

## **Guest Editorial: Difference and Globalization**

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Our original aspiration for this special issue was to attract a broad base of visual communication scholars working on the nexus of difference and globalization, with the aim to define the substance and assess the significance of this particular dialectic in our field. While globalization does entail the ever-growing significance of deterritorialized practices and transcultural flows, these connections, movements and exchanges still largely occur across specific locales and identities, and through appeals to various dimensions of cultural and social difference. Purposefully comprehensive in scope, our call for papers led to over 70 abstract submissions on topics such as contemporary visualizations of European identity, Korean pop music videos, representations of Arabs and the Middle East in popular television shows, glocalization in digital storytelling, and grassroots images of LGBT and queer movements. The special issue's theme drew in proposals that tackled the relationship between globalization and race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and religion in visual communication from a number of theoretical angles, including but not limited to diasporic, queer, postcolonial, feminist, and intercultural perspectives.

Needless to say, here we can only propose a small though diverse selection of the possible theoretical, methodological and topical approaches to the remit of our special issue. Taken together, the selected contributions address questions related to the integration and deployment of major dimensions of social and cultural difference in visual communication materials with a globalizing reach, the perspectives and practices of designers, image-makers and media producers in relation to the work involved in the planning and creation of such materials, and both the dominant ways of seeing and unique experiences that impact the visual 'reading' of globalization. As a whole, the special issue is based on three main assumptions regarding the centrality of visual communication, the significance of difference, and the ways in which identities are constructed and exchanged in (con)texts of cultural globalization.

### **The visual and the global**

One first, key assumption underpinning our work here is that the visual is a privileged and in fact crucial mode of communication in (con)texts of globalization. This is both thanks to its perceptual availability and transcultural potential. Let us recall that the visual has an ability to authenticate, resemble and connote without the aid of language, and often in the absence of a clear demarcation of its possible uses and functions. In the face of cultural and historical idiosyncrasies,

the concurrently indexical, iconic and symbolic substance of images contributes to making the visual especially powerful as a mode of communication in the contemporary semioscape, that is, the “globalizing circulation of symbols, sign systems and meaning-making practices” (Thurlow and Aiello, 2007, p. 308) that has become vital to post-industrial politics and economics.

It is also largely for this reason that visual communication scholars have taken a keen interest in the study of globalization processes, although they have so far focused predominantly on ‘traditional’ media (e.g. film, advertising, television, journalism) and more recently on digital and social media. Because visual communication transcends a narrow definition of visual ‘media’, though, we concur with Couldry’s (2009) view that due to the progressive hybridization of communication practices and products “the media” should no longer be seen “as a privileged site for accessing a common world” (p. 441). Combined with Silverstone’s (2002) claim that “all communication involves mediation” and that the latter is “a transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed” (p. 761), this expanded definition assists us in fulfilling our aim to offer a perspective that firmly places the visual mode at the centre of communication in its various forms of mediation. Therefore, this special issue examines a range of visual and broadly multimodal communication materials, drawn from genres that comprise while also reaching beyond those that are typical of ‘traditional’ or new media, and that include formats such as women’s lifestyle magazines (Chen and Machin), corporate store design (Aiello and Dickinson), international news magazine covers (Nothias), ethnic museum websites (Johnson and Carneiro), participatory film and photography (Shankar; Pristed Nielsen and Thidemann Faber), and urban space in its own right (Pauwels).

Spread across the digital and the analogue, the ephemeral and the material, and the institutional and participatory, the texts and practices examined in this collection of contributions offer a particularly rich snapshot of the status and potential of visual communication in relation to globalizing phenomena such as old and recent migration, gendered lifestyle identities, corporate branding, urban cosmopolitanism, postcolonial inequalities, and neoliberal aid and development. Within this assortment of issues and foci, our emphasis on the visual gives us the opportunity to shed further light on some of the contradictions and ambiguities of globalization in its multiple facets.

### **Difference in globalization**

Another important assumption for the purposes of this special issue is that difference is central to globalization. The rise of global capitalism has been overwhelmingly associated with the increasing ‘loss’ of difference in cultural production. As a fundamental issue in global interconnectivity, the key tension between homogenization and heterogenization has generated

interest and apprehension over the preservation and disappearance of difference across cultures. It follows that globalization is often mistaken for a finite state of economic decentring and cultural homogenization, which has occurred without reference to geographical divides, political struggles, economic imbalances, cultural specificities, and social inequalities. And while scholarship on the homogenizing forces and effects of globalization has flourished, less systematic attention has been given to how cultural and social difference may be mobilized for symbolic and material profit in global(izing) communication contexts, while also being a significant factor in the production and reception of texts. Although a critique of globalization as a homogenizing process is important and based on compelling evidence, it is therefore necessary to keep accounting for the increasingly complex, powerful and indeed heterogeneous ways in which contemporary communication is realized in everyday life (cf. Kraidy, 2005; Georgiou, 2013).

The term globalization “suggests all-inclusiveness, along with a certain finitude and limit” (Featherstone, 2006, p. 387) and in turn this ‘all-inclusiveness’ can be critically translated into “an expansion of capitalist production, market-based consumption and Western culture” (Waters, 2001, p. 232). Scholars, as well as political actors, activists and the general public are divided as to the nature and impact of globalization and its ‘effects’ on national, ethnic or more broadly ‘local’ discourses. Nonetheless, in its common usage the term ‘globalization’ is often the outcome of the linguistic form of nominalization, whereby this concept is discursively “transformed from an action into a reified event” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 44).

By representing this process through a noun rather than verbal forms, nominalization removes agentful human action from discourse and works to strategically frame the inequalities and tensions that originate from globalization as an inevitable and completed ‘states of things’ which can neither be attributed to specific institutions or individuals nor reversed, or even simply changed. An emblematic example of nominalization resides in accounts of the ‘new’ and ‘global’ economy by national governments and international agencies like the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, where ‘globalization’ is de facto equated with a quasi-natural condition grounded in the inexorable expansion of capitalist structures (Fairclough, 2003). It follows that speaking of globalization as an entity and an actor in its own right, rather than as enacted through specific actions and practices, may contribute to “the elision – and, to take it further, we might say thereby to the mystification and obfuscation – of agency and responsibility” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 13).

Clearly, globalization is a subject of controversy par excellence that demands a very nuanced deliberation of its many real and perceived trade-offs and dilemmas. The cultural aspect of globalization relates primarily to the meeting of different value systems and the ways in which they are deemed (ir)reconcilable. As a process rather than a state, globalization offers a “single interactional space” (Belay, 1996, p. 332) in which multiple identities overlap, interact, and

compete. This resonates with Appadurai's (1996) groundbreaking description of contemporary global cultural 'flows' and his now iconic argument that there are evident disjunctures in our globalizing world, in that "people, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow increasingly nonisomorphic paths" (p. 37). Generally, globalization may be defined as a process that "involves expanding worldwide flows of material objects and symbols, and the proliferation of organizations and institutions of global reach that structure those flows" (Lechner and Boli, 2005), but this needs a further qualification of the kind of globalization one is referring to: economic, political, cultural (and which aspects of culture exactly) and even then the term may remain somewhat misleading. Similarly the 'anti-globalization' movement, with its mission to reform unbridled forms of capitalism and competition, is somewhat misnomered since it is not propagating cultural differentiation per se, nor nationalist or regional sentiments.

Speaking of difference, rather than sameness, allows us to examine globalization itself as an ongoing processual phenomenon entailing intensified flows and overlaps of both material and symbolic products and practices across geographical, institutional, and cultural borders. We steer away from a conceptualization of globalization as a "linear process of social integration" (Featherstone, 2006, p. 387) with the understanding that cultural exchanges and intercultural engagement are deeply rooted in the power relations underlying globalism – or advanced capitalism – and the corresponding concentrations of power that operate in specific urban, national or regional contexts. Though historically Europe played a dominant role in the creation of an early version 'world culture', or more precisely a 'trans-European' culture, founded on particular political and philosophical principles, ways of organizing and institutionalizing life and the firm belief of its universal value (Lechner and Boli, 2005), it never was – nor is today – characterized by a monolithic culture. Moreover, other parts of the world since long have taken a stake in defining the contours and rules of a world culture, or at least of some of the "processes which are producing the globalization of culture" (Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 306).

It is in a web of locales and through a wealth of trajectories that globalization comes into being. Hence, this special issue strives to cover as much ground as possible, both figuratively and literally. With a selection of contributions whose geographical foci span across Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, our aim is to highlight the multiple directions, shifting forms and ideological variations taken by flows of semiotic materials and visual resources. Just as globalization is not a given or a state of things that is independent of human – that is, economic, social, political – responsibility, the actions and practices that occur within and across national or regional borders are still most influential in shaping the dynamics and realities of contemporary global processes.

It is in this sense that, in regards to communication, there are voices and visions that are better able to cross geographical, cultural, and institutional boundaries, and circulate as symbolic

capital (Bourdieu, 1991) by virtue of their sanctioned, well-supported, at times capillary, and ultimately powerful political economy. At the same time, the growing capacity of reception to turn into production (or, at the very least, response), together with the ongoing merging of genres that are usually found in institutional or corporate communication and those that are characteristic of self- or community-based representation (see Thumim, 2012), make for a contradictory and even ‘messy’ picture of global communication.

### **Difference, identity and discourse**

In light of such power-laden complexity and differentiation, a third and final assumption that shapes the special issue lies in the recognition that cultural and social differences are largely constituted through discursive means and that, in late modern times, such identities also contribute to generating tangible political and economic realities – and in particular inequalities – that reach far beyond local or national contexts. Stuart Hall’s intellectual legacy is evident here, and we are especially indebted to his work on identity formation, in which he highlighted that identities are never fixed, but are constantly (re)produced in “a process of becoming rather than being” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). To explain this process, Hall relied on the psychoanalytic notion of identification, according to which the human self is permanently divided between ‘being’ and ‘having’ the other. Because we first identify with the ways in which we are seen by others and then with what we want to be, our self is permanently divided. In this regard, Hall (1996) stated that identity “is constantly destabilized by what it leaves out” (p. 5). This accounts for a dynamic approach to difference as a defining trait of identity formation, since identity is seen as dependent – at all stages – on a constitutive outside, which is also constantly changing (Butler, 1990).

The notion of difference involved in identification is best explained by Derrida’s (1982) post-structuralist notion of *différance*, which entails the ‘other’ as a constitutive part of the ‘same’ (cf. Butler, 1990). Whereas from a structuralist point of view the ‘same’ is defined by its not being the ‘other’, from this standpoint the ‘same’ is continuously shifting and adjusting its boundaries to include or exclude parts – in excess – of the ‘other’. Identities, then, are not an essence or even a pre-condition, but the outcome of (unstable) positioning in relation to the structures of meaning to which subjects are summoned in historically and culturally situated contexts. In other words, identities are temporary points of attachment to “the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 1996, p. 6). Identities, then, do not correspond to an origin in the past, but they arise from a fictional process of narrativization that uses the resources provided by history, culture and language.

The ‘new’ or advanced capitalism that underlies contemporary processes of globalization is set apart by a centrality of communication. In this context, difference (or heterogeneity) becomes a

key resource for success in the heavily semiotized, rather than simply mediatized, global marketplace(s) of contemporaneity. Arguably, the neoliberal framework of contemporary globalization is not about erasing difference or engendering homogeneity, but it is rather tied to the active management and exploitation of specific identities—for example, locality, ethnicity, nationality or even broader constructs such as ‘Africanness’. As the political and social project that sustains and co-constitutes advanced capitalism, neoliberalism contributes to the (re)structuring of identities and social relations in ways that justify forms of governance where difference is deployed as a positive or negative form of currency. An exemplary application of the neoliberal ethic is the framing of individual agency in terms of ‘virtues’ or ‘flaws’ in the globalizing discourse against social welfare (Fairclough, 2000; Hall, 2011). And because globalism – or the idea that the cultural dimensions of globalization are regulated by the logics of the marketplace – is at the core of much of the production and distribution of visual imagery in late modern times, rather than undergoing a crude process of homogenization, the representation of cultural and social specificities is most often ‘designed’ to fit into a globalizing aesthetic and, in turn, be mobilized as symbolic capital.

Ultimately, success in the marketplace(s) of advanced capitalism may be progressively tied to any given economic, political and cultural actor’s ability to deploy difference in communication, but only insofar as this is a highly structured (and possibly sanitized) endeavour for the achievement of globalist ends. And it is in contemporary ‘design-intensive’ societies (Lash and Urry, 1994) that the visual – in its disparate forms, including mediated imagery, the urban built environment, design, branding, and material culture – becomes a highly privileged form of currency for the strategic performance, exchange and production of prized identities. A multi-perspectival approach to questions on the interplay of “the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence” (Wilson and Dissanayake, 1996, p. 6) enables us to offer a wealth of insights into some of the ways in which the visual contributes to shaping, constraining, and expressing both social and cultural difference in the globalizing, rather than already global, arenas of contemporary media and communication.

The seven contributions included in the special issue rely on methods such as interviews with image-makers and media producers, on-site observation, field photography, qualitative and quantitative content analysis, and participatory visual research. From a theoretical and analytical standpoint, several of the major frameworks that have become established in the inherently interdisciplinary field of visual communication are aptly introduced, systematically applied, and further developed. A combination of well-known and emerging scholars makes for an unusually energetic take on concepts and concerns that are distinctive of multimodal and critical discourse analysis, social semiotics, rhetorical criticism, visual anthropology, and visual sociology.

Through this multivocal approach to research design and analysis, there are three main

themes that arise from the special issue and that pertain to the recontextualization, stylization and texturization of difference, respectively. As we will see in a moment, each of these themes addresses a distinct though not isolated process of transformation undergone by specific dimensions of cultural and social difference in their encounters with globalization, through a range of visual resources and with related discursive outcomes. Overall, recontextualization, stylization and texturization are all terms that point to agentful interventions on difference's visual substance for the purposes of communication aimed at more or less implied globalizing publics.

### **Recontextualizing difference**

In globalizing settings of visual communication, difference is often 'moved' from one specific cultural or social context to another. This transfer is usually associated with adaptation, slippage, and even struggle. This process of displacement, recentering and reframing may be defined as recontextualization, insofar as it is characterized by acts of top-down colonization and/or bottom-up appropriation (cf. Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). In either case, and often as a combination of the two, recontextualization entails significant changes in semiosis (as in the use of particular visual resources) which point to broader changes in ideologies and practices.

Here we cannot address the vast literature on the notion of recontextualization that has been produced across sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis since the early 1990s. We are however interested in tracing some of the movements undertaken by visual resources used to communicate specific identities to globalizing publics and, in doing so, also examining the changes undergone by these resources and identities. And while we leave the drawing of major conclusions to the special issue's contributors themselves, through this first, overarching theme we aim to highlight that the movement of semiotic material across borders is never neutral or straightforward, and in fact contributes to continually redefining the position and status of given cultural and social traits over others.

In their article "The local and the global in the visual design of a Chinese women's lifestyle magazine: A multimodal critical discourse approach", Ariel Chen and David Machin foreground a major process of recontextualization, which has become fairly common in the regional globalization of media patterns in East Asia, while also reaching into 'Western' popular culture. In their analysis of how the Chinese women's magazine *Rayli* has changed over nearly two decades, Chen and Machin uncover designers' perspectives on the magazine's progressive integration of discursive elements originating from Japanese *Kawaii* culture, which emphasizes cuteness and vulnerability in contexts of youth culture, particularly those aimed at girls and young women. They argue that, together with the gradual adoption of more properly global branding and design principles, the recontextualization of 'cuteness' into Chinese media discourse and women's lifestyle

magazines in particular contributes to redefining core Chinese values regarding social relations and womanhood alike.

In a similar fashion, in “Beyond authenticity: A visual-material analysis of locality in the global redesign of Starbucks stores”, Giorgia Aiello and Greg Dickinson outline the trajectories taken by visual-material signifiers of locality as these were transferred into the global store design strategy devised by Starbucks in order to revive its image in the face of the economic crisis and the McDonaldization of its brand. As Starbucks opted for an aesthetic of locality, rather than authenticity, the new store design strategy imported and adapted meaning potentials of materiality and community from cultural repositories associated with vernacular cosmopolitanism. This process of recontextualization, Aiello and Dickinson argue, entails a top-down selection of discourses and rhetorics of locality which, in turn, contributes to redefining bottom-up practices around consumption and sociality.

In his article ““Rising”, “hopeful”, “new”: Visualizing Africa in the age of globalization”, Toussaint Nothias offers an account of yet another kind of recontextualization: that of discursive characteristics that are integral to the ‘Afro-pessimism’ that has for long characterized postcolonial and globalizing media portrayals of Africa into the emergent and apparently opposite ‘Afro-optimism’ that has become popular in neoliberal mediatized debates on contemporary Africa. In his analysis of British, French and US international news magazine covers, Nothias highlights that a host of visual resources originating from globalizing communication genres like advertising and stock photography are mobilized to frame ‘Africa’ in optimistic and even glamorous terms. Such visual framing, however, is eminently constrained by the (re)inscription of some of the very same key features of Afro-pessimism – including essentialist, hierarchical and racialized assumptions – into the ‘positive’ portrayal of Africa as an entire continent.

With a critical and participatory focus on a related topic, Shankar’s article “Towards a critical visual pedagogy: A response to the “End of Poverty” narrative” problematizes NGOs’ appropriation of neoliberal discourses and imagery emphasizing the desperate poverty, pathological helplessness, and radical otherness of marginalized communities in India as a way to solicit international aid and continued private and government funding for development projects. Following this critique, Shankar then proposes yet another form of recontextualization of this narrative, that is, one that works to deconstruct its ways of seeing and craft alternative forms of visibility within marginalized communities and in sight of a sustained engagement with both local and global audiences.

In keeping with a sustained analysis of ‘othering’ in the age of globalization, in “Communicating visual identities on ethnic museum websites” Melissa Johnson and Larissa Carneiro describe how certain stereotypes associated with specific ethnic groups in the United



States are actively appropriated and reframed by non-profit ethnic museums to craft visual and multimodal narratives for their official websites. By mobilizing some of the same tropes that were previously used to profile and discriminate against the groups that they represent, ethnic museum websites actively promote ‘self-othering’ narratives, which work to turn such stereotypes into positive identity markers. In this regard, Johnson and Carneiro offer examples ranging from ethnic museum websites’ emphasis on heritage to the selection of metonymic imagery associated with some of the readily recognizable ‘characteristics’ of any given group.

In a similar vein, the research participants involved in Helene Pristed Nielsen and Stine Thidemann Faber’s participatory study “A strange familiarity? Place perceptions among the globally mobile” draw from a repertoire of representational resources that are available to them in the space of their host country (Denmark) to produce photographs that ‘defamiliarize’ and, in this way, redefine some of the established, local meanings attached to particular places and signs in space through the lens of their personal, embodied experiences as recent immigrants. Finally, with his visual essay “World cities reframed: A visual take on globalization”, Luc Pauwels offers a striking visualization of the juxtaposition of the unique spatiality of internationally known cities like New York, Copenhagen, Hong Kong and Athens with both visual and linguistic references to geographical and cultural ‘elsewheres’. The co-presence and even collapse of signifiers pointing to globalization, exoticism, and locality contributes to redefining each of these terms in their own right and in relation to one another. Urban metropolitan spaces are indeed sites par excellence where encounters with difference become apparent.

### **Stylizing difference**

In conjunction with the recontextualization processes outlined above, another theme that surfaces from the special issue’s contributions is that difference is often ‘performed’ in ways that are tied to the pursuit of symbolic capital. Broadly speaking, the notion of stylization pertains to the “promotion of particular ways of being (or styles) involving language, image, social practice and material culture” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2006, 105; also cf. Cameron 2000). In other words, “a reflexively managed resource” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2006, p. 104) such as visual semiosis can be mobilized to produce and stage, rather than simply represent, prized identities. In the process of stylization, therefore, the substance of representation is actively managed and ‘designed’ to achieve discursive ends regulated through broader social practices—for example, those associated with lifestyle and consumer capitalism. What surfaces from this theme, then, is that the globalizing communication of difference is most often preceded by the strategic foregrounding, enhancement, containment, reduction, or even loss of specific identity traits.

Johnson and Carneiro’s article offers a prime example in this regard. In their detailed

content analysis of visual resources used across ethnic museum websites, they point out that there is a shared tendency to craft strategic imagery aimed at projecting a desirable identity both for publicity and funding purposes, for example by foregrounding uplifting pastoral sceneries or historic architectural details, while relying on highly muted if not absent narratives of a specific ethnic group's history of hardship through migration and discrimination, both within the original homeland and in the host country (in this case the United States). Along the same lines, what emerges both from Nothias' and Chen and Machin's articles is that, in news and women's magazines, images of specific identities are increasingly abstracted and decontextualized, to the extent that complex issues regarding particular groups or places are visualized through symbolic and generic visuals that are typical of advertising and stock imagery, and which could be equally used to illustrate a number of other texts.

Responding to largely different exigencies, on the other hand, imagery associated with humanitarian aid and development tends to rely on illusions of authenticity. As Shankar points out in his critique of the "End of Poverty" narrative, photographic images of marginalized communities in developing countries are most often staged to communicate their subjects as 'others' urgently needing help by means of heightened realism, or modality, a deliberate focus on the interaction between portrayed individuals and the viewer through the adoption of a 'demand' gaze, and the selective exclusion of visual traces pointing to the relationships that portrayed subjects may have with other members of their communities and the image-makers themselves. Pristed Nielsen and Thidemann Faber's research participants are in turn 'stylized' in their self-representation, inasmuch as the performativity of their images is constrained by social norms regarding the separation of private and public space together with their own positionality as outsiders.

Both Aiello and Dickinson's work on Starbucks stores and Pauwels' visual essay on globalizing cities point to yet another form of stylization: that of indoor and outdoor urban space for market- and lifestyle-driven arenas such as commerce, tourism and planning. In both cases, there is an orchestrated attempt to balance and foreground the dialectic between the global and the local, in the pursuit of distinction within recognition and by combining generic references to architectural and consumer cosmopolitanism with markers of urban 'grit' and specificity.

### **Texturizing difference**

The special issue's third theme is rooted in the attention given by some of the contributions to both hegemonic and resistive attempts to confer 'texture' – that is, a specific feel and experiential quality (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2011) – to the visual communication of cultural and social difference. As a way to underscore the processual nature of this final, burgeoning theme, we propose the term 'texturization' to describe the active deployment, amplification and organization

of the graininess, consistency, and concreteness of difference through visual and multimodal means. While texturization may seem to be odds with stylization, we suggest that the former may in fact be an emergent development of the latter. Both stylization and texturization involve the transformation of representational substance for performative reasons and with the aim to craft desirable identities. Whereas stylization often entails techniques aimed at ‘cleansing’ images from ‘inappropriate’ characteristics (Cameron, 2000), texturization works to add visual cues aimed at invoking the emplaced, embodied and overall phenomenological qualities of given representational resources.

Germane to the now hugely popular notion of affect, texture is a visual rendition of haptic and more broadly sensorial, indexical features. In other words, texture is a semiotic resource that conjures up sensations regarding the physical and motivated – rather than conventional and arbitrary – nature of visual communication (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2011). It is in this sense that texturization entails a purposeful attempt to amplify perception through residual or excessive cues and, in doing so, also interrupt interpretation. References to texture, albeit often more symbolic than indexical, are present across our special issue’s contributions. For example, Chen and Machin explain that ‘cuteness’ is associated with the visual representation of items of clothing that range from fur and flannel, to imply softness, to ruffles and lacy textiles, which point to the delicateness and vulnerability of childhood. Likewise, Johnson and Carneiro describe some of the ways in which textural aspects of layout and backgrounding are emphasized to imply tradition.

Generally, such references to texture seem to design ‘weight’ into given representational resources, while also functioning as a visual counterpoint to more stylized cues, like the increasingly decontextualized backgrounds and human ‘types’ which, as both Nothias and Chen and Machin demonstrate, are now commonly used in print magazines. Pauwels’ visual essay offers a vivid impression of the hybrid layering of textures in the urban fabric of world-known or aspiring world-class cities, from the smoothness of the glass and steel used in landmark buildings and the cleanliness of fonts and imagery in outdoor advertising to the roughness of graffitied walls and the unevenness of human bodies in public space. It is in this layering of urban textures that Pristed Nielsen and Thidemann Faber’s research participants find points of attachment to engage with questions about their own lived experiences of difference as recent immigrants in North Denmark, for example through the expression of affiliation with the materiality of particular places and localities.

In two cases, however, texturization is at the very centre of efforts to communicate difference as concrete and material. On the one hand, Aiello and Dickinson’s article examines Starbucks’ top-down approach to texturizing its stores through visual-material anchors to the local provenance of fixtures and furnishings, which are visibly dented, scratched, grooved and mismatched. In this way, the Seattle-based corporation strategically embeds its homogenizing

forces in the material feel and sensuous experience of emplaced difference. On the other hand, in his own pedagogical practice, Shankar advocates the bottom-up texturization of community-based film and photography, as a means to reveal the mechanisms of production and radically question the implied objectivity and authenticity of imagery that is commonly used to portray impoverished communities. By crafting an aesthetic that relies on semiotic resources grounded in self-authoring practices – and which, therefore, are often shaky, blurry, or compositionally ‘messy’ – Shankar and his students mark their visual narratives as embodied and relational, thus questioning both the implied imagined audiences and institutional goals of development-oriented imagery of poverty and suffering.

In both cases, though with wildly dissimilar motivations and results, texturization contributes to bringing out the grain and frictions of globalization, rather than its supposed seamlessness and liquidity. This, in turn, has an impact on producers and viewers’ experience of difference within the global, insofar as the presumed opposition between homogenization and heterogenization as well as the hegemonic and the vernacular becomes untenable. To conclude, it is precisely such grain and frictions that this special issue as a whole aims to highlight, with the hope that visual communication scholars and those who are more generally interested in cultural globalization find methodological, empirical, and theoretical entry points into further critical investigations of the numerous, unanticipated, and even seemingly contradictory trajectories of contemporary cultural production and exchange in and through visual communication.

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