

## MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

Add to New Methods / Comps 3

## Photo Essay

## Tainted Frictions: A Visual Essay

Paolo S. H. Favero

University of Antwerp

“Tainted Frictions” is a **nonlinear visual essay** that generates a creative set of **tensions** between photographs and texts. **Bringing words** (in the form of a variety of quotes, snippets, and longer reflections) into an interrupted and unstable set of dialogues and frictions with **images** (photographs by the author of this essay), this work can be looked at as a simple and manual form of interactive documentary.

During the **act of exploring** the essay, the viewers/readers are never allowed to take full visual possession of the “big picture” of the essay—that is, of the interface containing the texts and photographs on which the essay builds (see Figure 1; visit the *American Anthropologist* website for the full experience). The logic is simple. When zooming out in order to see an entire photograph, they lose the text (either entirely or simply because it becomes too small to be read). When zooming into the text, they can only see details of the photographs (see Figure 2).

The **interface** functions primarily as a container for a set of (textual and visual) frames that the viewers are constantly forced to “break” and redefine. Actively interpellated by the dialogues between images and text, they have to **frame** and **reframe**, to **zoom** in and out, to **rotate** and **slide**. They get engaged in a choreography that breaks down the act of viewing/reading into a series of small acts of selection enacted through an ongoing **decentering and recentering of the gaze** (see Figure 3). **Vision** mirrors here the process of critical **reflection**.

A theoretical key feature of “Tainted Frictions” is the **move away from and beyond the fixity of the frame**. A notion that has had **fundamental status in our understanding of the meaning of images, the frame is today, in fact, under threat, challenged by hypertextuality, multimodality, and by the incorporation of metadata into the image** (see Favero 2014). To play with the frame and to explore its present boundaries is of fundamental importance for our understanding of the changing meaning of the image in a digital landscape. “Tainted Frictions” also translates onto a flat surface some of the principles that underpin **interactive documentaries** (see Aston and Gaudenzi 2012; Favero 2013), highlighting, in particular, the role of the viewers/readers as active spectators and of nonlinearity (Ranciere 2009; cf. Favero 2014). **Nonlinearity has classically been addressed in the context of text and novels by scholars such as Barthes,**

**Derrida, and Deleuze, and has become fundamentally important for understanding the construction of narrative in a digital landscape** (Lambert 2013). In the specific context of this essay, **nonlinear viewing/reading is generated through a series of tense, ruptured “syntagmatic relations”** (Barthes 1977) between text and image, language and the visual. **Mirroring the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized, the West and the non-West, the mind and the body (in a Cartesian sense), such dialogues promote the search for a new way of bringing text and images into dialogue with each other (beyond the logic of “the caption”). Content and form merge in the space of this dialogue.**

As **active spectatorship**, “Tainted Frictions” has been designed to bring to the surface the viewers’ **“knowledge-seeking strategies”** (Färber 2007). The images here interrogate not only the relationship between text and image but also conventional ways of controlling the polysemic character of images with the help of captions and other types of verbalized expatiations that consolidate the primacy of verbalized narratives and interpretations over the openness of the image. It is in response to this that “Tainted Frictions” refuses to allow for the creation of a hierarchy (or even a chronology) of viewing between image and text, leaving instead the desire for definitive explanations unfulfilled. Open to the ongoing reinterpretation generated by the viewers, this modality of viewing highlights the nature of **knowledge as something processual** rather than a static thing out there waiting to be discovered, captured, and eventually explained to an external audience, to paraphrase Banks (2001, 112).

In terms of **content**, the essay explores the meaning of color in the colonial encounter. Based upon original high-definition photographs of “tainted public spaces” taken by the author in **India** (Delhi, Kochi, Mumbai, and Kolkata) and **Cuba** (Santiago de Cuba and Havana), “Tainted Frictions” addresses color as a terrain of confrontation and friction between the colonized and the colonizer. Refusing to reproduce the simple dualisms of **chromophobia versus chromophilia and of West versus the rest**, the essay nevertheless challenges the “unstable mix of attraction and repulsion” that characterizes Western relations to color in general and vivid color in particular (Taussig 2006, 31). Dominated by ideas about rationality, mathematics, geometry, and lines (see Crary 1990; McQuire 1998), the West has looked upon color as secondary to form. Diverging from **the white, heterosexual, civilized (bourgeois), male**



FIGURE 1. The entire visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 2. Close-up segment of the visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

norm, color became associated with **women, children, and primitive** people. Goethe famously wrote, “savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors” (1970, 55).

With its ambivalent status fluctuating between **science and magic**, and between **material and visual culture**, color was hence a fundamental actor in the colonial encounter. There were many conflicts in which color was involved—for instance, the case of *purree*, or Indian Yellow (cf. Bailkin 2014), and the case of *indigo* (see Eaton 2014). Repulsively attracted to it, the West tried nevertheless to **conquer and control** color. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it became an important tool for cataloging (and representing) scales of racial difference. Bailkin (2014) states that “starting in the 1860s art teachers

began to offer skin-color charts and proposals to standardize terminology—especially terms like *dusky*, *swarthy*, and *pale* that might provide clues to racial identity” (94; italics in original).

But it is not the goal of this essay to offer an in-depth linear exploration (or explanation) of the meaning and role of color in colonial societies. Quite the opposite. My ambition here is to let the tensions between color and form, senses and the intellect, the colonized and the colonizer, feed (and be fed by) a series of creative, contrapuntal dialogues between images and text. In a constant **merging of content and form** (or to use Chris Wright’s [1998] terms of “anthropological relevance” and “aesthetic composition”), I will rather attempt to let such dialogues and frictions open up the horizon of meaning and of experience. Attempting to



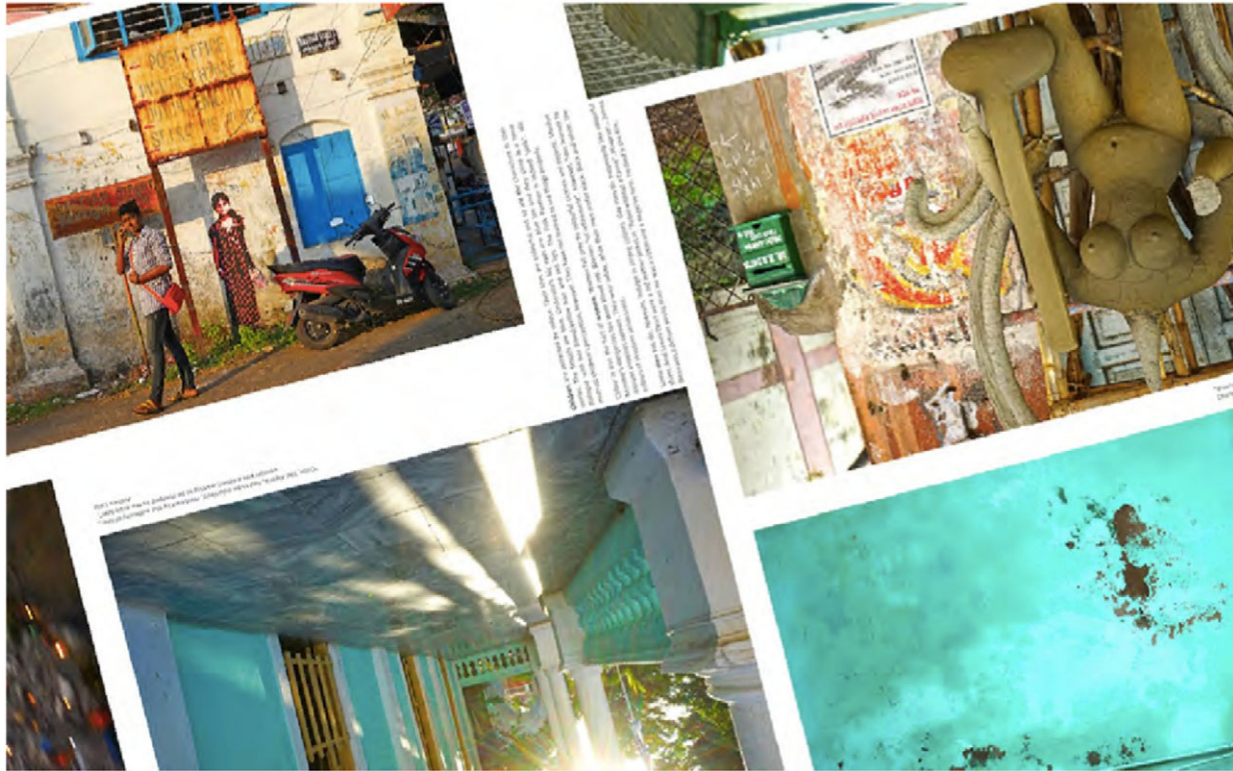


FIGURE 3. Close-up segment of the visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

feed new ideas and visions, this essay will hopefully constitute a step in the search for a language capable of finding the connection between the senses and the intellect, the body and the mind.

The **photographs** selected for this essay are the result of a series of visual searches (enacted in the present) for visible traces (belonging mainly to the past) of chronic resistance. Aiming to **evoke** rather than to explain, to **affect** rather than to document, the chosen images address the natives' engagement with color as a tool for taking possession of space and for creating a visible tension with the colonizers' desire for orderly whiteness (or white orderliness). Colors mark out space here, claiming back what was once taken away. In line with this visual approach, the **texts** that make up the essay should not be reduced to excerpts of a linear essay. They are designed to **intervene** and **interfere** with the act of viewing the photographs that are the center of the essay. Offering a different way (beyond the caption) to conceive of the role of text in relation to images, these texts are to be seen as **provocations**, as **glimpses** into what **could be known**. It is in the ongoing act of "swimming" into this big image composed of photographs and texts that each viewer will find her or his meaning, stimulated by the ongoing series of critical acts of zooming, reframing, rotating, and shifting in which they get involved.

The wish is that "Tainted Frictions" will provide inspiration for rethinking the role and form of the visual (photographic) essay in a digital habitat, and inspire the creation of a variety of adaptations of the logic that underpins

its functioning into different ethnographic and theoretical terrains.

#### HOW TO INTERACT WITH THE ESSAY

In order to explore this visual essay do the following steps:

1. Visit the page for this essay on the *American Anthropologist* website.
2. Download the JPG file.
3. Open the file with image-viewing software (Preview, Image Viewer, etc.).
4. Start swimming in the image.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The essay is available as a JPG. The original physical size of the image is 202×172 cm but it can be compressed to a variety of (physical and memory) sizes to fit any platform. The picture in the attachment to this document is 28.6 mb.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Aston, Judith, and Sandra Gaudenzi. 2012. "Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field." *Studies in Documentary Film* 6 (2): 125–39.
- Bailkin, Jordanna. 2014. "Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette." In *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, edited by M. Jay and S. Ramaswamy, 91–110. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Banks, Marcus. 2001. *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. 1969. *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chowdhry, Prem. 2001. *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology, and Identity*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.
- Cole, Michael, and Sylvia Scribner. 1974. *The Role of Schooling on Memory: Cross-Cultural Research*. New York: Wiley.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1990. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Eaton, Natasha. 2013. *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation*. New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Eaton, Natasha. 2014. "Swadeshi Color: Artistic Production and Indian Nationalism, ca. 1905–ca. 1947." *The Art Bulletin* 95 (4): 623–41.
- Färber, Alexa. 2007. "Exposing Expo: Exhibition Entrepreneurship and Experimental Reflexivity in Late Modernity." In *Exhibition Experiments*, edited by Sharon MacDonald and Paul Basu, 209–39. London: Wiley.
- Favero, Paolo. 2013. "Getting Our Hands Dirty (Again): Interactive Documentaries and the Meaning of Images in the Digital Age." *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (3): 259–77.
- Favero, Paolo. 2014. "Learning to Look Beyond the Frame: Reflections on the Changing Meaning of Images in the Age of Digital Media Practices." *Visual Studies* 29 (2): 166–79.
- Goethe, Johann. 1970. *Goethe's Theory of Colors*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Greenfield, Patricia M. 1966. "On Culture and Conservation." In *Studies in Cognitive Growth*, edited by Jerome S. Bruner, Rose R. Oliver, and Patricia M. Greenfield, 225–56. New York: Wiley.
- Govea, Marcos. 2011. "El prejuicio del color en el colonizado en el pensamiento de Frantz Fanon." *Revista de filosofía* 67 (1): 99–109.
- Keesing, Roger. 1981. *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Kuper, Adam. 1988. *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, and Jan Ovesen. 1980. *Främmande kulturer: Den moderna etnografins grunder*. Hedemora: Gidlunds.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper.
- Jay, Martin. 1988. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." In *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster, 3–27. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Lambert, Joe. 2013. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. London: Routledge.
- McQuire, Scott. 1998. *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*. London: Sage.
- Metz, Christian. 1982. *Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nash, Katie. 2012. "Modes of Interactivity: Analysing the Webdoc." *Media Culture Society* 34 (2): 195–210.
- Ranciere, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1976. "Colors and Cultures." *Semiotica* 16 (1): 1–22.
- Said, Edward. 1995. *Orientalism*. Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Schultz, Emily A., and Robert H. Lavenda. 1990. *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sheikh, Gulammohammad. 1997. "The Making of a Visual Language: Thoughts on Mughal Painting." *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 30: 7–32.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. 1997. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Image*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 2006. "What Color Is the Sacred?" *Critical Inquiry* 33 (1): 28–51.
- Taussig, Michael. 2009. *What Color Is the Sacred?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, Chris. 1998. "The Third Subject: Perspectives on Visual Anthropology." *Anthropology Today* 14 (4): 16–22.