Using Video Methods to Uncover the Relational, Interactional and Practical Constitution of Space

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Abstract

Why are visual methods, and in particular video methods, so naturally associated with the study of space in organizational studies? This chapter suggests that this relationship has to do with both video and space having been shown to be relational phenomena. Combining work in relational studies of space with French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's writings on moving images allows formulating a communicative approach to the analysis of space using video data, in terms of three sets of relationalities that reflexively fold into one another: (1) the spatial relations more or less faithfully represented in the data; (2) the relations that are outside the data but that made it possible; and (3) the relations defining the observation context.

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Stating that visual methods such as video ethnography are suitable for the study of space may appear commonplace.[1] "Of course," one could say, "we need to *see* space." Spatiality and visuality appear, indeed, to entertain a special rapport. We view our childhood home on Google Street View and realtors offer 360° virtual visits of apartments. We send our families pictures of charming medieval streets that we wandered during our last trip. It appears that we are not content with an oral description and we do not trust our memory. However, while the connection between space – and geography as its study – and visuality is commonplace, we may find ourselves wondering, "How, exactly, is geography visual?" (Rose, 2003). How, indeed, have we come to consider visual methods as a natural means for the study of space and, in particular, why do we rely so much on *moving* images? Understanding this connection is of special importance to researchers so as to precisely grasp what is gained when using methods such as video ethnography for the study of space.

To understand this relationship, we need to both review our understanding of space and revisit our conception of moving images. While different understandings of space exist, we will adopt a relational view of space that puts at the forefront the tangible embodied and communicative practices through which space is woven (Massey, 2003; Rose, 1999). Studying space, thus, also means studying these practices. On the other hand, we borrow from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1996) the notion that (moving) images are open-ended systems, being themselves portions of broader systems and made up of many others. These open-ended systems are woven together through communication and they also mobilize the body. What space and moving images share, therefore, is that they are both constituted through the relations between the elements that compose them and to which they give meaning. Those relations are experienced through the body (as noted by Mengis et al., 2018) and may be understood as communicative in nature (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2018).

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[1] I would like to thank François Cooren for allowing me to use, in this chapter, excerpts from data he collected.

A common approach to understanding these communicative practices analytically draws on ethnomethodology (see Garfinkel, 1967). Indeed, ethnomethodology has proven powerful in looking at the spatial arrangement of bodies and other material elements (for instance, queues in Garfinkel & Livingston, 2003; or surgeons' tools and hands in Koschmann & Zemel, 2011). Researchers adopting ethnomethodology have regularly used video recordings as a data collection strategy, but also as an analytical tool (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002). However, they have primarily argued in favor of collecting video data because of its ability to keep a "dense" and persistent record of events (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2010). They have yet to recognize the parallels in the relational and systemic nature of both video and space.

After discussing this parallel in detail and providing more insight into ethnomethodology's analytical usefulness, this chapter will briefly suggest ways to transcribe video data before delving into an example. The data is drawn from an extensive video shadowing of a building manager in a Manhattan skyscraper, during which a researcher followed the man completing various renovation work. This example will demonstrate how video ethnographic data allows one to observe how people and things relate to one another, and thus compose space. In doing so, it will reveal the key elements of spatial arrangements.

Space as a relational accomplishment

The term "space" has been used in organizational studies. The notion of space has been used in a metaphorical sense to grant spatial properties to other "things," for instance, "spaces of speech" (Steyaert & Hjorth, 2002). On the other hand, the notion of space has also been used in reference to specific locations, such as "cyberspace" or "San Francisco" (Pratt, 2002). However, even when using the term "space" in a more literal sense, different understandings of the notion exist. For instance, space has been considered as the *distance* between two points, as the *materialization of power relations* and as a *lived experience* (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Using a distance metaphor, studies have looked, for instance, at how employees may work remotely (e.g., Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2015), while studies viewing space as the

materialization of power have argued that it channels and disciplines bodies (Knox et al., 2008). For its part, viewing space as a lived experience asserts that people constitute space as they give meaning to it, for instance, as they negotiate the relationship between their body, their identity and their workplace (Riach & Wilson, 2014). Research on space has also been categorized as either *realist*, seeking to alter space for organizational needs (Gandini, 2015), *symbolic*, viewing space as a reflection of culture (see the example of a chair in Strati, 1996), or *critical*, viewing space as a territory of power (Shortt, 2015).

Despite these different ways of understanding space, there is a growing recognition that space, as physical as it may be, is *produced*. However, even when agreeing that space is a product, perceptions of *how* it is produced differ from study to study. In this sense, Wilhoit (2018) distinguishes "space as constructed" in people's meaning of it, from "space as constituted" in their interactions. "Space as constructed" adopts a more phenomenological lens. Studies embracing this approach have relied, for instance, on Henri Lefebvre's triad of space as perceived, conceived and lived (see Michels & Steyaert, 2017). In this view, as in Taylor and Spicer's (2007) space as a lived experience, space is (re)produced and evolves as people make sense of it and share, confront and renegotiate those meanings (e.g., Dale, 2005; Pepper, 2008). What Wilhoit (2018) refers to as the "constitutive" view of space, on the other hand, goes beyond the opposition between meaning and materiality, and views space as anchored in communication and relationality.

This relational view of space is based on the work of human geographers who reject the distinction between space and its experience. Instead, they argue that space is the outcome of practices and that "space is produced as a *plenitude of different relations*" (Thrift, 1999, p. 310). These authors invite us to think of "such relationalities as performed, as constituted through iteration" (Rose, 1999, p. 247). This does not mean, though, that space is "infinitely plastic," as some forms of space may endure and repeat, thus becoming elements of power (Rose, 1999, p. 248). The plasticity of space is also limited by the fact that every person arriving "here" steps into a "simultaneity of unfinished stories," the

traveler's being only one such story among others; as Doreen Massey writes, "If movement is reality itself then what we think of as space is a cut through all those trajectories" (Massey, 2003, p. 107).

What people do, then, also constitutes the space they dwell in and that gives meaning to what they do – but that constitutive process is not reducible to any one activity. Indeed, space is constituted as people position respective to one another to form a queue (Garfinkel & Livingston, 2003), when they walk and talk together (Mondada, 2017) or when they stick together in "viscous" groups that exclude others (Saldanha, 2005). People constitute an arts festival by performing in the street with the audience's participation (Munro & Jordan, 2013) and a hiking trail by trekking along it (Crevani, 2019). Each time, space is constituted and endures thanks to the relative movement of bodies and material elements in collective practices (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2018).

Moving images as relational systems

When wondering what about geography is visual, Rose notes that, while pictures are often used in her discipline as "faithful signs of what was photographed," they also produce "extreme decontextualization" by bracketing out the technical and aesthetic, but also the social, economic and institutional constraints that operate on the object being represented (Rose, 2003, p. 215). For her, though, the solution is not to create better cameras to generate a more faithful representation. Rather, the answer is relational and spatial. As she notes, the relation between the geographer and the photograph – say, of a cup of coffee – is not the same as the relation between her and the cup. When she shows photographs, for instance in a classroom, she becomes an interpreter, translating to her audience what is being seen and gaining authority in the process. The space where the photographs are shown, say a lecture hall, also matters in this relational configuration. This includes the audiovisual equipment within it and that serves to display the photograph, as well as the practical conventions that constitute that space. In this sense, a picture in a gallery, in a café or in a lecture hall is not the same, not because the picture less faithfully represents, say, a cup of coffee, but because the relationship that ties the geographer, the audience and the picture are not the same in each situation. There are, then, at least three sets of relationalities at play: 1) the spatial relations that the photograph represents more or less faithfully;

2) the relations that are outside of the photograph itself but that made it possible, which we can access through the interpretation provided by people or documents that were present at the time (for instance when using visual elicitation techniques; see Shortt, 2015); and 3) the relations that define the observation context.

Such a relational understanding is also at play in French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's conception of cinema and moving images (Deleuze, 1996). When he discusses the notion of "frame," Deleuze explains this relational nature in systemic terms. For him, "The set cannot divide into parts without qualitatively changing each time: it is neither divisible nor indivisible, but 'dividual' […] the screen, as the frame of frames, gives a common standard of measurement to things which do not have one" (Deleuze, 1996, p. 14). The cinematographic image is thus constituted by its parts but also gives them a common meaning *as an image.* The image, as a system, is open; what is out of the field of vision is not negated but can be made present otherwise by inference or, for instance, through sound (as when a gunshot is heard but not seen). Said otherwise, "Every closed system also communicates" (Deleuze, 1996, p. 16). Indeed, even if the French philosopher was notoriously suspicious of communication, he extensively used the notion of communication to describe how relations between the parts of a frame, including what's outside of the visual frame, are held together.

Relationality and communication are therefore also at play in constituting a (moving) image. Making sense of a picture, then, is not so much a matter of interpretation in the conventional, cognitive sense, as much as it is a matter of accounting for the many relations that are at play in making it what it is (see also the notion of relational aesthetics in Bourriaud, 2009). In the same way that Wilhoit (2018) contrasted space as "constructed" and "constituted," we thus see that a relational understanding of images invites us not to consider that an image means whatever signification people invest into it, but to develop a sophisticated apparatus to detect the many trajectories that constitute both space and the images through which it is documented.

In addition to being relationally woven, space and image also share another, related feature: they are both experienced through the *body*. On the one hand, we perform and occupy space with our bodies (Lewis, 1996; Riach & Wilson, 2014). On the other hand, photographs and videos are often *of* our bodies (Hassard et al., 2017) and recorded *thanks* to our bodies holding the camera, sometimes even putting ourselves at risk (de Rond, 2012). Also, both space and images are analyzed through embodied practices, those that are represented in the visual material and those of researchers. Indeed, ultimately, space must be felt, for instance by walking through it (Cnossen et al., 2020), and sight works alongside the researcher's other senses to make up the experience that propels the analysis of visual data (Pink, 2006).

Studying relationality as a communicative accomplishment

Both space and the (moving) images through which we capture it are relationally woven, from the moment the camera seizes space all the way to the lecture hall where it is projected again. The body – the participants' and the researcher's – is a surface on which relations converge and reveal themselves (Matte & Bencherki, 2019). In this sense, "the body and embodied conduct is a critical resource for organizational members themselves," as well as for researchers. Yet, the fact is that while research treats the body as a topic of investigation, it mostly continues to use conventional methodologies to do so (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007, p. 1395). There is, therefore, a need for a genuinely communicative and relational perspective that may capture the way bodies reveal the link between visuality and spatiality.

There is indeed growing evidence that relations result from "the work of communication" (Kuhn et al., 2017). However, space and images are not reducible to what people say of them. Communication is also material (Cooren, 2018). It is an exchange of symbolic as well as physical action, as when my foot pressing the pedal communicates "go faster" to my car's engine, through mechanical and electronic mediators (Bencherki, 2016). Paying attention to how relations are communicatively constituted thus requires an analytical approach that considers communication as social and material action.

Scholars adopting this view look to how space is constituted when things and events that took place *there and then* act again *here and now*, thanks to social and material practices that weave together times and spaces (see Vásquez, 2016). In this sense, they show that action relates to space through its *dislocal* character (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2008). These researchers borrow ethnomethodology's focus on what people say and do with each other and with their physical surroundings (Garfinkel, 1967). This focus is possible thanks to video data (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002), including video ethnography and video shadowing (Meunier & Vásquez, 2008; Vásquez et al., 2012), with a strong focus on bodily action. For example, when a Western humanitarian worker is walking in a Kenyan shantytown (Cooren et al., 2013) or fleeing on muddy roads to take shelter from a possible attack (Matte & Bencherki, 2019).

The epistemological status of video-based data is rarely made explicit. The few studies that do refer to it present video as better capturing and recording details that would otherwise escape the researcher's attention (e.g., Sormani et al., 2017). However, visuality is even more intrinsic to ethnomethodology as the approach's core tenet is that people structure their actions so as to make them *visible* in one way or another (Ball & Smith, 2011), drawing attention to the way bodies and materialities are positioned relative to each other and made jointly relevant in people's interactions (Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000). Indeed, "the visible bodies of participants provide systematic, changing displays about relevant action" (Goodwin, 2004, p. 157). Through embodied interactional practices, people also position these very practices as relevant to, but also constitutive of, the space they are in (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2018).

Ethnomethodologists often review recordings in "data sessions," during which a group of researchers and students collectively watch and comment on recording excerpts. The relational aspect of video data thus also reveals itself through the interactions that surround the viewing and analysis, as data sessions allow insider / outsider collaboration (Bartunek, 2008). The researcher who was in the field presents their recordings (first relationality), complements their recordings with statements on what they experienced in the field (second relationality), and their account then confronts the experiences of other

data session participants (third relationality). In such settings, video recordings allow one to "inspect, zoom in, juxtapose, annotate and slow down audio-visual records" (Hindmarsh & Tutt, 2012, p. 57). Analyzing video data thus relies on the body as an interpretive engine, especially since analysts also assess the practices they observe by reenacting them (Tutt & Hindmarsh, 2011). Around the meeting table or remotely, people's embodied practices make the relations they observe available again for collective scrutiny (Mondada, 2007).

However, when *writing* about spatiality and visuality, there is a risk, in the absence of bodies, of losing the relations that substantiate them. Although it is rarely explicitly addressed, this concern is noticeable in the way ethnomethodological studies write up their analysis and present their video data using different transcription strategies (Jefferson, 2004; Mondada, 2018). Just as ethnographic writing is an integral part of analysis (Richardson, 2000), the presentation of ethnographic data lays out relations between elements and, as what happens during data sessions, invites the reader to inspect, juxtapose or annotate visual elements (Hindmarsh & Tutt, 2012). To better preserve the relative movements and actions that take place in the video, the excerpt below inserts speech components directly into the video stills, making these the main vehicle of "transcription" (see Zemel et al., 2019).

An illustration: Video shadowing the constitution of space

To illustrate how spatiality and visuality can be analyzed through a relational lens, we draw on recordings from the video shadowing of a building manager in a Manhattan skyscraper, conducted by François Cooren. Shadowing consists of observing the interactions and practices through which a person conducts their daily activities (McDonald, 2005). Video shadowing, for its part, supplements this observational work with a video camera (Vásquez et al., 2012). In the excerpt below, the building manager, Eric, discusses, with Edward and Emilio, the air conditioning needs of a tenant business that wants its office separated into two spaces. Figure 1 presents six video stills from the video shadowing data along with people's speech during each still. Right before this excerpt started, Emilio fetched a stepladder, positioned it underneath a ceiling tile, and started climbing.

Figure 1: Stills from the video shadowing data: Emilio climbs up a stepladder.

First relationality – the relations that are present in the image: As Emilio climbs up the ladder,

the researcher tilts the camera upward to record the ceiling. In the first still, Edward says, "Right here, and

then it comes down," and points up, seeming to predict how the duct runs through the suspended ceiling,

perhaps to help Emilio decide which ceiling tile to open. However, Emilio, as he climbs up the stepladder, is facing away from Edward and cannot see him, and no one responds to Edward's comment.

Eric then moves towards the researcher's right in the second still, while Emilio opens a ceiling tile, which Edward seems to think is not the right one since he says, "You're on the other side." Again, nobody responds to Edward's comment. Emilio then puts his head inside the opening to look inside the suspended ceiling, twisting his body to the right to look behind him. Meanwhile, Edward moves around the stepladder to the researcher's left and looks up towards the opening. Emilio point his arm in the same direction beneath the ceiling, and says, "Yep, here is where it comes, right here" (still three).

The "yep" seems to indicate that Emilio's visual inspection confirms something that had been said before, perhaps agreeing with Edward's initial comment (although we know that Emilio could not see Edward pointing at the ceiling earlier). In still four, Emilio takes a step down so that his head is no longer in the opening, twists his body to look at Eric (who is out of the frame), points up and says, "Yeah, either the unit's got to go on the room…" (he then says something inaudible).

However, Emilio then looks inside the ceiling again, this time towards his left. He seems to see something he had missed the first time as he exclaims, "Oh, oh, I'm wrong! I'm wrong" (still five). He then takes a step down again and points toward the wall behind him, looking at Eric. Without Emilio saying anything, Eric seems to know what he means: "That's in the other space" (still six). Following this sequence, everyone moves to the other space.

A detailed analysis of what we see in the video highlights the importance of body positioning in weaving relations between people and space. How Emilio, Edward and Eric position themselves with respect to one another, and how one of them has his head in the ceiling, clarifies who spoke to whom, who knows what, and what made Emilio recognize that he was wrong.

Second relationality – the relations that are absent but make a difference: François Cooren is the researcher holding the camera. He experienced and felt the relations at play, on and off the frame. François followed Eric for three days as he visited tenants in their premises, went up and down elevators, and moved around the building. Being familiar with Eric's work, François knew that Edward ran a HVAC business, Emilio being one of his technicians. Eric was thus their client. However, François witnessed that they knew each other well, for instance when Eric, earlier that day, seemed sincerely concerned about Edward having hurt his finger on his way to their meeting, and when the three men exchanged family anecdotes in the elevator. François also noted that they worked in a similar manner in several premises, showing they were used to working together. Typically, Eric would explain what the tenant business wanted, Emilio would inspect the premises and suggest how to do it, and Edward would take notes and discuss resources. On their way from the elevator to the room in the excerpt, Eric had explained the work being done on that floor and they passed by the other space, which used to be part of the same large room.

The researcher's presence in the field thus provides access to otherwise absent relations that allow one to revisit the original analysis. For instance, it may seem rude that Emilio turned his back on Edward and ignored what he said. However, knowing that the two men were used to working together, and that it was Emilio's role to inspect premises, implies that Edward's statement was a mere suggestion. Also, we may have been surprised that Eric understood that the duct came from the other room when Emilio pointed at the wall, but less so when we realize that the group had passed by the other space, which is behind the wall. In each of these instances, other relations, absent from the video frame, overlay the first and alter its meaning.

Third relationality – the relations in the observation situation: Visible relations take on another meaning when they are embedded in the larger set of relations that the researcher experienced. However, this embedding takes place, in its turn, in yet other relations that define the situation during which the observation takes place. In this case, while François recorded the data, I wrote the chapter. I did not experience the space and bodies we were looking at, while he had. Although data sessions normally

involve several people looking at a screen together, in our case, due to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic,

we held a data session through videoconferencing with just the two of us, to discuss the spatial

implications of the excerpt while each viewing the video on our own computer. This analytical situation

led to a particular distribution of roles between us and generated ideas that would have been different in a

conventional data session. We had already held data sessions previously to look at other parts of the video

shadowing data from which the excerpt is drawn (e.g., Bencherki, 2014), but my limited familiarity still

led me to play the part of the outsider, with François as the insider.

This role duality meant that our joint analysis took a question / response format. I expressed

surprise at some of what occurred during the interaction and François offered clarification or helped me

work things out. For instance, I drew François' attention to Emilio's apparent neglect of Edward's

comments. It was my surprised reaction that led him to tell me that the men had worked together and

known each other for a while. When I asked how François seemed to anticipate that Emilio would open a

ceiling tile when he tilted the camera upward, he pointed out that the three men were already intently

looking upward and told me that he had observed the three men complete the same routine before. It is

my own perplexity that enabled François to determine which relations mattered or not in the scene, which

in turn helped me to write the previous section.

Discussion: Learning about space through video shadowing

What does the above video shadowing data tell us that would have been different otherwise?

First, to reiterate the theory reviewed earlier, and in agreement with ethnomethodologists and geographers

alike, we learn about how people and things relate to each other, and the importance of bodies in

revealing those relations. For instance, the crucial element of the situation – Emilio climbing up a

stepladder and opening the ceiling – is never mentioned in speech. Yet, its effect is manifested both in the

others' movements as they repositioned themselves to look at it, and in the researcher's body, as he tilted

the camera so that the ceiling occupied most of the visible frame. The participants' and researcher's

bodily position also matters as there was no verbal reference to the fact that Emilio turned towards Eric

(i.e., out of frame at the researcher's right) and spoke to him in still four. From words alone, we could interpret that he was responding to Edward's remarks in stills one and two. Again, Eric's statement in still six, "That's in the other space," would not make sense without understanding the bodily and relational configuration of the space.

In addition, our analysis shows how the black square in the middle of the screen, where Emilio hid his head, is a materialization of his special epistemic stance, again in agreement with prior work on embodied (and, arguably, spatial) knowledge (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; O'Connor, 2005). The subject of the video shadowing, Eric, was left out of the picture, leaving Emilio at the center and thus making the researcher complicit in recognizing that being up on the stepladder provided him a privileged perspective. This is never mentioned verbally and, if we focused only, for instance, on the fact that Edward was Emilio's hierarchical superior, or that Eric was their client, we would not expect Emilio to lead the interaction as he did. Video data clarifies that it was his relation to space that granted him an authoritative viewpoint.

Second, and relatedly, we extend literature on the body's role in understanding space (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Pink, 2006) to clarify that analysis of video shadowing and space must include all three relationalities that we introduced above. While resisting the urge to draw too quickly on outside context to account for occurs in an interaction, our analytical strategy shows that surprising elements of the video data can result in shifts to "higher" sets of relations. It is, therefore, breakdowns in the ability to rely on in-frame data that materialize or make salient the effects of out-of-frame relations. This is true of what Emilio saw in the opening, to which we do not have access, but is partly witnessable in what he said and did afterwards. This is consistent with Massey's (2003) theory that we always step into "unfinished stories" and into trajectories that began before we got here and will continue beyond this particular relational encounter. Our bodies, as they move while contributing to a continued sense of selfhood, also weave together a seemingly smooth fabric of space from loose strings of experience.

Finally, to continue on a textile metaphor and use the terminology of Deleuze (1993), the three sets of relationalities fold into one another. This fold, more precisely, consists of the reflexive thinking and the gaze that each set casts upon the previous. Relationality, indeed, is an exercise in reflexive embodied empathy (Finlay, 2005). In the first relationality, the participants themselves appeared to have a bodily understanding of each other's movements and of the space they were in, as they knew how they would feel and move themselves if they were in each other's place. In the second relationality, François was able to recall what he saw and felt while present in the field, and was therefore able to be empathetic with his past self and with other participants. Finally, in the third relationality, the conversations that François and I had related to how I would have behaved in similar circumstances, and my surprise that the participants did not do so. In the latter case, reflexive embodied empathy is congruent with the idea that data sessions involve "reenactment" (Tutt & Hindmarsh, 2011). Through successive layers of reflexivity and embodiment, relationalities fold into each other, generating analysis that does not *abstract* the relational nature of reality, but rather *recapitulates* it, preserving the fullness of experience throughout.

Our original question was: Why are spatiality and visuality so tightly related? Why, more specifically, is video shadowing so appropriate to the study of space? We can now answer that it is because video allows us to *see* more of space, but also because space and images alike are relationally constituted. Further, it is because bodies – the participants' and the researcher's – provide reflexive access to the successive layers of relationalities that, in turn, allow the analysis of space. The message, then, is that researchers should preserve the thread that ties together the relational richness of each stage as they transform their data from observation, to recording, and then to text. Another lesson is to remain attentive to the researchers' own relational entanglements, which are integral to analysis.

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