Framing Migration and Childhood: An Anthropological Film Approach

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On Methodology
(to be integrate by the audio-visual presentation at the Conference)

Migrant children who have been in transit for long periods, or who 'finally' reach a new country in Europe, in which their families hope or simply need to stay, experience on the one hand, a 'geographical-cultural' shift, and on the other, by virtue of having entered an entirely different mandatory school system, a 'disciplinary-collective' one. It is in this context, often marked by long silent periods of observation and withdrawal or conversely by hyperactivity and anxiety, that a psychic and physical journey towards so-called adulthood occurs, as the children become integrated linguistically, come to understand norms of behaviour and develop the skills necessary if they are to find employment and social acceptance. Migrant children, like settled ones, are not a homogeneous group; if their parents or carers are temporary workers, travellers or nomads, asylum seekers or expatriates, the personal investment and expectations on them vary considerably, affecting their identity expressions in the host environment (Faulstich-Orellana et al 2001).

How then do migrant children from non-European countries link their places of origin to their countries of destination? Are these concepts of 'origin' and 'destination' too narrow and can they be challenged? How do migrant children express, not only verbally, but in many other forms, from somatic to artistic expressions, their multiple identities and identifications? How do they perform when speaking different languages and how are they required to downplay their linguistic and communicative knowledge, which at times appears to be no longer useful in much the same way a currency becomes obsolete? How do migrant children access compulsory school and how are they received by the European educational system? How are they located as objects of study within educational practices connected to intercultural policies? How do migrant children experience being responsible for communicating and translating a 'family lexicon' in addition to a parental 'inexpressible', through acting as mediators between their family-members and their schools, often in the midst of misunderstanding and prejudice? (A. I. Castaneda 1996: 201-204;   C. Piault 1986).

These questions have framed my research throughout the past seven years (with regard to research in Ireland, Italy, France and Norway). During this period I have conducted research alongside and with migrant children and have focused on the political, symbolic and imaginative dimensions underlying the expression of transient or resettling acts (J. Clifford 1997) in their lives. These children have names, faces, lived experiences and stories. The manner in which they express these experiences is clear evidence of how they refuse to be essentialised as a generic social category. What I have witnessed first hand throughout this research is the emergence of a remembering and subtle re-articulation of diverse childhood

experiences, which have taken place both before and after these young boys and girls have come to their 'new home'.

My research focus, therefore, centres on the emergent intersubjective knowledge surrounding these sometimes hidden moments and comparative social conditions, experienced first hand by the children. My focus does not provide a macro-sociological analysis, rather I utilise empirical methods and experiments produced through longitudinal film fieldwork, where the camera and cutting room are the main instruments. In this respect, this practice-led research is anchored in the tradition of ethnography, ethnology and anthropological film-making, following the methodologies, film techniques and fields of study evident in the tradition of 'cross-cultural filmmaking' (Barbash and Taylor 1997) and more widely 'transcultural cinema' (D. MacDougall 1998).

When filming and researching in such a comparative context, I have tried to learn about childrens' abilities of living and surviving, through sharing everyday events with their peers and families, educators in the schools, engaging and observing encounters in the streets and other places where migrant children act. As for my own subject position as researcher, I am similar to the ethnographer conducting 'homework' (Clifford 1997:85), who has increasingly become a member of the social web within which they are engaging, exploring contexts of reception within host-countries rather than those of departure from left behind homelands. Throughout this work I hope to restore and expand on images depicting the childrens' personhood, particularly with regard to how they are framed in institutional settings such as the school and the family.

Through the accounts of migrant children and their relationships with those who care for them, I have come to identify issues of 'memory', 'embodiment', 'silence', 'resistance', and the disciplinary framework and performed identities shaping the space/time surrounding a child while adjusting to new cultural contexts. I analyse via the use of filmic excerpts selective experiences of migrant children who find themselves in a liminal zone; whose sense of identity is gradually reshaping itself since they are yet to put everything from their past life behind them. Fragmented recollections are revealed to the camera before being buried, perhaps forever. As I wish to argue, migrant children can often teach us crucial knowledge about the condition of displacement, since they occupy a very critical position: one demanding that they constantly adapt despite competing allegiances of family and community. They are also often under extreme pressure as part of a generation that must 'manage' migratory success and achievement, given that in many cases they are the generation for whom the act of cultural displacement was first planned and executed. Key, then, to my research is the recognition that migrant children are often socialized both by their older kin and by school staff, through a radical inhibition of their creative responses to a 'new' social environment. These children occupy a crucial position in that they are able to make manifest alternative forms of knowledge and agency.

Throughout I assume that 'childhood' is itself a culturally constructed concept (Ariès 1962; Prout and James 1990; James et al 1998; Gullestad 1996; Shephens 1995; Feldman 2002), but would argue that since children exist in reality and are perceived through a model of a deep essentialism of childhood, materialised in the form of generic categories often imposed via social policy, they are not given power over many of their options and choices. They are, in

fact, often refused the option of a youthful agency. Even from the standpoint of when they are subordinated (in Europe the term 'subaltern' is not commonly used, even if recent scandals over the child-pornographic industry illustrates new forms of being subaltern, exploited and deprived of rights), children are indeed individuals shaped by sociality and capable of articulating a transcultural bias; they are subjects who are able to control their psychological and physical selves. What I hope to demonstrate in this research, albeit modestly, is that because migrant children belong to different cultural contexts and share new cultural horizons in contemporary Europe, they are often able to educate us about the emerging boundaries which inevitably build and define the discourses of 'childhood' – whether this discourse is disseminated in the sphere of the family, school, or through state policies on immigration and 'integration'. Through their everyday practices, migrant children often subvert forms of social domination in their own particular manner, and this study explores some of these local, singular and collective (resistant) practices.

Thus my main difficulty with conducting research among children arose when I realized that to gain access to their perspectives one should be extremely careful not to fall into the adults' perspectives where one ends up speaking on behalf of one's subject – both a real temptation and a methodological limitation. I had to work hard to maintain contact with my target constituency of social actors despite the fact that adults tried to 'take over' at times, whether teachers, parents or audiences to whom my partial findings where shown. It is important to emphasize, however, that the results of this research are not fully returned to the children. One has to be honest and recognize that the mediation of this research, at times, occurs between and among adults, where it is framed according to their expectations and knowledge base.

While a central emphasis in this research is that contemporary European debates on migration need to hear children's accounts and be sensitive to their utterances, opinions, and stories, I do not categorise children as an oppressed category who are subsequently 'empowered' by the research. The children in this study respond in multiple ways to systems of oppression. By emphasising diverse forms of agency, formations of consciousness, and through the sharing or denying of the experiences and narratives structuring their everyday lives, this overall sense of oppression is often transformed by way of both a participation and protection of their integrity. With respect to the children throughout this research, such multiple levels of agency coexist and traverse the cultural specificity of each dominant institution they find themselves located in. I would argue that it is within this notion of multiple agency and the coexistence of levels of participation and response to the 'new' institutional frameworks within the host environment, that the concept of the 'transcultural' is performed and enacted.

However, the juxtaposition of these visual ethnographies constructed in contemporary European nation states is not designed to provide merely a comparative analysis, rather I hope to argue that this kind of macro assumption is in danger of overlooking a more productive, perhaps less judgmental comparison.[2] Throughout this comparative analysis, therefore, I will argue that difficulties of perception and representation experienced by migrant children in the society 'still in progress' within an imagined federal Europe, needs to be understood within the framework of a 'shared' dialogue about European citizenship. Most importantly, the critical and reflective encounters with migrant

children in this 'multi-sited' ethnography (Marcus 1995:102), aims to offer a detailed and intimate understanding of the attempts made by young subjects to become citizens, children who are in a dynamic relation with the bonds of family, the educational system, their 'fresh' past and their sense of the future.

I hope to demonstrate that children, in this case migrant children, have the creative ability to weave different realms and modes of being, from those experienced at the level of the everyday to more imaginary scenarios constructed by them as a means to 'escape' and 'cope' with challenging and stressful situations. This imaginative ability is something that adults have either forgotten and often renounce yet, nonetheless, long for and perhaps seek to restore. Migrant children practice and perform this imaginative skill even more intensely when they physically travel through or inhabit spaces that appear 'other' to their original life world. From this unique position, they often express unconventional, sometimes transcultural views of the world, enriching their modes of mediating, adapting, and getting to know (or indeed resisting) the sites in which they are expected to become 'integrated'. When migrant children attempt to express just how they experience these different and often competing spheres of action and perception, they often have relevant insights which rely on unpredictable forms of knowledge and agency.

This interstitial and oftentimes ephemeral knowledge needs to be studied, re-presented, depicted or narrated. Hence in attempting to explore the experiential dimension of the social actors of this study, I have chosen to ground my research in what Abu-Lughod (1991:149) refers to as 'ethnographies of the particular' picturing what MacDougall (1998: 246) calls 'the general forms in which the particular is contained'. This attention to the particular is necessary and is complementary to related studies on migration and childhood, in fields such as cultural geography, social anthropology, history, sociology, pedagogy, and social policy. Nevertheless the use of anthropological film, which is my main instrument, calls for a level of engagement with the minutiae of everyday cultural practices. As a research methodology, film-fieldwork of this type does not yield macro statistics and analyses, yet it can reflect larger paradigms and social trends. Anthropological film, when so conceived and practiced, captures and re-presents levels of the ordinary, the prosaic ritual, the symbolic and liminal aspects of people's expressions and consciousness; it is able to explore intimate modes of sociality, the minutiae of spaces and places, the unique specificity of social atmospheres and cultural codes. In this way, film provides me with what I call a 'cinematic engagement' (Ragazzi 2006, forthcoming), whereby I attempt 'to re-inscribe the body and senses into ethnographic practice' (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2004: 7) through the creation of a space surrounding the camera (rather than having the camera search for events) so as to allow children's storytelling to emerge as a form of social articulation, especially in the case of those children who are testing out cultural boundaries and the limits of their social selves. It is by looking retrospectively at the various modes in which the child protagonists of these visual ethnographies articulate their narratives that I begin to 'map' out the various trajectories of their 'identities' – always emerging and in flux, but nonetheless situated by the time-space of the classroom and their own mixed memories of 'home', as mediated by themselves, their families, the 'host' environment in which they find themselves and the diverse global 'archives' that shape this environment. 'Home' is not only a location of residency or citizenship,

of family values or of safety: it is also an imagined realm or a period of life attached to an object or a person who is both protective and familiar. It could well be a pet, a car, a group of siblings, one's twin, a refugee camp, a secret place, even an imaginary land. Home for the migrant child is mostly reached by crossing a threshold: physical, psychic, or just symbolic (Blunt 2005:193). With this in mind, children are never forced to 'enter' into the field of the film. Rather I invite them in through a silent and methodical attitude; not by emphasising or blaming those who withdraw or stand aloof, but encouraging silently those who dare to take part in the 'scenes'. In this way I do not force children to immediately be 'actors' of a movie but observe and give weight to the moments in which they 'step in'. It is clearly a performative situation, very different from the active demand for an interview typical of certain social scientific or journalistic inquiries. Moments of dialogue and conversation between us obviously occur, but they rarely occur prior to the observational moment. In some ways film is also the ground in which to meet and communicate. I do not film only to illustrate what I have previously analysed but I try to mobilise my 'cinematic engagement' and understanding of the situation as phenomena literally appear and evolve. I simultaneously analyse the footage and compare my notes, discuss the footage with the actors (children, educators, parents), and inform and transform my way of filming in an ongoing dynamic where one shapes the other and vice versa. To work with primary school children, with a reduced command of any common language vis-à-vis their hosts and myself, since many are the subjects of a non-voluntary project of migration (given that they are children and do not always have control over the decision to migrate but also because they are asylum applicants or children of economic migrants forced to leave), provokes a whole series of methodological and communicative strategies and challenges (with film-strategies at the core) that the researcher (adult, female in the age of a mother or of a teacher, foreigner, more or less integrated and most of the time loaded with film equipment) must mobilise in order to gain access. It is precisely because an ethnographic frame was constructed that we could reveal our mutual intentions; ethnographic and media scholarship empowers both perspectives in that it constructs an exchange where there is not merely a recording of events or documentation of encounters later transcribed in diary-based fieldwork. The researcher in the school or in the family occupies, partly because s/he is not a teacher, a relative or a carer, a particular status *vis-à-vis* the children.[3] Furthermore, when s/he holds a camera in the way I have done so, the relation forged with the children is of a very particular type. For example, the digital video camera – an instrument resembling a child's toy, all too familiar to migrant communities in the context of circulating video tapes between separated communities – has made my presence as filmmaker both fascinating and acceptable to the children. Had I only observed and taken field notes, the children would have (perhaps) experienced the medium – text – as strange and even threatening, a sort of report, or worse a perpetual form of assignment, or worse, 'homework'.

Social actors surrounding the protagonist children, such as peers and teachers, those who did not want to be filmed and occupy the role of episodic onlookers, could witness this progressive shift, in which the intimacy of film has left them out, so to speak. In this respect a sort of aporia can emerge: the 'public intimacy' of a 'responsive' and more seldom 'interactive' camera (MacDougall 2006:4), is a very particular way of directing fieldwork, but it can also exclude, at moments, crucial interventions from those who do not want to adhere to the rules of the game, or

who regret having refused their participation at a earlier stage. Hence the social actors are many more than the 'visible' actors in the actual film footage. Moreover, children talk about movies as if those who are listening them have watched the films (or better again, they experience the screenings with the all the senses). I experienced that with the children actors of the study, the screenings were experienced as sharable performances; movies cannot be paraphrased. Filming and watching the footage with young subjects provided me with these various levels of understanding and again I learned from them and was able to consolidate my critical viewpoints on the basis of this learning.

The children sometimes have also teased me, because I was neither making money nor making them famous. Sometimes I felt that I was confusing all the categories in a dangerous initiative from which nobody could benefit, not even my study. But this also derives from the imagined audiences who inhabit, haunt each actor's mind when participating in such 'audio-visual research'. I think now retrospectively, that the confusion about the overall sense of this enterprise was a consequence arising from literally embodying the contradictions sustaining my commitment to this project. Children, again, showed me ways to clear these contradictions, but also to constructively manipulate my hesitations and dilemmas. The film footage revealed furthermore a series of subject positions which are interwoven across a range of 'situated' perspectives. The 'situated knowledge' (D. Haraway 1991) stems from, on one hand, the ways in which different subjects interpret the fieldwork footage. There is then a relay of knowledge perspectives informing this material: from the subjects within the film itself, who embody a variety of positions of power and also the potential audience(s) for the footage. For example, when the teachers view the filmic material, they are and will be in a position of power in relation to both the pupils and myself, who are both still 'learners'. But yet when the relationship is read as an interaction between one teacher and me, my status as an academic will most likely be perceived as a given in that I occupy a position in third level education. Other colleagues of the teachers participating in this project may well, in turn, be able to perform a relation of power in contrast to the teacher/participant who risks making themselves 'vulnerable' and have in some respects 'exposed' themselves on film. Yet again, a child from a different classroom who occupies the 'majority national' status in relation to the migrant children will perhaps have an advantageous position within the host society. Whereas an elder belonging to the ethnic group of any one migrant child in the film, could well give voice to the power of 'tradition' and identify values of authenticity, at odds with and contradicting the performance of the migrant actors. These multiple layers and configurations of power not only set in motion a more complex interpretive schema for the film footage but also raise the question of the impossibility of predicting how the footage will be received. Film can resurrect many different codes of knowledge each time it is shown, depending on the audience engaging with it. This is why film has a generative power and facilitates an innovative way to examine transcultural codes and social patterns. For children to be able to observe footage of themselves during the passing of a particular period of time (no matter how brief), facilitates the emergence of a historiographic understanding of their own being in the world. At least this is what their feedback always confirmed. Yet throughout this research I also know that my 'interlocutors' cannot stand in the same position of power as I do and

their stories and histories are often denied or re-narrated according to educational patterns of disempowerment and inequality.

My aim is to thus explore situated perspectives through children's accounts which are often received in loose conversations with the actors. The reception of these stories is based on a direct observation and phenomenological involvement, in which articulations of human and social relationships are revealed on a first hand basis. Jackson describes how 'telling' is always embedded within a complex web of social structures and situations.

'Stories are also authored and told by individual subjects - again, persons acting in relation to others, subject both to the influence of stories already told, and the impinging pressures of their society and their situations. (….) It therefore makes no sense to speak of individual lives without reference to the social and historical conditions that bear upon them, nor to invoke universals without reference to the individuals who embody, experience, objectify, perpetuate and struggle against them (2001: 290-291)'.

Hence storytelling can be recorded as a form of social articulation. It is precisely by looking retrospectively at the various narratives provided by the children protagonists of my ethnographies that I can begin to 'map' out the various trajectories of their 'identities'. These identities are always 'becoming' and in flux, nonetheless situated by the time-space of the classroom and their own mixed memories of 'home' as mediated by themselves, their families, the 'host' environment that they find themselves in, the diverse 'archives' that shape this environment, and myself as receiver and listener to these stories. Gupta (2002) explores this issue by relating migrant narratives to concepts of transmigration (and also re-incarnation):

'[R]enunciation of one's allegiance to an old 'homeland' is often a necessary part of the legal requirements of citizenship in the new one; denunciation of one's affiliation with some other 'homeland' may be an important part of the cultural or civic requirements of citizenship as well. ... But this model of immigration as a displacement of dwelling, voluntarily undertaken by a subject in order to improve his or her life conditions, rarely does justice to the experiences of immigrants. By uprooting the sedentarist assumptions of the dominant narrative of immigration, we can resituate it more fruitfully in terms of a notion of *dwelling-in travel* (2002: 176).'

The trope 'dwelling-in travel' (Clifford 1997:44) is a common experience for migrant children I worked with in these years. Their family often re-build homes in transient situations, the children react to places, people and languages in flexible ways, sometimes unconventionally. This ability to remain flexible and to be open to the novelty of what situations may offer is learned from other children more if not as much as from adults. Such a flexibility stands in contrast to the institutional frames posed around the child. When analysed in contemporary European institutional contexts, which tend to overlook the experiential consequences of a 'dwelling-in travel' perspective, migrant children's experiences and acts are often marginalised. For example, migrant children often reveal a depth of form and express interesting and conscious skills that are mostly unrecognised within current educational curricula. The stories which I present and analyse in the study pose interesting challenges to the image of a homogenised social sphere, for they express forms of cultural transformation, mobility and a strong critical (freshly

articulated) perspective on the 'host' country. Many of these accounts take the form of story fragments, variations of similar and repeated stories, communication about events, misunderstandings, difficult utterances and involuntary poetry and descriptions of resistances to political and cultural violence. In some instances I noted that certain children were actively discouraged to tell their own stories and verbal stories were frowned upon. There was a distinctive contrast between telling stories in the family versus the school. In school the recurrent pattern was to contain, if not deny the role of the personal narrative in the class. One of the key and consistent patterns I have observed in the classrooms is that the voices, claims and knowledge of children are hardly listened to and considered seriously by adults, yet, in contrast, children show a subtle understanding and respect for stories told by adults – whether in speech or simply in the form of a prescriptive information giving. This lack of a balance between who is listening and who is talking is a daily feature in school life and the filming process reveals some aspects of this recurrence. What I have repeatedly observed is the tendency to downplay or restrict the limits of a migrant child's desire to tell his/her story, even if still fragmentary and in progress. Yet when in some instances they are given the possibility of telling stories, the speech act visibly empowers them and benefits the whole constituency of adults framing migrant children's education, including their parents. Much of the fabric of the film material is therefore based on children's narrative contributions as evidenced throughout the study.

Notes:

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[2] The extent to which the researcher is familiar with the original culture of migrants s/he seeks to portray is crucial. The difficulty of relying solely on doxic (Bourdieu 1977) accounts is often conflated by the tendency of migrants to 'freeze' certain images of the past, offering a restricted level of 'truth' to the researcher. The assumptions of the researcher can further influence the response of migrant actors, reinforcing stereotypes about their 'origin' in the continuing construction of patterns through which culture is re-invented for the purposes of Western multiculturalism.
[3] See, for example, Steedman (1982, 1988, 1992); Toren (1993); Stephens (1995); Gullestad (1996); Corsaro (1997); Christensen and James (2000); Olwig Fog 2004.