

**NOMADIC VISION:
PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUALITY IN THE WORK OF WILFRED THESIGER¹**

TOBY GOAMAN-DODSON

(Edited by Christopher Morton, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, and James Ryan,
Department of Geography, University of Exeter)

Introduction

Any consideration of Sir Wilfred Thesiger's significance, both within the historical geographies of empire and exploration, must come to terms with the fact that his photographs constitute the most significant and substantial record of his travels, numbering around 38,000 negatives. His fame rests primarily on his literary presentations of his expeditions, but photography was Thesiger's favoured method of both recording and creatively expressing his personal memories of the places he visited and the people he encountered. Thesiger compiled over seventy albums of selected photos, which constituted his main method of personally recording and recollecting his journeys. His works of travel literature, on the other hand, were written years after the event and required considerable prompting and support from friends, editors and publishers. Indeed, there is considerable evidence to support the idea that his literary works were almost collaborative co-productions, at least at their outset (for example, his friend Val French Blake was instrumental in transforming the coldly factual initial drafts of *Arabian Sands* into the far more personal memoir that it became).²

This is not to devalue or belittle Thesiger's role in writing his works, but rather to illustrate that he found the writing process (even more than ordinarily) difficult and unnatural. This is perhaps not unsurprising given the circumstances of his developmental background at public school, imperial administration, and the military, which instilled in Thesiger an ideal of reserved and hardened stoicism.³ While we can treat with a little scepticism Thesiger's later assertion that he never

¹ Editorial note. The text of this article is, apart from minor copy-editing, an unaltered version of a sample chapter from the author's PhD upgrade paper, submitted in 2011 in the Department of Geography, University of Exeter. Toby Goaman-Dodson died in October 2011, and the editors would like to thank his mother Karen Goaman for permission to publish his research on the photography of Sir Wilfred Thesiger, whose collection is archived at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Toby worked closely with the Museum in preparation for the first permanent exhibition of Thesiger's Arabian photography at the renovated Jahili Fort in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, sponsored by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (Langham, Goaman-Dodson and Rogers 2008). As this article shows, Toby's research on Thesiger would have made a significant contribution to our understanding of this major figure of twentieth century exploration and travel.

² His friend and biographer Alexander Maitland also became an increasingly important collaborator in later works, especially as Thesiger's eyesight worsened in later life.

³ As Maitland's biography reveals, the major exception is the letters he wrote to his mother, which are

intended to write about his travels, it is true that his expedition journals were primarily sparse and utilitarian records of compass bearings, with few notes. By way of comparison we could contrast this with the long-held literary aspirations of one of Thesiger's inspirations, T. E. Lawrence, who, even in the desolate Al Houl desert, would scribble down evocative phrases for his planned book on spare telegraph forms (Barr 2007: 132). Consequently, when Thesiger came to write his travel books he relied on his personal photo albums rather than his journals to develop his narratives. This interrelationship between word and image is maintained in Thesiger's published works, which are profusely illustrated with his photographs.

It is clear, therefore, that Thesiger's photographs must be a central focus for enquiry, even if our interest is a narrowly literary one. I want to argue, however, that a detailed engagement with Thesiger's photographic practice is even more vital if we seek a wider contextualized understanding of his journeys. Reconsidering his expeditions in terms of their 'ocularcentrism' – Thesiger's preoccupation with seeing, recording, and memorializing places unexplored – allows us to draw upon and contribute to debates on the role of visual culture in forming both popular and scholarly geographical knowledge. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels' work on landscape was instrumental in making visibility a dominant concern for the 'new' cultural geography. Their redefinition of landscape as a 'cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings' (1988: 1) helped spur on historicized re-readings of geography as a 'way of seeing' that reflects and often reinforces existing social relationships and power structures.

In this article, I aim to provide an overview of some of these debates by reviewing the connections between visual culture and histories of geographical exploration. In particular, I want to focus on the way that photography was used as a means of visualizing the cultural 'contact zone' and negotiating the radical difference presented by non-Western subjects, whether in exploration or tourism.

Visuality and ocularcentrism

Visual representations have been essential to fulfilling geography's aim to represent the world, but it is only recently that geographers have begun to reflect on how this 'picture-making impulse' has shaped the discipline. As David N. Livingstone points out, the picture-making impulse has its roots in the Renaissance revival of Ptolemy's characterization of geography as 'an enterprise essentially concerned with picturing (or representing) the world' (1992: 99). Livingstone relates this revival to

representational modes of thinking by the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, highlighting Descartes' conclusion that 'the only knowledge any of us can have of the outside world is through the process of constructing a picture of it within the mind' (1992: 98). In this way, geographical representations such as cartography or landscape painting that sought to mirror nature as accurately as possible can be interpreted as expressions of the epistemological project begun by Descartes.

Modern geography's picturing impulse could therefore be considered an example of the ocularcentrism that emerges in modern Western thought. Martin Jay (1993) notes how a reaction against this ocularcentric bias has been a major theme within post-war French thought. Jay borrows the term 'scopic regime' from film theorist Christian Metz to refine and elaborate precisely how vision dominates Western culture. Critical studies of visuality are often founded upon the idea of a single scopic regime that has come to dominate Western culture since the Renaissance, which Jay calls Cartesian perspectivalism. As Livingstone observes, this regime is associated with the early modern revolution in ideas, including the development of one-point perspective by Brunelleschi, Alberti and others and Cartesian science and philosophy. Perspective ordered and rationalized space, allowing it to be represented accurately in two dimensions, but differed from our actual experience of vision in two crucial ways: it was monocular and static. Cartesian perspectivalism was based on a model of a detached and disembodied gaze that was atemporal, or more accurately eternalized. The art historian Norman Bryson argues that perspectivalism allows the viewer to re-experience what he calls the 'Founding Perception' of the artist:

The gaze of the painter arrests the flux of phenomena, contemplates the visual field from a vantage-point outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence; while in the moment of viewing, the viewing subject unites his gaze with the Founding Perception in a moment of perfect recreation of that first epiphany. (quoted in Jay 1988: 7)

The philosophical anti-ocularcentrism mapped by Jay can therefore be understood as fundamentally a critique of Cartesian perspectivalism, one that,

denounced its privileging of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world it claims to know only from afar. The questionable assumption of a transcendental subjectivity characteristic of a universalist humanism, which ignores our embeddedness in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty liked to call the flesh of the world, is thus tied to the 'high altitude' thinking characteristic of this scopic regime. (Jay 1988: 10)

As well as being connected to the cultural turn within the humanities and social sciences, the gaze can be considered an important expression of the emergent philosophical critique of

Western ocularcentrism. At least in Britain, John Berger (1972) was immensely important in showcasing this kind of approach to analysing visual art to a wide general audience. Berger was an early popularizer of the idea of the gaze in Western art, in terms of the female nude. He drew attention to the role in which the viewer is placed, unmasking the way the conventions of the nude reinforce the passive and objectified status of women in society: ‘according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome – *men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (Berger 1972: 45–7, emphasis in original).

The intellectual revolt against the gaze found its most overtly political expression in the work of Michel Foucault. It is Foucault’s reformulation of the gaze as a means of dominating and punishing the subject that has become prevalent in much work on (post)colonial representation, and photography in particular. The hidden, disembodied eye of Cartesian perspectivalism is now recast as surveillance – a means of instituting and upholding a uniquely modern form of power that Foucault terms ‘discipline’. Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian *panopticon*, a prison where the unseen guards can oversee all the prisoners, becomes a metaphor for the experience of modernity itself:

In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assumes the hold of the power that is experienced over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his [*sic*] subjection. (Foucault 1979: 87)

The gaze as a concept thus associates the act of looking with power relations and social structure. At this point I would like to suggest that the gaze also consequently and necessarily implies the alterity of the seen subject. This again is an entirely negative reading of otherness – since, in privileging the status of the observer, the observed is invariably placed in the position of an inferior other. Thus the critical notions of the masculinist gaze in Western art discussed by Berger ultimately stem from de Beauvoir’s influential feminist reading of the other as a deficient and weak mirror of the masculine norm.⁴ Edward Said (1995) combines this specifically feminist concept of alterity with Foucauldian ideas of discursive power in developing his critique of discursive constructions of the Orient. A fundamentally Saidian notion of the exotic Other still frequently underpins discussions of alterity in postcolonial theory. Cultural productions are for Said inseparable from the political processes of colonial and imperial domination that they accompanied.

⁴ There are other competing and not necessarily negative concepts of otherness in European philosophy. The notion of the Other was first introduced by Hegel and was most notably developed by Levinas and Lacan, who provided the two most enduring developments of the concept within contemporary philosophy.

Orientalist knowledge is consequently framed as discursively constructing a feminized Other: passive, sensual, backward, and above all conquerable.

Photography's truth claim

Having briefly sketched some of the predominant themes in discussions of visuality and ocularcentrism, I want to turn to photography as a revealing case study in this intellectual history. This discussion will draw upon a framework put forward by Pinney (1992, 2003). Pinney argues that there is a dominant first history of photography underpinned by a tacit or explicit acceptance of photographic verisimilitude. This same narrative underpins a fundamentally negative interpretation that emerges as part of a philosophical turn against ocularcentrism, a tendency extensively discussed in the work of Martin Jay (1988, 1993). Whilst criticizing the naivety of a positivist reading of photographic image making, this current nonetheless frames photography in monolithic and totalizing terms. Readings of photographs associated with the colonial encounter – whether in the context of ethnography, geographical exploration or popular travel – are judged to be discursive formulations of Western power.

The feature of photography that distinguished it from all other previous forms of pictorial representation is its verisimilitude. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes that photography in the nineteenth-century 'was understood to be the agent par excellence for listing, knowing and possessing, as it were, the things of the world' (quoted in Schwartz and Ryan 2003: 2). More than other sciences, geography and anthropology relied upon 'certain kinds of visualities and visual images to construct knowledges' (Rose 2003: 212).

It is significant to note that both disciplines are deeply embedded and implicated in imperial 'discovery' and annexation. In this way the photograph could accurately record the encounter with otherness, whether an unknown landscape or an uncontacted 'native'. Accurate visual representation was therefore an important tool, part of a general trend in the nineteenth century towards classificatory and taxonomic systems of knowledge. Given its importance as a background to Thesiger's photographic practice, this interrelationship between photography, colonial power and scientific knowledge needs to be set within a broader theoretical context.

The slow rise of critical theory of photography in the latter decades of the twentieth century still frequently revolved around its truth claim. More specifically, the theoretical framework for debate

has drawn a great deal from Charles Peirce's discussion of photography as an indexical sign. In Peirce's semiology, icons are signs that bear a resemblance to the referent, while an index has a direct and causal relationship with the referent – the relationship between smoke and fire, or bullet hole to bullet. Unlike symbols, the relationship between the icon and the index and their referents is fixed and not arbitrary. For Peirce, a photograph is both iconic in its resemblance to the original event, but also indexically linked through the reflected light acting upon the emulsion: 'a photograph, for example, not only excites an image, has an appearance, but, owing to its optical connexion with the object, is evidence that that appearance corresponds to a reality' (quoted in Brunet 1996: 305).

Taking the indexical truth claim as a given, Roland Barthes's influential final work on photography is based on an acceptance of photography's verisimilitude. Barthes's semiotic reading of photographs emphasized the near invisibility of the photographic medium itself; the referent – the event – was everything. The indexical link between photograph and event is fixed and immutable, and the mediating role, or more accurately 'presence' of both photographer and photograph, is deemphasized. The skill of the photographer according to Barthes is in capturing that peculiar and unique moment, each being a unique temporal event: 'What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially' (2009[1980]: 20).

Peirce's semiological framework and Barthes's application suggested the realist or positivist position on photography, a belief so commonplace and pervasive that it is frequently taken as fact. Barthes provided a frequently cited example of how we take a photograph's indexical status for granted: 'Show your photographs to someone – he will immediately show you his: "Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child", etc.' (2009[1980]: 20). That is to say, a photograph's iconic resemblance shows us *what really happened* because it is indexically linked to an actual event (the referent). Nonetheless, Peirce's discussion of photography is ambiguous: given the obvious overlap between the two, how are we to correlate a photograph's iconic resemblance to the subject and its indexical link to the moment? In considering a photograph, should the iconic or the indexical take ultimate precedence? An iconic resemblance does not necessarily imply a truth claim; an indexical link does, but only in so far as it implies ('corresponds to') the existence of an actual event.

Barthes's *Camera Lucida* prompted a number of influential studies that were written partly as challenges to his tacit acceptance of a fixed indexicality, and instead posited the disciplinary and

institutionalized origins of its truth claim (e.g. Burgin 1982; Tagg 1988). These arguments invoke the anti-ocularcentrism discussed previously as a means of challenging any tacit acceptance of a photograph's truth-value. Foucault was a major influence on this line of critique, but in fact he never discussed photography in particular. The camera can, however, be integrated easily within Foucault's intellectual project, as the eye of disciplinary surveillance. As Pinney explains, both photography and discipline rely on the assumption that the medium is invisible: 'In photography, as with "discipline", the photographer is completely invisible behind his camera, while what he sees is rendered completely visible' (1992: 76). John Tagg (1988) was one of the first to attempt a Foucauldian analysis of photography, charting its integration into the work of institutional apparatuses like prisons, police forces and asylums:

Photography as such has no identity. Its status as technology varies with the power relations that invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such. (Tagg 1988: 63)

Photography, then, only gains its coherent status through its adoption as an institutional technology; more importantly, it was only through this process that photographs became accepted as truth.

Just as Foucault has been used to show photography as an institutionalized technology, studies of photographs of other cultures have often been analysed within Said's framework of Orientalism. Thus a sexualized, feminine Orient is invoked by Malek Alloula in a pioneering study of French picture postcards of Algerian women in the early twentieth century (1986), and Gregory (2003) takes an explicitly Saidian line in his work on Maxime du Camp. These studies highlight that popular images associated with travel and tourism are increasingly considered valuable subjects for serious study.

Many have noted that photography and other forms of visual representation are thus instrumentally vital in the production and consumption of the tourist gaze (e.g. Urry 2002). Invariably the alliance between tourism and photography has been condemned as a way of violating and possessing other cultures – a clear illustration of what Susan Sontag called photography's 'predatory' side (1977: 14). Sontag uses the example of the opening of the transcontinental American railroads in 1869, which enabled the ordinary tourist to visit the West. Serious photographers like Adam Clark Vroman, who visited Arizona and New Mexico to record disappearing Native American cultures,

merely whetted the visual appetites of sightseers:

They were the vanguard of an army of tourists who arrived by the end of the century, eager for 'a good shot' of Indian life. The tourists invaded the Indians' privacy, photographing holy objects and the sacred dances and places, if necessary paying the Indians to pose and getting them to revise their ceremonies to provide more photogenic material. (Sontag 1977: 64)

Patricia Albers and William James (1988) provided an early survey of the range of methodologies available in studying the relationship between photography and travel. Albers and James base their brief study on their research on a large sample of ethnographic postcards from across the world covering the period from 1890 to the present day. In a related way, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins examine the production and consumption of photography in *National Geographic* in the post-war period. They highlight the multitude of gazes that each photo presents, being

not simply a captured gaze of the other, but rather a dynamic site at which many gazes or viewpoints intersect. This intersection creates a complex and multidimensional object; it allows viewers to negotiate a number of different identities both for themselves and for those pictured; and it is one route by which the photograph threatens to break frame and reveal its social context. (2003: 354)

I want to pause here to note that Lutz and Collins reach an important conclusion, which seems to reveal a contradiction present in currents of anti-ocularcentrism. For if the travel photograph represents the intersection of a number of different and competing gazes (such as the photographer's, the viewer's, and the subject's), all of which are contingent and temporary – how can its historical meaning be fixed within the image? It is this question that I want to address in the following section.

Problematizing orientalism and ocularcentrism

The preceding brief survey has attempted to convey some of the underlying tendencies in recent histories and theories of photography that have filtered down to many critical studies of travel, colonialism and exploration. It is necessarily selective, and therefore presents something of a simplified ideal type based on the framework first suggested by Pinney (1992) and Jay (1988, 1993). Indeed, I have not attempted to emulate Pinney's deep and thoroughgoing engagement with theory here, but nonetheless I share some of his criticisms. To summarize this ideal type of photographic history once again – there has been a widespread (but not total) acceptance of photographic truth in the West since its invention, which has continued in a modified form within

recent cultural critiques of Western ocularcentrism. These arguments have roundly critiqued the notion that photography passively reflects reality, which is considered to be a useful and necessary justification for its incorporation within a governmental and institutional context. Instead a photograph is re-read as a projection of a gaze that actively surveys, controls and constructs the subject. However, such currents of critique carry with them a legacy from a realist acceptance of photographic truth, for they still maintain that the photograph has an ability to 'fix' the ideological or discursive motivations of the image-maker. The scholar of photography therefore only requires the right methodological tools (e.g. semiotics, discourse analysis) to uncover the true (e.g. disciplinary, Orientalizing) motivations of the photographer. As Pinney notes,

much recent writing that seeks to historically contextualize photography's emergence during a period of colonial expansion has drawn on crucial insights from Edward Said and Michel Foucault and has tended to construct photographic imagery and practice as immovably within a 'truth' that implicitly reflects a set of cultural and political dispositions held by the makers of those images. (2003: 2)

More importantly, there is the possibility that interpreting a photograph in this way does not uncover the photograph's historical context, and indeed only confirms a pre-existing theoretical viewpoint held by the interpreter. Carlo Ginzburg has described such approaches to art as 'physiognomic' readings, where the viewer 'reads into them what he has already learned by other means, or what he believes he knows, and wants to "demonstrate"' (1989: 35)

But the very fact that we can re-read and re-evaluate an image shows that the link between the formal qualities and a particular discursive formation is subject to change and far from inflexible. There is, of course, much that can be gained from historicizing photography through the parameters advanced by Said, Foucault and others. Similarly, my analytical approach to images will proceed from the premise that photography is indeed a socially and historically situated 'way of seeing'. At the same time, any attempt to use photography as a historical source must also recognize that meaning is shifting and contested. A photograph is polysemic, in so far as there are tensions within the image that can give rise to different meanings and interpretations.

Indeed, the notion that photographs were accepted as truth until recently has been revealed to be an oversimplification. We should note that while there has always been a pervasive faith in photography's verisimilitude, there was also an undoubted awareness of its creative and distortive potential from the time of its invention. As is well known, the camera's ability to record detail exactly was initially thought to detract from a photograph's artistic potential, with pictorialism

advocating techniques that heightened the painterly aspect of images, such as deliberately keeping them out of focus. Such debates over the role of interpretation and accuracy were not confined to photography's artistic merit. Jennifer Tucker's work on photography in the history of science suggest that its truth claim was contested at an early stage:

Nineteenth-century debates in Britain over claims made with photographs in a variety of settings, from fields outposts to the laboratory to the spiritualist seance, suggest that Victorians did not, in fact, accept photographic evidence as unconditionally true and, indeed, that they interpreted facts based on photographs in a variety of different ways. (quoted in Ryan 2005: 207)

While the photographic truth claim does indeed distinguish it from other kinds of image, these debates still rest on the questions of visibility introduced earlier in this chapter. Just as the plurality of photography cannot be reduced to a single disciplinary gaze, Jay questions the assumption that Cartesian perspectivalism has been the unique and unchallenged scopic regime of modernity. Jay not only notes the tensions within this scopic regime, he identifies at least two other contemporary regimes in art that compete with the perspectival gaze found in Italian Renaissance painting. Following the art historian Alpers, Northern Renaissance painting exhibits a different, descriptive scopic regime – one that does not privilege the status of a gaze that frames and brings the world into existence. Instead it is a regime that describes a pre-existing world that extends beyond the boundaries of the frame, and in this way is a closer relative to the map making of Mercator – challenging the idea that geography's visibility is founded on a Cartesian gaze. Even more significantly, Jay also suggests that it is this descriptive regime that closely anticipates photography.

Jay concludes by arguing for an acceptance of a plurality of scopic regimes:

'Rather than demonize one or another, it may be less dangerous to explore the implications, both positive and negative, of each. In so doing, we won't lose entirely the sense of unease that has so long haunted the visual culture of the West, but we may learn to see the virtues of differentiated ocular experiences.' (1988: 20)

Thesiger's photographs as imaginative geographies

Having sketched briefly how we might problematize totalizing theories of visibility in Western culture, I want to return once again to photography's role in picturing the geographical imagination.

The role of photography as a geographical way of seeing only began to receive attention comparatively recently. One particularly fertile area for investigation has been the historical role that photography played in constructing 'imaginative geographies' of travel and empire (Ryan 1997, 2005; Schwartz 1996; Gregory 2003). The term itself was coined by Said to demonstrate how representations of places mirror the preconceptions of their makers. Said's intention was to show how images of non-Western spaces are implicated within matrices of colonial and imperial power; such imaginative geographies were for Said as much constituted through popular and artistic representations of the Orient as they are by Orientalist scholarship proper. In a similar way, Joan Schwartz (1996) and Gregory (2003) both write on the imaginative geography of Egypt embodied within the popular photographs of Maxime du Camp. James Ryan likewise examines a number of commercial travel photographers, including Samuel Bourne and John Thomson, in terms of their discursive link with imperial geographical exploration: 'their photographic expeditions were animated by a sense of discovering the unknown and they prided themselves on the arduous conditions they endured to secure their photographs; indeed to many viewers this enhanced the novelty, scientific worth and artistry of the images' (1997: 45).

Thesiger's photography as a case study is suited to drawing out some of the recurring issues that have emerged from recent work in geography. The great majority of this work has concentrated on the nineteenth century, and with good reason: the new technique of photography was invented during a period when the modern science of geography was just beginning to establish itself, while mass tourism was in its infancy (Thomas Cook's first pleasure excursion took place in 1844) and a new phase of European imperial expansion was around the corner. There has been rather less work on photography in the latter half of the twentieth century, and I therefore hope to use Thesiger's photography to establish how the historical context for visualizing travel and exploration changed during this period, and to what extent this influenced Thesiger's representational practice. As Schwartz writes, 'today's armchair traveller, relaxing with a copy of National Geographic or Travel & Leisure, continues a long established tradition of the vicarious visual exploration of distant places through the intertwined and changing relationship of travel and photography' (1996: 34).

The importance of context as a means of framing the meaning of geographical photography raises fundamental questions of photography's intertextuality. The approach taken here will be that photographs do not derive meaning as individual entities, but as part of a wider visual culture, or to use Deborah Poole's phrase, a 'visual economy' (1997). Thesiger's photographs derived different meanings depending on the context in which they were reproduced, the texts that they accompanied or that accompanied them, and so on. In this final section, I want to sketch some of

the ways in which his photographs link to and disrupt established categories within visual economies of travel and exploration: the anthropometric archive, the lantern slide, the photographic travelogue, and the personal album. In so doing, I want to underline the different meanings that each of these contexts draws out from similar images.

The anthropometric archive

As we have discussed, photography's status as the mirror of nature gave it particular value in establishing taxonomic and universalizing systems of knowledge. As Pinney writes, 'this relationship of physical contiguity between image and referent certainly played a central role in the truth claims of the colonial archive: photography was seen to surpass and eradicate the subjectivity and unreliability of earlier technologies of representation' (2003: 6). When considering other cultures, the taxonomies constructed would invariably place the West in a position of superiority over other cultures and places. One example is anthropometric photography, based on systems devised by John Lamprey and T.H. Huxley. Anthropometry systematically reformulated the art-historical genre of the portrait in such a way as to deny the sitter's individuality. Rather than attempting to capture the subject's character, the anthropometric photograph reduces them to a generic example of an inevitably inferior racial type. The camera was quickly accepted within nineteenth-century cultures of exploration as the vital means of capturing ethnological data. While planning his exploration of Zambia, David Livingstone instructed his brother Charles to ensure that he photographed

characteristic specimens of the different tribes... for the purposes of Ethnology. Do not choose the ugliest but (as among ourselves) the better class of natives who are believed to be characteristic of the race ... and, if possible, get men, women and children grouped together. (quoted in Ryan 1997: 146)

One tenet quickly adopted was to ensure the ethnological photograph did not show any clue that would betray the presence of the photographer, or indeed any trace of Western contact:

At this point the recurrent anthropological quest for Otherness coincides exactly with the trick that photography enacts in pursuit of its 'reality effect'. Just as the anthropologist is often concerned with the polluting effect of his presence on those he studies ... so the anthropological photographer strives to preserve the purity of the cultural other he represents. (Pinney 1992: 76)

There are certainly parallels between Thesiger's photographic practice and the ethnographic archive. Elizabeth Edwards draws parallels between Thesiger's photographs and salvage

ethnography, both being attempts to record the purity of traditional cultures before their ‘corruption’ by Western culture (2010). Thesiger was equally concerned to ensure his photographs had no visual manifestation of Western modernity that would pollute the timeless images he creates. Mechanized transport, mass-produced material culture and other signifiers of the twentieth century are all conspicuous by their absence. Most strikingly of all, Thesiger never included Western people within the frame, meaning that the significant relationships with important figures like Harry St John Philby and Ronald Codrai go unrecorded. It is significant that not only does this purify the places he visited from any other corrupting Western influence, it also helps uphold Thesiger’s status as the lone ‘author’ of his own expeditions, and obscure the networks of friends and contacts who were instrumental in its fruition. The major exception is, of course, Thesiger himself, who appears in a number of individual and group portraits in the Arabian albums. The timeless visual purity is nevertheless maintained, since Thesiger is dressed in the local manner in a long *tawb* and *ghutrah*.⁵

There are even portraits in the Thesiger albums that strikingly resemble anthropometry in terms of pose and composition, a supposition often supported by the brief captions (for example, ‘Bedu types’). It is quite probable that at this stage he was attempting to emulate the established practice of ‘professional’ explorers (such as his predecessor in the Empty Quarter, Bertram Thomas, who recorded anthropometric data).

But even the photographs that echo anthropometric composition do not constitute (in the words of Barthes) a ‘visible object of a science’. Indeed, Thesiger made few attempts to record extensive contextual details on each photograph. By way of comparison, the Field Museum’s expeditions to the Iraqi Marshes and Bertram Thomas’s Arabian travels both methodically collected anthropometric photographs with accompanying data. After his travels, Thesiger’s negatives, photographs and albums remained in his possession – they were not systematically catalogued and donated to any institution until their loan to the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford in 1991 (they were permanently donated to the Museum after Thesiger’s death in 2004). The cataloguing projects on the Thesiger collection at the PRM have increased our knowledge considerably, but this has been painstaking work based on the few details provided by Thesiger himself. It would be difficult, then,

⁵ This would be the first and only time that he adopted local dress, and Thesiger defensively maintained that this decision was motivated by the need to be accepted by his local travelling companions: ‘To have worn European clothes would have alienated these Bait Kathir at once, for although a few of them had travelled with Bertram Thomas, most of them had not even spoken to an Englishman before’ (2003[1959]: 50).

to bracket Thesiger's photography as constituting part of the imperial archive, as they seem to lack a motivation to systematically construct the kind of Foucauldian 'power/knowledge' that Tagg suggests is characteristic of photography in an institutional context.

The lantern slide

While Thesiger lacks the taxonomic tinge of 'scientific' explorers and anthropologists, it is true to say that his journeys took place within networks of geographical exploration established for the benefit of Empire. Recent work on histories of geographical knowledge has emphasized the role of institutions in shaping cultures of exploration (Ryan 1997; Driver 2001). The Royal Geographical Society was the principal institution in Britain that promoted a discipline eager to establish itself as a thoroughly professional science. At the same time, the RGS was keen to establish geography's practical benefit for the British Empire and to exploit its popular appeal to a British public eager for stories of exploration. As Ryan notes, the RGS occupied

a pivotal position between the British scientific establishment, imperial government, and the wider public sphere. Indeed, the society nurtured and exploited the great public enthusiasm for geographical exploration and discovery that dominated the 'culture of exploration' in mid-Victorian Britain. More than other scientific societies, the RGS courted both popular prestige and scientific distinction, and it is therefore not surprising that many of its fellows should have taken an active interest in the revolutionary new technology of photography. (2005: 203–4)

The first public displays of Thesiger's photographs were during lectures he gave at the Royal Geographical Society. The photographs themselves, carefully selected from his negatives, were reproduced as lantern slides to accompany his talks given to fellows of the RGS. By the time of Thesiger's lectures, lantern slides were a well-established visual tool for the popular dissemination of scientific knowledge, geography in particular. Such techniques of visual instruction were taken up with particular enthusiasm within geography, prompted by the RGS and other bodies keen to develop novel educational methods that would aid and promote the subject in schools (see Ryan 1997: 191–3 for an account of this; the following brief summary largely follows the discussion found there). Indeed, the Geographical Association – which remains the main UK body for the subject in schools – came into being precisely because of the need to produce and distribute sets of lantern slides to classrooms around the country. The fact that lantern slides were particularly valued for disseminating accurate images of Britain's colonial acquisitions indicates the continuing importance of geography to the imperial project. The wholehearted promotion of lantern slides by

Douglas Freshfield, the Geographical Association's first President, paved the way for their wider acceptance: 'They became such a regular feature of geographical lectures that the RGS itself, despite objections from those for whom the magic lantern was synonymous with "a Sunday School treat", purchased its own projector in 1890' (Ryan 1997: 193).

The adoption of lantern slides by the RGS at the close of the nineteenth century coincided with the British Empire's zenith; Thesiger's journeys took place during its twilight. The year that Thesiger crossed the Empty Quarter for a second and final time, the partition of India took place and the British Mandate in Palestine was abandoned. If we accept that a longstanding role of Britain's 'informal empire' in the Middle East was to maintain strategic routes to India and prevent any rival power gaining influence in the region (see Onley 2007 for an account of how the 'native agent' system in the Gulf was intended to support this 'greater Indian Empire'), then this pretext melted away in 1948. In his survey of British travel writing on Arabia, James Canton (2008) characterized Thesiger's writing as a final flowering of the imperial Arabist tradition, before the symbolic failure of the Suez plot in 1956 that marked the decline of decisive British power and influence in the region. Thesiger's photographic record could similarly be read as reflecting nostalgia for an imperial era, when imaginative geographies of a timeless Arabia inhabited by Spartan and primitive Bedouin could be easily constructed. The decline of British power in the region, the emergence of wealthy proto-nation states in the Gulf and their readiness to adopt urban modernity would then all be considered as heralding the collapse of the power relationship that maintained these images.

There is always a temptation to make clear causal connections between politico-economic base and cultural superstructure, but I argue that such an approach in this case would obscure as much as it would reveal. For, if the strategic role of the Middle East as both a buffer and a maritime conduit to British India abruptly disappeared shortly after the Second World War, the geopolitical significance of the region itself dramatically increased. The need to keep as much of the region within Britain's sphere of influence in a post-colonial era was vital if access to its vast fossil fuel resources were to be secured. The material produced and collected through Thesiger's explorations of Arabia at least must be seen in this light – his maps of the Empty Quarter would be of importance to oil exploration, and the data he collected on Buraimi Oasis would be cited by the British legal team in the 1955 border dispute between Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and Oman.

While I will draw on postcolonial approaches, we must be aware that the visual productions undertaken by Thesiger vary. For example, one could argue with good reason that the

instrumental and utilitarian motivations for Thesiger's maps and field data would implicate them within post-war geopolitical manoeuvres. But his photographs evade and complicate any attempt to read them as neo-imperial domination. Displayed as part of a lantern slide, they may be implicated within instrumentalized geopolitical knowledge; reproduced as an illustration to one of Thesiger's travel books, they may be used for a quite different purpose. As Ryan has pointed out, the lantern slide can include not only the photographic image but also explanatory text, maps, diagrams and so on. In many cases, the intended significance of the image is only made apparent through the context provided by the other information on the slide. This is, of course, equally true of Thesiger's published writings, beginning with the edited versions of his RGS lectures, published in the *Geographical Journal* and once again accompanied by selected photographs.

The photographic travelogue

By the time of his earliest and most important travel books, *Arabian Sands* (2003[1959]) and *The Marsh Arabs* (1964), the photographs have assumed a more than illustrative importance and become integral to the imaginative geographies that these narratives convey. Reading them through the lens of postcolonialism does indeed reveal much about their assumptions. They surely exhibit what Derek Gregory called 'colonial nostalgia': a sense of loss towards authenticity and tradition that masks and naturalizes the true role of colonial modernity in effecting that change (2004: 9).

Thesiger's photographs can be read in this context as a late example of a genre of explorer literature that Mary Louise Pratt (2008) has termed the 'anti-conquest' narrative. But drawing such a conclusion from this particular usage does not mean that this is the only meaning present in a photograph. Doing so would not only ignore the tensions present in an image, more importantly it would deny the represented subject any agency. It would founder when faced with the changing contexts in which the same images are used in the very places that Thesiger photographed. The fact that Thesiger befriended and photographed the future founding President of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, as well as many members of the Al Nahyan ruling family, meant that these images have assumed huge national importance. Similarly, Thesiger's photographs of Dubai were selected to decorate the city's recently completed metro stations. These images have been reappropriated as part of a drive to construct a unified national identity for the UAE since its foundation in 1971; the 'Emirati' nationality is a neologism without historical precedent, deriving from the name of the federal state. Therefore, it is fair to say the idea of an 'Emirati' national culture is an artificial construct in a region where tribal affiliation and segmentary lineage defined,

and indeed superseded, state formation. The parallels with historical work on nationalism, such as Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000) and Anderson (1990), are clear. Furthermore, the commercial value of historical images of the past has increased since the sudden increase in capital-intensive cultural projects designed to diversify the Gulf's economy and create a market for tourism. The possible inclusion of Thesiger's photographs within planned museums and exhibitions indicates a growing commodification of the past as an attractive tourist product.

It is not my intention at this point to debate the historical origins of such change. To be sure, the Gulf's sudden modernization in the region is inextricably bound up with the informal empires of both Britain and the United States, but it is also very evident that the ruling tribal confederations had much to gain in welcoming the development of an oil economy. But while the paramount sheikhs of the Gulf were swift to transform their territories into an image of late capitalist modernity, they also were keen to retain at least some of their cultural traditions – of which Thesiger's images provide one of the few historical records. Far from rejecting the Orientalized Other that his photographs would seem to portray, these images have been reclaimed as vital documents for the invention of Emirati tradition. While the contradiction between images of hunting and camel races and the 4x4s and McDonald's of Dubai may seem glaringly absurd, it is no more absurd than the disconnect between modern Britain and similar images of its national heritage (see Wright 1985 for an influential – if polemical – study of this process in 1980s Britain).

The personal album

So far we have noted how the context of public display can shift the meanings of an image, but I would like to conclude by drawing attention to the ways in which personal meanings can be ascribed. In doing so I would like to return briefly to Barthes' final work. *Camera Lucida* (1980) was prompted by the death of Barthes's beloved mother, and is consequently preoccupied with photography's intersection with memory and loss. Rather than the objective, public truth claim of photography as scientific record, Barthes posits the subjective, personal truth claim of photography as private memento. He was by this stage uninterested in studies that analyse photographs from a technical point of view, or in terms of their historical and social context and significance; for Barthes they do not 'discuss precisely the photographs that interest me, which give me pleasure or emotion... I saw only the referent, the object, the desired body' (2009[1980]: 7). Barthes calls the subject matter or general type of a photograph the *studium*. This might describe the type of photo that interests us, but it also highlights the quality that draws us to a particular photo, the way it

captures a particular moment. Barthes calls this the *punctum*, bringing with it the associations of being pierced or wounded by a moment's resonance. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the so-called Winter Garden photograph, showing his mother as a five-year-old. The image is not reproduced (and may not even exist), since its significance and meaning is entirely personal:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of a thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, photogeny; but in it, for you no wound. (2009[1980]: 73)

Even if we do not accept his interpretation of photographic truth, Barthes nonetheless draws attention to the importance of the photograph as memorial. Photography was for Thesiger above all a personal means of recording the places and people encountered during his journeys, and nowhere is this more evident than in his photo albums, which were put together with a great deal of care in order to create a narrative of each journey. While aesthetic considerations undoubtedly played a major part, I would argue that selection is also based on Thesiger's personal sense of each photo's *punctum* – as in the Winter Garden photograph, perhaps there is 'no wound' for us, but we can follow hints in the brief captions written on index cards and the descriptive accounts in his travel books.

Indeed, it is the personal photo albums that constitute the most understudied part of the collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum. They foreground the materiality of the photographs themselves, a fact highlighted by recent studies (Edwards 2010). Though Barthes sees only the referent, I would maintain that it is the almost fetishistic resonance of the photograph itself – the material trace of the 'desired body' – that has the ability to wound. Arranged in these albums, the photographs in this most personal context function as what Mike Crang calls a 'mnemotechnology', a visual trigger for memory and narrative: 'they serve both as landmarks of what is significant to the individual and as starting points whereby, no matter how conventionalized they may be, the viewer and owner can weave further stories' (1997: 368).

To return to Barthes' argument, we cannot and should not speculate on the personal *punctum* of any given photograph. However, if (unlike Barthes in *Camera Lucida*) we accept an image's intertextual link with other narratives and stories, we may be able to attain some sense of the photograph's mnemonic function. An image in Thesiger's album may not have a fixed meaning taken on its own, but the published and unpublished narratives built around the image can reveal

to us something of the photograph's resonance within personal memory.

Conclusion

This article has introduced questions of visibility as an important debate in how geographical knowledge is produced and communicated. Indeed, it has become something of a truism that geography is a particularly visual discipline (Rose 2003). In charting the rise of intellectual counter-movements to the dominance of vision, I have been concerned with how these debates impact upon the study of visual cultures of exploration. I have used photography as a case study of how these discussions have played out. Images are vital in validating and communicating experiences of travelling and discovering new places, and photography – the 'pencil of nature' – soon established itself as the dominant medium because of its apparent truth-value. The camera became an indispensable part of the technological array of the explorer, a way of accurately recording unknown or unfamiliar places. The camera's aesthetic possibilities were also harnessed, with commercial photographers carrying out expeditions for the primary purpose of producing marketable images of exotic locales.

The anti-ocularcentric tenor of much critical theory led many to seize upon photography as the foremost example of a Western gaze that dominates and controls. The camera's apparently dispassionate ability to merely reflect 'what really happened' occludes its active gaze, and makes the photograph's ability to frame and control all the more insidious. Tagg (1988) drew upon Foucault to argue that the evidential value of photography was only produced by its integration within (often disciplinary) institutions. A Saidian approach has likewise frequently been applied to photographs of travel and exploration, and has been effective in revealing the cultural imperialism on which such images rested.

However, there is tendency in this kind of approach to imply that photographic meaning is fixed within the image itself. This is an inversion rather than a challenge to a realist interpretation of photography – the camera *always* lies. As Pinney (2003) concludes, the very fact that we can read photographs differently, as expressions of imperialism or discipline, for example, suggests that we need a more nuanced and contingent idea of the meaning of images.

I have argued in this article that the meaning of a photograph in itself is highly mutable, and is dependent on the context in which it is displayed and consumed. I have used Thesiger's photographs to outline this argument. A photograph may be displayed in an album, a personal record of memory, a lantern slide, an institutional archive, or as a billboard in the Dubai metro, re-

presented as a heritagized symbol of national identity. The composition may remain the same, carrying with it the preconceptions and ideologies of the photographer; but it would be difficult to claim that an essentialized meaning is present in all these contexts; we need to trace the ways in which image objects (particularly photographs) are circulated, acquiring different values and meanings as they do so.

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