Chapter 10

Combining Participatory and Audiovisual Methods with Young Roma “Affected by Mobility”

Stefano Piemontese

10.1 Introduction

Using videos in anthropological research with children and young people has gained prominence over recent years (CHICAM, 2007; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Queirolo Palmas, 2015). Similar to more established visual formats such as drawings and pictures, videos can be used both as field notes (Grau Rebollo, 2008) and as working tools to be employed during interviews, focus groups, or in the creation of personal diaries to elicit otherwise unexpressed thoughts and meanings (Allen, 2008; Harper, 2012; Marcu, 2019; Russell, 2007).

The reasons behind this methodological trend are to be found in specific epistemological and deontological aspects associated with the act of shooting, editing and sharing audio-visual products. Some scholars suggest that recording videos during fieldwork can represent a fundamental exploratory moment and also a source of data that does not necessarily need to be edited for public representation (Stagi, 2015). Videos, in fact, allow one to catch sight of those non-verbal elements of communication that would not completely emerge in written notes, such as postures, gestures and facial expressions (Lagomarsino, 2015). An increasing number of scholars, however, have decided to go further and capitalise their growing technical expertise to edit and publicly screen their material with the purpose of stimulating discussions about their work with a broader audience. This deontological posture is based on the awareness that videos, compared to more traditional academic formats, have the great advantage of creating knowledge on social phenomena beyond the boundaries of written and disciplinary knowledge (Harper, 1988). Actually, videos

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are able to convey the emotional aspects of research and help viewers to place themselves in a more colloquial and less academic dimension (Lagomarsino, 2015).

Images, however, are not neutral, but the result of multiple choices made by the people involved in their creation. They do not show objective evidence, but interpretations and constructions that reproduce cultural meanings (Aguilar-Idáñez, 2016; Lagomarsino, 2015). Therefore, they need to be problematised. When it comes to migrants and discriminated minorities, their public portrayal often contributes to strengthen prejudices and stereotypes and to perpetuate pietistic or alarmistic narratives while neglecting other types of representations. From this standpoint, the use of audio-visual methods can also be interpreted as a means to challenge the hegemonic representations of marginalised groups and to promote social change (see Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła, Chap. 1, in this volume).

During my doctoral research on the experiences and expectations of underprivileged Romanian “Roma” youth (Piemontese, 2017; Piemontese, Bereményi, & Carrasco, 2018), I myself have been using videos in very different ways and for very different purposes. When I met my research participants, they were in the midst of their adolescence and had been living in the suburbs of Madrid for almost a decade. Their families moved to Spain to seek working opportunities and better living conditions; however, both the economic crisis and the administrative restrictions for Romanian citizens did not allow them to overcome the material insecurity which they fled. Since their arrival, forced evictions pushed these families towards continuous moves between shacks, abandoned buildings, squatted apartments and rented flats, but also back and forth between Spain and their home village in southern Romania. Focusing on the youngest members of this transnational migrant community, the aim of my research was to unravel the nexus between urban and international mobility and the transition from school education into the labour market.

Since the early days of fieldwork, recording videos with my smartphone became a central element of my research and eventually proved to be an indispensable methodological tool for the experimentation of participatory research approaches. As we will see, along this path videos came to represent both an alternative way to write a field diary; a means to engage the fluctuating interest of my research participants; and an experimental space of co-writing.

Building on an intense, erratic and many times improvised audio-visual research experience, this chapter offers a theoretically-informed empirical account of the failures, negotiations and opportunities disclosed by the use of participatory video-making in ethnographic research with underprivileged young people “affected by mobility” (Carrasco & Narciso, 2015). The first section lays the conceptual background for a broader reflection on the nexus between participatory and audio-visual methods: I discuss the advantages and disadvantages associated with the use of the former and address the practical and conceptual dilemmas raised by the co-creation of audio-visual products. The second section follows the invitation of Annalisa Frisina (2015) to tell more about the negotiations and the confrontations that underly the use of audio-visual methods and gives a detailed account of my efforts to combine both approaches. This path has been paved by a succession of optimistic advances, hopeful waits, unexpected slips, and humble retreats which

have allowed me to further develop my methodological posture and reflection. In light of the presented data, the conclusion substantiates two key hypotheses. First, I discuss how – even if the results are not as expected – audio-visual methods are a valuable pretext for engaging informants in participatory research practices as well as for digging into personal beliefs, feelings and associations that otherwise would remain hidden. In particular, I defend the value of *uncertainty, improvisation and failure in the making of participatory videos*, whereby precisely these complications are crucial to shorten distances and compensate for unequal power relations between researchers and their informants. Second, and similar to other contributions in this section, I discuss how *the use of participatory audio-visual methods in migration studies* can both help to mitigate the practical problems posed by remote data collection, and contribute to mainstream novel approaches to the study of migration.

10.2 Audio-Visual Research as a “Making Together”

The purpose of using videos for data collection and communication does not require any significant methodological approach *per se*: videos can be recorded without actively involving research participants or being edited for academic purpose only. However, when ethnographic movies are intended to contest hegemonic (mis)representations of a given social group or serve as an empowering tool, engaging research participants in the creative process is seen as a critical condition.

Some authors suggest that co-creating audio-visual texts allows ensuring spaces of legitimacy and communication to those subjects that rarely talk for themselves in the public sphere and are more often hetero-represented by others through colonial discourses and imaginaries (Lagomarsino, 2015; Queirolo Palmas, 2015). From this perspective, and in order to help these people to construct new narratives about themselves, researchers should “give back the power of representation [and] bet on research processes that are rather a making together” (Queirolo Palmas, 2015, p. 114). The success of these attempts, however, largely depends on the ability of scholars to challenge the positivist epistemology of distance and to completely (and truly) involve research participants in the writing process, even at the expenses of appearing “less scientific”. But what does this mean in practice?

Luisa Stagi (2015) describes the use of participatory methods as an essential condition for bringing together the *directivity* of video-editing with the *non-directivity* of biographical methods. During her research with female-to-male transitioning people, she realised that some requirements needed in the post-production process (mainly technical skills and availability of time) would have excluded almost by default her research participants from the construction of the story. In order to mitigate these risks and “dilute the power” of the researcher/director in selecting scenes and shaping representations, she arranged moments of collaboration already in the preproduction phase. These include activities aimed at co-writing the script or co-designing the structure of the video-interviews.

On other occasions, a higher involvement of the research participants is just a direct consequence of the employment of audio-visual tools. In fact, while more traditional means of data collection, like audio interviews, allow participants to use anonymity to mitigate their responsibility over their opinions (Stagi, 2015), appearing on camera tends to amplify their demand for control over the ways and forms in which their image is produced and reproduced (Queirolo Palmas, 2015). This fact alone triggers a more decisive request for participation in both phases of post-production and restitution than any other condition (Lagomarsino, 2015; Stagi, 2015).

The link between participatory and audio-visual methods may also work in reverse, with the latter becoming crucial for the former. White (2009) uses the expression “ethnography 2.0” to refer to the space of opportunities that the availability and development of digital technology has generated in the field of participatory ethnography. On the one hand, smartphones, digital cameras, and editing software allow participatory groups to work more independently on the collection and creation of audio-visual material, contributing to balancing the unequal relation between internal and external researchers. On the other hand, these tools express their potential, especially in participatory research experiences with underprivileged youth with trajectories of school failure. For them, the audio-visual text is far more attractive, understandable and connected to their daily life than the written one, which rather represents “the code of a control device that turns and classifies them into culturally disabled people, and the concrete sign of their own humiliation and failure” (Queirolo Palmas, 2015, p. 115).

10.2.1 Reasons and Problems of Conducting Participatory Research

Participatory research practices are expected to bring the perspective of both researcher and research participants together. In the words of María José Aguilar Idáñez (2016, p. 164) collaborative research is not about explaining *the* Other, but it is about “exploring together *with* the Other to reconstruct cultural experiences through dialogue”. Therefore, planning moments of cooperation meets the twofold purpose of establishing more equal power relations among the subjects involved in the research process and adapting the research agenda to the participant's needs and interests (Zeitlyn & Mand, 2012).

When it comes to children, young people, and other groups defined as vulnerable, these processes have an added value: by taking advantage of the competencies and skills of the participants, they may represent an unparalleled measure of empowerment and contribute to breaking their representation as “vulnerable people”. Participatory approaches can be effective also in creating playful spaces of expression and communication away from pedagogical and adult-centric prescriptions. In this respect, Rachael Fox (2013) claims the need for a radical change in the

participatory ethnographic practices, pointing out how young participants often advocate for research that is funny and focuses on topics that are relevant to them. Other scholars, instead, emphasise how incorporating the perspective of children and young people in scholarly research may help to understand aspects of social life that would remain hidden without a certain distance from the conventions that shape “adult ideas about the world” (Milstein, 2010).

Conducting participatory research is nevertheless challenging. Regardless of good intentions, the imbalance between the investment of the researcher and the interest of the participants risks reproducing mechanisms of coercion and persuasion (Fox, 2013). As I had occasion to experience during my research, these tensions are mostly reflected in the design of the research questions before the beginning of the fieldwork; in the excess of planning by the researcher; in the pedagogical approach of the “participatory clubs”; and in the uncritical adoption of adult-centric ethical guidelines that – besides not to consider children as competent social actors – risk to reproduce pre-existing impotencies and absences (Campbell & Trotter, 2007; Fox, 2013; Sime, 2008; Skelton, 2008). It is perhaps due to the difficulty of remaining in the conventional formats of social research that according to Audrey Dentith, Measor, and O’Malley (2012) the most crucial risk faced by those scholars that may want to adopt *truly* participatory methodologies is to be excluded from academic and funding opportunities.

10.2.2 *Representation, Authorship and Self-Analysis*

The adoption of participatory approaches may disclose further dilemmas when combined with the creation of audio-visual products.

Co-creating audio-visual texts certainly allows the researcher to share the power of representation with the participants. However, when it comes to discriminated groups and individuals, putting them in the conditions to exercise control over their image may not bring the expected results. Researchers may assume that the self-representations of discriminated people are different and opposed to those produced by dominant discourses about them, and that if they only had the opportunity to express themselves publicly, they would put forward alternative narratives about themselves. Luca Queirolo Palmas (2015, p. 124), however, reveals how members of youth gangs in Barcelona “loved to publicly represent themselves, through texts and videos, in the wake of a *gangsta* imagery, which is basically the barbaric imagery through which the hegemonic discourse labels them”. Similarly, but with an opposite impact on public representation, the involvement of research participants in the post-production phase may trigger forms of censorship and neglect important sociological aspects (Cannarella, 2015).

Making a movie together also raises the issue of authorship. This question is not limited to the formal acknowledgement of the intellectual contribution of each person involved in the creative process but calls directly into question the very idea of participation. Participatory practices make the boundaries of ownership very

fluid for the simple reason that it is difficult to clearly identify “who made what”. When it comes to video-making, having a camera in hand does not mean to exert more decision-making power than the people performing on the other side of the lens. Similarly, being involved in the editing process does not always guarantee full control over the story. Therefore, what determines the degree of polyphony of an artefact are mainly the relations established within the participatory group. The elusiveness of authorship in the making of participatory films is well grasped in the description that Luca Queirolo Palmas (2015, p. 129) gives of the process that led to the production of *Buscando Respeto*: “Fragments of our discourses have penetrated the scene of the gangs as no book or sociological essay could have ever done; fragments of their viewing angles and their positions have pervaded our narrative. Who is the author, and what is the artefact?”

Finally, we have to consider the unexpected and sometimes counterintuitive impact of audio-visual methods on research processes. It is very common for scholars to assume that recording videos in the field may turn into an element of discomfort for the research participants. Against this posture, Karla Ballesteros Gómez (2012; in Lagomarsino, 2015) suggests that the camera can become an occasion for unleashing emotions because it generates a chance to be heard. Other authors have reported similar experiences, proving how participatory video-making can create a deep and critical reflective mechanism that amplifies and drags the participants towards crucial questions related to how their image is reproduced and made public (Lagomarsino, 2015; Stagi, 2015). In this context, it cannot be underestimated how the external and empathic gaze of the researcher/director may contribute to change the self-analytical perspective of the participants and push them to repopulate their self-perceptions with new meanings. As stated by Max, one of the female-to-male transitioning people interviewed by Luisa Stagi (2015, p. 50): “Through your empathic look we were able to reverberate our thinking, this led us to talk about things we had inside that we never said to each other: usually we talk about concrete things among ourselves”.

10.3 Experimental Collaborations

During my research, I have been experimenting with both the limitations and the transformative potentials associated with the adoption of participatory and audio-visual methods. In principle, this methodological choice was not based on any particular deontological or epistemological posture. When I started my fieldwork, I was not aware of the theoretical implications linked to the setting up of participatory research groups, neither was I conscious of how to use videos in anthropological enquiry. Quite the opposite (as I had to recognise when I read my field notes some time later) my approach was merely functional to reach the very practical purpose of accessing a wider sample of Romanian “Roma” youngsters living in homelessness in Madrid. And to do it as quickly as possible.

In June 2014, my only contact with this community of young people was a 13-year-old boy called Adrian.¹ After one of our first meetings, I asked him if he could introduce me to other adolescents with similar paths of urban and international mobility. By instinct, and without letting him answer, I suggested to him that we could interview them together. However spontaneous, my proposal was coherent with the awareness that the future of my doctoral research was largely dependent on his will and availability to help me. Offering Adrian to join my research project as a sort of assistant became an intuitive way to reframe my request for support and to balance my condition of dependency. My unexpressed purpose was to turn his extemporaneous “endorsement” to my research into something more durable and concrete through developing a bond of complicity and trust. The tactical nature of this operation never made me feel a worse anthropologist, but probably a less hypocrite one. Over time, however, I started interpreting and confiding to Adrian that our potential collaboration could have been interpreted as an exchange between people with different yet complementary expertise. The choice was now his hands.

The boredom of the summer days played in my favour. Following my request, he started organising meetings between his friends and me. During these reunions, structured interviews – that originally were not meant to be crucial to my methodology – proved to be a valuable tool for creating an operational framework for Adrian’s involvement in the research process. Previous to each interview, I would share with him a copy of the interview structure and invite him to ask some of the questions. Unlike participant observation, interviews also represented explicit moments of encounter that parents could easily recognise and give their consent to. These first attempts, however, failed for a number of reasons, among which it is worth highlighting some degree of unpreparedness on my side; the abstract language of the interview structure; and the priority I was giving to data collection over anything else. Despite these limitations, Adrian’s engagement in the conduction of interviews was priceless. Through his comments, specifications and sarcastic reactions he was able to transform the meetings with his friends into a dialogical space where personal fragments of their shared experiences of mobility could merge and give shape to collective memory and imagery.

Motivated by these early experiences, I started a path of collaboration that involved two co-researchers (Boylorn, 2008) in two transnational locations: Adrian in Madrid, and his close friend Leonard in their home village in Romania. The interviews conducted with their peers in both localities were open also to other young participants: everyone was listening and stepping in to clarify, dispute or contribute to the answers. Towards the end of each meeting, I invited everyone to ask their own questions with the twofold purpose of concluding the interview in a playful way and allowing topics I was overlooking, such as sexuality and romantic relationships, to emerge. Over time, this path of collaboration has adjusted to the specific competencies and interests of the co-inquirers and has also been accompanied and facilitated by the creation of videos, moving along the “ladder of

¹ All the names of the research participants have been anonymized.

participation” defined by Hart (1993). While commissioning tasks, consulting and sharing decision-making have been the main ingredients of what I have called “experimental collaborations” (Piemontese, 2017; see also Estalella & Sánchez Criado, 2018) the horizon I was longing for – setting the ground for research initiated and directed by young people – was only partially achieved. Nevertheless, despite the entire process being based on a high degree of improvisation and experimentation, it is possible to identify three main phases: training, participation, and professionalisation.²

10.3.1 *From Commissioning Tasks to Research Training*

Living in Hungary but doing fieldwork between Spain and Romania has significantly affected the decision to experiment with participatory methods. My own trajectories of displacement pushed me to consider Adrian and Leonard as two privileged observers of geographically distant realities and communities that I could not witness on a daily basis. Despite myself, the absence from the field (which did not exist during the first months of research) was preventing me from building stronger relationships with other young participants in both locations. Consequently, I convinced myself that a more active involvement of Adrian and Leonard could have become the safest way to gather data and succeed in my research. At that time, however, the question of how to involve them in this process was still unanswered.

As a first step, I decided to share with them some basic information about the formats of academic research and the methods of ethnographic inquiry. I considered essential to frame our relation in the context of a broader system of knowledge production that, despite the claims to social change and social justice, mainly results in publications, conferences and job contracts of which they were only going to be passive protagonists. Afterwards, while structured interviews continued to represent recognisable moments of collaboration, I started introducing Adrian and Leonard to the method of participant observation. These training activities were carried out mainly spontaneously. For instance, the very first time I invited Adrian to accompany me on fieldwork with people other than his close friends was after reading a *tweet* of the local anti-eviction movement. A Romanian family was about to be evicted from its apartment, so I called Adrian, and we reached the site together. Since the police had not arrived yet, we were invited by the householder to join him for a coffee. Then, when a couple of hours later we left the apartment, I decided to encourage some reflections on what we had actually done:

«You know, my job, more or less, works like that: the first thing to do is to ask questions about the topic you are interested in. Then, there is a second important thing to do: if we had

²The involvement of Adrian and Leonard as co-inquirers has been voluntarily from the very beginning. However, throughout the research I have first contributed to the purchasing of two smartphones equipped with cameras, and successively rewarded the ethnographic work carried out by Leonard. These expenses were covered using my salary.

time we should sit down and write what has happened this morning, including the information Nelu gave to us». Adrian is particularly interested in this aspect: «What should we write?», he asks. «It depends on our interest», I answer. «The main point is that the more stories you collect, the more you can say something about a topic». I predict what Adrian is going to say, so I anticipate him: «It's weird to go back home and write things about the people you've had a coffee with, right?». He smiles: «Yes, a little bit». «In a sense, it's like being a spy ... or at least this is what they would think if they knew that we write about them, right?». He agrees. So I continue: «And this is the reason why one of the basic rules that you have to comply with is to make always clear who you are. Did you notice that at the beginning I told Nelu about my research, that I was a scholar and you were my research assistant?» (Fieldnotes, 3rd July 2015)

Asking Adrian what could have happened “if they knew what we write” (Brettell, 1993) was not simply a way of making him aware of the ethical issues surrounding the ethnographic method: I was also telling him that I was constantly writing about him and his friends. Unexpectedly, our experimental collaborations were offering the space to address some ethical issues that had not been completely faced in the initial stage of my fieldwork.

Regarding the use of videos, at this stage they were still separated from my participatory attempts. Nonetheless, three genres had already emerged, that anticipated my subsequent efforts to combine audio-visual and participatory practices: fiction, video interviews, and the ethnographic documentary. At that time, I was not aware of the multiple implications of recording videos during the fieldwork, so without giving much thinking I had started filming Adrian, Leonard and his brother Nicolae on a daily basis. Accustomed as they were to shoot videos of themselves, they immediately felt at ease in front of the camera. One afternoon, the four of us were walking across the neighbourhood when I shared with them the idea to make a movie together. I had nothing planned yet, but they liked the idea and immediately started to develop and perform a story of thieves, fights, secret police, and family unity. When a couple of days later I edited the scenes in chronological order, we were all surprised by the result: we had filmed a *gangsta*-themed short movie (Fig. 10.1). In that moment, I understood that video-making could be much more eloquent than any other source of data and could also represent a playful and engaging way of conducting research with my young participants. After this revealing experience, I invited them to show me the places they had been living since their arrival in Madrid: abandoned yards, ruined buildings and ordinary blocks became the scenery in which Leonard was describing to an imaginary audience the living conditions and the forced evictions that he and his young friends had been experiencing during the previous years (Fig. 10.2). When he moved back to Romania, we continued video-recording interviews on different topics but, as the fieldwork was moving ahead, I also started collecting a third and more extraordinary kind of video material: that for an ethnographic documentary (Fig. 10.3).

Fig. 10.1 Nicolae and Adrian performing the “bad guys” in our gangsta-themed short movie, Madrid 2014

Fig. 10.2 Leonard describes the consequences of forced evictions in front of the remains of a building where he had been living illegally with his family for a couple of years, Madrid 2014

Fig. 10.3 Following Leonard after a day of work in the construction, Medgidia 2016

10.3.2 Towards More Autonomous Forms of Participatory Data Collection

The silence of Adrian and Leonard that too often accompanied our improvised training sessions revealed their perplexity in front of an ocean of amorphous words that rarely resulted in concrete actions. I had the impression that I was imposing my concerns on them without leaving them enough space for contributing with their own doubts, interests, and questions to a common research agenda: the main protagonist of our collaborations was still me. The event that made me aware of this situation took place a few months after our *gangsta*-themed short movie, when I invited Adrian to film his summer trip to Romania with his smartphone. I had imagined that my proposal would have been a good opportunity to extend my participatory approach to the use of videos. But then he asked, “Then I am Stefano, right?” and I did not know whether to feel pleased or downhearted. If on the one hand, I was afraid of “assimilating” him – not exactly the process I was hoping to generate – on the other hand, his response could have interpreted as a sign of empowerment, whereby the creation of an audio-visual diary represented an opportunity for Adrian to increase his self-esteem as a competent person. Whatever the correct interpretation was, I understood that something had to be changed. This happened when the advancement in my research rescued me from the bulimia of ethnographic data and enabled me to put into practice the purpose I had previously recorded in my diary:

I have always been critical about the opportunity of letting them develop their own research questions, mainly because I feared that they would not fit in my research. I always tried to encourage their collaborative potential, but always within the limits of my research

questions. I do not want to radically change this approach now, but to complement it with a more participatory one. (Fieldnotes, 2nd July 2015)

My cynical self was still interpreting participatory methods as a means to engage the fluctuating interest of my informants. However, as I was progressing with my research, I started to emancipate myself from such a narrow-minded vision. I finally learned to listen and to appreciate their active involvement as a prism through which I could better comprehend their world. Actions like conducting interviews together, taking decisions on the sample, or sharing reflections about the fieldwork became the fundamental elements of a shared space of co-creation, negotiation, and “mutual gaze” (Paloma Gay y Blasco, 2017). With regard to the use of videos, after our *gangsta*-themed short movie, I was left with the impression that the enthusiasm and the creative inspiration of my co-inquirer had already vanished. The documentary-like videos that I kept recording were neither initiated nor explicitly directed by them. However, their presence on the scene was anything but passive: Adrian, Leonard and Nicolae were making decisions on the attitudes they wanted to perform; the messages they wanted to communicate to the audience; and the private moments they wanted to make public. Sometimes I had the impression that I was the passive observer in charge of following them with the camera while they were performing their own script (see also Desille, Chap. 4, in this volume).

These reflections pushed me to reconsider our experimental collaborations as an opportunity to bring to light a range of skills, competencies and expertise they were endowed with, but that were silenced in the public sphere. Leonard, who was described as a lazy student and a class bully by his mother and teachers, in the time we spent together proved to be a sharp para-ethnographer (Holmes & Marcus, 2008) and a talented actor. Therefore, I imagined that if we had structured our collaborative sessions in a more consistent way, and if I had pushed them towards more autonomous forms of data collection, they would have had the opportunity to test themselves against a new and thrilling activity; increase their self-esteem; and consider the intellectual work as a feasible and desirable horizon. This attempt has involved both the conduction of interviews and the use of videos (Fig. 10.4).

To start with, I organised some working sessions with Adrian in Spain and Leonard in Romania. The purpose was to adjust the research questions to their own interests and to provide them with the skills to conduct interviews on their own. We first edited the interview structure in a more accessible language and, by testing it with me, they learned how to conduct interviews (Fig. 10.5). Then, I invited them to develop their own research questions. At this point, while Adrian chose to keep playing his comfortable role of “executive producer” of my research (i.e. facilitating the organisation of meetings and interviews with peers, educators, and social workers), Leonard committed himself to the proposed plan with dedication and started designing his own questions. There was an important biographical element behind this choice: returning to his home village had confronted him with an unfamiliar environment he was seeking to re-appropriate. Leonard’s questions were about the recent history of the village and the origins of the ethnic divides that shaped the relations among its inhabitants.

Fig. 10.4 Snowfall in a video recorded by Leonard, Călărași County 2015

Fig. 10.5 Leonard rewriting the interview structure, Călărași County 2015

Considering his growing interest in exploring the dynamics of remigration and separation, I invited Leonard to work on a script for a documentary movie about the experience of return. I suggested to him that he could use his smartphone to narrate the daily life of his brother Nicolae who, like him, was caught between the strive to

integrate into the Romanian rural economy and the desire to move back to Spain. In that period, we used to call each other every week, and even if I was living in Hungary, I believed that we would be able to achieve something even by phone. For a couple of weeks, we developed a story, imagining scenes, dialogues and locations. However, due to his daily commitments, constraints, and hesitations as well as to the impossibility of materialising our ideas in the near future, we did not move forward with this idea. Downhearted by the lack of progress, and definitively aware that the co-creation of videos required personal meetings and a greater follow-up, I invited Leonard and Adrian to record “any video” as if they were to write a diary in images (Allen, 2008). I contributed to purchase two new smartphones because those they used so far were shared with other family members, and after some weeks I started receiving scenes of young people riding bikes in the parks of Madrid, working in the fields close to the banks of the Danube, or enjoying the abundant Romanian snowfalls (Fig. 10.4). For the first time, I saw their world through their eyes. But, again, these videos were the result of unstructured initiatives that relied too much on the extemporary motivation of my co-researchers. This attempt also failed.

10.3.3 Professionalisation: Structuring and Rewarding Collaboration

For Leonard, returning to the home village also corresponded to a decline in his purchasing power. The pension of invalidity of his seriously ill mother could not meet the basic needs of the family and much less satisfy the consumption habits that her children had been accustomed to in Spain. Their subsistence was ensured by the loans of the local grocery stores and a transnational support network that included relatives and friends. Despite some initial doubts, I had also started to contribute to their precarious livelihood with occasional remittances. I found it in line with my custom of expressing gratitude to my research participants through small gifts and invitations. The conflicts that arose between me, Leonard and his brother Nicolae around the amount of these contributions did not prevent me from supporting their family. In fact, the chance to conduct fieldwork in Romania was largely based on the availability of their mother to have me as a host.

These conditions changed with the arrival of the second winter, when Leonard started demanding money more often than usual, sometimes speaking in his name, sometimes interpreting the very needs of his household. In that period, he and his brother had no job, nor any other option than waiting for the summer to be employed in seasonal works. Therefore, since I would have transferred Leonard some money anyway, and because he was already 16 years old, I tried to turn this despairing situation into an opportunity for both of us: I offered him a job. We multiplied the firewood price by the tons needed for the whole winter and concluded that his household would have needed a given amount of money for the following months. I agreed that I would have transferred this amount from my own pocket in monthly rates and that these donations should have been considered as an economic compensation for the

Fig. 10.6 Leonard reading and analysing the written notes he took during the interviews he conducted in his village, Călărași County 2016

conduction of interviews based on the structure we had developed together. We informed his mother, and Leonard promised her that he would have contributed to the domestic economy with half of his “income”. From an ethical point of view, the fact of having developed our relationship voluntarily and prior to such deal pushed me to consider my proposal a way of empowering Leonard and giving dignity to his work: I was recognising and remunerating his competences, nothing more and nothing less. During the following months, he conducted eight interviews with Roma and non-Roma people living in his home village. In the beginning my suggestion was of video-recording these talks, but I had reckoned neither with the reluctance of the interviewees to be filmed for a research they knew little about, nor with Leonard’s autonomy to make his own methodological choices according to the context. Therefore, the use of video was limited to the co-analysis of the written notes Leonard had diligently taken during each interview (Fig. 10.6).

The fact that a more structured approach led to concrete results with Leonard convinced me that I could adopt a similar *modus operandi* with Adrian in Madrid. Unlike his friend, he was not very interested in conducting interviews, but he was attracted by the idea of shooting videos. Consequently, towards the end of my fieldwork, I made the last attempt to involve him in the creation of a participatory documentary movie. I first presented my project to the local anti-eviction assembly and booked a space where to organise our audio-visual club, and then met Adrian to set the work schedule. We made a list of the potential protagonists and agreed on the potential structure of the film: the actors would have worked in couples, each of them filming the partner for a whole day. By way of exercise, I asked Adrian to sketch the traits of the potential actors: he described Andrei, who loved dancing;

Mihai, who enjoyed riding his bike through the district; and Darius, who was famous for spending his nights watching television; among the girls, Geta was popular for writing romantic sentences on Facebook; while her sister Raluca aimed at more and was constantly looking for a job as a care worker. After a few minutes, Adrian stops and stares at me. Two characters are missing:

«And now it's your turn», he says. I did not realise that I could be one of his protagonists. I answer: «It's true, what ... what do you think of me?». He is a bit of embarrassed, then he goes: «Well, you're interested in things. You have a passion to know things», and after a pause he continues: «Now it's my turn: "how do you see me?"», he asks. I feel the same embarrassment: «Well, it's hard! I know you pretty much now. Uhm, you're a boy who basically gets bored. But from outside you seem to adopt adult roles». (Fieldnotes, 29th October 2015)

Unfortunately, the audio-visual club never started. Beyond any complacent narration about my research being participatory and audio-visual, I continued to prioritise more traditional ways of writing ethnography. Compared to the beginning of my fieldwork, I was certainly less anxious to consolidate my relationship with the research participants, but now I was feeling the pressure to start writing my thesis. Moreover, I had underestimated the element that partly determined the success of my collaboration with Leonard and that appears to be fundamental for involving on a regular basis people living in precarious economic conditions: the economic reward. The lesson learned by this succession of false starts is that, in order to carry out a research that aims at combining audio-visual and participatory methods, it is necessary to commit to this plan from the very beginning.

Then, is there no value in failure and improvisation?

10.4 Conclusive Remarks

Recent developments in digital technology have enabled an increasing number of social scientists to create audio-visual products with more ease than before. The opportunity to record, edit, and broadcast videos even in the absence of high professional skills has revealed the potential of this tool as a means to collect data and communicate scholarly research through a more compelling and engaging format. At the same time, however, the lack of academic training in this field has put many of us in front of another range of questions: Which is the place of images and videos in our research? And how is it possible to combine audio-visual writing with the traditional formats, competences, and methods of scholarly research? The delay in response risks relegating the apprentice filmmaker in the uncomfortable halfway position between the amateur taste of films with no appeal for the general public, and the colleagues' reprimand for wasting time in "non-scientific" and, career-wise, pointless activities. However, I argue, it is precisely this sense of inadequacy that may disclose unexpected conceptual and methodological advancements.

The "trial and error procedure" that guided my endeavour to combine participatory and audio-visual methods has significantly contributed to shortening the

distance with my research participants. The fact that I was not sure of how to use videos; that I did not make accurate methodological choices; and that I was proceeding mainly by mistakes, was critical to balance the unequal relations within the participatory group. Luca Queirolo Palmas (2015) suggests that assuming the role of the film director allows scholars to get rid of what is perceived to be a distant and useless intellectual culture, and to come closer to their participants. To this, we can add that unpreparedness, indecision, and failure are fundamental ingredients of the co-writing process as they truly promote the creation of non-hierarchical relations.

“Lacking a plan”, however, also meant that the vast majority of the videos recorded during my research does not differ much from the traditional format of the ethnographic documentary, with its protagonists being followed at a distance by the researcher/director. Against this impression, it must be said that even though the young people appearing in these videos have not been directly involved in their creation, through their performance, they have meaningfully contributed to writing their own script and, on some occasions, new imaginaries about themselves. Their control over the story has fluctuated between film direction and improvisation acting: while the *gangsta*-themed short movie has condensed various nuances of authorship – with the protagonists combining in a few minutes production, direction, and acting – in most occasions they preferred to be followed by the camera in their daily activities, and to continuously oscillate between fiction and reality. These interactions raise fundamental questions about the boundaries of authorship and participation. Is performing in front of the camera a process of co-writing? Did we actually write videos together?

Similar to other contributions in this volume, this chapter has also addressed the methodological and theoretical implications linked to the use of audio-visual methods in migration studies. Existent literature tends to consider this nexus either in terms of representation of the migrants or in terms of the methodological choice of following migrants with the camera to better understand a phenomenon that is multi-located and in motion. There is no doubt that both understandings have been relevant to my research: for my co-inquirers, holding me back from recording scenes that they considered reproducing negative imagery about Roma was a way to avoid stereotyped representations about this group; in the same way, following Leonard in Romania has allowed me to grasp return migration from the perspective of one of its young protagonists. Nevertheless, there are two further methodological implications that have to be considered in relation to the act of visualising migration. First, adopting participatory audio-visual methods can be a useful stratagem both to mitigate the problems created by the geographical distance between external and internal researcher, and to balance the power relations within the participatory group. Nowadays, the use of smartphones and cloud computing allows co-researchers to work more independently on the collection of audio-visual data, consenting the main researcher to be “here and there” at the same time, but also expropriating them from the monopoly of data collection, thus providing the condition for truly participatory research practices, in particular with young people with low literacy skills. Second, if we consider that social categories are based on observable circumstances and therefore can be better understood through images (Harper,

1988), video-making bears the potential of conveying new understandings of the migration phenomenon, and not a mere description thereof. Reproducing the disordered fragments of the transnational and translocal subjectivity of underprivileged young Europeans “affected by mobility” into new imagery of migration that blurs the distinction between urban, domestic and international moves can be a next challenge for audio-visual migration research.

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