Methods for Change

Visual Organisational Ethnography

Prof. Stephen Linstead, *University of York*
and Dr Laura Pottinger,
The University of Manchester

Corresponding author
Prof. Stephen Linstead
stephen.linstead@york.ac.uk

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Visual Organisational Ethnography is a transdisciplinary approach that brings together artistic interpretation and theories from the social sciences used to study management and organisational culture. Researchers using this approach aim to generate a rich site-specific understanding of organisations, institutions, industries or interest groups, and work closely with those communities to produce a creative representation of their culture that can galvanise change.

As an ethnographic approach, it often entails long-term and immersive processes of observing, collecting and recording while participating in the communities or organisations that are the focus of the research. Gathered materials are then brought together and edited in order to release and develop the narratives within them, telling the stories of these places or communities in a way that moves and energises the people involved and provides a springboard for their future action. The researcher is not viewed as an expert, but rather as someone with the desire and skills to comprehend and help to articulate the worlds in which participants are the real experts.

Visual Organisational Ethnography frequently involves the use of several different methods that aim to open up suppressed or neglected dimensions of a culture. Specific tools, such as photography, film, poetry or theatre are selected in response to the context of the community or organisation that is being researched. Similar approaches are sometimes termed sensual ethnography, and while visual forms of data such as photographs and film are important, researchers should aim to draw on the full range of senses in order to understand and communicate participants' experiences and stories. Whether the research culminates in a film, an exhibition or performance art, the aim is to create an immersive experience that has an emotional impact on those encountering it. The principle is that you might not remember what the research makes you see, but you will remember how it makes you feel.

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How does Visual Organisational Ethnography create or contribute to change?

Much work in the social sciences is shaped by an implicit assumption that the world is relatively stable, with change being a temporally bounded process that needs to be introduced or promoted in some way to get us from A to B. In contrast, Visual Organisational Ethnography is informed by the view that the relative stability we may perceive is something that we create out of a basic state of flux. Things are not static, but are changing, even if subtly, all the time. This suggests that rather than seeking to develop methods that promote change as an external initiative, there is a need for methods that galvanise the unacknowledged changes that are already in motion and have their own momentum, and which empower people to recognise their role in enabling these changes to take place.

Visual Organisational Ethnography can be understood as a portfolio approach, which draws on many different methods with the aim of 'broadening the bandwidth' of people who are involved in change in organisations, communities or industries, so that they become more aware of these processes and able to see things they otherwise would not see. It does this by creating cultural representations that have an emotional impact on those involved, that move people and inspire further action. By inviting people to participate in this process in a way that is organic, rather than attempting to impose an intervention onto a community from the outside, any resulting changes or actions are likely to be more meaningful and longer lasting.

What ideas or concepts influence Visual Organisational Ethnography?

This approach has its roots in social anthropology, which has a long history of using visual data, and traditionally involved researchers observing cultures perceived to be very different from their own. Throughout the 20th century, anthropologists became more interested in studying cultures that were less 'remote' and closer to their own experiences and communities, often from an inside position. Following this line of thinking, Visual Organisational Ethnography draws on broadly ethnographic methodologies built around participant observation, that involve both observing the activities of a group or organisation, as well as taking part as an active participant within those communities and practices.

Visual Organisational Ethnography is an interdisciplinary approach to studying management and organisation as cultural practices, bringing together artistic interpretation and theories from the social sciences and humanities. Importantly, it foregrounds the significance of emotions in organisational behaviour and culture, and the 'art' of management, which is often overlooked in more 'scientific' management theories. Images, in the form of photographs, film, or artworks, are not drawn upon to supplement existing data, added in later to communicate findings, or incorporated to make research appear richer in detail and more interesting. Rather, the generation and curation of visual material is integral to this approach both in terms of understanding and representing the cultures that are studied.

A culture is a learned and shared way of life of a group of people or similar collective - the behaviours, beliefs, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that they accept, generally without thinking about them. These are passed along and learned by symbolic communication, including stories, heroes, written and oral histories, songs and art objects; and pattern repetition, such as imitation, rituals, common experience, practices, artefacts and products. For example, the National Coal Mining Museum for England acts as a repository for many of these things for the industry and is a place where people can go to celebrate the beliefs, behaviours and collective values that shaped them and their communities. The exhibits of such a place don't reflect to people what they think about their culture – they remind them how they feel about it by prompting them to re-experience it, which can spur them to new directions of action.

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Why might I want to use Visual Organisational Ethnography?

- Visual Organisational Ethnography provides a tool for interrogating and revitalising culture. It can be particularly useful for drawing people's attention to aspects that are already embedded within their own cultures, but which may be overlooked, such as those mentioned above.

- While there is much research that looks at culture at a national level, or at the level of an organisation, this method is well suited to understanding the culture or folklore of an industry – the stories, fables, practices and rituals through which cultural values are communicated.

Visual Organisational Ethnography has been particularly useful in understanding the values embedded over many years or even centuries within 'smokestack' industries, such as railway or mining industries. It has highlighted the ways in which they continue to exist in what remains of these industries, but also in the descendant communities and the landscapes of which they were part and which they shaped. Such insights are significant because studies of cultural change since the 1970s have confirmed the importance of respecting, honouring and celebrating the past in ways that allow its positive elements to be carried forward in continuity. Where regional economies have been successfully regenerated, it has often been because this has formed a springboard for change that built on and maintained existing values, skills and capabilities.

- Visual Organisational Ethnography can take a variety of forms, depending on the culture that is being studied, and can involve varying levels of involvement from participants. While the format can vary, the aim is to produce a critically affective performative text. This means:

  - The work produced should be critical in that it ask questions where they would not ordinarily be asked, and interrogates what may otherwise be taken for granted.

  - It is affective in that it takes emotion and the impacts of emotion seriously, and examines how people respond emotionally to the situations that they are in – literally how they are affected.

  - It is performative because the goal is for people to do things as a result of viewing or experiencing the piece that is produced. The aim of the research is not to tell people what to do, but they should come away from that experience wanting to take some kind of action.

  - The term text refers to any piece of representation. This does not refer only to written text, although the piece that is produced could involve the written word. It could be a painting, a film, an exhibition, a drawing, a theatre production, or it could take any variety of visual, multi-sensory or written formats.

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Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

1. **Get access:** When you have identified a community that you are interested in researching, which could be an organisation, a subculture, a group of people living in a place or working on a specific project or campaign, you need to think about how you can gain access or invitation. A good way to approach this is to find some action or service that you can offer them as a gift or a token of respect, which demonstrates that you are willing to contribute to their causes and concerns and to make yourself useful. This could mean offering to take some photographs, to produce some filmed material, getting them information they need, or to write about an event. This offer should not be conditional on you being allowed greater access – you will do it anyway, and participants can then decide if they want to continue working with you in other ways. Basically, they often will want to keep working with you, if they like you and trust you.

The process of gaining access may take a considerable amount of time. The aim is to make yourself available, and while there may not be an immediate payoff, this will help to establish your credibility as well as developing your understanding of the culture you are interested in. As you build relationships and become embedded within the community, other opportunities may arise. For example, you may be able to support with developing funding bids for future work that they were unaware that they could access.

2. **Gather as much material as you can:** When you have developed strong relationships and agreed with participants to work towards an output, the early stages of the research involve a process of gathering elements that may help to tell the story of that culture. This means the researcher must spend time in the community or organisation registering and collecting a vast amount of images, phrases, situations, stories, poems, events, and key informants, and looking for the connections between them, which then become the building blocks of a narrative. As you go through this process of collecting, stay open to possibilities and unanticipated lines of inquiry. Depending on the type of output you plan to produce, identify what additional skills you may need to draw on and identify partners who can help you deliver the project successfully.

3. **Planning and pre-production:** You may now want to make a storyboard, or to create some kind of structure that allows you to plan the practicalities of producing your output. This approach requires effective multi-tasking. If you are making an independent film, you will often need to perform many different roles, from writer, producer, director, to cameraperson, as well as thinking about sound, lighting, and recruiting interviewees or actors. You will need to identify locations, plan what scenes you wish to shoot and when, taking into account your budget and the number of days you have available, as well as any other technical expertise you may need to draw upon.

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Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

It is important to identify the key skills that you don't have at the right quality level, and find ways of getting people who have these skills on board. For example, if you plan to show a film as part of an exhibition, or embed it in a performance, or extract stills to make an article or book, design expertise will be essential. If you are creating a performance, what needs to be added is a sense of stagecraft in three dimensions rather than the film producer's two, an understanding of audience dynamics, and a different understanding of lighting. Whatever media you introduce to communicate, you should identify its key contribution and its specific demands. Get some input from someone who really understands the medium to make sure your work is of the appropriate quality.

Serendipity is important – whilst attempting to be as complete as possible, you need to be open enough to take advantage of what opportunities emerge as you go along. During the production of Black Snow, discussed below, we had no plan to use virtual reality or computer-generated imagery elements when we began. As a result of a technical failure of a drone, we discovered the drone pilot was also a computer design artist. On discovering this I rewrote the screenplay, and his work for the film won awards in its own right as well as making a substantial contribution to the films' overall success.

4. **Production:** In this phase, you are making sure that you have all the materials in place to create your planned output, which could be a theatre performance, an exhibition, or a film, for example – even a ballet, an opera or a poetry slam. This might involve filming in various locations with actors or with members of the community who will be interviewed; taking photographs of specific locations, people, or artefacts; creating sound recordings or sound effects; or if using existing images or sound recordings, getting permissions to use them. The aim is to generate everything that you might need so you can then move on to the process of editing, structuring, scripting or curating, without having to go back and do something again.

5. **Edit and curate:** Once all the raw materials have been collected and recorded, the next stage is to decide what will be included, and how it will be stitched or staged together. This is when the potential narratives crystallise and interweave. You decide what emphasis will be placed on certain elements, and you discover which ones work and what needs rethinking. For a film production, this may involve editing film footage, perhaps adding sound effects, animation, virtual reality special effects or a musical score. This requires attention to detail and often making very tiny adjustments which will refine and lift the quality of the finished piece and therefore the experience of the viewer. Whatever form the final output takes, it needs to be conveyed in a way that is accessible and meaningful to your particular audience, so that they can take something away from it. It can work well to leave some ambiguity in the way that the narrative is constructed, so that the possibility is left open for viewers to write the next chapter of their story.

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Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

Editing can be a long and drawn-out process, because it often means leaving out material to which you have become attached. Creating a coherent and impactful narrative involves making difficult choices, because there will be more stories than you can tell within the material you have gathered.

6. **Share your creative output with people:**
   It is a good idea to plan in advance where you will show or exhibit your final output. Are there any competitions you can enter, or other methods of widening its reach? Depending on your budget and how much time you have available, you may wish to arrange a première or preview that invites participants to view the film, exhibition, or production rehearsal, and to provide

feedback that be used in a final round of edits. This can be useful in understanding how the piece is received and if changes are needed. It also enables participants to feel more fully involved in the process, and holding an event can help to bring together the community and energise a campaign.

Remember that you are not the expert. As a researcher who is also a director or curator, your purpose is to help participants to release their energies and their capabilities. Your role is not to take their information, repackage it and tell them 'this is who you are'. You are helping your participants to realise their stories.

Examples of Visual Organisational Ethnography in social science research

Film: *Black Snow*

Researchers: Prof. Stephen Linstead, University of York and Dr. Andrew Lawrence, University of Manchester.

Black Snow is a 23 minute documentary film which was created as part of an ongoing appeal to raise money for a bronze memorial to England's worst mining disaster, as its 150th anniversary was approaching. Visual Organisational Ethnography was used here to create a visual part of an educational package for the general public and schools as the disaster was almost forgotten and was largely unwritten about.

The project involved a combination of historical archive research, and participant ethnographic research and interviewing, underpinning the full range of filmmaking skills. The main partner was the National Union of Mineworkers, who collaborated with a charity, People in Mining with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, the National Coal-Mining Museum for England, AHRC

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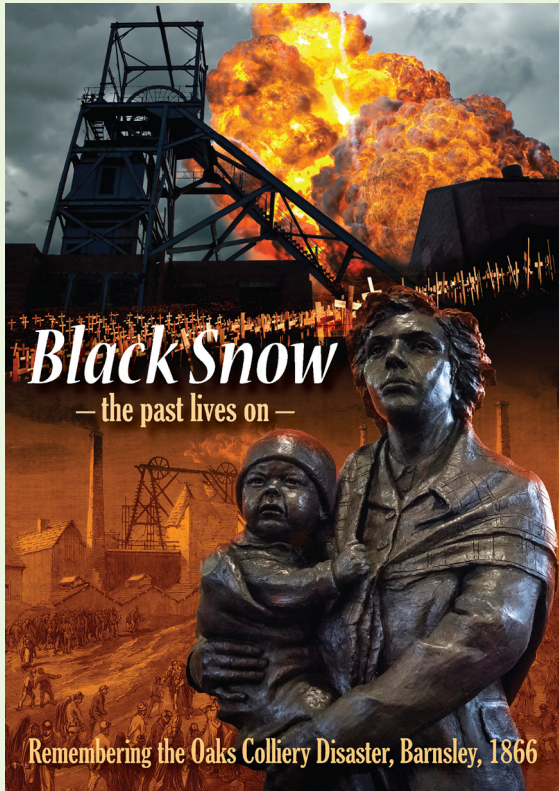
*Black Snow Film Poster
(Image credit: Bryan Ledgard).*

(Arts and Humanities Research Council) and ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) were also important collaborators along with volunteer groups.

After the making of Black Snow and its public showing, the volunteers who had been involved with the raising of the Oaks Disaster Memorial, that features in the film, began to realise that they could do other things to promote campaigns for industry memorials elsewhere in the country than they had hitherto thought possible. As with the film, in these new activities they wanted to get across the social dimensions and values that the industry had fostered or provoked in its communities. They wanted to emphasise how

it felt to be part of such a community and why those values – cooperation, pragmatism, care for others, respect, precision, resilience, reliability, ingenuity, 'getting the job done', endurance, kindness, sociability, friendship, generosity, connectedness - live on today. They used the film to highlight their work and help other volunteer groups, and they were also inspired to collaborate on different projects and attempt new things. This culminated in them working with Temple Newsam House in Leeds to create an installation and presentations that formed the 'Blot on the Landscape' exhibition. This won both regional and overall national Marsh Christian Trust Volunteers for Museum Learning Awards from the British Museum in 2019, both illuminating the general public and inspiring even more heritage groups.

What was particularly useful about Visual Organisational Ethnography in this project was that film was able to pull out of the archive stories that needed to be brought alive to create a living history – a history not of an event but a community discovering itself. The impact of the film on audiences has been global. Press, broadcast, online and other reads/views have reached around 9 million. It has also had an impact on curricula, and on other communities now attempting to memorialise their own histories. Most importantly for an event that was forgotten, the anniversary of the disaster is now the UK's National Workplace Day of Remembrance, commemorating all those who died at work.

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Photographic/Multimedia Exhibition: Rhythm of the Martyrs

Researcher: Prof. Stephen Linstead, University of York and Dr. Garance Maréchal, University of Liverpool

In Rhythm of the Martyrs, a Visual Organisational Ethnography approach was taken to the problem of familiarising people on the UK mainland with the experiences of those in Northern Ireland as the anniversary of 50 years of The Troubles approached in 2019. It aimed to bring together work towards peace and reconciliation that had been undertaken by artists and musicians in order to communicate more effectively with people outside Northern Ireland, and deliver deeper messages than were possible through tourist bodies.

In this project, Visual Organisational Ethnography involved a range of methods, including archive analysis of written, oral, visual and newsreel materials, photography and photographic editing, sound and music editing and mixing, exhibition design. One professional photographer joined two academics to photograph and write about the so-called 'peace walls' and murals in the province, mainly in Belfast. This work considered their changing history and involved discussions and consultations with different bodies alongside some musical initiatives. These were all incorporated into an academic paper on peace-led arts interventions in conflict situations, and a publicly accessible exhibition in two parts.

The first part was a single room installation of 72 photographs, taken at a five year interval – 2014 and 2019. The second part of the exhibition was a 360° visual display of full wall versions of a further 72 photographs, accompanied by music and interview data.

This immersive experience gets audiences closer to the kind of embodied experience that is only possible in the streets of Belfast, but it simultaneously embeds that in the experiences of others through sound, and history through the accompanying text. Unfortunately the exhibition had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but those who have seen it enthuse about its power, and the way it is able to convey conflicting feelings and subtleties, horror and hope in a powerful new form. It is hoped it will be staged at Easter 2022 in York, and August 2022 in Liverpool.

Rhythm of the Martyrs Exhibition Poster (Image credit: Bryan Ledgard, Terence Letiche).

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The peace walls and murals in Belfast have been the subject of documentary film work, but they are complex and demand a degree of time in contemplation that is not possible in the film medium. The availability of 360° immersive technology enabled us to produce a unique experience to convey even greater richness for those for whom a visit to Belfast was unlikely to be possible. In the complex situation of Northern Ireland and Brexit our contribution is likely to be very small indeed – but nevertheless the spirit of the arts interventions into reconciliation in the province demonstrates the power of many small intensive actions can sometimes have more lasting benefit than high-level political manoeuvres. We hope that when we are able to show the work it will be a contribution to understanding for those who have no direct experience of Northern Ireland and its problems as it comes back into the spotlight yet again.

Where else could Visual Organisational Ethnography be used?

This approach could be used to gain deeper understanding of many different organisations, industries and communities across a range of sectors and settings. It has been used with heritage industries like museums, and public memory installations, industries undergoing change such as the railway industry in the Netherlands, and service industries such as health care and occupational health. It is particularly useful in contexts where there is a hidden history that needs resurfacing or an underemphasised human dimension, in contexts where organisations are merging, especially across cultural boundaries, or where cooperation needs to be developed. Given that this approach aims to galvanise changes that are already happening, and can enable people to recognise their role in mobilising change, Visual Organisational Ethnography could be particularly useful for understanding the work of organisations whose work itself aims to create social or environmental transformation, such as activist groups or charities, for example.

Top tips

- Always carry a camera. You may come across an opportunity for photography when you least expect it that could play an important part in the narrative of a film or exhibition, for example, and once you miss it, it's gone! The best camera is the one that you've got on you, and that might mean the mobile phone in your pocket. It is far better to have a photograph, even if it is poor quality, than no image.

- Listen, and do not underestimate the importance of sound. In film making particularly, it is a natural tendency to prioritise the visual, but a film should be 360 degree experience. Remember to listen, and you may notice sounds that can convey an emotion that you see in your film. If you watch a film that has the wrong sounds with it you know instantly.

- Remember whose story you are telling. The story does not belong to you – you have the privilege of being able to tell it, and that is a great responsibility.

A note on ethics

VOE can be understood as an ethical practice in itself, in that it reflexively monitors and embodies its own process. It seeks, as an art form, to build on the principle of 'informed consent' as embodied in signed declarations and contracts and to operate according to a code that protects the well-being of all involved - film subjects, film makers, film partners, and film viewers - as situations evolve. Filming and photographing in public places does not always require the express consent of every individual featured, but may require permissions from authorities (e.g. local government, businesses) if public activities might be disrupted. Unless you know you won't see someone you film intensively again, you may not need them to sign consent on the shoot. Ideally, let them think and reflect and meet again to discuss any issues and sign – that you are willing to give them time shows a level of trust that they will appreciate. However, please check this with your institutional ethics guidance. The University of Manchester Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology Filmmaking for Fieldwork programme are a good source of advice. Helpful material can also be found at the InVisio researcher support pages with example permissions forms here.

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🌐 **Further reading**

- Filmmaking for Fieldwork, Manchester Methods Fair, University of Manchester

- Black Snow: The Past Lives On

- Feeling the Reel of the 'Real': Framing the Play of Critically Affective Organizational Research between Art and the Everyday

- The Rhythm of the Martyrs: Boundaries, Barricades and in Communities with a History of Violence.

- What to Do About Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics

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