



Hedda's camera: and 'the real'

The contingencies of life. This essay was revised at the news of Jean-Luc Godard's death, who gave his character to the words, "Photography is the truth. And cinema is the truth at 24 frames a second."¹ From an iconoclast and one of the most innovative directors in contemporary cinema, it is a flippant comment, for all his films are but driven by the opposite, a distrust of realism. I began this essay as an elaborate footnote to my text in the previous issue of this journal on the artist Sim Chi Yin and her postcolonial critique of the British counterinsurgency in Malaya (1948–60).² Her photographs showed participants on both sides of the conflict: the British soldiers in manipulated images, the captured communist insurgents piteously *real* under watch at the police station, and her martyred guerrilla grandfather was evoked as a ghost of memory. Realism, in Sim's handling, was denied to 'the enemy', but lavishly bestowed upon those with whom she politically aligns. It was an odd artistic strategy, I suggested. For realism offers no final arbiter of truth; it can potentially distort and falsify as with any method of artistic creation.

In my critique of Sim's work, it was relatively easy to lever oneself into an anti-realist position. As I wrote, I was alerted to the fact that the writings on photography are 'anti-realist' or 'anti-photography', questioning at every move, the metaphysical sincerity, the perceptual integrity of the camera. At the end, the polemics is so cuttingly persistent that it made me pause. Thus, in a modish gesture of autocritique, I shall revisit the inquiry and cast it in a zone less conclusive, where thoughts and the senses reside, where the experience of seeing demands reckoning.

It has been said that "The history, criticism, and theory of photography is a relatively new and eccentric discipline."³ Indeed; and an eccentric discipline calls for an eccentric, or better, a capricious approach—to show the fecklessness of photography as a means of capturing the real. The invention of photography in 1826 stands as one of the signature events in the age of mechanical reproduction. Photography is essentially an analogue medium, in the sense that it seeks a direct, almost literal connection with a subject. Said differently, each photograph functions as metonym—like the Whitehouse is to the US Presidency, or Canberra to the Australian Parliament—which makes a straight equivalence of reality. Metonym is not metaphor which deploys a connection "in terms of an imaginary resemblance."⁴ In other words, photograph has little sense of conceptual or visual distance from the object; while art, as metaphor, involves a good deal of imagination or reinvention on the part of the artist and the viewer in the making of meaning and significance. The photograph allows little lassitude in this regard. 'Art', or 'invention', of course, can be embedded in a photographic print by manipulation, distortion and other means, but the intimate tryst of image and the real remains its primary quality.

This insistence on photography as 'art of the real' is contentious, until we remember the reverse: the almost universal distrust among writers and critics of the photograph's claim to exactitude. This distrust has all the signs of modernist avant-gardism. It debunks the seeing-is-believing maxim, and it belittles the ground-holding veracity a photograph boldly claims. The legacy goes back at least to the Greeks, whose preoccupation with the question 'what is real?' became the foundation of Western metaphysics. That in Plato's cave, what you see is a mere phantom of

the real—philosophers are haunted by it, and writers on photography base on it their profound incredulity towards the medium. The camera lies! From this it is but an easy step to tie photography to modernity's anxiety to put any givenness, any established criterion of signification to radical scrutiny. It is not too much to say that writers on photography, from Susan Sontag to John Berger, Max Kozloff and Allan Sekula, is each an essayist of the mind, less an essayist of the visual.

In their writing, there are brilliant intellectual insights and sharp political speculations, but there is little of the *jouissance*, the sensuous puzzlement of one who has unwaveringly 'looked'. Essentially, their method is to read outside the image and draw inferences from the social and political circumstances. The 'big picture', less the images, drive the arguments. Reading John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), it is hard not to feel impatience to get to the exegesis: an image, a photograph, is but an alienated object, its main purpose to give substance to the prevailing idea of power and class. As he writes, "An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been *detached* from the place and time in which it first made its appearance."⁵ For Susan Sontag, "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power"; in other words, what feels like power is mystification and falsehood.⁶ Photography is simply "the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts."⁷ Berger's Marxist discoveries, Sontag's cultural and political readings: they rage against photography's literalism and metonymic potency, and make much of its detachment from history. These approaches run the constant risk of reductionism. Since what you see cannot be trusted and 'the real' lies outside the image, the viewer is hauled away from the visual in search of the prey in the forest of meaning and significance. In not too subtle a fashion, it denigrates the eye, and cast aspersions upon the senses and the carnal affirmation of the world.

This academic pleading comes from an anthropologist who packs a camera each time he goes to the field. The camera is a Nikon FM2. Nikon FM2 can function without a battery—an important consideration when battery-run devices often fail in the heat and high humidity of the jungle. The camera is used to record ritual dances and the harvesting festival in the longhouses; for day-to-day use he uses an iPhone so he can instantly share with people what has been captured of events. Back from the field, he would do a bit of testing of the 'reception theory': how do people of another culture perceive what is familiar and understandable to us. The results are revealing. The verdict on his VitaWeat high fibre crackers is, dry, tasteless, "like burnt rice at the bottom of the pot." Glenn Gould playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* reminds them of a sewing machine: the change in tempo is like a woman working on her machine, slowing down or picking up the tempo as the sewing job demands. These may be rather idiosyncratic views, but they are recognisably the principle of Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology. The symbolic analogy is not a:b, that is, crackers to burnt rice, or Bach to sewing machine. It is more suggestively a+b in reference to a third category: thus, a+b as to food, and a+b as to a set of rhythms.⁸ The analogy makes sense—from the native's point of view.

With 'the photograph', a similar approach dominates. The way they look at the images entails the principle of 'structural correspondence'. The images—of closeups and people in motion—evoke curiosity and pleasure: "Ah, do I really look like that?" "Why did I look so sad when I was actually happy." "My son is nine-months old, and you can see the front teeth!" What they see matches what they know of themselves, but each image nonetheless tilts slightly the scale of the familiar. For a moment, it is as though they don't recognise themselves in these images. The 'correspondence' between object and image is direct but never in the form of perfect mimicry. The images are real

—but not quite. This modest experiment shows that photographic images are invariably 'strained'. What makes them real is a partnership between the images and the viewer's inventiveness and fancy. The viewer's input does not distort, so much as participating in the recreation of scenes and passions they recognise in their own lives. Ideological sham or cultural wrong-thinking is not the only story of photography.

The Kenyah men and women in the longhouse believe in what they see. They trust their senses. Their eyes carve out an intimate zone where things are undeniably real, where scepticism has no purchase. No wonder the viewers of the photos are self-absorbed, the range of their reading limited to their experiences and familiar social surrounds. They trust what they see and the feelings the images evoke—less what they think. For the anthropologist, it has much of the character of the post-Enlightenment philosophy. Thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, in their assault on the body-and-mind split, aim to restore the role of the senses in the sharpening of human consciousness. Leaving out their ideas' serpentine detours and byways, the pertinent question is: how do we see when the body regains its rightful place in the merging with the mind? Sartre, who believes literature is the best form that lends truth to his idea, has given an answer. In the novel *Nausea* (1963),⁹ in a classic existential moment, the character Roquentin observes the exquisite "thinghood" of a tree. He sees the "compact sea-lion skin," "that oily, horny, stubborn look" of the roots.¹⁰ And with this intense regard, Roquentin says of his experience, "I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather, I was all consciousness of its existence. Still detached from it —since I was conscious of it—and yet lost in it, nothing but it."¹¹ What exists "lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it."¹²

This elevation of the visual: it is a struggle against the denial of the body, against a mind forever busily making comment and judgements. *Nausea* is a classic existentialist text, and as literature it makes you see, it dazzles you with images at once powerful and undeniably real ("compact sea-lion skin", "that oily, horny, stubborn look"). What is described is as near as possible the nature of human consciousness—when the body no longer plays second fiddle to the mind. Actually, any piece of good writing would attempt to achieve to do so. This, from the beginning of travel writer Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance* (1997),

Breasting the regular sweels of the land, on a red dirt road as true as a line of longitude, the car was like a boat at sea. The ocean was hardly more solitary than this empty country, where in forty miles or so I hadn't seen another vehicle. A warm westerly blew over the prairie, making waves, and when I wound down the window I heard it growl in the dry grass like surf. For gulls, there were killdeer plovers, crying out their name as they wheeled and skidded on the wind. Keel-dee-a! Keel-dee-a! The surface of the land was as busy as a rough sea—it broke in sandstone outcrops, low buttes, ragged blutes, hollow combers of bleached clay, and was assured with waterless creek beds, ash-white, littered with boulders. Brown cows nibbled at their shadows on the open range. In the bottomlands, where muddy rivers trickled through the cottonwoods, were fenced rectangles of irrigated green.¹³

It is all seeing, all hitting on the senses. Outside the car window the scene is colonised by a vertiginous listing of things ("The surface of the land was as busy as a rough sea—it broke in sandstone outcrops, low buttes, ragged blutes, hollow combers of bleached clay..."). And your senses are bolstered by a dispersal of metaphorical connections ("the car was like a boat at sea"). Images and meanings are not the binary thinking of postmodern woes, but as intimate as love-making.

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When the historical musing comes, the ground has been prepared. The West as centre of pastoral capitalism, the pioneers and the landscape of solitude, the natural conservatism of the American West: they are footnotes—critical, urgent—to a literary enterprise full of sight and sound and the feeling of worldliness. It is the same with photography. Certainly, there is truth beyond the image. But to get there, the viewer must be made to see, to be dazzled by the senses—before they can be led to think about what an image means.

Before me, on my desk are some heavy tomes of the work of the photographer Hedda Morrison. To read a photographic image requires us dipping into the 'big picture', its social and political conditions where the artist makes their work; and here the 'big picture' is diverse, colourful, transnational—from pre-Communist China, to Sarawak, East Malaysia, to Australia.

Hedda Morrison (nee Hammer) was born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1908, and died aged eighty-three in Canberra, Australia.¹⁴ After high school, she studied medicine at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Expressing no interest in becoming a doctor, she got her parents to enrol her in the Bavarian State Institute for Photography in Munich, where she completed a certificate course in 1931 and commenced working in commercial studios in Stuttgart and Hamburg. Sensing the rise of Nazism, she left Germany and secured a job at the German-run Hartung's Photo Shop in Peking (Beijing), China. Japanese troops occupied the city in August 1937. Hedda remained in Peking as a freelancer and travelled across China. Her photographs of temples, palaces and the life of Chinese people, taken between 1933 and 1946, were featured in a series of books, including *Hua Shan*, her observation of one of China's sacred mountains, based on her visit in 1935, but published in Hong Kong only in 1973. *A Photographer in Old Peking* was published in 1985, including commentaries she penned in 1946. Her other book, still widely available is *Travels of a Photographer in China 1933–46*, first published 1985 by Oxford University Press.

In 1940 Hedda met Alastair Morrison, son of G. E. 'Chinese' Morrison (1862–1920), the famous Australian journalist and advisor to the government of the Chinese Republic. The couple married in Peking in 1946, at the height of the civil war. The following year, they left China and Alastair Morrison joined the British colonial service and became a district officer in Sarawak where they lived for the next twenty years. The post-China sojourn proved to be equally prolific, accompanying her husband on his official journeys to the longhouses, and made photographic tours of her own. From sacred mountains and temples to dusty folks in shops and streets of China, her work shifted to the less moribund tribal communities in the jungle and riverbanks. The titles of her books tell the story: *Sarawak* (1957), *Life in a Longhouse* (1962) and, as co-author, *Vanishing World: The Ibans of Borneo* (1972). In the mid-1960s, she was with the Sarawak government's information office, training photographers, and founding a photographic library.

Sarawak was granted self-government and admitted into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, ending the British colonial rule established in 1946 after the Japanese occupation. The year 1967 began the final stage of the Morrisons' travelling life when they settled in Canberra. After her death in 1991, her archive of negatives and photographs was bequeathed to the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University, Cornell University and the National Library of Australia. Smaller collections were gifted to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, which held in 1993 an exhibition of her work under the title, *In Her View: The Photographs of Hedda Morrison in China and Sarawak 1933–67*.

Hedda Morrison's life and work traversed the timeline of modern Asia's tumultuous history. Almost a century before her sojourn in China, in 1839, the First Opium War took place in the same year as Daguerre's announcement of his newly invented photographic process. As the camera became popular among Western diplomats and missionaries, there appeared daguerreotype records of the subsequent wars of foreign invasion. By the mid-1930s, when Hedda Morrison started photographing in Peking, China had witnessed the anti-Qing revolution and the founding of the Republic of China whose expeditionary army marched north to unite the nation. On the cultural and political front, the country had gone through a series of reforms, including the May Fourth Movement of 1919. The early Chinese Republic may be a land of rural poverty and technological backwardness, but it had an urban cultural elite with an extraordinary modern outlook who produced writings that attacked China's feudal tradition and Western and Japanese imperialisms. This was the cultural milieu in which Morrison produced her major work in China. The photographs she made were a long way from the antiquated look of the daguerreotype. Each holds a sense of perspective that pampers the viewer and their sovereign eye—a recognisably modern aesthetic. Each affirms who sees and who/what is being seen. And in these images, the "shifting relativity of the border between nature and culture" that typifies modernity makes its mark.¹⁵ Moving from street to street, village to village, from sacred mountains to age-old temples, from funeral processions to family workshops, Morrison's photographs recorded the vast contrast of a land slowly emerging from its ancient slumber. Overall, viewing these images gives one the sensation of "the acceleration of time, and the dispersal of places."¹⁶ Behind the quietude and meditative ease was the gathering storm of history which China could not escape.

Looking North from Chongwenmen Gate, Peking, 1933–46 was taken from the eastern gate of Peking's inner city, with the Forbidden City at its centre. The gate was a part of a system of fortification designed to blunt an invading army making an assault on the palace. Peking was an imperial capital for several dynasties, including the Yuan with Genghis Khan as its first emperor. In the 1930s, like the rest of Peking, the Tartar City (which the inner city was called) had taken on distinctively contemporary features: as the photograph shows, the German Hospital walled off from the street, traffic police, naked legs beneath khaki shorts, most likely a Sikh, the electric wires overhead. Then signs of older things: rickshaws and single-wheel carts in mid-street, a train of camels—seven sauntering beasts—their humps weighed down with goods. Only these beasts of conveyance are visible, though you suspect motorcars are there outside the frame. Camels in the Tartar City: they evoke scenes of another era. Besides serving as the imperial capital, Peking sat on a plain that links Northeast and Southern China. Western and Middle-Eastern trade travelled along the Silk Road, entered the western borders, then the central plain, and terminated in Peking. It is a story told of Xinjiang; its desert, remoteness and hardship were allied with a trade that had brought riches and power to the Central Kingdom.

Looking at Morrison's pictures, a great deal of pleasure comes from their ethnographic feel. *A Photographer in Old Peking* is filled with portraits of merchants in their shops, friends sitting on a heated-kang playing chess, diners enjoying a feast over a well-stacked table, medicine sellers performing kungfu in the street. The click of the camera froze, in time and place, the rich everyday life in mid-twentieth century China. Yet these images do not appear to you as a cadaver of history. In the aesthetics of stillness, the real and the contemporary are but a slim line away from seizing hold of your attention.

The young performer in *Child Acrobat, Tianqiao, Peking, 1933–46*, looks healthy and well-fed, he is no street urchin. His performance has a certain gravity, a professional acuteness: he needs no comic excesses of a Jackie Chan to incite his audience. The pained, wrinkled brow, and the tensed upper lip signal the strained labour in the execution of his art. The camera has, just for a moment as the shutter speed allows, stalled the flux of doing and acting. You see the boy tensed up, his legs twisted back to front, on his inverted buttock sits a tower of china bowls, tea or water flowing from top to bottom. As you observe, questions intrude upon your mind: is he a child sold to the theatre troupe by parents who cannot feed him? Has he gone through the punishing tutelage—always a mixture of praise and the use of the cane—in order to gain such skill? You are affixed to what you see, the body's artful contortion cuts the impulse to place him in the land of the Other. The acrobatic act is the boy's life-at-work, an affirmation of a selfhood not easily given to social and psychological speculation.

Child Acrobat was photographed in the street under natural lighting. When the camera migrated indoors, the constraining of Othering became even more palpable. *Women Assembling Glass Grapes in the Chang Family Workshop, Peking, 1933–46* is filled with shady modulations that bring out the figures in sharp relief. The light from the window glosses over the women's hair, their clothes, the dexterity of their fingers, but the contour of their faces are barely visible. Yet, there is no mistaking in what you see: a sedate scene of women at work in a family workshop. The political economy of petite capitalism makes a claim on your attention, like a busybody feeding you with gossip. But it soon gives way to insignificance—when you truly see, when you trust your eyes. The two women (sisters? Daughter and daughter-in-law?) in pleasant joint labour belittles Marxist grandstanding. In the family workshop, if there was exploitation of women's labour, there was also commitment of daughters and wives to a domestic economy in which they too had a share.¹⁷ The women are settled in the centre of the frame, which gives the feeling of a statement being made. Exploitation and domination of women is not the only story of Chinese petite capitalism. *Women Assembling Glass Grapes* alerts you to two women who have found their place in a society at the cusp of radical change.

Morrison's China photographs are real for their dense social and cultural inferences. Each image depicts a situation or an activity recognisably modern and Chinese. Each is the work of culture and history, and the act of seeing embraces the assurances of the eye. In this, the eye works in tandem with history in guiding what you see, a partnership as intimate and uncertain as marriage. And this is the contradiction: confronting an object, the eye makes you see only by being blind to some aspects of it. Seeing, we may say, is a selective process; when you see, the mind has to shut off what it has decided as irrelevant. This is the legacy of John Berger's influential *The Ways of Seeing*.¹⁸ To say, as Berger does, that an image is distorted by history, "because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes" is to put forward a view both remarkable and conventional.¹⁹ If ideology and culture make you see an image in a certain way, it is also the case that ideology and culture do not, by themselves, 'see'. There is much happening, from cultural ideology to the physiology of the eye. An approach like Berger's prompts the leap from image to social context and spurs the escape from carnality to meaning. Notably in postcolonial critique of photography, the result is the elevation—the overstating—of history allegedly embedded in the image of the colonial subject, an embeddedness that awaits the deft hand of deconstruction.²⁰ There is a great deal of this in the artist Sim Chi Yin's images of the British counterinsurgency in Malaya referred to at the beginning of this essay. A criticism can be raised when history is so dominant, so comprehensive that everything can be explained and explained away.

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Facing the sinuous relationship between images and power, it serves little purpose to do away with our curiosity, our puzzlement that struggles to find intelligibility in what we see.

Reductionism is a risk created in the social and political reading of art. When the main task is the exegesis, when preoccupation is the force beyond the images, it takes a subtle yet vigilant viewer to rein in the extravagance of meaning and significance. It is perhaps no accident that a novelist like John Updike makes a sharp and whetted critic, as evident in his two volumes of essays, *Just Looking: Essays on Art* (1989), and *Still Looking: Essays on American Art* (2005).²¹ For Updike, the extrapolation "to include 'psychological' and 'social' along with 'visible' ideally sums up what the poet and storyteller hope to render."²² On Alfred Stieglitz's *Winter-Fifth Avenue* (1893), the Updike writes with flair, "the sensation of a city in a snowstorm, down to the texture of the slushy rutted snow and the American flag distantly whipping in the gray sky, has been brought eternally fresh from the era of horse-drawn carriages."²³

Besides reductionism, there is another issue. As the social and political analysis puts a certain spin to an image, where does that leave the photograph's subject? This is a question about agency. The ethical point, it seems to me, is that a photographic subject's views and rectitude deserves recognition. Even in a colonial context, did photography invariably transform a native into a hapless victim of the European gaze? The insight of anthropology has been that in many instances, in colonialism the ruler and the ruled shared common interests in infrastructural improvement, economic development, peace and order—power differences and conflict notwithstanding.²⁴ This is true of British rule in Malaya and in much of Africa. Colonial rule is not invariably an undertaking of naked exploitation and violence as was the case in the Belgian Congo. By giving the colonised a stake in the social and political order, racism towards the natives was moderated, if only out of expediency. Speaking of photography, the natives may see themselves in other ways than the European image makers intended. Agency is not too modish a term to describe colonised people and their sense of selfhood outside European rule. The total destruction of native customs and cultures did not happen under colonial rule, and tribal consciousness became the spirit of anti-colonial struggle; the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952–60) being a classic example. The point is that neither European repression nor the natives' cultural identity can exhaust our understanding of power and production of images in a colonial context. Our postcolonial commitment often encourages a rush to judgement, but the concept of the European photographic gaze remains problematic.

I have been going to Sarawak since 2012 to study the trading system at the upper reaches of the River Rejang, the state's main waterway. A great deal of my time has been spent in the longhouses of the Keyah people, one of the tribes in the Sarawak interior. They make their living by growing rice and cash crops—cocoa, pepper, rubber—which they sell to the Chinese traders in Belaga township downriver. It is a riverine existence worthy of a Conrad novel: the tribal people in their stilted dwellings; the movement of goods along the dark, winding river; the Chinese merchants, greedy and voracious, typical middlemen in the exchange of goods for cash. And befitting a Conradian plot too is the Rajah Brooke dynasty that staged incursions into the interior, opening up the territory for exploitation. In 1947, when the Morrisons arrived, the Brooke family had ceded power to the British Colonial Office. The handover coincided with the heightening of the Cold War. British rule was one by development. In the fight against communism, the aim was social and economic improvement

with the view of eventually transferring power to a liberal, capital-friendly government.²⁵ This was the context of Hedda Morrison's photographic work in Sarawak. Accompanying her husband, she travelled upriver and visited the longhouses, while also travelling on her own. Taken over twenty years (1947–67), the Sarawak photographs are even more modern and contemporary than her China photographs. Many appeared in *Life Magazine* and *National Geographic*—of dense jungle, idyllic scenes of Iban women by the river attending to their toilet au naturel, longhouse existence, government officials attending ceremonies and rituals of tribal people, and public health nurses dispensing services.

The theme of development is pervasive in the Sarawak photographs. If modernity and modern selfhood defined the China images, here it was government assistance and peaceful existence. Viewing of the photographs is enlivened by the bewildering political backdrop. During the Cold War, the West was preoccupied with how to fight communism.²⁶ In the Third World, it was argued, the best way to lessen communism's appeal was to improve the lives of the poor and the marginalised through government planning. Instead of revolution, development—and modernisation—were the stairways to freedom and prosperity, with a little help from capital and the free market.

Demonstrating by a Kenyah midwife and Health Assistant, Long San, Ulu Baram, Sarawak, 1966, shows a midwife teaching a native woman how to bathe a baby the modern way, not in the river, but in an enamel basin with soap and talcum powder. The mother is attentive as she listens to the instructions. The midwife from the health services is friendly and proficient. There is a quiet, glowing intensity about her that suggests a sense of pride—at her profession, at earning a livelihood outside the family farming. The photograph has the feel of a government department services pamphlet, aiming to be accurate and informative. Which invites the question, is this an example of modernisation's intrusion on the traditional way of life and that threatens to bring about its destruction? The Marxist 'underdevelopment' theory is abstract and long-winded. For the mother the health clinic is simply a part of the government largess, like the fertiliser, the seeds, the fry for the communal fishpond. And the mother notices the health worker's stretched ear loops kept in shape by heavy silver rings: she and her assistant are like her, Kenyah people. Kinship has made easier the transition to modernisation.

Travelling along the Rejang River, one encounters scenes and activities reminiscent of what Morrison had set down a few decades before. Things have not radically changed. *Iban Ancestor Festival, Betong (Saribas) district, Sarawak, 1960s* is a fair depiction of the Iban Gawai celebration, a seasonal ritual that appease the ancestors who have brought abundance to the community. The same parade outside the apartments, the same watchful women, the same bare-footed men in rich headgear of feathers—though women are now commonly dressed in blouses and sarongs, the men in cheap polo-shirts and cargo pants. The camera was not there to record the night-to-morning drinking in which the visitor was obliged to participate, and Tiger Beer now supplements the traditional rice brew *tuak*. Retained in my memory is the noise, the rowdiness of the proceedings. In the photograph, the Iban elder who heads the parade holds a bowl from which he would have taken a big gulp, as he takes his steps forward. He is advancing though a corridor of people, like a narrow road with trees alongside it. When you dwell on the photograph long enough, stillness gives way to motion. The drink in the man's hand, the music you could hear if you try hard enough, the rapt attentiveness of the audience; everything comes alive.

The age-old craft of Penan sword making is faithfully captured in *Penan Sword Smith, Ulu Baram, Sarawak, 1960s*. The Penan are still hunters and gathers who live in simple shelters of

attap leaves propped up by wooden stakes. The Morrison picture shows their relative 'primitive state' compared with the Ibans, the Kenyahs, and the Bidayus along the Rejang River. Some have taken up farming and moved into model villages to be near schools and other government services. Morrison's image is eerily true to life: the hand-operated bamboo pumps, the molten iron, the shaping of a sword in a mould of clay, the messy floor of a hut-turned-workshop. Your eyes register the skill, the proficiency, the pride. A sword, a parang, can be purchased for a few ringgits at the trading store, but these people would not let go of the tradition and artistry.

The Sarawak territory was for nearly two decades, from 1946 to 1963, a British Crown Colony. In the consideration of colonialism-and-photography, it almost impossible to view Morrison's work in terms of the single narrative of race-and-European rule. In the expansive field of theoretical criticism of colonial imagery, there is Elizabeth Edward's pioneering *Anthropology and Photography 1860–1920*.²⁷ Many of the by now familiar portraits of native people of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries are found in the contributed chapters of this book. From page to page, from contributor to contributor, the reader is led through a plethora of grimy-faced men and women, natives posing as human specimens for the study of physical anthropology, men each with a fetish in their hands—a prop for their arcane beliefs and ritual practices. These pictures present a soft target for postcolonial critique. If European racism is evident in these images, it is also that daguerreotype demanded the subject to pose in absolute stillness, which partly explains their intensely forced gaze back at the camera. It can be considered that technology had something to do with the stilted postures of these photographic subjects. We are on surer ground when we revisit the question, how did colonial subjects perceive the images made of them? It is a question about shifting political thinking and the effect of a different mode of administrative rule.

As Sarawak state was propelled forwards by its development, the native people too had their own view of policy and their needs. It is the genius of British rule to emphasise the common ground between the aim of political stability and the promotion of the social and economic welfare of the native communities. The tribal leaders I have met were young men during the British takeover. Being shown the Morrison pictures, they recall the 'development fever' of their time: another visit from the agricultural officer, the District Officer squatting on the floor consulting with the longhouse residents, the opening of a road or a small bridge attended by officials and local leaders; the government-funded repair of an old jetty. People complained too—about the pressure to plant cash crops, about the unpopular poll tax, but they recognised too the benefits and services the government had brought.

One can't blame Morrison, or her photographic subjects, for not discerning British strategy. We do not expect a photographer to be a philosopher nor a social scientist. Morrison's work displays no ideological preoccupation that would fire up a postcolonial critique. In the Republic of China and later in Sarawak, Morrison was following what was considered good practice at the time. Different circumstances called for different concepts, but the tools were the same, the impulses were allied. Looking at the photographs of post-independence Sarawak, they exude optimism and a sense of a fresh beginning. Still, there is the ominous element to consider.

Call it the tragedy of modernisation where liberal freedom is market freedom, some benefit more than others. Sarawak's transition from colonial rule to independence was more or less as planned. Currently, elections are fundamentally free, but competition among political leaders with rich natural resources invites corruption and misuse of state authority. The Morrison photographs may lack ideological bite, but they prove remarkably prescient—if you know where to look.

From 1960 to 1966, Hedda Morrison was a photographer with the Information Office of the Sarawak government, a position that took her to numerous government functions. *Reception at The Istana (Government House), Kuching, Sarawak, 1963*, depicts one such occasion. We are far away from the longhouse existence; in the cocktail party, two men are deep in conversation. Each holds a drink in his hand, a teeth-baring smile on their faces. On one side is Dato Temenggong Oyong Lawai Jau, a Kenyah chief; on the other side the then Malaysian Ambassador to the United States, an ethnic Chinese. Both are wearing a suit and tie, though the Kenyah chief has the trademark mop-topped haircut and extended earlobes. In a government reception like this, the hangers-on and the low rank officials would, as a matter of course, make their appearance. The photographer has relegated the minor guests to the dark recesses; a ghostly presence unworthy of the eye. Yet, they make up the army of aids and enablers who help grease the machine of graft and corruption. *Reception at The Istana* has seized on a situation that encapsulates the many strands—all allegedly positive—of the British legacy. The picture shows two men having a good time. Pick what you will, it is instance of cross-cultural communication, a display of inter-ethnic trust among the official circles, an evidence that the Westminster system of government works.

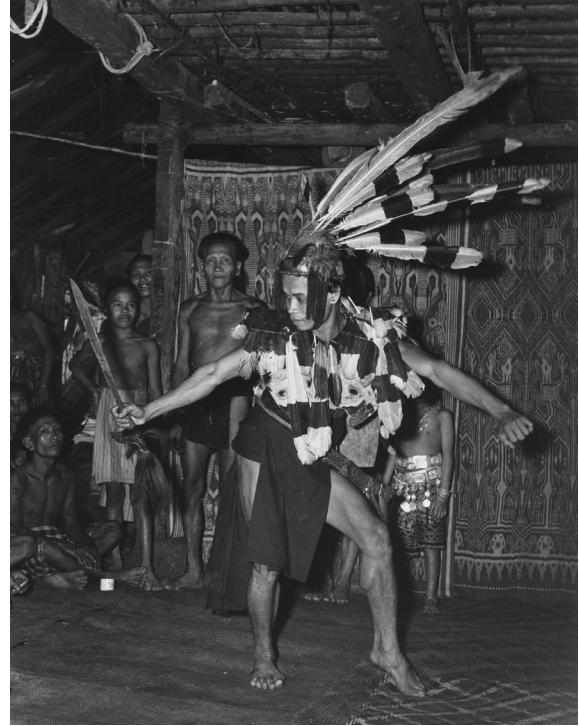
Malaysia's ethnic relations do not have quotidian charm as in other countries. Built into national politics, they define the race-based policy that favours one community and discriminates against others. As a reflection of the wider society, *Reception at The Istana* is jarringly real. The photographer has captured all that was relevant when surveying the scene. The bacchanalian enjoyment has an intensity and rhythm that both the eye and mind register. If the 'ethnic communication' is emblematic of the wider state politics, the image is both mystifying and revealing.

Hedda Morrison died in 1991. Having settled in Canberra, Australia's capital city, they had enjoyed the city's intellectual life and rural surroundings. She had remained busy, giving lectures and taking photographs for the Australian Information Service. A keen observer of the local society, she was made a life member of the Canberra Photographic Society. The Australian Dictionary of Biography describes her as, "A perky sparrow with a wonderful dry wit and a touch of wickedness."²⁸

Morrison lived through compelling times and her prodigious record of observation was extraordinary. However, her work is not easily deployed for an enquiry into the nature of photography. The German photographer showed no pretension for avant-gardism. The uneasy struggle of reality and its representation was not her *métier*, but the veracity of what she saw and registered was. Do we need to cast doubt on her images via the theoretical modes now applied to works of photography? Death has, so to speak, put the question to rest. Things and images, of course, live on after death. For Morrison, the cessation of her life has left a legacy, and a range of work that puzzles and intrigues and invites new readings.

Morrison was a documenter, whereas Sim Chi Yin is an artist of postcolonial certitude in the way she sees herself. Sim's exhibition *One Day We'll Understand*, at Zilberman Gallery in Berlin in 2021 made arduous viewing. The history of the Malayan Emergency was presented as given, its facts and the political ambitions of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) left unexamined. For an artist working in the twenty-first century, it seems remarkable that a communist revolution could be perceived with such guilelessness. Almost next door to us in Malaysia and Singapore, there had been a 'people's revolution' that was the harbinger of communism's social and moral catastrophe. Who's is to say, if the MCP had gained power, struggle sessions and the 'cleansing' of the old order would not have taken place in Malaya/Malaysia? The point is that after Cambodia (not to mention the USSR and Maoist China) it is impossible to see communism with an innocent eye. And in this sense,

Hedda's camera: and 'the real'



Sim's political artlessness has much to do with the overriding nostalgia in *One Day We'll Understand*. From images of captured "communist terrorists" to the evocation of her insurgent grandfather who died in exile, each is shrouded in a veil of longing—as though the violent struggle is something we should miss, as if the insurgency universally wants our ideological sympathy.

Deploying realism, Sim let her photographs do the work. The piteous images of captured insurgents, and the wretched recollection of her grandfather who had fought the good fight and paid for his suffering; they pull at the heartstrings and leave unanswered the crucial questions about communism's political and moral failures. Sim and Morrison are artists of different temperament, of contrasting approaches to the art of capturing the real. One gives over to the romanticism of an aborted revolution; the other maintained her day-to-day observations. One tries hard and is driven by a certain engagement, the other uncomplicated and purposeful. It is the German-born photographer who allows us the meditative ease to make what we will of her photography. We are endeared to her work, because we are granted the freedom to wander among rich and diverse images, and thus revisit the past and the circumstances of their making. Great art changes us a little. Political art—art with a political agenda—is often too full of checklists and world-changing ambitions to enable this to happen. It is artists like Morrison, modest and lacking in bluster, who make us trust our eyes and truly see, and in the process make one think.

SOUCHOU YAO



Hedda's camera: and 'the real'

Notes

¹ From his 1960 film, *Le Petit Soldat*

² See 'Nostalgia and intervention in colonial archives', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts* 11, 2022, pp. 50–63; see https://artdesign.un2sw.edu.au/sites/default/files/atoms/files/4._nostalgia_and_intervention_in_colonial_archives_souchou_yao.pdf

³ Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes On Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective*, Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 1997, p. xi

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix

⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin, 1972, p. 9, emphasis added

⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York NY: RossettaBooks, 1973, p. 2

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59

⁸ See the method of analysis in, *Claude Lévi-Strauss Structural Anthropology*, Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf trans., New York: Basic Books, 1963

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, New York NY: New Directions, 1963

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 185–86

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 144

¹³ Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance*, NY: Vintage Books, 1997, p. 1

¹⁴ Claire Roberts, Morrison, Hedwig Marie (Hedda) (1908–1991), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 19, 2021; <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/morrison-hedwig-marie-hedda-20706> accessed 24 August 2022

¹⁵ Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life & Art in the 20th Century*, London: Thomas & Hudson, 1998, p. 8

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9

¹⁷ See Souchou Yao, *The Shop on High Street: At home with petite capitalism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

¹⁸ Berger, op cit.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11

²⁰ See for example, *Anthropology & Photography, 1860–1920*, Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992

²¹ John Updike, *Just Looking: Essays on art*, New York NY: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1989, and *Still Looking: Essays on American Art*, New York NY: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1989, 2005

²² Updike, *Just Looking*, p. 200

²³ Updike, *Still Looking*, p. 138

²⁴ See the analysis in Max Gluckman, 'The Bridge: Analysis of a social situation in Zululand', *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand*, Manchester: Manchester University, 1968, pp. 53–58

²⁵ See W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960

²⁶ *Ibid.* The subtitle *A non-Communist Manifesto* all but gives the game away

²⁷ *Anthropology & Photography 1866-1920*, Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992

²⁸ Roberts, op cit.