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## On the Circulation of Colonial Pictures. Polyphony and Fragmentation

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# On the Circulation of Colonial Pictures

## Polyphony and Fragmentation

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HANS PETER HAHN

### **INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY AND CURRENT RELEVANCE OF COLONIAL PICTURE ARCHIVES**

In the last few years, an increasing number of picture collections from the colonial era have surfaced. Apparently, the era of colonial appropriation was also a phase of intensive mediatization of the politics of expansion. While the presence of these old pictures from all over the world grows more obvious, the intensity of the connection between politics, ideology and new media is just now becoming apparent (Kundrus 2003). And although their presence may remind us of a neglected, even suppressed, chapter of global history and are thus perhaps an impossible burden, they also offer an opportunity for historical research and an investigation into the ambivalences of this era.

There is a surprising temporal congruency between the development of photography and the establishment of colonial structures. Already in the early years of photography, photographers were commissioned to document colonial infrastructures. For example, in Ghana (at the time the Gold Coast) a project was launched in the 1870s to compile a photographic collection of all colonial administration buildings (Haney 2010). Such early photo projects commissioned by the state are an indication of the unique expressive quality of the new medium, something which was widely appreciated at the time and which will be the primary focus of this essay.

To this day, we are still not able to gain a precise overview of the unexpected flood of pictures from the former colonies, nor are we able to systematically

catalogue them. Although these pictures were used extensively during the time they were taken – for instance, as a means of making colonial ideology plausible in the metropolis – their existence was soon forgotten.<sup>1</sup> Digitalization and virtual access via the Internet have now made it possible to assess just how many pictures are still languishing in various archives, waiting to become accessible for the first time in the next few years through exhibitions, online databases, catalogues and books.<sup>2</sup> As Christopher Pinney (2007) has stressed, a phenomenology of such photographs must first come to terms with the fact that they do not have a genuine “message”. Their openness to different interpretations is, of course, the main reason why these pictures were able to be used primarily for colonial propaganda at the time. These colonial images were therefore a special variation of the “world as image” that contributed significantly to the imagination of the colonies as being associated with fear and desire.

And yet, the content of these photographs is still a challenge. The messages within them are far from evident. Many of the current projects designed to investigate such pictures tend to overlook one basic feature of the photograph as a medium – that is, there is no clear assessment of these documents. This lack of evidence aggravates those interpreting them as well as historians, in spite of the rapidly growing access to archives in the last years. The pictures now accessible on the Internet, which can be said to be circulating at an ever increasing speed, are, in a sense, not only “raw material” for colonial apologists; they are also the basis for a comprehensive, critical, post-colonial analysis of the contradictions of the era from which they originated. The scientific investment in producing virtual accessibility is enormous, and recent digitalization projects supported by the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) have exhausted sizeable funds in the

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- 1 I would like to mention only two popular magazines in the nineteenth century that today are veritable “quarries” for postcolonial research: *Kolonie und Heimat* (Walgenbach 2003) and *Die Gartenlaube* (Belgum 1998).
  - 2 Prime examples of books using pictures that have “re-emerged” are those by Reinhard Klein-Arend (1996) and Marko Frelih (2007). Astonishingly, these documents suggest present quite idiosyncratic interpretations of the hitherto unknown pictures.

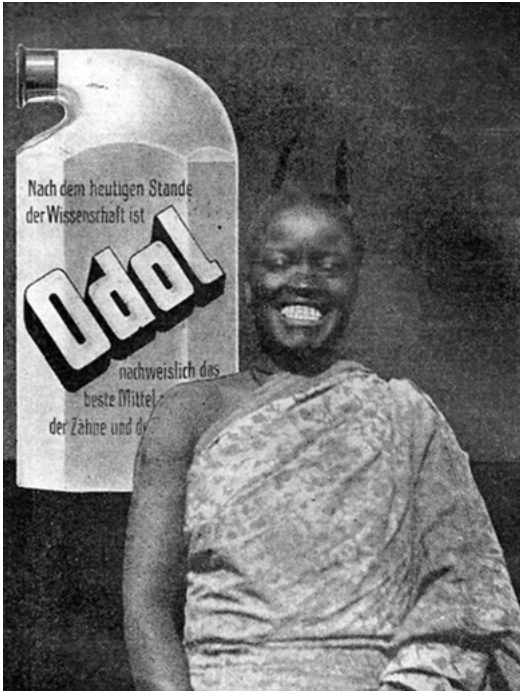
last few years.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, they have not been able to make evident what these pictures mean, and what effect they have on the present day. Because they are accessible to everyone via the Internet, they can be used not only by researchers and critical historians for investigating contradictions of the colonial era, but by colonial apologists for painting an ideal colonial world as well.

This fateful openness – also to interpretations that contradict scholarly insights – is the reason why it is so important to define the range of acceptable interpretations and identify arguments to support them. The basis for this must be the pictures themselves – after all, they have been made accessible and available for use and abuse (in the sense of reconstructing an “ideal world” and thus denying colonial injustice). The social sciences – from history to anthropology – have an obligation to provide well-argued interpretations that clearly demarcate the possible range of plausible readings.

One of the models I shall discuss here is an idea proposed by Pinney that he refers to as “contextual phenomenology”. This model revolves around the position of the beholder and less on the pictures themselves. It inspires us to ask the question: What position are these pictures taken from? Pinney demonstrates this model by referring to pictures that reveal the “event of portraying”, in other words the moment in which a photograph is created. The idea is to reconstruct what we assume was the approach of, and the associations presented by, the photographer in that moment. According to Pinney, contextual phenomenology provides a basis for deconstructing previous contexts and for creating a critical distance (Jäger 2006, Axster, Jäger and Kusser 2006) through which new contexts can be established, thus exposing these pictures as documents of a regime of injustice.

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3 An example of such an investigation is the digitalization and publication of the Deutsche Koloniale Bildarchiv (German Colonial Image Archive) found online at: <http://www.ub.bildarchiv-dkg.uni-frankfurt.de/>. See also Schmidt and Wolcke-Renk (2001). Because technical questions were in the foreground, the problems of interpretation were hardly discussed (Jäschke 2004). The photography archive of the Frobenius Institute ([http://www.frobenius-institut.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=189&Itemid=230](http://www.frobenius-institut.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=189&Itemid=230)) is also similar, as are other archives that have made attempts in the same direction, such as the Basler Mission: <http://www.mission-21.org/de/forschung-und-wissenschaft/archiv/>, <http://www.bmpix.org>



**Figure 1:** This is an advertisement for Odol mouthwash from around 1912. By this time, it had already been printed several times in different media (such as calendars and weekly magazines). More recently, Gabriele König (1993) discussed its several variations, and Thomas Held (1984) included it in his study.

Criticism directed at this photograph (of the idea that Africans need oral hygiene products to become civilized) is justified, but it is still unable to outweigh the inherent humorous association of the image. In order to evaluate the picture appropriately, we should thus strive to consider both 1) the colonial appropriation that defines European hygiene as the future of Africans as well as 2) the successful communication taking place that makes the humour and irony obvious concerning the person depicted and the beholder.

## SUSAN SONTAG: PICTURES ALWAYS LIE

One of the greatest narratives of the second half of the nineteenth century is the discovery of photography as a widely accessible mediatized means of documenting historical facts. While the pioneers of photography still had to work hard to convince people of the practical applicability of their new technology in the mid nineteenth century (Talbot 1844), the use of photographic illustrations was already a common and widely accepted means of self-portrayal by 1900. Its trajectory of roughly half a century toward acquiring an authoritative character had to do with the technical development of photography itself: The long exposure times in the early days meant that it was difficult to take pictures of people, while it was even more difficult to take pictures of moving scenes. Although we know today that motifs were at first defined by this technical coincidence, at that time the early pictures of buildings, monuments and streets radiated a factual power that made a vital contribution to the role of the new medium as a means for the “documentation of facts”. In their more recent review of the literature on the subject, Coombes and Edwards (1989: 510) take this a step further by referring to the “seductive quality” of the pictures that have been lent a witnessing potential by more recent publications. Books on photography from the 1980s also succumb to this seductive narrative by confirming the myth of the picture as a public witness instead of undermining it, thus propagating the view that pictures show “how it really was”.

The particular logic of technical restraints and the appearance of a “documentation of facts” also applies, of course, to how the colonies were represented in the photographs. These images arrived in the metropolises in a steady stream and were almost always understood as propaganda for the idea of colonialism (Mirzoeff 1998). These documents were also collected in elaborate volumes, such as *Eine Reise durch die deutschen Kolonien* (A Journey through the German Colonies) published by the magazine *Kolonie und Heimat* (1909–13), or *Togo unter deutscher Flagge* (Togo under the German Flag) by Heinrich Klose (1899).<sup>4</sup> The popularity of these photographs can also be seen in the success of postcards (Meurillon 1996), world expositions

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4 Early pictures of missions also belong to this field. It is possible that the interest in using pictures as evidence was even greater here than in the national context (Alsheimer 2004; Jenkins 1994, 2006; Kittel 1996).

(Bayerdörfer and Hellmuth 2003, Maxwell 1999), posters (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1986) and advertisements (Zeller 2008).

Klaus Scherpe (2010) places the extensive use of these pictures in a broader perspective, regarding them as part of a “colonial imaginarium” that, at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, resulted in surprisingly inflexible European ideas about other parts of the world. According to Scherpe, photographs played an outstanding role in this imagination. Alongside literature, furniture and ethnographical objects, photographs were used as resources for the increasingly stabilizing image of exotic societies in the colonies.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, pictures and objects from the colonies “conveniently” served the purpose of exoneration. This reflected a certain aesthetic in which cultures were sought out in other parts of the world that were thought of as completely separate from one’s own. The construction of alterity during this era was thus driven by distinction and self-assurance (Nederveen Pieterse 1992). An important but often overlooked aspect of early photography is the rapid acceptance of this new technology within the colonies themselves. Many travelling photographers spent several months in the capitals of the colonies – for example, on the West African coast – offering their services as portrait photographers to wealthy businessmen (Schneider 2010). Many African photographers were also successful and had their own studios. They recorded everyday life in the service of the colonial rulers and took representative pictures of public life in the colonies. Nonetheless, figures such as the Togolese photographer Alex Acolatse have played only a minor role in the postcolonial discourse, perhaps because they saw themselves primarily as service providers for Europeans in Africa. It can be said with certainty, however, that the pictures taken by Acolatse (fig. 4), in fact, fail to provide evidence for interpretations critical of colonialism (David 1992).

With the emergence and development of postcolonial research, the photographs of colonial propaganda have been readdressed, reprinted and critically discussed (Timm 1981, Honke 1990). The trust postcolonial studies has placed in the recognizable message of these pictures is essential for the following argument. That a photograph is a pictorial document is never questioned in these studies. While these pictures were seen in the old context of

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5 Deroo and Lemaire (2005) call this a “colonial illusion” in their history of the propagandistic effect of pictures. Along with reproducing historical pictures, they also talk about the “seduction” and the intensification of prejudices and so forth.

propaganda as providing arguments in favour of colonialism, in the context of postcolonial studies they are seen as evident portrayals of the manifestations of injustice and oppression.

Although the contradiction between these two interpretations may be obvious, authors of postcolonial studies still claim that they have found the only objective way of interpreting the photographs. Their method of interpretation is to search for contexts that can be used to identify the prejudices expressed within the pictures serving as propaganda messages. By contradicting earlier interpretations and speaking out in favour of their own, they argue that, while the truth may still be hidden in the pictures, an extensive knowledge is required to be able to recognize the “correct truth”.

In her famous work *On Photography* (1980), Susan Sontag strongly criticized (more than most) the claims about the objectivity of the photograph, which had dominated for more than one hundred years. Sontag argues that what we see in a picture is, after all, only a statement about a particular moment in time that is now no longer accessible in the same density and intensity. Photography, in other words, is not a window to the past, but an interpretation of this past. Thus, the question emerges as to who decides the criteria for the selection, and who has the power to define a picture as a historical document and to readdress it (regarding the quickly growing availability of pictures today)? According to Sontag’s argument, a photograph is not a “document”; it is merely a step toward a universe of interpretations, all of which refer to one another.<sup>6</sup> The choice of motif, the perspective, the time frame and the light conditions are all arguments used by someone interpreting a picture – someone who, instead of acting as an individual, can only argue within the context of the picture’s accepted readability.

Sontag’s work has been, and still is, an important argument for overcoming the narrative of the photograph as an objective document. This fundamental criticism also departed from the idea that there is only one legitimate interpretation of a picture. While it certainly would be an exaggeration to follow William Mitchell’s argument and call the current time a “post-photographic era” (1994), the impulse behind this polemic is not unjustified, as Mitchell argues against searching for the evidence in favour of polyphony.

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6 This is the basic assumption of the so-called visual (or visualistic) turn (Gerhard 2006, Sachs-Hombach 2009).



The phenomena of retouching, deconstructing and reinterpreting thus move from the margins to the centre of the analysis. Although this does not necessarily make it easier for us to read photographs, it does make it possible for us to consider the dynamics of the allocations of meaning generated by the images without having to provide the only “valid” hegemonic interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Photographs do not deliver a privileged way of accessing “how it really was”; they are themselves interpretations whose intention and effect should be subjected to constant reassessment.

An important step in the direction of a polyphonic interpretation is Mary Louise Pratt’s much-quoted study *Imperial Eyes* (1992). Pratt uses these provocative ideas about colonial pictures for a different understanding of the colonial encounter. While nothing seems more plausible than regarding colonial images as ever-fixated “imperial eyes”, Pratt goes beyond this by focusing her analysis on “transculturation” (the next point in our discussion), arguing as I have already that it would be incorrect to reduce photographs to documents of colonialism, whether for apologetic or critical reasons. Pratt insists instead that the correct method to regard these pictures would be to see them as located in a transitional, transcultural zone. Within this transcultural zone, several cultural perspectives are connected with one another: They are not only instruments of colonial propaganda (quite effective at the time); seen from today’s perspective and after being deconstructed, they are also convincing indicators of the prejudices and mistakes of colonialist ideology. Pratt’s concept of transculturation allows both interpretations to exist simultaneously, making it possible to consider two contradicting interpretations at the same time while understanding both as layers of meaning. The picture as an instrument of interpretation thus works in two directions that are weighted differently, depending on the beholder.

One example of how transculturation can be used in the interpretation of pictures has been provided by Emmanuel Akyeampong through an online publication of his studies in the Basel Mission archive. His interpretation of colonial pictures is grounded in an openness to different points of view. He organizes the pictures of missionaries in the former British Gold Coast colony according to very specific and carefully chosen criteria. These not only

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7 It is, of course, legitimate here to recognize a post-structuralist view along the lines of Roland Barthes’ polysemy (1973).

represent the facts, they also refer to the cultural contexts of the host societies. In one picture, we see not just female teachers and pupils, but also the process of learning, which is depicted as an impulse for changing women's roles. This picture has a double message: on the one hand, it bears witness to the existence of schools for girls; on the other, it is a provocation within a society in which education is an obstacle for girls' eligibility for marriage. Akyeampong has managed a groundbreaking feat with "visual interpretations" of this kind.<sup>8</sup> And yet, even his work also cannot overcome this significant openness of interpretation sometimes, because he is not always able to reconstruct definite contexts and thus make the interpretations of the picture plausible. Thus, the pictures from the Basel Mission archive cannot be seen solely in the context of missions, but also as a comment on social change in the former Gold Coast colony; in a larger sense, these pictures are about moments of transculturation. As Frank Heidemann (2005) points out, we must overcome photography's apparent indexicality. A picture is not just "an indicator of something", but is itself a means of identifying and allocating new meanings. Pictures thus enable a double interpretation, thereby referring to a third space.

There are also arguments against this model of having two or more interpretations, however. After all, the different interpretations within these pictures cannot simply "coexist". They have the ability to contradict and confront one another; it is impossible to build a direct link between different ways of reading these photographs. Pictures from the colonial era can be an affront. They can shock, and in many cases they simply provoke rejection. Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Sylvester and Wolfram Hartmann (2002) describe these effects as "fragmentation". According to them, this "energy that can be released by picture archives" (Hayes/Sylvester/Hartmann 2002: 124) can also lead to disturbances and negative reactions. These absolutely plausible scenarios fit well with the idea of the photograph as an interpretation; however, they reach far beyond Pratt's concept of transculturation.

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8 See [http://lib-app5-2.usc.edu/bmpix/visip\\_emmanuel/chapter\\_18\\_2.htm](http://lib-app5-2.usc.edu/bmpix/visip_emmanuel/chapter_18_2.htm)



**Figure 2:** This picture belongs to the private collection of Dr. Rudolf Simon, who was a government physician in Togo 1910–14. His primary responsibility was taking care of the “compulsory workers” (Pflichtarbeiter) during the construction of the Togo railway (Hahn 2004d, 2007). His collection of photographs, today housed in the museum of local history (Heimattmuseum) in Zusmarshausen, comprises mostly private photographs that more or less represent the non-official side of everyday colonial life. The scene depicted here – the beating of a Togolese man with short segments of heavy rope – apparently required the presence of the public health officer. In other words, witnessing these punishments was part of his official duty. And yet, the picture is not an official self-portrayal. The intensity of the violence depicted causes the picture to contradict the self-defined image of Togo as an ideal colony. It is actually a very rare picture.

Chaudhary (2005) calls this a “phantasmagoric aesthetics” – a fascination for horror that is able to portray boundless violence in such a cool and distanced manner only because it is attributed to the “other”, the colonial subject. Total control of the body belongs to this phantasmagoric idea of control. The emotions on the people’s faces reflect an absolute distance from the scene. Coombes (1994) discusses similar reproductions, including a scene photographed immediately after the destruction of the palace in Benin City. In the middle of the ruins, a colonial officer sits in a casual pose. In front of him are the palace’s art treasures that soon will be confiscated as war booty.

Chaudhary (2005:77) describes this photograph as part of the substitution of the gun: in the language of violence, the camera replaces the firearm. For this particular photograph represented here, it implies a readiness to use violence, or at least the approval of violence, also by the photographer.

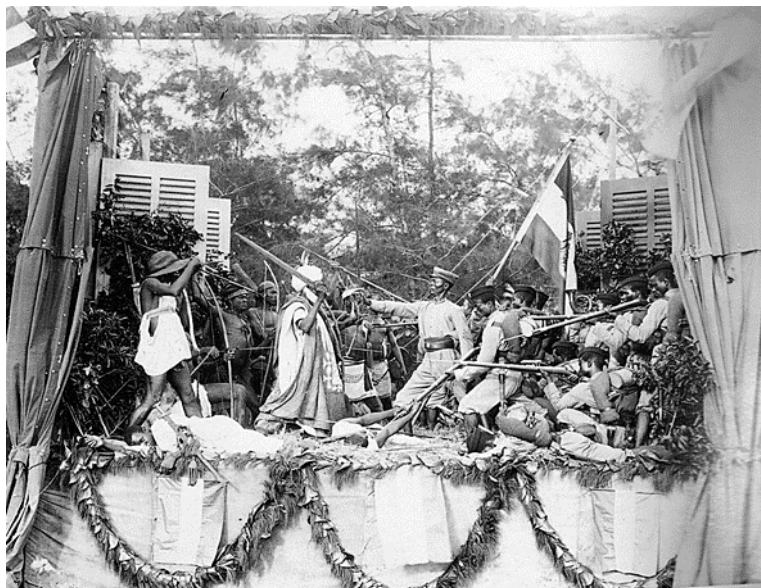
The use of corporeal punishment was already disputed in Togo at the time and was notorious as an arbitrary act in the neighbouring colonies. We cannot help but get the impression that the drastic representation of violence in the picture is both an approval (in the sense of the already mentioned phantasmagoric idea) as well as a criticism of this practice. We should also consider the presence of the camera, which was set up and dismantled during the punishment most certainly without the consent of the person being punished. This action shows the photographer's inner distance to the event, which he may have justified with the desire to take a picture. Raising the camera to the status of the middleman of documentation contributes to the "self-alienation" of the colonist (Chaudhary 2005: 89).

## TOWARD AN EMOTIONAL HISTORY OF PICTURES

For this reason, it is important to venture yet another step toward a phenomenology of colonial pictures by concentrating on deconstruction, which calls for an "interpretation against the grain" with the help of contextual information and politically informed approaches. We should also concentrate on the idea of colonial images as manifestations of a transcultural space. Unfortunately, however, both of these approaches suffer from a problematic lack of reach that does not do justice to the spontaneous perception and assessment of many pictures. Additionally, these models do not account for why "simple" interpretations persist despite knowledge to the contrary (fig. 1).

In an attempt to not fall back on the "photographs-are-documentation" narrative, I would like to suggest a complementary principle of categorization based on three levels of emotions: first, the immediate emotions of the beholders; second, the emotions that can be read on the faces of those depicted in photographs; and third, the emotions of the photographer – in other words, we must ask ourselves if it is possible to assess the photographer's emotions through interpretation. I believe that these three levels are connected in a certain way, and all of them should be taken into consideration. This would enable us to subvert the apparent objectivity of photographs while taking care

to remember that such emotionality does not necessary result in a coherent interpretation.



**Figure 3:** This picture, entitled *Lebendes Bild Christentum - Muhamedanismus (Pferdesportlicher Verein Togo)* (Tableau vivant: Christianity – Islam (Togo Equestrian Club)), from the Leschin collection (private collection of Peter Sebald), represents a popular nineteenth-century theatrical mis-en-scene. This pictorial idea has a more prominent staged character (which every picture has, in principle) than other documents. Each gesture is, of course, controlled and the protagonists adhere to the logic of dramaturgy, even before the picture was taken. By bringing performativity to the fore (Jeschke/Zedelmaier 2005), this picture becomes an argument. We would thus not interpret it as a document of colonial culture but rather as an outcome of transcultural interaction.

A broad range of emotions can be recognized in pictures – from grief, earnestness, anger and despair to pride and superiority. At the other end of the emotional scale, we find happiness, amusement, merriment and perhaps even

irony. Emotions are almost always relational expressions, referring to a certain occasion – even if this often cannot be immediately derived from the content of the picture. The relational character of these forms of expression also includes gestures of superiority or inferiority, both of which play a central role in the colonial context. Approaching colonial pictures through the emotions that can be detected within them privileges those pictures that include discernable people. While this may seem obvious, it is still worth pointing out in order to avoid the temptation to regard these pictures as merely the “documentation of facts”.

Because emotions are revealed through communication and interpretation, this approach highlights the aspect of pictures as a means of interpretation. In this context, we must keep the fragmentation we discussed earlier in mind, as it is very possible that the perception of contradicting emotions can be the core of an image’s interpretation. Especially in moments when the photographer’s emotions cannot be clearly recognized in the faces of the people photographed, the attentive beholder will notice a perceptible distance, which leads us to look more closely at how the picture was created rather than at the actual content.

According to Chaudhary (2005), it would certainly be plausible here to speak of “self-alienation”, not to mention the imagined horror that must have played a role in the production of photographs such as in figure 2. Although not all colonial pictures evoke such obvious emotions as this one, by reflecting on the emotions that can be detected in pictures, we gain access to the intentions behind the pictures’ creation.



**Figure 4:** Few pictures incorporate the “colonial idea” more thoroughly than this photograph from the Simon Collection. Unlike the greater part of this corpus of pictures on glass plates, this picture is contained in a small album and only exists as a paper print. Judging from the other pictures in the album, we can estimate that it was not taken by Simon himself, but was bought from Alex Acolatse’s studio (David 1992). Part of Acolatse’s business was to sell photographs of the colony to the Germans before they returned to the homeland. These were readymade as prints on paper and arranged in an album. The habitus of brevity represents the affirmative attitude toward the iconographically composed pictorial elements: the steaming train in the background as a sign of modernism, the distribution of money (the compulsory workers received a so-called “food allowance”), the police violence in the background (on the very left side in the picture) and the dress code, showing the Europeans in white clothing and the Africans mostly half-naked. The only detail that disturbs this affirmative harmony is the bored gesture of the seated European, who obviously has no active part in this scene. Presumably, it is Simon himself.

## CONCLUSION: POLYPHONY AND FRAGMENTATION

Colonial pictures are a virtually inexhaustible resource whose presence is becoming more and more a pressing fact. The logic of these hundreds of thousands of pictures – namely, supporting the propaganda for the colonial expansion of European countries – is without doubt a result of the simultaneous development of photographic technologies and the control of overseas territories. The dominant, but questionable, idea that photographs are “objective documents” is inseparably connected to this logic. In this essay, however, I contradict this idea by arguing that photographs are interpretations to begin with.

In the light of these contradictions, it becomes all the more urgent that we develop a broad range of methods of interpretation. Postcolonial research has been able to demonstrate new ways of reading these pictures by expanding their contextualization. This has resulted in a multitude of alternative interpretations that present colonialism as an unjust regime while revealing representational practices as “exoticizing” the colonized.

Transculturation is thus a further step on our way toward making the polyphony of these pictures more comprehensible. Colonial pictures are not simply documents of colonialism, and they should not be understood naively as documents of those cultures in which they were taken. Following the conceptional framework of transculturation, colonial pictures create a “third space”. This space represents the indissoluble connection between two cultures; it is the foundation of their polyphony. And yet, this polyphony reaches its limits when interpretations contradict one another and we are compelled to make a decision. For this, postcolonial scholars have proposed the term fragmentation. While pictures may allow different interpretations, their incompatibility is rather an expression of the contradictions that can be found already in the colonial system itself.

In an extension of this concept, I thus propose utilizing the emotions within pictures as a resource, according to the concept of a phenomenological approach based on immediate perception. Emotions can be found on at least three levels: the emotions of the people being photographed, the emotions of the photographer and of the emotions of the beholder of the picture. All three levels are interrelated. The aim of this approach, however, would not be simply to establish a new way of interpreting pictures. Instead, this approach would make it possible to successfully describe how to access the relevance



of these images, both in terms of their high historical and propagandist value as well as the effects they can still have today. In place of one or more interpretations, we would thus have an approach that would focus more on their emerging significance for the beholder (fig. 3). Furthermore, the suggested approach would overcome the problematic objective of stressing the “truth of the pictures”, which anyway cannot be the same for colonial subject, colonialists and current day observers. Perceptions are not only polyphonic, but also so immensely different, that it is legitimate to speak about the fragmentation of understandings of these pictures.

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