

## DISCOURSES ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND NATURE ACROSS TIME AND PLACE

CATHERINE DE LORENZO

*Name:* Catherine M. De Lorenzo, Art Historian, (b. Sydney NSW, Australia)

*Address:* Architecture Program, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, Australia. *E-mail:* [c.delorenzo@unsw.edu.au](mailto:c.delorenzo@unsw.edu.au)

*Fields of Interest:* photographic history and theory, public art, ethnography, interdisciplinary art and design, twentieth century art.

*Recent Publications and Papers relevant to the paper:*

De Lorenzo, C. 2000a 'La Terre Australien: French, ferns and fantasies', Unpublished paper for Art Association of Australia and New Zealand conference, QUT, Brisbane, December 2000

De Lorenzo, C. 2000b 'Appropriating Anthropology? Document and Rhetoric', Journal of Material Culture, 5, no.1, 2000: 91-113

De Lorenzo, C. 1998 'Interconnections', catalogue essay in Whichaway? Photographs from Kiwirrkura 1974 - 1996 Jon Rhodes, Jon Rhodes, [Thora], 1998

De Lorenzo, C. 1997a *Proceedings of the Conference Emergent Paradigms in Design Education: De Lorenzo, C. Sustainability, Collaboration and Community*, Edited by C. De Lorenzo, Sydney, 1997

De Lorenzo, C. 1997b 'Paradis Primitif: French Photographic Constructions of Australia', History of Photography 21, no.4, Winter 1997: 319-329

**Abstract:** From its inception in ca. 1839, photography was seen by its admirers and detractors as oscillating somewhere between art and science. The one image could be admired both for its replication of the subject (its scientific value) and the interpretation by the photographer (its aesthetic value). Several prints, taken in the late C19 by artist-photographers in Melbourne and collected by science patrons and learned societies in Paris, will be examined for ways in which they expose these debates and, in the process, reveal an emerging discourse on geography, photography and art. The photographs served as a kind of lingua franca across cultures and disciplines in the 1880s and 1890s. Today when historical photographs are examined through filters of nature, meaning, and place, the arguments turn less on ideas of authority and authenticity than they do interdisciplinarity. Geographers, photo-historians, art historians, cultural theorists, and archivists have found they share a common visual heritage. This renewed dialogue testifies to the contemporary value of re-evaluating the images.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper will commence with a couple of photographic images taken by artist-photographers working in Melbourne in the 1880s. Being an artist photographer was in no way antithetical to being a successful commercial photographer (McCauley, 1994) and, although no analysis has been done on their accumulation of wealth, the evidence is that two leading Melbourne photographers, Nicholas John Caire and John William Lindt, successfully penetrated the popular market with landscapes and cityscapes, ethnographic and genre scenes. Their images also infiltrated scientific discourse (De Lorenzo, 1993, Edwards, 1992). In this specific instance they came to form, *inter alia*, part of the collection of the Société de Géographie de Paris, so they can fairly be examined as a medium for discourse across cultures, geographies, professions and disciplines. I am interested in the ways in which images such as these, which once formed part of a *lingua franca* across disciplines and cultures, have recently been retrieved from the archives in order both to demonstrate shared histories across disciplines and to be seen to provoke and interrogate new understandings of interdisciplinarity (Herbert 1995 and Mitchell 1995). On this latter point, W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) has upped the stakes and argued that a paradigmatic shift in intellectual discourse in 'disciplines of human sciences and in the sphere of public culture' might best be understood as centring on "the pictorial turn".

Can archival photographs, carrying fragmented histories of exchange and transposition, be re-examined to retrieve lost histories *and* to provoke new kinds of discourse between disciplines that declare a vested interest in them? Scholars that have recently shown most interest in archival photographs are art (especially photographic) historians, geographers, archivists, and environmentalists (Bonyhady 2000). It is useful, therefore to co-examine some of their disciplinary-informed strategies in order to understand how interdisciplinarity works, as it were, at the coal face.

## 2. TRANSPARENCY

From the outset, both admirers and detractors saw photographs as demonstrating the closest one could achieve in reproducing nature, being freed from the biases and distortions embedded in drawings, sketches and hand-made prints. They came as close as was conceivable to an unmediated view of the world. Not only were photographs seen as somehow objective records of nature, but the high degree of correlation between the referent and the image provoked the use of metaphoric tropes such as 'transparency'. The images of nature could be admired for their instrumental, authentic and, indeed, aesthetic values. 'Nature photographs', according to Dunaway, were seen 'as truth-telling images and objects of beauty' (2000: 215). Certainly, given the art and geographic provenance of the Lindt, Caire and McDonald images, one can concur with Jonathon Friday's observation that 'aesthetically pictorial and environmental values coincide' (1999: 29). The breathtaking beauty of a photographed scene is no impediment to its scientific value, and, indeed, a skilled photographer might very well reveal intrinsic local qualities otherwise overlooked by the observational researcher.

After Sontag, Tagg, Burgin, Sekula and others fulsomely rebutted notions of photographic neutrality or transparency in the 1970s and 80s, more recent scholarship has sought to reconcile lingering inclinations to affirm the evidential value of certain photographs ('that

tree really did exist', 'doesn't he look like his great grandfather, especially now that he too is in his seventies') with the equally-obvious fact that when we look at a photograph we are indeed looking at a representation of the real. Photographs might not only show us the world, but show it to us 'in a way we've never seen it before' (Friday 1999: 34).

The printed image remains a more reliable representation than almost any other form of visual imaging. It may well be this transparency factor that opens a photograph to such widespread use across disciplines, and cultures.

### 3. CONTEXTUAL TRANSFORMATIONS

The value of archival documents is predicated on evidence of authenticity: that they were written, authorised, signed or received by a person or organisation, is intrinsic to their historical worth. An image might be understood within the confines of a particular setting, but the same image elsewhere might carry quite different meanings. These relativities of meaning are not solely attributable to replication. The meaning of any single image remains up for grabs: an image of a fern tree gully might be admired by an art curator, a botanist, an ecologist, a water catchment authority, an environmentalist, a tourist, and so on. Indeed, 'it is their functional context that transforms photographic images into archival documents' and that, depending on the purposes of the collecting institution/s and the interests/requirements of the researcher, the one 'photographic image may become several, separate photographic documents'.

Effectively, these arguments suggest that the hermeneutic value of an archival photograph can best be understood after an understanding of its purpose within the archive shifts the open-ended image into a useful archival document.

### 4. IMAGES AS PRE-TEXTS

The photographs under discussion are the property of the Société de géographie de Paris and are currently lodged in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. One can only presume that the images were considered to have geographic value: that they reflected assumptions about Australia or that they added new data to the existing body of knowledge. What was their evidential status within the archive? What has been their use-value? Geographers, like art historians, have long cherished extensive visual archives in order to disseminate information about their discipline. Short of endlessly embarking on study tours of the world, geographers have taught their discipline with the help of photographs, slides, maps, globes and other visual tools. These documents have served as 'pre-texts' for the traveller and geographer alike: they have constituted a sort of surrogate, ersatz experience for those unable to experience the terrain themselves. Photographs have been read against discourses on imperialism and post colonialism, travel (Crang 1997), embodiment and imaginings (Harvey), spectacle and the social: 'having learned...to exploit the embarrassment of riches in archives and libraries...geographers must now venture into museum and gallery collections to recover from photographs – preserved there for their artifactual importance or artistic merit – their meanings as documents of culture'.

## 5. BACK TO STARTERS

It would seem, then, that if indeed discourse in the 'disciplines of human sciences and in the sphere of public culture' has taken "the pictorial turn", then understanding how images have been critiqued, and might be critiqued, will become a *sine qua non* for interdisciplinarity. Art historians are seen by many other disciplines as having had a head start in terms of iconographic and image analysis, but even there we see a desire to broaden the image field to include maps, diagrams and other 'images that are not art' (Elkins 1995). The visual archive, and in particular the photographic archive, is currently being re-examined by philosophers, cultural studies experts, geographers, environmentalists, archivists and others keen to more closely examine the extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics of the images. Significantly, this expanding discourse embraces cyber-media as much as it does archival photographs. At the end of the day we might ask if the nineteenth century desire to regard the photographs 'as truth-telling images and objects of beauty' – modes of enquiry that at least privileged (if also fetishised) visual ways of knowing – can survive the verbal onslaught of analysis premised on notions, for example, of transparency (mimesis), contextual transformation, pre-textual surrogacy?

### References

- Bonyhady, T. (2000) *The Colonial Earth, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press [and Melbourne University Press]*
- Crang, M., (1997) *Picturing Practices: Research through the Tourist Gaze*, *Progress in Human Geography*, 21 no.3: 359-373
- De Lorenzo, C. (1993) *Ethnophotography: Photographic images of Aboriginal Australians*, Ph.D., University of Sydney
- Dunaway, F., (2000) 'Hunting with the Camera: Nature photography, manliness, and modern memory,' *Journal of American Studies*, 34, no.2: 207-30
- Edwards, E. (ed) (1992) *Anthropology and Photography 1860 – 1920*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press
- Elkins, J. (1995) *Art History and Images that are not art*, *The Art Bulletin*, 77, no.4, December: 553-71
- Fox, P. (1989) 'The imperial schema: Ethnography, photography and collecting', *Photofile*, Summer: 10-16
- Friday, J. (1999) 'Looking at Nature through Photographs' *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 33, no.1, Spring: 25- 35
- Herbert, J.D. (1995) 'Masterdisciplinarity and the "pictorial turn"', *The Art Bulletin*, 77, no.4, December 1995: 537-540
- McCauley, E.A. (1994) *Industrial madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848-1871*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- McLean, I. (2000), 'False Messengers: Visual culture, cultural studies and the new art history', *Pre/dictions: the Role of art at the end of the millenium, Papers presented at the conference of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, Victoria University of Wellington*, 2-5 December, 1999. 162-167
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994) *Picture Theory*, Chicago & London: Chicago University Press
- Mitchell, W.J.T. (1995) 'Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture', *The Art Bulletin*, 77, no.4, December: 540-4