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Multimodal Values: The Challenge of Institutionalizing and Evaluating More-than-textual Ethnography

Tomás Criado, Ignacio Farías and Julia Schröder

Abstract

In this collective text, we introduce the vision and work of the Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology at the Humboldt-University of Berlin and propose to explore the values of multimodal ethnographic projects, broadly construed. Thinking from our very explorations in multimodal production, foregrounding a concern on values is critical to share a conundrum that has been haunting us in recent times. Indeed, while engaging in various multimodal projects, we have been confronted with a predicament that we assume many multimodally-invested colleagues must have faced at some point: the problem of how to evaluate and even institutionalize multimodal anthropological projects. This question has started to become pressing when discussing our projects in different academic contexts. In what follows, we aim to expound on and discuss the particular challenges of evaluating multimodal productions and thus of institutionalizing values for the multimodal.

I. The Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology: A public platform to work on the design of and intervention in urban matters

The Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology is one of the *Labore* (labs) operating at the Institut für Europäische Ethnologie (IfEE) of the Humboldt-University of Berlin, where collaborative thought and practice is made specific in different areas of concern. A *Stadtlabor* (city lab) already existed when we arrived at the IfEE in 2018, which had been shaped by colleagues now working elsewhere, such as Alexa Färber or Caroline Genz. Under our direction, the approach has been to posit the Stadtlabor as a collaborative and experimental research platform, open to anyone at IfEE and beyond, where anthropologists interested in contemporary urban issues explore multimedia formats of knowledge production and intervention in collaboration with other urban actors. Thus, we are particularly interested in approaching the city, *Stadt*, as a platform and as a method for blurring the boundaries between ethnographic practices of knowledge production and those various practices of city-making deployed by urban designers, activists and residents.

The particular qualification of *Labor* that inspire our work draws from current anthropological design-inspired approaches (Murphy, 2016; Criado, 2021) and STS concerns with ‘intervention’ enabling different explorations of ethnographic arts (Eitel et al., 2021). Although design is far from being a singular practice—with many disciplinary concerns, skills and forms of knowledge being mobilized in concrete professional and amateur spaces—in the last years it has started to inspire contemporary anthropologists to rethink their roles. Generally speaking, this has entailed a displacement of anthropological practice from being ethnographic documenters or narrators of social needs, aspirations and injustices to becoming concerned and wishing to partake in the remaking of plural worlds (Escobar, 2018). This, of course, occurs in various modes ranging from the engaged and activist to the speculative, thus aiming to unsettle given definitions, categories or ontologies and contributing to fleshing out their ongoing and unfinished status (cf. Savransky, 2021).

With the addendum “for multimodal anthropology”, we relate to recent conversations and initiatives, mostly in English-speaking anthropological circles, to carve out a space for such more-than-textual anthropological productions in curricula, journals and conferences using the wording of the ‘multimodal’ (Collins, Durlington and Gill, 2017). These variegated series of concerns bring together the debates around multi-sensory productions and forms of output with a renewed interest in public and collaborative anthropology. And they do so at a time when fieldwork takes place amidst a widespread use of digital technologies, with interlocutors having the chance to partake, in manifold ways, in the description and critical interventions of their own worlds. Yet, as colleagues Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón (2019) suggest, ‘multimodality’ is not just a multimedia-invested ethnographic practice, but it also involves different modes of doing anthropology: indeed, the media and material displacements happening in the design and implementation of research devices, as well as the proliferation of collaborative and public epistemic approaches to intervention, result in a wide plurality of modes of inquiry. As Dattatrejan and Marrero-Guillamón argue, then, working multimodally fosters a new politics of ethnographic invention, opening up possible forms of ethnography to come.

To some in anthropology, this need for a new term might be seen as a desire of distinction, a form of posturing for ‘the new.’ We do not think that is the most relevant rendering, although after the *Writing culture* debates (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), which created a peculiar obsession with writing as a craft of professional anthropology, a multimodal turn might indeed appear as something refreshing. But, admittedly, rather than a turn, this is a return: for ‘the multimodal’ was always there in anthropology. The importance of collaboration in field research, as well as the politics and aesthetics of fieldwork devices or the long exploration of museum and visual forms of knowledge production and dissemination are far from being new. Anthropology has never been ‘mono-modal.’ And, yet, the current multimodal (re)turn appears to be different. Perhaps the difference is that for a long time multimodal renderings of anthropological practice and knowledge played a sort of auxiliary role, such as in drawings and pictures to add nuance to factual explanations or in taxonomic approaches to material culture. In spite of its long genealogy, the multimodal has only recently started being actively pursued and valued as a mode of inquiry of its own, not just as a mode of representing scholarly output.

The open-source platform *xcol*, an *ethnographic inventory* (see www.xcol.org), curated by Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Criado, starts precisely from the premise that the relational encounters of ethnography have always been a creative and inventive venture. This inventory hence aims at taking stock of ethnographic inventions, that is, of the small discoveries, emergences and the devices found, invented or repurposed by ethnographers in the field to create the social and material

conditions to do fieldwork. This is different from the normative and standardized approach to 'method' found in handbooks or manuals of ethnography. Hence, the inventory aims to counter a trend: anthropologists have not been very good at describing these processes. One of the main items being inventoried are 'field devices.' This term, or, rather, this descriptive analytic, (Estalella and Criado, 2018) foregrounds a tale of the field that pays attention to singular social and material dispositions and predispositions, and how they pave the way for particular modes of ethnographic inquiry. In highlighting field devices, the attempt is to provide the grounds for a description of the empirical inventiveness of ethnographic practice, the tinkering different practitioners underwent when doing fieldwork.

In this context, the most interesting push that recent multimodal debates are bringing to the fore is, perhaps, a need to consider visual, sensory, public, collaborative, digital, or design anthropology, not as separate conversations or segmented ways of doing but as interconnected developments, thus taking fieldwork as a ground to experiment with different forms of knowledge production, mediums and modalities, as well as aspirations or ethnographic effects. While a comparative analysis of how each of the abovementioned anthropological approaches has experimented with fieldwork remains to be written, they can all be misunderstood, and thus short-circuited, if their contributions appear to be nothing more than a current re-instantiation of ancient dichotomies opposing thinking and texts with doing and artefacts. Describing the multimodal as a more-than-textual practice is a step towards overcoming such dichotomies: this is not about critiquing textual experimentation, but about enhancing it by other means. Thus, it seems critical to find ways (and words) to create a common ground for conversations between different practitioners, so as to address such fundamental concerns with the future of academic and particularly ethnographic work across the diverse arenas, fields of practice, and media. Engaging the multimodal thus entails posing the question of "what the academy might be, and what futures and new modes of scholarship we might want to invent" (Chapman, 2020, p. xx)

II. The Challenge of Institutionalising and Evaluating Multimodality

Seen from this perspective, what distinguishes current engagements with more-than-textual practices and formats in anthropology is not their utter novelty in anthropological practice. Rather, the emphasis appears to lie in a renewed (and as of yet insufficient) attempt at institutionalizing a broader and unifying understanding of multimodality in the professional spaces of social and cultural anthropology. Without aiming to simplify the very complex histories of institutionalization of anthropology and ethnology in different countries and regions, we notice interesting projects in that direction in the English-speaking context. Particularly relevant to this are the various journals that have emerged in the last decade, such as this one, *Entanglements: Experiments in Multimodal Ethnography* (from 2018). But also: *Journal of Anthropological Films* (from 2017), *Anthrovision* (from 2013), *Visual Ethnography* (from 2012), and many others. Of special significance is also how the section 'Visual Anthropology' of *American Anthropologist* was renamed in 2017 into 'Multimodal Anthropology.' Moreover, the *Anthropology and Humanism* journal also appointed a poetry editor. Also worth of mention might be the 2022 call of the Society for Cultural Anthropology to appoint a Digital Curatorial Collective to pursue related multimodal efforts. But we should also consider the work of labs, such as the Ethnography Lab in Toronto, Kaleidos in Ecuador, or our very own, which can also be seen as pioneering attempts at institutionalization (Quinn and Gilbert, 2021).

Such efforts to broaden our disciplinary horizons requires that we face the challenges that still work against the institutionalization of multimodal ethnographic projects in academia. In our view, there are two interconnected issues to address. On the one hand, we do not seem to share a vocabulary for describing these more-than-textual projects and their effects. On the other hand, we lack the parameters to assess or evaluate them in ethnographic and anthropological terms. As a result, these projects are oftentimes received as intriguing, if not amusing, ‘openings’ that need to be placed in singular spots: treated as forms of outreach rather than as research itself, lumped together in special slots of conference programs rather than being in conversation with conventional presentations, or given special spaces in journals rather than treated as regular contributions in their own right.

At the same time, we must consider that certain forms of multimodal ethnographic production were indeed institutionalized in the past. This matters because these practitioners can rely on languages for describing the operations at stake, as well as shared conditions and criteria of appreciation. Although a highly-specialized field with great entry barriers for many amateur producers, ethnographic film is, perhaps, an interesting archetype of this. Even if theory might not be the crux of the matter, the importance of film theory or documentary film scholarship cannot be overstated: it has enabled an analytic vocabulary on filmic narratives and storytelling, which—together with specialized training workshops on skills such as editing or camera techniques, as well as with an scene of festivals and film critics—enable practitioners to orient themselves, building upon more or less shared criteria of quality and worth. Of course, such criteria are subject to changing conditions of power and hegemony, are disputed, and have different effects in different contexts, but in that field there exists at least some criteria that enable to us grope in the dark, and to create assessable forms.

Accordingly, the problem as we see it is not that other forms of multimodal practice might be ‘too arty’ or ‘not sufficiently anthropological’ or ‘too new’, but that these productions are not sufficiently institutionalized. In saying this, we deploy the concept of institution in its two more common meanings. First, institutions can be understood as formal organizations of the social. Here, institutionalization refers to the process by which explicit rules and norms that formalise certain practices are articulated and established. In this first sense, the institutionalization of multimodal anthropology thus concerns the processes by which these practices are formally recognized in anthropology’s educational, academic, and professional settings.

Second, the concept of institution also refers to the sets of conventions, more or less written, that articulate certain practices, also having a lot of strength in the articulation of particular social arenas. In this second sense, institutionalization here could thus refer to the process of conventionalisation, or the creation of shared meanings and criteria of worth. Approaching conventionalisation might open up a different path to discuss multimodal anthropology, usually cast as an inventive field of practice (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019). Indeed, in Roy Wagner’s (1981) anthropological study of invention—which also argues how anthropologists partake in inventing the cultures they study—convention is almost as relevant. As he argued:

“Since the collective and conventional only makes sense in relation to the individual and idiosyncratic, and vice versa, collective contexts can only be retained and recognized as such by being continually drawn through the meshes of the individual and the particular, and the individual and particular characteristics of the world can only be retained and recognized as such by being drawn through the meshes of the conventional. Order and disorder, known and unknown, conventional regularity and the incident that defies regularity, are tightly ...

bound together, they are functions of each other and necessarily interdependent” (p. 43-44).

Put otherwise, an invention can only be understood when cast against conventions. This does not just mean that conventions render inventions possible but that they make them readable as such.

Drawing from these two understandings (as formalisation and as conventionalisation), a better institutionalized multimodal anthropology would have a richer vocabulary, more formalised and conventional criteria to produce and establish, compare, assess, or evaluate the uniqueness of inventive productions, and what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ attempts for a variety of reasons.

In that institutionalising work, the introduction of multimodal approaches in the education of students and the corresponding study programs is a first crucial step. This is relevant to address the shortcomings in how multimodal approaches are usually received or (mis)handled in educational settings. Following that aspiration, in 2019, the Institute of European Ethnology (IfEE), where we work, introduced an elective module on multimodal anthropology in the then new Master’s program “Ethnography: Theory - Practice - Criticism”.¹ The experience gained so far points to some of the central institutionalising challenges that appear when teaching multimodality, namely evaluation. The problem in teaching multimodality lies not only in the great variety of possible multimodal formats—each of them requiring highly specific competencies proper of established artistic or design practices—but also the cascading series of concerns around how multimodal artefacts and projects can be evaluated without previously established standards.

Driven by these challenges, the Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology organized a workshop in July 2021 entitled “Anthropology beyond text? Experiments, devices and platforms of multimodal ethnographic practice” with two dozen outstanding multimodal practitioners from different universities of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.² The four sections of our workshop were a first attempt at creating a ‘cartography’ of types of multimodal projects that we saw developing across the board. In our attempt to render the work of relevant colleagues discussable and comparable, we grouped their presentations using the following categories: (1) projects working on ‘interventions and collaborations’ with other actors, (2) projects with a predominant concern for ‘visual and design practices’, ranging from film to VR, also including architectural practice, (3) projects based on ‘immersive and performative practices’, such as multi-species or multi-sensory ethnography, and (4) explorations at what we might call ‘multimodal intraventions and pedagogies’, such as attempts at reworking the institutions and teaching spaces of anthropology, drawing inspiration from other fields of practice.

The aim of the workshop was to create incipient conditions of institutionalization in the aforementioned two senses. This required exchanging our different approaches, sharing not only a

¹ The study program can be consulted here: <https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/de/studium/master/ma-ethnographie> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

² The workshop’s documentation can be accessed here: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/event/anthropology-beyond-text/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

reflection about the practice of formats themselves but also the knowledge production these different projects afforded. Hence, the focus was on the resulting conceptual, methodological, ethical or political horizons for anthropological practice, paying attention to surprises and failures, to experiments that had and had not worked out, and why. In a nutshell, the attempt was to create the grounds for a conversation on ‘values’ and ‘valuations’ of the multimodal in training and professional settings. We wanted our workshop to create a space to make explicit the different projects and experiences under discussion, and to enable a first approach to a certain formalisation and conventionalisation of evaluative criteria. Like this, we wanted to start delineating *what a ‘good’ multimodal project can be*.

This required comparing or contrasting variegated procedures, conventions, formalizations and rules. The conversations in the workshop made apparent that multimodality takes place in at least three institutional and evaluative contexts that demand our attention, namely: a) *pedagogical*, in which multimodality plays a role for student qualification work; b) *academic*, in which multimodality can function as a form of publication equivalent to articles and monographs and thus as a criterion in, e.g., appointment procedures; and c) *public/collaborative*, in which multimodal projects are to be evaluated in terms of their transformative potentials and/or issues of responsibility, ethics, or responsiveness.

Thus, the workshop was ripe in problematizations surrounding how to ‘value’ multimodal projects: that is, not just how to praise (‘valorise’) but also how to appraise (‘evaluate’) (cf. Vatin, 2013). In this context, we considered promising to distinguish between value regimes and value practices. Our conversations on ‘value regimes’, on the one hand, touched upon the ethical values and commitments of multimodal explorations but also different criteria of worth: there, the tension between professionalism and amateurism, and its impact in the aspirations, standards, media and material productions, took centre-stage. Regarding ‘valuation practices’, on the other hand, we considered the problem of how to evaluate: that is, how to create criteria to discuss, appreciate, and assess singular multimodal endeavours.

Following the workshop, we launched a Multimodal Projects Fund,³ inviting students at all levels—BA, MA, and PhD—of our university to apply for funding for their multimodal projects on urban transformations. With this fund, we aim to foster urban ethnographic projects featuring more-than-textual research or public engagement and intervention formats. Funded projects should develop, test and reflect upon multimodal strategies for ethnographic work in urban fields, paying attention to how specific devices might enable or hinder particular descriptions and conceptual understandings of current urban conditions. But also, and beyond our programmatic interest, the fund is a challenge for the Stadtlabor. Having to evaluate and select one amongst many proposals, requires: (i) comparing seemingly ‘incomparable’ project proposals, making evaluation criteria explicit; (ii) asking practical and logistical questions about the production of multimodal artefacts; and (iii) confronting hurdles of existing institutional circumstances. As a modest institutionalization experiment, the Multimodal Projects Fund can thus be understood as a space for learning how to e/valuate multimodal projects.

³ The call for the Multimodal Projects Fund and some of the evaluative criteria there developed, can be consulted here: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/project/multimodal-projects-fund/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

III. Playful Engagements with the Game Form

Many of these concerns relate to our very own predicaments in the last years, engaging in a series of experiments with the game form. This was a strand of work that started out in 2018–2019, as part of a one-year long studio course in the MA called ‘The only game in town?’.⁴ In it, students studied ethnographically the assemblages of sociotechnical, calculative and political practices shaping the housing and real estate market in Berlin in different projects. The question “The only game in town?” was there to suggest that our task as ethnographers would be to go beyond the notion that there is ‘a’ market or ‘a’ capitalist logic underlying residential real estate markets. It was an invitation to examine the multiple ‘games’ in which market actors participate.

Following the insights of the *Gaming Anthropology Sourcebook* (Collins, Dumit, Durning, González-Tennant, Harper, Nick and Salter, 2017), we decided to explore the game form as a teaching tool, enabling not just other ways of discussing or put together the students’ fieldworks but also trying to make space for different formats of both collaborative analysis and public intervention on a highly debated and heated topic. Indeed, as anthropologist Joe Dumit (2017) elaborates, we wanted to engage in “the serious play of designing a game” (ibid., p. 609), a ‘liberating’ form of cultural and socio-technical analysis. As this inspiring work forcefully argues, designing a game requires working with manageable simulations, simplifications and conceptualizations of complex techno-scientific phenomena of the contemporary. At the same time, games in different stages of development can function as peculiar fieldwork scenographies in the sense given by Luke Cantarella, Christine Hegel and George Marcus (2019). That is, games can foster productive encounters in the field with other actors, making public arenas emerge wherein we can undertake fieldwork, as well as enabling different conversations and joint work to arise.

The housing and real estate crisis affecting Berlin and many other European cities is a particularly suitable field for the game form because it is characterized by complex technical platforms, calculative practices and legal instruments, among other things. After several months of student ethnographic field research on specific market actors and settings, we organized a three-day workshop to develop games, based on and relevant to their field research. After all, we had been working in a world of games, where not only *Monopoly* but especially its anti-monopolistic predecessor, *The Landlord’s Game*, as well as a wealth of other different contemporary anti-capitalist or commons-based versions (Pilon, 2015), enabled a critical take (Flanagan, 2009) on the different economic ‘games’ at stake in housing and real estate markets.

The three games we created collectively with our students were also presented at an exhibition together with the *Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik* (Z/KU) at the Werkstatt Haus der Statistik in 2019, a renowned activist hotspot in Berlin. After this event, in the last couple of years we decided to continue developing and elaborating one of them, *House of Gossip*: a board/performative game co-developed with Lena Heiss, Marie Aline Klinger, Lilian Krischer, Leonie Schipke and Tan Weigand. It is a game for 4 to 6 people that immerses players in the tensions of a Berlin building in the late 2010s. In the game, players are randomly selected to play either as a resident of the house or as a covert buyer acting as one of the house’s residents. The main idea of the game is that in a process where no one can be certain about anything—such as when a whole building is about to be bought—gossip abounds. So, when meeting others in the imaginary staircase, and with the help of

⁴ For a broader description of the course, see: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/teaching/togt/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

cards including quotations from newspaper articles from issues affecting housing regulations and urban dynamics, players enter into a performative gossiping space: trying to understand who the others are and what moves can be made to save or buy the house. After developing the prototype for more than two years, in the last half of 2021—with the help of architect and illustrator Vasylysa Shchegoleva—we produced a downloadable DIY version of the game that could be easily reproduced with regular office supply materials.⁵

After this project, we have remained captivated to continue exploring the ethnographic capabilities of the game form. And we are currently pursuing a project working with Sebastian Quack—renowned game designer, member of the Invisible Playground collective, and curator of the *Now Play This!* festival—and anthropologist and research creator Petra Beck—a long-time explorer of urban trash, waste and the materiality of storage. In particular, we are interested in how ethnographic approaches might inform game design, and how game design might create forms of playful engagement with concrete ethnographic topics. This current one-year project, called *Trash Games*, is being funded by the Berlin University Alliance’s call for experimental science communication laboratories.⁶ In collaboration with the Chair of Recycling Engineering at TU Berlin, we wish to approach the predicaments of civic, grassroots and do-it-yourself approaches to the circular economy, like the ones being experimented at the *Haus der Materialisierung* (HdM). The HdM is one of the so-called ‘pioneer usages’ of the Haus der Statistik, where different projects are expounding the hopes and meanings of different takes to recycling, re-use and the recirculation of materials.⁷ The process of approaching how to develop the game has required a period of research, and we have visited recycling plants and circular economy initiatives across Berlin. More than simply witnessing their work, we have been trying to imagine the flows of disposable materials and their leaks, as well as the different attempts at creating circular ways of bringing them back to use. All of this with the aim of making them discussable through a game.

In these works, we have kept confronting a pressing question very much in line with the concerns with the institutionalization and evaluation of multimodal practice expressed in this text: How can explorations of the game form be of relevance for anthropological practice? Or, in more concrete and manageable terms, what is the ethnographic value of a game like *House of Gossip* or the game we are designing in the *Trash Games* project? The institutional and academic contexts of anthropology seem to have managed to successfully find pathways to institutionalise and evaluate, that is to formalise and conventionalise, an approach to particular works. For instance, we have to our avail recognisable forms for textual production, such as the ethnographic article and the review essay or the ethnographic monograph. Also, even if there might be different approaches to peer review, more or less thorough, there are more or less explicit conventional understandings of how to approach the task of evaluating them. But how to narrate, document, give value and evaluate the anthropological or, specifically, ethnographic, contribution of practices whose form has not been institutionalised or conventionalised. How to evaluate, then, a game of this kind?

⁵ The game can be downloaded from this website: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/publication/house-of-gossip/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

⁶ For more information about the project, see here: <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/project/trash-games/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

⁷ For more information, please check: <https://hausdermaterialisierung.org/> (Accessed July 1, 2022).

In what follows, we would like to contribute to that task thinking empirically from our very own predicaments. Indeed, we could derive a series of criteria of *ethnographic value* that we have found of great relevance in the process and as a result of designing games:

1. A first value has to do with the kind of *ethnographic engagement*, that is, the sorts of problematising practices or modes of inquiry that particular multimodal forms afford.

To reiterate Joe Dumit's (2017) argument, making a game implies a distinctive engagement in ethnographic inquiries. Rather than just documenting social dynamics using customary fieldnotes to later produce an in-depth textual account, the task at hand is different: one needs to find situations, moments or patterns in the field that could be abstracted into a gameplay, the game's materials or its mechanics. What might feel like a limiting or constraining form is then turned into a virtue, as thinking in this way enables an in-depth attention to phenomena of abstraction simulation and modelization already happening in the field. This is especially relevant to engage with complex infrastructural and socio-technical arenas.

For instance, in our current explorations on *Trash Games*, Sebastian Quack has been pushing us to gather, draw and think in 'circles': that is, the attempts by different actors invested in the circular economy to capture a wide variety of materials for further use, creating material loops. Framing the concrete social and material attempts of circular economy practitioners as 'circles' enables experiencing and thinking about them as gameplays or mechanics. This also allows differentiating these practices from other approaches to trash and waste, such as the ones of classic recycling and the throwaway economy, in more condensed and experiential terms.

Interestingly, in this field games are also an indigenous format. For instance, the waste management authority of Berlin (BSR) has started developing games targeting children to teach them the predicaments of waste recycling. Many consultancy brands are designing different kinds of games as well, ranging from the pedagogic to the speculative, to address different conundrums: how to deal with toxicants, e-waste, or heavy metals in a 'circular fashion'? In the project, we have gathered and revised some of these examples to think with their concrete approaches to gameplays and mechanics, hence understanding how they are theorising, conceptualising and making tangible the circular economy through them.

But perhaps the most important takeaway point here is that working as ethnographers alongside artistic game designers, research takes a peculiar shape. This has happened in the form of rapid site visits in search for game aesthetics and concepts, trying to grasp something we do not know yet but always looking for specific arrangements. In these rapid visits, we have encountered civic projects like Textilhafen (dealing with overflows of clothes); a new second-hand shop put together by the large German mall chain Karstadt; or Berlin waste management authority's (BSR) exploratory attempts at working with the circular economy, ranging from an incinerator facility to a chain of second-hand shops, called NochMall (a German wordplay between *nochmal*, again, and mall). In our engagements with them, our aim has not been to engage in long encounters documenting the minutia of their everyday practices. Rather, in these specific encounters, the objective is thinking alongside them as a starting point for something altogether different: a process of game design, focusing our gaze to concrete abstractions that might serve in creating the materiality of a gameplay, its mechanics or its aesthetics.

This is different from the idealized one-year ethnographic participant observation, ‘documenting in order to write’ (Emerson et al., 1995) long ethnographic accounts. Alternatively, in this kind of ethnographic engagement, the final form of the game implies a different take to indexicality or the following of indices that any empirical work requires. Here, ethnography takes a playful, *detectivesque* contour (Ginzburg, 1980), searching for very concrete clues, dealing with existing conceptualisations, abstractions, and puzzles in the social worlds under study.

2. A second value has to do with how these forms create particular social and material conditions to undertake fieldwork. Or, put in other terms, they ‘*device*’ *field-working* (Estalella and Criado, 2018) in particular ways.

The prototyping House of Gossip, which was, for a very long time, a perpetually unfinished and broken game requiring many tweaks and tests (see Farías and Criado, 2022, for an expanded account), indeed afforded particular ways of ‘*devising*’ the field:

a) Game prototypes can act as *elicitation devices* because people play them and then they start telling you things, anecdotes, political positions, predicaments—stories one would probably not have come to encounter were it not for the game experience. Similar to Cantarella, Hegel and Marcus’s (2019) argument about how scenographies transform the fieldwork encounter, encountering others with a game transforms something like an interview into something much more intimate and immediate, as it has happened many times when testing the game.

b) But also, game prototypes can function as *collaboration devices*. When you play them, people start giving you advice on how to improve the game, so that it better resembles the thing at stake. Also, critical conversations arise as to whether ‘it might be ok or not’ to playfully address pressing issues like housing that some people consider far too serious. This, in fact, is feedback we received in a *Nachbarschaftsfest* (a district’s festivity) before the pandemic, at a time when the infamous *Mietdeckel* (the rental cap) was being unfolded and disputed.

3. A third ethnographic value we would like to intimate regards how particular multimodal forms might work as ethnographic *representations* in their own right.

Even if we have worked with game prototypes so far, we have pondered at large about the kind of ethnographic storytelling device that a finished and published game might result in. Indeed, games are also published by game production companies or on online platforms like *BoardGameGeek*. But how would these publications relate to more conventional modes of publishing in anthropology? As we see it, rather than a text representing or relating to a field in depth, in the form of an article or a monograph, we believe there are interesting potentials in games as forms enabling the ‘re-enacting’ of fieldwork materials and conceptualisations: creating more or less open situations that, in more or less abstract or simplified terms, make felt situations or conundrums lived in field encounters.

A relevant aspect to consider is how and in what ways published games could enable different 'representations' of the field: that is, how the situations experienced when playing the game might be connected to the situations ethnographic game-makers drew from to construct it. And we see major challenges here that appear time and again: How to ensure, for example, that their ethnographic character is not distorted by conventions of game mechanics and the expectations of players just wanting to have fun? How can the translation process from field to game be justified without reducing too much complexity?

IV. Valuing Multimodal Anthropology

While these observations speak of some potential ways of how games can have ethnographic value, their unconventional status in anthropological practice—like many other multimodal artefacts—reinforces the problem that they can be difficult to evaluate in an academic context. How to approach this? Based on these experiences, in the Stadtlabor for multimodal anthropology we have come to believe that the evaluation of multimodal projects requires a systematic examination of their process of development/invention/emergence. The process of institutionalisation we wish to enable hence goes hand in hand with the documentation of these processes, as well as their reflexive accompaniment. Both are crucial to evaluate their value, quality and effects.

As we have learnt, the documentation of three dimensions of the emergence of a multimodal artefact seems to be of paramount importance for these tasks. What follows is a certainly incomplete but empirically grounded matrix of evaluation criteria, something that we posit would be relevant to enable later on, setting up more formalised and conventional evaluative frames:

i. When discussing a multimodal anthropological production, we think it is crucial to *establish a relationship between the chosen form and the ethnographic site or problem*. Why this form for this site or problem? Why a novel, a comic, a podcast, a cooking session for this topic? Here, of course, different replies are likely and possible, from the allegoric to the indexical. But these questions cannot remain unanswered.

Our games we have tended to be more indexical than allegoric because both real estate and waste markets are often represented as games. Indeed, as already mentioned, games exist in these domains to educate, think and politicize. Hence, we have imagined our experiments with the game form as a response to the field, hopefully adding different nuances: games within games?

ii. Another important aspect is *recounting the knowledges drawn from in the making of these concrete media/forms and reflecting about them from an anthropological perspective*. This means expounding the learning process undergone, both in terms of the theoretical vocabularies to account for the process of creation of specific forms—like games or films—and its outcome, as much as the concrete hands-on experience there derived.

Working alongside expert game makers and theorists, we have indeed started that path, and we think we can confidently say we are now able to speak the lingo, explain and justify the specific form our games took. At the same time, of course, we should never take things at face value, and it is important to critically reflect about these media and genre conventions from an anthropological perspective, perhaps in how they 're-function' ethnographic fieldwork. We have hinted at some of our explorations in that regard in this text.

iii. But also, as anthropologists who have been working for years on design practices, we know all too well that any artefact has many lives. That is why we think *any attempt at documenting multimodal artefacts needs to pay specific attention to its effects and afterlives*.

The process of designing and making a multimodal artefact such as our games happens in particular fields and, thus, in relationship and conversation with very concrete others: multiple actors who might not want to engage, or if they do, they might do so in a wide variety of ways. However finished or open to recursive modifications a game process might be, these interactions are relevant and need to be documented. And, when possible, one would need to continue documenting its afterlife, tracing the effects of the project/artefact: how playing triggered what conversations, as well as how games might have been disputed to address 'too serious' topics.

Dwelling on our own endeavours in the Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology, with this contribution we want to invite other colleagues to think about how to approach the institutionalization and evaluation of more-than-textual ethnographic projects. Hence, we have been expounding some approaches to valuing and evaluating more-than-textual projects like our games. We are all too aware that this cannot be a solitary approach. This is why we would like to suggest other multimodally-invested colleagues to start documenting their own examples, and to share their predicaments when valuing works in different forms and media. We believe this might help us all understand better diverse multimodal projects and the critical moments or impasses encountered in their process. Like this, we could start working together towards crafting a common vocabulary, enabling some degree of conventionalisation. This would be of great relevance to evaluate and institutionalise these inventive productions. But also, and perhaps more importantly, to create the conditions to elaborate what each of them sought to achieve, hence granting them their potential to continue unsettling previous anthropological conventions.

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