

Material Hermeneutics and Remediation as Challenges in Visual Studies in Histories of Education, 2022

Nearly half a century ago, Susan Sontag in *On Photography* coined the phrase “photographic seeing” to describe the fact that “photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world”. Postcolonial theorists were quick to recognise the significance of the phrase when they argued that imperialism “found sustenance” in photographic practices and that the camera was a vital tool in European colonialism (Ryan, 1997). For the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera the camera was “a dire instrument. In Africa, as in most parts of the dispossessed, the camera arrives as part of the colonial paraphernalia, together with the gun and the bible ...” (Cole, 2019). Following Vera, the photographer and essayist Teju Cole observed, “When we speak of ‘shooting’ with a camera, we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence” (Cole, 2019). Photography saturated the Victorian imperial archive and contributed to the fantasy that it was possible to map the entire world’s knowledge (Richards, 1993). Everything had to be seen, studied and catalogued, a task for which the camera was the perfect tool of technology. The camera was an appendage of state power, and visually collecting the lives of others involved a process of objectification. The camera “legitimated the world’s reconstruction on empire’s terms” (Azoulay, 2019). While collecting and cataloguing everything remained a fantasy, imperialism’s photographic archive nevertheless represented a form of collective colonial memory, one that perpetuated a persistent set of cultural values, perceptual concepts and attitudes. In sum, as Ariella Azoulay documents in *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*, there was a “fatal” conjuncture between the appearance of imperialism, the emergence of evolutionary sciences, the development of photography and the growth of sites of classification and display (Azoulay, 2019). Photographs are always “inside a history” (Meiselas 2012). Therefore, analysing processes of meaning-making and looking at the ecologies and power relations of picturing, recording, editing and archiving is as important as the photographs themselves (Roberts 2014). These ecologies offer an insight into how empires claimed “the right to look” (Mirzoeff 2011) and help us to uncover the processes that defined how public audiences saw, observed and structured the world. The *longue durée* of visual history seems to reveal long-lasting effects: Geoff Dyer (2005) analysed “the ongoing moment” as an implicit order of photography and Teju Cole (2019) has persuasively argued that imperialism and colonial photographic practices both “extended themselves, with cosmetic adaptations”, into the twentieth century.

Education and the Imperial Gaze is the focus for our Standing Working Group in 2022 and we encourage submissions which address a range of related questions:

- What values and attitudes did imperial photography project when the camera lens was pointed at education and schooling?
- To what extent are the histories of colonial education an invention of the imperial gaze?
- How were education-related values and attitudes visually projected and were these projections consistent and persistent across time?
- Did the imperial gaze extend to post- or non-colonised contexts?
- Was the imperial gaze challenged when subject peoples used the camera for their own purposes?
- Was the camera ever a positive force in education and schooling in colonised societies?
- How visually were/are the stories of colonial education presented in museum displays, archives and other formats?

References:

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