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Tainted Frictions

a visual essay

Abstract

Tainted Frictions is a non-linear visual essay that produces a generative set of tensions between photography and text. The essay contains two parallel tracks bringing content in dialogue with form. On the one hand it addresses (mainly with the help of original photographs taken in India and Cuba by the author) the meaning of colour in the contact-zone between the colonizers and the colonized. On the other hand, it offers a (formal) challenge to conventional ways of presenting social scientific research. Aiming to offer a vision about a possible future for the photo-essay *Tainted Frictions* suspends consolidated (hierarchical) ways of bringing text and image in contact with each other (hence going beyond “the caption”). Playing with notions of friction, counterpoint and provocation this essay translates the principles that underpin contemporary online, interactive documentary and storytelling practices into a single image. Asking the viewers/readers to “swim” in a sea of photographs and scattered sentences it offers an “active” and non-linear reading/viewing experience highlighting the processual character of knowledge. Possibly, this is the simplest and most manual form of multimodal interactive documentary that have so far been divulged.

Author Bio

Paolo Silvio Harald Favero is Associate Professor in Film Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Antwerp. With a PhD in Social Anthropology from Stockholm University he has devoted the core of his career to the study of visual culture in India and Italy. Presently he conducts research on image-making, politics and technology in contemporary India while focusing also on questions of ontology and methodology in the context of emerging digital visual practices and technologies at global level. Previously a lecturer in Portugal, UK, Italy and Sweden Paolo is also active filmmaker photographer and filmmaker. He has held several personal photographic exhibitions and in 2004 he directed *Flyoverdelhi* (2004), a film on youth in Delhi that was screened by Swedish and Italian national broadcasters. He is presently an elected member of the Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and the vice-chair of the ECREA Visual Culture network.

Introductory/accompanying text



Screenshot 1

Tainted Frictions is a **non-linear visual essay** that generates a creative set of **tensions** between photographs and texts. Bringing **words** (in the form of a variety of quotes, snippets but also longer reflections) in an interrupted, fastidious, unstable set of dialogues and frictions with **images** (photographs by the author of this essay) this work can be looked at as a simple and manual form of interactive documentary.

During the **act of exploring** the essay, the viewers/readers are never allowed to take full possession visually of the “big picture” of the essay, i.e. of the interface containing the texts and photographs on which the essay builds (see screenshot #1). The logic is simple. When zooming out in order to see an entire photograph they lose the texts out of sight (either entirely or simply because it becomes too small to be read). And when zooming into the text they can only see details of the photographs (see screenshot #2).



Screenshot 2

The **interface** functions hence primarily as a container of a set of (textual and visual) frames that the viewers are constantly forced to “break” and redefine. Actively interpellated by the dialogues between images and text, they have to **frame** and **re-frame**, to **zoom** in and out, to **rotate** and **slide**. They get engaged in a choreography that breaks down the act of viewing/reading to a series of small acts of selection enacted through an on-going **decentring** and **re-centring of the gaze** (see screenshot #3). **Vision** mirrors here the process of critical reflection.



Screenshot 3

A theoretical key feature of *Tainted Frictions* is the move away and beyond the fixity of the **frame**. A notion which has had a fundamental status in our understanding of the meaning of images, the frame is today, in fact, under threat, challenged by hypertextuality,

multimodality, and by the incorporation of metadata into the image (see Favero 2014). To play with it and to explore its present boundaries is of fundamental importance for our understanding of the changing meaning of the images in a digital landscape. *Tainted Frictions* translates also onto a flat surface some of the principles that underpin **interactive documentaries** (see Favero 2013 and Aston and Gaudenzi 2012) highlighting in particular the role of the viewers/readers as active spectators and of non-linearity (Ranciere 2009, cf. Favero 2014). Starting from the latter, a topic that has classically been addressed in the context of text and novels by scholars such as Barthes, Derrida and Deleuze, **non-linearity** is a notion of fundamental importance for understanding the construction of narrative in a digital landscape (Lambert 2013). In the specific context of this essay, non-linear viewing/reading is generated through a series of “tense”, “ruptured” syntagmatic relations (Barthes 1977) between text and image, language and the visual. Mirroring the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized, the West and the non-West, the mind and the body (in a Cartesian sense), such dialogues promote the search for a new way of bringing text and images in dialogue with each other (beyond the logic of “the caption”). **Content** and **form** merge in the space of this dialogue.

Regarding the question of **active spectatorship** *Tainted Frictions* has been designed, in its fastidious counterpoint between the visual and the textual, as to bring to the surface the viewers’ **‘knowledge-seeking-strategies’** (Färber 2007). This image interrogates in fact not only the relationship between text and image. It also challenges conventional ways of controlling the polysemic character of images with the help of captions and other types of verbalized expatiations and hence of consolidating the primacy of verbalized narratives and interpretations over the openness of the image. It is in response to this, that *Tainted Frictions* refuses to allow for the creation of a hierarchy (or even a chronology) of viewing between image and text, leaving instead the craving for definitive explanations unattended. Open to the on-going reinterpretation generated by the viewers this modality of viewing highlights the nature of **knowledge as something processual** rather than a static thing out there waiting, to paraphrase Banks (2011:112) to be discovered, captured and eventually explained to an external audience.

In terms of **content** the essay explores the meaning of colour in the colonial encounter. Based upon original high-definition photographs of “tainted public spaces” taken by the author in **India** (Delhi, Kochi, Mumbai and Kolkata) and **Cuba** (Santiago de Cuba and Havana) *Tainted Frictions* addresses colour as a terrain of confrontation and friction between the colonized

and the colonizer. Avoiding, in particular with the help of the counterpointed (at times even contradictory) dialogues between photographs and texts, to reproduce the simple dualisms of **chromophobia vs. chromophilia** the essay challenges nevertheless the “unstable mix of attraction and repulsion” (Taussig 2006: 31) that characterizes Western relations to colour in general (and vivid colour more in particular). Dominated by ideas of rationality, mathematics, geometry and lines (see Crary 1990, McQuire 1998) the West has looked upon colour as second to form. Belonging to the realm of the **senses** this was something that could not quite be **controlled** and that was, hence, capable of exercising an enormous **attraction**. Belonging to whatever was divergent from **the white heterosexual civilized (bourgeois) male norm**, colour became quickly associated with **women**, children and **primitive** people. Goethe famously wrote “[s]avage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors” (Goethe 1970:55). And it is not by coincidence, in their reflections on colour Benjamin spoke primarily of **children** and William Burroughs of **drugs** and **sex** (cf. Taussig 2006:31).

With its ambivalent status fluctuating between **science and magic**, between **material and visual culture** (let us not forget that from Aristotle onwards many have been the debates in the West regarding whether colour can be looked upon as a substance) colour was hence a fundamental actor in the colonial encounter. Many are for instance the conflicts in which colour was involved, see for instance the case of *purree* or Indian Yellow (cf. Bailkin 2014) and of *indigo* (see Eaton 2014). Repulsively attracted to it, the West tried nevertheless to **conquer and control** colour. In the 19th century, for instance, it became an important tool in the endeavour of cataloguing (and representing) scales of racial difference. About this Bailkin states for instance that “[s]tarting in the 1860s art teachers began to offer skin-colour charts and proposals to standardize terminology – especially terms like *dusky*, *swarthy*, and *pale* that might provide clues to racial identity” (2014:94, italics in original).

In parallel to this, however, the colonial subjects, identifying colour’s potential alterity and magical character, used it as a **tool of resistance against the colonizing West** (cf. Eaton 2014, Govea 2011, Taussig 2006, Sheikh 1997). For them it was a precious instrument for marking out their difference from the colonizers (Eaton 2013). It is indeed not the goal of this essay to offer an in-depth linear exploration (or explanation) of the meaning and role of colour in colonial societies. Quite the opposite, my ambition here is to let the tensions between colour and form, senses and the intellect, the colonized and the colonizer, feed (and be fed by) a series of creative, counter-punctual dialogues between images and text. In a constant

merging of content and form (or to use Chris Wright's terms of "anthropological relevance" and "aesthetic composition", 1998) I will rather attempt at letting such dialogues and frictions open up the horizon of meaning. Attempting at feeding new ideas and visions this essay will hopefully constitute a step in the search for a language capable of finding the connection between the senses and the intellect, the body and the mind. After all colour and images do both, paraphrasing Taussig, encourage us to see "ourselves in the midst of the world... to enter into ourselves as image" (2006:31). It is therefore that, just like Taussig, I encourage the viewer to "swim" into the image.

The **photographs** selected for this essay are the result of a series of visual searches (enacted in the present) for visible traces (belonging mainly to the past) of chronic resistance. Aiming to **evoke** rather than to explain, to **affect** rather than to document, the chosen images address the natives's engagement with colour as a tool for taking possession of space and for creating a visible tension with the colonizers' desire for orderly whiteness. Colours mark out space here, claiming back what was once taken away. In line with this visual approach the **texts** that make up the essay should also not be reduced to excerpt of a linear essay. They are designed to **intervene** and **interfere** with the act of viewing the photographs that are the centre of the essay. Offering a different way (beyond the caption) to conceive of the role of text in relation to images, these texts are to be seen as **provocations**, as **glimpses** into what **could be known**. It is in the on-going act of "swimming" into this big image composed of photographs and texts that each viewer will find her or his meaning, stimulated by the on-going series of critical acts of zooming, reframing, rotating and shifting that they get involved in.

The wish is that *Tainted Friction* will provide inspiration for rethinking the role and form of the visual (photographic) essay in a digital habitat and inspire the creation of a variety of adaptations of the logic that underpins its functioning into different ethnographic and theoretical terrains.

How to interact with the essay:

In order to explore this visual essay do the following steps:

#1. Download the PDF or JPG file.

#2 Open it up with an image viewing software (Preview, Image Viewer, etc.)

#3 You are now ready to start swimming in the image.

Practical info:

- ✓ The essay is available in JPG and PDF formats.
- ✓ The original physical size of the image is 202x172 cm but it can be compressed to a variety of (physical and memory) sizes as to fit any platform. The picture in attachment is to this document is 16,6 MB.

Content:

- ✓ Text (in the image): 1300 words
- ✓ Accompanying text: 1559 words (without references)
- ✓ Abstract: 186 words.
- ✓ Visuals: 18 original high-definition color photographs

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