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ARTICLE

The aesthetic turn in border studies: Visual geographies of power, contestation and subversion

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Abstract

In recent years, critical border studies have developed sophisticated concepts and methodologies for exploring the multifaceted spatialities, sociologies and temporalities of contemporary borders. In this article, we consider how the “aesthetic turn” that has gained prominence in the scholarship can further inform thinking in border studies. Specifically, we focus on the role of the visual in the construction as well as subversion of borders, suggesting possible avenues for future critical aesthetics-engaged research on COVID-19 era border reconfigurations. To do so, we first briefly outline the theoretical evolution of border studies, paying attention to recent conceptualisations of borders as dynamic processes of social and spatial differentiation. We then build on the borderscapes concept to unpack research on border aesthetics, with particular attention to the heterogeneous roles played by visual objects such as maps, photographs and videos in shaping both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes of bordering. Finally, we bring these contributions into discussion with recent insights on the COVID-19 pandemic, sketching several ways to advance aesthetic concepts and methodologies in academic research on borderscapes that are emerging with, and will likely outlast, the pandemic. We suggest that border studies and

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affiliated sub-fields can gain useful insights from attending more explicitly and robustly to dynamic visual geographies of power, contestation and subversion.

KEYWORDS

border aesthetics, bordering, borders, borderscapes, cross-border geographies, visuality

1 | INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING BORDERSCAPES

The last 2 decades have seen growing interest among geographers in how visuality shapes the geopolitical world. As influentially discussed by Rancière (2004, 2010), aesthetic regimes and practices have ambiguous entanglements with politics, some reproducing entrenched forms of inclusion and exclusion while others offer critical counter-modes of perception that may challenge the status quo for more equal orders. Geographers have explored the relationship between politics and aesthetics by studying the limits and possibilities of art for critically “reflecting, contesting and reframing ‘the new normal’” (Gregory, 2010; Ingram, 2011, p. 221), further enriching parallel inquiries into how visual objects, technologies and practices shape geopolitical actions, subjectivities and formations (Macdonald et al., 2010). Following important ontological, epistemological and methodological developments in the discipline, border studies too have branched out into studying the role played by aesthetic performances in reproducing, contesting and subverting borders (Schimanski & Nyman, 2021; Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017). In this review, we analyse some of the critical trajectories in the study and engagement of aesthetic practices in recent border research, focusing particularly on the visual and its entanglements with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes shaping borderlands, the international migratory environment, as well as in contexts whereby racist, capitalist and colonial borderings sustain structural inequalities and injustice.

For 3 decades, border studies have been sharpening their conceptual tools to examine border changes in the wake of the Cold War and 9/11. Already in the 1990s, scholars abandoned simplistic understandings of borders as linear and static expressions of state power and approached in more systematic and sophisticated ways their complexities (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997; Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Rumley & Minghi, 1991). Following the processual shift introduced by Paasi (1998) and considerable debate on notions of a “borderless world” (Diener & Hagen, 2009; Newman, 2006; Newman & Paasi, 1998), Critical Border Studies (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, 2012) now conceptualise borders in terms of dynamic “bordering” processes socially performed at both practical and discursive levels (see Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Border performativity highlights how borders are continually made and re-made through three “performative registers”: state description of borders, policing and patrolling of borders, and popular support and contestation over borders (Johnson et al., 2011). These registers draw attention on “borderwork” or the important role of ordinary people in “constructing, shifting, or even erasing borders” (Rumford, 2012, p. 897), from the US-Mexico border (Doty, 2007) to the Congo-Rwanda borderlands (Doevenspeck, 2011), and beyond.

Research on borderwork has long underscored how bordering occurs across multiple temporal frames (Megoran, 2012) and geographical scales (Laine, 2016), prompting geographers to develop a multiplicity of new concepts beyond the line metaphor, including “boundary variations” (Mol & Law, 2005), “borders in motion” (Konrad, 2015), “borderities” (Amilhat-Szary & Giraut, 2015), “polymorphic borders” (Burrige et al., 2017) and “hyper-bordered territory” (Lizotte, 2020). Arguably, the notion that has gained greatest traction is the “borderscapes” concept, referring to

a way of approaching bordering processes in specific geographical and social contexts, both in borderlands but also wherever a specific border has impacts, is represented, negotiated or displaced.

Borderscapes ... are local configurations of bordering processes connecting different communities, case specific relations of how notions of border and perceptions of identity are conditioned by the interplay of historical, socio-cultural, geographic and political narratives as well as the experience of living at and with borders (Brambilla et al., 2015, p. xv).

In outlining the critical possibilities of the concept, Brambilla (2015a) emphasises how the etymology of borderscapes seeks itself to capture the ever-evolving nature of borders as relational spaces made of actors, practices and imaginaries, rather than static and natural lines fixed once-and-for-all. The epistemological and ontological coordinates behind borderscapes reflect this shift by explicitly rejecting binary categories and investigating instead a plurality of places and voices, including "not only in the 'big stories' of the nation-state construction, but also the 'small stories' that come from experiencing the border in day-to-day life" (p. 25). For Brambilla, borders are complex loci of interaction which can engender "hegemonic borderscapes" where reality is ordered as well as "counter-hegemonic borderscapes" where power is instead contested or subverted (p. 23–24). To explore these paradoxes, she invites border scholars to embrace multidisciplinary and intergenerational methodologies capable of humanising and giving voice to otherwise hidden border experiences.

Krichker (2021) notes that the conceptual and methodological flexibility of borderscapes vis-à-vis previous concepts has paved the way to a variety of research trajectories (see also Peña, 2021). Research grounded in borderscapes has generated rich ethnographical research on everyday agency in borderlands across Europe (Cassidy et al., 2018), the Middle East (Schneidleder, 2018), Africa (Adotey, 2021) and Asia (Loong, 2019). But the concept has also enabled sharper explorations of the shifting temporalities and spatialities of borders – on the one hand, by channeling attention into how migrants experience and navigate E.U. borders (Pagogna & Sakdapolrak, 2021; Pellander & Horsti, 2018) and transit zones (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016; Godin & Donà, 2020), and, on the other, through genealogical inquiries of how the past informs contemporary borderwork in Europe (Pfoser, 2020) and post-colonial contexts (Brambilla, 2014). Finally, borderscapes have inspired scholars to examine with greater nuance a vast array of cultural productions, with the overarching goal of critically linking "border experiences with border representations by rethinking borders through the relationship between politics and aesthetics" (Brambilla, 2015a, p. 27; see also; Dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015).

Border scholars have widely turned to Rancière's aesthetic contributions for exploring border representations as well as the broader sensory and axiological dimensions of contemporary borders. This "aesthetic turn" has been generating rich literary research on borders in novels (Schimanski, 2015) and poetry (Paül & Trillo-Santamaría, 2015), but also probed into visual representations of borders – not only as objects of critical inquiry but also as innovative methods of investigation (Kudžmaitė & Pauwels, 2020). From photos of migration (Boyce, 2020; Ellison & Van Isacker, 2021) to documentary films and beyond, visibility is deeply implicated in shaping hegemonic bordering forces as well as in creating counter-hegemonic borderscapes and "alternative viewings of the geopolitical" (Holland, 2020, p. 1). In this article, we explore how visual objects like maps, photos and videos – as well as employed visual methodologies such as sketch mapping, photovoicing and videographic methods – can be productive of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic borderscapes.

Broadly speaking, the aesthetic turn in border studies refers to a variety of empirical, conceptual and methodological interests in prompting attention to how processes of rendering visible/invisible are to be understood, with some common understanding among growing numbers of geographers that certain power dynamics need to be subverted when thinking about the coloniality of the cartographic gaze and a host of other visual renderings. In the following section, we approach the aesthetic turn by considering respectively how *mapscapes*, *photoscapes* and *videoscapes* construct and subvert borders. Although we focus particularly on visual objects and methodologies, we nevertheless also emphasise the aesthetic complexities at play in contemporary borders by considering the entanglements between visibility and other realms of the sensible through a variety of *artscapes* and sound-based research contributions. In section 3, we bring these contributions in conversation with recent insights on the COVID-19 pandemic, to

then conclude by suggesting that more extensive and critical explorations of how the visual mediates hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic processes of bordering greatly enrich research on borders and borderscapes.

2 | APPROACHING THE AESTHETIC TURN: THE CONSTRUCTION AND SUBVERSION OF BORDERS IN MAPS, PHOTOS, VIDEOS AND BEYOND

2.1 | Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic *mapscapes*

For decades, geographers have been problematising the alluring nature of maps as accessible, intelligible and apparently neutral representations of reality. Harley (1989) has drawn attention to the relationships between map-making and knowledge-production, highlighting how maps always reflect the interests of their creators and are deeply implicated in processes of boundary-making, state formation and nation building (see Paasi, 1996; Puente-Lozano & García-Álvarez, 2021; Strandsbjerg, 2012). The intertwining between cartography and state power is exemplified by the development of the modern European state, which maps have supported by enabling rulers to transform previously ill-defined dynastic realms into clear-cut territorial units and naturalise them to the wider public (Biggs, 1999). But maps have also been crucial for exporting the European state model during the imperial and colonial eras, when cartographic representations of African settings as blank spaces legitimised partition regardless of existing indigenous geographies (Bassett, 1994; Kachena & Spiegel, 2019; Ramutsindela, 2010). Cartography has been crucial for crystallising hierarchical relationships between Europe and these colonized geographical entities, and still today shapes imaginaries of the European Union by naturalising particular boundary reconfigurations (Bueno Lacy & Van Houtum, 2015).

Throughout the last decades, the cartography-bordering nexus has been reinvigorated by the diffusion of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). The unprecedented integration of automation algorithms and geo-tracking technologies in current border management systems – what Pötzsch (2015) calls “iBorder” – has engendered new processes of bordering. GIS have been applied to map and control migration flows, gathering and transmitting real time intelligence to Border Patrols operating along the U.S.-Mexico border (Stewart et al., 2016; Walsh, 2013) or feeding data to interactive visualisations of migration routes that inform international border management coordination efforts, such as the *i-Map* employed by FRONTEX and other European agencies (Cobarrubias, 2019). As Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020) show, the cartographies of migration produced by FRONTEX not only facilitate border control practices, but also help entrenching dominant perceptions of undocumented migration by framing migrants as arrow lines violating the clear-cut boundaries of European space.

Drawing inspiration from counter-mapping and other critical methods approaching instead “[m]aps as resistance” against state-framed cartographies of in/visibility (Crampton & Kryeger, 2005, p. 25), border scholars have also investigated counter-hegemonic dynamics silenced by dominant cartographic narratives. Some scholars have engaged with counter-mappings of international migration (Van Houtum & Bueno Lacy, 2020) or by analyzing borders in maps produced by scholars of geography and geopolitics (Boria, 2015) or visual artists (Novaes, 2015), while others have instead investigated bordering through participatory digital methods and GIS. For instance, Kwan and Ding (2008) charted on space-time cubes the life paths and autobiographical data of Muslim women to study the everyday, gendered effects of bordering processes that emerged in the U.S. after 9/11, while Buckle (2020) investigated bordering by mapping migrants’ journeys on Google Maps. GIS technologies have been also employed to problematise processes of securitisation along the U.S.-Mexico border (Walsh, 2013), particularly in visualising how state apparatuses push migrants along dangerous desert routes (Stewart et al., 2016) and mapping the deaths that have occurred as a consequence (Chamblee et al., 2005).

Border studies have explored analogous research trajectories through sketch mapping methodologies, which allow participants to draw and label on maps, either by hand or with the assistance of a computer, their spatial conceptions, experiences and relations (Gieseking, 2013). Building on Lynch’s (1960) pioneering work on urban

imageability and following approaches developed within the positivistic confinements of behavioral geography, Van Houtum (1999, 2000) has deployed sketch mapping as a quantitative tool for measuring how borders shape cognitive perceptions of distance and attachment to place. More recently, however, sketch maps have been revitalised in more qualitative capacities. For Kaisto and Wells (2021), sketches are well suited for exploring how borders shape identities across multiple scales and especially in borderlands, where residents display multiple territorial affiliations deriving from complex interactions between national imaginations and local experiences (see also Kaisto & Brednikova, 2019). Brambilla (2007) similarly used sketch maps to study how pre-colonial territorial identifications are differently mobilised in the cross-border narratives and practices of Kwanyama communities along the Angola-Namibia borderlands. More recently, the methodology has also informed research on urban borderscapes, with a focus on how migrants experience and navigate processes of bordering (Franck, 2016, 2019) or challenge suburban ghettoisation by forging counter-hegemonic imaginaries and practices of belonging (Brambilla, 2015c).

Sketch mapping methodologies have populated also the literature on transnational migration. Campos-Delgado (2017, 2018) engaged in sketch mapping exercises with Central American migrants transiting through Mexico for the U.S. and analysed the technical, physical and connotative dimensions of sketches to understand how bordering clusters have been externalised along transit routes and how migrants experience the resulting geographies of precariousness. Moreover, sketch maps have supported feminist research seeking to explore voices of migrant women in rural areas (Jung, 2014) or to generate critical cartographies of the traumatic border experiences of Syrian refugees (Kelly, 2019). Yet, as Mekdjian (2015) notes, mapping collaborations between migrants, artists and academics also offer critical visualisations of borders and migration. Amongst other projects, Casas-Cortés et al. (2017) discuss for example, how the *Drawing our own Map of Routes* workshops challenged the bordering cartographies of FRONTEX's *i-Map*. Brambilla (2021) similarly explored alternative spatial imaginaries of the Mediterranean borderscape with Italian and Tunisian children by combining sketch mapping with photographic and videographic methodologies, which we discuss in the following sections.

2.2 | Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic *photoscapes*

Analogous to *mapscapes*, the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic possibilities of *photoscapes* in borderlands have also taken multiple forms – inflected by a variety of intentions, whether exploring borders as “semiotic system[s] (...) of images and imaginations” (Sidaway, 2002, p. 140) or tackling border patrol spaces and other phenomena. For quite some time, geographers have been rethinking images through rich methodological discussions concerning the collection and analysis of visual data as well as the production and dissemination of critical knowledge about the power relations embedded in visual objects (Pauwels, 2015; Rose, 2001). Employing a photo essay format, Murton (2016) contrasts infrastructure and operations of three border posts between China and Nepal, while Ptak (2019) unpacks pictures of Asian borderlands “to visually challenge and deconstruct notions of uniformity, linearity, and homogeneity commonly associated with border phenomena” (p. 2194). Scholars have embraced photo essays also to critically engage with visual terrains and politics along the U.S.-Mexico borderland, documenting the progressive militarisation of the border under the Secure Fence Act 2006 (Lugo, 2018) or responding to popular imagery found in *Time Magazine* and *National Geographic* that reinforced calls for securitisation by presenting the region as “lifeless and desolate” (Dorsey & Diaz-Barriga, 2010, p. 128).

Other visual methods have been extensively deployed to examine how photos mediate processes of border construction and subversion in the context of international migration. For example, academics have analysed the iconography of refugee photos (Clark, 2020), investigated how visual environments produced by relief organisations (Massari, 2021) and mainstream media reinforce border securitisation in the E.U. (Hansen et al., 2021), and addressed how depictions of migration in newspapers shape “cultures of inhospitality” by dehumanising (Bleiker et al., 2014) or criminalising refugees (Banks, 2012). However, although anonymous depictions of refugees desensitise audiences, visual accounts of individual deaths at border crossings tend instead to generate public outrage and sympathy

(Lenette & Miskovic, 2016). Thus, while serving hegemonic functions, photos can also mobilise forms of moral responsibility and action by emplacing asylum seekers within specific regimes of visibility (Chouliaraki & Stolić, 2017). Imagery produced by photojournalists (Chouliaraki & Stolić, 2019), activists and militant researchers (Ellison & Van Isacker, 2021), and migrants themselves – individually or collaboratively (Ball, 2014; Jeffery et al., 2019) – can challenge processes of bordering, although possible appropriations and recontextualizations by mainstream news outlets systematically threaten this counter-hegemonic potential (Chouliaraki, 2017).

Analogous research objectives have also proceeded via the empowerment of research participants through a variety of participatory visual methodologies. Consistent with growing interest among critical geographers in “photo-interviewing” and “photovoice methods” to explore socio-cultural and power relations at play in producing “visual knowledge” (Spiegel, 2020; Vila, 2013), Smith and Burch (2012) explore through photo-elicitation how residents along the EU-Russia borderland “subvert the identity categories that elites and outsiders (including ourselves as researchers) would seek to impose on them from above” (p. 400). This, they explain, is significant for its methodological novelty, as well as in grounding understandings of ongoing ethnopolitical contestation. Photographic methods in Cypriot borderscapes have similarly been embraced to enable focus on people’s everyday “perceptions of the border and thus on how people are experiencing the border while ‘walking and talking’” (Strüver, 2020, p. 622). Photovoicing has instead been employed in the U.S. to investigate bordering processes in health, whether unveiling linguistic inequities in medical facilities (Martínez, 2014) or barriers experienced by Latino immigrants (Lightfoot et al., 2017), particularly women (Hinojosa Hernandez & De Los Santos Upton, 2020), as well as how the U.S.-Mexico border affects drug use (Salerno Valdez et al., 2019) and shapes experiences of homelessness (Moya et al., 2017).

From photo essays to critical explorations of photo environments, to participatory photo methods, photo-based visual methodologies are thus also increasingly figuring alongside maps in the aesthetic dives of contemporary border studies. Yet, while showing interest in photos, scholars have investigated the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic intertwinements between borders and the visual by dedicating attention to video environments and methodologies, to which we turn in the following section.

2.3 | Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic videoscapes

Research on *videoscapes* similarly reflects a range of political entanglements, in some cases unsettling both visual production itself as well as the visual gaze of interlocutors and the social meanings at issue. The 2015 migratory “crisis” has introduced a plethora of video representations of migration, which are attracting growing critical attention by media scholars and social scientists (Austin, 2019; Schurmans, 2015). For Kovačević (2019), the acclaimed docudrama *Fire at Sea* (2016) freezes migrants in their perilous Mediterranean journeys, with the effect of concealing the broader geopolitical context and possibilities for future integration. Celik Rappas and Phillis (2020) similarly emphasise how European film productions “utilize the ‘Other’ in need as a European avatar in order to construct a compassionate European identity, one firmly devoted to humanitarian ideals” (p. 39). Humanitarian tropes are also present in the videographic narratives produced by the Italian Navy during operation *Mare Nostrum*, which, by simplifying migration to a question of saving lives and stopping smugglers, have silenced its underlying causes and thus further de-politicised discourses around it (Musarò, 2016).

Hegemonic video representations of border zones have attracted analogous academic interest. The show *Border Wars* (2010–2012) has constructed the U.S.-Mexico borderland as a problematic area requiring further securitisation by repeatedly associating military imagery and alarmistic phrasing (Jones, 2014), while depictions of the border in feature movies entrenched geopolitical imaginaries that frame the U.S. as a superior civilisation free to decide who gets into its territory and who does not (Dell’Agnese, 2005). Probing into similar themes of power, Casaglia (2020) discusses pornographic online series filmed and produced in the U.S., *Border Patrol Sex* and *Latina Patrol*, unpacking narratives associated with videos of young women described as ‘illegal’ Latino migrants “who are offered or forced into sex by patrol guards as an alternative to deportation” (p. 2). While these approaches contribute to growing

critical scrutiny of border zone representations in movies and TV (Mendes & Sundholm, 2015; Shapiro, 2015), Koskela (2010) placed the emphasis on the equally political dimensions of Texas's *Virtual Border Watch Programme*, which provides real-time videos from the U.S.-Mexico border and invites thinking about "how interactive online watching has expanded the existence of borders to be located at any observer's home" (p. 119). Lybecker et al. (2018) similarly invite researchers to pay sharper attention to how visual narratives floating online, particularly on YouTube, contribute to the social construction of borders and borderlands.

While attentive to the hegemonic implications of visual environments, scholars have nevertheless investigated also the de-constructive possibilities of videoscapes. Brambilla and Pöttsch (2017) discuss the politics of visibility and invisibility alongside a detailed unpacking of audio-visual self-representations. Exploring the aesthetic, for them, means paying attention to the sensory, and offers a way of exploring contrasts – between drone warfare-centred visualities and migrants' self-representations, for example, and subtleties of social identities and experiences at play. In a similar vein, Labayen and Gutierrez (2021) argue that videos produced by Sub-Saharan migrants in Ceuta, while serving as tools for placemaking in a context of liminality, also carry aesthetic counter-discourses against the "spectacles of migrant 'illegality'" dominating mainstream media (De Genova, 2013). Critically exploring migrants' self-representations, research has also sought to visually subvert border regimes by embracing participatory video methodologies, problematising stereotypes by attending to asylum seekers' subjectivities (Haaken & O'Neill, 2013) and de-spectacularising the Mediterranean borderscape through alternative imaginaries generated via videographic methodologies and disseminated among non-academic audiences as documentaries and exhibitions (Brambilla, 2021).

Looking specifically at the intersections between videography, knowledge production and research dissemination, Franceschelli and Galipò (2021) reflect on how the documentary *Ccà semu, here we are. Lives on hold in Lampedusa* (2018) has provided a counter-representation of the migratory crisis in Italy through the eyes and experiences of the community in Lampedusa. Brambilla (2015d) similarly considers visual environments displayed at the *LampedusaInFestival* instances of counter-hegemonic borderscaping, underlying how the active role assumed annually by migrants within the Festival transforms migration into "a creative force that causes important social, cultural and economic transformations, slipping away from the limits imposed by the political sovereignty of nation-states" (p. 117). Mazzara (2015) defines visualities of this kind "aesthetics of subversion" (p. 458), "where those who are normally depicted as 'imperceptible bodies' become 'subjects of power', the power of subverting the narrative around their journey, their past and their desires for the future" (Mazzara, 2016, p. 135). As Bayraktar (2019) notes, essay films such as *The Leopard* (2007) and *Havarie* (2016) can also convey aesthetic subversiveness by contrasting images that may strengthen the tragedy of the migratory "crisis" with others which can instead offer more nuanced understandings of displacement and migratory experiences.

2.4 | *Artscapes and beyond*

While focusing on the visual, critical dives into border aesthetics have engaged more broadly also with artistic productions in borderlands and beyond, intermingling with other realms of the sensible such as the sonic. In a seminal contribution, Amoores (2006) focused interest on how artistic interventions "have an important role to play in a politics that disrupts what we have come to see as necessary or normal ways of living" increasingly dominated by biometric bordering (p. 347). Since then research on the entanglements between art and borders has taken the scholarship along a variety of routes. The fencing of the U.S.-Mexico border has driven research on the vibrant artistic environments which are transforming the fence from a material marker of state power into a symbolic canvas of resistance (Amilhat Szary, 2012). Looking at graffiti in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands, Alvarez (2008) illustrates how imagery mirrors local social discourses and while Madsen (2015) further discusses how street art also enables communities to recapture a sense of belonging in the face of political and economic marginalization. Graffiti reflect a practice of "place-making in non-places" also for migrants and refugees who leave historical marks in the barren transit spaces of borderlands (Soto, 2016) or transform walls into spaces for public debate and resistance against encampment policies

(Lehec, 2017). Textual inscriptions in the walls of Lesvos similarly chronicle the struggles of migrants transiting the Aegean borderscape and offer an analytical window into how “hegemonic discourses on migration are being experienced, negotiated and confronted from below in more (or less) obtrusive ways” (Wagner Tsoni & Franck, 2019, p. 17).

In addition, scholars have explored border contestation and subversion in artistic installations and projects. For instance, Amilhat Szary (2012) has analysed art installations in the Canadian side of the U.S. border, which have emerged in response to increased surveillance and perceived shifts in transnational relations after 9/11. Echoing insights from the literature on geopolitics and art, Giudice and Giubilaro (2015) talk explicitly of an “art of *dis-bordering*” (p. 83) to emphasise how artistic installations can unsettle the scopic regime of borders and make room for alternative narratives, practices and imaginaries. Visual and written testimonies displayed in the *Eufemia* exhibition in Italy, for example, were part of a network of graphic novels, guides and disobedience manuals through which solidarity networks publicised migrants' struggles and supported their border-crossings to France (Queirolo Palmas, 2020). The online visual campaign of the *NO US WITHOUT YOU* initiative similarly re-contextualises and resists criminalised perceptions of immigration in the U.S. (Alvarado, 2021), while the installations *Kikito* and *Giant Picnic* generate new embodiments that transform the original meaning and effects of the U.S.-Mexico border by allowing visitors to enact the fence and connect through this experience (Morrissey, 2021). For Amilhat Szary (2016), the transformative power of border art calls for more intimate and long-term engagements between artists and researchers – well exemplified by the *antiAtlas of Borders* project (Parizot et al., 2014) – to harvest the critical possibilities of arts-based research for generating counter-hegemonic modes of knowledge production and dissemination.

The tinkering of many art installations with other realms of the sensible, like those insightfully explored by Amooore and Hall (2010) from the perspective of tactility and sonority, finally reminds of the complex aesthetic layers involved in the construction of contemporary borders. This is reflected in scholarly attempts at transcending visibility and engaging more deeply, for example, with sonic bordering and de-bordering. Western (2020) approaches borders and migration from a sonic perspective precisely to emphasise how privileging the visual can silence sound-based practices that ‘amplify the creativities of people crossing borders, disrupt normative narratives that present migration as a problem, and challenge representational practices that reify ideas of “refugee crisis”’ (p. 294). Similarly to Western, who engaged ethnographic soundwalks and location recordings among border crossers in Athens, Dell’Agnese (2015) also draws attention to the variegated mix of musical ensembles, genres and songs that has developed around the U.S.-Mexico borderland, acting as a powerful carrier of both hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic discourses. From this perspective, considering sensory dimensions beyond the visual provides an equally important and complementary lens for future investigations into the aesthetics of contemporary borderscapes.

3 | BORDERING, VISUALITY AND COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented changes in territorial, political and governance dynamics worldwide (Dodds et al., 2020), pushing geographers in both familiar and deeply uncharted directions (Megoran, 2021; Sturm et al., 2021). The pandemic has exacerbated already established re-bordering trends and is driving a profound reconfiguration of borders across all geographical scales (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). For Radil et al. (2021), COVID-19 is paving the way to a new bordering regime structured around enhanced restrictions to movement with asymmetrical and wide-ranging implications for everyday life. International border closures have already disproportionately affected migrants (Casaglia, 2021) and prompted protests in borderlands (Opiłowska, 2021), while the imposition of internal borders as part of quarantine measure is reterritorialising regional identities and politics. COVID-19 has also driven an unprecedented expansion of geographic technologies for tracking and surveilling individual movements that will likely become a staple in post-pandemic border regimes (Liu & Bennett, 2020). Within these ongoing developments, aesthetic lenses offer critical and analytical possibilities for understanding emerging mechanisms of hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic bordering.

COVID-19 has triggered a proliferation of visual materials communicating the evolving geographies of the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2021). Governments have conveyed information about the virus through maps, although accessibility to datasets and mapping platforms has allowed also the public to share their personalised cartographies of the pandemic (Mooney & Juhász, 2020). This expansion of cartographic storytelling demands heightened attention on the role played by COVID-19 visualisations in producing hegemonic borderscapes. Geographers are starting to explore emerging bordering processes by investigating which spatial (and at times racialised) imaginaries COVID-era maps convey, as well as how these are incorporated in popular mappings and with what implications in terms of bordering practices (Pase et al., 2021). Research is also addressing how media coverage of asylum seekers is reinforcing or subverting borders in healthcare (Shomron, 2021), although more extensive studies on the visual dimensions of the pandemic are needed. While before COVID visuals of migrant crossings dominated newspapers and often spread xenophobic political attitudes, the pandemic's intensified injustices in amplifying forced *immobility* – illustrated by protracted refugee detention and encampment – present one of many avenues for visually engaging with COVID-era borderings, as recently done by contributions in borderlands studies (Brunet-Jailly & Carpenter, 2020) and in line with growing interest in the intersections between visibility and migration (Nikielska-Sekula & Amandine, 2021).

Near and far from the state lines themselves, the vernacularisation of visibility is also producing new, counter-hegemonic border aesthetics. For Bowe et al. (2020), user mappings show who is included or excluded in dominant COVID-19 visualisations and give relevance to the embodied dynamics of everyday life under lockdown-driven bordering. Popular cartographies and other aesthetic environments represent fruitful objects of investigation into emerging counter-hegemonic borderscapes, but sketch-mapping, photovoicing and videographic methodologies could also be mobilised to re-imagine visibilities of bordering by showing, for instance, how border closures are seen and experienced by migrants and borderland communities or how quarantines and lockdowns are reconfiguring regional identities. COVID-era research also urges pluralistic methodologies for seeing the visual and non-visual manifestations of disaster capitalism and amplifications of state violence against Indigenous people, where current colonial bordering shapes injustices. Spiegel (2021) analysed settler-colonial territorialisation and related visual tactics of control, amid state strategies of building new fossil fuel pipelines, along with Indigenous-led resistance that includes diverse practices of counter-watching and land defence. The analysis offers a case for engaging hegemonic and counter-hegemonic visual practices, exploring different value systems, vantage points and articulations that challenge entrenched structures of white supremacy.

Border studies is invariably confronted with dilemmas about which goals, methodological combinations and methodological sequencing will guide anti-racist, anti-capitalist and decolonial research on bordering processes and/or border subversion. Alongside critical discussions of nation-building (Rossetto & Lo Presti, 2021), visual methods offer a chance to unsettle, challenge, subvert and disrupt dominant visual cultures in bordering as well as assumptions in research communities. Some visuals are auto-reflexive or otherwise highly individualised; some, by contrast, more participatory, such as digital storytelling – which was gaining momentum as a research tool prior to and ascended in significance during the pandemic (for obvious reasons amid mobility restrictions), to provide more culturally nuanced and socioeconomically informed understandings of challenges of who cross territorial lines have allowed, during the COVID era.

While some methods are more centred around unpacking surveillance cultures, racialised capitalism and violent political cultures that shape contemporary practices of rule, others focus on documenting or articulating the multiplicity of situated cultural and social identities and relationships that shape life in – or in reference to – bordering regimes, de-centering the border itself from the discussion. As the COVID era disrupted research trajectories and challenged researchers to think freshly about new ways of engaging with participants in times of duress (Valdez & Gubrium, 2020), border studies have pursued diverse methodological paths and inevitably need to think at length on critical dilemmas in framing moral, ethical and strategic visual practices. Taking up the challenge to consider “in/visibilities beyond the spectacularisation” (Brambilla, 2021) requires attending to both the obvious and clearly visible and the subtle, sometimes entirely overlooked dimensions of living with borders. Increasingly, there is recognition of the need for not only an intersectional but also an intergenerational lens in border research – particularly given

that youth experiences of borders and bordering processes remain under-researched (Venken et al., 2021). Yet, if the COVID era has ushered forward a new sense of urgency in “seeing” situated injustices that can vary according to age, class, race and ethnicity and how they link to aspirations for “transnational solidarity”, the solidarity-building is never a given. Visual displays of “solidarity” are easily commodified by transnational corporations and political elites who underperform, as we have seen in COVID times (Sniečkutė & Fiore, 2020), and images can mislead, as we have also seen time and time again (Toukan, 2021). The cultural politics of visual production, circulation and meaning-making all shape not only what is seen and not seen but how they are seen and not seen, and critical disjunctments between those producing and those viewing can, at times, be considerable as well.

4 | CONCLUSION: FUTURE AVENUES OF VISUAL RESEARCH ON PROCESSES OF BORDERING

In reviewing scholarly trajectories that frame the aesthetic turn in border studies, we conclude that there are diverse, fast-changing sets of visual technologies, practices and critical cultures at play in making sense of life in relation to contemporary borders. At times border aesthetics can be clearly or subtly disrupting state-ordered frames of visibility, while, at other times, visual practices may be entangled and co-opted by the very forces they seek to challenge. We are simultaneously impressed by and at times skeptical about the power of visual practices to disrupt global and nationalist power structures that depend on state-centric bordering practices. Just as geography has raised questions about the power of maps and counter-maps to “subvert” asymmetrical and systemic power relations, the power of photography and video methodologies also need to be understood as contingent. Studying hegemonic ways of seeing needs to be complemented by exploring both counter-hegemonic visual practices and ways of communicating that go beyond the visual. What is perhaps most striking about the recent literature has been the growing number of new multi-method approaches that, in varying ways, relate to Brambilla's (2015b) aspiration in moving from “border as a method of capital” to “borderscape as a method for a geographical opposition to capitalism.” Exploring this shift itself can be a fruitful nexus of analysis across research fields, whether in critically pursuing issues of structural discrimination, white supremacy, unjust treatment of migrant populations and in knowledge production processes, or unsettling other assumptions predicated on colonial borders as they are familiarly known.

Cartographic, photographic and videographic practices as well as visualities created through other visual methods all offer avenues for geographers in mixed methods combinations seeking to subvert state-ordered frames of visibility. Yet, the situated social justice intentions behind these efforts, the idiosyncratic perspectives and experiences of different research interlocutors, and the various critical epistemologies and ontologies at play can all matter as much as the practices themselves in aesthetics-oriented research. If the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented regimes of digital visibility to certain issues, we are nevertheless reminded that these are always only selectively visible and selectively understood – and also that digital worlds are ultimately a mere part of the wider spectrum of visual politics being negotiated across the planet. Ultimately, while certain visual practices may unsettle current regimes of bordering, they may also always be at risk of being co-opted in subtle or overt ways. In centring the idea of subversion, we stress that there is always a need to understand who is seeking to subvert what, why, how and with outcomes over not only the duration of a project but over the long-term well beyond.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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