

The Long Journey to Senso-Digital Walking: Exploring Fragility and Care in an Alpine Valley



Dolga pot do čutno-digitalnih sprehodov:
raziskovanje krhkosti in skrbi v alpski dolini

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1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek
DOI 10.4312/svetovi.3.1.115-129

ABSTRACT

This paper explores walking as a research tool and cultural practice, tracing the trajectories of its intellectual and methodological development in the social sciences and humanities. It examines early intersections between walking and aesthetic practices in the 20th century, highlighting key debates and advances. It then introduces senso-digital walks, an ethnographic method used in the Solčavsko region (Slovenia) to explore the understandings that emerge from a combination of sensory perceptions, environmental transformations, and digital technologies, while examining care, fragility, and localism.

KEYWORDS: walking ethnography, walking methodology, environmental fragility, Alps, senso-digital walks

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek obravnava sprehod kot raziskovalno orodje in kulturno prakso ter sledi njegovemu intelektualnemu in metodološkemu razvoju v družboslovju in humanistiki. Analizira zgodnja presečišča med sprehodom in estetskimi praksami dvajsetega stoletja, kjer so izpostavljene ključne polemike in premiki na tem področju. Nato so predstavljeni čutno-digitalni sprehodi, etnografska metoda, ki je bila na Solčavskem (v Sloveniji) uporabljena za raziskovanje razumevanj, ki izhajajo iz čutnih zaznav, preobrazbe okolja in digitalnih tehnologij, pri tem pa preučuje skrb, krhkost in lokalnost.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: sprehajalna etnografija, sprehajalna metodologija, okoljska krhkost, Alpe, čutno-digitalni sprehodi

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Walking has long been recognised as more than a simple means of locomotion, or a mere activity of a body-in-motion; it is a human practice imbued with social, cultural, sensory, and affective significance (Ingold 2011; Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008a). Although the body has been widely recognised as a research tool (Low 2015), walking as a research method, in particular, has surfaced over the past two decades across various paradigms in the social sciences and humanities (Bajič and Abram 2019; Bajič, Abram and Muršič 2022). Walking as an ethnographic method, along with the notion of the “ethnographer-as-walker” (Williamson 2016: 27), has become not only a commonplace but at times also a privileged practice in anthropological fieldwork. Central to walking methodologies and to the methodological turn is their ability to embed “ideas of the social and the symbolic within the immediate day-to-day activities that bind practice and representation, doing, thinking and talking, and to show that everything takes place, in one way or the other, on the move” (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008a: 3).

This article provides a brief overview and critical reflection on walking as a research methodology, and then, by introducing the method of senso-digital walking, seeks to enhance and contribute to the evolving discussion on walking as a research methodology. By engaging with some of the intellectual trajectories that have shaped the scholarship on walking practices, the paper shows how walking, once a rather sidelined practice, has turned into one of the central themes of anthropological inquiry, especially in contexts that are concerned with the understanding of sensory, affective, and material engagements with place.

I begin the discussion by highlighting the contributions of those who have used walking as a means of exploring (urban) space, and conclude with an overview of contemporary research conducted on foot, especially when it situates walking within the realm of sensory ethnography. Along the way, the literature review provides not only a comparative basis but also the entry point to present the development of senso-digital walking as a response to those critiques of walk-based research that have articulated its shortcomings in addressing sensory experience, digital mediation, and environmental transformation, among others.

The method of senso-digital walking, as applied during my fieldwork in the Solčavsko region (Slovenia) between 2022 and 2024, aimed to unpack the ways in which fragile environments are digitally aestheticized and how they are perceived. Thus, a series of ethnographic vignettes from Solčavsko, in which walking with a key participant is delineated, offers glimpses – and by no means an exhaustive account – of how (senso-digital) walking, alongside other, more “classical” methods, can illuminate complex issues, such as environmental change, fragility, care and localism in the Alpine context of Slovenia. In a way, the interplay, as well as the disengagement, between the sensory and the digital, allows for the final discussion on the entanglements between the human and non-human worlds. By providing these ethnographic snapshots, however, my aim is to illustrate a possible use and usefulness of senso-digital walking in research on environmental change.

Before moving in this more empirically grounded direction, I will trace some possible intellectual trajectories that have shaped the scholarship on walking practices and have, in one way or another, inspired the design of senso-digital walks.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WALKING AS AN AESTHETIC PRACTICE AND RESEARCH TOOL

A review of intellectual production in the social sciences and humanities over the last two decades reveals that walking studies have gained significant attention. The history of walking has been thoroughly examined (Amato 2004; Andrews 2020; Nicholson 2008; Solnit 2000; Wallace 1993); meanwhile, one of the most insightful discussions on how walking and research have intersected and diverged is found in the work of Bates and Rhys-Taylor (2017), who propose grouping walking practices into two main strands.

In the first strand, walking is seen as central to the production of philosophical and theological knowledge, functioning as a meditative practice through which one can arrive at rational and meaningful thought. The second strand, which traces the everyday pedestrianism of others, is of more recent origin (cf. Büscher and Urry 2009). This socio-anthropological and historical approach focuses on the everyday walking practices of others. Scholars in this stream examine power dynamics and resistance or the inherently social nature of walking within the modern city (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017: 1, cf. Solnit 2000). This strand, charting the genealogy of walking (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017), dates back to Romanticism, where walking in the countryside was understood as a way to (re)discover aesthetic and moral values that had been eroded by industrialisation and urbanisation. For the individual walker, this practice offered a person a way to reflect on the self and *his* role in the world (Andrews 2020; see Bajič and Abram 2019; Benjamin 1998, Coverley 2006).

I also follow in the footsteps of Marcel Mauss, who considered walking a valid ethnological research topic. In *Techniques of the Body* 1973 [1936], Mauss discusses walking within the broader context of the body as the essential instrument of human beings. In his conception, the body is both a technical object and a means of action, leading to the idea that the body can be shaped and manipulated through training. His argument culminates in the concept of techniques of the body: practices that “can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e., according to the results of training” (Mauss 1973 [1936]: 77). These techniques, including marching and gait, are passed down through training, or what Mauss refers to as dressage (see Fehringer 2020: 190–191, cf. Lefebvre 2004: 38–45).

However, from the 1960s onward, a new strand of walking research began to emerge. It combined epistemological and methodological elements from both of the above-mentioned traditions. What differentiates this development is that it embraced aesthetic, artistic, and artistic practices, is grounded in experimentation and experience, and has since developed into a multidisciplinary understanding and application of research walking within academic contexts. Before delving further, it is essential to briefly outline and reconsider what has come to be known as the walking turn.

Hayden Lorimer situates the recent re-emergence of walking within the framework of new walking studies, which advance this interdisciplinary field by “uniting social and geographical research and critical arts practice” (Lorimer 2011: 30). Lorimer clusters walking into four thematic headings. The first is that of *walking as a product of place* (e.g. mountaineering, pilgrimage). The second theme is *everyday walks*, referring to the practices of daily life. The third theme, *self-reflective walking practices*, encompasses those who perceive solitary walking as a “spiritual plane, rather than a practical-referential one” (Lorimer 2011: 23). Finally, the fourth theme is *political and creative walking*, where walking becomes “the expression of artistic invention or political intent” (Lorimer 2011: 24).

The realm of walking infused with art, activism, and activism, intertwining research approaches with critical arts practices, has long been present in the history of artistic wanderings. Francesco Careri identifies three movements that influenced the artistic adoption of walking in the 20th century, namely the Dadaists and Surrealists, the Letterist International and, finally, the Situationist International (Careri 2018: 20–22, cf. Debord 2006 [1955]). In the second half of the 20th century, however, walking again played a central role in artistic practices concerned with the environment and ecology, including Minimal Art and Land Art (Careri 2018). From the 1970s onwards, movements such as New Media Art, Electronic Art, and others incorporated walking into the thematisation of developing technologies and media, linking it to various social, environmental, and political contexts (see Bajič and Abram 2019).

I conclude this periodization of walking by adding another significant moment in which artistic practices and environmental research intersected at a productive crossroads. In line with the previous categorisations, this fifth heading can be termed *research walking*. Within the history of walking as an aesthetic practice, research walking emerged in the late 1960s as a distinct method of investigating urban space, “as a cognitive tool, a consciously used technique, and a method/methodology of research” (Rogelja Caf and Ledinek Lozej 2023: 23). Besides early figures who used walking as a means of making sense of the changing urban fabric, research walking can be traced back to Michael Frank Southworth (1967), who pioneered the concept of soundscapes and experimented with mobile methods to explore urban soundscapes. Southworth’s ideas were later popularised by acoustic ecologists R. Murray Schafer and Hildegard Westerkamp, who introduced the soundwalk method in 1974, describing it as “any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment” by “exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are” (Westerkamp 2001). By focusing on the “varying subjective experiences of places” and “moving narratives” (Westerkamp 2006), soundwalking offered a medium for analysing complex soundscapes from an embedded, experiential position. In other words, sounds recordings, previously considered primarily as artistic materials, became a rich source of sensory information that could be recomposed, analysed, and archived. These sounds represented valuable material for analytical insights into the specific dimensions of a certain environment – from urban soundscapes (Westerkamp 1994) to the acoustic landscapes of indigenous communities (e.g. Feld 2012).

It was not until the new millennium that walking as an ethnographic method was consolidated by Margarethe Kusenbach, who introduced the go-along method in 2003, with far-reaching variations (see Spinney 2015, Abram 2021: 26–27). The go-along method “brings to the foreground some of the transcendent reflexive aspects of lived experience as grounded in place” (Kusenbach 2003: 456). By the early 2000s, locomotion and footwork had become fresh points of departure for the study of perceptual activity (Ingold 2011: 46). Walking methodologies in anthropology reached a new milestone with the publication of the volume edited by Ingold and Lee Vergunst (2008b), and called for novel mobile methodologies in ethnographic research to capture elusive sensory experiences (Degen and Rose 2012; see Lee and Ingold 2006) by immersing the researcher’s body in the “fleeting, multi-sensory, distributed, mobile, and multiple, yet local, practical and ordered making of social and material realities” (Büscher and Urry 2009: 103).

In sum, before the late 20th century, walking was rarely discussed as a research method in its own right in ethnographic fieldwork. It was not until the early 2000s that comprehensive discussions about walking as a specialised research method emerged, particularly in two areas: one concerned with the study of the body, embodiment, and sensory experience, and the other focused on landscape, place, and mobility (Rogelja Caf and Ledinek Lozej 2023: 25). The methodological openness to walking in ethnographic research coincided with several intellectual turns in anthropology, including the sensory, affective, and material turns, among others (Bajič, Abram and Muršič 2022: 15). Although Southworth (1967) experimented with soundscape research by blindfolding his participants and moving them around Boston in a wheelchair, such “walking” methods did not gain widespread attention until decades later. Epistemological and methodological debates expanded walking methods centred on one sense and performed with one individual at a time, into multisensory, collective explorations of urban spaces and beyond.

An illustrative example of this evolution is the emergence of transgenerational sensobiographic walking, which provided a framework for exploring the embodied and site-specific emergence of sensory remembering and experiences (Järviluoma 2022: 86). Initially designed to study the soundscapes of small towns by conducting walking interviews with individuals, this method has developed into transgenerational, multisensory walking practices involving two or more participants.¹ The intellectual legacy of this method has since inspired the development of senso-digital walks in non-urban areas of Slovenia.

In the following section, I will first introduce the Alpine valleys of Slovenia, where ethnographic research eventually turned into a specific walking method that used research on foot to explore the digital aestheticization of this environment (see also Bajič 2024). I will then situate the empirical material collected through senso-digital walks within the framework of care and fragility.

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Between 2017 and 2021, researchers in Finland, the UK and Slovenia, including myself, Blaž Bajič and Rajko Muršič, employed sensobiographic walking in three mid-sized cities, including Ljubljana.

SENSING FRAGILITY AND CARE THROUGH SENSO-DIGITAL WALKING IN THE SOLČAVSKO REGION

Solčavsko is an Alpine region in northern Slovenia, located in the Upper Savinja Valley, and bordering Austria to the north. Surrounded by the massifs of the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, the region features several distinct glacial valleys, including the Logar Valley, Roban Cirque, and Matk Cirque. The Solčava Municipality covers an area of approximately 103 km², where four small settlements and surrounding farms have just over 500 inhabitants, making it the most sparsely populated administrative unit in Slovenia. Known for its biodiversity, approximately eighty percent of the region is under the ecological protection of the Natura 2000 network. The area includes two landscape parks: Roban Cirque and Logar Valley. The region is also known for its Alpine farming, with five homesteads located above 1,200 metres (Meze 1979: 33), and for its landowning families.² The local economy consists of three main sectors, namely (mountain) farming, forestry, and tourism (Svetel 2022: 76).

I began conducting fieldwork in Solčava in 2022, building on the prior experiences, contacts, and ethnographic insights of three colleagues who had worked in the region during previous years (see Bajič, Svetel and Zavrtnik 2021; Svetel, Zavrtnik and Bajič 2022). These three colleagues have been organising an annual student summer school in Solčava since 2020, which – with the assistance of students – has expanded the existing, though still largely incomplete, body of ethnological knowledge about Solčavsko. The week-long event blends lectures with thematically focused ethnographic research, which is carried out both in groups (of usually up to 5 people) and individually. Evening sessions provide space for moderated discussions and reflections between students and mentors, with the occasional participation of local residents (Bajič 2023: 112–114; Svetel 2022: 75). This framework has engendered a specific approach to data collection, which is best understood as a combination of multi-sited (Marcus 1995), collaborative (Elliott and Culhane 2017), and participatory ethnographic fieldwork (Bajič 2023; Svetel 2022).

Although ethnographic research in this Alpine environment had regularly been conducted on foot as part of the summer schools since 2020 (Bajič, Svetel and Zavrtnik 2021; Svetel, Zavrtnik and Bajič 2022), it was not until 2022 that walking was intentionally employed as a research method through the use of senso-digital walks. Over the course of two years (2022–2024), we conducted senso-digital explorations in Solčavsko with five key participants. Their ethnographic narratives on various topics were complemented by semi-structured interviews with fourteen local residents and visitors involved in various roles in Solčavsko, such as tourism service providers, municipal personnel, social media influencers, and local hunters. Additional methods included participant observation,

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Before the agrarian reform in Yugoslavia, five farmers in Solčavsko together owned more than 2,200 hectares of land (Meze 1963: 229), which is more than 20% of the present territory of the region. In 1945, over 80% of the land was concentrated in the hands of 22 farmers, with the Matk farming family, located in Matk Cirque, being the largest farmer in all of Yugoslavia at the time (Meze 1963: 228, 258).

informal conversations, engaging with locals in their everyday activities, including, among other, participating in Alpine transhumance, attending arts and crafts events, celebrating municipal holidays, joining a gathering of regional cheesemakers, and attending events showcasing the local dialect.

A key focus of the senso-digital walks in the Solčavsko region is how walking acknowledges the co-creation of ethnographic knowledge, where participants engage with researchers en route through conversations, interventions, and shared experiences. Moreover, it resonates with some of the premises put forward by Springgay and Truman (2018) in their notion of “walking-with place” as a critical and relational engagement with place, emphasizing the co-production and entanglement of human and more-than-human worlds. As Springgay and Truman explain, walking-with engages, among others, with local epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies, and foregrounds the “more-than-human ethics and politics of the material intra-actions of walking research” in the presence of others (Springgay and Truman 2018: 11, 15).

This post-humanist focus is relevant in the context of fieldwork in the Solčavsko region, as it addresses another criticism of contemporary walking studies – namely, that these methods have not adequately captured the intersection of sensory perceptions and the “post-digital world” (Berry 2014) in environmental research. For instance, consider how digital technologies simultaneously enhance our sensory experiences, following McLuhan’s classical argument, while also displacing and dispersing our senses through sensors in drones, data trackers, smartphones, various AR and VR devices, as well as other digital media and technologies (Bajič 2024: 51). The senso-digital walks were specifically designed to explore these interfaces, particularly the dynamic relationship between “the sensory” and “the digital”. In doing so, they facilitated what Przybylski (2020) calls hybrid ethnography: a “temporally and spatially focused ethnographic study of the interrelatedness and in-betweenness of digital and non-digital, online and offline engagements” (Bajič 2022: 8).

To ethnographically research digital-environmental relationships in the Alpine region, it was important to think from, through, and with walking. The goal was to turn walkers in Solčavsko into critical storytellers and agents-interpreters, reflecting on the use of digital media and (digital) technologies in their surroundings as these environments unfolded beneath our feet. While we occasionally allowed for autoethnographic explorations and experimentation, the primary focus remained on collective data gathering. Before each walk, participants, if they agreed, were equipped with filming devices, such as body cameras. During the senso-digital walks, they were encouraged to engage with their experiences through the use of digital media and technologies and to narrate any past, present, or any other correspondences with the surrounding environment. The senso-digital walkers were free to choose both the route and the duration of their journey. Sometimes we strolled along flat, well-worn paths for only a few minutes, while at other times, we clambered up remote, challenging terrains that tested our endurance. Although we meticulously prepared for walks, we were often unable to carry them out due to various circumstances, ranging from adverse weather conditions, the seasonally timed obligations of potential participants

(such as work in the forests or tourism-related duties) to personal factors like illness, reservations about being filmed, unexpected emergencies, etc.

DIGITALLY SENSING FRAGILITY IN AN ALPINE VALLEY

Alongside conventional ethnographic methods, we thus engaged in senso-digital walking in the Solčavsko region with both visitors and locals to explore how “the sensory” and “the digital” possibly intertwine, and to identify the discrepancies between the two as observed through walking in this Alpine environment.

In July 2023, during a period of week-long fieldwork, we conducted a second senso-digital walk with a key interlocutor. On this occasion, the research participant again chose to lead us along the right side of the valley, an area we later identified as having significant symbolic and material significance for the local population (see Bajič 2023; Korbar, Krašovic and Troha 2021). Alenka³ began by telling us about a secluded spot rich in Alpine flowers on a scree slope, accessible only by an unmarked path. She also recalled a visit to a forest glade at high altitude to pick partridge berries and cranberries for jam. When asked what she says to day-trippers and tourists if they inquire about where to pick mushrooms, wild garlic or blueberries, she replied that she refers them to a “neutral” location, far from the right side of the Logar Valley: *“I usually send them to the [Solčava] Panoramic Road. [...] It’s also nice to ask the local farmer [for permission]”* (Fieldnotes, 22 July 2023). We learned the exact sites of these microlocations in the Logar Valley as Alenka pointed them out while we walked. Another topic that emerged during the senso-digital walk was the issue of rock and boulder slides, which, according to her, have become increasingly common on the steep precipices of the Alps’ northern faces in recent years. For Alenka, these slides are easily identifiable from a distance due to their distinctive brown-orange color, visible even to the naked eye from afar. As we gazed at the surrounding mountain massifs, Alenka explained that she perceived the forest and mountains as *“unstable”* (Fieldnotes 2023; see also Bajič 2023: 116 n. 10).

A similar point to Alenka’s also came up in a conversation with an alpinist. He regularly climbs these parts of the Alps and posts about his breakneck, mostly winter ascents on his YouTube channel. According to his observations, the extremes in temperature – whether extreme cold or intense heat – affect the solidity of mountain rocks. As he explained, when *“extreme [weather] hits, it really doesn’t help the compactness of our limestone.”* In his opinion, the current *“crumbliness of certain [climbing] routes”* keeps increasing.

I’m almost certain that when these people, these first climbers, were climbing, it [the rock of the climbing route] wasn’t so crumbly. Sometimes I wonder: “How did you even climb this?” Sure, they were aces [in climbing]... but now it’s so crumbly. For example, on Debelak’s route on Velika Mojstrovka [mountain], there’s a section graded IV+. That is tough. Everyone I’ve asked was like: “No way, that’s not a IV+.” Even if we assume it’s an exaggerated rating, it’s not a IV+. And I’m

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All verbatim quotations in italics were transcribed from walks and interviews, pseudo-anonymised and grammatically corrected for readability. The participants were assigned altered names corresponding to their age group.

almost sure that in the past, there was some kind of jug [a large, secure handhold that is easy to grip] or an extra piece of rock to hold onto, and that isn't there anymore. (Marko, September 2024)

Similarly, Alenka not only viewed the mountains as increasingly unstable but also considered them more dangerous for anyone venturing uphill, including mountaineers and visitors, due to unpredictable weather conditions.

I try to warn them about the weather conditions. If I think they might not be familiar with the conditions in the Alps, I try to scare them a bit. I explain for their own good that a storm could come, with loud thunder, that there could be lightning around them, and strong winds. (Alenka, July 2023)

In that same week in July, we experienced a powerful thunderstorm ourselves, driven across the valley by intense winds. Just moments before we were engulfed by gusts of wind and rain, a series of cracking sounds echoed in the distance. We realised only later that this was the sound of trees being felled by the wind. Alenka described these weather conditions as strange and quite unusual. While she was used to mild winds blowing from the southwest, she noted that in the past decade or so, intense gusts and storms from the north had begun to devastate the valley: *"In 2017, there were not only heavy wind gusts reaching 170 km/h, but also whirlwinds. My father's hat was swept away by one of them"* (Alenka, July 2023). Her father, joining our conversation, reflected on the recent storm: *"I've never seen anything like it before... for it to rain that way. Our horse was right there [in the meadow in front of the house], but I couldn't see it because the rain was falling so heavily"* (July 2023).

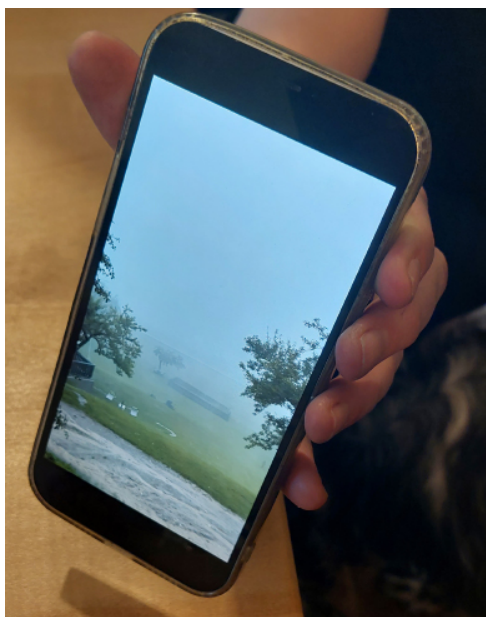


Photo 1: Alenka's photo of her encounter with a thunderstorm in the summer (Author: Sandi Abram, 19 July 2023).

Unsurprisingly, in the days that followed, our discussions and observations on her porch often turned to reflections on the changing weather patterns, severe weather events, shifts in seasons and temperatures, as well as environmental change in general. Past weather disasters, particularly those involving windthrows and windsnaps, and the uncanny feelings they provoked, remained a central theme during the conversations with Alenka. She sometimes decided to support these claims by showing us a collection of photos and videos saved on her smartphone. These sensory encounters with crumbling solidity and the “aesthetics of fragility” (Bajič 2023) are evidenced in her digital archive of more than 4,000 various photos, along a collection of hundreds of old postcards and photos of Solčavsko (see Photo 1).

As a local tourism service and accommodation provider, Alenka cares for this fragile environment in specific ways (see Bajič 2023: 125–126). She reserves the aforementioned places for herself and her friends, while at the same time warning tourists staying in her guesthouse about the increased risks of rock falls and unstable weather conditions in the higher areas of this glaciated valley. By selectively filtering what visual and verbal information reaches the outside world and demarcating safe and unsafe areas or conditions, these local aesthetic and care practices aim to micro-manage the movement of bodies in Solčavsko (see Korbar, Krašovic and Troha 2021). Having in mind the ethnographic vignette above, one could argue that the fragile environment in Solčavsko is produced, sustained, and maintained through the care and control exercised over the environment – land that is “inherited” by the local population – and that care and control over the landscape and the community encompass material, symbolic, and aesthetic dimensions. In the most elemental way, from the perspective of local people, it structures what they consider to be acceptable, accessible, and available. (Bajič 2023)

An example can help illustrate this argument. On 17 September 2022, we accompanied some students who were participating in a livestock drive in a part of Solčavsko. This involved walking as a group with local farmers to a mountain ridge where a flock of sheep had been grazing on a mountain pasture throughout the summer months. On that day, the forecast predicted snow, so the livestock needed to be herded down to the mountain farm in Robanov Cirque. After successfully gathering all the sheep, my colleague and I turned our attention to the forest floor during the descent to search for porcini mushrooms. When we returned to the mountain farmstead owned by one of the landowning families, with far more mushrooms than we could ever have expected to find (or manage to hold), we casually asked the surprised farmer if she wanted some. “*Half of what you’ve got,*” she replied without hesitation. It was only then that I realised this was *her family’s* forest, and that my colleague and I had been gathering mushrooms on *their land* without asking permission (Fieldnotes 2022).

Care and control over the environment and the community can determine which paths, narratives, conversations, materialities, and aesthetics are permissible, affordable, and attainable – and which are not. As an ethnographic method, the walking method can facilitate a grounded understanding of these elements as they unfold in a specific place, but should also seek the ethnographic knowledge gained from other research approaches due to some of the limits outlined. Senso-digital walking, with its temporally limited “multisensory

ethnographic immersion” (Rhys-Taylor 2018: 140) thus seems to fall under the umbrella of the broader criticisms directed at walking methods, particularly that they are “often too methodical, systematic, and pre-determined by a priori research agendas” (Vannini and Vannini 2017: 179).

CONCLUSION: WALKING, FRAGILITY, AND ALPINE VALLEYS

Focusing on regions in Italy and Austria, Corrado describes the fragile areas in/of the Alps as mountain communities facing depopulation, negative demographic trends, infrastructural shortcomings, low levels of industrialisation, limited employment opportunities, a shortage of services, predominantly elderly populations, and limited tourism exposure, with fewer than 300 inhabitants and a high percentage of outbound commuters (Corrado 2010: 2). In contrast to such a socio-economic definition of fragility, the anthropological focus on Solčavsko, though presented here only through select frames, fragments and glimpses obtained through senso-digital walking and with other methods, points to the complexity of constructing the local's understanding of fragility. The notion of fragility in Solčavsko, as perceived by locals in their everyday life, seems interlinked in a multilayered flow of environmental and atmospheric changes, care and morality, mass tourism, localism, and autonomy, among others. In the discourse of locals, fragility becomes accentuated and tangible *inter alia* through the recent shifts from previously familiar experiences of climate patterns to unfamiliar atmospheric phenomena and environmental transformations. Take, for example, how Alenka expressed her concerns after the floods affected Solčavsko. Referring to the new weather patterns, she claimed: “*We need to accept this situation without being frightened by it*” (Fieldnotes 2024). The manifestations of these occurrences and disturbances, sometimes sources of uncanniness and unsettling affects, especially when they occur one after the other, tend to be documented by locals using digital devices and commonly also shared in person or online.

Over the past two years of conducting fieldwork in Solčavsko, it seemed that weather was no longer perceived, verbalised, and represented as simply “innocent” and “given,”⁴ but as “haunted by the specter of anthropogenic climate change” (Bubandt 2018: 4). Flood debris, cracked roads, gaps in the forest canopy, rock and boulder slides represented visual, material testimonies, often captured digitally, on the basis of which locals reflected on the social, cultural, and economic implications of climate change during our serendipitous encounters, informal discussions, and senso-digital walks.

The senso-digital walks, designed to explore the “messy” (Tsing 2004) field between sensory perceptions, sensor-driven digital technologies, and environmental transformations

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In the memory of the locals in the Solčavsko region, past weather-related disasters were vividly remembered and referenced in conversation, including, for instance, a high-mountain fire at Rjavčki Peak (in 2021) and other fires caused by lightning strikes, windthrow events and the subsequent outbreak of bark beetles (in 2017), as well as landslides (in 2009), heavy snowfall (in 2020), and, more recently, floods (in 2023) (Interviews A1–A5).

thus represented neither the beginning nor the conclusion of the research path in Solčavsko. As I attempted to show, what one gathers through senso-digital walks needs to be put into active conversation with other “well-trodden” ethnographic methods. Even when we had not planned to walk with a specific person, and were therefore without the proper technical equipment, fieldwork serendipity often led to situations where interlocutors showed us places that were significant for their arguments, from forests, cultural heritage sites, tourism spots, and other areas. Using an anachronistic metaphor, Stoller (2017), trained in what he calls a culture of speed, reminds us that learning the culture of others requires a glacial pace, as social relations are built over long periods of time. His central call is to practice slow(er) anthropology, “in which scholars take the time to savor the sensorial dimensions of social life” (Stoller in Järviluoma et al. 2020), especially in a contemporary, fast-paced, digitalised world that has transformed the landscape of anthropological expression and inquiry.

In light of the criticisms directed at walking methods, senso-digital walks and similar “new” walking methods should neither turn into another form of academic branding (Bajič and Abram 2019: 32), and fall into the trap of capitalist commodification as the Situationists warned, nor serve as some sort of fast-paced shortcut to ethnographic accounts. Rather, they should be taken as opportunities that allow us to capture “a bit better” the verbalisations of how environments are experienced as they unfold beneath our feet during fieldwork.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This research received financial support as part of the project Digital Aestheticization of Fragile Environments (DigiFREN, 2022-2025), supported by the Ministry of Culture, Slovenia; NCN, Poland; AKA, Finland; HRZZ, Croatia; and RCN, Norway, under the CHANSE ERA-NET programme, which is co-funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101004509. The author also acknowledges financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding: Ethnological research of cultural knowledge, practices and forms of socialities, No. P6-0187). I would also like to thank both anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and feedback. Special thanks go to Blaž Bajič for his careful reading of the manuscript and his comments and suggestions.

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INTERVIEWS AND FIELDNOTES

Senso-digital walk with Alenka in the Logar Valley. Key research participant, local tourism service provider, 21 July 2023.

Senso-digital walk with Alenka in the Logar Valley. Key research participant, local tourism service provider. 14 February 2023.

Interview with Alenka. Key research participant, local tourism service provider. Interviewers: Ana Svetel, Blaž Bajič and Sandi Abram, July 2023.

Interview with Marko. Interviewer: Blaž Bajič, 27 September 2024.

Interview with A1. Local inhabitant, pensioner, and former forester. Interviewers: Tina Krašovic, Tina Mlinarič and Lina Troha, 25. September 2020.

Interview with A2. Local inhabitant, former musician, and music enthusiast. Interviewers: Marko Senčar Mrdaković, Žiga Korbar, Tajda Jerkič and Tara Milčinski.

Interview with A3. Local inhabitant, former student of the Biotechnical Faculty. Interviewers: Tina Mlinarič and Neža Zore, 25. September 20 21.

Interview with A4. Local inhabitant, farmer. Interviewers: Julija Zupan and Petra Goljevšček, 26. September 2021.

Interview with A5. Local inhabitant, tourism service provider and municipality employee. Interviewers: Eva Malovrh, Julija Zupan and Tara Milčinski, 25. September 2021.

Fieldnotes, 2022–2024.

POVZETEK

Članek podaja pregled in refleksijo sprehajanja kot raziskovalne metodologije ter kulturne prakse. Sledi intelektualnemu in metodološkemu razvoju sprehajanja v humanistiki in družboslovju. Njegov namen je s predstavitvijo čutno-digitalnega sprehajanja, metode, ustvarjene za proučevanje čutnih percepcij in digitalnih tehnologij, spodbuditi razpravo o sprehajanju kot raziskovalni metodologiji. Prispevek predstavlja uporabo te metode v kontekstu Solčavskega, slovenske alpske krajine, za raziskovanje tem okoljske krhkosti, skrbi in lokalizma. Po obravnavi intelektualnih usmeritev, ki so oblikovale zgodovinsko in sodobno vedenje o sprehajalnih praksah, bo umestil metodologije sprehajanja v domeno antropološkega raziskovanja, natančneje v kontekste in intelektualne tokove, ki jih zanima razumevanje čutnega, afektnega in materialnega doživljanja prostora. Na koncu razpravlja o vplivu raznih obratov na širitev metodološkega dosega raziskav, utemeljenih na sprehajanju.

Članek na podlagi čutno-digitalnih sprehajalnih intervjujev, opravljenih na Solčavskem med letoma 2022 in 2024, predstavlja sovpliv čutnega in digitalnega pri doživljanju prostora. Niz etnografskih vinjet prikazuje glavno udeleženko raziskave in načine, kako je uporabljala digitalne naprave, da je dokumentirala svoje izkušnje okoljskih sprememb, kot so spreminjajoči se vremenski vzorci, kamniti plazovi ter krhkost nasploh. Take pojave je udeleženka interpretirala ne le kot dane okoljske razmere, temveč tudi kot doživete izkušnje in dokaze podnebnih sprememb. Članek v sklepnem delu trdi, da lahko čutno-digitalno sprehajanje okrepi stare antropološke metode z zagotavljanjem potencialnih novih poti do uvidov v preplet čutne percepcije, digitalnega posredovanja in preobrazb okolja, obenem pa poudarja potrebo po dolgotrajnem, poglobljenem terenskem delu, ki je nujno za razumevanje kompleksnih odnosov med človekom in naravo v kontekstu krhkih okolij.

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*The Long Journey to Senso-Digital Walking:
Exploring Fragility and Care in an Alpine Valley*