

A New Safari : some reflections on 'shooting'

Review Assignment 4 for OCA course : Landscape Photography

Linda Mayoux October 2016

This review looks at challenges and potential ways forward in photographing journeys - issues I became interested in Assignment 2 but were left pending. It looks at ways I might approach 'journeys' in Africa and Asia, compared to the way I photograph journeys in UK - supposedly my 'own' society'. It briefly considers issues of 'colonial gaze' and travel photography. But it is more concerned with wider issues of tensions between subjectivity and objectivity in landscape photography, and the implications for an 'enlightened' and relatively informed approach to photographing journeys as a process of exploration and discovery, then selection and interpretation – inevitably raising political questions about what I am photographing and why. It makes substantial use of my own photographs of journeys taken before and during my work on this course, placing these in the context of other African and Asian photographers as well as Western photographers who have depicted similar landscapes both as studied 'documentary landscapes' and as journeys/journey narratives. This review is partly a way of taking stock of the photographs I have and how they can be made more meaningful through selection, processing and narrative sequencing. Partly a way of comparing my images to those of professional photographers who have dealt with similar types of images. In order to draw implications for possibilities for my own practice in future.

A new photographic safari?

The word 'safari' means journey in Swahili from the Arabic root 'safir' travel. It was used by colonial powers to refer to game hunts that were a part of colonial life and travel in both Africa and Asia. Local hunters and trackers were used to provide information about where animals are, the trophies then taken by the 'brave hunter heroes'. The essence of this type of 'safari' are unequal power relations and the predatory nature of the hunt – not only for the animals, but also local populations. The hunter's only interest is their own aggrandisement through the trophies they parade back home as proof of manhood.

Photography was used in a somewhat similar vein to document the routes of colonisation that provided the political and class context for 'safaris'. Early photographers like Francis Frith¹ and William Ellerton Fry and John Thomson photographed landscapes and portraits of kings and dying races in the Middle East, Africa and South and South East Asia (Haney 2010) p42. The attitudes expressed by anthropologists up until 1970s, and the underlying power relations and distortions, has been the subject of much critique as part of serious self-questioning within anthropology (Edwards 2001) (Pinney 2011). Anthropological documentaries where photography was seen as more 'objective' than written documentation – because anthropologists often did not have sufficient grasp of the local

¹ See Blog posts: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/francis-frith/> and <http://photography.zemniimages.info/john-thomson/>

language and/or the 'natives' were too 'devious' to want to reveal the truth about their lives and cultural practice. Photography offered a way of recording and systematising racial physical differences. It also meant that non-anthropologists on the ground (traders, missionaries and others) could record people and events, then send back the documents to be 'correctly interpreted' by anthropologists in universities back home. Later photography became incorporated as part of participant observation, using landscape format with maximum depth of field to record context as well as subjects. But the underlying power relationships and lack of self-reflection of the anthropologist photographers remained.

In the commercial expansion of tourist travel photography as 'aesthetic consumerism' (Sontag 1977) this romanticised objectification of 'the jungle' (idealised wilderness as advertised in Africa, Asia or Latin America) as a place 'to shoot' images has intensified. As Malcolm Andrews (Andrews 1999) remarks, there is "something of the big-game hunter in these tourists, boasting of their encounters with savage landscapes, 'capturing' wild scenes, and 'fixing' them as pictorial trophies in order to sell them or hang them up in frames on their drawing room walls". They ignore the complex social, political and economic interests and conflicts between classes, conservation and industrialisation, commercial interests and local people. Such images are taken alongside glossy portraits of smiling darker faces, the occasional bare-breasted woman, and exotic dress². Not least, for tourists it perpetuates the comforting thought that beyond our own busy 'modern' world, there still lies some comforting wild pristine paradise 'out there' that means we do not need to change the way we treat our own environment around us.

The commercial potential of landscapes is now increasingly exploited by national governments, with tourism seen as a key generator of foreign capital and investment – as well as 'monetising landscape value' being the only way to protect of wildlife and 'indigenous culture' (McKeown 2012). Game hunts themselves are becoming 'tamed' with captive lions and other large predators being bred and fattened in captivity, just being let out for 'the shoot'. The term 'safari' is used by African governments and tour companies to refer more to eco-travel in national parks, and also African tourism more generally - photographic opportunities often being stressed in part of the promotion. This has also increased the demand for 'nice beautiful pictures' to put on websites and brochures. In reality what is generally provided to tourists with very busy lives are a quick in and out, picking up on 'the exotic', staged access to 'local people'. Then images are uploaded to Flickr, Facebook and other social networking sites – with Photoshop cleaning.

Much of the above can also be said of the growing national and regional tourist industries in African and Asian countries, in the context of the now ubiquitous mobile phone 'selfie' and people wanting to understand and know their own country better. Although – as with British tourism – people are less of an outsider, there is a similar idealisation of 'landscape' as a means of escape from pollution, chaos and stress of urban living. The growing number of professional African and Asian photographers (like their Western counterparts) vary in their knowledge of, and level of sustained engagement with, people outside their own

² This is also to a large extent true of a lot of professional photography of Africa by women as well as men, for example Beckwith, C. and A. Fisher (2009). *Faces of Africa: Thirty Years of Photography*. Washington, National Geographic.

immediate circle and background. There is a long history of African photography, but this was mostly portraits – landscapes generally echoed Western photography (Haney 2010). Many are still unreflective outsiders who are by no means immune from sexism and/or idealisation of the ‘rural idyll’ and search for the exotic in order to fulfil the demands of the photography market³.

This is not say there are no exceptions – photographers from Africa, Asia and the West – who have taken a much more reflective (for this maybe read similar political perspective to my own?) approach. This is particularly the case with documentary photography. For example, the very powerful landscape as well as portrait images in documentary photography. Western documentary photography like Dana Lixenberg’s ‘Last Days of Shishmaref’, Nadav Kander and Ed Burtynsky’s photographs of China, Paul Seawright’s images of African urban landscapes in ‘Invisible Cities’ (Seawright 2007) have all served an activist function in highlighting the social as well as environmental impacts of rapid economic development and (maybe to a lesser extent?) the structures of power behind it. ⁴

Most African and Asian activist photography is mainly concerned with social documentary. There are some very interesting participatory projects doing urban documentary using very simple cheap cameras which have a similar out-of-focus and immediate impact similar to some of the blurry journey photography of people like Coekin, for example the book by Slum-TV collective in Nairobi (Slum-TV??). African photographers like Michael Tsegaye’s photos of remote communities in Ethiopia, Dillon Marsh’s studies of commodity production in South Africa ⁵ are examples of engaged social environmental documentary, as well as compelling landscapes from an aesthetic perspectives.

An alternative approach is to accentuate, rather than reduce, the feeling of voyeurism and being an outsider – focusing as much on the ‘journey experience’ as on what is seen. There are also some extremely powerful narrative series of journeys and the experience of travelling in Europe, US and Japan – notably Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Daido Moriyama and Chris Coekin⁶. These often use photographic devices like framing and inclusion of the windscreen and/or reflection of the photographer, blurry images, images shot (apparently at least) carelessly at an angle. Cartier-Bresson’s black and white images of people on the move in India have a feeling of movement – not just ‘decisive moment’. Daido Moriyama’s

³ See for example Mathua Mutheka: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/mathua-mateka/>. As considered documentary or art photography I find the work of Emeka Okereke of Nigeria too posed, glossy and cliché without focus <http://photography.zemniimages.info/emeka-okereke/>.

⁴ See posts: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/dana-lixenberg/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/nadav-kander/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/burtynsky/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/paul-seawright/>

⁵ See posts: Dillon Marsh: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/dillon-marsh/>, Michael Tsegaye: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/michael-tsegaye/> Unfortunately some websites are rather flaky eg the promising-looking blog of Nii Obodai in Ghana. <http://photography.zemniimages.info/nii-obodai/>. Many other links from African photography networks do not work. I suspect there are very many good activist environmental photographers out there who do not have websites at all.

⁶ See posts: <http://photography.zemniimages.info/chris-coekin/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/robert-frank/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/paul-graham/>, <http://photography.zemniimages.info/lee-friedlander/>

'Tales of Tono' (Moriyama 2012) I find particularly evocative in their high contrast black and white images of a journey through Japan and its flash-like glimpses.

Alternative Approaches to Journeys: implications for my own practice

My main purpose in this review was to look at ways I myself might approach 'journeys' in Africa and Asia, compared to the way I photograph journeys in UK - supposedly my 'own' society'. I travel a lot in my professional work as trainer and evaluator for development projects in different parts of Asia and Africa. I have the opportunity to visit places where few other foreigners go. Some are remote and extremely 'beautiful' – others are polluted and 'ugly'. Most cannot easily be researched using Google Images or travel guides. The nature of my work with local people and national development agency staff also gives me insight into urban and rural communities and peoples' perceptions and impacts on the physical environment around them. I increasingly have opportunities to do documentary portraits as part of impact assessment for my work – now my photography skills are better. But, unlike professional photographers, I am employed to do a different job and cannot spend a long time planning and waiting for the right 'shot' – unless it is directly relevant to what I am paid to do. I have only fleeting opportunities to do more contextual landscape or environmental work. This is generally limited to what I can photograph from a car (often with broken and/or muddy windows speeding on bumpy roads) with the occasional 'scenic' or 'health/food' stop when others also want to have a break or take photos also.

In my own practice I therefore have to accept a number of constraints – until such time as I may be able to negotiate some specific space for photography as part of my work I cannot do in-depth landscape documentary. However, drawing on some of the 'journey photography' coupled with the possibilities to get background information, I could aim to produce some interesting work that captures my own feelings as an outsider as well as give some valuable insights into life in the rural and urban areas where I work.

I have done a number of 'journey' sequences of photographs before and since starting this course, trying out a number of different approaches⁷. The best examples of contrasting approaches are:

[Rwanda: Gisenyi to Muhanga](#) (May 2013) was an experiment in manual focusing. I found this technique interesting, and some of the blurry images quite atmospheric in their 'rapid glimpse' effect of people going past. But - partly because of my eyesight - I find manual focus difficult, and the approach rather too hit and miss.

[Kenya: Thika to Nairobi airport](#) (January 2015) I took frequent photographs as things interested me - I was struck by the interesting names of shops and hotels, and the amount of building work in an otherwise empty landscape. The light was bright so I fixed the aperture at f/10 to give greater depth of field. However this proved too slow for the unpredictable speed of the car in many of the images, making them blurred. In this case (unlike Rwanda) I find it annoying. I think because the subjects are further away. The series

⁷ For all the documentary travel photography currently uploaded see:
<http://www.zemniimages.com/Photography/Documentary>

could be edited down and the photos themselves edited as a narrative focusing on shop signs only.

[Cote d'Ivoire: Zaranou to Abidjan](#) (August 2015) fixing the aperture at its widest: f/1.8 to allow maximum shutter speed for the dull rainy season light - together with the fast car. The contrast between sharp and blurred areas maintains the feeling of travelling, whilst still giving some focus. I could exploit this more with practice to create more deliberate meaning/juxtapositions.

[Indonesia : Sumatra](#) (April 2016) Portfolio images were taken in the conventional way - selecting the 'picturesque' while travelling or on travel stops while my Indonesian photographer friend also took photos. The Journey images experimented by taking photos at regular intervals while going through villages and urban areas - counting 10 between each press of the shutter and pointing in the same direction - giving a much more automatic random sequence. These are probably more 'representative' overall. It is interesting how many of the images have no people in - they were all in the fields at this time of day. Also the numbers of satellite dishes.

[Kyrgyzstan](#) (May 2016) reverting back to the method from Cote d'Ivoire but with an aperture setting of f/3.2. I maintained as much sharpness in all the images as possible - despite the unpredictable bumps in the road), often through shooting forward through the windscreen (atmospherically cracked). But I exaggerated the feeling of journey through including the window frame and cracks, as well as the driver in some of the images.

Conclusions

On the whole I find Kyrgyzstan the most successful of the series - along with Cote d'Ivoire. This is partly because of the subject matter itself. But also because keeping the aperture setting constant I can focus on the image. But in both taking and selecting the images I need to think carefully about what it is I am trying to say - I am not a neutral observer and it is important not to perpetuate stereotypes. It is maybe a bit too easy to focus on obvious political themes of environmental damage and urban poverty as the only alternative to tourist voyeuristic exoticism and focus on the unfamiliar. Or subjective exhilaration of the journey itself. I need to think much more about selection of images – why would I want to select a series of billboards or road signs or people on bicycles? Or intrude into peoples' privacy because they live along a road? Exactly what am I trying to say about what to whom and why? These are questions I want to explore further in Assignment 5 when I look at different possible book designs and slideshow formats and selections from these images, and other new ones from Ethiopia and Nigeria.

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