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Ottoman past with a strong European heritage, was once dubbed the 'Jerusalem of the Balkans' for its religious and ethnic diversity. Today, out of its 550.000 inhabitants only 18.000 are ethnic Serbs. For all it counts, the only thing people of Bosnia, whatever their ethnicity, clearly agreed upon is that direct external intervention has to be reduced.

There's no silver bullet for Bosnia's problems. But the failure to spark a constitutional debate on the devolution of powers from the High Representative to the local level will hamstring the government in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and render it even more powerless than it is now. Also, the EU has to have a clearer policy toward Bosnia and stop sending mixed messages, as was the case when it allowed Serbs and Croats to travel without a visa but not Bosniaks.

Mistakes were made as it was hard to connect the dots looking forward. But now, looking back, they must be amended. The final decision is with the people of Bosnia. Only Bosnians can say if they are willing to take up the challenge, make difficult reforms and join the EU, or keep the status quo, which will only widen the existing gap between Bosnia and the rest of Europe, and in turn reduce the likelihood of a better life in the foreseeable future.

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### *Visual Approaches to Urban Ethnography<sup>1</sup>*

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The visual tells about the city: its history, its social and spatial forms, and its characters. Ethnography helps us understand the meaning, identifying the processes. Visual language has in fact the potential to uncover meanings and representation that reflect an interesting micro perspective on phenomenon under study; a connection that, however, today it is still restrained by a mutual shyness. Both ethnographic photography and film may be the place where the work

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary is part of my ongoing reflection on ethnographic experience and visual methodologies. Some of the issues addressed here were discussed during a workshop (co-authored with Jerome Krase) held in Buenos Aires during the last ISA Visual Sociology Thematic Group conference of August 2012.

of urban research encounters audio-visual skills and competences. The visual, in fact, provides a way for social scientists to explore various kinds of representations applied to the field of ethnographic research.

This commentary gives a snapshot on visual sociological methods, spatial semiotics, and visual culture to study the urban scene. Moreover, it would underline that we could treat observations and photographs as we do other information, such as interviews or demographic data which are specific to areas, neighbourhoods, streets, organizational boundaries and census tracts. We should note here that our snapshots attempt to be as close as we can get to what an ordinary person might see as they traverse a space. They are not attempts at artistic representation but are intended to document visual surveys. Indeed, visual sociology and attention to vernacular landscapes in the inner city allow us to see conflict, competition and dominance at a level not usually noticed and which can easily be related to the theories and descriptions of Lefebvre and Bourdieu.

As Krase (2012) states, explaining how urban spaces are used, contested and transformed by different social groups is a crucial task. It is suggested here that a visual approach to the study of gentrification in ethnic neighbourhoods could encourage a synthesis of old and new approaches to the pre- to post- modern urban scenes. This could also provide insights as to how visible cultural resources are commodified. Given that rapidly changing metropolitan landscapes are often the venues for sociological reconnaissance of globalization and de-industrialization, visual sociology can be a valuable adjunct to 'normal' urban research and reportage. For example, we can use photographic surveys in comparison with historical photographic archives to see and record how differing constructions of space and spatial practices in the landscape of new immigrants transform the city. We can photograph, film or video ethnic enclaves in order to both document and illustrate how particular spaces are changed by their new occupants. Of special interest might be the ways by which public areas are used. Visual methods make it easier to examine new constructions, as well as the alterations of existing spaces.

On Sunday February 10<sup>th</sup>, for instance, the Chinese New Year Parade with the ethnic spectacles of Chinese dragon dances, live musical performances and more took place in the so called Milan's Chinatown, in Paolo Sarpi street. I could not stay still in one place, so I took one chance to shoot some photographs of people interacting in the area. I am using this as an example of how the built environment may be used as an empirical source beginning from the

analysis of visual data. In this sense, my visual research concerns the visibility and reflection of the social relations and the everyday negotiation of prejudices and stereotypes in a contested urban space. We can study the Milan's Chinatown and its changes under the lens of gentrification, globalization and migration policies in Italy (Manzo 2012a, 2012b). As shown in the photograph below, during the Chinese parade in Milan I noticed a kind of blackboard full of different signs, articles and notes on a local Italian street florist.



Figure 1: A local Italian street florist in Paolo Sarpi street, Milan (Italy), February 10<sup>th</sup> 2012.  
© Lidia K. C. Manzo

My attention was particularly attracted by a hand-written sign in Chinese. The florist explained to me that it was a notice for his Chinese customers. Since Valentine's Day was close, he thought to suggest to book flowers in advance. He said, 'They love blue roses, Chinese people are crazy for blue roses nowadays and they are very good customers, they always buy a minimum of eleven roses, not as the Italians (laugh)'. Signs like this seem to me to constitute a fascinating 'mix' of commercial advice and suggestions for any kind of customer, Italian as well as Chinese. Interestingly Italian anti-immigrant rhetoric sometimes doesn't match everyday negotiations of consumption practices and commercial interests.

As Mac Dougall (2006) points out, we should develop forms of ethnographic knowledge and explore areas of social experience for which the visual media have a demonstrated affinity; in particular the spatial, the temporal, the corporeal and the emotional. In this perspective, what role does the visual play in understanding how power structures operate at the micro level of

social relations? How do we visually build stereotypes? In the process of constructing reality, how can visual methods allow us to understand the social constructions of meaning? Or, again, is semiotics a way to understand different systems working in the construction of meaning?

Drawing up the legacy of documentary, fine art and social critique, the Visual applied in Urban Research is an interdisciplinary field of practice which develops a deeper dialogue on urban sense-making processes. By encouraging contributions from scholars around the world and promoting a discussion on this topic, *Urbanities* may contribute to develop answers to the above questions.

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