in describing the social world and its transformations – and, when *good* – even in *fostering* those transformations in a way that is more effective than a typical essay in the social sciences per se.

In a less ambitious formulation, one could simply say that artistic production – also meaning the aesthetics and languages of literature, for instance – is able to serve as a useful tool for the social sciences. It can help disseminate the

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knowledge generated by social research – or, more broadly, scientific research as a whole – to a wider public beyond just specialists (Della Puppa 2022; Sanfilippo 2021; 2022). The perspectives this artistic production provide are especially relevant today: the epochal turning point marked by the pandemic shows how crucial it is to foster trust and immediacy in the relationship between science and society.

Building on this conviction, the author decided to produce a sociological comic book to communicate the results of multi-sited ethnographic research conducted between Italy and London. More accurately, this refers to the results of a series of studies carried out over several years in Bangladesh, Italy and the United Kingdom. This was a qualitative inquiry aimed at exploring the motivations, hopes, disillusionments and living conditions of Bangladeshi men who migrated between the 1990s and 2000s and, after spending over half their lives in Italy, where they reunited with their wives and their children were born and, above all, acquired citizenship, decided to migrate further across the Channel to settle, with their families, in London.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL ON MIGRATION BETWEEN BANGLADESH, ITALY AND LONDON

Before the mid-1970s, Italy was mostly a country of emigration. The number of Italians leaving the country to live and work abroad exceeded the number of foreigners moving to Italy. Starting in around 1976, however, the growing influx of foreign immigrants began to outstrip the exodus of Italians, albeit the latter has never completely ceased.

Still, in the past decade or so a new and, in some respects, unprecedented phenomenon has emerged, not merely in Italy but across Southern Europe more generally, which can be described as *onward migration*. This term refers to the movement of foreign-born migrants who, after having lived in Italy for nearly 20 years and acquired Italian citizenship, leave the country to settle elsewhere abroad. Taking advantage of their European passports, they are able to move freely within Europe (and sometimes beyond) without major bureaucratic hurdles or visa restrictions.

With *La linea dell'orizzonte. An Ethnographic Novel on Migration between Bangladesh, Italy, and London* (Della Puppa et al. 2021), the author's aim was to shed light on both the brighter and darker aspects of such a migratory experience by reflecting on the dynamism of these 'new Italian citizens' on migration routes shaped by ongoing global transformations, and on the broader social, political and economic conditions in Italy and Southern Europe. At the same time, the book sought to highlight the challenges and turning points in ethnographic research itself.

Primarily, however, the intention was to reach an audience of non-specialists, individuals who are not necessarily social scientists or migration scholars. To that end, the author turned to the language of comics. The form of "drawn

literature”, as Hugo Pratt described it, belongs fully to the realm of artistic production capable of analysing and narrating reality, and can serve as a valuable communicative tool for the social sciences as well.

TOWARDS A COMIC-BOOK ETHNOGRAPHY

The mentioned experience – which led the author to take on the role of a comic artist and, in particular, to collaborate with professional cartoonists – was very insightful and prompted deep reflections on various aspects of language and narrative style.

First of all, the author came to realise that the relationship and interplay between the social sciences and comics are both long-standing and well-established, notably on the international level (consider, for example, works published in the *Sociorama* and *ethnoGRAPHIC* series). The way this intersection has been unexpectedly legitimised by the ‘gatekeepers’ of both disciplinary fields seemed especially noteworthy. Around these and other forms of ‘alternative writing’, a rich sociological, anthropological, historical and geographical debate has emerged – or perhaps *re-emerged* – as shown, for instance, by a special issue of *Sociologica* edited by Eduardo Barberis and Barbara Grüning (2021) that considers the practice of doing social science “via comics and graphic novels”. In addition, there has been a growing number of collaborations, even in Italy, between comic artists and social scientists.

Yet, this process made the author somewhat sceptical of the expression *graphic novel* now widely used in cultural, media, academic and publishing circles – even though, for reasons of stylistic and communicative convenience, *La linea dell'orizzonte* uses it in the subtitle. Comics, after all, are a *language* and, as such, require no external validation or legitimisation from academics or, more generally, ‘official culture’. Through this expressive form, one can tell a journalistic story, present scientific research, or narrate the plot of a novel. The English term *graphic novel* – a less awkward and seemingly neutral equivalent of the Italian *romanzo grafico* – nonetheless carries with it an implicit claim: it signals that what we are dealing with is ‘high literature’ or, in our case, a legitimate socio-anthropological production, rather than a mere item purchased at a newsstand.

Conveying an ethnography through the language of comics required the author to learn, even if only partly, how to use this language and construct a narrative that suits it: the way to develop a coherent and comprehensive script; how to shape dialogues that appear spontaneous, concise, fluid and natural, making each panel effective without relying on long stretches of written text and instead harnessing the communicative power of the drawn image; and how to organise the page layout, arrange the panels, and structure the visual sequence of images.

NARRATING ETHNOGRAPHY AS IT UNFOLDS

To meet the goal of making the sociological and ethnographic content of the author's work accessible to a broader audience beyond academia, the author and co-author of *La linea dell'orizzonte* needed to craft a narrative that was engaging and enjoyable to read. Namely, we had to take the reader by the hand and guide them naturally through the dimensions of *onward migration* among Italo-Bangladeshi moving from Italy to London, while revealing the ambivalence concerning their experiences and the many facets of the prism this phenomenon represents. To achieve that, we had to make specific narrative choices.

Focusing on a single Italo-Bangladeshi protagonist who, through his individual, familial and migratory biography, could illuminate all of the dimensions of what the author has called a *migration prism* would not have proved effective. Such a story would have appeared implausible, concentrating on an excessively dense array of situations, dynamics, perspectives, and lived experiences – sometimes even contradictory ones, of just one character. Similarly, we decided against devoting each hypothetical chapter of the book to a different protagonist since that would have made the narrative fragmented and discontinuous, too reminiscent of an academic essay, and thereby contrary to the initial aim of producing a smooth, accessible read for those not necessarily accustomed to the 'traditional' styles of the social sciences.

We therefore chose to structure the ethnographic story around the protagonist as generated by the narrative itself by placing the researcher and his movements during the fieldwork in the centre of the spotlight. The described decision allowed the sometimes divergent trajectories of the Italo-Bangladeshi participants whose voices were collected and represented to be brought together, in turn offering a *choral narrative* regarding these new Italians of Bangladeshi origin and their migration to London. Parallel to this, it enabled the plurality of perspectives and experiences to be weaved together to create a coherent and fluid reading experience. Finally, it provided an opportunity to portray the often uncertain development of an ethnographic inquiry *as it takes shape* – with its inevitable pauses and unexpected accelerations, obstacles and the strategies devised to overcome them. In so doing, it allowed us to show the ethnographer *in the field*: his body and emotions, experiences and feelings, blunders and discomforts, idiosyncrasies and moments of exhilaration, along with rigidities and transformations.

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF COMIC-BOOK NARRATION

Placing the figure of the researcher in the centre of the comic-book narrative permitted the author to convey both the irony and poetics of ethnographic work – the prosaic aspects, the burdens, and perhaps even the fascination that characterises this activity – while also *desacralising* and *demystifying* both ethnographic practice itself and academic conventions more broadly.

As mentioned above, use of the language of comics required the author to

shorten the amount of text, reduce the essay-like components, and make the dialogue lighter. Still, it also made it possible to *visually represent* and *show* the meeting places, the multiplicity of bodily hexis and their interactions within physical, social and cultural spaces, and to express emotional reactions with an immediacy which, in a 'traditional' socio-anthropological text, would call for lengthy clarifications and cumbersome commentary (Gusmeroli 2022).

The graphic medium also permitted the portrayal of conversations and interviews with Italo-Bangladeshis living in London coupled with the unfolding, over the pages, of visual representations of their migratory, familial and socio-material trajectories. It moreover facilitated the weaving together of different temporalities and the articulation of various voices between the historical, structural, collective and macro dimensions and the subjective, micro dimension of individual stories/choices.

Compared to 'traditional' writing, creating an illustrated ethnography also made it easier to establish *social connections* between places (Bangladesh, northeast Italy, other hubs of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy, and London) and between multiple temporalities and biographical projections (youth in Bangladesh, early years in Italy, memories of family reunification and parenthood, the new migration, old age, and death).

Such an interlacing of spatial and temporal lines was rendered with the use of different colour tones in order to communicate the idea that "every moment of the present contains the past and is already projected into the future" (Spada 2022). Specifically, together with the co-authors, the author chose warm, reassuring colours to evoke nostalgia for the years spent in Italy; cold, unwelcoming tones to capture the harshness of the difficult integration into London's socio-territorial context; and sepia-brown hues (borrowed from the language of cinema) for flashbacks distant in biographical and historical time. Through this process, the author learned that colour choices must remain within a limited palette so as to produce visually pleasing pages and a comic that feels harmonious and coherent.

Most importantly, the language of comics facilitated the *methodological restitution* of ethnographic practice and its reflective and emotional dimensions. It made it possible to: narrate the modes of access to the field and the way the 'snowball' process unfolded, including all of the accompanying anxieties and embarrassments; depict the reconciliation between the rituals of hospitality and empirical activity; and represent the fieldwork itself, continuously reshaped by the shifting and recombined power relations between the researcher and the research participants. It also allowed for the ethnographer to express his recurring sense of inadequacy and anxiety: the feelings of being judged by those one wishes to interview; the fear of being out of place, intrusive, or adopting a colonial and/or objectifying gaze; the worry of not being understood, of failing to grasp what the field is revealing; of wasting time or not having enough of it; and of not having strictly adhered to the rigid models of qualitative data collection and systematisation (ibid.).

“THINGS DISCOVER US AT THE SAME TIME AS WE DISCOVER THEM”

Canonical sociological and anthropological literature often presents scientific products that appear almost *autopoietic* or, at best, as if elaborated by a *deus ex machina* who descends ‘onto’ the field fully confident in their bibliographic preparation, untouched by hesitation or uncertainty. These works tend to erase the unexpected, the failures, and even the curiosity and proactive engagement of the interlocutors – who, as all of us have experienced at some point, sometimes turn into interviewers of the interviewer.

If ethnography is, as the author believes, a *posture toward life*, then ethnographic writing must also reflect the aspects that typically remain in the shadows of social scientists’ accounts: the lack of control over the research’s trajectory, the challenges posed by unforeseen events that demand new strategies, the constant possibility of failure, or the reinterpretation of apparent failure as a research finding. Above all, as a life posture, ethnography often helps the researcher to relativise their own perspectives, inner movements, personal issues, and (im) mobilities, thereby triggering both cathartic moments and reflexive processes.

By creating an *ethnographic novel*, the author was able to make visible the inner movements of the researcher and reveal the reflexive processes that ethnographic and interpretive research sets in motion – not only in the subjects under study, but primarily in the one conducting the research. The protagonist of *La linea dell’orizzonte*, much like anyone engaged in good ethnography, emerges from his journey – geographical, ethnographic and biographical – *transformed* by having been immersed in the social world he has explored. Understanding others inevitably leads to understanding – or perhaps *the unveiling* – of something about oneself. It is this dual biographical tension and mutual reflexivity that runs through the pages of the comic, binding the researcher and the other protagonists of both the study and narrative together.

As Arianna Mazzola (2022) observes, this way of approaching ethnographic writing – or ethnographic literary production – has perhaps unwittingly borrowed elements from the broad category of *writing of the self*. The formula of *Bildungsroman* is present for both the Italo-Bangladeshis, who are pursuing a multidimensional and polysemic horizon that is becoming ever more global, and for the researcher who mirrors their trajectories, intermeshing the research process with his own personal story. Such dual growth – individual and collective – unfolds through a *journey*, a dynamic that also recalls the literary genre of reportage, although here the photographs are replaced by pencils and watercolours.

Qualitative research follows a ‘spiral’ pattern, a continual oscillation between empirical activity and theoretical reflection, yet it unavoidably leads to an *overflow* of analytical thought into the interstices of the researcher’s daily life. At times, this ‘intrusion’ of ethnography into everyday existence manifests in moments when the researcher seeks a space-time dimension ‘for oneself’: in the practice of a sport, a discipline, or an artistic or creative activity, for instance.

Based on the author's comic-based experience, it was decided to portray running autobiographically as a *courtyard of reflexivity* – a space in which to return to theory and nurture the dialogue between the empirical, analytical and theoretical moments of research, and, of course, as a time when the researcher can come to *understand oneself* through the very process of seeking to understand others.

CONCLUSIONS

The *graphic* representation of research through panels and speech balloons inevitably raises choices and issues that, in more 'traditional' forms of writing and representation, the social sciences has learned to *manage*, but which now, in a comic-book context, resurface forcefully. These include, for example, how to avoid stereotypes and simplifications in representing class position, the 'colour line,' bodily *hexis*, and the internalised social *habitus* of the subjects portrayed.

Simultaneously, however, the reemergence of these challenges may help to expose without 'hypocrisy' the positionalities, postures, categories, and forms of self-censorship that social scientists (more or less consciously) have often concealed between the lines of canonical written texts. The language of comics and the graphic rendering of socio-anthropological work therefore compel social scientists – authors and researchers alike – to put themselves on the line, to step outside of their comfort zones (Gusmeroli 2022) where the legitimacy of academic discourse is seldom questioned. In such a way, this form of expression contributes to the creation of genuinely *public knowledge*.

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LINIJA HORIZONTA, MOJA PRVA ETNOGRAFSKA IZKUŠNJA: ETNOGRAFSKE MOŽNOSTI IN MEJE STRIPOV

Povzetek. *S tem člankom želim razmisliti o procesu širjenja etnografskih raziskav skozi jezik stripa, pri čemer se opiram na svoje izkušnje (so)avtorja knjige Linija horizonta, etnografski roman o migracijah med Bangladešem, Italijo in Londonom. Te izkušnje so mi omogočile prepoznati nekatere prednosti etnografske reprezentacije v stripih: učinkovito komuniciranje raziskovalnega procesa; natančen prikaz prostorskega in okoljskega konteksta, v katerem se odvija preiskovani družbeni pojav; primerno upodobitev čustvenega vzdušja; poglobljeno raziskovanje refleksivnih procesov samega raziskovalca. Ta članek bo zato preučil te priložnosti in omejitve, skupaj z drugimi možnostmi in omejitvami, s katerimi sem se srečal pri pisanju tega etnografskega romana.*

Ključni pojmi: *stripi; etnografija; etnografski roman; migracije.*