

The visual turn and the digital revolution

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The visual turn in auto/biography studies has long been taken with some very interesting contributions in the field.¹ But how is the force of the visual shaping theoretical and methodological directions that will open up new vistas for auto/biography? This is what I want to reflect upon in this essay, looking back in my own work with women's auto/biographical narratives.

My first encounter with the visual came through the archives. This was during the years of my doctoral research when I was reading British women teachers' diaries, journals, letters and memoirs (see Tamboukou, *Women, Education and the Self*). I remember being drawn to the milieu of the archived photographs displaying women's bodies in the spaces of their newly founded colleges. Embodiment and spatiality in auto/biographical narratives were thus two themes that emerged in my analysis and are still here to stay. The way I approached these photographs then was not theoretically informed by semiotics. It was mostly the affective forces that those photographs were emitting that engulfed my interest and attention: a feeling of existential proximity to the subjects of the autobiographical narratives. And yet affective forces have become particularly important in neo-materialist approaches to auto/biographical research: it is not only how we read narratives, but also how we feel them, since we are part of the narrative worlds that we are trying to understand, as I have argued throughout my work with textual and visual narratives. (See Tamboukou, *Feeling Narratives*)

My engagement with the grammar of the visual developed during my research with women artists' auto/biographical narratives.² Painted images and the way to make sense of their meaning were central in this project since women artists seemed to express themselves better in painting and drawing than in writing. Women artists' self-portraits took central stage in my auto/biographical inquiries and explorations and it was then that the complexities of the visual and its multifarious entanglement with the textual opened up new ways of bringing together images and words. What mostly emerged in my research at this point was the importance of 'how matter matters' (Barad, *Meeting the Universe*). It was not just the sitters of the portraits or other motifs and pictorial themes that were important in my analysis, but also the vibrant colours, the oils, the watercolours, the frescoes and the ceramics that left their own traces on auto/biographical themes and meanings emerging from my research. The material and the visceral open up new ways of understanding the real.

When I started working on my current project with women workers' autobiographical documents I thought that I was going to have a break with visual inquiries. And yet the photographs I found in the archives were invaluable in filling the so many gaps, silences and absences in documenting women workers' lives. Edward Hall has called our attention to how people

use their bodies to structure social and personal spaces in ways that are often invisible and unspoken of (*The Hidden Dimension*). It is such invisible spaces, interpersonal relationships and institutional environments that the visual analysis of women workers' photographs has unveiled. The photographs were further catalytic in registering feelings and emotions that had remained invisible in the bodies of the textual autobiographical documents that I had studied in the archives and beyond. As Charlotte Bates has persuasively argued visual methods are more sensorially attentive and in this sense they can better capture visceral bodies and register intense emotions and feelings ("Video Diaries").

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have long pointed out that 'photographs never simply illustrate a written narrative' (*Interfaces*, 96). What I want to add here is that in the same way that photographs cannot be used as illustrations, narratives cannot be used as captions of images either. Photographs and stories should rather be viewed, read and analyzed in their interrelation, forming a complex and often conflicting network of visual and textual practices and discourses. In my attempt to theorize visual practices that women workers deployed in documenting the material and discursive conditions of their political work in the margins and interstices of the labour movement I have thus come up with the notion of 'visual technologies of the self' (see Tamboukou, *Women Workers' Education*). In collecting and archiving photographs and documents of their involvement in the labour movement women workers have created an assemblage of stories, discourses and images through which they constitute themselves as subjects. Rather than representing the real, these visual technologies respond to the world, opening up dialogical scenes where the readers/viewers are openly invited to participate.

My visual inquiries have further benefited from the rich digital archives of labour history that have recently become available with network and database technologies. A photograph always functions in relation to its context and the image it offers continually emits different signs and is subject to continuous transformations. When the researcher has access to wider photographic collections he/she can more easily discern visual patterns of presence and absence, feel and follow space/time rhythms and map the entanglements of bodies and practices. How can we then incorporate the digital revolution in the various ways we write, read and understand auto/biographical documents that seem to be continually drawn out from their archival hideouts and be displayed in their virtual 'originality'. There is indeed a wide range of theoretical, epistemological, methodological and ethical issues that the digital turn has brought forward. Digital archives have radically changed our understanding of 'what an archive is' to a realisation of 'what an archive can become'.

What I therefore suggest is that visual studies and image-based research can significantly enrich the field of auto/biographical studies and need to be developed more. Photographs and art images open up a field of infinite materialities and spatialities that the auto/biographical researcher is invited to explore and experiment with. But how can we analyse transpositions of material and spatial practices into language, art and culture? In addressing this question we need to devise more nuanced epistemologies and methodologies about how to discern meaning and understanding in visual and textual entanglements and how to treat images beyond the limitations of representation: not as signs that mirror or even reveal aspects of a reality that is out there, but rather as 'things' in themselves, components rather than representations of the real. The visual turn in the era of the digital revolution has opened up new opportunities for auto/biographical studies, but has also raised important questions that need further investigation.

References

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¹ See amongst others, Brophy and Hladki, *Embodied Politics*; Edwards et al., *Textual and Visual Selves*; Smith and Watson, *Interfaces*, Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*.

² For an overview of the project 'In the Fold between Life and Art' and its publications, see:
<https://sites.google.com/site/mariatamboukoupersonalblog/home/research-projects/in-the-fold-between-life-and-art> [Accessed, April 4, 2016]