Reimagined Communities: Understanding the Visual Habitus of Transcultural photographs

Molloy, C.

Caroline Molloy

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Chair Marilena Zackheos. University of Nicosia, Cyprus

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(This script has been written to deliver in association with current research practice so the first person has been used throughout the paper)

INTRODUCTORY SLIDE

I have been a photographer, I am trained in photography and anthropology and I now work in academia. I am interest in how ethnography is a way of knowing.

This paper, is a snapshot of my interdisciplinary PHD research, in the context of photography and the everyday. The research looks at commercial photographic practices within the London-Turkish community in relation to understanding collective identity formation. I discuss, the research process and some of the findings that have come out of the research. I undertook qualitative ethnographic research in seven London-Turkish photo-digitals studios, which were followed up with subsequent interviews with clients who frequented the studios, through which I focused on micro-narratives around the studio photographs.[1]

OVERVIEW SLIDE

Using examples of studio photographs assembled during the research, I build an argument that beyond aesthetics, the studio photograph is imprinted with specific visual vocabularies

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[1] I am aware there is no tangible London-Turkish community and it is in fact a self-styled imaged migrant community – but that discussion is for another point

which can be interpreted as cultural texts.[2] The research re-frames the photo-digital studio and associated photographic practices as a transnational space arguing that it is a transcultural contact zone, where hybrid identities are performed.[3] [4] Pinney (2000) suggested that the photographic studio could be seen as a prosthetic space, where desires are realised. A space where, as discussed by Barthes (1977), the self is experimented with and re-constructed, and wherein the photograph becomes visual evidence of the identity performed in the photograph.

To give you a flavor of the research, this is part of a conversation with one of my participants about a circumcision party we both attended. The aim of the conversation was to try and figure out the cultural significance of the events that unfolded at the party.

FILM CLIP: ZUBEDAH [5]

What transpired through the conversation, was it was common practice for the young boy and friends to be driven around London in a Limousine prior to his party. Riding into the hall on a horse, as my participant said, was not usual in London. It was however a traditional cultural practice of the village where the host family came from. I argue that the family are doing here are trying to bridge their heritage with the geographical locale.

OVERVIEW SLIDE

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[2] I refer to London-Turkish photo-digital studio as photographic studios that are owned by Turkish born nationals whose clients are mostly, but not exclusively, Turkish born nationals.

[3] Mary Louise Pratt (2007) Imperial eyes: Travel writing and Transculturation refs to the contact zone as where meet, clash, grapple with frequent asymmetric relations of domination and subordination.

[4] Bhaba, Homi (1994) discusses hybridity as the fusion of cross-cultural identity, a migrant narrative. He argues that post-colonial hybridity can be a collective experience where cultural values are negotiated.

[5] The *Zubeda Clip* is a 47 second extract from a research film with ZB which discusses reflections on a circumcision party both she and the author attended.

In recent decades there has been a growing recognition of the value of the studio portrait photograph, beyond its vernacular use.[6] However, historically the studio photograph has been discussed dismissively as being bland, banal and formulaic. Using an 1887 studio portrait of Kafka as an example, when writing about early studio photography, Benjamin (1931) excluded the studio photographic portrait as an **auratic** encounter, instead describing the studio photography as repetitive and formulaic.[7] More recently, Batchen (2001) placed studio photography within the genre of vernacular photographies, which he noted have been largely ignored by a critical gaze. I consider how the studio photograph has its own incisive photographic historiography, which is indeed rich in cultural knowledge. I argue that a photographic studio portrait may not reveal very much about the individual sitter in the photograph, but by examining the visual methods used in the studio photograph, social aspirations and cultural values of that sitter can be revealed.

HISTORICAL SLIDE

Thinking through the visual 'Habitus' of the studio photograph

The studio photograph as a visual vocabulary

The studio photograph could be considered a genre of photography that started with early Victorian studio photographs and has since been adapted and built on. Linkman (2000) suggests the combination of visual elements used in the Victorian studio photograph, the costumes worn, the additional props, backgrounds and deportment of the sitter collectively locate the social position and class of that sitter. She also suggested that the language of studio photography inherited its method of representation from the academic tradition of

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[6]Adil, A. (2015), Batchen, G. (2005), Behrend, H. (2003), Dahlgren, A. (2010), Dewan & Hackett (2009), Edwards, S (2009), Flint, K, (2015) Keller, C. (2008), Linkman, A. (1993 & 2000), Pinney, C. (1997 & 2008), Oztuncay, B. (2003), Williams, V (1997), Siegel, E. (2010) all contribute to the literature on studio photography.
[7] Benjamin, Walter (1931) described the aura as something inherent in an original, unreproducible artwork.

the Grand Manner painted portrait. In which, she argues, it would not be unusual to see a mock parlour, the corner of a library and even a painted rendering of a picturesque landscape as a painted portrait background. These emblematic details were then transported to the photographic studio, which may account for the seemingly incongruous use of a rustic and picturesque landscape or Romanesque plinths as props in the early photographic studio portrait. Re-considering the Victorian studio photograph as the beginning of a photographic genre of photography which represents the social aspirations of the sitter could be considered a guiding thread on which to critically analysis the studio photograph within different contexts.

The studio photograph with a colonial legacy

The development of early photographic histories outside of Europe, can be traced alongside European colonial cartographies. Whilst Ottoman Turkey would not have been subject to colonial expansion, it would have interacted and traded with Europe.[8] [9] Consequently, Ottoman Turkey would have been influenced by European tastes, imperialist ideals and would have been informed by a history entangled with Orientalist identities and the visual culture of Orientalist paintings.[10] [11] Early Ottoman Turkish photographic studios were mostly

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[8] Roberts (2007) writes of how the Ottoman empire was increasingly beholden to European imperialist western powers, although they were politically independent. Check this quote

[9] Hight and Sampson (2002) discussed how photography and with it, photographic studio practices crossed international borders expanded as part of the colonial invasion. They suggested that early photography became a government sponsored tool that documented colonial encounters, specifically recording indigenous peoples in an attempt to elucidate and dominate the unfamiliar. Furthermore, they argued that early photography was employed to capture and document the unknown as a way of reconfiguring the colonial space for the benefit of western occidental audiences, promote tourism and feed an interest in the newly colonised European empires.

[10] In his book *Orientalism*, Said (1978) argued that Orientalism was an imagined western construct, which bore little relationship to the real Orient. He discussed how Orientalism could be understood as a western tradition of representation, which used a dominant European hegemonic language to mediate Oriental representations, for a European gaze.

[11] Linda Nochlin (1991) made the connection be between the concept of Orientalism and Orientalist art.

run by non-Muslim photographers, notably the Armenian Abdullah Brothers and Syrian Christian Pascal Sebah, whose early photographic practices catered for Tourists, providing studio portraits for western sitters and creating ethnographic indigenous portrait photographs that echoed the dominant hegemonic emblems visible in Orientalist paintings.[12] Painting that avoided modernisation, instead depicted an untouched Oriental with ancient customs and rituals.

Reframing the Habitus

In addition to social aspirations discussed in the studio photograph within an art historical discourse, critical questions around power and race, as well as cultural and ethnic representations can be raised. Anthropologist Pinney (2008) discussed the studio photograph from an hermeneutic perspective.[13] He adds to an art historical discourse, asking specific cultural questions about the Indian studio photography within a post-colonial context. Pinney suggested that early Indian studio photographs were inscribed with a colonial habitus. Pinney's use of 'habitus' builds on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of the 'habitus', in which Bourdieu argues that our environment is culturally and politically ingrained by our aesthetic tastes in art, food, clothing, politics and culture. All of which Bourdieu reasons, becomes hardwired ideological structures with which we identify. Pinney's appropriation of this term 'habitus' specifically locates 'habitus' to a visual domain, which he argued is created and imbedded in the studio photograph. In the same way

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[12] Both the Abdullah Brothers and Syrian Christian Pascal Sebah contributed to the Sultan Abdul hamid II 1893 photographic albums, which offered an alternative visuality for the Ottoman Empire.

[13] Geertz, C (1972) discusses an hermeneutic interpretative approach, as a way of understanding the symbolism of social actions, rather than the actual social action, i.e. understanding the meaning and intent of something. This could be useful if applied to analysis of the studio photograph, understanding what it represents, what it does in place of what it looks like.

Bourdieu argues our cultural habitus is built into our intrinsic nature, Pinney claims the visual metaphors that appear in the studio photograph can indicate the cultural habitus of the sitter in the studio photography.

This is a conversation between myself and one of the participants discussing the critical decisions made when selecting the digital background to add to the contemporary studio portrait. What we could understand as creating the Visual Habitus for the photograph.

FILM CLIP: HATUN[14]

SLIDE: ARCHES PORTRAIT

This photograph has not been selected for any particular artistic merit, it is unremarkable in terms of originality. However, the photograph is an example of how transcultural identities are visualised. Although without exception everyone working in the photo-digital studio could not articulate why the studio background had been chosen beyond 'because it looked nice.' If the earlier discourse around the visual metaphors used in Victorian studio photograph and Grand Manner painted portrait are re-considered, a connection can be seen between the French style arches used in both the contemporary London-Turkish studio portrait and seen in the Victorian studio photograph. At the same time the costume of the two young boys at the front of the portrait locate the purpose of the studio photograph. Their costumes are out of keeping with contemporary formal and informal dress for a young boy. They are wearing white satin costumes, an inherited style of outfit dating back to old ottoman dress, inclusive of fur trimmed white cape and cap, embellished with silver trim.

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[14] The *Hatun Clip* is a 115 second extract from a research film with HB which discusses the selection of studio photographs available to clients for their studio portrait.

Only just visible at the bottom of the photograph, both boys can be seen holding decorative white scepters. The costume is ceremonial, worn as part of the circumcision ritual, a deep rooted custom within the Turkish community, that symbolises a change of status for the boy. [15] [16] The costume locates the purpose of the photograph, to memorialise the circumcision ritual. The photograph could be seen as testament to what one participant noted was neither specifically English nor Turkish but are an alchemy of, a London-Turkish identity.

When discussing the cultural significance of the subaltern photographic studio background as part of a post-colonial discourse, Appadurai (1997 check page number) suggested that there is an ambiguous relationship between the foreground and the background in the studio photograph. He asks for a repositioning of that relationship. It is the background after all, that adds the crucial context integral to locating the meaning of the photograph and thus drives how it is understood. Appadurai suggests that instead of assuming the sitter in the photograph to be the main subject. Reconfiguring understandings of the studio photograph so that the background is understood to be subject of the photograph that is then animated by the sitter, could lead to more meaningful understandings of the photograph within a social and cultural context. Whilst the sitter in the studio photograph changes, the studio background and props remain the same. With only a limited selection of backgrounds available to the sitter in the traditional photographic studio, the context of the

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[15] The circumcision celebration party is asynchronous to the cultural ritual the celebrations are shared with an extended community. It was argued by more than one of the photo-digital studio managers that the timing of the circumcision celebration party is strategically celebrated to impress large audiences.

[16] Although there seems to be no consensus on the exact age for the ritual there was agreement, that it is a pre-pubertal ritual.

photograph would have been pre-defined before the arrival of the sitter. The studio background and props then wrap themselves around the sitter and the portrait narrative is complete. Elkins' (2011) argument could be seen as central to locating meaning in the studio photograph, he echoes Appadurai's argument suggesting that the studio background as the key linchpin for understanding the studio photograph.

If the argument is then updated to discuss the photo-digital studio, as in the example of the London-Turkish studio photograph, it could be reasoned that very close attention should be paid to the backgrounds of the studio portraits. With potentially an inexhaustible selection of digital backgrounds available to choose from; the critical decisions made by the sitter when selecting their portrait background should be considered crucial and more culturally relevant than if they had posed in front of a static pre-defined constructed studio background.