In/visibility: exploring the representation and agency of borderscapes beyond the seen

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Title

In/visibility: exploring the representation and agency of borderscapes beyond the seen

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Abstract

The article examines how visibility and invisibility intertwine in borderscapes, shaping them as sites of inclusion, exclusion, and negotiation. Drawing on the non-binary concept of 'in/visibility', it combines a literature review with fieldwork on the Swiss Italian border. It examines in/visibility as both an analytical tool for border studies and a strategy in borderwork, particularly in cross-border dynamics, migration control and resistance. The study unpacks its role in contrasting scenarios, where in/visibility is instrumental to surveillance and silencing, or to counter-representations and self-protection. It argues that deconstructing visual stereotypes and embracing the traces of in/visible practices can open the path to multisensory dimensions that challenge dominant border representations.

Keywords: borderscape, in/visibility, traces

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1. Introduction

This article argues that visibility and invisibility are closely knit qualities that coalesce in the making and unmaking of borders as contemporary assemblages of grounded artefacts, political narratives, control technologies, and creative human agency. In an age of intrusive surveillance and identity documentation (Caplan and Torpey, 2002), increasingly carried out through automated visual inspection, a closer examination of the interplay between visibility and invisibility in liminal spaces may be a safeguard from the panoptical model of society. The visible dimension of action becomes disproportionately telling of who we are as it imbues space with eye-related norms, qualities and signals that undermine other sensory modes of experience. The invisible, instead, evokes the resonance of orality, the reciprocity of tactility, and the commonality of practice in human behaviour. In acknowledging the twining of the visible and invisible in bordering practices, the crossbreed noun 'in/visibility' is used throughout the article.

The in/visibility concept finds its place in a variety of social science scholarly literature such as women studies (Barthwal-Datta, 2023), migration studies (Finiguerra, 2022), lesbian and gay studies (Renkin, 2024), minority studies (Leinonen and Toivan, 2014) and border studies (Brambilla and Potzsch, 2017). It connects to vulnerability, discrimination, marginalisation of bodies and voices, but also creative resistance to disempowerment. Often, the otherings explored through this conceptual notion take place in space, with urban public space standing out as a major arena of tensions between control and reaction due to its high visibility and symbolic value. Acute tensions between visibility and invisibility arise in borderlands as well (Anzaldúa, 1987), both as a consequence of cultural hybridisation contrasted with nationalist typification and the spectacular development of visual tools for the identification and detection of people on the move (Nail, 2016; Dijstelbloem, 2021).

The borderland as an environment of high in/visibility is addressed in this article based on a relatively recent stream of literature on borderscapes (Perera, 2007; Brambilla, 2015), which is believed to be a filiation of Arjun Appadurai's learning on globalisation. In *Modernity at Large* (Appadurai, 1996), the eminent anthropologist weaved together five cultural dimensions called ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes that portray the landscapes of globalisation. All dimensions have a fluid nature and reflect a reality where it is not sound to keep going with binary and oppositional categories of analysis and policymaking.

After 2014, contributions adopting the notion of borderscape have multiplied in border studies and beyond. The term gradually came to signify borders as extended landscapes constantly reshaped, imagined, and represented via human action and across multiple scales, in which agency is a distributed talent and not a prerogative of state power. Being a crasis of two terms – landscape and border – each bearing multiple and sometimes ambiguous meanings, the resulting concept may appear daunting to scholars due to its vagueness. However, much of its potential resides in defying the binarism of modernity discourses and theories (Alexander, 2013) in a domain where clear-cut categorisations blur under the blows of global societal reshuffles.

The concept of in/visibility is not merely a side topic within borderscape studies but stands at the very heart of the field. The derivation of the suffix *-scape* from the term *landscape* implies a connection to vision and representation. However, in its original meaning, landscape was both an object of representation – i.e. a painting of scenery – and a subject in itself – i.e. a portion of land, a territory. This second meaning of landscape as a territory which is *scaped* or shaped through spatial practices (Grillo, 2024) brings together the representational and the lived experience of borders (Brambilla, 2015).

The article explores the amalgamation of visibility and invisibility in borderscapes to distance ourselves from the trap of rational dualism. Accordingly, the argument does not counterpose what is visible to its reverse. Instead, an intimate concretion of in/visibility is sought in bordering practices. This concretion, it is argued, expresses its full potential in both interpretive and operational terms when applied to

borderscapes. Interpretively, in/visibility broadens borders' semiotic beyond vision towards the perception and assembling of traces and practices that shape borderscapes. Strategically, it unfolds creative devices in the hide-and-seek game of empowerment and disempowerment played by state institutions, NGOs, and disfranchised migrants. A deconstruction of border representations is the preliminary condition to silence the stereotype of the migrant (Nail, 2015) and make a counter-hegemonic narrative possible, free from the oppositional and visual categories that surround it. Thus, the border decomposes into a mosaic landscape imbued with everyday practices, sounds, smells, living memories and traces of in/visible presences.

The notion of borderscape is intentionally explored by foregrounding the condition of people on the move. While this choice is reductive, it nevertheless focuses on people whose movement across borders is highly subject to visual inspection. The practices they adopt in reaction to the gaze that scrutinizes their status are positioned on the hidden edge of the visible. Their marked in/visibility motivates the relevance of (human) migration in this article, in line with its weight within the recent borderscape literature.

The sources we draw from to build the argument are twofold. On the one hand, an extensive review of the scholarly literature on borderscapes focuses on the double meaning of the *-scape* suffix, between the shaping and the representing of a marginal territory, with the two influencing each other. On the other hand, the fieldwork analysis of a European borderscape, that between Switzerland and Italy, exhibits an instance of in/visibility related to tactics and strategies for crossing and controlling a networked border hanging in the balance between openness and closure in response to mounting nationalist ideals.

The literature review and the case study inform section two. The affordances of visibility and invisibility in the context of borderscapes are first examined apart from one another – as they are found in literature – and then recombined in section three as a non-binary spatial concept with open-ended possibilities to be grasped creatively. The conclusions argue that borderscapes are a far-reaching field to operationalise the in/visibility of people on the move – and not only – as a resource to hinder the hegemonic power of visually constructed space in the contemporary Anthropocene.

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2. The Affordances of Visibility and Invisibility in Borderscapes

2.1 Visibility: Interpretative and Strategic Bearings

A key aspect of visibility within borderscapes is the material presence of borders themselves. Militarised and walled borders embody a form of hypervisibility. These heavily securitised areas, marked by physical barriers, have become iconic in media portrayals and public imagination. The fortified borders of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla are prime examples of visibility intensified to deter crossings (Buoli, 2020). Xavier Ribas's photographic series *Melilla Border Fence,* 2009, and *Ceuta Border Fence,* 2009, testify to physical displays of border securitisation (figure 1). Borders are visible not only in their physical structures but also in their symbolic meaning as representations of state control and sovereignty. However, even borders that lack tangible barriers leave behind traces that reveal their presence. These traces can be subtle, yet they shape landscapes and everyday practices in ways that call for interpretation to uncover the ongoing processes of borderwork.

The study of traces serves as a crucial interpretive tool in border studies. By examining traces – be they physical remnants, spatial patterns, or social behaviours – researchers can gain insights into borders' characteristics, their persistence or transformation over time, and the socio-political changes they reflect.

This approach is useful for identifying historical shifts and predicting future changes, making it valuable for 'borderscaping' design studies (Buoli 2015; Van Houtum and Eker, 2015) as well as cross-border policy-making (McCall and Itçaina, 2017). For example, the photo-interpretation of aerial images has been used to analyse the transformation of the Catalan cross-border landscape following a process of de-bordering (Pastor-Saberi *et al*., 2018). Increased permeability of the border has resulted in a homogenisation of the landscape, resulting in previously distinct territorial patterns becoming morphologically similar.

Fig. 1: Xavier Ribas, *Ceuta Border Fence* (2009), # 22. One of 24 pigment prints, 71x89 cm. © Xavier Ribas

The concept of visibility through traces, or circumstantial visibility, is particularly relevant in post-borderland contexts where previously 'hard' borders have transformed significantly. Studying what remains of a border after its formal removal or translation reveals how borders persist in new forms. The port city of Dover provides a compelling example. Following the construction of the Channel Tunnel in the 1990s, many of the physical and functional aspects of the border shifted elsewhere in a de-bordering process. Yet, the bordering processes had not disappeared entirely, not even before the UK's withdrawal from the EU after the 2016 referendum, which reinstated the border. For some residents, these remnants

continued to shape daily life through the 1990s and the early 2000s, while for others, they remained invisible, depending on their social and spatial position (Cassidy, Yuval-Davis and Wemyss, 2018). For example, people with non-EU passports faced ongoing border effects that remained invisible to the broader population. Others involved in border work, such as those with relatives employed on Dover-Calais ferries, felt a sense of loss as the de-bordering process eroded easy access and connection across the Channel.

A key strategic use of visibility involves the technological disclosure of identities in border areas via passports and biometric data (Dijstelbloem, 2021), along with the implementation of clear strips along borders to monitor encroachment and utilize unmanned aerial vehicles. A diametrically opposed use of visibility involves making border dynamics, inhabitants, and imaginaries visible through counter-representation, including artistic projects and literary texts. These representations can foster critical engagement to advance political, social, or humanitarian objectives. The concept of 'border art' refers to artistic practices that arise from the existence, construction, and contestation of borders, often reflecting their performative implications (Amilhat Szary, 2012). These forms of art can provide new visibilities by creating spaces for critical imagination, where artists use personal experiences and alternative narratives to contest dominant discourses (Giudice and Giubilaro, 2015).

In this realm, it is essential to consider the positionality of those producing and consuming representations. When border people are involved in the creation of artistic works or narratives, this public visibility can become a means of reclaiming agency (Brambilla, 2021). Participatory film-making with people on the move exemplifies this dynamic. As Brambilla and Potzsch (2017: 81) note, «precisely in articulating their crossing-in-invisibility, migrants in their videos reconstitute themselves as publicly visible subjects (in Arendt's sense) in spite of their institutionalised invisibility». By creating their own representations, people on the move transition from objects of observation to active subjects, challenging mechanisms that silence them. An example is the *Archivio Memorie Migranti* project (Horsti, 2019), which uses participatory aesthetics to document and reinterpret the experiences of migrants crossing European borders in collaboratively created documentary films.

Visibility can also take the form of spectacularisation, particularly in the media, where it is strategically deployed to promote specific narratives about borders (Mazzara, 2020). Media coverage sensationalises border-related issues, shaping public perceptions and political discourse. An example is the portrayal of sham marriages in the UK (Wemyss, Yuval-Davis and Cassidy, 2018). Sham marriages – those allegedly arranged to obtain UK citizenship – have been turned into spectacles through TV programs and news stories that dramatise such cases. These media productions do more than highlight individual incidents: they actively participate in everyday bordering practices. By staging investigations or reporting on court proceedings, these programs extend the borders' reach into daily life. The spectacle associates these events with anxieties over immigration. The visibility created through this media framing works strategically, not merely reflecting but actively constructing a border feeling that permeates societal attitudes and policies.

In other contexts, visibility has been employed for propaganda purposes. The Italian-Libyan borderscape is a post-colonial context that provides an example of how visibility can be manipulated to project power and control (Brambilla, 2014). During Gaddafi's rule, a series of billboards promoted identity propaganda within the Libyan territory, presenting an idealized version of government policies that often diverged from reality. The billboards functioned as tools to construct a narrative of legitimacy and effectiveness. Although static, the billboards can be understood as a form of media that visually reinforced a carefully curated image of state control. In this case, visibility served to obscure rather than clarify the dynamics of power, using public representation to mask discrepancies between rhetoric and practice.

Visibility also serves as a strategic tool for control and surveillance, reinforcing power asymmetries within border regimes through 'new' technology of vision. The US military use of drones to patrol and execute targeted killings in border zones is, for example, a form of surveillance technology that dehumanises those subjected to its gaze (Brambilla and Potzsch, 2017: 79). By reducing individuals to abstract targets observed from a detached perspective, drones facilitate a form of aerial warfare that dehumanises 'other' subjects and bodies by creating a division between 'their' space of chaos and insecurity and 'our' space of order and civilisation. The technological distance inherent in drone operations does more than reinforce this dichotomy, because it renders the subjects on the ground as faceless entities.

2.2 Invisibility: Interpretative and Strategic Bearings

Invisibility may be a substantial feature of borders, a quality to perceive them indirectly, or at least with senses other than sight. Borders are sometimes absorbed in their surrounding landscapes to the point of becoming invisible to distracted crossers. When this occurs, their existence is hinted at by variations in the landscape that may depend on cultural and political discontinuities, which experts can discern. A border that sinks deep into the landscape, becoming unnoticed, is no less active in shaping spatial practices and is felt by those living in proximity through memories, dialectal variations, and other symbolically marked non-visual distinctions.

The partial dismantling of visible border infrastructures inside EU's Schengen area and the emphasised representation of it in media discourses as an area of free movement, as noted by Silvia Aru (2022) in her field research on the French Italian border, creates a misleading perception among migrants that Europe has no internal borders. This deceptive perception, however, clashes with migration management policies when actual cross-border movements are undertaken on foot or by train, and the paper trails stored in administrative archives turn out visible (Tazzioli, 2024).

Invisibility is as crucial as visibility in interpreting borders. Glaring traces left by human and non-human actants in a borderscape evoke movements, practices, feelings and presences that hide out or may not be directly observed because they vanished in the past, fade in the present and are expected in the future either with anxiety or desire. Invisibility is closely tied to the temporality and historicity involved in borders, and it keeps them always in the making as borderscapes. Therefore, traces can be assembled metonymically, like mosaic pieces in artworks, to make sense of lost, invisible or inaccessible meanders of border-related knowledge.

Among the numerous visual art projects that use invisibility to address border imaginaries is *A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project,* 2005, by FrancoMoroccan artist Yto Barrada (Tazi and Barrada, 2005). The project explores the 'drive to leave' that permeates the Moroccan borderscape, often depicting metaphorical elements between the city of Tangier and the Mediterranean landscape. For example, one image shows a person holding a model boat while passersby are captured looking toward something unseen in the photo, in the direction of the miniature ship's bow. The book ends with black-and-white photographs of people gazing toward a sea panorama and presumably toward Europe, in images where the border remains intangible. The Strait of Gibraltar, referenced in the project title, represents not only the body of water that many attempt to cross in search of Europe – often at the cost of their lives – but also the geographical and symbolic connotation of that aspiration to migrate which is reflected in the pictures.

At the same time, institutional actors consciously pursue invisibility as a strategy to serve several purposes: to consolidate cross-border identities (Porcelli, 2021), mitigate the remembrance of past conflicts and divisions, remove the threatening Other from collective consciousness (Paasi, 1996), and so forth in a versatile and multifarious manner. Invisibility can work alone or in alliance with visibility to

attain effects and affects of connection and breakage between people and territories, even appealing to sensory and emotional modes of persuasion that are not visual.

For instance, in a cross-border regional initiative in Greater Geneva (Sohn and Scott, 2020) the project maps did not display the border between Switzerland and France. Its absence in the cartographies and policy documents was part of a strategy put in place by the actors involved in the project aimed at showing the border obsolescence. Yet, this obsolescence did not correspond to local inhabitant's feelings, as many still valued the border's significance. Such strategies of border invisibilisation may have the counter-effect of fostering populist movements and hindering cross-border cooperation.

In Nicosia's historical city center, divided into two halves by the buffer zone under UN control, tourist and road maps display the other part as a blank area with only a few by-communal monuments highlighted based on a strategy that takes on different meanings on each side. For the Greek Cypriot community, it is a matter of contesting the Turkish occupation and denying the reality of the island's partition in the place most loaded with emotional value. Instead, the Turkish Cypriot community strives to convert the buffer zone into a permanent international border symbolically and materially (Casaglia, 2020).

These two cases from different European contexts illustrate how some border inhabitants resist efforts to render borders invisible, as they perceive them to be essential elements of their identity, a feeling shaped by factors distinct from the migration-related narratives that often dominate discussions about belonging. At the same time, these contrasting strategies of cartographic representation show how the symbolic treatment of borders can serve as both tools for contestation and cooperation, revealing the tensions between institutional narratives and grassroots perceptions in divided regions.

Analysing the borderscape of Punta Tarifa, Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas (2014) highlighted a two-fold process of invisibilisation of Punta Tarifa put in place by the EU. First, the area's historical significance as a landing point for Arabs, which resulted in the place's name, had been erased from historical recounting. Second, the presence of a Migrant Detention Centre was kept mostly invisible by avoiding showing its presence on maps and billboards. These invisibilisation tactics had been part of the dynamics of 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra and Brett, 2012) linked to EU bordering practices.

Invisibility can be put in place to deny the existence of weaker subjects in a borderscape with unbalanced power relationships. One such case is shown in a study on Bedouin-Palestinian villages in Israel (Plonski, 2018). Here, the border is both a means of control and a line of protection. Israeli authorities wanted to make the presence of the Bedouins invisible. Still, it was precisely the definition of a border that was later re-appropriated by the Bedouins that protected them from Israel's expansionist aims. The borderscape emerged as a liminal and in/visible space produced by the Bedouins through their protests.

The case of two asylum seekers' hunger strikes that took place in Helsinki (Pellander and Horsti, 2018) shows how the in/visibility of borders was negotiated in urban space and the media. The hunger strike, carried out for seventy-two days in front of the Parliament Building, was deliberately ignored, hence made invisible, by the media and politicians for a long time. Yet the asylum seekers' protest ultimately succeeded in making visible to Finnish citizens the political violence of the border in the urban space, far from the site of the border itself.

Surely, invisibility can also serve as a defence strategy for migrants and minority groups who feel threatened by excessive visibility. Finiguerra (2022: 262) argues that invisibility has become «a resource to 'escape' detection by instruments of control both at the border and in the everyday and to avoid the risks of violence or forced mobility in the form of repatriation and deportation». This case holds for undocumented migrants, for instance. Yet, scholarly literature concentrates more on disempowering aspects of invisibility, leaving space for new research on progressive – and not repressive – in/visibility in

borderscapes. Borren (2008) has taken a conceptual step in this direction, drawing on Arendt's politics of in/visibility to account for contemporary regimes of technological visibilisation and counterstrategies adopted by migrants.

2.3 In/visibilities of the Swiss Italian Borderscape between Cross-Border Work and Migration

The examples drawn from the literature and examined here have highlighted the multifaceted meanings of in/visibility and the interpretive potential of this notion for border studies. Building on these emergent meanings, we now turn to the empirical interplays of visibility and invisibility observed at a specific border: the Swiss Italian one. This case allows us to examine how the above-mentioned dynamics manifest in a single borderscape, and how even an 'open' and 'uneventful' border within the EU can reveal substantial aspects of in/visibility.

The material presented is rooted in extensive fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 by Nicoletta Grillo in the context of her doctoral study. Exploring non-hegemonic forms of representation of this borderscape involved a review of local newspapers, photographic fieldwork along specific border crossing routes, interviews with local and institutional actors such as trade unionists and migration activists, informal conversations with cross-border workers and people on the move.

In the national media narratives about migration, the northern Italian border is featured in connection with border towns like Ventimiglia, on the French border, or Trieste, on the Slovenian border, which serve as key nodes for contemporary border flows. In comparison, the Swiss Italian border and the city of Como attract less coverage because flows have been smaller there, except during specific situations. For instance, during the so-called migration 'crisis' between 2016 and 2018, Como gained prominence in national narratives due to the increased presence of people on the move at the border, a situation largely driven by the growth of fluxes and by pushbacks enforced by Switzerland under the Dublin agreements, which created a bottleneck, leaving many people on the move stranded in Italy (Grillo, 2024).

The Swiss Italian border between Ticino and Comasco has distinct characteristics. It divides two districts that share the same language, religion, and to a large extent, geographical morphology. However, the national territories differ economically, with Switzerland being wealthier, and having a higher GDP per capita, which corresponds to both higher living costs and higher wages (OECD, 2024a; OECD, 2024b). These economic disparities drive significant cross-border movement. Many Italians work in Switzerland as cross-border commuters, residing in Italy, while Swiss residents often purchase goods in Italy, where costs are lower. These dynamics are not recent but historically rooted, although their forms have evolved over time. Cross-border commuting has long existed (Barcella and Sanfilippo, 2016), while smuggling was part of the everyday life of the border communities until the 1980s.

As internal to Europe, with Switzerland adhering to the Schengen Agreement, this border is not securitised by highly visible barriers. In 2024, an update to the Schengen Borders Code approved by the EU council provided for a more flexible reintroduction of internal border controls, enabling transfers of irregular migrants and allowing the insertion of travel restrictions during public health crises, but the free movement for citizens of EU member states remained formally unaltered (Council of the EU, 2024).

Apart from customs checkpoints, the border remains largely open and invisible on the ground in other areas. The photographic series *Pietre, Foglie, Acque, e Filo Spinato*, 2017–2019, by Nicoletta Grillo, made of images depicting sections of the border where it is clearly delineated on maps but invisible in space, testifies to this physical reality. The title of the series, which translates as *Stones, Leaves, Waters, and Barbed Wire*s, highlights the border's material existence, which is mostly mundane, except for few traces of a wire mesh fence known as *ramina* installed by Italy at the end of the 19th century, primarily as

a fiscal barrier to curb the smuggling of goods. Yet, the mesh has never fully succeeded in stopping smuggling, nor has it entirely prevented the movement of people (Codoni, 2018). While these photographs do not explicitly depict what they reference, they gesture toward the abstract nature of border cartographies, challenging the tangible reality of maps. They expose the border's invisibility while capturing its indexical presence within the images (figure 2).

Fig. 2: Nicoletta Grillo, *Pietre, Foglie, Acque, e Filo Spinato* (2017–2019), # 13 and 14. Two of 14 pigment prints, dimensions variable, accompanied by 8 text sections. © Nicoletta Grillo

To move beyond the material invisibility of the border and interpret its functioning as a borderscape, it is essential to consider spatial practices of border crossing and their effects. Cross-border labor dynamics become visible through clear markers, such as the enormous traffic at border points near small towns every weekday morning. This became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when border controls were temporarily reinstated, leading to long queues for cross-border workers entering Switzerland. Other traces include functional services for cross-border workers, such as currency exchange offices that offer more favorable rates for converting Swiss franc salaries into euros compared to banks.

Regarding migratory dynamics, during the 2016 'crisis', people on the move set up tents in the green spaces in front of Como San Giovanni train station, transforming this urban area typically detached from the border into a hyper-visible marker of that moment, which was shown in different news reports. After the tents were removed and institutional reception facilities proved insufficient, activists and migrants occupied a parking lot in Como, primarily used by cross-border workers, setting up tents on its ground floor as an alternative refuge. These too were cleared, but traces of these events remain. A concrete wall of the parking lot, now enclosed by two high metal fences erected by the municipality to prevent new settlements, had Arabic handwritten inscriptions on it. These traces, observed during a 2021 site visit, can be interpreted as elements that testify both to the past occupation by people on the move and to the enforcement of local border policies.

As in other border contexts, visibility is central to political propaganda connected to the border effects. One example is the case of some political manifestos visible in Ticino for a while. In a conversation during fieldwork, a cross-border commuter reflected on the experience of crossing the Swiss Italian border by train. The worker recalled feeling uneasy upon encountering a political manifesto by the right-wing Swiss party UDC. The poster, depicting rats symbolising Italian workers and other foreigners while eating a piece of Swiss cheese, employed xenophobic imagery to advocate against cross-border laborers. This visual discourse reflects broader tensions in Ticino, where cross-border work is a source of conflict due to the perception that Italian workers are 'stealing' jobs from the local Swiss population. The sentiment was central to campaigns like the 2014 referendum 'against mass immigration', which, though widely supported in Ticino, ultimately clashed with European agreements on the free movement of people and was unsuccessful.

The 2014 referendum sparked a national debate within Switzerland, and also the creation of visual artworks from artists based in the country. For instance, Salvatore Vitale stated that his photographic project *How to Secure a Country. From Border Policing via Weather Forecast to Social Engineering: A Visual Study of 21st Century Statehood*, 2019, was developed in response to the referendum and its associated political climate. This work critically explores statehood and security in Switzerland, examining systems such as border policing and surveillance, highlighting the tension between visibility and invisibility in these mechanisms through photographs and documents (Vitale and Willumeit, 2019). Following that same referendum, Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo created the video work *Appunti del Passaggio*, 2014-2016, which brings to light the historical dynamics of labor migration from Italy to Switzerland between the 1950s and the 1960s, and the health checks that the migrant workers had to undergo upon entering the new country, as a form of bio-political border policing. The video work also challenges the stereotypical representation of Italian migrants as Mediterranean-looking male figures with suitcases, a narrative that renders the presence of female migrants invisible, reclaiming this presence by featuring women in its imagery through archival photographs (Grillo, 2024: 94).

Amid the many visual representations of this border, there are also counter-narratives created by those who inhabit it. During fieldwork in 2021, a smuggling guide was found handwritten by a former smuggler, who was involved in the lively cigarette smuggling trade of earlier decades of the 20th century (Grillo, 2024). Combining nostalgic storytelling with practical advice, the guide included illustrated instructions on crafting a special backpack for transporting contraband cigarettes – called *bricolla* in the local border language –, covering shoe soles to muffle noise during nighttime border crossings, and identifying the best trails to remain invisible to border policing. This is an example of the agency exercised by individuals who navigate and subvert border controls with a strategic use of invisibility.

In the contemporary securitisation of border spaces, a visual dimension remains essential, particularly in the use of aerial surveillance technologies like drones. Along Swiss borders, drones are deployed within a civil–military agenda for border management, accident response, and traffic control by monitoring national borders, nearby foreign areas, and key routes (Pedrozo, 2017). Their surveillance capabilities are augmented by technologies such as thermal and infrared cameras and sensors, which enable night vision and the detection of human bodies based on temperature contrast with the environment, generating distinct imagery with color palettes reflecting heat distribution. The use of such technologies transcends observation, as they facilitate the storage of traces in databases that are tools of power and knowledge for the state (Pedrozo, 2017). Even when physically invisible, drones are perceptible to those inhabiting the borderscape. During fieldwork, local residents described hearing drones monitoring the border at night. The machinery sounds introduce the presence of drones into the sensory realm beyond vision.

An instance of the institutional use of strategic invisibility is the opening of a temporary camp for asylum seekers in Como. A former car depot on Regina Teodolinda Street was transformed into a Red Cross-managed camp at the height of migration in 2016, confining people on the move to a surveilled space,

relatively out of reach in the city. As the location of such camps in urban areas is often contentious, this site choice has been seen as an effort to minimize the camp's visibility. Symbolically enclosed by a cemetery, railroad tracks, and a secondary road, the location underscored the transient and precarious nature of migrants' lives (Jacqmin, 2018). The camp, which operated until 2018 and housed over 7.000 asylum seekers, primarily unaccompanied minors and women, was then repurposed into a parking lot. Later largely unused and overgrown with plants, the site shows almost no traces of its past usage.

People on the move employ different camouflage strategies to pursue invisibility on this border. During fieldwork, migration activists shared the story of a white person on the move who blended into the morning commuter traffic to cross into Switzerland and reach another European country successfully. Camouflage tactics, along with assistance from *passatori* (smugglers) offering hiding spots, can make a difference. However, visibility linked to ethnicity often works against people on the move. Those perceived as foreign – especially Black individuals – are more likely to be reported to authorities or stopped for checks. This underscores how the human body itself becomes a marker of national control, where ethnicity and skin colour create disempowering visibility.

Camouflage is also recommended by Italian cross-border workers who navigate the area, driven by the hostile dynamics they often experience in Swiss territory. During fieldwork, some workers recommended being cautious when driving across the border into Switzerland with an Italian license plate, as it would make the driver immediately identifiable as Italian and more likely to face fines. However, it is equally important to highlight that some cross-border workers view the border as a meeting point. They shared how it allows them to form friendships and connections with colleagues on the other side, facilitated by their transnational everyday life. This perspective aligns with insights from critical border studies, which sometimes describe the border as a two-sided entity (Van Houtum, 2019).

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3. Framing In/visibility as a Non-binary Concept for Border Studies

In/visibility defies simplistic categorisation, resisting the attribution of absolutely positive or negative values. Instead, it finds meaning in contexts where its effects are contingent, ambivalent, and processual, as they quintessentially are in borderscapes. In/visibility expresses deeply seated characteristics that modern political geography and the national state system developed on a global scale tried to remove from borders as an attempt to universalize them as boundary lines without depth. Despite this attempt, the oxymoron effect of uniting and dividing at the same time, the transitional nature of margins where a condition is dismissed before assuming a new one, and the mutual dependence of communities living on indivisible natural resources have long been considered and felt as an integral part of the border experience. These characteristics have not wholly disappeared due to the powerful linear and visual logic that state-centrism imposed on boundary-making and management. Today, their resurfacing is driven by momentous social and technological changes that can be summed up as triggering an epistemic and ethical crisis of the binary biased rationality long naturalised in Western civilisation (Agamben, 1998; Derrida, 2005). Nowhere is this crisis more acute than at borders, if taken as embodiments of established geopolitical partitions between 'us' and 'them'.

The visual and the eidetic have provided paradigmatic sensory evidence to binary modes of thought and action, exiling other forms of perception, including the invisible, to the realm of the irrational. Evidence is etymologically linked to vision, with darkness and opacity equated rationally and emotionally to wrong beliefs and dubious conduct (Levin, 1993). Understanding in/visibility conversely means fully acknowledging the visible and invisible as interpenetrating semiotic aspects of border reality, equally

active and endowed with meaning-producing power. In/visibility, therefore, more than juxtaposing two concepts bearing different values, conflates them into a non-binary form of representation. This kind of representation becomes particularly disruptive if applied to borders because the media routinely expose the former as the standard-bearers of distinction between ordinary citizenry living in broad daylight with nothing to hide and undocumented migrants who conceal themselves and their uncertain identity in interstitial spaces.

The multifaceted concept of in/visibility allows the proliferation of sensory modes of perception of both borderscapes and personal identities linked not only to sight, alphabetism and biometric identification, but also to oral history, psychophysical conditions, emotional affects and other traces of humanity that digital technology, photography and artistic performance could help merge synesthetically into inclusive forms of representation when used as critical praxes. Commenting on the ambiguity of contemporary landscapes, photographer Luigi Ghirri (2017: 224) praised inhabitants' ability to recognise and value their distinctive traits because «they look on these places as if they were reading the palm of their own hand, knowing that […] apart from the main lines which stand out clearly, there are countless other very small lines that intersect, creating their uniqueness». This metaphor hints that figure-ground relationships are reversible, and their mutual play in a landscape is best captured when visual perception becomes fused with an embedded experience of place. The small intersecting lines easily recall the entanglement of trajectories that Doreen Massey (2005) laid as the basis for her relational idea of space. With life trajectories, it is not crucial to know how much distance is travelled but how valuable the crossings that occur are. The main lines, such as borders, however sharp and clear, are made what they are by a network of trajectories originating from all directions and in/visibly scaping lands like hands.

The performative meaning of borderscape, which the *-scape* suffix conveys, combines with multisensory representations of space as it reinstates the human body in its creative and formative capacities against passivity and subjugation. The borderscape results from myriads of in/visible performances and practices carried out by individuals, groups and communities in the endless attempt to live together, shifting here and there the mobile frontier that separates who they are from who they aspire to become tomorrow.

This endless effort entails a potential for emancipation and empowerment that the play of visibility and invisibility can help negotiate with state institutions and the socio-technical systems they use to control borders, migrants, refugees and travelers of all kinds. Visibility can foster the empowerment of people by amplifying marginalised voices, as in the case of self-narrative documentaries that claim the agency of individuals often rendered voiceless in dominant border discourses. Invisibility can offer some degree of protection from the penetrating and inquisitorial capacity of video surveillance systems to access private lives with anxiety-inducing effects that can become pathological when people are exposed to scrutiny at a border checkpoint.

The fact that emancipation is a potential that in several circumstances may not be achieved, because visibility and invisibility are used as strategies to prevent it, is consistent with the ambiguous meaning that should always be attached to the concept of in/visibility in the study of borders. This is, however, acceptable and consistent with the openness to the future that many scholars recognise as a valuable quality of borderscapes. In/visibility may alternately lend agency or strip it away, depending on who holds the power to see and hide. This power is not a prerogative of the authorities, rather it can be claimed and appropriated in unexpected ways and forms by those who participate with their presence and absence in the life of a border. The uncertainty and indeterminacy of the process are not negative factors in themselves because they promise future encounters, surprise from new contacts (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000), a space to negotiate with the authorities and the responsibility of making choices along the arduous journey across borders (Khosravi, 2010).

The interplay of visibility and invisibility at the Swiss Italian border highlights the layered complexity and ambivalence of a seemingly 'open' border. The border's openness under Schengen rules is juxtaposed with its material traces and symbolic presence, which become particularly evident in dynamics driven by economic disparity such as cross-border labour flows and migratory disputes, which shape not only institutional strategies, but also artistic and social imaginaries. Different visual, sensory and mental markers, connected on one side to political propaganda and surveillance technologies and on the other to smuggling traditions and contemporary migration practices, reveal how in/visibility operates as a double-edged device of control and subversion. Practices such as camouflage – based on the principle of blending in, becoming invisible while being visible – underscore the potential agency to renegotiate the state gaze of those navigating borders. The borderscape emerges as a space of tension, where inequalities, surveillance, and identity politics coexist with opportunities for connection and transnational interaction at the edges of in/visibility.

Part of the process to reduce the visual and binary dominance in understanding borders goes through a rediscovery of all forms of perception and representation involving human senses, including those with no linguistic meaning. In addition to the space of visible presence, it is important to restore the space of allusive traces, silent routine motions, and memorable absences. In his later years, Henri Lefebvre (1981) insisted that representation is not only by and for the eye. The distinction he had drawn a few years earlier between representations of space and spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1974) characterises the latter as sedimentations of artworks, imaginations, symbols and sounds irreducible to the analytical clearness of perspectival space. We may argue that Lefebvre's distinction applies to borders and helps to make sense of borderscapes as 'borders of representation' as suggested by artist Etienne Guilloteau in the boundary-crossing dance performance *Retour Amont: le Rêve*, held at Kaaitheater in Brussels in 2021 (Guilloteau, 2021).

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4. Conclusions

In this article, the visibility and invisibility of borderscapes were reconsidered based on literature review and fieldwork across the Swiss Italian border. Though both concepts can be investigated separately, their full potential in understanding and transforming borderscapes lies in the merger that finds expression as in/visibility. This non-binary concept disavows the bias of visually constructed liminal spaces for uneven power relations on the one hand and encourages the surfacing of latent creative energies in the cultural landscape of borders on the other. In/visibility means the quality of being more than what is apparent to visual strategies of identification and control. Therefore, it paves the way to multiple senses of presence, dignity, and agency in the making and unmaking of lived borderscapes.

The in/visibility concept calls for multi-sensory modes of perception and asserts the evocative value of the most irrelevant traces left in a borderscape as signs of practices, events and memories that are an active part of its becoming and would otherwise be lost. Traces are incomplete yet telling symbols for scenes that have no eyewitnesses, both for tragic events like the sinking of a boat loaded with migrants in the sea, or everyday activities such as the informal grazing of sheep across transnational trails.

The interplay that in/visibility allows unravels the socio-political and spatial dimensions of borderscapes, emphasising how they are shaped by policies, perceptions, and lived experiences. This interplay not only 'elucidates' how borders are constituted but also 'shades' the ways they can be crossed, subverted, or reinforced through strategic uses of presence and absence, action and inaction, motion and arrest.

Hence, in/visibility is an ambivalent force, which can be either *oppressive* or *progressive* depending on the effects it produces within specific borderscapes (Brambilla and Potzsch, 2017). This ambivalence is critical to understanding how borders function not as static divides but as dynamic spaces where visibility and invisibility are continually negotiated relationships involving humans, non-humans and artefacts alike. By engaging with specific examples from different borderscapes, we have further illustrated how in/visibility, with its empowering and disempowering mechanisms, can have an interpretive value for border studies and a strategic value for the subjects directly situated in borderscapes to counteract their reduction to digitally documented identities.

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Fig. 2: Nicoletta Grillo, *Pietre, Foglie, Acque, e Filo Spinato* (2017–2019), # 13 and 14. Two of 14 pigment prints, dimensions variable, accompanied by 8 text sections. © Nicoletta Grillo