Time in Kyrgyzstan

Robert McPherson

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Time in Kyrgyzstan

By Robert McPherson

This thesis is presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Communications Photomedia (Honours)

Faculty of Education and Arts
Edith Cowan University

November 2006
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

The topic of the exegesis is travel documentary photography. The exegesis is based on previous written academic work on travel documentary photography and it is related to my own experience when photographing the people and the landscapes of Kyrgyzstan. In the exegesis I argue that travel documentary photography is highly subjective and ambiguous. There is no such thing as a purely objective representation of the ‘Other’. Rather it is an illusion of objectivity that emerges through the eye of the photographer. In travel documentary photography I argue that we make the ‘Others’ seem less like us than they are because it is the difference that is interesting. Even though one wishes to photograph things just as they are one just cannot because travel documentary photography is much more complicated than this.

In addition, the exegesis looks at the concept of Orientalism. Orientalism is the key discourse in representing other cultures. Travel documentary photography mostly represents other cultures therefore the concept of Orientalism needs to be taken into account. It is what separates the East from West or as Stuart Hall (1992) calls it the ‘West’ from the ‘Rest’. In terms of my project, Kyrgyzstan could be viewed as the ‘Rest’ in Orientalising discourses. I then used Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism and argued that one cannot consider Kyrgyzstan as the ‘Rest’. The ‘Rest’ is a larger entity compared to the ‘West’ with different people and cultures that cannot be represented as one.

Furthermore, coming from the ‘West’ and documenting ‘Otherness’ complicates documentary work because of the tourist gaze and the fact that it is a one-way representation by the photographer. As a result, power relations and ethical issues arise which a documentary photographer needs to consider as part of the research. When photographing in Kyrgyzstan I tried to represent the northern parts of the country in as balanced a manner as possible, for example by not only photographing the exotic, but also modern parts of Kyrgyzstan in the capital.

Within the genre of travel documentary photography there are limited strategies of representing the ‘Other’. Stereotyped depictions include victims, villains or heroes. One may argue that the Kyrgyz people are victims of poverty, and are depicted as such in my photographic project, but as I experienced when traveling there people did not seem to be discontented because of this. Rather they seemed to be a people with dignity and pride, which I argue is also apparent in my photographs.

In the exegesis, I argue that travel documentary photography relies on what Muecke calls contingency, or unforeseen events. By contingency Muecke (2005) means what opportunities
that arise by accident, kismet. In other words, one cannot know how the photographs will turn out before one has actually been there. For example in Kyrgyzstan I never knew what people I would meet on the streets at the exact time I was there. What's more, even though I wished to represent Kyrgyzstan as a romantic/exotic place it didn't happen because not everything in Kyrgyzstan was romantic.
Declaration

I certify that this exegesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

It was the middle of a night in the security ward of a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane in Norway. The snow was drifting down outside, and a cold wind whistled in through the old windows from the early 19th century. I was on duty with four of my fellow employees, my alarm clipped to my pocket. I was ready for anything to happen. Some of our patients had committed murders so we were always on alert. Our job was to keep the hospital safe case some of the patients became violent during the night. Every night I hoped that nothing would happen, even though it sometimes did. However, this night it was quiet so my fellow workmates and I had time to chat in the living room.

It was then we started talking about photography. I mentioned that I was going to do an Honours degree in documentary photography in Australia, and that I wanted to travel somewhere most people had not been before. It was then that one of the guys I worked with mentioned Torbjørn Tandberg, a friend of his who at the time was organizing a photography trip to Kyrgyzstan. I knew straight away that this trip was exactly what I wanted to do. Then, at the security award, I began fantasizing images of the nomadic horsemen. Leaving the criminally insane for a trip to Kyrgyzstan seemed like the best experience one could ever imagine. So I called Torbjørn the day after and asked if I could come along. Because he’s a nice person, he said yes. I saw this as a great chance to combine theoretical work with my practical photography.

The topic of this exegesis is travel documentary photography. First I will give a political overview of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Then, I will examine Hamilton (1997), Ritchin (1997) and Nordeman’s (1997) arguments about representations of the ‘Other’ in regards to subjectivity and objectivity. I will then argue that documentary photography is highly subjective and ambiguous. Furthermore, the exegesis will look at Edward Said’s Orientalism. Travel documentary photography mostly represents other cultures; therefore the concept of Orientalism needs to be taken into account. After that I will discuss the power relationship between the
‘West’ and the ‘Other’ in regards to travel documentary photography. In addition, I will discuss the relationship between the tourist gaze and travel documentary photography, using John Urry’s theories. Furthermore, I will discuss the theory of contingency written about by Muecke (2006) and argue that travel documentary photography highly relies on unforeseen events and the opportunities that emerge as part of the flux of travel and the encounters that arise. Finally, I will give a brief summary with a reflection on the body of work I produced.
Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz

The republic of Kyrgyzstan is located at the north-eastern edge of Central Asia. It borders Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and China. Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country with lots of mineral deposits, and the fast flowing mountain rivers have enabled hydroelectric power to be developed. In the valley areas of Kyrgyzstan there is mostly agriculture, but livestock breeding is the traditional work of a Kyrgyz. Modern industrial centers are situated around the capital of Bishkek in the north of Kyrgyzstan and Osh in the southwest (Bohr, 1996, p.385).

The early history of the Kyrgyz people is complex and their origin uncertain. According to Denise Coleman (2006) most academics believe that they are a mixed people of Mongolian, Eastern Turkic and Kypchak descent with an identity formed slowly over the course of many centuries. Modern Kyrgyz language is a mixture of the original Turkic-speaking nomadic herdsmen and their Mongol conquerors. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the Kyrgyz people alternated between periods of tribal independence and foreign conquest. The Kalmyks in the late 17th century, the Manchus in the mid-18th century, and the Kokand Khanate in the first half of the 19th century overran them. Russian conquest of the Kyrgyz began in the mid-19th century, and by 1867 they were absorbed by the Russian empire. The Tsarist government did not recognize the Kyrgyz as a separate national entity or political unit. In other words, Kyrgyzstan became a major area of Russian colonization with Russians and other Slavs given the best land to settle, reducing the extent of grazing lands available for the Kyrgyz nomads considerably. As a result there were bloody oppositions movements against the Russian empire, but the Russian empire was too strong so thousands of Kyrgyz fled with their flocks to Afghanistan, the Pamirs and China (Coleman, 2006, p.7).

Kyrgyzstan in the Soviet Period

In the mid 1920s the Soviet government softened its former colonial policy. The Soviet Administration permitted traditional Kyrgyz culture to flourish, promoted the creation of native leadership and slowed the influx of Slavs into the region. During the 1930s these polices were
replaced by Stalin’s plan of forced de-nomadization and collectivization. Furthermore his program of Russification replaced Kyrgyz intelligentsia and leadership with an ideologically acceptable Stalinist elite. Some Kyrgyz protested by slaughtering their herds or driving them into China, but by 1933, nearly 67 percent of the nomads were collectivized, the Kyrgyz intelligentsia was removed, and the Kyrgyz political cadres were taken away. Despite the unrest, the Kyrgyz were eventually able to achieve some industrialization, a higher standard of living, higher education and an increase in population. However, they continued to be one of the least urbanized major nationalities in the Soviet Union (Coleman, 2006, p. 8).

**From Perestroika to independence**

After the new reforms made by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, the Kyrgyz people were allowed to form several different political parties. As a result of this the political party Democratic Kyrgyzstan successfully put pressure on the republican Supreme Soviet to elect reform-minded Askar Akaev over the reactionary Masaliev to Kyrgyzstan’s first presidency. In December 1990, Askar Akaev renamed the country, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. The attempted coup launched by hard-line communists against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991 encouraged a showdown between Akaev and Kyrgyzstan’s own conservative forces in a scenario similar to that played out by Boris Yeltsin in Moscow. Akaev went to war against the Communist Parties and within twenty-four hours of the coup’s resolution he had put most of Kyrgyzstan’s Communist Party leaders under house arrest, and within a few days he had banned all political party organizations from operating in state organs. On 31 August 1991, Kyrgyzstan banned the Communist Party and declared itself an independent state (Bohr, 1996, p. 392).

**Kyrgyzstan after the Soviet Period**

After the country had been under Russian rule over several decades there was a strong need for Kyrgyz people to re-establish national traditions. Consequently the Republic of Kyrgyzstan argued that Kyrgyzstan was their ‘national home’ and therefore belonged to them. The Kyrgyz people have demanded that they should have priority over other ethnic groups. As a result of this, many Russians who still live in Kyrgyzstan feel that their human rights have been violated
because they must now learn Kyrgyz to keep their jobs in the public sector and that they do not enjoy the cultural advantages as their kinsmen in Russia. Instead of going to battle with nationalist forces, many Russians have chosen to emigrate back to Russia. Lots of Germans, Uzbeks and Dungans have chosen the same path leaving the country with acute shortages of trained workers in the construction, machine building, electronics, defense and cotton growing sectors during the crucial transition period to a market economy (Bohr, 1996, p. 392). The small nation has also experienced several earthquakes and landslides that have contributed to the economic decline and in 1993 Commonwealth of Independent States stated that Kyrgyzstan had the poorest economic performance, in competition with Tajikistan and Armenia (Bohr, 1996, p.400).

Moreover, after Kyrgyzstan became independent, they have had many conflicts with their borders, especially with Uzbekistan where there have been inter-ethnic violence between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The most seriously outbreak of civil unrest in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history took place in June 1990 in Osh Oblast on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, leaving more than three hundred dead and several hundred injured. The fighting broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks after some Kyrgyz were given housing plots and the Uzbeks received none. However, although the initial violence was impulsive to the distribution of land, the roots of the conflict go much deeper. When the Fergana Valley was carved up in 1924 and divided among Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, large numbers of each ethnic group were left outside their original republics. The relatively recent population growth in the region and the consequent shortage of jobs, land, and other resources have created frictions between the ethnic Kyrgyz. According to Annette Bohr (1996) ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan feel that their rights are being infringed by the dominant nationality (p. 396). Even the former USSR did not solve this problem.

**The Tulip Revolution**

President Askar Akayev sat in power of Kyrgyzstan for 15 years until March 2005 when he had to flee the country following a mass assault by protesters on the presidential compound in the
capital city of Bishkek. Over the previous years, Akayev took more and more control of the country because of the ongoing decline in the economy. People who once approved of the Akayev regime began disliking it, claiming that the presidential power recorded violations of the freedom of association, as well as reducing the freedom of speech. In the previous presidential election in year 2000 when president Askar Akayev was re-elected as the president for five new years, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) verified that they were critical of the fairness of the process. Apparently the main opposition party, the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK) were not allowed to participate in the election by a local judge. However, DMK’s leader Felix Kulov, was allowed to run for a People’s Assembly seat as an individual. In other words, the election was highly corrupted. Lots of people demonstrated violently in the subsequent years. Some were killed and others arrested by the police, resulting in a national protest, which saw Akayev fleeing the country. After Askar Akayev was sent into exile, opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiev took over the role as the new president of Kyrgyzstan. Bakiev was born in the south-western Jalalabad and he was also the governor of Jalalabad where the March 2005 protests began.

Religion

Islam came late to the Kyrgyz people. It was first introduced in the south of Kyrgyzstan in the late sixteenth century. However, in northern Kyrgyzstan it was first introduced in the early eighteenth century. As a result Islam plays a less direct role in the lives of the Kyrgyz nomads in northern Kyrgyzstan. In other words, they are superficially Islamicised, while religious feeling in Osh Oblast and the western part of Naryn Oblast, where the majority of Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbek population live, is considerably stronger.

Terrorism

Because of all the mountains in Kyrgyzstan it is an easy country to enter. As a result of this the crime rate in Kyrgyzstan is high. According to former president Akayev in 2005, “southern Kyrgyzstan has become one of the most vulnerable spots for penetration of international terrorism, religious extremism and separatism”(Coleman, 2006, p. 31). Regional-based Islamic
militant organizations are a continuous threat to Kyrgyzstan's security. In relation to Al-Qaida, two of its allied organizations have a significant presence in Central Asia: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement. Both of these organizations have showed an eagerness to perpetrate attacks inside Kyrgyzstan. Another terrorist organization, Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islami has also caught the awareness of the United States government as a possible vehicle of terrorist violence in the region. According to Denise Coleman (2006), IMU seeks to conquer the Uzbek Government and replace it with an Islamic regime. In addition to Al-Qaida, IMU is also anti-western. In 1999 IMU was linked to several terrorist incidents in Kyrgyzstan, including the abduction of four US climbers and the 2000 abduction of four Japanese geologists and eight Kyrgyz soldiers. The Kyrgyz Government also interrupted a plot against bombing the United States embassy in Kyrgyzstan and a nearby hotel in 2003. There are also other terrorist organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan which are anti-western which makes Kyrgyzstan a significant Central Asian partner to the U.S in the war against terrorism. At the moment U.S have a military base on the airport in Bishkek the capital of Kyrgyzstan which accommodate 3000 troops and other necessary personnel.

Crime

Not only does Kyrgyzstan have the problem with terrorism, but also drug-trafficking and illegal-immigration. In Kyrgyzstan a large amount of illegal cannabis and opium is cultivated. Most illegal drugs are transported to neighboring countries. In 2002 the Norwegian Magnum photographer, Jonas Bendiksen photographed the drug trade in Kyrgyzstan. For my project I did not focus on this problem. However, poverty is a social problem in Northern Kyrgyzstan and apparent in my photographs. Jonas Bendiksen has mostly photographed the regions of Kyrgyzstan where modern industrialization has made its impact, whereas my work is mostly focusing on the people of Kyrgyzstan who live outside modern civilization.

In conclusion, from my own experience in the northern region of Kyrgyzstan the country today seems stable, but still struggles with poverty. According to Denise Coleman (2006), the country still struggles against corruption and terrorism. Forty percent of the population still lives below
the poverty line. There are still inter-ethnic conflicts between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in the south of Kyrgyzstan. To improve the economic situation in Kyrgyzstan, Bakiev, the president of Kyrgyzstan, is steering the country towards the development of tourism, hydro-electric and mining industries. Whether it will improve economical situation is still yet to be seen.
Travel documentary photography

By comparing my work with Jonas Bendiksen's, it is obvious that travel documentary photography has its representational difficulties. What counts as the truth of a story told by a travel documentary photographer all depends on what the photographer aims to focus on and what they experience when going to the country. Peter Hamilton (1997), states that documentary photography has claimed to be purely objective. However, he argues that there is no such thing as a purely objective photographic representation. It is much more complicated than this. Hamilton asserts that the idea of objective representation was based in early discourses on photography that stressed the camera's 'infallibility' over human perception and saw the mechanical reproductive nature of the camera as the 'true and exact' rendition of the subject. "This in turn gave legitimacy to the notion of the photographic document as proof or truth, so that the object portrayed by the lens was simply what is was, a person, a glass or a building" (Hamilton, 1997, p.83).

By contrast, Hamilton argues that the information we receive from an image is a mixed composition between the photographer and what there is to be seen in the photograph. The photographer's ability to choose what he/she wants to photograph and how he/she wants to photograph the object in the frame, makes his or her work highly subjective and, importantly, gives him/her a lot of power in how he/she chooses to represent his/her subjects. In other words, documentary photography can be ambiguous in regards to revealing the 'truth' about the 'Other' (cited in Hamilton, 1997, p.83). This is the case in regards to documentary photography where photojournalists or reportage photographers travel far away from the Western World to record the 'uncivilized'. They then have power to claim what is true, because most other Westerners have not been there themselves.

While Hamilton argues that documentary work reveals an ambiguous 'truth', Fulton argues that photographs do reveal some kind of 'truth'. He argues "the representations that the photographer produces are related to his or her personal interpretations of the events and
subjects which he or she chooses to place in front of the camera lens" (cited in Hamilton, 1997 p. 85). In other words, the photographer allows viewers to see some kind of 'truth value' and get some insight into what has been experienced or depicted in photographs. However, what needs to be remembered is that what the photographer depicts in the photographs is still a subjective representation. According to Hamilton, there is a double process of construction at work here: first the creation by the photographer, who frames and chooses the subjects he takes. Then there is the second process of construction where the editors in the magazines and newspapers choose the photographs. The editors use textual information and captions to reveal new meaning to the photographs or add meanings they are looking for.

Fred Ritchin, former picture editor of the New York Times, likewise agrees with Hamilton. Ritchin (1997, p. 269) claims that any photograph is an interpretation of events and is essentially ambiguous, relying on captions, headlines, and other contextualizing text, as well as the way it is placed on the page by the designer, for much of its meaning. Ritchin says that any photographer or editor who makes the statement that “the camera never lies” is lying (Ritchin, 1997, p. 269). He explains that the camera can make very different statements about what is depicted according to, and among other factors, the photographer’s choice of framing, the combination of pictorial elements, and the precise moment when the shutter is released (Ritchin, 1997, p. 269). Ritchin says that photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, the great French champion of the ‘decisive moment’, considers photojournalism/documentary work to be no less than keeping a journal with a camera, a diary of the photographer’s subjective experiences. Rather than primarily trusting the camera as a mechanical, objective recording device, one must consider the photographer as the author of the image, just as the director is the ultimate author of a film (Ritchin, 1997, p. 269).

Landon Nordeman (1997) in the same way argues that the camera is merely a tool, like a pen or a paintbrush, and it too, expresses the intentions of its possessor. In other words, there is an inherent problem with any type of documentary that you read because it is transmitted to you via an author. Nordeman then asks himself, how can one judge the ‘realness’ of what one is
observing, as compared to what a researcher last observed? He says that an answer to this may be that you must sacrifice your desire to know all the facts, and make a judgment on the truthfulness of the facts that you are given.

Furthermore, Nordeman argues that although we know that the photographer is not a mere objective recorder, but a subjective evaluator, we still trust that the camera does not lie. In other words, he argues that the camera is capable of two capacities at the same time: it can objectify reality and subjectify it, and it is in this dual function that the value of using photography as a research method lies. In other words, he says that it is necessary to remember, that although the photographer’s evidence may be declared rightful, it has already been selected by the photographer as such. That is, that the photographer has ultimate consent to edit his own images. There is no rule that says all photographs must be viewed with every other photograph taken in that same sequence. (Nordeman, 1997, p.2).

By comparing Nordeman, Hamilton and Ritchin’s arguments about subjectivity and objectivity in relation to documentary photography, it is clearly evident that documentary photography is highly subjective and ambiguous. Whether one believes what one can see or not is up to the viewer to judge and this is the power of travel documentary photography. In regards to my own project, one can argue that it is a subjective representation in relation to what I experienced in Kyrgyzstan. Coming from the ‘West’ to document and speak for another culture has its epistemological problems that those who employ Orientalist discourses seem to ignore.
Orientalism

Before we look at travel documentary photography in detail, one needs to discuss the concept of Orientalism, and later, the power relations inherent in photographing the 'Other'. According to Edward Said (1994), Orientalism is the key discourse in representing other cultures. Travel documentary photography mostly represent other cultures therefore the concept of Orientalism needs to be taken into account. Orientalism divides the globe between the East and West. Stuart Hall (1992, p. 279) calls this discourse, or system of representation, 'the West and the Rest'. In relation to my project, Kyrgyzstan is seen as the 'Rest' in Orientalising discourses.

According to Said (1994), the discourse of Orientalism is a way of illustrating how the 'West' has institutionalized our understanding of the 'Rest'. Said argues that this way of knowing the 'Rest' effectively shows the link between knowledge and power because it 'constructs' and dominates the 'Rest' in the process of knowing them. In regards to images and media there are a circulation of different discourses in how the 'Rest' is represented. A common phenomenon is to represent the 'Orient' as exotic, erotic and romantic or dirty and poor. In other words, according to Said, Orientalism is a strategy of dominating the Oriental world. The 'West' create and portray the 'reality' of the 'Rest', given that they are not allowed to speak for themselves.

According to Bill Aschcroft, "the essence of Said's argument is that to know something is to have power over it, and conversely, to have power is to be able to know the world in your own terms" (Aschcroft, 1999, p. 83). Furthermore, Ashcroft explains that although this 'something' is a whole region of the world, including lots of different ethnicities, nationalities, and languages, everything goes under the name 'the Orient'. The discourse of Orientalism becomes the frame within which the 'West' knows the 'Rest', and this way of controlling and understanding the 'Rest' is still evident today (Aschcroft, 1999, p. 83). An example of this could be how many people from the West label all Arabs as terrorists.
Moreover, another point that needs to be taken into account by Orientalism is the charged level of bias against the people they study. Bernard Lewis (1993) argues that “no one can deny that scholars, like other human beings, are liable to some kind of bias, more often for, rather than against, the subject of their study” (Lewis, 1993, p. 118). Furthermore he says that the important difference is between those who recognize their bias and try to correct it and those who don’t. In relation to my project in Kyrgyzstan, the photographs have been biased in the sense that I went there as a tourist coming from the ‘West’. Orientalist’s believe that Kyrgyzstan is part of the ‘Rest’, but one cannot consider Kyrgyzstan as the ‘Rest’. The ‘Rest’ is a larger entity compared to the ‘West’ with different people and cultures that cannot be represented as one. In relation to my documentary work I have tried to represent the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan in as balanced a manner as possible, for example by not only photographing the exotic, but also modern parts of Kyrgyzstan in the capital.
Power Relations

To give a photographer the opportunity to represent another foreign culture one cannot ignore the power involved. In relation to that I am a Westerner who traveled to the majority world to photograph indigenous ‘other-ness’. It is important to note that it is mostly Westerners, the ‘superiors’, who take pictures of these ‘premodern’ people. In other words, there is an ongoing imbalanced power relationship between the photographer and the ‘other’. The subjects in the photographs are represented as ‘objects’ or ‘types’. Authors who discuss this power relationship are Neubauer, Hamilton, Sturken and Cartwright, and Hall. As Neubauer states, most travel documentary photographers come from the Western World and document the ‘premodern’, and these ‘premodern’ people are represented in limited ways such as victims, villains or heroes. In other words, the Western photographer has much power because they can choose what and how they want to photograph the people and landscapes. According to Stuart Hall,

the term ‘Western’ is used to describe a society: that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist secular and modern. The term West or Western is not a position in geography but a position of cultural, economic and political power

(Hall, 1992, p. 62).

Neubauer informs that most travel documentary photographers come from the Western World and there are hardly any non-western people who take pictures of the Western World, mainly because the economic situations in these countries make it difficult or impossible for these people to travel other places (Neubauer, 1997, p. 67). For example in Kyrgyzstan most people cannot afford to travel outside their country. Furthermore, Neubauer argues that travel documentary work is a one-way representation of the ‘Other’ and the only representation the rest of the western world gets to see. This relationship makes the photographers very powerful because it is through their images that the western world understands the ‘other’ world (Neubauer, 1997,p.67).

Howard Becker (cited in Cross, 1988) claims that this power is of great concern because most ethical questions arise after the fact that the pictures have been taken. Howard Becker claims that the possibilities the photographers have to edit, frame and use lighting can make their work
highly unethical. He argues that objectivity is a myth with consequences (Cross, 1988, p. 3). To illustrate this in regards to travel documentary photography, Neubauer states that the ‘other’ usually does not have anything to say in regards to how they are being represented by the photographers. The photographer is in charge and the camera gives him/her the opportunity to show them as victims, villains or heroes.

Martin Jolly (1991) disagrees with Howard Becker and argues that photographic documentary work can be ethical. He talks about a photojournalist named Ken Jarecke. Ken Jarecke was photographing for the American military during the Gulf War. The photojournalists during the Gulf War were strictly controlled by the Military. They were not allowed to take pictures of real battle; instead they had to take pictures of the American soldiers training. Ken Jarecke photographed what they were not supposed to photograph, which was an Iraqi soldier killed in a truck. He was asked why he took the photo and he answered that if he did not, it would have been a distortion of ‘reality’ (Jolly, 1991, p. 71). In other words, his work became ethical because it represented the true consequences of war and not only what the American Military wanted him to show from the training.

Comparing Howard Becker’s statement with Martin Jolly’s, I argue that photographic documentary work can be ethical. It is an effective method of telling several sides of a story, but the strategies are limited. In regards to my own project when I photographed people in Kyrgyzstan I asked for permission, either with body language or through my translators. Not only did I photograph ‘premodern’ nomads, but also the modern aspects of Kyrgyzstan, such as cars, people with western clothing, modern buildings and tourism. By documenting my experience in Kyrgyzstan in this way one can argue that my treatment of both the content and my photographic subjects is ethical to some degree. In arguing that my work is ethical, I acknowledge there will always be some kind of ethical issues in representing ‘Otherness’ through photographs.
The Tourist Gaze

Traveling as a tourist has complications in relation to travel documentary photography. According to John Urry (2002) people go traveling to experience what is not considered normal everyday life. Parts of these experiences involve a gaze or a view of different scenes, for example landscapes, townscapes and people out of the ordinary. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter and photograph it. Furthermore, there is no single tourist gaze. It changes by society, by social group and by historical period (Urry, 2002, p.1). In regards to travel documentary photography, one can argue that the pictures taken by photographers are what grabs their eye in relation to what they find interesting to photograph. In return, what comes out of the photographs is what the tourist/photographer felt was interesting at the time. This again reflects what the photographer felt was out of the ordinary from his or her normal life, and which will bias the representation.

Magnum photographer, Steve McCurry, verifies this by saying that when he photographs people in other countries, he is more or less in the moment, experiencing what is around him. He says that his mind is free and that he photographs what grabs his eye (Curry, 2006, [podcast]. In other words, he photographs what fascinates him, and coming from the ‘Western World’ makes him a tourist when traveling to the ‘Oriental World’ which will affect how he chooses to represent what he is documentig.

Furthermore, Urry argues that “the gaze is made up of signs and tourism involves the collection of signs” (Urry, 2002, p. 3). When tourists see two people kissing in Paris what they capture in the gaze is ‘timeless romantic Paris’. When antique buildings of the colosseum is seen in Rome, what they gaze upon is the ‘real old history of the Roman empire’. As Culler states “the tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself... All over the world the unsung armies of semioticians, the tourists, are fanning out in search for signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes and typical American throughways” (cited in, Urry, 2002, p.3). In relation to my project in Kyrgyzstan one may argue that I was looking for exemplary Oriental
scenes because I went there as a tourist; however, I did not only photograph exemplary Oriental
scenes.

O’Shaughnessy (2002) uses Freud’s theory of projections to describe this phenomena of the
White/non white relationship. He argues that what we see in the world and other places are
projections of repressed features of our own personalities, our own psyches (O’Shaughnessy, p.
282). Jung (1973) proposes that we project this repressed side of our psyche onto other people,
such as the ‘Other’. One may argue then that the best way of representing the ‘Other’ is by
giving them a camera and letting them photograph themselves, but for a travel documentary
photographer this looses its point because you are a photographer who wants to take the pictures
yourself.

According to Hall (1992) the ethnic ‘Other’ is commonly represented in the western world
according to a narrow-minded range of binaries: friendly-hostile, innocent-depraved, noble-
ignoble. In regards to travel documentary photography, a common phenomena is to look for the
‘noble savage’, which is seen by Westerners as exotic and romantic. Hendrik Neubauer (1997)
introduces us to a history of photojournalism/documentary photography as it was produced by
the Black Star Agency. He explains that during the colonization of Africa and Asia by the
‘white master race’ at the end of the nineteenth century, white male photographers began
hunting with their cameras. Through their viewfinder they were hunting for the ‘noble savage’
and this is still evident today (Neubauer, 1997, p.66). This because there is a huge market for it
(Clark, 2004).

According to O’Shaughnessy,

the noble savage draws on European ideas established by Rousseau and
developed by American thinkers such as Thoreau, eighteenth- and- nineteenth
century thinkers respectively. These writers saw civilization as corrupted and
unnatural


They thought that people living outside European civilization were pure and noble because of
their relationship to nature and their distance from Western civilization. Non-Europeans who
then live in these conditions are thought to have a higher morality by the Westerners. O’Shaughnessy states that “the ‘noble savage’ stereotype draws on Christian traditions in that it sees the uncivilized state as similar to the state of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden” (O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p.273). According to O’Shaughnessy this is an example of eurocentrism, where non-White cultures are understood in terms of White belief, religion and mythologies and it shows the way European cultures project their own beliefs and values onto other cultures (O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p.274).

While this stereotype portrays non-Whites as morally superior to Whites, it is still limiting in that it locks non-Whites into a predetermined mould, denying them their own histories …and portraying them as incapable of change (O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p.274).

Sturken and Cartwright (2001) state that the subjects of these photographs are not named as individuals; rather they are identified as a particular category of ‘types’. The photograph is thus a central tool in establishing difference. Throughout the history of representation and language, binary oppositions, such as man/woman, masculine/feminine, white/black have been used to organize meaning, and Sturken and Cartwright believe that we know what culture is because we can identify its opposite nature, thus difference is essential to its meaning (Sturken&Cartwright, 2001, p. 104), and that is why we take pictures of the ‘Other’.

According to Hendrik Neubauer (1997) westerners saw the indigenous ‘Others’ ways of living as exotic and close to nature. This closeness to nature was seen as a big difference from the ways of living in the Western World, and it aroused curiosity and attention among the westerners. According to Neubauer, Edward C. Curtis, a documentary photographer, photographed the North American Indians in the beginning of the 20th century. The North American Indians were a dying culture because the new American lifestyle was taking over. Edward Curtis photographed the last relics of the dying culture. However, what is important here is that he saw it as a taboo to represent any signs of modern civilization in his photographs (Neubauer, 1997, p.66). In other words, he represented the ‘Other’ as ‘premodern’ even though the American Indians had become more modern and civilized (in Western terms). In regards to
my own project I have not chosen this approach. Rather I have photographed both the ‘modern’ and the ‘premodern’ in Kyrgyzstan.

This way of photographing the ‘Other’ as purely ‘uncivilized’ or romantic is still evident today. However, the difference today compared to hundred years ago is that it is harder to find the ‘premodern’. During the 1930s photo agencies emerged to help photographers sell their images, such as Black Star, and Magnum and they are still operating today. Their photographers are still traveling around the world searching for the ‘premodern’ and new ways of telling stories through their photographs. Neubauer says that these photographers have created what we today call photojournalism/documentary work. Through their work over the past seventy years they have developed a particular style representing ‘Other-ness’.

So a common phenomena in travel documentary photography is that the photographers are white westerners and they find it interesting to photograph people who are not urbanized. In other words, the photographic subjects are people who still have a premodern lifestyle compared to Westerners. Travel documentary photographers overlook modern civilization in their photographs, “portraying ‘the other’ as incapable of change or locating the subjects in an eternal past” (Neubauer, 1997, p. 166). However, for my project I have chosen not to represent the Kyrgyz people as incapable of change. This is a more valid representation of what Kyrgyzstan is like today in the northern parts of the country.

According to Muecke (cited in Leslie, 1993, p. 82) there are three dominant discourses in representation of the ‘Other’. These are: the Romantic, the Racist and the Anthropological. According to Peterson (cited in Leslie, 1993, p. 83) “romanticism is identified as the dominant mode of photographic practice of anthropological subjects resolving contradictory feelings towards other cultures by transforming them into aesthetic phenomena and in so doing decontextualising them and distancing them”. In regards to my own project the representation of the ‘Other’ has explored the discourses of romanticism in some parts of my project, however, it has also demonstrated that not everything in Kyrgyzstan is exotic and romantic.
As mentioned earlier, Magnum photographer Jonas Bendiksen documented the drug trafficking in Kyrgyzstan, which is a large problem in the country today. For my project I chose not to focus on this. Rather I focused on documenting what the northern parts of Kyrgyzstan were like. Drug trafficking is not evident in my project because it is not what I was interested in documenting. However, the struggle against poverty is evident. As Muecke identified earlier, the conventional strategies for photographing Others is to cast them as victims, villains or heroes. In relation to my project one may argue that the people in the photographs are victims of poverty, but as I experienced when traveling there, the people did not seem to be discontented because of this. I saw no Kyrgyz people in the northern parts of the country who were begging for money. They seemed to be a people with dignity and pride, which I argue is apparent in my photographs.

Furthermore, Muecke (2006) argues that there is a constant problem for both writers and photographers in representing Others just as they are. He says that “at the simplest, the problem is one of representation: when we write about the ‘Others’, or take pictures of them, do we make them seem more like us than they are, or less?” (Muecke, 2006, p. 10). I argue that we make them seem less like us because it is the difference that is interesting, but Mueke argues that even though photographers wish to photograph people just as they are you just cannot, because it is much more complicated than this.

According to Muecke even a ‘simple’ photograph of someone entails the following:

[someone] who has the means to take it (owning a camera), how the image is composed according to cultural conventions (‘realistic’, posed as portraiture), what gets included in the frame, has the subject given permission or has it been asked for, is the photo part of a social exchange or contract to do with friendship or love, does the subject want to be paid or are they expecting to see the results, how will the photograph be published or will it be kept as a private souvenir, and so on

(Muecke, 2006, p. 10).
To sum up Muecke's argument, it seems to me that the main point is that one cannot know what a place or culture is like before one has been there, and what one experiences while there will be reflected in what the photographer represents in his or her photographs.

Before I traveled to Kyrgyzstan, when I was considering my photographic approach I wished to represent the Kyrgyz people and landscapes in a romantic way: The vision I projected from the insane asylum in the heart of Norwegian winter- a longing for something different, something exotic. Not everything turned out to be romantic. The contingency of traveling in Kyrgyzstan left that projected desire unfulfilled. It is just what Muecke argued, that one cannot know how the photographs will turn out before one has actually been there. Muecke therefore suggests that travel documentary photography relies on contingency. By contingency, he means what opportunities that arise by accident or kismet. For example in Kyrgyzstan I never knew what people I would meet on the streets at that exact time I was there. In other words, contingency could be explained as the unforeseen event, that plays a large role in travel documentary photography.
My work in Kyrgyzstan

When I went to Kyrgyzstan I did not know what to expect. The government of Australia did not recommend that tourists travel there because of a high terror alert. However, after what I experienced while traveling there it seemed safe. The people I met there were always friendly and welcoming. Over the two weeks I stayed there, there were hardly any who refused to be photographed; rather it seemed like they were proud of being photographed.

The first two days we stayed in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. We stayed in old buildings from the Soviet period rather than nice western influenced hotels. The local girls told us that they still didn’t have a cinema in the country. When traveling outside the capital around Issyk-Kul we slept in nomadic yurt tents with the local people. It was an amazing experience being 3500 meters above sea level photographing nomads who had hardly ever seen a camera before. Their way of living was so ‘premodern’ that you would not believe it still existed. The nomads were proud of their horse milk and insisted that we had to taste. They called their horse milk ‘kumus’, and off course I tried it as it would be an insult if I didn’t.

We were eleven photographers traveling together with two Russian translators. For transport we used two minibuses with local drivers. The local drivers took us for a ride I will never forget. They drove on the wrong side of the road to avoid bumps on the road, but on their way back they drove on the wrong side as well making the clever driving pointless. When we drove up the mountains to meet the nomads it was in the middle of the night. There were no lights on the road and it was scarily thin. Looking out through my window it was 2000 meters straight down making it an experience I will never forget. In overall, the trip was successful with lots of new impressions that will stick to me forever.

In regards to the aesthetic approach I made while photographing in Kyrgyzstan, I always used a wide-angle lens. First of all because a wide angle lens is excellent for documentary photography. The wide-angle lens gives you more information about what one chooses to
photograph, and it also forces the photographer to get in close. Secondly, Magnum photographers who are known as the top documentary photographers in the world always use wide-angle lenses; therefore they have influenced me to use the same approach. However, I also used a polarizing filter to increase the contrast and colors in my photographs to make them look more romantic.

Furthermore, by using a wide-angle lens it makes my work more intimate. To take a portrait of a person demands close distance between the subject and the photographer, making my work personal. I used the wide-angle lens to create intimacy between me the photographer and the people in Kyrgyzstan. By using the wide-angle lens it created an awareness of the presence of the photographer on the scene, which was what I was aiming after, hence avoiding a voyeuristic gaze. Moreover, I did not use pictures of my self in the project for this reason, because the wide-angle created enough intimacy and visualized my experience of being there, even though I was not in the shot in any of the pictures in the book ‘Time in Kyrgyzstan’.
Reflection on my project

When I was working back home in Norway at Lier psychiatric hospital I imaged Kyrgyzstan to be a romantic place, where people and nature still lived side by side, untouched by the western world, and it was this that I was interested in photographing when going there. My aim was to represent Kyrgyzstan as a romantic place that would put the Kyrgyz people in an eternal past, but after reading and working on my research on travel documentary photography I have found out that this is not the way to document other cultures. Rather one should document both the premodern and the modern. By doing this one can also see how cultures change within the influence of the ‘West’. Furthermore, it is more ethical than only representing them in an eternal past.

Researching travel documentary photography before I went to Kyrgyzstan has also made me a more reflexive practitioner as a travel documentary photographer. I became aware of the ethical issues and power relations that a travel documentary photographer needs to consider as part of the research. Moreover the photographer needs to acknowledge the fact that there are several ways of representing another culture through the use of photographs, and that one needs to admit the cultural baggage that one takes with one, such as romantic views of the ‘Other’.
References


