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Divided Cities/Contested States


The Digital Eye in Conflict Management:
Doing Visual Ethnography in Contested Urban Space

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Divided Cities/Contested States Working Paper Series
www.conflictincities.org/workingpapers.html

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Editorial note

This paper results from the second-year undergraduate teaching module City Life: Divisions and Diversity which was convened by Dr. Martina McKnight and Dr. Milena Komarova at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast, in the Spring semester of 2011/2012 academic year. The module draws on the Conflict in Cities research and uses Belfast as a principle case study to investigate sociologically key dimensions of life in contemporary cities, probing their multiple meanings and the many ways in which they are contested and shared.

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The Digital Eye in Conflict Management: Doing Visual Ethnography in Contested Urban Space

Milena Komarova and Martina McKnight

Abstract

In this paper we reflect on our experiences with using visual research methods in the observations of an Orange Order parade and a nationalist protest in June 2011 and 2012. Building on Sarah Pink’s (2008a, 2008b and 2009) understanding of visual ethnography as ‘place-making’, we show how the shared (between researchers and participants) practice of using photography and video during contentious parades and protests in Belfast becomes a means of engaging with place and a tool in its collaborative production. We suggest that participants’ use of digital photography and video (marchers and protesters alike) has become integral to the repertoire of conflict and of its management in the city, serving as a tool in the process of transient (re)production of contested urban space. Our own use of digital photo and video in the research enables a deeper understanding of how contested space is reproduced through performance and generates reflexivity about our role in this process.

Keywords: visual ethnography, photography and video, conflict management, performance, parades and protests, Belfast

Introduction

This paper offers insights into the use of digital photography and video as methods of doing research in contested urban space and as part of the process of collaborative production of place (Pink, 2008a; 2008b and 2009). Drawing on participant observations and visual records of contentious parades and protests in Belfast in June 2011 and 2012 we reflect on how our use of visual methods drew us into a world of sensory, emotional and bodily experiences which provided us with a deeper understanding of how contested space is reproduced through performance and prompted us to reflect on our own participation in this process. Concomitantly, we demonstrate that the use of digital image technologies, incorporated in often highly regulated and ritualised bodily performances, plays an integral part in how urban space is claimed or contested. Serving as a medium through which people position themselves (signalling allegiances, distances, judgment or resistance), these digital gazes and glances draw participants into non-verbal interactions that become part of the repertoire of conflict and its management. Moreover, the power of the digital to move

* The authors thank Katy Hayward, Liam O’Dowd and Giulia Carabelli for their constructive suggestions on various drafts of this paper. We are particularly grateful to Katy Hayward for joining us on one of our field trips and for sharing with us her own experiences and photographs of it. We also thank the two Cinc referees Anita Bakshi and Lefkos Kyriacou for their comments.
beyond the spatial and temporal confines of individual events can potentially influence and mediate relationships and perceptions by widening access and channelling public attention to contestation and political violence.

Using Digital Photo and Video in Observation

Prior to the observations discussed here, we had already collected and analysed a large amount of discursive data, (such as individual interviews, group discussions, and public documents) relating to the Conflict in Cities research Module, entitled ‘Conflict Management to Conflict Resolution in Belfast’. The Module focuses on the performance of contentious events, micro conflict management strategies and the opportunities that these offer for constructive dialogue, mixing and transient productions of urban space. Partly due to the Project’s research design and interdisciplinary nature, our attention was drawn to developing a greater spatial and visual awareness of the city: how urban space is constituted and is itself constitutive of conflict and divisions and how this mutual constitution can be visually represented. For that purpose, and in addition to the more ‘traditional’ sociological data we were collecting, from the outset of the research we had also been making and collating photographs of a variety of spaces and events in Belfast. Initially, we tended to treat these photographs as supplementary to more ‘standard’ practices of sociological fieldwork. However, in the course of the project we began to develop an interest in how ‘the visual’ can itself be used as a method of analysis. Thus, we came to understand visual methods ‘not simply as a mode of recording data or illustrating text, but as a medium through which new knowledge and critiques may be created’ (Pink 2007: 13). Halfway through the project we also started taking short video footages and experimented with editing and producing short documentaries.

The visual turn in our work is by no means pioneering. Given the popularisation and sheer accessibility of ICT and the increasing ease and simplicity of obtaining digital photo and video images, photography and video (if not film-making) have become relatively banal techniques of data collection and tools for social analyses. These techniques are also changing what is deemed ‘researchable’ and are thus arguably reformulating the subject of social research (MacDougall, 2001; Pink, 2007). Furthermore, this phenomenon is just a narrow manifestation of a much wider social process of technologisation of the human and urban environments (Crang and Graham, 2007). The ‘digital eye’ is ubiquitous and influential: whether through the rise of complex surveillance technologies in processes of commercialisation and privatisation of public space (Monahan, 2006; Ellerbrok, 2010; Coleman and Sim, 2000); the implanting of ‘security’ as a concept and practice at all levels of governance (Coaffee and Wood, 2006); the use of CCTV by police monitoring spaces of
crime and dissent; the gaze of the media and the rise to prominence of the ‘citizen journalist’ (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010); or simply through the increasing presence of photo and video imaging in entertainment and daily modes of communication.

There now is a sophisticated and growing interdisciplinary body of literature on the various uses of digital photography and, especially, of video in social research: Video footage is appreciated as record of events and a method of field documentation which has inexhaustible capacity to remind us of intangible and previously unnoticed elements of events and behaviour, while remaining open for (re)interpretation with every next viewing (Murthy, 2008, Garrett, 2010); it is also valued for its capacity to capture images in their social and spatial context over periods of time, thereby providing an understanding of the mutual and fluid constitution of space and identity (Murray, 2009, 473); and to facilitate exploration of ‘the multi-dimensional, multi-sensory aspects of lifeworlds’ prompting among researchers ‘more immediate empathy for the experience than language alone could’ (Brown et al., 2008: 5.11).

Visual researchers also emphasise the capacity of video to literally draw one into the production of place in new emotional and kinaesthetic, in addition to cognitive and discursive, ways (Brown et al., 2008; Murray, 2009; Pink, 2008a and 2008b). Underlying this argument is a conceptualisation of ethnographic methods as place-making practices that pose the question not only of how research subjects are emplaced but also of ‘how researchers themselves are emplaced in ethnographic contexts’ (Pink, 2008a: 179); and how they create place ‘in a phenomenological sense during the research encounter’ and constitute it through a ‘range of “shared” multi-sensorial experiences and collaborative productions’ (between researcher and researched participants) (Pink, 2008b: 2). Considering the role of the camera in this collaborative production Pink (2009: 101) argues that:

‘In the first instance, place is made through the coming together of social, material and sensory encounters that constitute the research event. However, additionally place is remade as it is recorded in the camera… as a representation of that phenomenological reality. [Finally, place is] remade … when viewers…including… the ethnographer[s] – use their imaginations to create personal/cultural understandings of the representation’.

In this paper we step on Pink’s theorisation of visual ethnography as place-making where place ‘describe[s] the dual context of research’ (2008b: 3): both the one researchers inhabit and that which they investigate, trying to understand how others produce place by engaging in practices through which place is continually reconstituted. We apply this
conceptualisation to the empirical case of researching contentious events in contested urban space, in a context of ethno-national conflict, seeking to add to the understanding of how a place of conflict is experienced, reproduced, or perhaps challenged through embodied performances. A pervasive element of these embodied performances was the taking of photographs and video footage of the events themselves. This constituted an unplanned for common experience between researchers and researched and in our analysis was itself an important tool in the collaborative production of place and a main generator of our reflections. In order to contextualise our thoughts and experiences we first turn to the spatial and social context of Belfast as a 'post-conflict' city. We then present our notes from the field before drawing together our analysis in the discussion and conclusion.

**Belfast: The Production of Conflict Space in the Everyday**

As has been exhaustively recounted from various disciplinary perspectives (Whyte, 1990; McGarry and O’Leary, 1995; Coulter, 1999; Tonge, 2002), Northern Ireland has a long history of political and religious discord. The resultant conflict is often portrayed as being between Catholics/nationalists and Protestants/unionists, as these labels are generally conflated. The onset of the most recent and prolonged period of violence, (late 1960s to mid 1990s), commonly referred to as 'The Troubles', resulted in over 3600 deaths (Fitzduff and O’Hagan, 2009) and solidified and extended the ethno-religious segregation already in existence.

As a result of the ceasefires negotiated in the mid 1990s and the political Agreement of 1998, Northern Ireland, including its regional capital Belfast, has made undeniable progress towards a non-violent and more diverse society. Significant rebranding and regeneration of parts of Belfast is evident, yet many areas remain politically divided, economically and socially deprived, and physically depressed (Murtagh, 2011). Territoriality continues to define the city (Neill, 2004; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006) with more than half of its population living in wards that are 90% Catholic or Protestant community background (Belfast City Council Good Relations Plan, 2007). More than 14 years after the signing of the Agreement physical barriers (known as interface walls or ‘peacewalls’) still mark the boundaries between many working class Protestant and Catholic communities in the city.

The continued importance of territoriality is most clearly manifested in everyday life at ‘interface’ areas and in periodic contentious events. In such areas a variety of everyday practices, from kerb painting, flag flying and murals, to vandalism, and anti-social behaviour result in demarcation of territory and effectively restrict access and use. In addition to the ‘chill factor’ that the above create, someone who is not a resident of the local community can
feel visible as ‘not belonging’. This experience of visibility is central to the legacies of conflict in the city (Lysaght and Basten, 2003; Ó Dochartagh, 2007). It is a logical effect of the physical layout of such areas and the ability of local residents to know, by sight, many of their community thus exercising de facto constant surveillance over the spaces they inhabit. Zurawski (2005) describes the latter phenomenon as a common cultural practice of non-technological surveillance through ‘people watching other people’, highlighting (ibid: 499) that during ‘The Troubles’, survival could depend on knowing ‘who somebody is and what side he or she may possibly belong to’ which led to a culture of surveillance of the other’s and one’s own community. Similarly, in this working-paper series, Mitchell and Kelly (WP No. 17, 2011: 18) describe their experience of passing through segregated neighbourhoods in north Belfast ‘with residents keeping a close eye on [the researchers] as [they] traverse the streets’. The authors see this as a common practice in ‘enclaves’ such as the ones they researched and describe it as ‘crucial for collective security’ (ibid).

Indeed in the everyday management of conflict in this ‘post conflict’ city the legacies of distrust and fear that remain mean that in particular spaces or times ‘tactics of anonymity’ are still employed and signs of perceived cultural, political or religious affiliation are removed, hidden or disguised. While anonymity may be seen as a common characteristic of urban living, particularly resonant for those ‘whose bodies are marked [by] racial, sexual or cultural difference’, (Tonkiss, 2005), in Belfast communal and political affiliations are regularly ascribed to others on the basis of much finer detail, such as what people wear, where they live and how they are seen to use the city spatially, all with direct consequences for their experiences of safety or fear and threat (Shirlow, 2008).

**Contentious Events: Parades and Protests**

Conflict in Belfast is also performed through periodic contentious events, such as parades, protests and riots. The summer months are known, somewhat euphemistically, in Northern Ireland as ‘the marching season’. With well over 3000 annual commemorative parades or marches mostly organised by (or associated with) the Protestant and unionist Loyal Orders, the tradition remains important as a symbol of ‘cultural and religious witness’ for this community (Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 2011). Although the vast majority of parades pass peacefully they still engender varying levels of resentment among members of Catholic/nationalist communities. A small number, indeed, remain highly contentious, generally because their route passes through what is considered to be a predominantly Catholic/nationalist residential area. Despite the signing of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, this annual commemorative practice can lead to increased tensions, street
violence and rioting. While the significance of parades is differently understood by unionists and nationalists, contentious parades have, in practice, become a battleground for power struggles over identity, rights and justice (Bryan, 2006; Cohen, 2007). Nationalist communities and politicians tend to see Loyal Order parades that pass through nationalist residential areas as triumphalist and as denying them their right to live free of intimidation in their own homes. Unionist communities and politicians tend to see in nationalist protests against Loyal Order parades a lack of respect and understanding of their cultural tradition and a denial of their right as British citizens to march down a public road (or 'the Queen’s highway') celebrating this tradition ‘in a peaceful and dignified way’ (interview with a Protestant community representative, 24 March 2011).

Parades and protests are currently governed by the recommendations of the *Independent Review of Parades and Marches*, otherwise known as the North Report (1997). The Report centres on the fundamental principle of protecting the right to peaceful assembly subject to certain considerations, such as potential conflict with the rights of those people and communities who live in an area through which a parade passes. The responsibility for overseeing this is undertaken by an independent quango, The Parades Commission for Northern Ireland, which has the power to impose restrictions on parades and protests in cases where local accommodation cannot be achieved. Negotiations in the search for such accommodation are usually initiated and undertaken by a variety of voluntary organisations, local community and residents' associations, many of which over the years have developed a considerable degree of proficiency and sophistication in conflict mediation and management. While the Orange Order refuses to take part in such negotiations officially, representatives of local community organisations who do participate often reflect the stance of that organisation. On the day of a contested event there are a variety of groups and individuals present on site (invariably including the Police Service of Northern Ireland [PSNI]) to both manage the event, prevent its possible escalation, monitor the activities of all parties concerned, and to make sure any restrictions imposed by The Parades Commission are adhered to. Often the restrictions applied define and limit the route and/or the number of marchers and prohibit the playing of certain music or verbal exchanges. On the ground, visual technologies are used extensively and we have observed during our research how individuals from such groups and organisations use photography and video.

The marching season of 2011 presented us with an opportunity to observe and collect visual data of contentious events in territorially contested urban space. Our rationale was to illuminate the role of the spatial and performative aspects of conflict and its management. We felt that the use of film would record the more sensory experiences and
emotional reactions of participants at the event which are important ingredients in the constitution of place and in decision-making during performance (Murray, 2009). However, we did not anticipate the effect on our emotional and sensory experiences engendered by our use of photography and video and also by other participants' use of ‘the visual’ which we were to observe.

**In the Field: 25 June 2011**

The No 9 District Loyal Order Lodge Whiterock parade that we observe takes place on the last Saturday of June. It starts from the unionist heartland of the Shankill Road and passes through largely Protestant/unionist residential areas. The contentious aspect of the parade concerns the point where marchers emerge onto the Catholic/nationalist Springfield Road, through the Workman Avenue gate and ‘peacewall’ that separates the two communities. Since 2006 The Parades Commission has imposed restrictions on the parade and their determination this year states that ‘[o]nly the host lodge, accompanied by stewards and not exceeding 50 persons in total’, can ‘proceed without restriction’ through the gate. The remainder of the parade is asked to march through the adjacent (‘Invest NI’ or ‘Mackie’s’) former industrial site. The two groups will rejoin at the junction of that site and the Springfield Road.

Despite the potential for conflict we do not have fears for our own safety, nor do we feel additionally vulnerable as women. Perhaps this reflects the expected police presence, or perhaps - our assumption that we do not conform to the ‘typical’ characteristics of those who become embroiled in violence around these events. Yet, we do feel uneasy at the potential of being unable to blend in and of being unwelcome by local communities. A local community worker has advised us that, if we want to observe from the ‘Protestant/unionist side’ of the ‘peacewall’, we might be better negotiating access in advance. Time restrictions meant that we have not done so and, thus, our decision to stand on the Springfield Road (i.e. on the ‘nationalist side’) has been driven by pragmatic considerations. These considerations highlight how, in perceived contested space such as this, for us as ‘ordinary citizens’, a dimension of the public openness of that space is missing or, at least, questioned. We hold an assumption that, since we do not live in the area and do not belong to any of the parties who might have a ‘legitimate’ reason to be present, then the space is to no small degree closed off to us. There is a feeling of discomfort as we intuitively know, even before we set foot on the site, that the layer of anonymity generally afforded by urban space (and which would typically exist in this particular place) will be removed by the peculiarities
of the context. The very occasion which motivates and justifies our research is that which unsettles our confidence as researchers and onlookers.

We have decided that digital cameras and video recorder will be the most useful tools for recording our observations. As we walk towards 'the site', we find the road rather deserted, bar two police vehicles and the occasional police officer on foot. There are hardly any pedestrians, let alone protesters or marchers and sparse traffic is flowing freely. We feel 'exposed' in this public space; needing or lacking 'permission to attend'. We wonder if we are being observed by local residents and if they resent our presence? In these circumstances, Milena, who is not from Northern Ireland, finds her 'otherness' reassuring. She considers it preferable to be regarded as an 'outsider', equally removed from either side, than to be suspected of affiliations with one or the other. Carrying a camera becomes reassuring not just as a researcher's tool but as a possible indicator to others that she is merely a hapless tourist.

Figures 1 and 2: The Junction of the Springfield Road/Invest NI site on the right, from where the main parading procession will emerge at about 2 pm. Police officers can be seen on either side of the road. Traffic is notably light for the day and time, despite no roadblocks being in place. Photo taken at around 1:30pm; Springfield Road before protesters start arriving.

Despite our insecurities in using the cameras while there is hardly anybody else around, we agree that to us they are effectively a shield, a visible justification for our presence there. While we are happy to snap away at the built environment, we feel uncomfortable photographing the police. We wonder if they will challenge us. The previous week Martina, who had been doing some fieldwork on a 'normal' day, had taken a
photograph of a police station in another part of the city (no police officers or police vehicles were visible). From nowhere it seemed a police patrol had arrived and she had been questioned, asked to produce ID and show them the photos. We want to avoid a repeat of this event, but we also want to avoid giving the impression to local residents that we are in close communication with the police, thus assuaging our apparent ‘neutrality’. We debate this among ourselves for a brief time and decide to ask for permission to photograph them. The police officer Martina approaches looks surprised that she is asking. We feel our status as researchers is assured and start taking photographs that better reflect the scene.

At this point nothing much is happening and, in the absence of others, we are feeling conspicuous. Martina stays on one side of the road, taking photos and trying to look as if she belongs. At one level she feels she does belong (she no longer lives here but she grew up in this area), yet at another level in her role as researcher she feels alien. She wonders if the people living at this interface are looking out at her thinking that, like the marchers that will shortly follow, she is intruding in their space.

Chatting and laughing, a little self consciously, we reunite and walk past Workman Avenue gate, from which the marchers are expected to emerge shortly, and up to the junction where the two groups of marchers would come together. We stop to read and photograph a sign that gives The Parades Commission’s ruling on the conditions upon which the nationalist protest against the parade would proceed (Fig. 3). We read it as a reminder about whose territory this is and feel the presence of local residents through it. We then walk back towards the gate. It is a large metal construction consisting of two sections: pedestrian, which is opened and locked on a daily basis, and the main gate which will be opened to allow the marchers through but which is, bar one other occasion, locked and welded close at all times. There is additional space in front of the gate provided by the street layout of Workman Avenue which meets Springfield Road at a right angle thus literally setting the scene like a theatrical stage around which people can congregate.
Slowly at first but then rather swiftly the space in front of the gate begins to fill with more police, community stewards (wearing blue high visibility jackets), media (with much larger and more ‘professional’ looking equipment), a number of well known local political representatives from the nationalist SDLP and Sinn Féin parties, and nationalist residents. The latter are holding signs saying ‘Loyalist Threats Work’ and ‘Nationalists Have the Right to Protest Outside Their Own Homes’, among others. Nothing in their behaviour suggests any animosity or resentment of our presence. In fact, now that crowds are gathering, we feel more at ease as we are clearly beginning to blend in among the sheer number of bodies jostling for position opposite the gate for the best photo opportunity.

Many people have mobile phones, photo and video cameras and are walking around pointing them in different directions, alternating between the gate, the police and various elements of the crowd. The police reciprocate, although it seems, at this point, that their cameras mostly hone in on the disparate group gathered around the community stewards, a short distance from the main crowd of which we are part. Eventually the community stewards line up across the road, fencing the site from the lower part of the Springfield Road. Do they expect trouble to kick off from there?
Figures 4 to 6: Crowds have gathered in the Springfield Road facing Workman Avenue gate. Most of those present are using some digital recording device to photograph or video. Figure 7: Community stewards fencing ‘the site’ off from the Springfield Road.

We overhear someone nearby asking politicians and community representatives to comment on the day. We don’t know exactly who is asking but the cameras are rolling. Later we see some of these interviews on the news yet we are conscious that the footage released on TV is only a small fraction of all the photo and video images that we see being taken on site. A couple of months later we encounter a video from the day on YouTube. It has been edited into a short documentary that assesses how the parade has passed from the point of view of local nationalist politicians and community representatives.

Martina recognises someone in the crowd who, like her, has grown up in this area and they begin to chat. He wonders why she is there. As a local political representative his reasons are obvious, but her presence here at this time, despite or perhaps because of her previous connections, requires an explanation; her position as a researcher and her camera
provide this. The mood is quite light-hearted. Our feelings of being intruders are ebbing away; the crowd gives us confidence; lots of people are taking photos. Whereas at first Martina had asked permission to photograph a resident holding a sign she now feels at ease to snap away. Yet, Milena is still uncomfortable with turning her camera onto a group of ‘community’ people, standing close by. The few times she does that, she feels challenged by their glances back. She realises her newly-aquired feeling of blending in is rather fragile and depends on who she points the camera at.

The beating drums, whistling flutes and cheering crowds on the other side of the gate are becoming more audible all the time; perhaps the approved group of marchers have arrived? The police are to-ing and fro-ing through the pedestrian entrance and the relatively relaxed atmosphere in the crowd changes as the police arrange themselves in a cordon on both sides of the road, separating protesters and marchers when the latter emerge. Those of us with cameras are jockeying for a good position from which to get some photos once the gate is opened; some are more seasoned at this than others and we find ourselves getting annoyed when people stand in front of us. As the marchers come through the gates a loud cheer goes up from their supporters who are briefly visible on ‘the other side’. The marchers dressed in their suits and bowler hats, flags and banners blowing, emerge. The protesters and marchers do not speak but the sense of resentment between them is tangible and through it all the cameras are snapping.

At this point, we too are pushing to the front as best we can. Standing near the front of the group, Milena’s video recording cuts off what would normally be taken in by one’s peripheral vision. The digital eye is honed in on the gate itself; the gate is the ‘legitimate’ stage of performance. Perhaps to some extent this is the effect of us having bought into the competitive spirit of stealing the best photo opportunity. It is also influenced by Milena trying to retain her sense of anonymity rather than pointing the camera at people and in directions that make her feel noticed. To no small degree this narrow focus on the gate is conditioned by the physical layout of space around it – with the audience positioned directly across, and the gate opening as if a curtain is parting on the stage. Later when looking at our photographs of the gate opening we notice the positions of others photographing. Not only are the people standing on ‘our side’ of the road facing the gate directly with their cameras, as are we, but observers/spectators standing on the opposite side, which we briefly see at this moment, seem to be experiencing the same ‘drawing of the curtain’ spectating moment. Figure 8 shows this clearly as we can see photographers ‘shooting’ each other in an instance of temporal and spatial reciprocity of action, position and body language.
Figure 8: ‘Shooting’ from across the line; Figure 9: Orangemen walk through Workman Avenue gate and onto Springfield Road.

As the parade begins to make its way through the gate, we immediately notice one of the frontline marchers pointing a camera at the gathered crowd (Fig. 9). Despite so many others taking photos and filming, the camera in his hand feels out of place; at odds with the
general demeanour of the rest of the marching party. We realise then that we are also somebody else’s spectacle, somehow an object of scrutiny, even though we know that we are merely part of the crowd being ‘captured’ by him. It feels as if he is indicating that they, the marchers, are not just there to be stared at and judged. It is a fleeting feeling; the marchers quickly pass to meet up with the main procession further up the road and there are photos and videos to be taken; the crowd is quickly moving in that direction and we must be part of it.

We follow hectically, attempting to film as we go. Again, there is a moment of awkwardness for us as we try to reassess the new spatial configuration of the junction and where we could ‘legitimately’ stand within it. The protesters have now quickly regrouped so that they are visible to the marchers and bands when they emerge from the industrial site. The focus now is to get a good spot to begin photographing and filming. In the rush we separate. Martina notices a space by some traffic lights that would make for a good vantage point and rushes over. This brings her into much closer contact with the marchers and away from the protesters. She continues snapping away intrigued by the different banners, the age range of the marchers, the gender imbalance, the tattoos, the uniforms. At this moment the procession pauses and she finds herself face-to-face with a marcher with a camera; so close it feels as if the two of them could nearly touch. The Orangeman turns his camera towards different groups in the crowd and each time he puts his feet wider apart as if taking a stance (Fig. 10). Eventually he points the camera in what feels like Martina’s direction. Although she knows the camera is not directed personally at her she feels unsettled; too visible, as though some unspoken boundary has been infringed, but she continues snapping. Then another marcher with a video passes by. This time he is not even looking through the camera. It is as if he does not care what kind of footage he is really taking but that he is seen to be taking it (Fig. 11).
Meanwhile, Milena stands on the side of the junction, together with a number of protesters, and tries to continue filming from there. Soon she can see media people and the occasional police officer in a traffic island in the middle of the junction - a good vantage point for filming the procession. She is envious of their good position yet, she dares not cross
herself partly because she is concerned she may stand in the way of protesters. Earlier on, walking towards this spot while filming, Milena felt somebody’s hand pulling her up on the sidewalk, a man’s voice saying something like ‘here, love’. She could not figure out if that was purely the helpful gesture of someone who, seeing her concentrating into the video, was concerned that she might trip, or was he letting her know she was in the way of protesters? Either way she feels visible as if she has been standing out in the eyes of the observers and protesters surrounding her whilst her attention has been occupied elsewhere. She now hesitates to step onto the traffic island and thus into full view of all sides. However, as more people cross to stand on it (among which she now sees Martina) Milena is emboldened to cross too. From there she observes the way different parts of the crowd have reconfigured themselves at the edges of the junction. The community stewards have again lined up in a cordon, facing the marchers and with their backs towards the Springfield Road. Later, looking at the photographs we have taken, she notices the stewards were also holding cameras and directing them at the parading procession. Their body language reads as a challenge to the marchers (Fig. 12 and 13).

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Figures 12 and 13: Community stewards and protesters observing. Some are holding signs up and taking pictures of the parading procession.

From her new vantage point, Milena also observes close up two of the marchers pointing photo and video cameras at us. These men are simply reciprocating our digital glances but it makes Milena too feel distinctly uncomfortable. The discomfort that we both feel at that moment perhaps indicates our (pre-reflexive) assumption that the marchers, and indeed the protesters, have placed themselves in the ‘public eye’ in a way that we have not. In this fleeting encounter there is a sense that our role in the performance has changed, our anonymity compromised. To us it feels like marchers are saying ‘We are watching you too!’
In the Field: 30 June 2012

The following year we resolve to observe the event from ‘the unionist side’ of the ‘peacewall’. Having meanwhile done some fieldwork in this area, we are keenly aware of how much smaller and closed off the space there is and that few observers go to that side of the gate. Our previous research experiences are also suggestive of the unionist community’s reticence in responding to research and so we are both weary upon approaching the site of our observations. We feel that we are likely to stand out and be perceived as voyeurs even more than we had expected to be the case the previous year. We therefore seek to negotiate access in advance. Martina talks to a member of the Orange Order whom she has interviewed on another occasion and he assures her that there should not be any problem.

We start by observing at the junction of Shankill Road and Ainsworth Avenue, just a few hundred meters above the Orange Hall from which the procession begins. This is the heart of the surrounding unionist area which in this part runs parallel to the Springfield Road. A mesh of small streets separates it from the nearby interface wall and Workman Avenue gate where the contention takes place. Initially, before the parade itself commences, and while crowds have not gathered yet, it seems like our expectations of being unwelcome are about to be confirmed. Being early ‘on site’ we walk a few times up and down the relatively empty Ainsworth Avenue and are quickly spotted by a crowd of children playing with confetti outside their homes. A few of them follow us for a very short while laughing and shooting...
confetti at Milena’s back but then quickly lose interest. Harmless occurrence as this is it reminds us of our visibility and insecurities of being in this spot. Yet, once the parade commences and again, as the space begins to fill, we become more relaxed noting the sense of celebration in the air rather than of contestation. Our experiences now are very similar to having observed other parades in the city centre and, in that sense, familiar and unthreatening.

Crowds gather gradually. The spirit is one of community celebration; almost carnivalesque; there is no sense of tension. The streets and indeed many of the spectators are decorated in the usual red, white and blue. There are lots of young people, children, toddlers and babies in buggies. So celebratory and relaxed is the mood that the only indication to us any contention may be attached to this event is the group of community stewards who we notice passing by at one point. As the bands and accompanying Lodge members begin to march along, the crowd claps and cheers supportively. Streams of teenagers (and some younger children) flow on both sides of the procession following as it marches towards Workman Avenue where a small party will, as has become usual, pass through the gate and onto the Springfield Road from where we had observed the previous year.

Fig. 15

Figure 15: The Whiterock Parade procession in Shankill Road being greeted by crowds.
As soon as the front of the marching procession passes our vantage point we also start walking alongside it. We notice no media or other researchers. Those that we see using cameras appear to be simply supporters. We are not sure what to expect from the site around the gate. All along, as we walk, the local residents stand on the sidewalks in groups sipping drinks, eating, cheering, waving flags. They seem little interested in us and we pass by very quickly, concentrating on the procession, feeling again our cameras justify our presence. Later Martina finds one video (among numerous others) on YouTube taken from this section of the route in which we can briefly see ourselves walking by and smiling, virtually indistinguishable from anyone of the parade’s supporters.

The site around the gate surprises us when we approach. Community stewards have virtually fenced it off from spectators who are standing mostly with their backs to it looking at the procession. It feels almost as though they are neither conscious of the gate (or of the wall) being there nor aware of the nationalist protest held on the other side of it. Or perhaps they are intent on ignoring it and celebrating ‘their day’ and ‘their bands’ irrespective of the limitations that have been placed?

**Figure 16**

**Figure 17**

*Figure 16 and 17: The marching procession at the corner of Workman Avenue and Forth Parade. The gate is visible in figure 17. Observers, community stewards and the procession all turned mostly away from the gate.*
We stay in this spot and join the watching crowd. Martina notices that the pedestrian gate is ajar and, walking past and around the stewards, sneaks a brief preview of the 'other side' (neither community stewards nor police challenging her) and then rejoins Milena. Having seen her looking through a woman, who cheers in the crowd, asks Martina 'are themuns still there'? When Martina confirms this she makes a derogatory remark and turns her attention back to the bands. Clearly supporters and onlookers are far from unconscious of the protest on the Springfield Road but local stewards are purposefully managing, almost choreographing, the crowd’s attention away from the gate.

The procession walks on without slowing down or glancing in the direction of the gate and we find it impossible to tell which section of it is about to pass through it. One thing stands out: while spectators are snapping away, none of the marchers is using cameras while walking along; neither are we able to see any official media present. Perhaps not unexpectedly, there is no sense of confrontation in the air such as the one we perceived the previous year, while standing on the other side of the gate. We miss the moment when a sign is given (or must have been) for the opening of the gate. The procession doesn't perceptibly change its rhythm but by the time Milena notices movement closer to the gate and turns around to film the walk through, the gate has been opened and the head of the small marching party has already passed.
The gate is open and the small marching procession has just passed through it. Protesters and observers on the ‘nationalist side’ are taking photos and holding up protesting signs. Those on the ‘unionist side’ are waving banners and cheering.

Still, we are able to see enough for us to experience a similar ‘drawing of the curtain’ moment to the one we were able to observe the previous year. A wall of cameras, which we had previously been part of, is snapping at us from the ‘other side’. This is briefly unsettling as we know that many of those standing in the Springfield Road despise and ridicule the crowd that we are part of now. We observe and participate in the same moment of ‘mutual shooting’ although there is much less of this going on from our present position (we notice only a couple of photographers standing near us). This moment feels, again, like confrontation. There is an emotive element in it for us, especially as we see some familiar faces in the crowd facing us from the Springfield Road and fleetingly wonder if we are being recognised by anyone who may have remembered us from before. Cameras are still a justification and excuse for us to be there, only this time perhaps more in the face of those who are observing us from the ‘nationalist side’ as for those who are surrounding us from the ‘unionist side’. As the gate begins to close we witness a surge of cheering, clapping and waving of banners by supporters of the parade all around us directed at observers and protesters on the ‘nationalist side’. However, it is short-lived as the crowd immediately dissipates into the network of small streets around. We are able to freely walk through the pedestrian entrance of the gate. By this time most of the crowd at the ‘other side’ has moved to the nearby junction but some protesters remain, holding a huge sign which says ‘Make Sectarianism History’ (Fig. 21). Given the apparent lack of attention to the protest that we
witness among parade supporters at ‘the unionist side’ of the ‘peacewall’, and what looks like purposeful choreographing of the crowd away from the gate, we are struck by the imbalance between the mutual orientation of unionists and nationalists to the gatherings of their adversaries on each side of the interface wall; an imbalance counteracted by the ‘digital duel’ that the opening of the gate allows (or calls for) and that we are also part of.

Fig. 21

Nationalist protesters in the Springfield Road after marchers have passed through the gate.

Discussion

Pink (2009: 99) describes the use of visual media and images in research as ‘routes to multisensory knowing’; essential to the ethnographer’s engagement with place and to participating in place-making. Thus, when working with visual materials and, as we experienced, creating these materials - the latter ‘become meaningful in terms of the ethnographer’s whole biographical experience of the research process’ (ibid: 99); and, we suggest, their biographical experience beyond. Reflexivity therefore is essential in understanding how our responses to, and interpretation of, the events we became part of were not only influenced by our use of cameras, by that of others and by what occurred on the day but also drew on our biographies and (often) pre-reflexive dispositions.

Having lived in Belfast for thirteen years but grown up in Eastern Europe, Milena’s experience of life here has had its ups and downs. When she first arrived the city was (and largely remains), overwhelmingly ‘white European’, and since Milena perceived herself to belong to that category she was taken aback to realise how recognisable as a newcomer she was. Having lived in other cities outside her home country before moving to Belfast she
had never felt that she had stood out as ‘not from around here’ only by virtue of her appearance. Yet in Belfast she felt visible, standing out in a place that felt closed in on itself and with little interest in the ‘unfamiliar’. She had neither anticipated nor welcomed these feelings. She missed the reassurance that belonging and anonymity in the city provide. Raising a family here, getting to know, to work with and befriend people have gradually changed the way Milena feels in and about Belfast, and have helped her carve out her own sense of place. Yet, this experience of visibility stays with her to this day and contributed to her sensitivities at the times of our observations. She felt ambivalent: on the one hand recognising that on these particular occasions her usual discomfort at being visible was potentially a strength (her very visibility being an affirmation of a ‘neutral onlooker’ status); yet, in her mind, it still meant she was likely to stand out. She was also unfamiliar with the site itself, having never walked on foot through the area and so, although not fearing for her safety, was wary of what lay ahead.

Martina, on the other hand has grown up in the area of our observations. At one level, this provided her with ‘insider knowledge’ and spatial awareness that generated a degree of ease and familiarity but which, simultaneously, provoked a sense of discomfort upon arrival on the relatively empty Springfield Road. Whereas normally she would have had no concerns being in this area, to her surprise now she felt strangely out of place. Less than a month before our first observation she had walked around it, along a route very similar to that of the parade, taking photographs, crisscrossing the boundaries, exiting at Workman Avenue gate, and she had not experienced any of these tangled feelings. On reflection on that day, while undoubtedly people saw her, some despite not knowing her nodding and saying ‘hello’, she had managed to retain her anonymity while holding onto a sense of belonging. Lacking the potential for confrontation the space itself, and her sense of belonging within it, were differently understood and embodied by her on that earlier day. Approaching the potentially contentious site of our observation in 2011 she felt uncomfortable – an intruder, a voyeur; feelings which perhaps reflected her internalised dispositions, an empathy with the residents and an emotional response to place. These initial feelings subsided, as the space began to fill and, in particular, as the use of ‘the visual’ became more central and she became just one of many.

Despite the differences in our backgrounds some of the complexities and sensitivities that come with being a researcher in a ‘conflict society’ were also common to both of us and applied to both years of our research. There was tension for us that we could encounter people who we had previously interviewed or were hoping to contact for future research.
Inevitably we wondered if our visibility at the interface might associate us, in their eyes with one side or the other thus potentially compromising us. Thus, in both years of our observations our cameras turned into an essential tool for tacitly negotiating access and presence in the research sites; of dealing with our perceived loss of anonymity and managing interactions with others.

However, the role of our cameras extended much beyond the signalling of ‘right of access’ and of managing our researcher identities. Their use generated a tumble of feelings, senses and emotions that became an integral part of our analysis. These emotional experiences eloquently illustrate Pink’s assertion (2009: 101) that in creating (audio)visual research material ethnographers ‘provide a route to the more complex multisensoriality of the experiences, activities and events [they] might be investigating’. Ultimately, it was the interactions resulting from the reciprocating of visual glances between us and other participants - the shared use of the ‘digital eye’ - that allowed us to experience contestation emotionally; to understand the feelings of being stared at (being made to feel judged or accused) and the empowerment that comes with returning ‘the glance’. The use of visual technologies by others had the unsettling effect of turning us into objects of the ‘digital gaze’ and by prompting us to imagine ourselves through their eyes allowed us to empathise with their emotional perspectives (Woodward, 2008). We were thus enabled to understand the performance of conflict in a way we would not have otherwise, revealing contested space as emotional space and the ‘digital eye’ as a conduit of emotion (Koskela, 2000).

Still, our emotions also shaped and limited to an extent our observations: they influenced where and at whom we felt comfortable pointing our cameras, and where we positioned ourselves, arguably at times contributing to us emulating to an extent the ‘digital glances’ of those surrounding us. Pointing the video camera mostly at the gate (during our 2011 observation) and the group of marchers walking through possibly contributed to us legitimating, together with others, the gate as the ‘stage of performance’ of conflict. Yet, as with all research methods, the digital does not ‘act’ in a vacuum and this honing of ‘the digital eye’ on the gate was also conditioned by the layout of the surrounding built environment. The latter, allows a greater degree of access from the Springfield Road, influencing the spatial positioning of the ‘audience’ and channelling attention to the gate and to the ‘peacewall’. In contrast, our video footage from a contentious parade in the Ardoyne area of Belfast (two weeks after the 2011 events described here) is much more diverse (in terms of the directions we pointed our cameras) as the built environment there did not afford the opportunity to face the marching procession up front.
Our field notes also demonstrate how the dense mesh of digital gazes and glances drew participants into non-verbal interactions which signalled allegiances, distances, judgment or resistance and, acted as a proxy for dialogue and a powerful tool in the process of (re)producing urban space as a place of conflict. Yet, to understand what the embodied use of the visual meant and did for other participants in the events we must refer to the broader context of governing and managing parades and protests in Northern Ireland. The reform of political governance, including a far-reaching reform of the PSNI, have conditioned largely positive changes in policing and managing contentious events in Belfast (Jarman, Rallings and Bell, 2009). Working relationships between the PSNI and the dense network of local community and residents’ organisations and nationalist politicians have been gradually improving, resulting in pro-active engagement between key parties in advance of contentious events (ibid). This point was illustrated through the apparently smooth choreography of the events we observed in both years which clearly involved direct communication between community stewards and the police on site. Yet, the search for local accommodation around contentious parades remains a complex and fragile process, involving multiple power relations (Bryan, 2000 and 2006). The extent to which parades and protests are seen to be governed by The Parades Commission, the PSNI and, indeed, by some local community organisations (who find themselves in the ‘invidious’ position of intermediaries [interview community worker, 1 April 2011]) is viewed by many participants (and by some in the wider community) as a restriction of their rights and itself a cause of aggravation. It is such sentiments, together with the actual restrictions imposed on the use of other means of expression by marchers and protesters that confer particular significance on the embodied use of ‘the digital eye’.

Ó Dochartaigh (2007: 489) in his research of online interactions argues that the use of new information and communication technologies during, and beyond, contentious events at interfaces ‘demarcate[s] spaces of surveillance and penetration at lines of confrontation’, multiplying ‘territorial strategies for exercising power [and] generating new forms of action around a physical boundary’. Our observations confirm that, to a degree, for both marchers and protesters, the use of visual technologies was an exercise in surveillance; a demonstration of power – conveying a sense of ‘penetration’ of the other’s territory (ibid). Yet, we suggest, it was much more than that. By engaging in this digital ‘shooting’ both sides were also contesting the form of the events and their roles within them, thus making statements of defiance to their adversaries, to observers, and to the various official bodies, which, through governing and/or managing conflict, seek to define and shape such events. Thus, for protesters the use of ‘the digital eye’ reinforced the statement of their right to ‘live free of intimidation’ and ‘to protest peacefully outside of their own homes’. It communicated
their contestation of the right of marchers to parade through nationalist residential space. For the marchers pointing cameras in the direction of the observing crowd was an affirmation of their rights to march down ‘the Queen’s highway’ and to celebrate a cultural tradition ‘in a peaceful and dignified way’. Accompanied by defiant body language it also signalled their refusal to comply with the implied role of an ‘offender’ who is there to be judged and sniggered at.

Crucially, the diverse media representation of these contentious events has resonance beyond, the immediate experience of the events, continuing to reify or contest conflict. Whereas in the past conflict in Northern Ireland may have been exclusively reported by the official media, the growth of digital technology and online sharing heralds the emergence of competing narratives (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010), examples of which can be found beyond the context of Belfast, notably in the London riots of 2011. Through the internet those present at the parade and protest were able to tell ‘their story’, immediately reaching much larger audiences than that available to us as researchers. Internet footage we found highlights how the visual can be utilised to intentionally/unintentionally project ideologically loaded stories. Central to the nationalist video of the 2011 protest was the argument that the passing of this Orange parade ‘once a year’, is a nuisance and a provocation for local nationalist communities. By contrast, footage, taken by marchers or observers of the parades from the ‘unionist side’ of the interface presents a picture of festive occasions and community/heritage celebrations, suggesting that the protests, rather than the parades, are the source of conflict and that despite the restrictions placed upon them unionists are not cowed.

Conclusion

At the start of our research we were interested in assessing the opportunities that contentious events and micro conflict management strategies offer for constructive dialogue, mixing and urban border crossing in Belfast. Our rationale for using visual methods was to illuminate the role of the spatial and performative aspects of conflict management thereby capturing the fluidity of acts which, while ephemeral (Cohen, 2007), are an integral part of the dynamics of continuity and change. However, we were little prepared for how the use of visual methods influenced not only our interactions with others, what we noticed and what we omitted, our emotions and sensory experiences but also the focus of our analysis, shifting it onto how, we as researchers were co-implicated in the transient production of place. Thus in this paper we aimed to add to understandings of how a place of conflict is
experienced, (re)produced or challenged through embodied performances that incorporate ‘the digital eye’. We applied a perspective of visual ethnography as place-making (Pink, 2009) to the empirical case of researching contentious parades and protests in ethno-nationally contested urban space.

The use of ‘the visual’ constituted a shared experience - a de facto collaborative practice - between the other participants in the events we observed and us, the researchers. Thus we stress that this interactive use of digital image technologies represents a medium of communication between researchers and participants, not only in that it is a visual language above and beyond spoken discourse (thus conveying complex meanings in a flash), but in that it phenomenologically constitutes engagement and interaction during the research encounter and because it profoundly engages with senses and emotions in a manner that draws on researchers’ whole biographical experiences and compels reflexivity.

Furthermore, our reflections suggest that the use of digital image technologies as a part of the embodied performance of contentious events interacts with the experience of visibility of and in contested space. Visibility, as we suggested earlier, is central to the legacies of conflict and intertwines in complex ways with feeling safe or unsafe; acting as a tool in establishing or challenging territory; allowing empowerment, disempowerment and resistance (Ó Dochartaigh, 2007; Koskela, 2000; Monahan, 2006 and 2011). Its maintenance is not reliant on new technologies - residential segregation, the physical layout of segregated urban space and its symbolic markings and the closed-in character of many communities are the main contributors to feeling visible or invisible. However, during our observations ‘the digital eye’ had a particular role in both reproducing and legitimating a place of conflict and in challenging/redefining the meaning and significance of the multiple contestations taking place.

Underlying the above point is the argument that power is central to the performance of conflict and to its management and that the role of the ‘digital eye’, as we observed and contributed to it, is integral to possible (albeit temporary) shifts in power between various groups. The uses of digital image technologies we observed, by both marchers and protesters for instance, can be interpreted as, to use the words of Mitchell and Kelly (2011), an ‘instance of surveillance used as a tactic [of resistance]’: resistance by marchers and protesters to each other, to the media, the police, and the various organisations seen to be in a position of power to govern parades and protests. Crucially also, resistance to people like us – the researchers, seen as having an overwhelming degree of control over how we interpret and represent participants’ words and actions.
Indeed, at one level, academics have highlighted the capacity of visual representation to amplify the imbalance of power in the research relationship (Holliday, 2000; Packard, 2008), and have linked this capacity to the power of photography to create social subjects and social realities (Sontag, 1997). To be sure, it could be argued that by channelling, together with others, public attention to contestation and political violence our use of the ‘digital eye’ legitimated a place of conflict. Yet, equally, it has been pointed out that digital image technologies have the simultaneous capacity to engender a power shift in the research relationship (Murthy, 2008). The inclusion of self-directed photography and photo narratives in research is increasing, as are examples of participants deciding on what images of them can or cannot be used for research purposes or public consumption (Hingley, 2011; Packard, 2008; Woodward, 2008). In our case, although as observers we did not offer such a choice to those we photographed or filmed, many of them nevertheless had, and exercised, the capacity to take their own images, to make them public and tell a story through them. This capacity is directly linked to the increasingly ‘technologically mediated’ (Murthy, 2008: 849) character of everyday life, effectively changing the nature of social interactions and affording more agency to those who have traditionally been mere ‘objects’ of the photographic gaze. Depending on the type of research, participants are now not only able to influence how they are represented through the (digital) eye of the researcher but are in a position to generate unedited representations of selves (Holliday, 2000) and others, including researchers. Thus, the ‘digital eye’ has a democratising influence on various elements of the performance of conflict: (re)defining the roles of performers and audiences; of researchers and researched, opening contentious events to a wider audience; and facilitating the communication of competing narratives as opposed to limited and sanctioned stories.

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1 This is how Pink describes Chaplin’s view of the relationship between sociology and visual representation (in her book Sociology and Visual representation [1994]).
2 A recent survey identified 99 such barriers, consisting of steel fences, walls and gates of various height and length (Belfast Interface Project 2012).
4 Given that the previous weeks has seen severe rioting in east Belfast.
5 Entitled ‘A Nationalist Communities Experience of a ‘Peaceful’ Orange Parade’. Available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f85-pqVHn8w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f85-pqVHn8w)
6 For instance, The Grand Lodge of the Orange Order maintains the position that lodges ‘should not meet with “Sinn Fein controlled residents’ groups”, nor with The Parades Commission’ (Jarman, Rallings and Bell 2009: 19). Albeit relaxing this position somewhat during the latest marching season of 2012, The Grand Lodge still openly seeks the disbandment of The Parades Commission.
References


