

EXOTICISM IN PHOTOGRAPHY

**JEAN MOHR, BANDUNG -
JAKARTA, DECEMBER 1973**

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the era of colonialism, which spread globally from the 15th century to the middle of the 20th century, constructs the cultural map of the world. After decolonisation, this history gives way to exotic views, which, through post-colonial criticism, arrive in Segalen's thought, called symbolist-exoticism. This concept is useful for discussing Jean Mohr's photographs taken from inside a Pullman carriage on his journey from Bandung to Jakarta in December 1973. This article is a preliminary attempt to uncover the cultural construct behind the exotic moments of specific movements captured by Jean Mohr's camera.

Keywords: *Exoticism, Colonization, Postcolonial Critics*

ABSTRAK

Secara historis, era kolonialisme yang menyebar secara global pada abad ke-15 sampai pertengahan abad ke-20 membentuk peta kebudayaan dunia. Pasca dekolonisasi, sejarah semacam itu memberi jalan kepada pandangan eksotik, yang melalui kritik pasca-kolonial muncul dalam pemikiran Segalen sebagai eksotisisme-simbolis. Konsep ini berguna untuk membahas foto-foto Jean Mohr yang dijeprèt dari dalam gerbong Pullman, dalam perjalanan dari Bandung ke Jakarta pada bulan Desember 1973. Artikel ini merupakan perintisan awal, untuk mengungkap konstruksi budaya di balik momen-momen eksotis gerakan-gerakan tertentu, dalam pemotretan Jean Mohr.

Kata Kunci: *Eksotisisme, Kolonisasi, Kritik Pascakolonial*

I. INTRODUCTION

Photographer Jean Mohr (1925-2018) made a collaborative book with essayist John Berger, *Another Way of Telling* (1995), subtitled 'a possible theory of photography'. They experimented with comparing the way people see a photograph with the way the photographer thought when he took the photograph. What was discovered in this experiment was the ambiguity of photography, that from the second a subject is photographed, it continues its own story; while the photographs also have a life of their own in their own world (Berger in Mohr and Berger 1995, 120-1).

This article would develop this concept with the photographer's thoughts when taking a picture and how the picture could open a discourse that examines the cultural event from the encounter between the photographer and the subject, specifically what Jean Mohr was thinking when he took the subject outside the train in Java, Indonesia, on his way from Bandung to Jakarta, one day in December 1973.

The location of the research case, namely the Jakarta-Bandung commuter train on Java Island, provides an opportunity for the author, as one of the residents of Java Island who has the experience of using commuter trains on Java Island at almost the same time, to examine the photographer's point of view as a case of exoticism as part of the postcolonial view in photography.

So this article is not really concerned with the context of the new possibilities of photographic theory, but uses one of its research materials, in this case the photographer's thoughts behind the image, which are not related to the image itself, but to the moment when the image was taken.

In addition to the information presented in the book, there is another source pertaining to the same moment: a transcription of an interview extract with Jean Mohr by Olivier Germain Thomas, broadcast on France Culture in 1992.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. The Concepts

2.1.1. Exoticism

The concepts of exoticism had several meanings. Firstly, the bad name, that everything called exotic as something beautiful is a problem because come from the point of view of a foreigner or a stranger, which is not the reality, even the concepts is a result of serious work of research and thought. Secondly, that the concept of the exotic is not only an aesthetic but also a cultural one, that the apparently correct knowledge of the subject, but still in a situation of cultural distance, feeds back to the stranger as a finding of the self, or one could say self-discovery. The first one called *realist-exoticism*; the second one called *symbolic-exoticism* (Van Alphen 2002, 168).¹

Realist exoticism is like a fetish worship in which the traveler, the foreigner or the stranger, however good he may be as an excellent researcher, loses himself as a cultural subject in the worship of the newly discovered culture, which is formatted as empirical quasi-scientific description.

In the words of Victor Segalen (1878-1919), they were pseudo-exotics because they were mystically drunk with their object. They spoke as if "drunk with their god"; they were a kind of cultural transvestites, and their work showed an obsession with identifying with their Other subject.

For Segalen, the experience of the exotic is exactly the opposite. It does not go to a kind of fusion, but to discriminate as it is formed by the experience of diversity. This process will be strengthened, enriched and intensified so strong that it will go to destroy the weak personality, that will only make something on the experience of the exotic just not true (Segalen 2002, 40).

¹ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303976940>

In his own language:

Exoticism, then, is not the kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or the mediocre spectator, but the powerful and curious response to a shock that a person of strong individuality feels in response to an object whose distance from himself he alone can perceive and savour. (Segalen 2002, 21)

Segalen's concept called symbolic-exoticism because referred to the experience of the poet Baudelaire which the poetry speaks of something or some-body, that remains unclear or hidden.

This correspondence represents a relationship between elements that are different and separate on the basis of something they have in common. However, this relationship takes place in the sensory experience. They are not already there.

In Rimbaud's sentence:

The point is to reach the unknown
through the unsettling of *all the senses*

Symbolist exoticism does not seek to translate the other culture. In fact, it is an imperfect example of cultural translation. In the creation of poetry, symbolist exoticism is used in a process of self-discovery. This processing of the other culture is based on a differential confrontation.

The achievement of symbolist exoticism is its honesty: it does not pretend to represent or know the other culture. The correspondences that are stimulated do not bring the codes of different cultures into harmony. Instead, they produce a confrontative shock.

In symbolist metaphor, the pair of the tenor (the subject to which attributes are ascribed) and vehicle (the subject from which the attributes are derived) or compared and comparant, which broadly equivalent to the notions of target and

source domains in conceptual metaphor theory,² is reversed. The image (vehicle, comparant) assumes materiality and autonomy and the signified tenor or compared remains hidden (Van Alphen 2002, 167-9).

The reverse could be analogically compared with the transformation from the consensual semiotic symbol to the free interpretative poetic symbol, as Segalen symbolism rather termed poetics than aesthetics. In another term, if the realist-exoticism with the naïve aesthetical meaning is negative, the symbolic-exoticism with the hidden self-discovery is positive.

2.1.2. Postcolonialism

The concept 'postcolonial' alludes to the world both during and after European colonization and as such postcolonial theory explores the discursive condition of postcoloniality. That is, the way colonial relations and their aftermath have been constituted through representation. Postcolonial theory explores postcolonial discourses and their subject positions in relation to the themes of race, nation, subjectivity, power, subalterns, hybridity and creolization (Barker 148).

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This experience with diversity happens with colonialism, which make the time and space of the postcolonial situation in nowadays times of movement, that were of travel, international commerce, and globalization, which has sensitized people to movement (Van Alphen 2002, 160).

² https://dictionary.cambridge.org/example/english/general-tenor#google_vignette

In that kind of situation, what is left by colonialism actually had the determinant factors that constructed the contemporary cultures around the world, and created the postcolonial condition today.

As people and objects travel the world, and so carry in their thought and opinion along their movements, the exoticism from every encounter arise: that is to look at another culture with all of their supporting elements not as they were to be, but from their own point of view, which actually would always happened.

The exoticism that is mostly created by diversity as an effect of colonialism became the object of critical postcoloniality, where in this investigation would be described the relationship of the encounter between the different.

2.2. The Discourse: Between The Subconscious and The Consciousness

The book consists of five chapters, and only the first chapter ('Beyond my camera') is filled with photographs taken by Jean Mohr in various places. One of these is the subchapter 'A doubtful exorcism', which is the case study here.

The assignment, which came from The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), may not actually have been "photographing people from a moving train", since the 200-kilometre round trip from Jakarta to Bandung and back was only possible after considering several options, whether by plane, car or train.

Jean Mohr's point of view is really that of a travelling photographer, whose work is based on his impulse and spontaneity, or the subconscious, as a consequence of always being ready, with an open heart and mind, to find the best possible image. His sentences in this subchapter, or his consciousness, represent this position:

The sight of this, through the large Pullman window, was almost unbearable. Around me the other passengers chattered or read or daydreamed. I was the only one who could not look away.

Soon the hills became higher, and the railway track began to wind in and out, and go through tunnels. Emerging from one of these tunnels, the train slowed down as if it were going to stop. It never stopped altogether, but it went very slowly for several kilometers. From every side children began to appear, half-naked, wild-eyed, hands outstretched. They ran along beside the train for several hundred meters before giving up. Nobody in the carriage noticed: even the art student kept his eyes on his book and gave me no explanation (Mohr in Mohr and Berger 1995, 73)

If the children who run to follow the train become the subject of Jean Mohr's problem, then, if they were the centre of interest, there is obviously a binary opposition that shows the photographer's interest on one side, while all the people in the carriage have no interest at all.

From the photographer's point of view, the people who understand that all these children are waiting for a coin toss and doing nothing seem like an ethical sensation; whereas in his case, as a human being and a photographer, what he can and should do is to take their pictures, which fulfil what he called an obsession.

The homogeneity of silence among the people on the carriage side, each with their own opinion, could be interpreted as meaning that the situation was unquestionable for all of them. In general, it is just another day on the outskirts of the city, not normal in any critical sense, but not unusual either.

There are three points of view here: (1) that of the photographer, with his explicit discourse; (2) that of the people in the carriage, with their silence, which should be interpreted as meaning something; (3) that of the people, children and adults, who were photographed, as their action was a response to the passing train, with the passengers inside, who they were expecting to see and do something for them.

To read the meaning of this investigation would be a comparison of the triangle, which from the discourse should come to some understanding, however far from a final conclusion.

First of all, here is the display and notes on the three photographs from the book:



Figure 1. Of the objects, notice that only one moved with a specific-movement, due to the effect of the running child following the direction of the train while pointing to it. Of course the buffalo moved, but not as specifically as the running child. What is so specific? The fact that he was running with his face constantly turned towards the train, or more precisely towards the windows of the carriage
Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>)

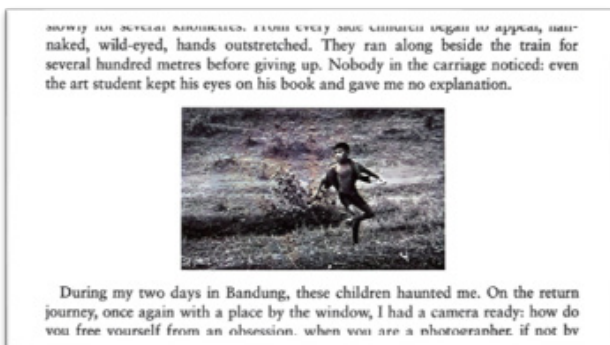


Figure 2. There are two versions of the second photograph, the first is the cropped version, compare it with the second, the original, which was uploaded in the article “Reportage: a form of exorcism. How do you free yourself from a haunting when you’re a photographer?”

(<https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>), so that it could be examined from what is erased (outside the frame on the working image above) that the photograph also intended to show the specific-movement: the child running with his face towards the window of the carriage, which the people inside are NOT looking at; except the photographer who took the picture. (Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>, and Berger, John, Jean Mohr, and Nicholas Philibert. *Another Way of Telling*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995)



Figure 3. The third picture should be the most touching, because only in this one the complete roles of the moment can be seen in the picture: the girl running after the train, with that kind of expression on her face, with the very limited possibilities that someone would throw coins or something for her; the window of the carriage, which bordered and related the outside and inside world of the train, where the point of view of the photographer behind the camera becomes this picture. (Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>)

These upcoming pictures is not from the book, but from Olivier Germain Thomas’s article, “Reportage: a form of exorcism. How do you free yourself from a haunting when you’re a photographer?”, also put here with notes. In all there are five pictures, but only two is in here, because the other three already showed, each with the notes.



Figure 4. Still on the same subject, one could now understand that this kind of picture in both of the two writings had the function of a master shot of the setting, so that people would know that the events took place in the countryside. (Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/>

reportages-forme-d-exorcisme)



Figure 5. This is the least of the specific-movements, and that’s why it’s not in the book. (Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>)

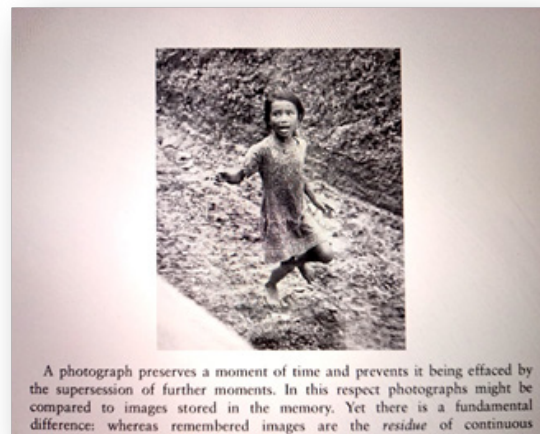


Figure 6. In John Berger’s article ‘Appearances’, also in the book, this picture was taken as an illustration and cropped until the window disappeared and with it the idea of the people in the carriage. (Source: Berger, John, Jean Mohr, and Nicholas Philibert. *Another Way of Telling*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

This means that what is really meant to be looked at in the two sources is mainly the representation of the specific-movements, as can be seen again from the same images in the two sources.



Figure 7. These three images, each in both sources, show the same specific-movements: children running to follow the direction of the train, with their faces turned towards the windows of the carriages, where the passengers inside are not looking at them at all, except for the photographer. (Source: <https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>)

After the tracing of these images, and how they composed to the idea of an irony, that after the desperately long run, at the end nobody ever looked after them. Do they really not care? To put it another way, are they really indifferent? In the coach they were the dominant group, the determinants of normality - whatever abnormality it may be.

It's clear here that for Jean Mohr as a photographer, the most visually interesting thing is the specific moment; and thematically or ideologically, that these poor children do not have the attention of the middle class of the Asian country, as an intimate subject for their counterpart, the European middle class, with the dominant modernity's idea of the human standard, which seems already fixed, to be claimed as universal, that modernity as a means of humanity is still being questioned in Asia.

At the same time, the homogeneous silence of the Asians in the carriage, as the children run along the train with their faces to the window, is unquestionable. It is the scene of a European stranger, too busy with his camera, perhaps exotic to them, a white man photographing the moment that is just ordinary to them.

So the exotic work here is the visual aesthetics of specific-movements, which can be seen as the aesthetics of dance, in the photographer's subconscious, while the conscious is reflected in what he said in the interview:

... but in the end, you have to impress, you have to take a photo. I had to show something, but I reacted too late because I had been upset by what I had seen and it was only on the way back, when the train was slowing down again, that I took out my camera and took this photo, which is obviously full of a guilty conscience on my part, and in taking it, I vaguely hoped to be able to pass on this guilty conscience to our western and highly civilized world (Thomas 1992)³

Now it is clear how negative exoticism can become politically correct, even if the result is a sense of loss, but allow the individual subject to find his hidden self-discovery. However, this 1992 explanation of Thomas's question is too easy to describe compared to his own writing in the first publication of the 1982 book, which could have been written earlier:

During my two days in Bandung, these children haunted me. On the return journey, once again with a place by the window, I had a camera ready: how do you free yourself from an obsession, when you are a photographer, if not by photographing the object of the obsession? And so, at a five-hundredth of a second, hidden behind my camera, I saw again those emaciated children running barefoot the length of the train, receiving nothing. Neither from the others, nor from me (Mohr in Mohr and Berger 73)

³ The article can be found in Thomas, Olivier Germain. "Reportage: a form of exorcism. How do you free yourself from a haunting when you're a photographer?". France Culture, 1992 (<https://jeanmohr.ch/itineraire/reportages-forme-d-exorcisme>).

Isn't he lost at that moment? As his distance in time from the momentum is at least 10 years closer than the time of the Thomas interview, the explanation could be seen as purer, revealing that at that time he experienced the exoticism, the situation of not knowing his own object of the encounter, only to find his own thought, which Segalen described as self-discovery.

What has happened to the children in this triangle of thought? Are they really full of expectation that their lives will be made a little happier by the coins or food thrown from the coach? It's possible that this kind of action has ever happened, and that's why they're running around with their innocent faces full of confidence that somehow, anytime, actions from outside their world will make a small contribution to their lives, which is certainly not often.

It is the gleaming, luxurious Pullman train that is negatively exotic to them, even the frequent passing of each train is entertaining.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1. Photography as the Extension of Ideology

Such conditions of exoticism at work in Jean Mohr were historically constructed by the colonisation of European countries, which exploited resources from Asia, Africa and South America, before ethical politics attempted to return the favour after centuries of exploitation, without any quid pro quo other than the use of high social natives to achieve their ends.

History has shown that the limited independence of thought needs some time to have its moments of decolonisation, where colonisation has already established its cultural construct, which, with all kinds of hybrid cultural processes, in one way or another, would remain forever, as

the post-colonial case.

As part of the phenomenon of travel, which the European coloniser always perceived as superior to the locals, the high culture of the locals was perceived as a mysterious superiority that still had to be found, that would happen forever, because the fading local original culture would always exist, with all its myths. This structure constructed the kind of exoticism in the postcolonial condition.

The concept of postcolonial critique then provides the methodology for work on the decolonised subject to (1) reject the claims of universalism on behalf of canonical Western culture; (2) examine the representation of other cultures; (3) show how such art and other media such as photography are silent on issues related to colonisation; (4) foreground issues of difference and diversity; (5) celebrate hybridity and cultural polyvalence, whereby individuals and groups simultaneously belong to more than one culture, which the coloniser seeks to establish through a colonial school system; and the same intention of the colonised through local and oral tradition; (6) develop a perspective in which marginality, plurality and perceived otherness are seen as sources of energy and potential change (Barry 192).

While photographs cannot stand alone to convey meaning, what Jean Mohr wrote and said about his thought, which clearly represents an ideology, is evidence that could invite the discourse on exoticism in photography that is possible through the concepts of exoticism in postcolonial criticism.

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