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Conference Report

Framing/Reframing: Visual Sociology, Goffman & the Everyday 35th International Visual Sociology Conference

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Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

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The 35th conference of the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) on *Framing/Reframing: Visual Sociology, Goffman & the Everyday* was held at Concordia University, in Montreal, Canada in June 2017. The yearly conference attracted delegates from 31 countries (with a high representation from Africa, especially South Africa), and from a wide range of disciplines—sociology, anthropology, education, communication, fine arts, and journalism to name few. Inspired by Erving Goffman's notion of strategic interaction and the ways in which marginalised communities are taking action in everyday life, the panellists explored various visual methodologies that are framing social change.

The theme of this year's IVSA conference was devoted to the work of Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist whose prolific and impactful publications have made him one of the most cited authors in the humanities and social sciences. His notions of *framing and reframing* and *the everyday* served as stimulus for the organising committee who wrote: "Goffman's work challenges visual sociology to find ways to dialogue with audiences across the academy and beyond to bring sociological understandings to the micro level of the everyday, but also to help connect it to broader public issues" (IVSA, n.d.).

For educational research for social change, Goffman's strategies for interaction offer compelling ways of thinking by engaging participants and audiences through the visual. Whether working towards informing policy decisions, or impacting implementation plans, or improving the everyday lives of marginalised communities, educational visual methodologists are translating their research into action through various socially engaged visual productions. Visual participatory research has been given a lot of attention within educational methodologies as a way of soliciting more equitable and representative involvement by—and more ethical engagement with—marginalised communities. Initiatives for gender equality and women's empowerment, for example, often fail due to limited awareness and understanding of girls' and women's needs. Visual productions offer a unique way of representing the unrepresentable, making meaning of difficult or traumatic situations or experiences, and this can be transformative at personal and societal levels.

The 4-day conference programme was brim full; there were five to six parallel sessions running at any given time during each day. Moreover, the enticing variety of the panel presentations made it difficult to choose which session to attend, and many session rooms were overflowing with audience members. The entire programming consisted of an opening and closing plenary, two spotlight panels, 12 sessions with 67 panels, eight workshops, 12 posters, and multiple film screenings, video installations, exhibitions, and a Muralfest walking tour in the city of Montreal.

The opening session, which was simultaneously interpreted in Canada's two official languages of English and French, began with formal greetings from the IVSA co-chair, Carolina Cambre. Then there was a welcome to Kanien'keha:ka Territory, the Indigenous land known as Montreal, in the Mohawk language by Elder Ka'nahsohon Kevin Deer. This was followed by a welcoming drum song by the Buffalo Hat Singers. IVSA president, Douglas Harper, also gave a welcome address and presented the Reiger Award for Outstanding Dissertation, and the Prosser Award for Outstanding Visual Methodology (Early Scholar). Homa Hoodfar was appointed Honorary Chair, and co-chair David Howes gave the keynote introductions. There was an installation by the Possible Movements Research Group, and the wine and cheese reception featured Montreal musicians Ida Toninato and Jennifer Thiessen, and experimental video art by Paul Neudorf. To cap off the evening, delegates were invited to gather in a less formal atmosphere at the post-reception *soirée* to meet and network with fellow researchers.

Judy Berland presented the opening plenary, "Social Life Through Images: A Speculative History of the Nonhuman." Berland is a senior faculty associate of Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and a research fellow at Goldsmiths, University of London. As an interdisciplinary scholar, her work investigates the relations between nation, technology, nature, and culture, and her plenary addressed how these relations manifest visually and sonically in culture.

Akosua Adomako Ampofo presented the closing plenary, "Whose Africa? Re-presenting the Self, Re-telling Our Stories." Adomako Ampofo is a professor of African and gender studies at the University of Ghana (UG), and was also the founding director of UG's Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy. Her scholarship is grounded in feminist and critical race studies, and her plenary addressed issues of representation and advocacy in relation to African knowledge systems, identity politics, and gender representations in popular culture.

The plenary spotlight panel, "Assessing Graduate Students Visual Work," featured presentations by Claudia Mitchell (McGill University, Canada), Paul Halliday (Goldsmiths University College, UK), Victor Frankowski (Goldsmiths University of London, UK), Lydia Nakashima Degarrod (California College of the Arts, USA), Sireita Mullings-Lawrence (University of Bedfordshire, UK), and was chaired by Patricia Prieto-Blanco (School of Media, University of Brighton, UK). The rich discussions between these scholars of visual pedagogy was insightful—and a timely deliberation considering the increasing numbers of graduate students who are engaging in arts-based research despite the tenuous availability of tools to assess and evaluate their creative work. This is indeed a tricky area of teaching in visual sociology; there is a tension whereby the work aims to "show not tell," meanwhile there are institutional and academic requirements to document and disseminate the research using text-based modalities.

The conference sessions were grouped according to several themes related to the visual study of society, culture, and social relationships: participatory visual methodologies; photo-elicitation; ethnography; curation as social interaction; senses in everyday life; stigma and identity; activism, engagement, and "situatedness"; land, nation, imaginary; visual criminology; invisibility/visibility; and framing/reframing the body, memory, youth worlds through images, family, pedagogy, testimony, and urban/suburban spaces.

The conference brought together visual researchers from all over Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. However, I want to refer here to the abundance of presenters associated with Claudia Mitchell's (James McGill Professor in the Faculty of Education, McGill University) Participatory Cultures Laboratory (PCL) at McGill University, located in Montreal, Canada, along with the wonderful cohort of researchers from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Nelson Mandela University. These scholars made up a "tidal wave" of panellists (as PCL researcher, Katie McEntee, called it), and generated critical discussions related to participatory visual methodologies within educational research for social change. Some highlights:

- Fatima Khan examined the curatorial tensions of exhibiting children's drawings that depict traumatic experiences.
- Haleh Raissadat spoke of the challenges and possibilities of using participatory visual methods such as photovoice to teach about HIV and AIDS in Iranian schools.
- Milka Nyariro reflected on her work with young pregnant and parent learners in schools in Kenya who seek to inform policy interventions through photographs of their everyday experiences.
- Katie MacEntee, Casey Burkholder, and Joshua Schwab-Cartas gave a captivating talk on their new book, *What's a Cellphilm?* (2016), and gave an informative introduction to the use of cell phones in participatory video.
- Claudia Mitchell, Naydene de Lange, and Relebohile Moletsane revealed and commented on the "everyday poetics" of cellphilms, such as those produced by the South African rural women teachers who participated in their research project.
- Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi and Relebohile Moletsane presented on their work with orphans in a township secondary school in South Africa, where they used photovoice to explore issues of sexual violence.
- Ehaab Abdou and Claudia Mitchell explored issues of who frames the picture, and curation as a mode of social interaction, in their investigation of Hollywood films "curating" ancient Egypt.

I participated on a panel with Haleh Raissadat and Milka Nyariro on visual strategies that highlight women's needs for education—whether poor, parenting, or at risk for HIV—and I reflected on the implications of an Indigenous women's art intervention that coincided with a major policy development conference. As a PCL researcher myself, I was also pleased to present some research findings with my supervisor, Claudia Mitchell, related to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and International Development Research Centre of Canada-funded project, Networks for Change and Well-Being: Girl-Led "From the Ground up" Policy Making in Addressing Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa (see <http://networks4change.ca/>). Claudia and I presented on the panel, "Participatory Visual Methodologies: Social Change Through Community and Policy Dialogue," along with Relebohile Moletsane, Lisa Wiebesiek, and Naydene de Lange. In this project with Indigenous girls and young women on issues of sexual violence, the arts offer a unique platform for the participants to speak back to a culture of violence that seeks to silence their voices. Drawing on experiences in their everyday lives, they choose which stories they want to tell and how they want to tell them and, in the process, they gain valuable peer support and a sense of solidarity. The three papers on our panel explored the challenges and possibilities of engaging Indigenous girls and young women with the arts to address issues of sexual violence in their lives, the tension between evocation and representation with respect to fostering audience engagement with difficult knowledge, strategies to help sustain the tension between transferring intended meanings and supporting a wide range of interpretations, and strategies to sustain audience engagement—debate, deliberation and action—after viewing an exhibition, screening, or performance.

There were two competitions for the 12 poster presentations; one competition was adjudicated by spotlight panellists, and another—“the people’s choice”—was judged by the conference delegates. The winners of both competitions were Hani Sadati and Milka Nyariro, doctoral students in the Department of Integrated Studies for Education at McGill University. Their award-winning poster, “Picturing Change Through Photovoice: Participatory Evaluation of a Daycare Intervention in an Urban Informal Context in Nairobi” (Figure 1), made excellent rhetorical use of space and savvy graphics. Cleverly incorporated into the leaves of a camera shutter, Sadati and Nyariro provided just enough text-based data to focus their message, and used a single evocative photograph as the lens reflecting a participant aiming a small handheld camera. One side of the poster (or camera) contained several other images documenting their research site and process. Eschewing the recommended white space, they framed this content below a film reel, increasing the visual appeal around their descriptive title. The details of the message that was rendered matched the varied audience’s knowledge base and the conference theme, framing the everyday experiences of their participants within the broader social context of childcare and gendered labour.



Figure 1: [Hani Sadati](#) and [Milka Nyariro](#) with their poster “Picturing Change through Photovoice: Participatory Evaluation of a Daycare Intervention in an Urban Informal Context” (McGill Institute for Human Development and Well-Being, 2017).

Another stunning poster presentation was by Robin Notshulwana, lecturer and doctoral candidate in the faculty of education at the Nelson Mandela University. Her poster, “‘Girls Here and Boys There’: Participatory Visual Methodology as Intervention to Facilitate Gender Sensitive Practice With Foundation Phase Preservice Teachers in South Africa” (Figure 2), utilised a layout more traditional to the scientific poster genre. Notshulwana used a visual method of curating family photo albums and drawings to explore preservice teachers’ understanding of gender and gender sensitive practice. Contrasting four colours from both cool and warm palettes could be interpreted as representing both the challenges and possibilities inherent in the research. The use of drawings and computer-generated graphs and diagrams clearly depicted Notshulwana’s data generation, method of analysis, and recommendations. As Notshulwana stated in her poster abstract:

The findings suggest that participatory visual research created a space that enabled preservice teachers to begin to critically self-reflect about gender through making the

unknown visible, rethinking and making new meaning individually and with others with regards to how gender shapes identity, is performed and perpetuated by themselves and their teaching practice.



Figure 2: Robin Notshulwana with her poster, “Girls Here and Boys There’: Participatory Visual Methodology as Intervention to Facilitate Gender Sensitive Practice with Foundation Phase Preservice Teachers in South Africa.” Copyright N. de Lange, 2017, personal communication. Reprinted with permission.

The theme of educational research for social change was eminently apparent throughout all aspects of the 35th conference of the IVSA organisation. Principles of Indigenous recognition, environmental sustainability, and social equity were mirrored not only in the selection of conference papers, but even in the conference support structures. The ethos framing the conference image, from the territorial acknowledgment to the environmental policy and food planning, was oriented towards social justice. A territorial or land acknowledgement is a cultural protocol that is gaining increasing importance across Canada; it is a statement that recognises the Indigenous Peoples who cared for the traditional territory on which one stands. A territorial acknowledgement was prominently figured on the cover of the conference programme and read aloud at various sessions, announcing that Concordia University is located on the unceded Indigenous lands of the Kanien’keha:ka Nation. The catering service chosen for IVSA 2017 was the Montreal nonprofit organisation, Inter-Mission, founded in 2007 by Petites-Mains. The nonprofit organisation offers social integration and employment training programmes for women living in precarious situations.

The 35th conference of the IVSA succeeded in demonstrating that there are myriad creative strategies for educational researchers to work for social change by engaging through the visual—cellphlms,

photovoice, participatory video, dialogue quilts, and games—to activate conversations and help navigate complex issues and impediments to personal, communal, and global issues related to education, health, safety, and well-being.

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