//'REPRESENTING THE OTHER' TODAY: CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE LIGHT OF THE POSTCOLONIAL DEBAT (WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON INDIA)[1]//

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ABSTRACT**:** Based on postcolonial theory and the deconstruction of the orientalist discourse, this article sets the problem of the representation of the 'Other' in photographic practice. A new form of orientalism seems to be guiding a large part of the cultural production today, where East is represented as polarized between darkness and light. By taking the example of representation of India, and analyzing the work of some contemporary documentary photographers who have worked on this country, the author tries to uncover the implications of this new discourse and finally advocates for an unorthodox use of the medium.

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[1] This essay is a continuation of a reflection I started during my stay in India in 2006-07 about my 'Western gaze' and which ended up in a photographic essay untitled *Hindividu (fragments)*. Available at http://www.philippecalia.com/portfolio/hindividu-fragments/

It has been now more than thirty years since Edward Said published his seminal book, *Orientalism,* in which he deconstructed the vision of the Orient that had been propagated throughout Western knowledge. Said's assumptions sparked off a very controversial debate that is still very much relevant today. First of all, because at the beginning of this new century, when the 'clash of civilization' theory is gaining more and more followers, orientalist discourse is still greatly influencing the cultural production of the West, be it academic or artistic. In popular culture, a recent example of this is given by the Hollywood movie *300*, released in 2007, which relates the resistance of a handful of Spartans warriors against the Persian invasion during the battle of Thermopylae. In this American blockbuster, the portrayal of the Spartans has nothing to envy Leni Riefenstahl's aesthetics, while the massive 'Asian' horde of invaders is depicted as barbaric and monstrous. This crass caricature of the Persian army caused a strong reaction of Iranian authorities at a time of heightened tensions with its American counterpart, so much that the issue came to the fore in international institutions like the UN. The representation of the 'Other', especially visually, is indeed a very sensitive matter.

In academic circles, the issues at stake have nevertheless significantly evolved and been reformulated over the last decades. Nowadays, the question is not so much about orientalism than about postorientalism (Dabashi, 2009), which means the set of theories and productions that were made in Said's wake in order to explore alternative approaches towards identity/ies in reaction against the cultural legacy of colonialism. In other words, the cultural actors, be they theorists or artists, were thus able to redefine their ideas and practices in the light of the deconstruction of the notion of 'Otherness', cornerstone of the orientalist discourse. As far as the research on photography is concerned, this work of deconstruction had been carried out thoroughly since the nineties, with scholars showing to which extent the photographic medium had been used as a domination tool over the 19th and 20th century, under the guise of anthropological objectivity but finally at the service of the colonialist enterprise (Edwards, 1997; Hight, Sampson, 2002). Taking the example of a country like India, whose photographic archives are remarkably rich, some researchers have convincingly exposed how much the exotic representation of the Other was fitting with the imperial objectives of the British administration (Rao, 2000); just as interestingly, they uncovered the existence of an original practice of photography, a true 'Indian eye', drawing its inspiration from the local traditions of popular imagery (Gutman, 1982; Pinney, 1997).

This critical outlook on the Western culture and representations, even though significant, does not imply that the fascination for the Other has vanished. On the contrary, it is still prevalent today in a large part of Western art, in the field of photography among others, while the artist in general increasingly tends to consider himself and act as an ethnographer, relying mainly on three assumptions as summarized by the art critic Hal Foster:

> *"First, there is the assumption that the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, that this site is always located elsewhere, in the field of the other: in the productivist model, with the social other, the exploited proletariat; in the quasi-anthropological model, with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural. Second, there is the assumption that this other is always outside, and, more, that this alterity is the primary point of subversion of dominant culture. Third, there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is not perceived*

Contemporary photographers, therefore, operate today with these assumptions as a backdrop, which can all basically be translated into a wider question about the location / positionality of the artist. The stakes then are no more only about *how* the Other is represented but also about the legitimacy to talk about 'it' and the ability of the artist to transcend his or her own identity. More precisely, this will lead us to question the work done *about* the 'East' *by* contemporary documentary photographers from the 'West'[2]. While keeping in mind the specificity of the medium, one should then ask : can photographers ever manage to avoid the predicament of essentialisation of the Other and, if yes, how? In that perspective, some of them may have tried to renew the vision of the other by departing from the perennial characteristics attached to it, whether by adding new characteristics or by negating the existence of any specific ones. We will see to what extent these approaches can be qualified as a form of 'neo-orientalism'. Nevertheless, this doesn't sum up all the initiatives undertaken by photographers in that matter: one should consider how some contemporary works might propose answers to the postorientalist queries. For this, we will have to replace these works into the debate of the so-called 'indignity of speaking for others', as formulated by Deleuze (1976 : 309). We will uphold that some photographers have overcome this apparent deadlock by exploring the limits of the photographic image itself.

1. Orientalism in the era of globalisation

To illustrate our point, we will mainly focus on one region, India. To take this example is relevant in many ways. On the one hand, the collective imaginary about this country and civilization is quite intense, being traditionally represented as the land of *fakirs*, *sadhus* and snake charmers but also of beggars and cripples[3]. On the other hand, India has gained a new image over the past decade as the land of ITs and call centres. It is now expected to become a leading superpower on the global scene, the second Asian giant after China, besides creating in the West a new kind of fascination for the subcontinent mixed with its own fear of being ultimately surpassed and left out.

Of these two stereotypical visions, none is dominating the other in the present-day representation of India. On the contrary, both are hyperbolized, so that a unified and unique image of the country will *have to* convey a sense of polarization and contrast ; an image that carries the contradiction between the state-of-the art technologies of Bangalore and the 'filthy slums' of Bombay. Thereby, the dichotomic paradigm inherent

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[2] Two remarks should complement this choice. Firstly, we could have included works from the East also, because the photographers who are currently fulfilling a certain "demand" from the West (cf. infra) are obviously not necessarily western. Secondly, despite the facts that we are in a context of acute globalisation and that postcolonial theories have been precisely deconstructing this opposition between East and West, one cannot deny that cultural production *de facto* still functions largely along these lines.

[3] To take a trivial but revealing example, any westerner who has travelled in India is still likely to be asked two basic questions once back home: if he has "found himself" (spirituality) and if it was "not too hard" (poverty).

to the orientalist ideology (West/East; modernity/tradition; civilised/barbaric, linear/circular etc.) has undergone a kind of displacement, now operating *inside* the realm of the Other.

It is then necessary to assess the pervasive influence of globalisation onto this new economy of representation. The fact that the dichotomic paradigm has been reproduced from within can easily be put in perspective with the growing inequalities that globalisation generally entails on the ground (Cohen, 2004). But more importantly, one should acknowledge the fact that the opening of Indian markets – including art – to Western firms has stressed the need of representing a 'new India', poised to compete with the big superpowers. As the Indian photographer and cultural activist Ram Rahman notices:

> *"There has been a growing debate in Indian art circles on a 'Biennale aesthetic' being imposed on art practice here which is leading to production of work that is slick, easily slotting into a new Orientalism, now in its consumerist global market avatar. In photography circles, the previous generation was accused of being purveyors of an 'exotic' fakir-filled India steeped in colourful riverside rituals, or quaint Bollywood – that was the India in demand around the world. Is it then surprising that the demand for images now is for the 'new' middle class and elite young India – consumers of Chanel, Nokia, Honda, readers of Indian editions of Elle, Conde Nast Traveller or L'Officiel? Do these images provide a reassurance that the world is becoming less complex and differentiated and more comfortably mono-cultural?" (Rahman, 2007)*

The author invites us here to reckon the work of art as a commodity object, part of the larger social process that is globalization. According to him, the tendency to essentialise India as new, modern and 'shining' comes mainly form the 'demands' of the West. The use of the expression "new orientalism" to label this phenomenon is justified, given that the structure of essentialisation itself, as much as the system of cultural domination by which the 'West' projects its fantasies and fears onto the 'East', remains intact even though its features have changed. The representation of the Islamic veil in contemporary Western imagery epitomizes this type of reconfiguration : while the classical orientalism was centred on erotic images of 'unveiling', neo-orientalism consists of 'hyperveiling' the female body, in order to "[maximise] the social, cultural and political distance between the 'West' and 'Islam' and [convey] a sense of threat" (MacMaster, Lewis, 1998 : 121). This photograph in a front-page of a French weekly newspaper (Fig.1) clearly bears the symptoms – polarization and hyperveiling – of this contemporary trend.

Fig.1 "Islam-West. Dialogue of the deaf"

2. From dichotomy to ubiquity

These remarks may be perfectly appropriate to describe general mass media representations. As far as a more critical type of photography is concerned, the neo-orientalist ideology has certainly pervaded but in a more nuanced way. Take the pictures of Johann Rousselot, photographer of the French collective *Oeil Public* for about ten years till the closing down of the agency in 2010. He has produced so far one the most original body of work on India[4]. Rousselot exhibited in several galleries around the country, among which the series titled: *India Shining, India Crying*[5]. This formula certainly indicates some critical aspect of his work, being sarcasm about the self-satisfactory and, to some respects, contemptuous 'Shining India' slogan that the Hindu Nationalist Party had chosen for its political campaign during the 2004 elections. The photographer's rhetorical device is above all a way to denounce the marginalization and suffering of a

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[4] His photographs have been published in various newspapers and magazines while his work titled *Indian Night* was nominated for the 'Fondation HSBC for Photograpy' prize in 2007.

[5] This work can be seen on the photographer's website. "India shining, India" [Online], 2003-2009. Available: http://www.johann-rousselot.com/en/contemporary-india-shining-crying/ [Accessed 23rd October 2011].

significant part of the Indian population, which gets crushed under the wave of globalization while some urban counterpart surfs on it.
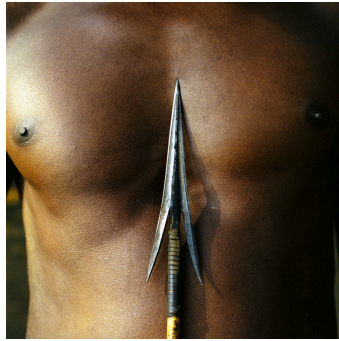

| **Fig.2** | **Fig.3** | **Fig.4** |
| Courtesy of the artist | Courtesy of the artist | Courtesy of the artist |

The whole series of photographs is therefore built along a binary structure, starting with a close-up on dark-skinned naked tribal chest with an arrow in the center (Fig.2), shot in remote areas of the country, then gradually evolving towards a more urban, opulent and westernized environment, exemplified by this picture of a stylish, fair skinned, made up, young Indian woman listening attentively to her mobile phone (Fig.4). With this chronological display[6], Rousselot's work is a journey which oscillates between the periphery and the center. The dichotomic mindset is embodied by the picture of chimneys looming in the horizon of a forest, the scene having most probably been shot in a tribal region where industrialists have flocked in order to exploit its energetic resources (Fig.3). In the end, this image does not only tell us about the divisions between nature and artifact, or between rural and industrial societies, but is also loaded with a value according to which there is a hierarchy in that relation, with an oppressor and an oppressed, the activities of the former disrupting the lives of the latter.

This discourse of dichotomy and polarization, inherent to Orientalism but then recast by postcolonial theorists who demonstrated its oppressive dimension, is increasingly giving rise to more and more scepticism among scholars and curators (Green, 1999). Sarat Maharaj for instance curated an exhibition in China named 'Farewell to Postcolonialism' in which he affirmed his choice to depart from what he terms "the post colonial kit – centre/periphery, N/S divisions, migrant/citizen, colonizer/colonized, authentic/derivative, authority/subordination, self/other and the like" (Maharaj, 2008). Homi K. Bhabha had already pointed in his essay, *The Location of Culture*, the need to reconsider the methodology of cultural analysis in the West and especially the traditional binary oppositions in which, according to him, there is always an implied domination of the first term over the second. The author prefers to focus on 'in between' spaces, i.e. 'those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' (Bhabha, 1994 : 2). In other words, Bhabha's model

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[6] Unfortunately, I have not been able to observe the scenography during exhibitions, so my remarks are solely based on the slideshow presented on the photographer's website

is above all meant to criticize the vision of ascribed and fixed identities and invites us to focus on those 'hybrid' and 'liminal' spaces where identity is 'performed'.

Besides, one should also take into consideration how double-edged the dichotomy model is: from a photojournalistic point of view, it happens to be very useful since the moral values attached to each part enable the photographer to convey his commitments to a cause, while the representation of binaries and contrasts is quite communicative, visually speaking. However, the subsequent risk is to fall into a kind of Manichaeism as well as in an aesthetisation of it. Rousselot seems to have decided to distance himself from this pitfall when he undertook his last project on India, called 'The New India: essay'.
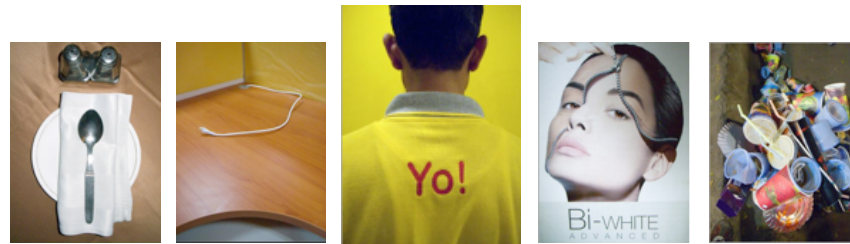

Fig.5. Courtesy of the artist

In this series, the pictures are not about dichotomies but about ubiquity. His close-up shots of clothes, objects and adverts testify the commodification and consumerism which are gradually overpowering the Indian society (fig.5); so much that the *Indianness* of this society fades away and gives place to an ubiquitous, globalized rendition of reality. The obvious ironic outlook posed by the photographer on this cultural evolution prevents us from suspecting him of feeding the West with a fantasized and glamour vision of the 'shining India'. The risk of 'ideological patronage' that Foster was warning us about therefore seems not to apply in this case[7] (1996: 303).

Nevertheless, two remarks should be added: first, if the photographer went from one project to another straight from archetypal polarization to absolute non-differentiation, does it not say something again about the never-ending difficulties to represent the 'Other'? Where have gone these 'in between' spaces Bhabha was suggesting us to explore? Second, I mentioned the irony that was perceptible in Rousselot's work, an irony actually shared by the viewer *when he sees the pictures being aware* that they were taken in India. Somehow there is thus a meta-polarization, which know does not operate *within* the image (or corpus of images) itself but *beyond it*, at the level of the viewer. To sum it up, when I look at these pictures, I perceive a kind a western lifestyle; this immediately enters in *contradiction* with my own preconceptions about India, which is, as a Westerner, most probably filled with holy cows, Bollywood actors and Taj Mahals. The dichotomy has thus been transposed at a meta-level but finally still pervades this work, as if a feeling of alienness, an otherness, was unavoidable. So that the 'non-

[7] Another observation that goes in that sense is that these pictures of the *New India* essay have not, to my knowledge, been published in the mainstream press. In this happens to be confirmed, it shows that this body of work doesn't fit with the expectations of the West as regards its representation of India, as described by Rahman (cf.supra).

Other' viewer is, as Bhabha pointed out (cf.supra), necessarily given a feeling of superiority.

3. Speaking for others

In general, Indians are quite pernickety about which way the West is representing them. For instance, anyone who had followed the reaction to *Slumdog Millionaire*'s success could see the country being torn out between pride and anger: pride over the fact that a film about India and with Indian actors was awarded so many Oscars; but much anger too, because the director Danny Boyle had not hesitated to sneak his camera into Dharavi's most shabby lanes. So much that the most famous Bollywood star, Amitabh Bacchan, publicly rose up against the film, stating that it was depicting his country as a "third-world, dirty, underbelly developing nation"[8].

The underlying question to the *Slumdog Millionaire* controversy was the following: can a westerner represent India? The French director Louis Malle already asked himself this questions in his documentary 'Phantom India'. The first episode of this work is precisely called 'The Impossible Camera'. The year the documentary was released in 1969, he declared during an interview, speaking of a woman he had filmed:

> *"To photograph her is to take possession of her, it is to steal everything she has. Despite this fact, we are still filming, but something inside me is revolting against that intrusion. By what right, on behalf of which privilege do we allow ourselves to point a camera on these women, to turn them into things? […] We could even ask, what's the difference between a camera and a rifle, between us and a patrol that controls a village in Vietnam ? On one side, you have those in India who speak like me, with Western words, and who are somehow my accomplices, and on the other side, those that we strip off."[9]*

This statement can be criticized for many reasons, not the least because Malle, by implying that all the Indian English-speaking elite is alienated, reproduces one of the most commonly used argument by the colonial administration. But what interests us here is this fundamental intuition that he feels regarding the underlying violence in representing the Other. In more general terms, the question thus derives to the possibility and legitimacy to simply *represent the Other*. Said had already raised his doubts about the possibility of discussing the Other without hostility and aggression (1978: 325). As for Deleuze, he praised Foucault's work for teaching us the 'indignity of speaking for others'. But then, if I can't speak for others, can I speak only for myself? That probably means that I should retreat. However, is silence not a form of saying something? And anyway, what is my *self*? Is it not another western myth? In an enlightening article, Linda Martín Alcoff proposes a few answers to the various questions and dilemmas generated by 'the problem of speaking for others'[10] (Alcoff,

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[8] Randeep Ramesh, "Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan rubbishes Slumdog Millionaire", *The Guardian*, 14-01-09.

[9] "Entretien avec Louis Malle" by Robert Grélier in *La revue du Cinéma*, n° 228, mai 1969, quoted in Malle (2005 : 52-53)

[10] Alcoff shows that speaking 'for' and 'about' the other are equally problematic. The problem comes from two claims: firstly, "that a speaker's location [social location or identity] has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims"; secondly, "that certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged

1991-92). Drawing on the Foucauldian analysis[11], the author invites us to focus on the positionality or location of the speaker and its discursive context to show 'that the problem with speaking for others exists in the very structure of discursive practice, irrespective of its content'. Aware of these relations of power in discourse, she nevertheless refuses total retreat from speaking for others and proposes an alternative, consisting in speaking *with* others. Which means, according to her, creating the conditions for dialogue but also assessing the impact of the discourse:

> *"In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak; nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there.*
> *"This shows us why it is so important to reconceptualize discourse, as Foucault recommends, as an event, which includes speaker, words, hearers, location, language, and so on." (Ibid.)*

4. Fumbling for the limits of photography

These theoretical ruminations are crucial. They can definitely help us to shed light on the work done by another French collective of photographers called *Tendance Floue*. In 2008, its thirteen photographers went to India for three weeks with the objective of producing a coherent body of work. The outcome was *Mad in India*, a review putting the images provided by the collective in dialogue with texts produced by writers, poets and journalists found on the spot[12].

Quite originally, some texts have been printed in the writers' native languages like Hindi and Bengali. Beyond the purely aesthetical pleasure one might experience when discovering mysterious foreign script, the presence and the forms of these texts show a consideration for the vernacular and the Other's point of view. It actually fits quite well with Alcoff's idea of speaking *with* others. To start this dialogue, the collective had thus chosen the format of a book, each side contributing in its own language, thus blurring the line between the subject and the object[13]. This can be considered as an interesting move in rethinking the representation of the Other through Western photography.

It is then quite eloquent to see that the most innovative pictures are printed on the double-pages that serve as transitions from one story to another. Using the technique of photomontage, the images of Meyer artificially locate common people in places they would never be at: a (presumably) slum-boy in a library, a worker in a posh

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persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for." (*ibid.*).

[11] As this sentence illustrates: "I will call these "rituals of speaking" to identify discursive practices of speaking or writing which involve not only the text or utterance but their position within a social space which includes the persons involved in, acting upon, and/or affected by the words." (*ibid.*)

[12] Their two other reviews *Mad in China* (2007) and *Mad in France* (2009) were based on the same principles. The trajectory of this review (China, India, France) is quite revealing of the contemporary fascination for the two Asian giants (cf. supra) as well as the mirror effect that this encounter with the Other engendered.

[13] The recent work of Jim Goldberg, *Open See*, where the subjects photographed are asked to write in their own language, but this time *on* the image itself, can be understood in the same perspective of dialogue.

residence, a *rikshawalah* in a five-star hotel, a Hindu in a Mosque… At first sight, we have here an umpteenth reiteration of the dichotomic paradigm. But there might be a second level to the reading of these photomontages.

Fig.6. Courtesy of the artist

When I first saw the picture of the boy at the library (Fig. 6), I thought he was in a jail. I found myself trapped by my own prejudices, no more laughing at the situation as I was with Rousselot's work. This picture precisely talks about the *location* of the subject, about where is he *is* and where *is not*, where he *should be* and where he is *supposed to be*. The ambiguity of the photomontage finally leaves space for reflection and questioning. The *dis*location of the subject can be viewed either as a violent uprooting from the boy's milieu or as a fulfilment of wish he had actually formulated. Whatever the answer, the important effect is the spatial fluctuation between the three *actors* of the picture: the photographed, the photographer and the spectator. Meyer's work can thus be replaced in the idea discussed above of location and positionality as multiple and fluid, with varying degrees of mobility. But even more significantly, it should be put in perspective with Alcoff's demand for a consequential discourse. By taking out the marginalised from his daily context of poverty and 'bringing' him in a place of prestige and power, this picture is probably self-gratifying for the subject. It is a fantasized image certainly; but it may be even more powerful for this reason, because it relies on a rich heritage of photomontage so deeply anchored in Indian popular culture (Pinney, 1997).

The necessity to find new ways of representing the Other have thus led the photographers to reinvent their practices. The most promising initiatives seem to come from those who dared to intervene on the support of the photographic medium, played with its definitions and tested its limits. This observation could prompt the most dogmatic documentary photographers to reflect upon their practices.

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