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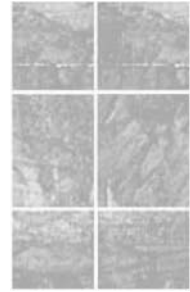

Towards a critical visual pedagogy: a response to the ‘end of poverty’ narrative

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author calls for a *critical visual pedagogy* as a means to challenge visually constituted ‘grand narratives’ of poverty and suffering. In the first half, he situates images of poverty in India within a global development discourse termed the ‘end of poverty’, which functions as the rationale for social interventions in the global south and sustains a circuit of ‘poverty capital’. The author critically analyzes the visual aesthetic that accompanies the ‘end of poverty’ narrative, focusing on the visual choices that reinforce difference and promote the perception that marginalized populations need ‘saving’. Using images from his fieldwork with students in a village school in Karnataka, India, about 50 km south of Bangalore, he proposes an alternative visual aesthetic, grounded in visual ethnography, which may serve to counter the ‘end of poverty’, and grand narratives like it, while impacting how and why we participate in poverty alleviation efforts.

KEYWORDS

critical visuality • development • digital media • India • neoliberalism • postcolonial • poverty • representation • rural education • visual pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

In August 2013, I conducted a lecture on media and education with a group of Karnataka state government schoolteachers. I began my presentation with a screen shot taken from Tehelka’s ‘Independence Day Special’ on the state of education in India. Tehelka is an Indian national English-language media outlet hailed globally as ‘one of the best sources of news in India’ (www.tehelka.com/about/). It began online as a news website before creating its own news magazine. From its inception, therefore, Tehelka’s audience has not been limited to those within the nation-state itself, but includes ‘first world’ audiences who have access to online technologies and can read English. Tehelka’s import is linked to this global circulation, providing information about ‘India’ to upper middle-class readers both inside and outside India’s political borders.

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The image on the exposé's webpage depicts a smiling student, clad in a shoddy and unbuttoned school uniform, standing in front of a chalkboard with the alphabets written in both English and Hindi, underneath the words 'Can't Read. Can't Write. Can't Count'.[1]

When I showed this image to the teachers they were livid. Five got up at once to lecture me on how misinformed my assessment of government schools and rural children was and how wrong the image itself was. In a misunderstanding partly brought on by a communication gap and partly by their emotional response to the images themselves, they started chastizing me for creating the image, thinking that I was showing them something of my own making. After 15 minutes of shouting, I went to the board and wrote 'DANGEROUS', with an arrow pointing towards the image.

The teachers were angry because of the exposé's message, which reflected poorly on them and their students. They were unhappy that their students could be depicted as dirty, poor, unkempt, and unintelligent. The child's image mattered a great deal and the teachers were quick to critically engage with it.

Our dialogue focused on the risks associated with such images of poverty and suffering and the pedagogic sensibility that must accompany the presentation and consumption of these images. How do we situate the Tehelka image in a sociohistorical context? What are the implicit messages associated with the image and how does the visual convey these meanings? What power differentials shape the interpretation of the photograph?

In this article, I call for a *critical visual pedagogy* as a means to challenge visually constituted 'grand narratives' of poverty and suffering. In the first half I situate images of poverty in India within a global development discourse termed the 'end of poverty', which functions as the rationale for social interventions in the global south and sustains a circuit of 'poverty capital' (Roy, 2010). I critically analyze the visual aesthetic that accompanies the 'end of poverty' narrative, focusing on the visual choices that reinforce difference and promote the perception that marginalized populations need 'saving'. Using images from my fieldwork with students in a village school in Karnataka, India, about 50 km south of Bangalore, I propose an alternative visual aesthetic, grounded in visual ethnography, which may serve to counter the 'end of poverty', and grand narratives like it, while impacting on how and why we participate in poverty alleviation efforts.

SITUATING THE END OF POVERTY IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

The Cold War politics of the mid to late 20th century came to a close with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a moment which Francis Fukuyama termed the 'end of history'. While socialist systems still remained after the wall's collapse, most notably in China and Cuba, many have regarded this

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event as the moment when neoliberal values associated with democratic free markets took hegemonic standing globally. Supranational development organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank played a key role in enforcing structural adjustment policies and loosening restrictions on free trade in the recently independent nation-states of the global south, including those in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They argued that the free flow of goods and services across borders would increase a nation-state's overall wealth and eventually lead to its infrastructural and human development.

However, since the late 1980s, neoliberal policies have actually resulted in an increase in economic inequality between countries and within countries. As a result, the 'end of history' has been replaced with a global discourse on the 'end of poverty' (Sachs, 2005, referenced in Roy, 2010). This particular discourse sees the increase in malnutrition, human subjugation, and illiteracy as a byproduct of neoliberal values and argues that poverty alleviation should be a central goal of development interventions.

One primary outgrowth of this 'end of poverty' narrative has been the redeployment of financial resources to poverty alleviation and human development – a growing circuit of capital that Roy (2010) terms 'poverty capital'. This circuit of capital seems to have the double advantage of creating new markets for continued capital accumulation – the primary goal of capital – while alleviating a social ill. An example of this new circuit of capital flow is the 'NGOization' of the social sector – in both education and health – in developing nations. In India, there are now over 3.3 million NGOs, both national and international (for reference, that is approximately 1 NGO for every 400 Indian citizens). NGOs (especially INGOs) that seek funds from private corporate interests are tied closely to market forces in their funding cycles, specifically in relation to funding sources and the stipulations that accompany this funding.

Those working within the development space actively interpret the nature of poverty in their depictions of local communities, associating poverty with powerlessness and despair or worse, pathology, in order to justify intervention. This strategy is crystallized by the World Bank when it explains its reasons for intervening in 'underdeveloped nations'. The website notes:

> Any of the UN's Millennium Development Goals for 2015 seem out of reach for the world's poorest countries. An estimated 1.4 billion people survive on incomes of $1.25 or less a day. Rising food prices threaten to increase hunger and malnutrition, while climate change is affecting agriculture, the mainstay of most people in poor countries. Communicable diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria, are widespread. ('Global challenges: The poorest countries')

In trying to argue for their development projects, the World Bank's rhetoric effectively erases people from the discourse, replacing human subjects with disease and poverty.

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Speaking of the postcolony, and specifically Africa, Mbembe (2001: 1) critiques:

> Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature.' Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality … all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind.

The 'developmental gaze' described above falls within this historically situated notion of who 'third world' people are, and, if uncritically consumed, can reify narratives of inadequacy and deficiency.

THE IMAGE AND THE END OF POVERTY

Images play a key role in the 'end of poverty' narrative. Because they are taken during an experiential moment, images seem to convey 'authentic' data about a space and time. Viewers see, hear, and feel the referent's force, link it to themselves, and are therefore likely to reinforce the image's authenticity (Barthes, 1981). Jackson (2012: 481) relates one such audiovisual experience, describing how Marlon Riggs's film, *Black Is… Black Ain't* (1994), was 'an early trip to one mass-mediated field site from which a portion of my own anthropological subconscious has never completely returned'. What Jackson sees and hears becomes a part of him, resting in his subconscious and leading to a particular kind of experiential authentication. Drawing on the work of Anne Grimshaw and Thomas Csordas, he concludes that 'The filmic's problem … is that it always bends toward the aesthetic, the emotive, the artistic, the affective, and maybe even … the "preobjective"' (p. 482). This particular quality of image and film has been reinforced by high definition, a digital technology which makes photographs and film look so perfectly clear that viewers feel 'just like they are there'.

Yet, the camera's gaze always mediates the visual product and the visual's aesthetic carries particular ideological qualities, i.e. 'ways of seeing' (Berger, 2008[1972]). Jackson (2012: 482) argues that mass-mediatization, and the social relations therein, demand critical attention precisely because 'the digital can still have ethnocentric inflections when uncritically presumed to be the sort of universalist rubric that it is not'. When images of communities circulate with the implicit assumption that the renderings are unmediated, the viewer can make meaning of images without critically appraising who produced the image, why it was produced, or how it was produced.

As Chouliaraki and Blaagaard (2013: 254) state:

> Rather than interpretation being concerned with the witness's 'spontaneous' faculty of empathy, it emerges instead at the interface between the witness and the object of his or her gaze precisely through those texts that produce meaning about vulnerability and violence.

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The images and films associated with the 'end of poverty narrative' function as these 'texts', guiding how groups that are marginalized along racial, ethnic, gender, and class differences are made visible. Without a critical exploration of *how* these images make marginalized communities visible, we can neither ethically engage with them nor understand how communities are (re-)constituted because of them.

As an example, take one of ActionAid India's short films, 'Landless'. ActionAid is an anti-poverty agency working in communities all over the world, including India. ActionAid India claims to reach over seven million people within India alone and has assets worth over US$100 million (ActionAid Annual Report, 2012–2013). ActionAid India's mission is certainly not reflective of every NGO's vision or ideology, nor is 'Landless' a 'stand-in' for all humanitarian films. However, in critically considering the film, one recognizes how imagery associated with poverty begins 'new processes of inclusion and exclusion' which 'create Otherness' linked to humanitarianism and the flow of poverty capital (Rizvi, 2004: 90).

The film tells the story of the Dalit and Mushar communities in Bihar, India, who have been left landless for years. The story unfolds with images of landless laborers working, standing unclothed, malnourished and hopeless. A child stares into the camera unsmiling, unclothed from waist up. An unsmiling woman in an orange and blue sari stares into the distance while sitting against a crumbling brick building. Interviews comprise the voiceover, in which members of the community tell stories about their plight, their feelings of hopelessness and despair. Text screens show statistics of malnourishment and landlessness. It ends on a hopeful note, with the community fighting for land rights under a new policy, which ActionAid is working to promote. A woman with a breathtaking smile tells the camera that now that the community has come together, their lives can be better. A child smiles while brushing his teeth. The scene shifts to a green room, where a man sits at a typewriter and types away. The film nears its end with two text screens. First, 'Millions of Dalits are now entitled to own land. / By supporting communities applications, / we are able to access land for the landless.' Second, the ActionAid logo with the caption, 'supporting vulnerable communities' rights to land and livelihood across India'.

How do we excavate the meanings associated with a visual representation like 'Landless'? An empowerment narrative emphasizes the communities' self-generated power to change, and shapes the selection of images, the story arch, and the given text. Images slowly shift from those depicting despair and marginality to those that suggest hope and opportunity in the future. The smiling woman refers to her community and the change that is occurring from within it. Throughout the film, the 'melodramatic mode' renders the moral landscape black/white and 'produces an identification of the spectator with the experiences of the suffering subject' (Wells, 2013: 278). Children play a special role in this melodrama, smiling innocently into the camera with

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looks that suggest that they can do no wrong. Such visual strategies produce a compassion that, in turn, may lead to mobilization to stop the forms of suffering experienced by the Dalit and Mushar communities.

The film's aesthetic conveys other messages as well. Men and women stare from just beyond the screen, a look into 'real life'. They are frozen in poses and are rarely, if ever, seen in action. When they are moving, it is to show them labouring, both in the field and at home. The characters – their faces, ordeals, and despairs – come to 'stand for' poverty and destitution. We are not given access to other aspects of their lives. How, for example, do they find hope in their everyday lives; what joys do they have; what is their community like; what oral histories do they share? In this sense, 'Landless' does very little to convey the complex 'felt experience' of the communities which are depicted. Characters and storylines are one-dimensional, and therefore their social life is also rendered as such.

The illusion of authenticity makes this collapse even starker: the men and women stare from just beyond the screen, a look into 'real life'. And yet, this reality is kept separate: it never interacts with realities more like our own. For example, we never see community members talking directly or working with those behind the camera, nor do we see anybody from 'outside' the community, depictions that would complicate the stark rendering of difference and Otherness. This Otherness is coupled with ActionAid India's prominent position in the community's newfound success: ActionAid India can access land for the landless when the landless themselves cannot. This foundational 'savior narrative' serves to justify ActionAid India's intervention by characterizing them as the catalysts for the change in the Dalit and Mushar communities.

The film's aesthetic has been constructed to facilitate the broader purpose of ActionAid India's web presence. Clearly, ActionAid is obligated not only to those they help, but to those who fund and bring visibility to their efforts. ActionAid's imagined audience must have access to and knowledge of the English-language and digital media, two characteristics that mark them as part of the global upper middle class (Goldfarb, 2002: 6). In trying to make their efforts legible to those that they seek to reach, ActionAid India relies on historically constituted semiotic resources – images of difference and poverty in the global south – that are broadly recognizable by their imagined audience. The webpage upon which ActionAid's films are viewed includes, in the right-hand column, a link that reads 'Help us end poverty … Donate now'. ActionAid India's audience is included in the savior narrative: we can help ActionAid India end poverty by funding the organization. In this sense, the savior narrative is constitutive of the circuit of poverty capital, providing justification both for ActionAid India's intervention and for continued funding of these interventions.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL VISUAL PEDAGOGY

These types of images, and the end of poverty discourse associated with them, have affected my own field research. I work with students in a village

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approximately 50 km outside Bangalore. Rural children, envisioned as a monolithic category, have been seen as socioeconomically marginalized, in need of outside help, and have been the objects of many of the portrayals described above. As part of my fieldwork, I use both photography and film, with a special emphasis on participatory film methods (Vasudevan, 2006). Over the course of six months, my students have taken thousands of photographs of their families, their village industries, their friends, and their school.

Recently, when I began to discuss my students' photographs with a man who was associated with the Taj Hotel Group, one of the largest and most prestigious hotel chains in India, he encouraged me to do a charity event in which the children could sell their photographs to raise funds for their school. But even before he finished making his suggestion or had seen my students' images, he told me, 'But you have to make sure you tell a really desperate story. You have to make the businessmen cry.' His implication was that the businessmen needed to feel both *that my students were radically different in their hopelessness and could be saved only through charitable giving*. In other words, to partake in the circuit of poverty capital, I needed to reinforce the savior narrative mentioned above.

Such conversations have made me less inclined to present my students' photographs and film footage, despite the fact that I consider them aesthetically dynamic and well worth sharing. When I do share these photographs I have been almost neurotically concerned with how those who view images may characterize my students or their communities.

As should have become clear from the earlier discussion, without the possibility of dialogic accompaniment, images and explanations are prone to static reification based on a priori knowledge of particular communities and may very well delimit the possibilities of dynamic engagement in future actions. This is why I prefer to show clips within particular learning spaces, where students, NGO personnel, or university scholars can understand, question, evaluate, and challenge the purposes for which these clips are deployed.

This, in turn, has led me to consider the affordance of a 'critical visual pedagogy', or the pedagogical approach one might take when presenting visual products to larger audiences. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2006[1968]) develops the concept of a critical pedagogy. Through dialogic engagement in which all individuals are considered participants in the construction of knowledge, the goal of a critical pedagogy is to become conscious of structures of power and one's position within these structures of power (*conscientização*), which in turn can allow for alternative, counterhegemonic forms of action. I apply these principles to the excavation and production of visual media, trying to draw awareness to the power inequalities inherent in visual representations and, in turn, seeking methods for counterhegemonic visual presentation. This has been a relatively underdeveloped aspect of critical pedagogy, which has focused on reading, writing, and speaking rather than the 'art–media–technology nexus' (Goldfarb, 2002: 3).

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In my pedagogic efforts, I build upon visual anthropology and participatory film methodology, a lineage marked by the films of Jean Rouch and developed in the works of Trinh Minh-ha, David MacDougall, Jay Ruby, Lucien Castings-Taylor, Sarah Pink, John L. Jackson, Jr, Roxanne Varzi, and Faye Ginsburg (to name a few). These media-making ethnographers have critically and explicitly engaged with the politics of the images ethnographers produce and consume, paying special attention to the power inequalities inherent in filmic data collection and the creation of visual products. I would like to extend such scholarship towards the question of how scholars might *present* such visual products in pedagogically salient ways, an emerging field in visual anthropology and developed in the works of Wilton Martinez and Joseph Tobin.

When I show my students' photographs, I am, like others who work within the development space, regularly presenting to audiences who are not from the community with whom I work. In most cases, my audiences have been part of an upper middle-class, English-speaking, digital public, whose position has placed them within the logic of poverty capital outlined above. In recognizing my pedagogic purpose as a challenge to grand narratives, like the end of poverty, I try to unpack the kinds of semiotic resources that audience members bring to their viewing of images like those presented by Tehelka and ActionAid. How do viewers 'see' images of children similar to those with whom I work? How might these ways of seeing be situated in broader narratives of poverty they have consumed? How might we de-construct these held assumptions regarding poverty and poverty alleviation?

Through discussion, we gather common characterizations – 'smiling', 'dilapidated', 'dirty', 'uneducated', 'poor', 'ignorant', 'rural child', 'government school' – and consider how and from where viewers have derived these notions. Which 'descriptors' come from the images presented, which come from a priori knowledge, and how do the two reinforce or challenge one another? The objective is to become aware of how visual meaning-making is not merely 'sensory', but has been constructed through both the previous exposure of those who are viewing *and* the intent of the images' producers (Martinez, 1992). Importantly, this initial excavation mitigates the effects of my own a priori and generalized assumptions of who my audience is or how they may understand images of poverty. Positioning the dialogue within the particularities of their understanding allows us to unpack the specific narratives that shape their uptake of images and to develop counter narratives in response to these held narratives.

While audience members are quick to connect the 'content' of images and films with their own meaning-making processes, they are less likely to see, at first glance, how the aesthetics associated with these images shape their uptake. Consumers of digital media have particular expectations of what and how poverty images should look, pertaining to lighting, proper framing of subjects, and narratological styles. Viewers who consume development-oriented

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imagery of poverty and suffering can be desensitized to the camera techniques and stylistic choices that produce one-dimensional portrayals of poverty and suffering. In turn, they are less likely to see how these images of poverty and suffering are constructed for a particular imagined audience (a middle-class, digital public) and towards a particular end (funding and mobilization). When these kinds of images have also been the primary method by which marginalized communities have been objectified, a critical appraisal of this way of seeing is imperative.

To make the end of poverty's particular aesthetic more obvious, I show images and films that have an alternative visual aesthetic, in which the camera's presence and the image's construction are both points of emphasis. Minh-ha (1991) writes regarding critical filmmaking that 'it understands the mutual dependence of realism and "artificiality" in the process of filmmaking. It recognizes the necessity of composing (on) life in living it or making it' (p. 39). Rather than 'hiding' the constructedness of the film in an attempt to create the illusion of authenticity, she argues that images rendered in new forms can force viewers to acknowledge their mediated visual experience and therefore critically engage with whom and how the footage has been created.

In Figure 1, a photograph taken by a student, the foreground of the image is blurry, a child moving just as the picture was taken. In the background, sitting contemplatively, is a member of the NGO that works in the school, and behind him one recognizes the outlines of a chalkboard with a few Kannada words and the torso of a girl wearing a blue *salwar kameez*.

When photographs like this are taken, with or without deliberation, the camera's mediation is obviated. With film, I take the technique further. Rather than having shots that are framed perfectly, I have students (and myself) take handheld video footage as they are participating in activities, which inevitably results in messy, constantly shifting clips for the viewer. The camera is no longer disembodied, but it moves with the human body and becomes a dynamic part of the depiction. One is aware of the camera at every turn. As students and community members go through everyday life, talking and joking, working in school and playing, the camera jostles, pans, shakes, stops, and starts. The technique makes interaction an emphasis of the films. The separation which was principally created by the still, 'objective' aesthetic of the ActionAid film is reversed, revealing three intersubjective links: that between the cameraperson and the film subject, that between the cameraperson and the viewer, and that between the film subject and the viewer. These types of links change how viewers uptake information and show how form and meaning constitute one another. Rather than reinforcing the notion of an 'Other' who is completely separate and different, pitiable in his or her poverty or destitution, these types of depictions show how people interact, share, and create.

The effect of these experiential films can be jarring and many viewers, both in the academic and NGO space, to whom I have shown these clips have commented on how 'amateurish' the shots seemed. These responses become

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Figure 1. Portrayal of an NGO member. Photo taken by a student.

the basis for a broader discussion regarding *how such value judgments are themselves a byproduct of a socialized way of seeing*, in which 'work that displays its own formal properties or its own constitution as work, is bound to upset one's sense of identity' (Minh-ha, 1991: 45). These filming techniques force the viewer to critically and self-reflexively (re)engage with the content of the footage that is shown. In juxtaposing these images and films with those associated with the end of poverty, viewers can see how particular visual choices have shaped their consumption of poverty and may begin to question the veracity and purpose of visual techniques that render communities as one-dimensional stand-ins for poverty. This critical (re)engagement is the beginning of a different way of understanding poverty and participating in the development space.

The almost hyper-sensitivity that anthropologists have to issues of consent, portrayal, and verifiability stems from a long history of social scientific scholarship which fetishized the 'primitive Other' associated with the Orient/postcolony and hid behind notions of the scholar as an authoritative 'observer' (Said, 1989). Ginsburg (1995) argues that the 'parallax effect' – research subjects returning the camera's gaze – makes transparency in visual representation vital as critical consciousness of media and its effects are no longer unidirectional. In this regard, she calls for 'mutual and reciprocal relativization, the idea that the diverse cultures placed in play should come to perceive the limitations of their own social and cultural perspective' (p. 64). This relativization must be a purposeful part of the filmmaking process and has particular implications for how viewers uptake visual information.

The photograph in Figure 2 was taken during a classroom session. In the shot, I am showing students footage that I have taken from my earlier

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Figure 2. Photograph of students and the author in a 9th standard classroom. Photo: Naveen Kumar.

visits to the school. Students eagerly crane their necks to get a better view of the screen while I try to find the next clip to show them. The computer rests upon one of the classroom desks and in the background we see the walls of the school building, a stairwell leading skyward, and the chalkboard with some words written in the left-hand corner.

The school building could easily be marked within the simplistic narration of poverty, powerlessness, and need that the 'end of poverty' discourse propagates. However, the students' own actions – how they are craning their necks to see, how focused they are on understanding what is on the computer screen – undermines any feeling of intellectual or emotional impoverishment. The fact that a fellow student has chosen to capture this particular image as a representation of his school community only amplifies this affect.

Moreover, when my student represents his lived environments – in this case his school – with pride rather than shame, *how* I characterize his environment also changes. I might consider, for example, that infrastructural 'decay' is not the basis for this community's definition of poverty and that the building itself may have beneficial attributes that should be considered when intervening in future infrastructure development projects. In this case, the large windows behind the student provide light and ventilation that most 'modern' school buildings in India do not. (This is also why I prefer spending time in this classroom.)

In the films that I make with students, I get them to capture 'processes-in-action'. What becomes clear in these films is the messy relationships, mutual learning, and misunderstandings that arise while intervening in such

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fieldsites. The viewer notices my struggle to communicate in Kannada, how unruly the class can be when using audiovisual equipment for the first time, and how I am clearly still learning about the local context.

But this is precisely the point: when displaying these processes on screen, the viewer gets information on how events played out and can therefore make informed decisions as to whether or not they should participate in a particular intervention. The more ethically significant aspect is that viewers see how much I need to learn while trying to become a participant in this research context. Seeing such processes in action forces viewers to think of development goals not just in terms of 'saving' or 'aiding' the desperate 'Other', but also in terms of learning and self-transformation.

Mutual self-relativization is heightened when viewers encounter my students' self-produced images. Working with African-American youth in New York City, Vasudevan (2006) shows how 'self-authoring practices' can be a method by which to complicate normative images of African-American adolescent boys. She develops a form of 'multimodal storytelling' based on both the 'plurality of knowledge … that constitutes our social relations' and the 'new kinds of spaces for storytelling and story listening' that digital technologies afford (p. 208). She shows how her participants manipulated the camera to create realities of their own, taking on narrative authority to reveal different dimensions of their personalities. Through their act of construction, they challenge negative portrayals of African-American boys that 'overwhelmingly narrate a "picture of pathology bordering on hopelessness"' (p. 207).

During my interactions in the field, students learn how to use audio, photo and video recorders, and create their own representations of their communities. In this case, I gave the students cameras and asked them to take photographs of their home lives. In Figure 3, a self-portrait, Naveen takes a photograph of his shadow, rich yellow-orange light streaming through a window just behind him, and the wall, presumably in his house, speckled with paint smears of both orange and white.

Naveen Kumar, a 9th standard student, authored the shot, deciding how, what, and where he wanted to shoot. In this sense, the photograph is a representation of his performance of Self in the world, 'self-authoring practices' connected to what he wants me, his initial viewer, to see. He is revealed only through his shadow, allowing him to hide from the camera's gaze while still marking his presence. He frames himself in the open window and clearly recognizes how the image's form relays a different version of his reality.

Naveen's depiction of home still includes the windows, the wall, and the paint smear. Yet, he draws the viewer's attention to his photographic skill, his silhouette, and the beauty of the sunlight through the window – all of which challenge one-dimensional portrayals of who he is, what he does, or how he feels. In his act of construction, Naveen provides a way of knowing that 'claims representational space outside the boundaries of the dominant discourses' (Vasudevan, 2006: 214). If dominant discourses about rural

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Figure 3. 'Self-Portrait'. Photo: Naveen Kumar.

children link poverty to ignorance to hopelessness, Naveen's image does anything but that: he makes meaning of his lifeworld from a vantage point not predetermined by the 'end of poverty'.

It is the aesthetic of this self-portrait that does the work of mutual and reciprocal relativization. Naveen 'sees' himself differently through the camera's lens, allowing him to create an aesthetic of his own facilitated by technology-mediated interaction. The viewer is able to recognize this conscious and intentional re-constitution of Self through image, which obviates Naveen's capacity for production and creation. The visual product, i.e. the image itself, serves to connect the viewer with the producer of the image in a shared recognition of Naveen's aesthetic sensibility. In turn, viewers can begin to reflect upon the limitations of their social and cultural perspectives on what a rural child should or can do.

But the knowledge that the picture has been taken by someone inside the community necessarily changes how the viewer views the image. Even if we do not know the exact meaning Naveen intends with the shot, the viewer is likely to ascribe 'local meanings' to the image. The walls, the sunlight, the paint, are all signifiers of how he makes sense of his home rather than how an outsider makes sense of his home. While this shift in viewing practice can open space for a richer understanding of community meaning-making, this does *not* mean that the representation is or should be construed as 'more authentic'. The uptake of this particular image is still mediated by my own selection and inclusion, and has been strategically placed to fit my own scholarly agenda, a fact I emphasize during my pedagogic engagements. In other words, interpretations of the image based on *who* takes the image, tell us as much about how

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we consume images – our politics, value judgments, and what we associate with authenticity and legitimacy – as about poverty or Naveen.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING POVERTY WITH THE VISUAL

In my contact with students, scholars, and NGO personnel, these aspects of the visual experience have been incredibly significant. It is not a question of whether we should help to alleviate poverty or not help alleviate poverty (either/or critiques that take us into practically useless space), but rather *why* we help. What does 'help' look like? Why do we want to help and what implicit messages might our humanitarian sensibilities reinforce? Rather than assuming a priori that communities need aid of a particular type, we can consider what type of assistance and how this assistance can be given. In sum, by using the image in the way I have described here, we can present the complexity of life-worlds and use these complexities to re-think discourses like the 'end of poverty' without losing the possibility for action.

I have argued that a pedagogic approach to visual presentation may allow for the ethical dissemination of photographs and films associated with traditionally marginalized populations, especially those affected by the images tied to poverty capital. However, my analysis only begins the theoretical discussion of how a critical visual pedagogy can facilitate awareness of the power relations that shape the uptake of images of marginalized communities. When showing visual data in pedagogic space, the choices remain complex and tenuous: should context be given before or after? Should context arise through discussion or before discussion? These questions can only be answered with specific reference to one's audiences and one's objectives. In the example with which I began, I used images strategically, knowing that I was speaking with government schoolteachers. With other communities – for example, an American or South African university audience – the images I use and the context I give have been quite different.

Such questions of pedagogic method have implications both for how viewers uptake information and on how we impact the communities we work with. A critical appraisal of what and how we choose to deploy our visual resources is what may keep us from reifying the same paradigms we seek to overturn.

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NOTE

1. The exposé can be found here: http://www.tehelka.com/independence-day-special-2013. Over 25 articles accompany the image, written by prominent members of the Indian cosmopolitan elite, including a majority from the NGO and private sector. One section is dedicated to philanthropic efforts suggested by Sunil Mittal (CEO of Bharthi enterprises), Rohini Nilekani (wife of Infosys Founder Nandan Nilekani), Ajay Piramal (one of India's 50 richest people) and Anu Aga (former chairperson of Thermax Ltd). The discourse accompanying the image intimates that the private sector, through both direct and indirect intervention, must resurrect a public education system in India that is currently failing and has left the most poverty-stricken without recourse.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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