

Imagery and Association in a group based method: the Visual Matrix

Introduction

The visual matrix is a qualitative, group-based method that was originally designed for researching experience of artistic production or reception and the psychosocial impact of aesthetic objects, processes or events on audiences, groups or communities¹. Its applications have since broadened insofar as it offers an empirical method with which to research the psychosocial and symbolic aspects of cultural imaginaries. Following Charles Taylor (2004) a cultural imaginary can be thought of as the expression or representation, in the form of images or stories, of a common background understanding that makes possible communication and social practices – it thus underlies how a group forms its ideas about interaction with other people, the natural and man-made world, and the moral order.

A psychosocial account of a cultural imaginary includes a consideration of the identifications and projections through which members of a group or community reproduce and relate to the world in which they imagine themselves to live. An unarticulated and partly unconscious cultural imaginary finds localised expression in a visual matrix and acquires symbolic form through the image presentations and figurative language of the participants. The symbolisation is ‘presentational’ rather than discursive (Langer (1948 [1942]) – its function is to find imagistic forms for the affect that circulates in the group.

The visual matrix involves a carefully designed facilitation process which is set in motion by a visual or sensory stimulus that bears on the research problem. The aim is to discover what the stimulus *produces in* the participants and the use they make of presented imagery, rather than *what they think about it*.

In this chapter I describe the visual matrix method, briefly highlighting its applications and some of the theoretical resources that have informed its development². However my focus will be on the conduct of the visual matrix and the nature of symbolisation within it, illustrated with an extended example of its use in an arts and community setting. The interpretive protocol that follows a visual matrix session will be explained before concluding with an observation on the relationship between imagery and the language in which it is expressed. The case example has been chosen to highlight the fact that in this method the group is the primary unit of analysis, and the focus of interest is on shared rather than individual experience. The reader is also advised to view a short demonstration matrix in relation to a photography exhibition on You Tube³. This conveys the nature of the ‘snowflake’ seating arrangement and the thinking that takes place within it.

Overview of visual matrix process

A visual matrix can accommodate between six and thirty members who are invited to gather in a room that offers the possibility of creating a setting, free from external interruption and where time

¹ The use of a matrix, rather than a thematic group discussion (as in a focus group) takes practical inspiration from the practice of ‘Social Dreaming’ developed by Gordon Lawrence (2005).

² The theoretical underpinnings of the visual matrix draw on Wilfred Bion’s theory of thinking (1959, 1962, 1970) and Alfred Lorenzer’s account of scenic experience (1986) - both of which are highlighted in this article. For a fuller discussion see Froggett et al 2015 in which other sources are also discussed, such as the Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome which has been descriptively important in depicting the structure, motion and affect of the matrix (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), and Donald Winnicott’s notion of potential space (1971).

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttHHty0f7Pg>

boundaries can be maintained. The chairs are arranged into a snowflake pattern – a seating configuration that encourages people to speak into a shared space, rather than making eye contact and addressing one another directly (see Figure 1.). This helps to avoid the pairings, positionings and power plays that are typical of group dynamics (Bion 1961).

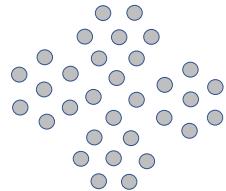


Figure 1.
Snowflake Seating Configuration

An entire visual matrix session has three parts. Firstly, a stimulus is presented. This is primarily visual (such as photographs, artworks, exhibitions or performance), or it could be designed to promote visualisation through figurative language such as poetry. This is followed immediately by the visual matrix itself which lasts from 45 minutes to an hour. The role of the facilitators is to model the associative process through occasional participation, but not to lead or shape the content of the matrix once the initial stimulus has been delivered. Providing assured facilitation protects the matrix from internal distractions and external impingements, a ‘reverie’ can emerge. This is a state of mind described by Wilfred Bion as daydream-like, indicative in a visual matrix of a well-functioning container (explained below), in which unbidden, unforced and often surprisingly creative associations of ideas spontaneously occur (Bion 1970).

Once seated in the snowflake, participants are invited by the facilitator to present images, thoughts and feelings that the stimulus has aroused in them. These are prompted by affective and sensory experiences within the group, but typically include biographical and cultural material that are brought to mind and expressed in a flow of associations. Images offered to the matrix can come from a wide range of sources: visual memories, dreams, landscapes, films or other cultural material. At times the associations will form into clusters of imagery from which other thoughts branch out. Frequently other sensory registers are introduced: acoustic, haptic, olfactory, kinesthetic. Ideas or strands of thought can appear with specific affective intensities, after which they may be overlaid by other images and ideas and lie ‘dormant’, re-emerging later in the matrix. Alternatively, they intertwine or diverge, building rhizomatically into a form of collage⁴. Seldom do they lead to linear themes and the facilitation process actively discourages participants from rationalisation or analysis. If thematic discussion, or long narratives occur one of the facilitators will offer an image to pull the matrix back into associative mode. Experience felt and enacted ‘in the moment’ is prioritised and, because this is prompted by other participants’ associations, it has a shared character.

Key to a well-functioning visual matrix is the ‘containment’ offered by the setting. The idea of a container-contained situation is central to Wilfred Bion’s theory of thinking (Bion 1959, 1962 1970) as a process of affectively and sensuously grounded symbolisation. ‘Containment’ depicts the conditions under which sense impressions are received by a receptive consciousness (the container) able to process them into thought. Bion, for whom the prototype of the container-contained relationship is

⁴ Associations spark off each other, giving rise to new sequences and clusters of imagery, and ‘nodes’ of ideas or affective intensities. The Deleuzian metaphor of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) captures the formation of images, affects and ideas and non-linear thought processes of the visual matrix.

the mother-infant nursing couple, describes the process in terms of metaphors of mental metabolism and digestion. A key function of the container is to allay anxiety so enabling sensory experience, which is always freighted with affect, to become thinkable and communicable. A similar process is at work in a visual matrix which aims to provide the containing conditions under which a group can metabolise experience transforming it first into imagery of its own and thence into a form of verbal language.

The associative process of the matrix has a mediatative aspect and often resembles the non-linear thinking of day-dreaming - similar to 'reverie' (Bion ([1962] 1970), where what comes to mind produces affectively-laden ideas in imagistic form. If the process is working well (which is to say associations are flowing spontaneously between participants and linking easily to one another (Bion 1959)), the group maintains a calm receptiveness to emergent imagery that is relatively uninhibited by discursive convention. The participants should feel 'held' by the matrix so that any awkwardness or anxiety on their part is moderated enabling them to process the thoughts that arise. The non-intrusive facilitation which allows thoughts to emerge rather than setting an agenda helps to avoid projections by the group onto a leader, or onto one another. The process should be led by the images that the participants offer, without undue dominance of powerful voices. The facilitation and setting are above all designed to maintain the matrix in associative mode. If it veers into analysis or argument the facilitator will gently draw it back by offering another image.

After a short break the matrix is followed by a post-matrix discussion and the chairs are re-arranged into a semi-circle around a flip chart or white board. The group itself maps the material produced by the matrix in order to identify not only clusters of imagery but also their affective and aesthetic character and intensity, linkages between clusters, and their significance within the matrix as a whole. The post matrix discussion effectively enables the participants to establish the frame for an interpretive analysis which is subsequently carried out by the researchers. The research team work as a panel on the audio-recording and transcript of the proceedings, according to a specially developed protocol. This will be discussed in more detail after an example has been presented.

Applications of The Visual Matrix

The method has been useful in researching aesthetic and affective experience of cultural objects, events or processes which people might otherwise struggle to talk about in words, whether because of personal reticence or social taboo, or because the accompanying emotions are conflicted, or because no clear discourse in which to express the experience has formed. The use of the visual matrix in investigating what emerges in the encounter between publics and contemporary visual or performative artworks is a case in point since people often find it difficult to convey after the event a lived aesthetic experience which depends on sensory and emotional engagement 'in the moment'. (Froggett et al 2015)

Applications of the method have extended to include highly sensitive topics such as breast cancer (Haga Gripsrud et al 2018), erectile dysfunction and impotence (Froggett and Manley 2017), death and dying (Ramvi et al 2017), substance misuse (Manley et al 2015). It has been used to understand the experience of people living with dementia (Clarke 2018, Bennett et al 2019) and their carers and advocates (Liveng et al 2017) where the verbal skills required to pursue a line of discursive reasoning may have diminished, but the visual imagination remains active. In addition, it has offered a means to understand public responses to a variety of mental health issues that arouse anxiety, including obsessional compulsive disorder, suicide, chronic pain, and being a patient⁵. The visual matrix has

⁵ Besides its primary use as a research method the visual matrix is also used as a public engagement tool. Workshops with these topics occurred in the context of 'The Big Anxiety' festival of Mental Health in Sydney Australia in 2017.

opened up a complex view of responses to psychosocial challenges which are often thought of in stereotypical terms, such as the move from working life into retirement (Liveng et al 2017). Finally it has been used in art-science contexts where it is difficult to characterise the knowledge that emerges at the interface of disciplines (Muller et al 2018) and in progress at the time of writing to research the anxieties posed by the prospect of techno-centred, ‘post-human’ futures (Froggett et al, forthcoming).

The idle women visual matrix

‘Idle women on the water’ was an art project that took place over several months in 2016 on a stretch of the Lancashire and Liverpool canal in Northern England⁶. It created a floating art centre in a barge pulled by a narrow boat which hosted a series of residencies by women artists and writers and a programme of participatory activities. The project was run in partnership with Humraaz, a South Asian Women’s refuge and a local women’s centre and residents from a nearby housing estate. They created a temporary community which came together to eat, talk and make art over the summer months. The canal surroundings offer an uncultivated environment of animals and plant life but are dominated by a semi-derelict architecture of disused textile mills. Some of the women had found this combination of Nature and post-industrial heritage strange, and at first threatening, but came to appreciate it as a repository of local history and regional identity as time went on.



Figure 2. Post-Industrial Heritage on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal

The research task was to understand how the experience had affected the women involved as a group, specifically to

- identify the memories that remained with them from the summer and the emotional and imaginative legacy of the project

⁶ <https://www.idlewomen.org/idle-women-on-the-water.html>. idle women was part of the Super Slow Way Creative People and Places Programme , directed by Laurie Peake. The project was produced by Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Brian. The action research of which the project is a part was undertaken by The Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire and funded by the Arts Council England.

- understand how it had affected their relationships with one another and the man-made and natural environment

We also wanted to understand better how an art programme of this nature could provide the context for a conversational encounter between South Asian and local white women with very different experiences of migration and settlement that often manifest in the region as the faultlines of cultural estrangement and racial tension. However, we took care not to allude to this context in order to see whether it would be raised spontaneously by the women themselves.

I have selected this particular matrix because it shows how the participants' thoughts and feelings about their situations were framed by a cultural imaginary that the group inflected with their own experience. Their visual matrix revealed that the architecture and surrounding landscape were dense with cultural and historical significance, acting as a visual metaphor and emotional backdrop for the biographical experiences the women had brought to the group. Discovering and articulating to one another how they held this in common across cultural differences became a basis for solidarity. For both white British and South Asian heritage women a sense of personal and familial loss had been imaginatively grafted onto the landscape, typical in many ways of swathes of impoverished, post-industrial Northern England. The derelict, abandoned mills provided a troubling visual metaphor for their own experiences, while shared pleasure in creative activities stimulated an inter-cultural conversation and eventually a sense of mutual understanding. This example also shows how a visual matrix can reveal a group's thinking and also offer a space in which to do emotional work. As the group elaborated an imagery of Nature re-claiming the decaying buildings, it converged on a sense of the fragility and brokenness of living things, of care and re-birth.

Context and Stimulus

This was a small visual matrix, convened in a local community venue in the gloom of a late November afternoon, two months after the art project had ended and the boat had moved on. There were two South Asian women who were vocal representatives of a larger number from the refuge who had been regular attenders of the project over the summer. In addition five white women came from the local estate close to where the boat had been moored, including one who worked at the women's centre. Two teenage girls who had also been regular visitors to the project (a daughter of one of the residents from the estate and a friend) were invited to join. I facilitated with the help of a research assistant. The artistic producers and organisers of the project stayed away in order to give the participants as much freedom as possible to say what was on their minds.

The stimulus in this case consisted of a series of slides designed to trigger visual memories of the boat, its surroundings and the social and artistic life of the project. The aim was to orient the participants to the topic without suggesting any particular angle on it. The slides consisted mainly of snapshots taken by women themselves, or by Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Boyle (the producers). We took care to avoid idealisation of the surroundings through professional photography, and the pictures were shown in no particular order – a mixture of flora, fauna, buildings, passers by, participants, artwork and the canal environment.



Figure 2. Selection of stimulus images

I assured the group that after viewing the slides in silence they would be free to contribute or not, according to inclination and without turn-taking. As is usual in a visual matrix I asked them to present what images and associated ideas came to mind as and when the moment seemed right. They were informed that the process would run for 45 minutes and that there would then be a short break before we discussed what had emerged, after which there would be an opportunity for comments or further questions. I asked who wanted to present the first image, and during the matrix intervened only twice – each time to offer an image when the group appeared to be drifting into a dialogue between two of its most talkative members. Even then I took care not to present new material, staying close to the imagery that participants had already been developing.

As long as the facilitators ‘host’ rather than lead the process, participants offer spontaneous associations according to their own criteria of significance. In this case there were two researchers but only one (myself) actually facilitated, while the other helped to welcome people, took manual notes, assisted with the seating and audio-recording and, most importantly, listened and observed, attending to the affect that accompanied the emergent collage of associations.

Pace and Affective Climate of the Matrix

Identifying the affective character of a visual matrix is part of an interpretive process which follows and which will be outlined later. Here, I describe it as it appeared to us at the time. These impressions were conveyed by the pace and wording of the associations, the imagery that the group selected to work with, and our perceptions of the affect in the room. They were later qualified by a close self-reflexive reading of the transcript. In the extracts that follow individual speakers are not identified because the accumulation or collaging of imagery means that it is in a sense co-produced and expresses shared ideas of the group.

From the outset this matrix appeared unusually slow and intimate. It became clear that these women were acutely conscious of loss - personal, familial, cultural and historical. The emotional tone was 'elegiac' from beginning to end. Elegy acknowledges things past, and arises from an affectionate relationship to those things, a desire to bear witness to them, and a sadness at their passing. However, the matrix started with the 'other-worldly' nature of the canal setting

- *Well I remember when C. got in the dinghy and when she got out I felt like I was out of this world cause I've never been anywhere closer to water*



Figure 3. "Closer to water"

This other world suggested a lost world of the textile industry and its passing, family members who had worked in the mills, the industrial heritage of Lancashire, and the singularity and beauty of its landscapes.

- *The picture of the older ladies in the looms. My family for generations and generations have all been in the textile industry so it made me feel proud, really, to be from Lancashire.*

Each presented image was followed by a meditative silence until the next one was offered. Such long silences (between five and ten seconds) sometimes feel awkward, but the women appeared to be enjoying the opportunity to re-visit their memories. The following interwoven ideas have been extracted from the matrix transcript for presentation purposes and brevity, but they have been selected because they were highlighted by the participants themselves in the post-matrix discussion.

Inter-twining of personal and regional histories of loss

The matrix had to accommodate the feelings aroused by the fact that the project had been and gone. It began by assigning itself a task of double mourning triggered firstly by the emptiness that remained to be filled now that the boat had moved on; secondly, by the decline of the region that had touched all their families' lives. Very early on its personal resonance was introduced

The picture of the older ladies in the looms. My family for generations and generations have all been in the textile industry so it made me feel proud, really, to be from Lancashire.

This pride, now compromised by the empty mills, was grafted imaginatively onto the broad historical canvas of Lancashire's industry – a loss of heritage intensely and personally felt

I think the emptiness is something. I think it struck me as being an empty place now and I think something like you said... there's an emptiness there for you now, which is quite, you know, it's quite sad.



Figure 4. "There's an emptiness there"

The deserted mills may be loved and laden with history, but are at risk if a use cannot be found for them. The predicament of the Mill Towns resonated with the participants' own, and especially so for the women from the refuge whose experiences of family rupture had left them at times adrift and depleted

I mean I love the buildings but there's a bit of sadness there. They're derelict. They are a kind of a shadow of their former selves. They get knocked down for new estates because it's a small country and there's not enough houses and you know it's sad really - to me it is anyway - losing that history, local history, of what we were. Great mill towns that were, you know, and that's just gone and the history is going with the buildings. It's cheaper to knock down than to...

Cross-generational experience

There is another idea that works its way through this matrix, a counter-point to the sense of loss, in cross-generational histories that live on

They've got models actually inside Oswaldtwistle mills where you can actually walk round and look at them. Somewhere in there there is a photograph of my Dad and my Grandma.

Traces of earlier generations highlight the different patterns of migration and settlement that these women and their families have experienced. The potential for new connections across the cultural differences in the group is a source of both surprise and hope. However there is an awkwardness

around racialised difference – the group departs from working with imagery and moves into argumentation; speech patterns become halting and sentences trail off while the associative process breaks down, as is typical of a visual matrix when it begins to get mired in difficulty

It's nice sometimes just to have women and not have any other things that we could just kind of ... women who would have never met ... you know what I mean, and actually finding common ground. When you were saying Asian people and white people - unfortunately there is a segregation - you know what i mean? You would be lying if you said there wasn't but I think, you know, it's... I think it's important all getting together actually learning about what especially in this climate where Islam, you know Muslims, and they have negative connotations towards it... and it isn't nice.

The group is beginning at this point to search for a commonality in women's experience, some of it grounded in anxiety and fear – hinted at here, but not yet explicitly explored.

Ambivalence and personal confidence

The visual matrix constantly navigated the temptations of romanticisation and regret with what might be described as reflective ambivalence. Emptiness needs first to be faced; only then can it experienced as a clean slate to be re-written

I thought those images with the panoramic view ... although it was a lovely image it was quite empty. There were no barges there, no people, no swans, no horses like the slate had been cleaned.

This prompted the women to consider how the project had helped them to widen their horizons. It created a place

....where anybody would come - a very easy going person to a very highly intellectual person could go. And we had a luxury of meeting people from all over - some people came from London.



Figure 5. "Meeting people from all over"

There was something about this mix of different and cosmopolitan backgrounds that brought to mind the welcome the group extended and the “smiles on women’s faces” which helped them to own an internalised negativity. The second personal pronoun appears – both a generic and a particular ‘you’ directed at one another. Here again, imagery dissipates in the face of a loss of confidence that is keenly felt

...you've got something else to give. You know what I mean? Draw on those things, because, you know, I think it's a lot about negativity, cause if you tell yourself that you can't do this, you can't do that... but actually just give it a go and try and see, and actually get something from that; and it's like that confidence to actually to think you're good enough to aspire to something else, I suppose.

At a late stage in the matrix two trains of thought are brought together through a single nodal image of Lancashire’s formerly confident industry and the labour and gender solidarity it had generated

I think the picture of all the women facing forwards with their arms around each other I think it made me think of it was a project which brought together people who would otherwise never have met and barriers were broken down, common ground was found and I think it brought out sisterhood again, of women.

Connection with Nature

An aspect of the women’s newfound confidence was the discovery that they could be at home in another element through connection with Nature (the matrix circles back to the ‘other-wordliness’ of its beginning elaborating it with new content). For local women who had grown up in the vicinity of the canal and whose children had used it as a playground, there was less caution. For others who had spent much of their lives in domestic settings which themselves were unsafe, connecting with Nature and animal life was a pleasurable discovery, although not without its own risks. Imagery surrounded the culturally ambiguous figure of the dog as aggressor - receptacle for projected human aggression, and then as victim

And you know that the person that was with the dog - he didn't even stop the dog attacking. The mum and dad did. Very forcefully he got that swan free from the dog but then the dog ran and the man didn't even stop.

He would just shout for the dog “come back” or something. It shows that everybody needs to to take responsibility to preserve the Nature.

...You know there were so many other people coming with dogs but never ever anyone attacked. We were all sitting there and people were passing. It shows that this ... is not in the animal – it's the person's responsibility, and understanding

From this point on, an identification with the fragility of living things develops as the matrix brings to mind “broken legs” - first of a cygnet, then a horse and then of the playwright, Mojisola Adebayo – who since her residency with idle women had also been grounded by a severe fracture. This succession of damaged creatures, animal and human, speaks to a sense of brokenness that is very present in the group, yet another implicit link with the ‘brokenness’ of Lancashire’s industrial past. However, Nature provides a image of protection. A scene witnessed on the far side of the canal is described

...the horses had babies there and we understood a little bit more about their way of life and how you know they ... and one day we came a baby was born. And the foal was on the ground so all of them [mares] crowded around that little foal. Wildlife that needs protection It was really a pleasure to be able to see something from such close quarters. Well, I've never seen anything like that before. I've seen horses on the TV and as a child in Pakistan, but not babies fresh and newborn and protected.



Figure 5. "Horses had babies there"

Personal and Collective Creativity

It is directly after this imagery of birth, cooperation and mutual protection that the participants begin to talk about the creativity they have discovered in themselves through the things they have made, poems they have written, and food they have shared. Emblematic of shared creativity is their mural close to where the boat had been moored. This enduring visible legacy of their presence has so far withstood destruction



Figure 6. "Something there that's still alive "

- *The before and after pictures of the wall where the mural was. I'm not a negative person but I've thought from time to time I wonder if it's been painted over, sort of vandalised.*
- *No it hasn't. It's not vandalised.*
- *No? Brilliant.*
- *Nobody's wrote on it. It's still there cause I just live around the corner from it, I just live up the road, so I don't have so far to go. I've been walking past it and sometimes you still get people stopping and looking at it. So i just walked past and still look at it.*
- *And apparently, if you catch the train, you can see it from the train as well. And I just found out that there's houses being built over the wall so we're hoping it just stays*
- *It was like we left something there that's still alive in that surrounding and passers-by - they were stopping and they were saying "oh, what a wonderful transformation"...*

idle women had offered the group an opportunity to use the canal and its surrounding scenery as an ambivalent symbol of hope and connectivity on the one hand, and of isolation and dereliction on the other. Although there was some nostalgia for the summer the matrix largely avoided romanticisation. Because a visual matrix is a form of re-enactment, its affect and imagery is usually isomorphic with the original experience to which it refers - here for example its exceptionally slow pace reflected the the slow movement of the other-worldly waters, and of life on the canal. The matrix provides a setting in which that experience can be re-explored 'in the moment'. In this case, having staged in the protected space of the matrix the hitherto unstated awkwardness of cultural difference, they conclude

I think people said how can you get Asian women and white women together. There was loads of Asian women other than us two. We all got on very well. We never had an issue because we were women - we had our own issues (laughs).

The research team found that despite the deceptively easy sociability idle women created, the depth of engagement was profound, weaving together personal biographical narratives with a sense of women's contribution to the industry and history of the region. They did this through an intercultural exchange which brought together local white working class women from an area where there has been a history of inter-racial tension and South Asian women with backgrounds of domestic violence

and abuse and little previous access to the public realm. In the course of the project they discovered new shared pleasures in the here-and-now of the canal environment, natural and man-made. Participants were aware of their cultural differences and worked their way through them to reach for newly discovered commonalities.

Visual matrix Interpretation

The interpretation of a visual matrix involves several ‘passes’ at the data and in practice there is some overlap between successive phases. The research team works as an interpretive panel combining a reflexive researcher reading of the material from the viewpoint of individual panel members with a hermeneutic process whereby particular interpretations must find support in the whole data-set to ‘survive’. Panel members who have participated in the visual matrix can bring to the interpretation group an ‘insider’ perspective insofar as they have a strong sense of what it felt like to be there and of the relative intensities with which images are presented, but they also move gradually towards ‘outsider’ perspectives as they attempt to grasp meaning and contextual significance. As Gleeson (2011) points out it is only possible to interpret from a historical and cultural location and the panel must gain access through their interpretation to a cultural imaginary that is in some degree shared.⁷

There is a progressive change of focus as the work of interpretation proceeds from close up to more distant in time from the matrix. Panel members negotiate and contest each other’s interpretations, until they arrive at a consensual view, returning to the data for closer reading where there is dissonance. Broadly speaking, the quality of thinking of the interpretation panel progresses from experiential to analytical.

It is important to bear in mind the nature of the visual matrix collage. This is not a series of disconnected images, nor a thematic or narrative development, but rather an accumulation of ‘scenes’ which take their meaning and significance from their relation to each other and the subjective situation of the participants and cultural context in which they are introduced. Hence the derelict mills are not singular images, rather they evoke the landscape in which they are situated, the labour relations through which they produced, personal family histories, austere industrial architecture, along with an emotional legacy of pride and loss. Some of this is explicitly acknowledged but the air of sadness and regret finds its fullest expression in the slow musicality of the vocal delivery and the persistently sombre aesthetic of the imagery in the first half of the matrix. There appears to be an unconscious and shared ‘working through’ of loss and a realisation of what might divide the women before they can arrive at a more hopeful state of mind. The sense of emotional resolution comes about gradually through the articulation of emergent and interlinked scenic material, visualised and then expressed in language – It takes a whole rhizomatically structured matrix dense with affect and embodied ideas, to produce it.

The diagram (Figure 1.) below depicts the process whereby the scenic content of the matrixial rhizome is analysed. The protocol draws on and adapts for visual interpretation the depth hermeneutic tradition of the Dubrovnik Interpretation Group Method⁸ which in turn owes much to the legacy of psychoanalyst and cultural analyst Alfred Lorenzer (Salling Olesen 2012, Salling Olesen and Weber

⁷ Where the primary research team is composed of cultural ‘outsiders’ – there is scope to involve ‘insiders’ in any phase of the analysis but in particular in the final phase where further contextual knowledge or expertise can be introduced.

⁸ The International Research Group for Psychosocietal Analysis meets annually in Dubrovnik, Croatia to work on interpretation methods, putting different psychosocietal frameworks into dialogue with one another. See Froggett and Hollway 2010, Hollway and Froggett 2012 for an encounter between Lorenzerian and British object relations perspectives.

2012, Redman et al 2010; also Froggett et al, 2015 specifically for development in relation to the visual matrix).

Lorenzer's work (Lorenzer 1986, Leithäuser 2012) is still little known to anglophone audiences but is influential in Germany and Scandinavia and has given rise to a 'depth hermeneutic' group interpretation practice which in contemporary research practice has been mainly developed in relation to interview transcripts. Lorenzer's own interest was in the analysis of literary texts and hence in forms of verbal expression that is replete with figurative associations. Of particular value in this context is his fundamental tenet that the 'scene' is the primary unit of experience rather than its singular components and that as an interactive matrix of actions, objects, figures and relations and emotions the scene is dense with sensory and affective qualities and always implicates the witness/participant as subject (in this example firstly the matrix participants who produce the scenes, and secondly, the research analysts who interpret them). This subject is always in interaction with the scene that is the object of attention, and unavoidably brings their own conscious and unconscious biographies and dispositions to the task. Any scenic analysis must therefore be thoroughly embodied and self-reflexive.

A visual matrix produces a succession of scenes to work with as participants weave together situated memories, small stories, scenarios taken from life, dream, art, media or other cultural reference points. Some of the relations that compose these scenes (interaction forms in Lorenzer's terminology) will initially be unsymbolised and collectively unconscious⁹ - they may be beset by anxiety, hard to articulate and outside of awareness. A visual matrix is a process whereby a symbolic form is found for such material – through the production and verbal communication of imagery. The various steps in the Dubrovnik Interpretation Group protocol which I describe below are designed to open up the latent, unarticulated content of the matrix

Interpretation Protocol

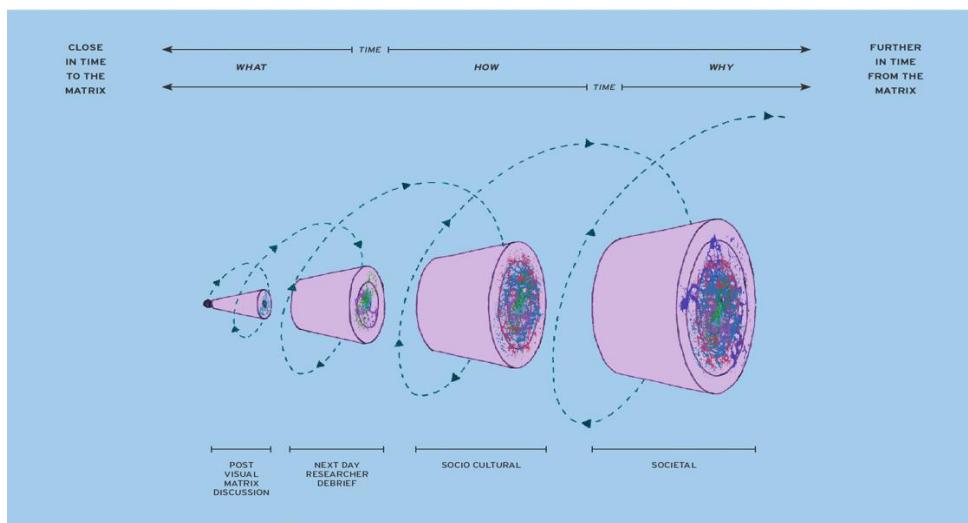


Figure 7. Hermeneutic vortex of the interpretation process

⁹ Lorenzer refers to a societal collective unconscious – material which is disavowed, unacknowledged and absent from the discursive symbolic order, which he explicitly distinguishes from the Jungian collective unconscious

The black dot at the conical end of the hermeneutic vortex depicted in Figure 7. represents the original matrix and is shown running all the way through successive phases of the interpretation. The branching patterns in the cross-sections depict its rhizomatic character. The widening cone represents distance in time from the original matrix and also a broadening of the frame of reference of the interpretation as it changes mode. The matrix transcript is subjected to a threefold line of questioning: substantive or propositional (what was presented?); performative (how was it presented?) and explanatory (why was it presented as it was?). However, as soon as possible after the matrix and post-matrix discussion have taken place, the panel begins, ideally the next day with an experience-near, self-reflexive 'thick' descriptive de-brief – with the aim of registering the experiential immediacy of the matrix and identifying and preserving a sense of its affective 'climate' throughout the analysis. It is important that the panel does not reach for explanation too soon, as the quality of the original matrix experience as a whole is then lost.

The post matrix discussion was earlier described as the third part of the visual matrix process but it is also effectively the beginning of the analysis because it captures participants' sorting and prioritisation of the matrix content by mapping images and ideas. It is important that participants lead, with one of the facilitators acting as scribe. I shall now describe the modes of interpretation, bearing in mind that these are always to some extent intertwined

1. Experience near recall

The panel begins with, 'experience-near' description (Geertz 1974) preferably the day after the visual matrix session. The quality of affect and imagery is kept alive in the researchers' minds by devices such as reading aloud (the matrix is once again 'performed') and uninterrupted recall. Besides ensuring that researchers remain close to the experience of the matrix this is a preliminary safeguard against over-interpretation because it renders transparent each individual researcher's perceptions and their disposition to construe in particular ways. Panel members have the opportunity to question and challenge each others' initial viewpoints. Spontaneous close-to-experience researcher recall is often written (as it is below) in the form of a brief summary - a scenic composition (Froggett et al 2014). As the imagery of the matrix configures into scenes, one of the tasks of the interpretation is to understand the relations that compose them and link them. The compositions are optional but very useful devices for (re-)visiting the scenic quality of the matrix as it occurs in the minds of the researchers who were present

This short extract was taken from the beginning of my scenic composition, written the following day.

The Novemberish gloom in the hall only accentuated the sadness that pervaded the room, yet by mutual consent we left the lights off, so that by the end of the session we were sitting in a semi-darkness that suited the palette and bleak aesthetic of the looming buildings - blackening stone beside black water. I wondered at their starting with this when there were so many snapshots of chatting, knitting and making things in the sunshine with the fecundity of living breeding creatures all around.

The silences seemed to be meditative, inwardly directed, yet at the same time shared. There was a feeling of unsentimental togetherness, and when J (who did sound terribly flat and depressed) voiced her sense of isolation, the matrix avoided the blind alley of consolation, preferring tacitly to 'hold' her for the time being. She was not forgotten - there was a little homily to come about believing in yourself but only after they had stayed awhile with the depression - allowed it to be...

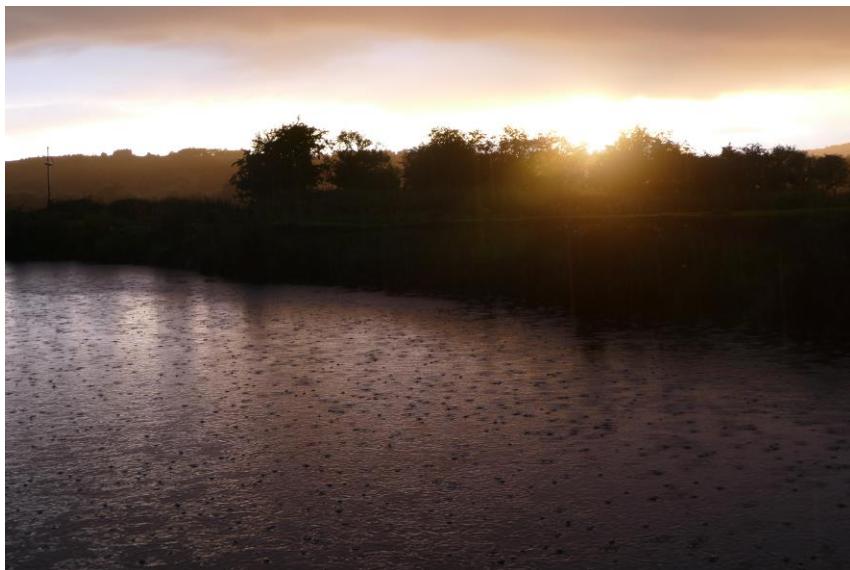


Figure 8. Black water

Writing this posed a number of questions for me. I had to ask myself, for example, whether, as someone who is much affected by seasonal low light, I was over-influenced by the gloomy room, transposing my mood onto the aesthetic of the matrix; whether or not I was discomfited as an outsider to this group; whether I was too inclined to bring a therapeutic frame to bear on the group's reaction to J's apparent depression.

Consistent with hermeneutic principles these possible perceptual biases needed to be identified and then interrogated with reference to the matrix transcript as a whole, where necessary returning to the audio-recording to check the affect that accompanied particular utterances.

2. First pass interpretation (mainly substantive): what was presented?

The imagery and motifs identified by the post-matrix discussion have to be compared with the matrix transcript as a whole, to establish their 'weight' and significance in the transcript for the group. These take priority for the interpretation panel, who then work towards their own understanding of it. In the idle women matrix the group did not itself consciously identify the 'binding' of biographical material to the built and man-made environment yet there were multiple references to it and we concluded that beyond providing a material and aesthetic backdrop, the post-industrial landscape infused the mood of the matrix. An awareness of place, familial histories and personal loss and connected with a fear that what they had created together would not survive the attrition of the environment. Support for these interpretations had to be drawn from the matrix as a whole, including the pervasive darkness – the point at which it shifted (birth of the foal), the affect associated with that shift (hope occasioned by care and new life) and any resolution of opposing affects (fear of vandalism/enduring sense of presence).

3. Second Pass Analysis (mainly performative): How was it presented (or avoided)?

Thinking about affect takes the panel into the territory of the performative: how material is presented with greater or lesser emphasis, or how it is linked to other associations to re-enact the shifting affective tenor of the matrix. The expressive language is also part of the performance, as is the capacity of the matrix participants to continue working with imagery, to maintain the reverie, or to abandon it when they are uncomfortable. Each utterance is understood as a speech act that influences

the content and tone of subsequent associations. For example, we had to ask ourselves whether reference to J's isolation was made as matter of fact, expression of sadness, bid for sympathy, or implication that the group had not been as inclusive as they imagined themselves to be. What had elicited this expression? Once made what was its impact? When the matrix withheld immediate consolation was this in fact the 'holding' presumed in my experiential recall, or were participants confounded at the disruption of togetherness that they wanted to create? Could it have been a form rejection, embarrassment or heedlessness?

4. Third Pass Analysis (mainly explanatory): why was it presented thus?

With increasing distance in time from the matrix, the panel refers to context and develops explanatory hypotheses that can be tested for plausibility in relation to the transcript and by reference to other related studies and literature. At this point people who have not been present in the matrix may be invited to join and offer critical commentary with regard to a particular area of expertise or understanding of context. In this case, the visual matrix strongly supported the possibility of building a temporary intercultural community around a women's art programme, so we compared our findings with other intercultural projects from the Super Slow Way programme and elsewhere. The research provided evidence of impact which has informed idle women's subsequent work and helped them to explain to commissioners the role of shared aesthetic experience as a basis for community. It underlined the value of mobilising a cultural imaginary through which people understand what makes them different from one another and what they hold in common. We also concluded that the particular sensitivity towards and use of landscape that developed in the course of the project was related to the fact that it was an *art* project that facilitated aesthetic and affective sensitisation to the environment. It was not so much that the women referred to their creative outputs (though they did to an extent), rather that the art had enabled them to attune to the visual and sensory qualities of the setting: buildings, canal, fields, animals which they used to symbolise their feelings about their own lives. In terms of Langer's theory of presentational symbolisation (1948 [1942]) they found in the aesthetic of the environment forms for feeling. The value of the visual matrix for them was that these forms could find expression through the imagery and figurative language that is promoted by associative visualisation.

Working with Imagery through Language

One of the challenges of researching lived experience is that many of the methods researchers have at their disposal rely on participants' ability to express the experience in words after the event. The problem is not only that accounts are filtered through a productive and shifting memory, but also that experience in the moment is a composite of sensory registers (Reavey 2011) and finding adequate words to express this multi-modal and interwoven complex of sensations and relations, together with associated ideas and affects is beyond most people's everyday linguistic capacity. If anything, this is the work of poets and artists who capture the quality of experience as it is enacted or imagined through presentational symbolisation.

Among other methodological and conceptual resources, Lorenzer's (1986) insistence that experience comes 'whole' as scenes (a matrix of relations and interactions) in which the individual subject of experience always plays a part has been important. The scene only becomes intelligible within a frame that gives it meaning – effectively a socio-cultural imaginary. Scenic experience inserts human subjects sensuously and affectively into space and time which are themselves cultural constructs. Communicating it demands an expressive symbolic repertoire that draws upon the background knowledge of a shared culture to achieve scenic understanding. The aesthetic dimension is inescapable if this is to be conveyed with vitality, which is to say that language must be experience near. In particular it must avoid cliché (in Lorenzer's terms a form of language destruction in which

the living link to experience is lost). Typically the presentational in language breaks down in favour of the discursive when unconscious anxiety emerges in the group. Disruptions to associative flow, loss of imagistic thinking, changes in speech style, reversion to cliché all present provocations in which the interpretive panel finds clues to unconscious emotions and ideas or hitherto unexpressed meaning. The hermeneutic process, in other words, works both with what the group struggles to express verbally as it emerges in the matrix and the imagery it uses to bring experience into thought.

Last word: limitations and ethical considerations

It should be clear enough from this account that the visual matrix is a group based method and not a viable choice if the research interest is in individual perspectives or characteristics. It follows that the selection of participants presupposes enough commonality to be able to form a group. The group sensitivity of the method means that the more participants are able to converge on a primary task, the freer the associations. Shared characteristics may be demographic or reflect interests, or social position. Often very mixed groups – for example drawn from audiences – have enough commonality in a shared focus of attention, however in such cases the visual matrix cannot deliver clear results with regard to audience segmentation. As far as quality of participation is concerned there are always factors that cannot be known in advance which are a risk for any group process - such as where incipient antipathies or collusions might lie. Although the snowflake formation and facilitation is designed to mitigate group dynamics, it is not always possible to eliminate them entirely. It can be very tempting in the analysis to single out particular influences despite the fact that the research task is always to identify the group's shared production. The facilitation, while subdued in style, demands practice and skill and so does the interpretation process.

Finally a particular ethical anxiety arises by virtue of the fact that thinking in the matrix is emergent and little controlled or directed by the facilitation. The strangeness and unpredictability of the associative process means that raw nerves can be touched and participants caught off-guard. They are assured in advance that they should only contribute as and when they feel comfortable doing so, and de-briefing is available as required, but the most important safeguard is one that has been briefly touched on here, and illustrated through the case example - in Wilfred Bion's (1970) terms the containment and metabolising function of the matrix itself as it digests its own material.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all the idle woment who participated in the project reported here and to Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Boyle and to Super Slow Way who commissioned and funded the work; Laura Robertson assisted with the matrix itself and ist transcription. My partners in the initial development of visual matrix methodology were Alastair Roy and Julian Manley from the Psychosocial Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire and Claire Doherty and Michael Prior from the Arts Organisation, Situations, Bristol.

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