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WHY DO “GOOD” PICTURES MATTER IN ANTHROPOLOGY?

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There are “good” and “bad” pictures—ask an editor, curator, or photographer. You might also have an idea of what a supposedly good picture is. What makes us see a picture as either “good” or “bad”? What do “good” and “not so good” photos do for anthropology? Why is it important to understand the moral ecology surrounding their creation and dissemination in anthropology? With this provocative title, my article explores both the phenomenology and the politics of photographic experiences in the field. I consider the pragmatic relationship we have with photographs through a series of ethnographic encounters based on critical, sensory, and situated practices.

I will begin my argument by stating what this article is not about. First, it is not a theoretical discussion on the status of images in anthropology. It does not intend to contribute to the rich visual theories that have nourished the anthropological reflection on photography (e.g., Barthes 1980; Belting 2004; Didi-Huberman 1990; Freedberg 1989; Mitchell 2009; Tagg 1993). This article also does not contribute to any prescriptive definition of what might be considered aesthetically pleasing in anthropology. Nor does this article offer a visual analysis of what might have been considered photographically good in the history of anthropology. Fi-

nally, this article does not constitute a plea for the aestheticization of photographs produced by anthropologists in the field.

This essay questions the practices and objects that define anthropologists’ photographic experience at various social scales. Based on a series of concrete experiences, I introduce a reflection on how in this age of future anthropologies (e.g., Pink et al. 2017; Horst and Miller 2014), photographs provide an opportunity to rethink the relationship researchers entertain with ethnographic materials. By drawing on one of the objects that have shaped the discipline since its origin (Edwards 1997), I develop a reflection about the multiple engagements that guide the photographic experience of ethnographers in the field.

To this end, this article is articulated in two main sections. First, I will discuss what I mean by a “good” picture. The central argument is that good pictures in anthropology will always be relative, incomplete, uncertain, sometimes inconsistent, and contradictory. Good pictures are *experienced pictures*. They rely on photographic conventions existing in the social environment from which they emerge and on the technical, pictorial, narrative, and material conditions in which they were produced and shared. Good pictures emerge from a dialogue. Unlike a “decisive moment” photograph (e.g., Cartier-Bresson 1952), good pictures in anthropology needs to engage in “good” ethnographic encounters.

Second, following a reflexive and critical approach (Cox, Irving, and Wright 2015; Pink 2001; De León 2013; Canals 2017), I will draw from photo-ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2018 in a French *banlieue* (working-class suburb) to describe the experiential relationship and corporeal sensibility to images in this social environment. I will discuss the phenomenological bond between the camera and the picture-taking process and outline why we need good pictures in anthropology. By looking at the disciplinary historiography of photographic practices (e.g., Edwards 1997, 2015; Poole 2005; Pinney 2012; Vium 2018), I suggest examining the conditions under which visual narratives are performed through engaged visual practices. At this point, I define *engagement* in more than just its political dimension. I conceive of engagement as the pictorial, narrative, and sensory awareness involved in constructing a visual narrative attentive to existing cultural practices and photographic conventions. I will draw on a series of ethnographic encounters to describe how the photographic experience connects to a phenomenology of visual representations.

I argue that good pictures rely on good ethnography, and to this end I will reflexively focus on encounters that brought out implicit ideological concerns about the photographic representation of the local community. I will discuss how

anthropologists' pictorial choices redefine our material and experiential ties to photographic materials and consider the editorial connections between photography, sound, and text. This article concludes that a good picture might embrace the politics of visual representation from a critical standpoint that questions the social depiction of imaged subjects.

WHAT IS A GOOD PICTURE?

Toward a Critical Phenomenology of an Experienced Picture

Before explaining why good pictures matter, I will sketch some possible answers to this first question: What, in fact, makes a good picture? We may first attempt to answer by looking at normative definitions of the good in photography.

In his famous book *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger (2013) evokes what is commonly considered good in photography. Based on the critical historiography of the pictorial approach, he shows the extent to which we often judge a good photograph by its composition. In his critique of this prescriptive definition, often advised in photography manuals, Berger (2013, 19) introduces a central idea: *time*, he claims, not the formal content of a photograph, matters: "The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time." This assumption constitutes the starting point of my argument. *Time* makes it possible to contextualize a photograph. Berger's critique allows us to place the putative content of the photograph in the space-time framework of the experienced image. While following a semiological approach (e.g., Barthes 1980; Krauss 1977), Berger introduces a practical strand to situate photographs in the experiential framework of what could be considered good. It is because it is lived and sensed that a photograph accomplishes its ends. The photographic condition does not derive from a moral normativity surrounding the iconic content of the image, but rather from the *practical experience* viewers have of it. A good photograph is an image that is experienced, performed (Bolt 2004), and shared (Gunthert 2015). Thus the value of a photograph does not derive solely from its aesthetic characteristics but also from its ability to provide *social experience*.

In the argument that I propose, a first response to the question about what makes a good picture relies on the inextricable relationship between photography and experience (e.g., Larsen 2005; Poivert 2016; Didi-Huberman 2009). The environmental interaction between beings and objects (e.g., Ingold 2000) shapes a photograph's social dimensions. At the crossroads of a pragmatic (Dewey 1934) and phenomenological (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Merleau-Ponty 1964) perspective, a good photograph is experienced by a variety of participants, including the pho-

tographer, the person or persons photographed, and the spectator. Cristina Grasseni’s ecological approach to visual practices might frame the theoretical framework of the experienced picture through the notion of skilled visions: “A plurality of visual practices that employ different kinds of gestural competence, develop within different kinds of apprenticeship, and are differently embodied” (Grasseni 2011, 22). This approach involves a perceptive exploration of the gaze and the inscription of visual practices in the sensorial environment of everyday life (de Certeau 1990). A good picture is sensed and embedded in the “phenomenal body” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 184) that involves a situational, bodily, and sensory engagement.

To understand what good pictures do for anthropology, we need to consider the practical relationship between photography and the act of picture-taking. For instance, how does the materiality of the photo shoot define the photographic experience?

DOES A GOOD PICTURE REQUIRE A GOOD CAMERA?

Gregory Bateson: By the way, I don’t like cameras on tripods. . . .

Margaret Mead: And you don’t like that?

Bateson: Disastrous.

Mead: Why?

Bateson: Because I think the photographic record should be an art form.

Mead: Oh, why? Why shouldn’t you have some records that aren’t art forms? Because if it’s an art form, it has been altered.

Bateson: It’s undoubtedly been altered. I don’t think it exists unaltered.

—Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, “Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Use of the Camera in Anthropology”¹

The above passage, taken from the renowned interview titled “For God’s Sake, Margaret!” (Brand 1976), portrays one of the dilemmas that have shaped the attitude of anthropologists toward visual media. Eighty years after the publication of the two anthropologists’ seminal work (Bateson and Mead 1942), this debate continues to structure disciplinary debates in anthropology (e.g., Pink 2001; Banks and Ruby 2011). Is photography an art form? Is it a “record,” a piece of “evidence” (Becker 2002), or “ethnographic data” (Emmison and Smith 2007)?

Historiographies of photographic use and practice in anthropology proffer the first key to answering these questions. Its colonial past haunts the medium’s tumultuous history (e.g., Blanchard et al. 2018; Morton and Edwards 2009). As a

direct witness to the violence committed and documented by ethnologists in the biometric quest for the “Other,” photography has found itself both promoted and critiqued as a powerful tool for recording difference. The performativity of photographic practices in colonial regimes helped define a structural praxis of domination and visual exploitation of the supposed Other, despite the heterogeneity of those visual practices (e.g., [Edwards 2015, 2014](#)). Photographic imagery during what [Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby \(2011, 13\)](#) called the first phase of visual anthropology was thus marked by the use of photography in a non-systematized and exoticized way. Some critical studies on this subject (e.g., [Poole 2005](#)) show how colonial photography played a significant role in constructing an iconographic representation of the studied communities. Between “cure” and “curse,” to use [Christopher Pinney’s \(2008, 17\)](#) expression, the creation and sharing of photographs constituted a way of exercising a “right to look” on those populations ([Mirzoeff 2011](#)).²

Furthermore, as a result of its supposedly indexical nature, photography in anthropology has historically been tied to its capacity for verisimilitude. [Elizabeth Edwards \(2015, 238\)](#) holds that in the tension between evidence and affect “photography becomes simultaneously naturalised, marginalised and submerged within anthropology.” Navigating between record and art form, evidence and affect, photography has become entangled within a form of realism increasingly challenged since the early 1990s.³

But how can we define a good picture? How do we situate the still image in what [Edwards \(2015, 236\)](#) identifies as the “unsolvable tension” between photography and anthropology? We might find a first answer in the relationship anthropologists entertain with cameras.⁴ [Brent Luvaas \(2016\)](#), in his ethnography of the fashion industry, develops one of the most insightful recent contributions on this subject.⁵ [Luvaas \(2019\)](#) points out that, despite extensive theoretical work in visual anthropology, little has been written about how anthropologists pragmatically deal with cameras in the field. Describing chronologically his relationship to a series of cameras he used, Luvaas highlights the role played by the visual tools in his interactions with his photographed subjects. As part of this heuristic account, he describes, for instance, how the use of long focal lengths (e.g., 85mm) “renders a subject” correctly. [Luvaas \(2019, 88\)](#) insists on the “trustworthy” character of professional cameras such as the Nikon D4S and on the importance of choosing lenses with proper bokeh (the quality of the out-of-focus parts of a photograph). But what if in the field we don’t necessarily need or want sharp photos? What if we are not looking for a nice bokeh or prefer lenses with optical aberrations? What if

supposedly bad cameras better capture our ethnographic experience? To answer these questions, I will consider the materiality of visual practices in a photographic ethnography I conducted in a French *banlieue* between 2015 and 2018. I will focus on a series of four ethnographic encounters to portray the role of bodily, technical, and pictorial choices in the critical definition of an experienced picture.

GOOD PICTURES INVOLVE GOOD ETHNOGRAPHY

Sarcelles is a *banlieue* located fifteen kilometers to the north of Paris,⁶ a place historically represented through the lens of marginality and violence. Moreover, with its 60,000 inhabitants, it constitutes one of the urban spaces traditionally mythologized through media, film, and photographic narratives since the birth of the *grands ensembles* (housing complex) in France (Canteux 2004). Locals are aware of the city’s unflattering image and endure the consequences of this stigma daily, particularly in terms of access to the labor market. This “bad image” results in part from a long history of visual marginalization (e.g., Bertho 2014). For three years, I was immersed in Sarcelles as a photographer and an anthropologist.⁷ While photographing the daily lives of locals, I recognized the importance of critically situating my production within a more exhaustive visual history of the community.

As soon as I started my fieldwork, I encountered a sort of objection from the local inhabitants to the stereotypical image publicly conveyed of their city. One of the first things participants asked me was to “show another face of the city” to “see deeper than the apparent misery.” They asked me to question the hegemonic representation of otherness through my photographic practice.⁸



Figure 1. An article from the local newspaper *Le Parisien Val d’Oise* publicized my photographic activity in 2015.

In the field, I was perceived as an outsider, since I am Colombian and wasn't just observing but creating new narratives in and of this space. People told me that as an outsider, I would manage to "see differently" daily life in Sarcelles. Residents, aware of their city's stereotypical image, were concerned about how my photographic narratives would depict Sarcelles. As one inhabitant put it: "We are sick of white journalists who come here and speak for us." In the field, an event revealed the extent of this citizen's awareness regarding the visual productions on Sarcelles.

On July 16, 2018, I went to Sarcelles to photograph a group of soccer fans while watching the World Cup final. At that point, I was photographing a group of Sarcellois I had previously met at a community center. At about 8 p.m., France won the match, leaving the streets in euphoria. I left the community center and started taking pictures outside as I had been doing with the neighborhood people I already knew. Cars raced through the streets of the *grand ensemble* at full speed; screams and firecrackers resounded everywhere.



Figure 2. Celebration during the World Cup 2018. Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

In three years, I had never seen Sarcelles like this. I continued photographing these moments of collective ecstasy without worrying that the people I was depicting didn't know me. While going downtown to the Flanades (the central mall of Sarcelles), I met Amin, a forty-year-old local well-known in the neighborhood. At the Flanades, a big crowd of around four hundred people had gathered in the street to celebrate the French victory.



Figures 3 and 4. Celebration in Sarcelles. Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

Soon some tensions arose. Some individuals fought in the street for a French flag; some others incinerated a few garbage cans in the middle of the crossroads. A car was also set alight at the corner of the boulevard, and two firemen and police cars were hit with bottles and stones.

I shot the crowd with my two DSLR cameras for fifteen or twenty minutes. At one moment, I noticed firecrackers started being thrown, falling near me. Then, when a firecracker hit my foot, I realized they were deliberately flung in my direction. I decided to move away. On the other side of the sidewalk, a stranger addressed me aggressively:

S: Who are you? Are you a journalist?

C: No, I am a photographer.

S: And for who do you work?

C: I'm independent, I don't work for anyone, I take pictures of the World Cup, and I might share them on the *Sarcelloscope* (a local citizen media I work with).

Behind her, other strangers look at me suspiciously.

S: Uh, you are with Amin? Do you know him?

C: Yes, I know him well. I was with him a little earlier.

She turns her head and speaks to another woman behind her.

S: It's OK. He's with Amin!

She shouts to the crowd.

S: Well, be careful man, it's dangerous to take pictures like that in the middle of a crowd.

Over the past three years in the field, I had never been attacked for my photographic practice. I quickly understood that something had gone wrong. Carried by the collective euphoria, I had photographed an illegal scene adopting the stance and attitude of a photo reporter. Far from the emotional and personal confidence I had previously built with the residents I used to work with, I had failed to socially engage with the people I was photographing. I later found out that the person confronted me directly because of the type of situation I was photographing. It was the first time I had photographed an illegal event (street gathering, assaulting police cars, burning objects in the middle of the street, etc.). In a certain sense, the group controlled the production of audiovisual activities of someone they didn't know, images they thought could potentially spread undesirable images of their community. This event revealed a significant phenomenon: at the citizen level, Sarcellois operate visual control over what can or should be publicly shown. Showcasing an illegal event would only reinforce the stereotypical representation of violent and deviant youth from social spaces already marginalized. In a certain sense, this event also allowed me to critically rethink the corporeal and material attitudes

deployed while shooting. I understood that somehow, at that particular moment, I had failed to engage in a direct dialogue with the people I was representing. Sometimes a “good” photograph thus also implies not taking pictures at all, or at least looking for other ways to visually engage with the public who expects the photographic materials.

This ethnographic encounter made me reconsider the position to adopt in such moments of social transgression, and critically explore how to depict collective moments through a more reflexive and empathetic attitude. A way to visually rethink the local community’s visual experience was to photographically reconsider the place of the author and the photographed by reassessing the point of view of the represented subjects. Acknowledging that local communities have their own visual values and critically inscribing the anthropologist’s photographic practice in light of those values redefined my visual encounters in the field. Good pictures are inextricable from good encounters. We need good pictures since they allow us to experientially reconsider the methodological and epistemological posture of a photographer-anthropologist in the field. A good photograph considers the power relations that shape the representation of a subject. Situating photographic practices in such a critical historiography of anthropological photography implies situating our production in a broader iconology of the people we represent. We need good pictures since they engage a “critical dialogue” (Vium 2018); they question the experiential relationship to the representation of the Other and force us to situate ourselves in regard to a more extensive visual history reflexively. We need good pictures to step outside the normative framework of the evidence. Following a phenomenological approach that is both “phantasmographic” (e.g., Desjarlais 2019) and critical (e.g., Cox, Irving, and Wright 2015), the corporeal encounter of the photographer with the lived experience allows us to position ourselves visually, at both an iconic and a pictorial layer, by offering a critical account of how we represent the subjects we are working with.

AN EXPERIENCED PICTURE

Opened in 1973, the Forum de Cholettes was a showroom at the heart of the *grand ensemble*. In 1997, the presence of asbestos shut down the Forum. For more than twenty years, public authorities neglected the abandoned building before its demolition in 2018. On March 12, 2016, I visited this place accompanied by local activists and former rappers. On his cell phone, Farid showed me a photograph taken in the 1990s: “This was the Forum before it was abandoned. . . . It was the *Secteur A*, the good old days of Sarcellois rap!”



Figure 5. Photograph of “old” (*les anciens*) rappers from Sarcelles.
Photographer unknown, the early 1990s.

In the picture, the most important figures of the Sarcelles rap scene pose on the roof of the Forum. It’s a well-known local cliché, reminding Farid of the “good old days” when the Forum offered a place for local people to meet. Unfortunately, since 1997, the *grand ensemble* has no major cultural center for a population of more than 40,000 people. Instead, places of local sociability have gradually disappeared. With nostalgia, Farid commented: “They [the local authorities] have broken all our memories.”

On the roof of the Forum, Farid asks me to take a portrait of the present group: “Camilo, take a strong photo, you know they are going to demolish the Forum, a photo for the record.” At this point, I feel a certain pressure on myself. What does he mean by “strong photo”? What does he intend by a “photo for the record”? I move along the rooftop, thinking about the best way to depict a place doomed to disappear. I photograph the Sarcellois, the buildings, and the Forum. I try several points of view, several focal distances. As I photograph, we move through this building with a certain despair. I see in this place the institutional decay of what was meant, in the 1960s, to be “the city of the future” (Canteux 2004).

When I press the shutter, I remember the image Farid showed me a few minutes before, and try to remake it. Unsatisfied after several tries, I decide to create

a whole new portrait that shows the city’s decor. The sun is setting behind the towers of Avenue 8 Mai 1945. I squat on the ground in front of the setting sun. I want to visually emphasize the contrasts of that renowned place. The participants, perplexed by the bodily position I adopt, ask me what I am doing and what they need to do. I tell them to approach me slowly. I aim for a low-angle, backlight portrait to highlight the participants’ shadows and the city background. I click the shutter several times as they walk toward me.



Figure 6. Photograph of “old” (*les anciens*) rappers (Collectif Made in Sarcelles).
Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

Among the dozens of photographs I took that day, I post-produced the one created in black and white during this staging. To me, the graphic construction of this picture was probably, to use Farid’s expression, the “strongest.” My manipulation is evident in the distortion of the wide-angle lens used during the shoot (24mm). The low angle and the strong contrasts (enhanced in post-production, but already present due to differences in the backlight) reveal the bodies, the shadows, and the abandoned decor. For me, this picture also seemed “strongest” in how it responded to the photographic conventions of the hip-hop world within which I had created and aimed to share it. In a certain way, the pictorial characteristics of this photograph responded to the visual performance of iconological patterns surrounding the visual culture of rap in France (Shuman 2021; Vallot 2021). I chose to post this photograph on social networks, where it received a series of shares and

comments. Some Sarcellois used it as a profile picture. One participant picked it up to advertise her brand of jewelry. Another one posted it on his Facebook wall, including numerous hashtags to promote the non-profit organization he manages. Another one reframed and published it as a cover image on his Facebook profile. Finally, under the hashtag #madeinsarcelles, the local community widely disseminated the photograph on social media.

While a good picture is a socially experienced picture, we must also notice the importance of photographic conventions and material arrangements in the way pictures are socially anticipated. For [Monique Sicard \(1997, 52\)](#), images “must arise in theoretically, emotionally, and institutionally prepared spaces. They must be anticipated [*attendues*].” Exploring how people conceive and want to represent their environments visually provides an opportunity to re-examine the photographic objects through the lens of lived and embodied experiences.

The previous ethnographic encounter, both sensory and participatory, allows us to identify specific elements that bring the *experienced picture* into focus: the interactional ecology that encompasses the realization of pictures in the field; how the inhabitants reclaim their depictions on social networks; the relationship of the local community to the visual archives; the photographic conventions that allowed the community to identify itself with a precise iconographic representation; and finally the relationship between the socio-spatial experience and the visual experience. While a photograph can be a pretext for discussion in the field (e.g., “photo-elicitation” [[Harper 2002](#)] or “photovoice” activities [[Wang and Burris 1997](#)]), a good picture engages a critical reflection on the conventions, manipulations, and materiality of the photographic process. Thus, a double photographic and ethnographic engagement requires focusing on the practical and phenomenological environment in which the image-making process is situated ([Cefai 2010](#)).

A GOOD PICTURE GOES BEYOND THE PICTURE

We have seen in these examples the extent to which performative practices of picture-taking can frame visual experiences. But what about the public circulation of these experiences? What is the relationship between photographs and other forms of writing? In particular, what role does a visual layout play in the sensory encounter of an *experienced picture*?

We might find one answer by exploring the visual layout of anthropological and other academic narratives. Standardized graphic patterns have historically structured the publishing format of academic publications. The visual layout of most articles and books in the social sciences has relied on a structure that priv-

ileges textual continuity. The textual format hegemonically favors a layout based on a central text, footnotes, and a median border between the pages' edges. This editorial format standardizes the presentation of academic work and limits graphic and narrative explorations in anthropology.

What happens when we change the orientation and framing of the text? And suppose privileging the pictures rather than the text? The rise of research collaborations such as *Writing with Light*,⁹ the emergence of photo-essay sections in journals such as *Visual Ethnography Journal*, or the increase of critical and multimodal journals (e.g., *Sensate Journal*, *Terrain*) may allow us to rethink visual experience in anthropology.¹⁰

Several relatively recent publications have redefined the editorial layout of audiovisual materials in anthropology, some in innovative fashion,¹¹ others in more problematic ways.¹² One of the books that I consider a reassessment of photo-ethnographic materials using an innovative editorial design is Alex Fattal's (2020) *Shooting Cameras for Peace*. This book has resulted from a multimodal and participatory survey conducted with young people in a marginalized district south of Bogotá, Colombia. Fattal's book reimagine how ethnographic narratives can be edited, arranged, and displayed. The horizontal framing, a layout closer to a photo book than a work of anthropology, and the way texts and images are graphically arranged prove the possibility of revisiting the experienced picture through graphic experimentation.

These editorial experiences, and more broadly visual experiences in other fields such as film, can revisit the relationship between pictures and anthropological publishing. If the book is one of the most popular media for photographers and anthropologists to share their work, other multimedia fora such as the sound slideshow may engage new dialogues among pictures, sounds, and texts. Halfway between film and photography, the sound slideshow connects texts, ambient sounds, interviews, and photographs in a short multimedia montage. The sound slideshow revisits the perceptual and sensory aspects of the experienced environment by combining photographs with other forms of communication.

In 2017, as part of my doctoral research, I produced *Les Rugbywomen* (2017), a sound slideshow and exhibition that focuses on the sporting experience of a group of rugby players in Sarcelles, twenty women between the ages of fifteen and sixteen. They were part of the rugby team of Chantereine, a local high school located at the margins of the *grand ensemble*. The school has a high dropout rate, and 86 percent of the students come from financially stressed households who live mainly in social housing neighborhoods. Throughout the academic year, I followed the



Figure 7. Still from the sound slideshow *Les Rugbywomen* (2017). Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

daily activities of the group. On receiving an invitation from the team, we decided that I would document their activities while producing photographic materials to showcase their actions to a broader audience. The photographic encounter provided a means to collectively consider the creation of new narratives in a social context marked by marginalizing and stereotyping visual discourses. Collaboration with participants through collective editing, feedback sessions, and sound recording activities resulted in a visual narrative centered on women's sports engagement.¹³ The visual and moral attention of the account was tightly tied to the dialogues and interactions I had with the rugby players. The photographic series focused on critical discourse in a social space publicly seen and perceived as dangerous and marginal. Consequently, the narratives we produced highlighted the women's corporeal investment in rugby and described the heterogeneity of the social world in which this practice occurred.¹⁴

As a result of our work, we first created a large-format exhibition in the high school. The players, the inhabitants, and the public who attended this exhibition discovered the bodies of the portrayed women differently considering the print size (3 x 4m), the location of the installation, and the vertical placement of the photographs (see [Leon-Quijano 2020, 2021](#)),¹⁵ engaging a new visual experience of the participants' actions.



Figure 8. Exhibition “The Rugbywomen” in the Chantereine high-school, Sarcelles.
Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

Second, I produced a sound slideshow. I initially shared this multimedia object with the local community during the exhibition’s opening at the rugby women’s high school in 2017. Then, I released this work to the national and international press in 2018. Sharing this experience, first within the community and then with a broader audience, allowed me to apprehend the gaze, reactions, and feelings of the different social actors (locals, photographers, journalists, editors) toward the representation of youth in terms of gender. By doing so, this multimedia piece allowed me to reconsider the social understanding of a public narrative. It created an immersive and sensory environment based on a story line that showcased these young women’s physical strength and determination. In addition, the presentation on a multimodal medium allowed us to reconsider the visual experience in Sarcelles using sound clips produced with the participants.

Moreover, texts and broadly verbal narratives (whether written or oral) played an essential role in defining the social experience of these visual materials. For instance, we used texts and oral excerpts in the sound slideshow and the exhibition. Whether it was an editorial layout or a projection on a multimedia device, the medium through which the pictures were experienced relied heavily on material arrangements. In this regard, Roland Barthes (1980) referred to the “anchoring” (*ancrage*) function of the text within a photographic object.¹⁶ The verbal excerpts “rooted” the purpose of the ethnographic narrative.

To summarize, a picture's formal or material characteristics do not make an ethnographic photograph a good one. Instead, the picture's experience during its conception, creation, socialization, and exhibition shapes the "content" of a photograph, to use Berger's expression.

PERFORMATIVITY, GOOD, AND TRUTH

So far, following my experience in Sarcelles, I have disclosed that good photography needs to be rooted in good ethnographic encounters. A photographic ethnography creates a critical interface between pictures and the ideological and cultural contexts of their production. Bodily engagement, as well as the technical and pictorial choices when taking photographs play an essential role in determining how any local community will apprehend pictures. This final section delves into more depth on this interface, exploring how photographs' formal, technical, and pictorial performances might redefine the ethnographic encounter.

In 2016, I met Maryse Gevrey, a local Sarcelloise born in 1934 who settled in this city in 1958. After the death of her husband in August 2017, she invited me to live in her apartment, so I could have a place in Sarcelles to do my ethnographic fieldwork. For a year and a half, I stayed with her and photographed her daily life.¹⁷



Figure 9. "Le deuil" (The grief). Photo by Camilo Leon-Quijano.

Even though I proceeded with an approach close to photojournalism at first (documenting the observed environment, bodies, interactions, and objects exhaustively), I gradually realized that taking photographs differently could offer a medium to reconsider the particular experiences that Maryse was living at that moment of her life. The camera, the lenses, and the other tools I used gained a whole new sense of purpose. At that moment in time, Maryse was in the process of mourning. I wanted to employ photography to portray this process and engage differently with the changes she was going through, which she often expressed through gestures and words. The camera thus constituted a place of creation and expression. Gradually I abandoned a photojournalistic approach for a more expressive approach, focused on Maryse’s lived experience. The camera became a device for depicting feelings such as anguish, solitude, and despair. In that way, the camera, the lens, the flash, and the tripod acquired a new function in creatively depicting the lived experience of mourning.

We conceived the above photograph to depict the state of stress Maryse experienced during her grief, a feeling related to the many responsibilities she had to fulfill after her husband’s death. Fatigued by the life-changing transformations, she fell into a state of depression at the end of 2017. We co-constructed this portrait to better express her inner experience.

I imagined a performative activity in which Maryse would become involved in the process of photo-making. First, I installed the camera on a tripod. With an external shutter release, I photographed to obtain an underexposed image (15s, f/14, ISO 50). At the same time, I randomly flashed Maryse’s face and moving hands with an external strobe. The resulting photograph does not pretend to “properly” show her physical body. Instead, it is a visual performance of a psychological and felt state observed and experienced in the field. This composed portrait is neither more nor less “real” than a spontaneous photograph taken in action. The performativity rather allows us to consider the photographic act as a *dialogue*. It less concerns capturing the “decisive moment,” to use Henri Cartier Bresson’s famous expression, than reviewing forms of visual representation in light of lived experiences in the field.

Let’s return to Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s conversation. In this situation, it was not a question of discussing whether what was produced by the camera was a “record” or an “art form.” The heuristic character of the photograph produced on a tripod doesn’t depend on the equipment itself. In the previous example, the tripod, the camera, and the lens didn’t fulfill their primary function (the tripod, to obtain a sharp image, the camera, to fix an instant of light, the

50mm lens, to offer a perspective close to the human vision). I agree with [Luvaas \(2019, 77\)](#) when he says that “cameras matter.” But I think that more than the camera, it is the graphic, pictorial, and iconic experimentation that we make of the lived situation, using appropriate photographic tools, that actually “matters.”

Painting and drawing ethnographic experiences provide a useful point of comparison. While a good picture doesn’t directly depend on the camera itself, the cultural and technical capital of the creator plays an undeniable role in the social experience of the emerging narrative. Parallels with other forms of visual representation allow us to explore the social construction of the good pragmatically from the device’s point of view and the necessary skills demanded to handle them. Acknowledging this practical and sensorial capital can foster a new understanding of the reflexive assessment of photographic practices (as raised by [Julie Spray’s \[2021, 11\]](#) discussion of participatory drawing exercises). Like painting, good pictures rely on the empathetic relationship to the subject, the technical and corporeal sensitivity to the medium. They represent “intangible human features in their specific sociocultural and historical contexts over time” ([Bray 2015, 129](#)).

Nevertheless, photography allows us to propose a different experiential engagement than the one involved in drawing or painting. A good photograph depends significantly on its capacity to interact with existing photographic conventions in the cultural environment in which they emerge ([Poivert 2017; Becker 1995](#)). This requires a bodily, sensory, and graphic intentionality by the photographer and mastery of certain technical skills. Deploying the camera in the field generates expectations, reactions, and sometimes tensions. The performance of the photographer shapes the moral ecology of the social environment. Therefore, the experienced picture creates a nexus between the photographic encounter, the device, the corporeal performance, and the visual conventions that exist in the cultural environment where it emerges.

CONCLUSION

The lens, the so-called impartial eye, actually permits every possible distortion of reality: the character of the image is determined by the photographer’s point of view and the demands of his patrons. The importance of photography does not rest primarily in its potential as an art form, but rather in its ability to shape our ideas, to influence our behavior, and to define our society.

—[Giselle Freund](#), *Photography and Society*

I develop a central assumption in this article: good pictures matter in anthropology. From both a pragmatic and a phenomenological perspective, I have defined a good picture as a socially experienced picture that is inevitably incomplete, uncertain, sometimes inconsistent, and contradictory. A good photograph relies on its capacity to engage in good ethnography. In this experiential definition, a good ethnographic photo is not necessarily a “beautiful” one. Yet even if the goodness of an image does not derive directly from its pictorial composition, a good photograph should nonetheless consider the photographic conventions of the social order in which it is perceived. As a “just image,” a good picture comes to matter when it is concerned with “what representation means within a larger history and context” (Carter 2019, 126).

Good ethnographies are rarely badly written. The same holds true for photographic narratives in anthropology. Appreciating the camera, mastering the editing and post-production process, reflexively situating its iconic production within the studied community, and more broadly inscribing its visual creation into broader photographic conventions allows a creator to rethink the significance of photographic encounters within the discipline. A good picture goes “beyond aesthetics” (Pinney and Thomas 2001), and it draws on the sensory and reflexive experiences we have of visual materials throughout the research process. Consequently, to produce a good picture, we must consider the materiality of the visual practices involved in the depiction of a social encounter. The “goodness” doesn’t directly rely on a moral or aesthetic judgment. In some cases, making a good picture means not taking a photograph at all. What matters in the ethnographic process is questioning the practices and objects that intervene in the collective experience of picture-making and picture-sharing.

From a reflexive, creative, and critical perspective, doing, sharing, and analyzing the social experience of good pictures brings us into the heart of anthropological action. Understanding the sensory interrelationship of photographs with other media such as text, prints, or sound has the potential to go not only “beyond text” (Cox, Irving, and Wright 2015) but also “beyond the image.” This point of view questions our relationship to space and to the phenomenal body. Creative, performative, and sensory practices provide a means to live the ethnographic experience differently. They make us reconsider our position in the field from an attitude that focuses on the sensory and creative engagements of visual practices. This experiential approach enables us to get away from the dualistic relationship between “art form” and “record.” Instead, it strengthens a synthesis between “evidence” and “affect” (Edwards 2015). By proposing a photographic activity based

on sensory experiences, this approach allows us to reflexively situate the creative practices of the anthropologist through a critical lens that takes into account previous iconographies of the represented subject.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between photography and anthropology in the age of digital ethnographies and anthropologies of the future. It focuses on the phenomenological bond between the picture-taking process and the politics of visual representations by looking at an object that has shaped the discipline since its very origins. Based on a series of visual encounters in a French banlieue, I describe to what extent good pictures are relative, incomplete, uncertain, sometimes inconsistent, and contain contradictory objects interacting with existing cultural and photographic conventions. I argue that good pictures are experienced pictures that go beyond the realm of a photograph. To this end, I consider the material and experiential connections between photography, sound, and text. Finally, I discuss how anthropologists' pictorial choices redefine the material and experiential ties to photographic materials. From a critical standpoint, a good picture might challenge the politics of visual representation of the imaged subject through both a photographic and ethnographic engagement. [photography; anthropology; visual, ethnography; phenomenology; urban; multimodal]

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la relation entre la photographie et l'anthropologie à l'ère des ethnographies numériques et des anthropologies du futur. Il examine le lien entre le processus de prise de vue et la politique des représentations visuelles en s'intéressant à un objet qui a façonné la discipline depuis ses origines. Suivant une série de rencontres dans une banlieue française, je décrirai dans quelle mesure les bonnes images peuvent être des objets incomplets, relatifs, incertains, parfois incohérents et contradictoires qui interagissent avec des conventions culturelles et photographiques existantes dans le milieu étudié. J'affirme que les bonnes images sont des images « expérimentées ». J'analyse en quoi les choix plastiques des anthropologues redéfinissent les liens matériels et expérientiels avec les matériaux photographiques issus de l'enquête de terrain. D'un point de vue critique, une bonne photo peut remettre en question la politique de représentation visuelle du sujet imagé, par un double engagement à la fois photographique et ethnographique. [photographie; anthropologie; visuel; ethnographie; phénoménologie; urbain; multimodal]

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la relación entre la fotografía y la antropología en la era de etnografías digitales y antropologías del futuro. El texto analiza el vínculo fenomenológico entre el proceso de realización fotográfica y la política de representación

visual mediante el estudio de un objeto que ha forjado la disciplina desde sus orígenes. A partir de una serie de encuentros visuales en un suburbio francés, describiré hasta qué punto las buenas imágenes son objetos relativos, incompletos, inciertos, a veces incoherentes y contradictorios que interactúan con convenciones culturales y fotográficas existentes. Las buenas imágenes son imágenes “experimentadas” que van más allá de la fotografía. Para ello, considero las conexiones materiales y experienciales entre la fotografía, el sonido y el texto. Des ésta manera analizo cómo las decisiones plásticas de los antropólogos redefinen los vínculos materiales y experienciales con los materiales fotográficos. Desde un punto de vista crítico, una buena imagen puede desafiar la política de representación visual del sujeto representado a través de un compromiso tanto fotográfico como etnográfico. [fotografía; antropología; visual; etnografía; fenomenología; urbano; multimodal]

NOTES

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1. This conversation was published in *CoEvolutionary Quarterly* in June 1976 with the title “For God’s Sake, Margaret!” It was partially republished in 1977 in the *Studies in Visual Communication* journal as “Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Use of the Camera in Anthropology.”
2. Among the numerous studies on this subject (e.g., Edwards 1997), James Faris’s (2003) photographic historiography of the Navajo holds a distinctive position in the critical analysis of material and archival photographic practices and representations.
3. Elizabeth Edwards mentions two “strands” in this regard, first a “reassessment of colonial practices” (Edwards 2011, 178) and second the “phenomenological turn” (Edwards 2011, 183).
4. Material analysis on this subject has mainly been made in historical anthropology (see Edwards 1997) and the history of ethnological photography (see Joseph and Mauuarin 2018). A genuine interest in the materiality of photographic devices has emerged over the past thirty years. I would mention the well-known research of Elizabeth Edwards (2002) on the materiality of photographic practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christopher Pinney’s (2008) investigations on photographic techniques in India, Craig Campbell’s (2014) analysis of Siberian photography, and the studies of Christopher Wright (2013) in the Solomon Islands.
5. Even though other anthropologists had also previously worked on this issue (e.g., Gómez Cruz 2012; Messier 2019; Pink 1999).
6. Sarcelles is one of the most recognized examples of French *banlieues* (Canteux 2004; Bertho 2014). This city is characterized for being one of the most diverse and mul-

- ticultural ones in France. It has a young population, a high unemployment rate, low household incomes, low levels of education, an underrepresentation of highly qualified working professionals, and a high proportion of immigrants in its population. Moreover, Sarcelles has one of the largest social housing complexes (*grand ensemble*) in the country.
7. As part of my PhD dissertation that I defended at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Leon-Quijano 2020), I analyzed how photographic practices socially define an “imaged community” (*communauté imagée*) in Sarcelles.
 8. Moreover, the studies on the *banlieues* have primarily dealt with the phenomena of ghettoization, violence, and exclusion, mainly by working on young populations (Lepoutre 2008).
 9. <http://www.writingwithlight.org/>
 10. The work of certain photographers allows us to explore other types of editorial arrangements between text and images within a publication. For instance, the participatory project Bieke Depoorter (2018) initiated with Egyptian families or the critical documentary work Matthieu Asselin (2017) did exploring the *modus operandi* of Monsanto.
 11. For example, Bruno Latour’s (2004) “online” book made in collaboration with Émilie Hermant, the visual exploration of domestic spaces in the collective work gathered in Arnold et al. 2012, Mirko Zardini’s (2005) sensory account of urbanities, Lewis Bush’s (2020) reflection on the algorithmic stakes of contemporary photography, or Catherine de Clippel’s (2020) recent photographic book on voodoo.
 12. For example, the book *Sexe, race et colonies* (Blanchard et al. 2018), coordinated by a group of historians and featuring extensive visual research on the connections between French colonization and race, has been heavily criticized for its exotic and ostentatious layout (see Bertho 2020).
 13. I taught some of the participants how to make sound recordings. They independently produced several hours of recordings, and then I selected and mixed them with interview extracts to make the slideshow soundtrack.
 14. I extensively describe the experience of designing, editing, sharing, and publishing *The Rugbywomen* narrative in the article “The Performative Photograph: A Poietic Approach to Visual Ethnography in a French Banlieue” (Leon-Quijano 2021).
 15. This project was supported by the Society for Visual Anthropology/Robert Lemelson Foundation Fellowship, made possible by a generous donation from the Robert Lemelson Foundation.
 16. Talking about the relationship between text and images, Roland Barthes considers texts as a way of “anchoring” the polysemic “floating string” (*chaîne flottante*) of pictures: “The denominative function corresponds to an anchoring of all possible meanings (denoted) of the object through the use of a *nomenclature*” (Barthes 1964, 44).
 17. A photographic narrative is available on LensCulture: <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/camilo-leon-qui-jano-the-fume-of-sighs>

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