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Collaboration and reflexivity in ethnographic site knowledge construction

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Film-eliciting the journey home from school

- Collaboration and reflexivity in ethnographic site knowledge construction

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I reflect upon my use of film-elicitation as a method to produce knowledge about a design site.

The data used for these reflections stem from my Ph.D. research into urban space design and mobilities. In this paper I focus on capturing, analyzing and representing a specific transit site in Aalborg East, Denmark, through the mapping of a particular mundane journey – the journey home from school - performed by two school girls on an everyday basis.

The paper is structured in four parts:

I set out by briefly introducing the research topic and contextualizing the choice of an ethnographic method.

Second, I introduce the motivation for using film-elicitation and outline four research actions of the method: the video tour, the follow up interview, the data analysis, and the representation.

Third, I reflect on collaboration and reflexivity in this ethnographic site knowledge construction.

In conclusion I sum up on the points discussed in the paper.

Keywords

film-elicitation, urban design, mobilities, ethnography, reflexivity, collaboration, mapping.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The research topic

The PhD study explores re-design potentials of the urban spaces of traffic segregation with regard to sensory and social qualities of different ways of wayfaring. The project draws, among other things, on ethnographic studies into journeys, which entangle at a specific transit site.

My purpose with this paper is methodological rather than empirical, and therefore I will not go deep into the research topic itself, but rather reflect on *how* to capture, analyze and represent data in this research context.

My aim is to learn about the sensed and embodied understanding of the properties and possibilities of the material urban space at the chosen transit site. I seek to access knowledge about the site as it is enacted, inhabited and experienced by wayfarers travelling through it. The question is how to access and deal with such knowledge. A few points contextualize that discussion.

1.2. Setting the scene - contextualizing the choice and use of method

First, in every urban design process the chosen design site is *constructed* (Burns and Kahn 2005). In the discipline of urban design the entire process of capturing, analyzing, and representing existing conditions (and perhaps identifying potentials) of a specific design site is often termed *mapping*. Mapping is a prerequisite of the urban designer's work with imagining and developing alternative futures through design proposals. The mapping of a site and the subsequent design proposal are closely interlinked; what we draw, as designers, is shaped by what we see: "*The implications of reciprocity between ways of seeing and ways of acting are immense [...] With regard to design, how one maps, draws, conceptualizes, imagines, and projects inevitably conditions what is built and what effects that construction may exercise in time.*" (Corner 1999a: 8) Mapping of a design site can be regarded a process of "site knowledge construction" (Kahn 2005). This draws to the foreground the *agency* of mapping; mapping as a creative and subjective operation, "inaugurating new worlds out of old" (Corner 1999b: 252), actualizing the unseen and unrealized.

Thus, in qualifying my research into re-design potentials, it is important to reflexively engage with the mapping method(s).

Second, I will briefly touch on the background for producing *ethnographic knowledge* in this research context of transit site design.

At the chosen transit site urban life is mainly comprised by people in movement. I have found that, for design purposes, there is a need to refine the understanding of such mobile practices and experiences in the urban realm to surpass an instrumental understanding of movement. Drawing on contemporary mobilities research, I suggest that there are unexplored potentials for embodied mobile experiences in the way transit sites are usually designed (Jensen 2009, Urry 2007). Research of the “mobilities turn” shows how there is more to mobile urban life than getting transported from point A to point B (Urry 2007; Jensen 2009, 2010; Vannini 2012). Movements are understood as *wayfaring* (Vannini 2012) in an embodied mobile perspective, which includes ethnographic sensitivity to the social interaction and cultural production of mobile practices (Jensen 2009). When we travel, we are not just *getting transported*. Instead what wayfarers do is that they *perform journeys* “a mundane but meaningfully ritualistic and artful practice which creates occasions for unique interaction settings and relationships” (Vannini 2012: 162).

Third, because this transit site is not an enclosed site with a static urban life of stand-still encounters, but rather a highly permeable place, criss-crossed by flows, the *dynamic and heterogeneous* must be acknowledged in the conception of place. It is a myth that places are bounded containers; we must rather understand place as mobile and relational (Jensen 2009, Vannini 2012). Places *happen* – they are produced - by way of the enactments, inhabitations and experiences, in multiple ways simultaneously and intermittently. Places are therefore heterogeneous, fluid, on-the-move, continuously shifting and in process. They can be understood as “created by routes” (Lee and Ingold 2006). Then, in moving through the chosen site, place is made in the shifting interaction of wayfarer and environment.

These points set the scene for the methodological challenge of the Ph.D. project’s analytical part: to construct knowledge for design intervention through a reflexive mapping process; in that mapping process to seek to capture and engage in the mobile productions of place; and to draw to the foreground in that mapping an understanding of wayfarers’ sensed and embodied perspectives on the site.

In the following section I will briefly outline my motivation and provisional reflections related to the use of film-elicitation as a method to respond to the challenge described above.

2. FILM-ELICITING THE JOURNEY HOME FROM SCHOOL

My tentative response –this is work in progress- to this challenge goes through an ethnographic sensitivity to the journeys performed at the site. The journeys are continuous practices through the material environment. They follow certain routes, are conducted in certain speeds and modes of transportation, by specific people with each their affordances, who perform their specific wayfaring ways of life as they go on. As such, film-eliciting the journey is a lens through which to learn about the site through the inhabitation and experience of it.

Journeys at the transit site are indeed ordinary. Many of them are daily commutes: people travel from school by foot, to the supermarket by car, cross the site by bike, or get on the bus. In this paper I have selected one of those journeys: the journey home from school, performed by two girls aged 13 and 14.

The mundanity of this journey is a challenge. Participants’ knowledge of their own wayfaring practices may be tacit; after all, the journey home from school is just a trivial everyday movement from one location to the other. So, how to unpack the inhabitation and experience of something which is indeed familiarized and perhaps could best be expressed as “embodied ways of knowing” (Pink and Mackley 2012)? With an ethnographic and sensitive approach to the lived lives on the way, and in an inter-subjective relation to the wayfarers, I pursue to learn about the transit site as it is produced in the interrelation of wayfaring ways of life and material design.

Following Pink and Mackley (2012) the video contributes to capturing the journey as a sensory (audiovisual) continuity through a certain environment and entangled in other journeys. Place can be understood as a “place-event” - open, temporal, unbounded and as constituted through entangled pathways (Pink 2008a: 193, Pink and Mackley 2012, referring Ingold and Massey). Pink and Mackley (2012) argue, that researching place, through the video tour method, as an interweaving of processes and entanglements, offer a way to understand how the processes, things and persons become interrelated to make place as a place event. They further argue that the video tour and the researcher become interwoven with other processes in the place-event of home, taking part in the place-making.

I have used this technique to explore particular, situated and personal experiences of the journey. This knowledge enter the mapping process to deepen the understanding of the less instrumental dimensions of journeys, and enlarge individual narratives while allowing affective accounts, associated meanings and perceptions of the environment to come forward. The aim is thereby to identify the properties and possibilities of this mundane transit site as they are sensed and embodied by wayfarers.

2.1 Video tour – follow up interview – analysis - representation

According to Murray (2010) film-elicitation involves two phases: one of video-recording (which Pink and Mackley (2012) terms “video-tour”), and one of interviewing the participants while watching the video (“follow up interview” (Pink and Mackley 2012)). In the study discussed in this paper, these two steps are those which involve direct contact with the participants. However, I find it fruitful to include in this paper also the other research actions related to this mapping: the data analysis and the representation of findings.

In the table below I have outlined these four dimensions of my use of film-elicitation, including notes on *what-how-why* of each of them.

At the video tour I pursue to evoke and capture a direct sensory response to the journey and the material environment, which we travel through. As such, the first step of film-elicitation allows an exploration of

the participants’ phenomenal experiences of everyday mobile life while it is taking place (Murray 2010).

In addition, it allows a further exploration – after the recordings, when we (the participants and I) together view the video at the follow up interview, but also when I – as a researcher - return to the recorded material to recall the journey and its details in the analytical processes.

It could be that the video was also used for representation of data. Pink and Mackley argue that the video is indeed valuable for this, as it invites “the viewer to empathetically imagine her or himself into the experience that is suggested by the video sequence” (Pink and Mackley 2012: 4.3). However, as outlined in the table below I have chosen, for now, to represent the data and findings through stills and written text in a commented photo essay. There is a down-to-earth argument for that: It is difficult to come across in traditional academic channels with video clips. In addition, I have found that my analytical intervention in the lengthy recordings – when I extract (elicitation comes from Latin *elicere* = to extract) key points of the journey across many video clips, is also a decisive part of the mapping, in that it frames and foregrounds (and leaves out, not least) certain site knowledge. This is a key example of my active part – as a researcher - in this collaborative mapping process, and it points to the importance of the researcher’s reflexivity in regard to site knowledge construction. In the last section of this paper I will return to that.

The choice of representing via a photo essay, arguable also make demands on how I communicate the sensory continuity, impermanence and fluidity of the journey in the stable, permanent medias of photo and text, but I have not here found the space to develop these reflections.

Pink and Mackley (2012: 4.1) argue that video can be understood “*as a route through which seeing and hearing can lead researchers and viewers to empathize with and imagine multisensory embodied experiences and not simply the aural and visual worlds of others*”. In other words, they argue that video can go beyond the direct transmission of image and sound – that the viewer might be capable to sense other dimensions of the situation too: the sound of footsteps tells us something about the materiality of paving, and perhaps make us imagine to feel the

paved surface underfoot, or, a whistling wind may make the viewer recall the feeling of a cold autumn day. To view the video might invoke a feeling of “being there”.

As already noted above, I have not used the video-recordings directly to invoke an audience’s empathy with the multisensory embodied experience of the journey. Still, this is an important point, as it shows how site knowledge, using the video, can be produced through a form of “acquaintance” with the environment and the experience (Pink and Mackley 2012). I have used the ethnographic video technique for the follow up interview and for my own analysis. By viewing the video the participants and I can recall the encounter with the field, attuning once again to that journey. In my analysis of the participants’ engagement with the environment the video allows me to recall “their world”, which, arguably, is different than my own. As such, it is a form of nuanced notation technique, acquainting me with the multisensory embodied experience of the journey.

As mentioned, the video-recordings were used in the follow up interview, as a means to access the feeling of being there. At the same time this setup allowed us to have distance to the embodied experience, thereby providing the option and context for reflection (Murray 2010). The recordings also gave me the opportunity to dig into the “less visible” (cf. Pink and Mackley 2012). For example some video-clips showed “live” situations of how social interaction was performed on the journey, as when the participants enthusiastically greeted some school friends we came across, or helped a stranger to find her way. This allowed me to get a sense of their social interaction beyond the ways the participants expressed themselves verbally, and use it as a shared reference for going deeper into this aspect during the follow up interview.

In the next section, I pursue to reflect on the ways in which I engage in a process of constructing site knowledge through mapping the design site in Aalborg East, employing the ethnographic method of film-elicitation.



Figure 1. Still from the video tour. In this sequence one of the participants tells about her encounters with other people at the site, after the lady in the background approached us, asking for directions.



Figure 2. Still from the video tour. In this sequence the participants show where they hang out with their friends on the way home from school, and they explain what they do and how they feel about it.

Table. The research actions of the film-elicitation study

	What	How	Why
Video tour with participants	A video-recorded walk-along interview along the participants' route home from school	Move through the site, videoing, following and being in-dialogue-with the participants, encouraging them to describe their feelings and responses to the environment and mobile situations. One central question, or "assignment", guided the video tour: <i>Think of this trip home from school as a "journey", and tell me about what we pass on the way, what you do and experience while travelling here, and what you think about it.</i>	Through the immersion with the environment and dialogue-on-the-move with the participants, learning about how mobile urban space is experienced and inhabited.
Follow up interview with participants	Feedback meeting With film-elicitation and mapping	Semi-structured interview, prepared by researcher according to analytical concepts. Viewing parts of the video, and engaging a dialogue around these.	To explore in depth participants' statements. Invite further reflections and insights. Pursue to actively structure the participants' statements in a narrative of the journey.
Analysis of data	Two phases: 1. after video tour, in preparation of the follow up interview guide 2. after follow up interview, in analysing the full data collection with representation of findings in mind	1. viewing the video, transcription, analysing statements according to analytical concepts, structuring topics and further questions in interview guide 2. transcription, analysing statements according to analytical concepts and according to the narrative of the journey	To extract detailed ethnographic knowledge from the dialogue with participants, and analyse it as to produce a layer of <i>site knowledge for design</i> about how the transit site is inhabited and experienced.
Representation	Commented photo essay: Stills of the journey supplemented by written narrative	Construction of a narrative of the journey: organise data and findings to follow the journey home from school, and to be able to unfold points related to the analytical concepts within that narrative.	To invite and engage the reader through words and stills to access the mobile embodied experience and inhabitation of that journey. To make a lasting representation of key concepts of the dynamic and ephemeral process of that journey, which can be used in the further design intervention processes.

3. COLLABORATION AND REFLEXIVITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC SITE KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

In her research on ethnographic method, Pink stresses the collaborative and reflexive dimensions of the ethnographic research process (Pink 2008a, 2008b, Pink and Mackley 2012). In this section I will use these points. First, to reflect upon the collaborative dimension of the film-elicitation process outlined above. And, second, to reflexively discuss the ethnographic site knowledge production of that film-elicitation process.

3.1. Film-elicitation – an ethnographic collaborative method

In this film-elicitation study I engage in a collaborative process of producing ethnographic knowledge (Pink 2008b). The video tour and the follow up interview are conducted in direct contact with the research participants. Through our contact I encourage them to collaborate with me in to allow me to learn what they know, feel and do. I seek to feel the multi-sensoriality of their journey in our collaborative research encounter (Pink and Mackley 2012), in order to produce – with the school girls – a sensory and embodied account of the journey.

During my research encounters with the participants at the video tour (which includes a semi-structured interview) and at the follow up interview, knowledge is constructed in an *inter-subjective* social relation between me, as a researcher, and the participants (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). This means that both the video tour and the follow up meeting, is a knowledge producing activity as well as a social practice. Since my aim was to learn about their embodied experiences and tacit journey knowledge, during our meetings I pursued to establish a casual and friendly atmosphere, in which a confident inter-subjective social relation would thrive and make them feel comfortable in bringing forth such dimensions in verbal expressions. This is but one aspect of the collaborative character of my collaborative research encounter with the participants. In the sections above I have touched other aspects, and below I will go into a few more (but arguably not all).

When I take part in the journey of the two school girls, I make my own trace of that route. I am not just

recording them and their journey, but also my own presence. The video is not a recording of people at a place, but a recording of the researcher's body moving through the environment (Pink and Mackley 2012: 4.4; see also Larsen 2008 on the hybridity of the camera and the person behind the camera). The researcher's viewing position will also be the position of future viewers. As such, the video is a way to capture the journey we made, but also a way to describe the collaborative experience of making that journey.

In ethnographic field work, Hastrup (1999) argues, the researcher is at the same time both subject and object. We are participants on the stage with our object, influencing it and becoming part of it, allowing us to experience – maybe even get acquainted with – the world of our participants. But we are also observers who try to understand the drama on the stage from an external, “clinical” position. This splitting of the researcher-subject is central, and we must realize, that when talking about the object, we also talk about ourselves as part of it. As researchers we are always part of that, which we are studying. Thus, the site knowledge of the participants, which I access through film-eliciting their journey, is influenced by my active part in the ethnographic research encounter. To eliminate this disturbance is an impossible ideal (Hastrup 1999: ch. 5).

3.2 Reflexivity and ethnographic site knowledge construction

Pink employs a sensitivity towards the ways in which collaborative ethnographic methods can be understood as place-making practices (2008a, 2008b). For example, she discusses “*how the sensory sociality of walking, eating, imagining, drinking, photographing, and audio- and video-recording, alongside and in collaboration with research participants, can be productive of place-as-ethnographic knowledge.*” (Pink 2008a: 176).

Ethnographic place-making happens both in our investigations of how the participants in our research make places themselves, but it also happens in the emplacement of the researcher in the ethnographic context, in which the researcher becomes attuned to and constitute ethnographic places (Pink 2008a).

We are dealing here with the researcher's awareness of and analytical focus on his/her relationship to the field of study. It is a reflexive stand to the subject-object relationship and the knowledge production – which Hastrup terms “essential reflexivity” (Hastrup 1999: 149ff).

Hastrup argues that all knowledge is positioned (Hastrup 1999: 144). “Facts” and “findings” are *positivist working notions* signifying an impossible ideal: every identification and classification is a manipulation, influenced by our values, and this locates facts and findings beyond the bare empirical order. It is not possible to see the world from “no-place” (Hastrup 1999: 134ff). This might be a commonplace observation, but it carries indeed relevance for a reflexive approach. Our values are present in our research question, our wish to undertake a certain analyses, our choice of methods, our face-to-face encounter with research participants, and in our selections of relevant and irrelevant material.

Essential reflexivity refers to the capability to alternate between first-, second- and third-person positions: In the first person position I am the researcher-subject with a clinical view on the world; In the second person position I put myself in the position of the object, sensing and experiencing the world of the object; In the third person position I locate myself outside the subject-object exchange and critically investigate my own position (e.g. my presuppositions) and method (Hastrup 1999: ch. 5).

In this section, I will pursue to locate myself outside the subject-object relation, and take a critical stance to the site knowledge production of this mapping, focusing on how I am co-implicated, with the participants, in place-making, and that the ethnographic research process can be understood as a form of place-making process (Pink 2008a: 179).

As outlined above, in my film-elicitation study of the journey, I have been preoccupied with investigating how the two school girls constitute the urban environment through their embodied practices of wayfaring. I have pursued to learn about the properties and possibilities of this transit site from the sensed and embodied journey perspective, in order to construct site knowledge. Following Pink's point about the researcher's place-making, we can look

further into the reflexive dimensions of this mapping process: how my research actions can also be understood as place-making. Pink writes:

“...visual ethnographers are dealing with the making and living of place on a series of different levels: first we investigate how the participants in our research make place themselves; second we reflect on how we collaboratively make place with research participants through research practice; third we consider how in representing our research we reconstitute place; and finally we anticipate how audiences/readers of our work in turn create place as they follow and add to its narratives. (Pink 2008b: 3)

The site knowledge of the two girls, related to how they inhabit and experience the site, is thus merely one level of the ethnographic place-making. Other levels come about through our collaboration, my representation of the site knowledge in a commented photo essay, and when that representation is received by the reader. Below I will reflect on the site knowledge production of those four levels.

3.2.1 How the participants make place themselves

The mapping showed that on the journey home from school the participants *make* the transit site as a dynamic, distributed and polycentric public space. This is an outcome of their negotiations and contingencies of stretches and points along the route (cf. Pink and Mackley 2012: 5.6). Their mundane journey encompassed spontaneity, appropriation of urban spaces, and enacted meanings. It came forth as more than just a trivial feature of urban life: as a sense-making, cultural producing social dimension, as also Jensen's research on everyday mobilities has suggested (2010). Through their embodied, practiced journey the material environment is enacted into a meaningful location. As Vannini has elsewhere been occupied with (2012: 50), this meaningful enactment is not confined to moments of transgression or special events, but does happen continuously and routinely when the site and these two wayfarers perform together, creating a variation of unique spatialities and temporalities.

3.2.2 Collaborative place-making – researcher and participant

As touched upon above the collaborative dimension in the site knowledge construction is inherent in the mapping process. Here, when reflecting on the collaborative place-making I want to pick out one example from the follow up interview:

As preparation for the interview I developed a detailed interview guide. I used the video tour for that development, as well as my “tool box” of analytical concepts, and my dawning idea for representation. I sought to *qualify* the site knowledge which had come forth in the video tour, by nuancing and questioning it via my toolbox of theoretically derived concepts of mobilities, urban spaces and journeys. This was one major factor structuring the interview guide. The other was my idea for representation: to construct an illustrated and written narrative of the journey, following the route home from school. Thus I prepared part of the follow up interview as a rough step-by-step remaking of the mobile embodied experience (following Murray 2010). As our time at the follow up interview was too short to view the entire video, in my preparation I did some heavy editing, cutting out short clips to show to the participants and discuss. At the interview, then, I guided the participants through their own journey, encouraging them to reflect on the issues which came forward in the selection of video clips. In this way they added points, qualified my understanding and their own statements, or defeated some of my assumptions.

Thus, the site knowledge that was produced at the follow up interview was indeed a collaborative inquiry, in which I took a big editing role as an interviewing researcher with a certain conceptual framework and research question in mind, as well as a specific representation directing the dialogue and my understanding.

3.2.3 How I reconstitute place in my representation of the research

As noted above, I have found that sensory properties as well as social qualities of the interrelation between the wayfarer and the material urban spaces have come forward through this pedestrian journey. In my representation (the commented photo essay) it is my intention to foreground this and relate it to the tension of the transit site: that it is *at the same time* an instrumental traffic facility *and* an important public space with sensuous and social qualities to the

wayfarers. The journey has shown that “travel time is not wasted time” (Urry 2007), and in the movement from point A to point B wayfarers use time and space to engage themselves socially and with the site in various ways.

The illustrated and written narrative, which I work on, should provide a nuanced description and analysis of this. This essay will be one of four essays in the representing the analytical part of the PhD project; three other journeys (by bike, bus and car) will be mapped. The *pedestrian* journey home from school should then foreground one situated and personal story - which is one of many stories - thereby beginning to build up a representation of the qualitative variation of performing journeys at this site (cf. Kvale og Brinkmann 2009: 48f).

Thus, with my essays I seek to develop the construction of site knowledge, by providing a representation of this site through four journeys, unpacking the site as a “multilocality” (Rodman 2003, referred by Pink 2008b): There are multiple, both diverging and intersecting, user perspectives from which to know how the place is made. This unpacking has two aims: To open a nuanced understanding, which is inclusive of divergences and ambiguities, and supports a conceptualisation of the transit site as a significant mobile, relational public space; And to bring into the design realm a sensed and embodied understanding of the tangible properties and possibilities of the material urban spaces.

3.2.4 Anticipating how readers will recreate place as they follow and add to the narratives

The journey narrative brings forth an understanding of the place as being created by routes (cf. Lee and Ingold 2006). Following my points above, with the detailed and rich journey narrative, I hope to convey to the reader the sensory embodied engagement with the site, which the participants practice, and which I have had the opportunity to feel through our collaborative journey. Though it is not a video representation, the essay might evoke in the readers an empathetical response, perhaps with feelings of recognition as well as feelings of discrepancies, if parts of the journey narrative appears unfamiliar to them. These receptions are thought of as “routes to emplaced knowing, imagining and forms of understanding” (Pink and Mackley 2012); a route with which I intend to open the reader’s eyes to an

understanding of the design beyond the functional instrumental traffic design – paving the way to unfolding re-design potentials of the transit site.

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have outlined methodological reflections regarding my film-elicitation study of the journey home from school.

I have aimed to elucidate the methodological challenge of this study, as a *mapping* analysis with the purpose of capturing, analyzing and representing the site in its fluidity, relationality, heterogeneity, and through its embodied and experienced mobilities, in order to construct site knowledge for design. I have further described how I use journeys as a lens to get an embodied and sensuous understanding of the site's properties and possibilities, and not least how I use the collaborative ethnographic method of film-elicitation to map one such journey.

In the latter part of the paper I have reflected on collaborative dimensions of the inter-subjective research encounter between me, the researcher, and the participants in the film-elicitation study. I have also engaged in a reflexive discussion of four levels of ethnographic site knowledge construction in the film-elicitation process.

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ⁱ The methodological elucidation and reflections of this paper are work in progress. Further qualification with e.g. “mobile video ethnography” (Spinney 2011), non-representational ethnography (Vannini 2012), methodological challenges in place analysis (Førde et al. 2012), “walking with video” Pink 2007