‘To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power’. (Susan Sontag). Critically engage with this statement.

Photography, according to Sontag, is a means to capture reality, of preserving the past in a way that becomes a kind of theft. Such an action becomes an aggression, a form of structural violence that makes reality manageable or subject to schemas of categorisation and classification. Using the work of Sontag and Berger as a departure, I contrast pieces of colonial photography with the work of Pushpamala N., Clare Arni and Heidi Larson, as well as the work of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch. Through this comparison, I aim to provide a critical reflection on ‘the politics of representation’ and to question the ways in which filmic techniques have potential to transcend the power dynamics which Sontag claims are inherent with photography. Through this argument I aim to question whether film is able to transcend these very power relations, as well as bringing into question the ability of the photographic image to do the same.

As John Berger astutely points out, photographs do not retain significance in themselves but in the subjective interpretations of the viewer. What is important to remember is the original presence or positionality of the person behind the camera, the act of ‘being there’. Responding to Sontag in his essay ‘Usefulness of Photography’ in his book About Looking (1980), Berger further problematises the issue of ‘truthfulness’ of the visual image, referring to the photograph as an ‘intervention’ rather than a documentation of truth, a tool which “relieves us from the burden of memory” (180, p.55). The ‘context’ of such an image is crucial, and Berger stresses the importance of the photographer being less of a “reporter to the rest of the world” then as “a recorder for those involved in the events photographed” (p.58). Here
Berger grasps the important fact that images not only capture but reconstruct reality, that within photographs is imbued the ability to cause ruptures, to intervene in the process of memory. Here I would like to use the example of colonial photography, a practice grounded in the belief of the true objectivity of the camera, of the camera as a tool to preserve and categorise reality.

The ‘indexicality’ of the photograph allowed for the colonial state to have knowledge over and thus control over their ‘subjects’. Here Pinney explains how the power of the photographic ‘gaze’ leads to individual identity being “largely displaced by generic masks rendered visible to the state” (1997, p.23). The structuring of the image, in form as well as context, allowed for the “frame” through which these so called ‘records’ of reality to become obscured. In the colonial encounter, photography largely became the method of proof for the theory of ‘types’, anthropometric measurement (Figure 3) being the methodological tool to justify theories of Social Darwinism. Thus through the seemingly innocuous act of the
collection of evidence, the visual image became a ‘weapon’ in which the colonial other became identified and classified. This essentialisation of the colonial ‘other’ “not only helped to sustain imperialist expansion but also supplied Europeans with a new, empowering framework for identity based on racial and cultural essence” (Maxwell 1999, p. 9).

Through her work with first generation Pakistani and Indian children in Southall, England, Larson (1988) argues that photographs can be used to uses “to question rather than confirm events photographed” (p415). Drawing from Henri Cartier-Bresson’s notion of capturing the "decisive moment", Larson argues that photography provides a methodological tool which may facilitate ethnographic work to the extent that it allows the researcher the possibility “not to "confer” importance, but to recognise it” (p434). This idea of the photograph being able to sample or capture a moment of reality speaks to common sensical perceptions of the photograph but such an approach seems to be lacking in reflexivity of the power relations involved in such image-making. As Macdougall remarks (2005), “framing people, objects, and events with a camera is always about something, it is a way of pointing out, of describing, of judging” (p3). Here I argue that Larson, does not truly point out how her images
form a genuine collaborative attempt to convey meaning, and this sense of ‘conferring’ is thus robbed of it’s significance. The act of conveying cultural symbols (Figure 4), of documenting, when taken outside of it’s context, can become bound to the same dilemmas of ‘judging’ found in colonial photography.

Providing a more substantial critique of the ‘truthfulness’ of the visual image, the work of Pushpamala N, a visual artist based in Bangalore, India, aims to not only to subvert and critique colonial photography through looking at the way images are framed and contextualised, as well as the aesthetic impetus behind such imagery. Here power relations are questioned and explored, as seen through her self portraits which critique anthropometric representations (Figures 5, 6, 7) and the objectification of the self. These photographs in many ways reflect the need for self representative visual media as advocated by Ruby (1992:58). Particularly Interesting is Figure 8 and 9, in which the framing as well as the presence of ‘onlookers’ (perhaps experts) is revealed, exposing the artifice of the photograph. Such a technique allows the viewer to be forced to confront the very process of the construction of cultural identities “within a context designed to destabilise those identities rather than maintain or strengthen them (Maxwell 2000, p10). These depictions highlight the staged nature of colonial photography, revealing both the frame and the bias in such a way which is unavoidable, exposing the ‘violence’ and historical weight involved in the production of such images of the ‘Other’ (Said 1978), and the ways in which such a frame gave the visual image “such importance in the colonial
imagination” (Pinney 1997, p20). The first photographic images of non-european peoples were produced by anthropologists (Maxwell 2000, 38), and such a pursuit involved the documentation of physical and cultural characteristics, conforming to a “system of representation that was based on racial essences” (ibid). Such a system of categorisation assumed that visible signs of the body could tell us about cultural differences, in a ‘scientific’ manner which often assumed these racially defined bodies could be examined to establish a certain form of cultural hierarchy and thus justify colonial power. Beyond social darwinism, such techniques of depersonalisation allowed for the organisation of groups which assisted imperial management, and in many ways led to the shaping of the colonial world, whose sediments remain powerfully transcribed both geographically as well as in the cultural imagination to this very day.

“The fundamental problem in all social science is that the facts are always distorted by the presence of the person who asks questions. You distort the answer simply by posing a question.” (Rouch, J., & Feld, Steven 2003, p219).

This quote typifies Jean Rouch’s approach to ethnographic filmmaking through it’s sensitive reflexivity and awareness of the power dynamics inherent in the visual image. Rouch, in his attempt to create a “cinéma-vérité” aimed to question the neutrality of so called ‘documentary’ film; his belief was that film and photography is always imbued with power and residue of ‘authorship’ - the gaze situated behind the lens. Such an applied and collaborative approach to visual anthropology allows “the experiences of those who are normally invisible to be seen and their voices and feelings to be heard” (Pink 2011, p450). A photograph cannot show the same temporal relationship between objects as a film can, they are only fragments (Omonri 2006).

“I am a student from Africa working on my thesis at the university. Would you permit me to measure you?” This question comes from the protagonists of Rouch’s film ‘Petit à
Petit', Damore and Lam, who travel to Paris to study the French “tribe” so as to get measurements and observations, to build a luxury hotel catering to westerners (Figure 10, 11). Here the direction of the gaze is reversed, as the filmmaker at once collaborates with those he is portraying, aiming to interrogate the “superiority of reason” (Stoller 1992, p56). Stoller remarks that “Europeans are usually the observers not the observed”, and here Rouch provides an account of his own “tribe”, the French, embracing the transformative potential of the visual image to problematise and bring into question the very foundations of ‘photographic knowledge’. To Rouch their is “almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction” (Rouch 1978), as he acknowledges “the permeability of categorical boundaries (fact/fiction/objectivity/subjectivity)” (Stoller 1992, p56). By acknowledging the porousness of such categorical boundaries, Rouche challenges both the categorisation inherent in colonial photography, as well as inherent in the venture of anthropology itself.

“The act of focusing involves an element where the self enters the other. In addition, when it comes to discourse, the self remakes what it has perceived in order to present it to others (Lydall, J & Strecker 2006, p139). Here Lydall, J & Strecker highlight the pluralistic aspect of photograph, the intersubjectivity involved in the process of image making, this intersection between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’. To conclude, I believe that Rouch’s ‘shared anthropology’ allows for a distinct dialogue to emerge between cultures, and a genuine critique can emerge which transcends the work of Larson (1988), whose act of ‘conferring’ seems genuinely empty of dialogue in comparison. The interpersonal engagement person in Rouch’s work, where films are not only shown and discussed with the subjects, but involve a creative collaborative process which act to expose the constructed nature of cultural narratives. Yet even Rouch acknowledges his positionally and the power held by the filmmaker or photographer when he remarks that “film is the only means I have to show someone else how I see him.” (Rouch, J., & Feld, Steven. 2003, p43). Yet his belief
that this quest of knowledge mustn’t be a “stolen secret” but an “endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet” (Rouch, J., & Feld, Steven. 2003, p101) allows for more space to interrogate and bring into question issues of power than photography. Such an approach has similarities with Trinh T. Minha quest to speak nearby, and perps such a pursuit must be adopted to transcend the seemingly inescapable power relations involved in process of ‘knowledge production’. Perhaps to truly engage with Sontag’s observation one must align oneself with anthropologists such as Geertz and Rouch in the stance that ethnography and visual media mustn’t claim to be ‘truthfull’ but rather tell a story.

Bibliography


Image Sources

Figures 1, 2, 3 Various Sources (shown beneath the images) taken from:


Figure 4


Figures 5, 6, 7, 8


Figures 9