

Chapter 5

Conclusions: Touching and Being Touched – Experience and Ethical Relations



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Sometimes, research can hit you in the stomach, making you angry and upset, possibly sick. With a bit of luck, this can be fine, as discontentment can be a force that propels you to become active and engage yourself. Sometimes, research can resonate in your heart, making you aware and empathetic. Not much luck is needed in these cases, as this will hopefully also stimulate you to get new ideas, a better understanding or hopefully even give you a better foothold for whatever you do in practice. Most of the time, research just passes you by, not leaving much of an impression. We do know that words can make a difference, that words can touch you. They evoke many different thoughts and emotions. It is not a single word alone that does this, it is the flow and rhythm of a text, how it takes the reader along, cognitively but also in space and time and in an embodied manner. To achieve different effects, we place words differently, we craft sentences that appeal to different senses and sensibilities, we use terms or jargon, we write complex sentences that juxtapose hosts of different qualities, as Michel Serres does in in *The Five Senses* (2008). We present a clear definition, we unfold arguments or put something to the point. Most of the word work we do, we do on our keyboards, sitting at a desk, in a train carriage or lying on a sofa. Thus, this word work happens remote from the site where our study took place, it is definitely not the same as the field work that we do, it is not the same as the numbers and algorithms that make up our data. But done well, it can still evoke the sense of what happens or happened “out there” in the field, the phenomena that the numbers point to, be they the numbers of people crossing a border or the feeling of someone who is lost or maybe even hunted (Guttorm, 2016).

This text, however, deals not with words but with images, both hand drawn images and those “taken” by a camera, static images but also moving pictures in film recordings. Images also evoke feelings, they can touch the person looking at

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them, studying them. In the following text, I will try to engage with different qualities of how using visual approaches touches all of those involved in different ways. This touching and being touched by the visual happens in ways that are different from the textual, but the focus will lie on the visual and comparisons to text serve mainly heuristic purposes. As I wrote above, word work happens mostly on the keyboard, remote from where our data originates. This is quite different from most of the visual work that is done by the contributors to this section that I want to comment on to develop my argument in this chapter – their visual work is deeply embedded in their respective fields or their studies. Because of that, I want to divide my approach into three different steps. The first enters the production arena of the visual material, the second revolves around analysis and the third step goes back to the keyboard and screen, examining issues of presentation and representation of the visual. Springing forth from these steps is the final part of this chapter, which will focus on the notion of how an “ethics in motion” plays itself out in the studies and in the form they are published here.

5.1 Production

Both the photographs and film stills do a work of *emplacement*. They tell us about the actual places in which particular people move about and execute practices that are relevant to the researchers. In the case of the presence of Norwegian Turks in Drammen, Norway, and in the Turkish province (Nikielska-Sekula, Chap. 2, in this volume), this work is more focused on the places as such, in most cases voiding the places of people and instead focusing the view on architectures, things and spatio-material assemblages that are co-established by migrants in both places (and nations) in different and significant ways. When reading the text along with the pictures, it becomes apparent that quite a lot of work and attention has gone into exactly that: keeping the images free of people, while at the same time providing visual access to everyday places. Places where real people follow their mundane, but also special or religious activities. The film stills do similar work, they also show places, but they do not focus on the places as such (even though similar information or data about place could be extracted from the stills), but they focus on places as situations for the main protagonist in the film. Dr. B. is always there (Desille, Chaps. 1 and 4, in this volume). The places that are documented here are places that situate the protagonist and the camera woman in his and her practice in and around the election. They show different aspects of how and where he is active and how Desille has positioned herself in relation to him, co-present others and the places where they move about.

Another important aspect of the images that are used in the chapters by Nikielska-Sekula and Desille is that they have been recorded at the *eye-height* of a normal adult, thus showing a normalized view of the surroundings, i.e. one that is not taken from a wheelchair or child-level, nor from angles or in perspectives that would only be accessible with the help of larger camera mounts, from the ceiling etc. This also

provides insight into the production of the visual material as happening in a non-exceptional, not overly technical setting. The camera and the person wielding it will still be visible, and Desille is also highlighting the fact that she used a larger, more professional camera to establish her position as an actual camera-person, but the recording or production setting is not re-ordering the space of recording in a physically significant manner, thus organizing the view of the camera as being human, rather than technical.

The cameras and the visual that are presented here are also *close, but distant at the same time*. They are with and among things, but also keeping their distance. We don't see detailed or close-up shots of either people or things. The fine-grained nature of surfaces, dirt and matter lingers in details that are not easily discerned in the photographs or stills, so that traces of human usage have to be found in the larger settings, with the possible exception of the tagging on a metal door (Nikielska-Sekula, Fig. 2.1).

The pictures in combination with the text thus display something about their production (Mondada, 2009), they give us insights into what distances the photographer or camera-woman has found acceptable, how close she moved to people, to single things or objects and what distance she kept. The one person that we can see up front in Nikielska-Sekula's chapter (Fig. 2.5) is far away, unrecognisable at least to us, who don't know the street and the people living there and who uses the bus stop, while the three children are faceless, moving away from the onlooker. Taken together, this kind of physical distance and material absence in Nikielska-Sekula's chapter also creates a sense of distance and an experience of absence (Frers, 2013). When read in conjunction with her text, this can evoke a strong feeling of how the researcher related herself to the field, thus resonating with the strong stance that she takes on ethical issues, avoiding risks and paying attention to issues of anonymity in particular. This is in strong contrast to the closeness to Dr. B. in the chapter by Desille. This person, still somehow peculiar but also very concrete and physically present, features prominently in the visuals presented by her. Again, the text read in conjunction with the images gives us cues as to how to see these stills, how to tune into them and listen to what they can tell us. Many situations that are depicted show a certain intimacy in the fact that Dr. B. is seemingly quite aloof of Desille's presence. But as her text clearly displays, this apparent intimacy is the result of a *constant negotiation of distances* between the two of them and co-present others, where her emotion works along with the use of the camera "as a shield" allows managing this closeness – but not without struggles. This is also relevant for Dr. B. as in the instance where Desille describes how he checks up on her being there when they record different events, either ones that he definitely wants to have documented or events where he displays awareness of the potential troubles connected to them. These constant negotiations show one thing quite clearly for both chapters: while the camera's presence might recede into the background of the interactions, it always lingers there, at the margins, and can in one instance be summoned back as a relevant part of the interaction. Thus, it quite clearly never is "forgotten" as such, but it is not always actively attended to.

The photos and video stills in the chapters by Desille and Nikielska-Sekula always carry with them an *excess of information and impressions*. This is an important aspect of photographs in general, as explored by Helen Liggett (2007). They show more than can be attended to in the text and also in their production – these are not carefully arranged studio settings, but mundane spaces that always are filled and crisscrossed by many different layers of agents and activities. One could surmise that the opposite is true for the drawings or maps generated by the participants in Buhr’s (Chap. 3, in this volume) study. The hand-drawn mental maps are *radical simplifications and abstractions* (Hendrickson, 2008; McGuirk, 2013). Here, migrant bodies as such stay out of the picture. They are recuperated and raised in the narratives or the interactions surrounding the production of the maps. In addition, the levels of abstraction enacted in the maps are quite different, as the author also makes evident. While some participants draw a symbolic house (we don’t know in how far this actually is a representation of the kind of building where the participant lives, or if this should just symbolize home, and the actual dwelling could be an apartment in a larger condominium), another participant draws spaces that depict whole city quarters and the routes that connect them. How do we get access to migrant bodies in or through these abstract figures? This question is central to Buhr’s argument about the necessity of interactions between the researcher and the participants that draw the maps. Both work out what these mean and where the participants are, also in an embodied way, “in” these drawings. The production of the visuals is central to their interpretation and understanding.

Again, the act of production happens in relation between researcher and co-present and absent others. It is quite obvious that in all three examples, even though they operate in very different material and technological settings, what we see, what is generated is the product of active and ongoing negotiations in the field.

5.2 Analysis

The negotiations do, however, not stop after leaving the field. I want to first focus on one usually neglected aspect of the research process that happens “after” the field, in the ordering, thinking through, reassembling and analysis of the material or data that has been produced before. When I closely observe myself during the ordering or analysis of my material, it becomes quite apparent that the field and the production of data has not only happened outside of myself. It also has happened inside me. The relationality of the production of data means that it leaves traces, lines, roots, hooks etc. in us, in our thoughts and in our embodied emotions. These find a way into our writing if we attend to them, as Caitlin DeSilvey (2006) demonstrates when she engages with her experiences at a decaying cottage. *Data also are embodied memories*. We do not suddenly shift to a completely different register, even though we might set agencies into motion that are new and different, such as qualitative data analysis software, logs, conversation with others either in random meetings in a floor or over lunch or in a well-organized data session. In all of these new

and different circumstances, memories and images continue to linger in us, we might be haunted by something we did, we might be proud of it, we might suddenly realize what something that we or others did actually meant. The past, the production of data and our inter- and intra-actions during that time do not just disappear. We experience encounters anew, partly rooted in our embodied memories and partly in what we currently see and do with the stuff of our research, in these cases especially with their visual qualities.

This aspect can also be discerned quite clearly in the accounts given in all three chapters. While the stay in the field may be long over, we re-enact it during our analysis, sometimes only in a fleeting manner, which does not touch us a lot, but sometimes in a manner that weighs heavy on us, accompanies us to when we look out of a window in an office, on a train or an aeroplane, when we lie down in bed and think and ask and worry, and probably even in our sleep.

The same is true when one thinks of the material that has been produced. This is *the secret life of our data* (Amoore, 2018; Bucher, 2016; Thatcher, O’Sullivan, & Mahmoudi, 2016). We store our images on a hard disk, on a card, in the cloud. We put away the papers on which people drew a part of their life, we photograph and scan them. What happens with them then? They become part of a different realm, of ones and zeros, incredibly stable and unchanging, but also completely malleable and perishable. A single incident could possibly erase everything that is not properly backed-up. Someone could intrude on the data, steal it, put it into different settings and circumstances, modify it or “just” read it, translate it to hash codes and put it into work in different algorithms, identifying faces and places, contributing to the manifold transformations constantly happening in the realm of big data, of surveillance, marketing, hacking, redistributing and ordering. We have some control over this, but much of this happens below the surface of attention, in a realm of its own that we not necessarily can fully control.

In both aspects that I have briefly mentioned regarding the analysis of data (there are many others, and there is a thriving literature on issues related to the analysis of different kinds of visual data, as all of the contributions to this volume show), something else happens, something that again introduces a certain excess to the data. The visuals are more than just that. More than a captured image, clip or drawing. They hook into our memories and bodies, and they are linked to algorithms and infrastructures that extend far beyond our control.

5.3 (Re)presentation

So where does the third step tread? The third step goes outside again, it creates an imprint that is then accessible, visible and readable for a more-or-less anonymous and unknown audience or readership. The visuals that have been produced and dealt with in the analysis are finally moved into a context of presentation or representation.

Many of the issues that arise in this context are related to issues discussed earlier in the text. What is presented is, of course, linked to what was recorded, drawn, produced earlier and how it was treated and (re)contextualized in the analysis. But the presentation also has a life of its own. Starting with the drawings produced for Buhr's study, we are confronted with scans of the drawings and narratives surrounding them and their production, but at least in one case, this is also accompanied by a visual move. The high level of distance and abstraction or simplification especially in one of the drawings (Fig. 3.2) seems to urge Buhr to accompany this drawing with a "regular" map, where north is up and the abstractions are laid over another layer of abstractions that readers will supposedly be more familiar with and that enable a different reading or seeing or interpretation of the drawing – the regular map, with printed names for places instead of hard-to-read hand written names. Our eyes can zip back and forth, compare the maps, pick up the color coding that is repeated as an overlay for the regular, geographic map, re-read words and names in both parts of the picture and thus think about how both the person who has drawn the map and Buhr have imagined the spatial practices of a mobile migrant body in Lisbon's urban space. We can combine two things: first, getting a sense of the person, of the way he writes and emphasizes some lines in the drawing, how quickly he makes his strokes and where he lingers, corrects or emphasizes; and second, getting a sense of geographical relations and spatial extension. These drawings are about space and spatial relations, as well as about movement. They are void of places and practices as embodied practices – we get access to these aspects through the text and the narratives developed therein.

The visuals for Desille and Nikielska-Sekula, on the other hand, are about place and embodiment as I have argued earlier in the context of production. This is also relevant in the context of representation, however. It is the places, both interior and exterior, that are presented – they give texture to the narrative and provide information and impressions that go far beyond what the text offers. The images open another "field", one that overlaps with what the words and the analysis say, but also one that goes beyond the text, that offers an excess that, as already stated earlier, cannot be captured in a meaningful way in text (Rancière, 2009). These places, as practically all everyday places, are full of complexities, and the photos we see show these places in their lived-in qualities. They are displayed with an aura of documentation rather than an aesthetics of evocation or estrangement. Even though the photos made by Nikielska-Sekula could also be gazed at as somewhat eerie images because they show *empty* places, or rather places in which people are (made) absent. In the case of Desille it is not people who are made present as absent, but it is their voices and movements. The subtitles and the aesthetics of video or film recordings contribute to the establishment of a sense that is different when compared with photographs. The viewer is confronted with frozen interactions, moments. Here, the absent voices are made present through the words that are displayed in the subtitles. We can imagine the tone, the pitch, the level of doubt or distance, of affection or aggression that vibrates through the air in the different settings – but we cannot see or hear it.

Again, the text gives essential cues as to how we can see and move into the visuals with our own thoughts, senses, imaginations. It tells us about the challenges lived through by the researcher in these situations, it tells us about what happened in these places that are depicted, what happened with those people, and in the interactions that are displayed. While we do not meet these people ourselves, we get sensory input that gives these people and places and events new and different qualities than the text. Ideally, it will give them a voice or a face of their own. If we, based on our encounter with a drawing, a photograph or a video still feel the presence of another, get touched by that other or his or her emotions, can sense the setting or situation affect us – then visual methods will have succeeded. They will not only provide “a more” but rather an encounter, the sense of being touched. This can also be achieved by words alone, but we are all different, and sometimes we get touched by the right words, but at another time, we might need an image to bridge the distance to the lifeworld of another, in these cases of migrants’ and their lives.

5.4 Ethics in Motion

While ethics may be understood as rooted in stable norms and values, they usually become relevant in living and highly complex processes, as displayed in the contributions to this volume. What is ethical, what feels and appears right to the researcher and those who participate or appear in her or his studies, is never stable (Bashir, 2018; Chung, 2020; Thummapol, Park, Jackson, & Barton, 2019). It shifts both when seen in the context of the production of data, in its analysis and when the visual or other material is presented – and it doesn’t stop there, as Desille discusses, because the presentation itself also can be performed in many highly different situations, with different audiences and different affects and connections coming into play. This is maybe the most important message: ethics are negotiated relationally in all of the different stages of a research process and this is certainly also true for visual approaches.

At the same time, we are also pushed to think about and respect general rules or principles that can be conceived as being trans-situational. Nikielska-Sekula writes:

In a context of photo-taking, however, the researcher should be aware of global as well as class differences regarding the consciousness of the consequences of a photo being taken and displayed. I believe that it is unethical to benefit from this bias to obtain more extended material. (p. 45)

What she states here is that situational differences should be seen in light of more general or even global differences and inequalities. Just because a behavior or the taking of pictures is not perceived as harmful by some groups in some situations, this should not be a free pass to lower ethical standards that might be required by others in other settings. This is, of course, a valid and important point. At the same time, it is not necessarily a given that seeing “lower” ethical standards in certain groups only is a sign of a less developed critical consciousness. Maybe there is a

certain colonial aftertaste to this notion, as different ethical standards are being hierarchized according to different degrees of enlightenment. But at the same time, this also displayed an approach that is characterized by thoroughness and care.

Desille, on the other hand, follows what could be perceived as a completely different approach. In her film, in the text, and in the film stills, we are confronted with two public figures and a number of others that are participating in the public sphere in a very classic sense: they are present in public space, where they are presenting and discussing political views and issues. The main protagonist is displayed close-up and personal. We also get to view the face and the stance of another politician of the same party in other images (Desille, Figs. 4.5, 4.6 and 4.8). Other participants are probably also visible in the rest of the film, as this is filmed from “within” the situations, even though we don’t get to see their faces in the stills. What is more than that, Desille also actively wants to give a face to the political stances that they represent. In a way, she serves us racists and misogynists in her visual material. She shields herself behind the camera, but offers us what is on the other side of the shield. Is this ethical? The motivation and the context and the positionalities and the stances of the people in her material are very different from the people that Nikielska-Sekula does (not) portray. They do not represent what is conceived of as the vulnerable side of migration, they might rather be understood as (potential) perpetrators. Their stances and values and utterances need to be critiqued. In this case, the researcher clearly is not just a distanced, objective and neutral observer. Rather, she is engaged, dancing her own dance of ethics in motion in a way that moves between her own vulnerabilities and the will to show the reality and depth of what happens in the field, all the while negotiating her relation with Dr. B. and the people he meets – both during the recording and later, in separate showings for and with him and others. As she writes:

But the main interest of following him with a camera, was to capture moments where he thought he was “not seen”, or moments that he perceived as belonging to uninteresting shots. As such, in between the discourses he performed, with the different functions he executed, I could grasp the tiredness, doubts, and waiting time (see Fig. 4.8 getting the results). Those informed even more acutely on his take on this campaign. (p. 76)

Even though we deal with a public figure, the filming is just as much interested in the “private” take, in looking beyond the façade. Again, the ethical stance displayed here is in strong contrast to what Nikielska-Sekula does in her study. At the same time, the people involved are different and they display different wishes regarding what is allowed for the researcher to record or not. To develop the thoughts on the researcher’s position and responsibilities in this field a bit further, I want to revisit the idea of different “consciousness” for different groups, individuals or cultures again, that Nikielska-Sekula raises when she argues for a strict approach. One could probably argue that a similar thing is at play when Dr. B. displays his awareness of the fact that some things are recorded that are of a highly questionable or even openly racist nature, but connected to him and his party or his party’s supporters. However, he does not ask for the recording to stop or be deleted, thus giving a

kind of implicit acknowledgment. Couldn't this just as well be explained by a specific and rather unenlightened cultural attitude, for example a kind of machismo that would keep him from showing signs of insecurity or weakness in front of a "colonial" female researcher? However, displaying machismo is different from displaying vulnerability and insecurity. Is this difference big enough to allow for such big variations in ethical approach? And, how do other stances factor into this, for example a cultural aloofness to the sharing of images, of just being a regular person with "nothing to hide", living in a regular place? How to place this in a discourse, or rather, a dispositive of surveillance, big data, capitalism, authoritarian regimes, populism, social media and hatemongering?

A different way of describing this is to understand these issues as located in a field of tension that sets the dance of ethics into motion. The tension is created between the idea of anonymity and the idea of agency (Sabar & Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2017; Saunders, Kitzinger, & Kitzinger, 2015). How much agency should, or should we not give to different participants in our studies? Should only those that are adult, educated, critical and un-impaired have the agency to decide about how and that they could and should be (re)presented? Whose anonymity needs more protection? Are vulnerability and marginality automatically resulting in the need for anonymity, regardless of what those that are depicted think, or display about their attitudes? What if these overlay with other criteria that make this more problematic? (Newman, 2020; Virtová et al., 2017). Should a racist belonging to a minority have the same privilege (if this is the right term)? Should a politician have less protection? Even though she is a minority female? Or not?

A similar but also different aspect that has been raised in this chapter is related to the richness of the data presented. In many regards, I have argued for or hinted at a preference for an ethics of excess or complexity. We should not be afraid to show "more". More than is needed to drive our argument into the heads of our readers. More than we immediately understand, grasp or can address in our texts or analyses. We should offer this excess, this more to our readers, to those seeing our data in a film or a presentation. At the same time, we have a clear need for minimization. The GDPR (European Union, 2016) even requires citizens of the EU and areas following EU law to only record and use minimal data, to reduce the risk of de-anonymization and cross-identification. This has clear benefits for the protection of anonymity, of vulnerable groups and individuals in particular. But it also makes our research more sterile, takes away some of the meat that is the hallmark of ethnographic and qualitative approaches and their specific qualities.

Taking all of these questions and tensions into our own research practices is what ethics in motion are all about. Different questions that are negotiated differently by different people in different situations. Looking back at the approaches displayed in the different contributions, there aren't any given or clear-cut answers to be had. Good ethical guidelines are aware of this fact – we need to give some trust to the competence of researchers and participants to negotiate these ethics themselves. But we also need to discuss and scrutinize our decisions with others. We need not be afraid to change positions later and we should not pretend that our solutions are

simple and not ambivalent. To negotiate ethics in motion means that we have to be open about what we did in the different stages of our research processes, about our own feelings as well as over the affects, feelings and positions that permeate our practices in the field, during analysis and when we represent our research to different audiences. I think the three chapters discussed here do this job in an admirable way – especially because they operate so differently.

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