

Photographing African Social Worlds: Production and Circulation of Visual Representations

This issue aims to critically examine, through the use of documentary photography in Africa, the visual representations of the social world produced and disseminated by researchers and photographers working together or independently. It aims to focus on the multiple influences that contribute to the construction and evolution of such visual representations, on the one hand, and on the circulation of individuals, norms and images, on the other. The contributions will be part of a more global reflection on the use of photographs as sources for research in social science and about Africa. They will be grounded upon in-depth case studies and will present the authors' approach in the field and show the photographs produced.

Special Issue Coordinators

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Production Timeline

The Coordinators invite researchers and/or photographers to submit an article proposal, in French or in English (3,000 to 5,000 characters), related to the theme of this call and in keeping with the editorial line of the journal. The proposals should present the body of material central to the article, describe it, and provide contextual elements related to the discipline and the research question. They should indicate the possibilities (or constraints) and conditions of their online distribution.

- June 30, 2021: submission of the proposals. They should consist of a 20-line abstract with a provisional title. Kindly include the author's name(s), contact details (e-mail address notably) and affiliations
- July 15, 2021: response to the authors (acceptance or refusal)
- October 30, 2021: submission of the full article
- February 2022: sending a peer-review report to the authors
- June 30, 2022: submission of the final version of the article

2023: publication of the issue Article proposals should be sent via e-mail to the following e-mail addresses:



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Please make sure that your article conforms to the editorial line and standards:

<https://www.sources-journal.org/162>; <https://www.sources-journal.org/382>

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Presentation

This special issue aims to critically examine, through the use of documentary photography, the visual representations of the social world produced and disseminated by researchers and photographers working together or independently. We posit that the representation of African social worlds through images is the result of what Bourdieu calls the “fields of the photographable” (*aires du photographiable* in the French original). These various fields are made of “implicit models which may be understood via photographic practice and its product, because they objectively determine the meanings a group confers upon the photographic act as the ontological choice of an object which is perceived as worthy of being photographed, which is captured, stored, communicated, shown and admired” (Bourdieu 1990, 6). The “field of the photographable,” therefore, concerns what is identified as worthy of interest—that is, worthy of being photographed and then shown. It also dictates how the subject should be treated (selection, composition, staging). Yet, we propose to distance from these schemas of representation of the social world through images as objectively determined by the norms of an identifiable and defined group. Rather, we aim to focus on the multiplicity of influences that contribute to their construction and their evolution, and on the circulation of the individuals, the norms and the images themselves—which all contribute to their plasticity. This reformulated understanding of the field of the photographable promotes an approach that is more sensitive to the experience of individuals (Kushtanina and Perrin-Joly 2020, 39), the actors’ reflexivity (Beck 2001; Giddens 1994) as well as their capacity for action.

This special issue invites contributors to explore and analyse the different elements of scientific and photographic approaches that inform their visual representations of African Social Worlds. Thus far, this question has not been much investigated, being mainly addressed in visual sociology in a segmented manner, that is, according to types of interaction: for example, between the one who takes the photograph and the one who is its subject (Meyer 2013), or between photographers, urban planners and researchers (Cuny, Jarrigeon, and Färber 2020). For this call for articles that questions the production, use and dissemination of photography about Africa in social science research¹, photographs may be used, which have been produced in various contexts: as part of the author’s own work, for exhibitions or catalogues, as institutional images, coming from private collections, visual archives, websites or social networks, etc. Each type of use,

¹ Photographs in audiovisual or multimedia montages may also be used provided that the analysis focuses on the visual dimension.



including of the same photograph, contributes to a new form of iconographic production. These contributions will thus be part of a more global reflection on the use of photographs as sources for research in social science, firstly, and in the analysis of contemporary Africa, secondly.

We propose to question the three following forms of circulation that condition these interactions. These interactions take various directions that reinforce or challenge different representations of social worlds in various places in Africa.

The photographable by the yardstick of the image producer's experience and circulations²

The implicit norms for producing photographs come from the continuous socialisation of those who create or use them and of their relationship with their object or model. Far from being static, this socialisation is a process that develops throughout the life course (Dubar 2010) and through which the individual plays an active and critical role (Dubet and Martuccelli 1996). Socialisation is therefore not regarded as a process promoting the homogeneity of society (Durkheim 1933), but on the contrary, as a peculiar and processual composition that is permanently strained between different spheres of life (Darmon 2016). Integrating the trajectory of the author and/or the photographer into the analysis (Perrin-Joly and Kushtanina 2018) is therefore crucial; as well as studying their mobilities, be they geographic, social or professional, and their [family, social and religious] backgrounds. This helps determine how the circulations between different spaces shape their ways of visually grasping what they observe. The familiarity of the photographed subject or, on the contrary, its strangeness, depends on these numerous experiences and potentially promote different sorts of hybridisation of models of representation.

This approach to the photographable as it evolves through life invites us to question the way in which the professional practice of those who practice photography is shaped: from the discomfort of fieldwork (Barley 1992; La Soudière 1988) to its trivialisation, from the photographer's initial training to their use and production of photographs and their confrontation with other visual approaches. Collaborations are frequent and often interdisciplinary, between researchers from different geographical areas or between photographers and social science researchers mobilising visual approaches. They also play a role in (re)defining the contours of the field of the photographable by the yardstick of individual professional standards.

The contributions could, for example, retrace the evolution of the authors' practices in relation to their personal life trajectory, with photographs taken or mobilised at different stages of the research as a central thread. Analysing collaborations between

² We consider an image producer to be one who either mobilises photographs that he or she has taken, and has them shown, or uses photographs of which he or she is not the author (reuse, secondary analysis, exhibition of visual archives, etc.).



photographers and researchers is also at the heart of the reflection of this call for articles. Thus, articles may question the differences in approach by comparing photographs on the same subject, but taken or selected by members of a team with diverse disciplinary or professional backgrounds and roots. They can examine the effects of interdisciplinary collaborations on professional practice by analysing the way in which these images are used and commented upon.

Photographing Africa: legacies and visual revivals

The field of the photographable feeds on inherited and institutionally constructed iconographic representations (Meyer et al. 2019). Photography was first developed in Africa at the time of the European exploration expeditions with the intention to gather information on and categorise people and their environments (Gordon and Kurzwelly 2018). The colonial administration took over this initiative, in particular that of physical anthropology, and used photography as an instrument of control. Highly standardised identity photographs were imposed (Awenengo and Banégas 2018, 2021) as part of the imposition of colonial—then post-colonial—domination.

Several perspectives have particularly influenced the image of Africa promoted by and/or for Europeans. We can cite three examples. Firstly, the photographs produced for the benefit of the tourism sector are often the product of the photographic standards of European explorers. This is the case when it comes to promoting the exoticism of certain populations or practices, like the southern Ethiopian women who wear lip-plates, making them living images of a timeless Africa fantasised in the West (Abbink 2009; Turton 2004). Secondly, and almost the opposite, international urban planning firms circulate the representation of a “modernised” Africa—symbol of the continent’s economic emergence—by constructing synthetic images showing African cities of the future as global cities (Watson 2014). Lastly, humanitarian action has relied heavily on photography to mobilise funds (Gorin 2011; Robinet 2011). It depicts the medicalised bodies of individuals that have already been used to condemn colonial violence (Peffer 2008), and who epitomise the victim (De Laat and Gorin 2016) or embody suffering, thus representing the woes of an entire population (Graham 2014).

These different sorts of photographic staging have a performative effect in the sense suggested by Judith Butler when it comes to gender (Butler 2006): they impose standards, visual standards in this case, but allow the subjectivation of these standards (Cotton 2016). They offer models and images producers the possibility of reacting to them. They can, for example, be reused by the models themselves according to their own individual strategies, as the co-constructed portraits of Aubrey Graham in the Democratic Republic of Congo reflect for instance (Graham 2016). Colonial identity photography also paved the way for the proliferation of independent studios and the use of photography in family and social events (Nimis and Nur Goni 2018). Therefore, rather than view iconographic representations in a binary manner (in this case, opposing dominant / dominated; Europeans / Africans; etc.), we contribute to a vein of research that raises question about



how they influence each other (Peffer and Cameron 2013). It is a question of analysing how these representations intervene in the photographic and scientific project, how the producers of images manage to become emancipated from (or to play with) these colonial or miserabilist legacies or these modernist representations of the continent.

Circulation and interactions around shooting and reception

The field of the photographable varies with the circulation of the images themselves. It is the result of the interaction between the one who produces and shows the photographs, and an audience, that is, broadly speaking, those who will look at these photographs. It is a question of reflecting on the manner in which the images' reception weighs up against—but also opposes or pushes forward—the production and showing of images. And this, whether this happens when photographs are commented upon during an elicitation interview (Collier and Collier 1986; Harper 2012) and according to the methodology of participatory photography; or when they are displayed to the public—which Christian Papinot calls “productive misunderstandings” (Papinot 2007). Indeed, these differences in interpretation of what photography represents and of its value raise questions about the image-producer's approach. Photography can also be an opportunity to discuss with respondents about what makes sense for them: their subjective relationship to space, to cleanliness and dirt in the city (Guinchard, Havard, and Ogorzelec 2012), or to the physical environment of their neighbourhood (Schoepfer 2014). Photo elicitation favours exchange in the same way as the act of photographing in the street allows one to interact with passers-by.

Photographs, once published, become independent objects and can be diverted from their original use, or, over time, change destination. Consider, for example, the village community, like the project *Voices of the Blue Nile* in Sudan (Aston and James 2012). The descendants of the photographed models (Haney 2012) are likely to reclaim the documentary photographs to make them part of their personal history even though the photographs were taken in the course of ethnographic research.

This circulation of images is also mediated. Legitimation authorities, be they exhibitions and sale venues, which assign a market value to the photographs (Vokes 2012), or the media, through the power that they have to refuse or to accept a photographer rather than another, to opt for the treatment of a “subject” rather than another, define both the photographable and the displayable. These authorities serve as key intermediaries between photographers and researchers and spaces and modes of reception. Distribution channels such as social networks also impose technical as well as aesthetic presentation standards.

For this special issue, we welcome articles that analyse the intersection between a photographic research project and the reception of the images produced in various contexts (colloquium, scientific or general public publication, exhibition, publication on the Internet, etc.) and the reception of different types of audiences (non-specialists or people directly involved in the subject, jury of a competition, journal board...). What do



the makings of a photograph that an exhibition visitor, a research colleague, a web user, a photographer or a participant in a collaborative investigation judge to be “good” tell us about the implicit standards that govern the subject’s photographic representation (Conord 2002)? How do these standards validate or question those used by the researcher when taking a photograph, selecting a photograph to be exhibited, organising an exhibition, etc.?

The proposed articles will be based on an empirical and reflexive approach. They may question the conditions, criteria and process for taking and selecting photographs, their place in the general economy of research, their expected and actual uses; and describe the concrete situations of restitution and audience reaction. They will display a selection of the photographs taken or used.

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