

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAGUERREOTYPE AND THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE.

Okechukwu C. Nwafor
Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
penncls@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper traces the origins of photography as a visual genre. It goes ahead to discuss the introduction of photography to Africans by the Europeans who used it to entrench stereotypes during colonialism. It questions certain essentialist assumptions in colonial stereotypical photography especially as they affect Africa. While colonial stereotypical photography persisted, Africans attempted to forge a visual subjectivity often downplayed in several colonial visual archives. This paper attempts to emphasize certain aspects of such subjectivities exhibited through African studio photography and visual culture. The paper also undertakes a critique of documentary photography and visuality in gender. This critique is narrowed down to Africa where it seems objectivity is far-fetched in an attempt to construct a visual narrative of social circumstances through documentary photography and where gendered visuality seems controversial.

Photography invented.

Photography was invented in 1839 by a French man known as Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre while the negate/positive process was invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in the same year. These discoveries were almost simultaneously announced in France and England. Daguerre's process produced a one-of-a-kind, highly detailed image on a silver-coated copper plate, while Talbot's was a paper-based negative/positive process that could produce multiple prints from a single negative. Both are based in two fundamental principle of chemistry and physics: the reaction of particular chemical compounds to light, and the creation of an image when light passes through an aperture in a dark room or box. The light sensitivity of certain chemicals had been experimented with as early as 1727 by the German natural philosopher Johann Heinrich Schulze (Mulligan and Wooters, 2000). Experimentation with optical principles can be dated back to the 4th century BC and the writings of Aristotle. Long before the invention of photography, artists utilized the "camera obscura," a Latin phrase meaning dark room, as a drafting aid.

Brief note on Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre

Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre was apprenticed to an architect at age 13 after showing an early talent for drawing. Following a brief career as a revenue officer, he became a set designer and painter. From 1822 until 1850, in partnership with Charles Marie Bouton (1781-1853), Daguerre ran the highly successful Dioramas in Paris and London. The Dioramas were exhibitions of pictorial views with various effects induced by changes in lighting. In 1829 he entered into partnership with Joseph Nicephore Niepce (1765-1833), who is credited with making the first permanent photograph, or 'heliograph,' of rooftops from his window around 1826 or 1827. Daguerre experimented for over a decade with Niepce and his son, Isidore, and in January 1839 the French Academy of Science published an announcement of the invention of the Daguerreotype process. The French government

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purchased the formula for the public's use, and while both Isidore and Daguerre received lifetime government pensions, it was Daguerre's name that became associated with the invention. In August the Academy of Science publicly disclosed the instructions for making daguerreotype in a joint meeting with the Academy of Fine Arts. From henceforth 'daguerreotypemania' swept through Europe, and the daguerreotype became the premier method of making photographs around the world.

According to Daguerre, Daguerreotype marks a turning point in his experiments with M. NIEPCE and which ultimately enhances the production process of the image. The manipulation of Daguerreotype does not demand specialized expertise rather its skills cut across the boundaries of naivety and knowledge. However, the triumph of discovery according to Daguerre lies in the speed of production and the simplicity of the manipulation and also in the universality of use depending on the intensity of light in a particular region. Daguerre believes the leisured class and ladies will find it most interesting.

Tagg (1988:37) has noted that "the rise of the middle and lower-middle classes" formed the basis for a democratization process of photography especially through portraiture which was seen as an exclusive preserve of the elite class before the advent of photography. Tagg notes that "it is estimated that more than ninety per cent of all daguerreotypes ever taken were portraits" (Ibid, 43). The implication of this estimation is that the "unprecedented demand for portrait images among the newly dominant middle class" was so overwhelming that photography gained an essential "accessibility to a wide public" (Ibid,41) especially with the invention of more sophisticated photographic techniques and machines.

Central to the accessibility of photographic portraiture among the middle class was the dismantling of the bourgeoisie economic barrier placed on photography by pre-nineteenth century artists upon whom fate had bestowed a monopolistic control over the profession. Thus the arrival of photographic equipments stripped many artists of that exclusive usurpation of representation. Again the sophisticated invention in photography provided an affordable economic reach to the middle class because of the simple application of the economic theory of demand and supply, "the more the demand, the lesser the price". Competition and technology brought about the total democracy of photography as Walter Benjamin notes "When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its base in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever" (Cited in Tagg, 1988:58). The same could be said of photography in an era of technological advancement.

Photography and Colonialism: 'Natives' and 'Nature'

In this section I briefly discuss the complex relationships between colonial subjects and colonialists under colonial ethnographic photography. This relationship suggests that colonial subjects were deprived of their agency in their encounters with colonial photographers.

Critics have argued that colonial ethnographic photographs seemed to reinforce social and cultural stereotypes that sustained the unequal power relationships between the locals and the colonial administration (Hight and Sampson, 2002; Appadurai, 1997; Poole, 2005). The structures of colonial governance and their apparatus of knowledge production were produced from these stereotypical images most of which are directly implicated in the process of "differentiating, ordering, and controlling the various peoples and landscapes under western occupation" (Hight and Sampson, 2002:7). Soon commercial photography was quick to deploy the instrumentation of ethnic primitivism and specific racial types popularized by colonial ethnographic photography (Poole, 2005; Banks, 2003; Prins, 2002). The hallmarks of colonial ethnographic photography therefore, could be seen in what George Baker, for example, describes as "the petrification of motion, the freezing of time, and instead of plurality, the fixed or repetitive motif," (Hayes, 2005:177) in what Patricia Hayes calls "the

interruption of a process, and fabrication of historical memory which excludes the “recent inroads of merchant capital into the region” of Africa. It suggests an imprisonment of a moving time into immovable spaces. The colonizers desperately attempted to exclude vestiges of modernity in its slightest touch and tried to show the absence of White presence even though it was the whites that took the photographs (Sylvester 2005). There is no doubt that the colonial ethnographic photographs enjoyed the exotic and the bestial nature of human living.

The enchantment of photography for the susceptible part of human existence questions the desires of photographers at times. There is an uncanny relish for human complications and frailties given the enormous collections to that effect. This tendency is replicated especially in contemporary African visuality as noted by Smith (2005:,740): “Images of crisis dominate the circulation of representations regarding contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Photographs of grinding poverty, brutal wars, unfathomable famine and the devastation of HIV/AIDS permeate global collective consciousness about the continent, too often producing a mix of resignation and despair”.

The effects of stereotypical ethnographic photographs on the group being photographed are complex. For example the viewer might be imbued with a feeling of fantasy or psychological emasculation which constantly evokes loss and displacement. Again, nostalgia might actually arise at this point not as a positive referent to a fulfilled past but as a reminder of torture and a violent past. In an analysis of C.H.L Hahn’s photography in colonial Namibia, Patricia Hayes has noted that “the fantasies about the north prompted by Hahn and his photography offered viewers an escape from the mundane and modern.” She argues that such photographs offer viewers a displacement from the present. In another context the stereotypical photographs could actually affect the group being stereotyped through what Manthia Diawara describes as “internalization of stereotypes” whereby there is an unconscious attempt by this group to represent the stereotypical photos of themselves (Diawara 2008).

For the viewer’s society, most C.H.L. Hahn’s photographs denote the ‘heart of darkness,’ exoticism, wildness, “lack of modernity” (Hayes, 2005:186), timelessness, and of course the image of white supremacy. This society obviously absorbs the content of these photographs which appropriates the fantasies of the stereotypes and dramatically obviates all sense of history in the photographed. For the Western viewers, Africa is unexplored and there is a phantasmagorical construction of “Old Africa Untamed,” (Hayes, 2005:185) a yearning for nature and of spaces fertile in game. It built a white racist ideology which also contributed to the deformation of Africa’s history.

Most hunting photographs circulated by Western colonialists especially from Southern Africa firstly attempted to detach the Africans from their original occupation and secondly they portrayed the natives as part of the animal kingdom that must be hunted down. These photographs positioned white men as having conquered not only the natives but also the landscapes. As these photographs tried as much as possible to conceal and bury the romance surrounding the game (Landau, 2005), they confront the viewer with an artificiality that also lacks conviction upon close scrutiny. They depict a power relation that is framed in the colonizing context of such words as subdue, conquer and kill. Again the feminization of the African landscape brought another dimension to the discourse and also alludes to Hahn’s attempt to genderize game. This depicts the natives as perpetually weak and portrays whites as strong and manly. There is a parallel between the hunting practice and the way Africans were treated: both were seen as objects of subjugation and enslavement.

In concluding this section, Africa just like other colonized peoples is yet to articulate the overwhelming impact of photography in depicting racial stereotypes. Even as it presents changing style of representation, photography is still not fully exonerated in present day

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stereotype which is still as physically visible in most of Africa as Hahn's images of disguise and deception.

Revisiting traditional ideas in African Studio Photography

Here I wish to briefly dwell on what Stephen Sprague describes as 'Yoruba Photography' to understand the implications of traditional photographic practice to Nigerians' expression of visual subjectivity. 'Yoruba photography' is an exemplary amalgam of modern technology and cultural values. Sprague's essay demonstrates how 'tradition' has been so integrated into photography in Yoruba culture as to suggest a perfect union. Sprague (2000) has shown that 'Yoruba photography' is a genuine expression of culture through their subject matter, formal and stylistic convention, as well as their symbolic meanings and functions. Drawing from photographs he took in Ila –Orangun in the early 1980s Sprague unveils how 'Yoruba' World View and culture are central to their photographic representation. For example, Sprague argues that their choice of the best traditional dresses, their full view and stately pose, their incorporation and display of traditional paraphernalia, and "the inclusion of proper symbolic objects" in a photograph all exemplify a deep attachment to tradition. Sometimes social status is emphasized through the sitting arrangement in a group photograph: "The most important person is seated (often in the traditional formal pose) in the centre of the first row, with the next most important seated to his left. Persons of least status stand farthest toward the back and edges of the frame" (Ibid, 12). This description however may prompt one to argue that the sitting arrangement is another context which parallels how photography has been implicated in the construction of social category and again compels one to re-think the complex "ways in which photography was involved in maintaining social class hierarchies" (Price and Wells 1997:33). It is possible to argue that Sprague's framework is problematic. One can contest Sprague's position here as a traditional ethnography that ultimately objectifies the 'Yoruba'. Visual subjectivity is dynamic and flexible and difficult to read in the context of ethnic category or class hierarchy. There have been instances where children have been made to sit and pose in the front row contrary to Sprague's submission to enable a clearer view because of their diminished stature. However, contemporary lifestyle may dismiss Sprague's claims as historical document. Because of these processes, photographs have been rediscovered as "contested sites of encounter and cultural exchange even within asymmetrical power relations" (Edwards and Morton, 2009).

Contrary to the Yoruba, Heike Behrend attempts to argue that "Kenyan of the urban Milieu constructed their modern identities by appropriating Otherness – certain aspects of Western and Eastern cultures" (Behrend, 1998:139). Kenya as a colonial subject witnessed the influence of merchants whose impacts were felt in the photographic tradition. Cosmopolitanism is without its attendant modernity which gave rise to a photographic tradition that made use of the "Africa's Other-European, the Indian or the Arab" (Ibid, 141). Using three studios in Kenyan East Coast, Behrend showed how elements typical of foreign cultures remained important instruments in Kenyan studio photography. For example, "flowers, backgrounds, poses of couple clearly belong to the standard Western photographic repertoire" (Ibid, 143). Western clothes, shoes, and display of intimacy are all seen as western and thus depict a notion of progress, modernity and civilization. The romanticization of 'love' is foreign to African culture and for these photographs to reinforce this idea shows that truly "love as a sexually-based intimacy" (Ibid, 143) came with modernity, which the Kenyans have adopted in their photographs. The symbol of the Indian beautiful woman was also a major influence in some studios as it was inscribed into some parts of the photos like the heart. Behrend attributed this influence to the conservative effect of Islam in Lamu which disallows women to be photographed.

On Tshibumba

In a rather entertaining narrative that searches for a fusion of the visual, the performative and the verbal metaphors in a work of art, Johannes Fabian in his book “Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire” leads us into the painterly world of the Zairean painter, Tshibumba who attempts a historical record of his country, Zaire through painting. Fabian’s narrative unfolds eventually with an observation that “photography was one of Tshibumba’s sources of inspiration” (Fabian, 1996:263). Tshibumba’s works correspond to the effect of snapshot as he tries to bring out the detailed activities and instantaneous happenings characteristic of the photographic snapshot. This is opposed to the art of painting which has been accused of selective memory in its bid to assume the stance of creativity. Framing of works sometimes manifests as “freezing of action” in Tshibumba’s paintings. This confronts the viewer as food for thought which is actually one of photography’s telling qualities. It could be suggested that Tshibumba’s paintings adopted a documentary approach which may have been influenced by television and film. There is a striking parallelism between Lumumba and Jesus Christ which Tshibumba demonstrates as he chronicles Lumumba’s vicarious journey in Zaire. This also suggests that he, Tshibumba, must have been influenced by pictures of Christ’s “Station of the Cross” (Firstenberg, 2002:61).

In concluding this section I have shown that the above examples capture the overwhelming influence of photography on African cultures. It shows how photography contributed to the making of cultures which most people would never thought of alien. Indeed some cultures considered indigenous may have been shaped by photography and again it could have influenced the making of human ‘natures.’

Documentary Photography

In this section I attempt a survey of documentary photography and how it built into the ideological regime of certain African dictatorships thus reshaping the dynamics of national and local social milieus. In an attempt to determine the limits of documentary photography, Abigail Solomon-Godeau surveys the contradictions surrounding its claims and noted that objectivity may have been obviated in an era of “politics of representation or the representation of politics” (Solomon-Godeau, 1991:177). Having emerged as a means of “fixing and registering a perceived reality into the two-dimensional space of representation” (Ibid) documentary photography became a tool of dominant ideology and a “sign system possessed of its own accretion of visual and signifying codes determining reception and instrumentality” (Ibid, 176). However there is a certain subjectivity placed on documentary photography that borders on the production of meaning; a conscious or unconscious tendency sometimes to represent theme. By adopting a somewhat “expansive” discursive approach, Solomon-Gideau may have succeeded in convincing the reader that documentary photography is “just about everything” (Ibid, 1). This approximates to a dismantling of photography’s claims to ‘authenticity’ both in terms of context and subject matter. Documentary photography has emerged as a multi-layered structured device that determines its own meanings.

One might as well see the argument from a clash between the traditionalist supporters of the medium and the postmodern advocates and then conclude that documentary photography may have been “malleable in a way... and that raises new questions” (Squiers, 2000:1). But history could still provide answers to the questions raised by this malleability for Martha Rosler tells us that in order to understand documentary photography, we need to look to history (Wells,1997:64). On this note South Africa presents a perfect example of how the instrumentality of the state power was used to define the parameters of documentary

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photography. That the apartheid regime sponsored a “photography exhibition in 1948 titled *Meet South Africa* which toured the United Kingdom” serves as a pointer to the appropriation of documentary photography into a dominant ruling class purpose. The exhibition was “inevitably biased towards the standpoint of official producers” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 49). Again Bester and Pierre (2000:14) note that “as much as photographers actively and subjectively invoked the medium of documentary photography as a ‘weapon of struggle’, apartheid itself also clearly positioned photographers and their work within an ideological struggle.” But when put into a critical discursive framework of dominant ideology then one would see how Leon Levison’s photographs fit into what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996: 49) describe as “a commonsense objections” to *Meet South Africa*. Levson’s photographs say that “all [was] not well in the state of South Africa” as contrary portrayed by *Meet South Africa* (Minkley and Rassool,1999:108).

But it seems that the archiving of Levson’s photographs have also produced “different histories of meanings” (Ibid, 104) for the photographs in South Africa. The photographs have indeed made epochal journeys of shifting contexts and purposes though, inevitably retaining their preponderant formal qualities of black working class. This is also part of the problems of documentary photography which seems to ascribe authenticity to “images of the poor and the dispossessed; people whose lives had about them (to the middle-class spectators) an air of being simple, real and untrammelled by the overt complexity of middle-class existence” (Wells, 1997:66). Documentary photography may not be the only discipline culpable of this (mis)deed if one considers how media organizations ascribe news to mainly WAR and severe human conditions. But if viewed from the context of “using the images in the service of social reform” (Ibid, 75) then documentary photography may have served messianic missions. The definitions of documentary photography are yet to be determined even as it speaks different languages at different occasions. And the definitions may emerge if we contemplate Liz Well’s question: “why should we trust the camera to be true-to-appearance? (Ibid, 65) when it has been proved that “the technologies of photography were not automatic transcribers of the world” (Ibid, 65).

South African Social Documentary

In South Africa during the apartheid regime, most photographers were unavoidably detached from their communities. This sense of detachment manifested as a stumbling block to most photographers who actually saw a tension between their photographic career and acceptance among their communities in South Africa. Santu Mofokeng, for example overcame this problem after a comment made by one Vusi during his exhibition. Vusi had written: “Making money with blacks” on his visitors’ book and this according to Mofokeng marked a shift of emphasis in his photographic career. “I began to enlist the participation of the communities where I worked,” (Mofokeng, 1998:45) Mofokeng said. This distance is further dissolved when Omar Badsha stated that “it is in the struggle for justice that the gulf between ...photographers and the people has been narrowed” (Cited in Ibid, 36). Hayes (2007: 154) has observed that the problem of distance between the photographer and his subject was countered “through the training of local, young township photographers.” The training was also as effective as David Golblatt’s antecedents in photographing the poverty around his own Afrikaner community which was later to be emulated by other younger white photographers in a bid to build mutual trust with their subjects. Once the trust is built, then confidence and intimacy is reassured and the photographer could once more exercise his skills without much inhibition.

The strengths of South African documentary photography in the apartheid period lie in the emergence of a group of left wing photographers with a common interest. Some of these groups such as the *Bang Bang Club* organized series of the activities rooted in unionism

and aimed to portray victimization and the “suffering of the innocents” (Ibid,144). Most significant among the left wing photographers is Ernest Cole’s epochal book, *House of Bondage* which “ripped open the belly of apartheid beast by making visible the multifaceted challenges people confronted in their daily lives” (Ibid,144). There was also the subsequent emergence of Afrapix in 1982, which featured mostly younger and energetic photographers ready to engage the dictatorial regime with a sense of determination and courage. I also consider circulation part of the greatest strength of South African documentary photography. The quick cross-over of this medium into publication and exhibition marked a new dimension to the struggle. In what Paul Weinberg calls “a mix of people and ideas that came out of *Staffrider*” (Weinburg 1991: 95), documentary photography in South Africa evolved into a community – based initiative that engendered a consciousness with an ‘over enthusiastic’ slogan of “to hit back with their cameras” (Ibid,95). Solidarity, resistance, struggle or *aluta*, comradeship, were qualifiers that got coalesced into a rallying arena of documentary photography which enigmatically bridged the gap between black and white.

Finally, it could be argued that the history of apartheid is the history of South African documentary photography. However, the new democratic South Africa heralded a new epoch for documentary photography which now shifted its emphasis from the volatile happenings to a more persisting social disturbances with less chaos and violence. It is observed that despite the end of apartheid, “impoverishment, housing and education crises continued and continue,” (Ibid, 97) but the new task for documentary photography entails an urgent re-appraisal, a quick re-examination and discernment to put creativity to use.

Photographing Gender: visibility and critiques of ‘the Gaze’

Film theorists at a time became critical of the objectification of women in an art that was principally a male domain. In what Kem (1996:13) calls “women ocular victimization, writings in feminist discourse in the past decades proceeded “from the idea that the male in culture and art has been the privileged subject and exclusive possessor of subjectivity, while the female has been primarily object, stripped of access to subjectivity” (Broude and Garrard, 1992:16). The annunciation of such ideological viewpoints came with Mulvey’s (1989) *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. She maintained that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”, with the result that women have been traditionally cast as exhibitionists and “can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1989:19). Mulvey’s hyphens seem like fastener binding together a concept of the visual personification that has become an appurtenance in the ensuing scholarship on the gaze. Mulvey’s theory connotes male desire to dominate and dehumanize women in film. It bespeaks of a subjugating male voyeurism, and an inevitably patriarchal preeminence in visual narration. Again Mulvey advances the use of the term, ‘scopophilia’ in her argument to show that “the woman as icon, is displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controller of the look” (Ibid).

Counter arguments came to question Mulvey’s obvious oversimplification of the female spectatorship and her overdeterministic theory of the power of the male scopophilic instinct. Fuery and Mansfield (1997:80) argue that Mulvey’s theories “are now really historical documents rather than viable theoretical processes.” They posit that “there is a two-way flow relationship of the gaze,” and that “there is much more free play in the act of looking, with readers continually adopting positions outside of those proffered by the mainstream gaze” (Ibid). Fuery and Mansfield voyaged across a broad spectrum of disciplines from the origins of perspective in art to Lacan and Freud’s theories to impugn the seemingly authoritative episteme of Mulvey’s theories.

Aside Fuery and Mansfield other writers have also “objected to Mulvey’s assumption of a monolithic, male dominance, an assumption that made real differences in power between

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men invisible” (Deverreaux, 2005:653). In an analysis of *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* by Kaja Silverman, Kern (1996:13) notes: “ As Kaja Silverman’s title implies, male subjectivity is never completely centered and dominant; it is sometimes marginalized and interactive with women, and is always dependent on women helping to fortify it”. The controvertible postulation which Silverman contends is that cinema’s scopic regime could be overturned by “giving” women the gaze, rather than by exposing the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency (Cited in Kern 1996:13).

On Hudita Nura Mustafa’s gender visuality

There is a correlation between Hudita Nura Mustafa’s essay and Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital whereby photography acts as a social relation within a system of exchange that includes a conglomeration of cultural knowledge which confers power and status to women in Dakar. Although Mustafa (1999:177) asserts that “Africans have used a modern technology for their own purposes, defying the logic of colonial indexing in favour of their own version of cultural sophistication”, I can argue that through such technological avenues, Africans also imagined cultures that are as socially divisive as they are fictionalized. Such practices also point to Dakarais women photography as a mode of cultural production. Perhaps Mustafa unconsciously records this cultural production when she observes that “photographic portraits of civilisé bodies have graced Africans’ walls and picture albums since the 1920s” (Ibid, 178). In what she calls “sartorial ecumene” she observes how “today’s proliferation of portraits of African women relishes specificity and presence in contrast to the typologizing of the colonial archive” (Ibid). In fact, her essay encapsulates the intersection of social hierarchies, circulation, commodification, identity, taste, memorabilia, all forming a totality of visual archive that would locate the Dakarais women within a nexus of personal, national, and international network.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that photography’s invention was coterminous with certain developments in the African continent. Firstly it came during the time of intense colonialism and became a ready tool for colonial domination. The context of most colonial ethnographic photographs revealed a complex relationship with their subjects often undermined in most colonial literature and texts. This paper also shows that traditional concepts of Yoruba photography were gravely implicated in their cultural world views. Tshibumba, the paper argues, invented a painterly style that parallels styles in photographic discourse. Furthermore, documentary photography is presented here as an ideological project, a dialect, an unresolved conundrum and a practice that is treated with mutual suspicion by the local communities as exemplified with Santu Mofokeng. Gender surfaced in film theory as a highly controversial phenomenon. However, contemporary discourses seem to dismiss Mulvey’s gaze theory as historical documents especially given several regimes of visual gaze that abound.

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