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Sean Willcock:  
**The Aesthetics of the Negative: Orientalist Portraiture in the Digitised Collodion Plates of John Thomson (1837-1921)**

### ***Introduction***

A key charge issued against Orientalist discourse by postcolonial critics is that it aestheticises its object of study. The ways in which Western writers, artists, and photographers have constructed visions of the East via recourse to exoticising, eroticising, classicising and other such literary and artistic devices have been explored at length by scholars. Historians of visual culture have demonstrated how the aesthetic pleasures gleaned from Orientalist motifs have nourished imperial politics in the European societies in which those motifs circulated. This entwinement of scopophilia and imperialism has placed modern galleries displaying Orientalist art and photography in a fraught position, as the curatorial instinct to encourage aesthetic enjoyment comes into tension with the iconoclastic thrust of scholarship following the pathbreaking anti-colonial framework of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).<sup>i</sup> The first major Said-inspired work of art history – Linda Nochlin's 1983 polemic against nineteenth-century French Orientalist oil painting – was catalysed by an exhibition that, to Nochlin's mind, elevated formal considerations while dismissing ideological critique.<sup>ii</sup> Nochlin's scepticism towards the blandishments of Orientalist aesthetics has been highly generative. A recent book on Orientalist photography by Ali Behdad has even coined the term 'curatorial Orientalism' to diagnose a problematic mode of display that prioritises aesthetic engagements.<sup>iii</sup> So are the visual pleasures of Orientalist images laced indissolubly with the ideologies of imperialism?

This article probes the interrelationships between aesthetics and politics within Orientalist photography by considering the global success of the recent exhibition, 'Through the Lens of John Thomson'. Touring twenty museums across Asia, Europe, and America, the exhibition displayed scenes produced by the Edinburgh-born photographer John Thomson (1837-1921) throughout Singapore, Malaysia, Siam, Cambodia, Hong Kong and China between 1862 and 1872.<sup>iv</sup> The particular emphasis of each iteration has shifted according to venue, with different host-countries opting for specific packages of the imagery; so, for instance, we have separate catalogues dedicated to Thomson's work in China and Siam.<sup>v</sup> During his travels, Thomson produced images of Asian royals, government officials, labourers, landscapes, and – prominently within his oeuvre and its subsequent display – women (fig. 1). Thomson's photographs went on their recent international tour after Betty Yao, Managing Director at Credential International Arts Management, 'fell in love' with the glass-plate negatives held at the Wellcome Library in London.<sup>vi</sup> High-resolution digital positives were made of the 650 negatives, and some were reproduced for the exhibition at 'life size' – a scale much larger than nineteenth-century audiences would ever have encountered them.<sup>vii</sup> This popular exhibition has now been on the road for almost ten years, and been seen by 920,000 people.

The captivatingly detailed digital scans of Thomson's plates – each one encompassing the entire negative, replete with signed and inscribed borders, accidental markings on the emulsion, and fractures to the glass – invite a gaze that fetishises the materiality and contingency of the wet-collodion photographic process. The aestheticisation of photographic imperfections was something that began to occur in the Victorian era with Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79) and her manipulation of the visual effects of imprecise focus, as well as her embrace of certain indexes of production like dirt, fingerprints, and hair adulterating the photographic surface.<sup>viii</sup> Cameron's subsequent canonisation in the history of photography – attested to by her prominence in academic surveys of the medium and the increasing number of exhibitions and conferences dedicated to her work – has primed modern-day audiences for the visual pleasures of the blemish. Yet, while contemporaneous with Cameron, Thomson's imagery would always be retouched before publication, thus removing evidence of the collodion process, such as lines resulting from cracked plates or discolouration from smudged emulsion, and instead cultivating a smooth veneer that stressed the documentary transparency of the medium. Notwithstanding the striking aesthetics of his Orientalist portraiture, Thomson's self-fashioning was primarily of a scientific bent.

The sense of beauty and authenticity – even aura – which we now derive from the fractured materiality of Thomson's negatives is to a considerable extent an inheritance of modernism, with its self-reflexive celebration of a medium's material specificity and representational limits. In other words, we view the aesthetics of the negative differently to Thomson, for whom marred materials were not signifiers of

modernist flair, but flaws to be fixed during the editing process. The modernity of the exhibition's prints – and to us they do seem strikingly modern – is largely an accidental function of a fragile medium, not the result of any avant-garde intentions on the part of their author. So what should we make of such aesthetic qualities, which are heavily emphasised in the show? As Yao, the co-curator, notes, viewers have been impressed by 'how big, how beautiful, how detailed' these 'stunning' prints are – and no wonder.<sup>ix</sup> My aim here is not to condemn this as a lesson in 'curatorial Orientalism', whereby Victorian imperial ideology is smuggled under the cover of formalism – for one thing, this is not a show produced by the West for the West, but was originally arranged by Yao for a Chinese audience. This article is not a review of the exhibition, but rather a response to it. I want to consider whether the show's invitation to pay sustained attention to the aesthetic, material, and thematic qualities of the photographic *negatives* – as opposed to the *positives* disseminated by Thomson over the course of his career – might enable new political readings of his photography to emerge.

### ***Thomson's Portraiture: Then and Now***

Given John Thomson's interest in, and embodiment of, the migrant nature of modernity – whereby the Scottish photographer travelled to Singapore via India to make (among other things) portraits of expatriate Chinese workers (fig. 2), before returning to England to become a member of the Royal Geographical Society, and then circling back to China by way of the British colony of Hong Kong – it seems apt that the recent exhibition of Thomson's work has itself been highly nomadic. Starting in 2009 and still continuing at the time of writing, 'Through the Lens of John Thomson' has injected Thomson's imagery back into the 'arteries of communication' from which it emerged.<sup>x</sup> In a series of papers published in 1866 by the *British Journal of Photography*, entitled 'Practical Photography in Tropical Regions', Thomson – just then back from Southeast Asia – expressed his hope that he had 'done something toward "laying the rails" for the future progress of photography in the far East.'<sup>xi</sup> The metaphor of transportation and the theme of progress point to recurring concerns within the photographer's writings: he was preoccupied with the technologies that linked international zones, from the emergent steamship routes of empire to the growing 'network of telegraphic nerves'.<sup>xii</sup> The photographic volumes published by Thomson over subsequent years emerged at a time of heightened public interest in the logistics of global travel; the Royal Geographical Society had begun to codify the proper methods of fieldwork in *Hints for Travellers* (with the 1865 edition containing the first advice on travel photography), while narratives of exploration were beginning to foster popular Victorian notions of intrepid heroes spearheading scientific discovery, civilisational advancement, and moral instruction in uncharted territories.<sup>xiii</sup>

For Thomson, photography was very much hitched to this wagon of Western-led 'progress'. The camera stood as a sort of hinge between old and new temporalities, penetrating beyond the comfortable bounds of modern transportation systems but serving as a foreshadowing of the technological change to come. If, as Thomson noted frequently with amusement, many Chinese at this time viewed photography rather fearfully as a sort of 'forerunner of death', there was a sense in which this morbid superstitious belief accurately captured something of the camera's significance to Thomson himself.<sup>xiv</sup> To read Thomson's travelogues is to hear from a man who self-consciously situated his photographic practice as a harbinger of 'that divine progress which, by a thousand telegraphs, railways and industries, is tending more and more to bind the nations of the earth together in one universal kinsmanship' – that is to say, as part of a technological matrix that was demolishing the spatial and temporal coordinates of traditional ways of life.<sup>xv</sup> Photography both symbolised innovation and, as Thomson claimed in a talk at the Royal Geographical Society, helped any 'pioneer' seeking to 'map out a new route and to picture to the scientific world at home, in a trustworthy manner, what he himself has observed during his travels.'<sup>xvi</sup>

Imperial ideologies of techno-civilisational progress thus structured both the production and the reception of Thomson's photographs. This is unsurprising for the time, and confirms the basic thesis of postcolonial studies of Orientalist visual culture: that such images buttressed Western claims to superiority over the East. James R. Ryan has noted how Thomson's photographs helped construct a 'scale of civilisation' which contrasted Chinese barbarism – epitomised for Thomson by punishments such as the *cangue* (a wooden collar used for public humiliation) and practices like female foot-binding – unfavourably with 'Western enlightenment'.<sup>xvii</sup> Given the supercilious imperialism implicit within Thomson's oeuvre, it is perhaps surprising that his work has experienced quite so much recent success at exhibition in places like China. However, 'Through the Lens' has effectively reframed his photographs in a manner that invites a more

sympathetic understanding of nineteenth-century cultural relations than a traditional postcolonial reading would allow. Indeed, I would argue that the exhibition encourages a more nuanced reading of these images than Thomson himself appears to have sought through either his writings regarding exploration and industrial development or via his choices when editing and disseminating the images themselves.

Thomson was a skilled photographer whose work was composed in a careful and considered manner; and yet these photographs were hardly meant to be read in the terms encouraged by the large-format prints of the recent exhibition. Victorian viewers in Britain, Singapore, and Hong Kong (the primary regions in which his work circulated) consumed Thomson's imagery in a variety of forms: as cartes-de-visite, as engraved illustrations, and as autotype reproductions. But they were nevertheless always dealing with remediated and edited images: cropped, printed, engraved, captioned, etc. To confront instead a 'life-sized', high-resolution digital print of an entire, warts-and-all glass-plate negative is thus to see a very different presentation of both the medium and the sitter than would have been the case for Thomson's original audience. There are shades in this exhibition of MoMA's famous 'Family of Man' show from the 1950s (which also toured internationally), with large prints encouraging an engagement predicated on the universal recognition of subjectivity among culturally diverse sitters – a show with a politically liberal charge. Thomson, too, as a video on the exhibition website tells us, 'humanised otherwise "exotic creatures" for these westerners.'<sup>xviii</sup> Yet, as I will show, such a humanising gaze is not inherent to Thomson's portraits, but a consequence of the exhibition's particular presentation of them. The humanist reading of his portraiture relies more on the latent qualities of Thomson's negatives than it does on the developed vision of his nineteenth-century output.

It is not that Thomson was anti-humanist. In fact, in his rhetoric about an enlightened, technologically-mediated global progress towards a 'universal kinsmanship', he was in many ways your typical nineteenth-century liberal imperial humanist. But his publications frequently shift the register of his portrait studies from an 'honorific' humanising portrayal of subjects to a 'repressive' anthropological mode – thereby lending credence to Allan Sekula's scornful distrust of the humanist gaze, encapsulated by the dictum that 'every proper portrait...has its counterpart in a mug shot'.<sup>xix</sup> It is striking the extent to which the decisions that were made (either by Thomson himself or by his publishers in London and Hong Kong) concerning the selection of pictures, the cropping of the scenes, the arrangement of the images within his publications, and the captioning of those images all helped to strip Thomson's portraits of the sort of humanising qualities that loom large in the exhibition.

Take 'Manchu Wearing Coiffure' (fig. 3), for example. Viewed as a digital reproduction of the negative, this portrait has many formal qualities prized by the exhibition: there are aesthetically-pleasing marks and inscriptions on the collodion, foregrounding the delicate materiality of the medium; there is the soulful quality to the sitter's gaze, which gives a humanising sense of interiority; and there is the pyramidal construction of the sitter, recalling classic compositional techniques and thereby figuring her within recognisable European aesthetic schema rather than emphasising racial otherness.<sup>xx</sup> Yet in Thomson's *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China; or Ten Years' Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad* (1875), the above portrait is reproduced as an engraved vignette captioned simply as 'Tartar' (i.e. Manchu) – that is, as a representative of an ethnic group – and placed alongside other such Chinese 'types': 'Chinese Boatwoman'; 'Ningpo Woman'; 'Pepohoan' (fig. 4). Such de-individualising captioning was commonplace in Thomson's publications: 'Four Heads of the Labouring Class'; 'Types of the Pepohoan'; 'Male Heads, Chinese and Mongolian'; 'Chinese Female Coiffure'; the list goes on.<sup>xxi</sup>

To look at the Wellcome Trust's digital scans of Thomson's collodion plates is therefore to see engagements with foreignness that feel considerably more sympathetic in their tone than do many contemporary nineteenth-century travel photographs; and yet once we see how such negatives were actually processed for publication during Thomson's lifetime, the difference between Thomson's imagery and the standard Victorian anthropological aesthetic is much diminished. The sense of subjectivity that comes through so forcefully in many of the portraits seen within the recent exhibition is largely lost, and instead we see the emergence of an ethnographic visual grammar of specimens. This was no accident: Thomson was a proud member of the Royal Ethnological Society. It was, as Geoffrey Belknap has shown, the ideals of Victorian science – in particular its investment in racial taxonomy – that ultimately structured Thomson's photographic output.<sup>xxii</sup>

One of the most striking portraits from the recent exhibition – and one which does not fit neatly into a purely scientific conception of Thomson’s practice – is ‘A Chinese Boatwoman’ (fig. 5). The smile marks this image out among contemporaneous photographic portraiture of both Western and non-Western subjects. Situated in a three-quarter pose reminiscent of European portraiture conventions, this woman from Guangzhou in southern China is a lively and engaging figure. It is worth noting that when Thomson came to illustrate a ‘boatwoman’ in his books, he did not choose this example, but opted for a more passive-looking figure (see the top-left portrait of figure 4), one whose downcast and submissive self-presentation was better able to maintain the unidirectional empowerment of the ethnographic gaze. Not only did Thomson crop and caption portraits in a manner that ethnicised his sitters, then, but he also tended to choose for publication those images in which Chinese agency and individuality were less plainly visible in the first place. The ‘Through the Lens’ exhibition thus recuperates an alternative and less domineering visual history by foregrounding some of the portraits that Thomson chose to marginalise.

The exhibition catalogue is likely correct in asserting that this woman’s smile demonstrates she is at relative ease. Thomson’s ability to ingratiate himself with his sitters is attested to by the fact he photographed men and women within their private homes and gardens, creating scenes with an amiable atmosphere and a palpable sense of intimacy (more on this below). Yet European-style portraits such as this are nevertheless ambivalent in their treatment of sitters. On the one hand such figures are rendered in a manner that elevates them in the Western mind, eschewing ethnographic difference by embracing a familiar and dignified European artistic style. But Thomson’s deployment of the three-quarter pose here is not a straightforward honorific. As the photographer states in his written account:

A China will not suffer himself – if he can avoid it – to be posed so as to produce a profile or three-quarter face, his reason being that the portrait must show him to be possessed of two eyes and two ears, and that his round face is perfect as the full moon... The same careful observance of symmetry is carried out in the entire pose of the figure. The face, too, must be nearly as possible devoid of shadow, or if there be any shade at all, it must be equal on both sides. Shadow, they say, should not exist; it is an accident of nature; it should not represent any feature of the face, and therefore should not be portrayed[...].<sup>xxiii</sup>

What might strike us as a sympathetic portrait, then, is at the same time a knowing European affront to Chinese sensibilities.

So, there is a clear tension here between the ostensible ‘sensitivity’ of Thomson’s portraiture as it is presented by the exhibition, and the manner in which those portraits historically came into focus for viewers in terms of the photographer’s wider discourse.<sup>xxiv</sup> The photographs that predominate in ‘Through the Lens’ present engaging sitters who often maintain a lively sense of agency before the camera – hence the pithy description of Thomson in a video on the exhibition website as the ‘Annie Leibovitz of Victorian times’.<sup>xxv</sup> But the expressive personality of the sitter is rarely able to sustain itself within Thomson’s books. The photographer’s text is by no means the worst example of Orientalist condescension in nineteenth-century Britain; in fact, he approaches other cultures with a degree of openness that is notable for the time, and he had many good things to say about the people he encountered. Still, his captions speak volumes about how the individuals in his portraits were ultimately to be understood: as ‘types’, ‘heads’, and ‘natives’. And we must consider Thomson’s delight in reporting on his fearsome repute among a ‘superstitious’ Chinese populace. He was a ‘dangerous geomancer’ whose camera constituted a murderous threat, ‘some black art, which at the same time bereft the individual depicted of so much of the principle of life as to render his death a certainty within a very short period of years.’<sup>xxvi</sup> In this regard, it is telling that one of the only photographs to include Thomson himself is of the photographer inhabiting this dangerous persona by posing with a gun (fig. 6). The elision of the camera and the cannon was endemic to contemporaneous accounts of photography – in particular colonial photography – and Thomson’s own writings were no exception.

Between the anthropological register of his captions and a wider personal narrative steeped in imperialistic hauteur and implicit violence, Thomson’s portraits emerged within an overdetermined interpretative framework for Victorian viewers. An ‘excessive textual anchorage’ serves to frame the imagery in fairly standard Orientalist terms, whereby Asian peoples are mostly denied a sense of individual agency and instead positioned as ciphers for ethnic categories that satisfy the imperial British desire for ordered

knowledge and racial distinction.<sup>xxvii</sup> At which point, we are a long way away from the humanising aspects touted by the exhibition.

### *Tarrying with the Negative*

The above account of the recent exhibition in the context of Victorian imperial ideology and anthropological practice constitutes an analysis based on a sort of ‘paranoid’ reading – to use Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s term – of the show, in which the visual pleasures of the portraiture are revealed to be a screen for the nefarious ideological work performed by the image.<sup>xxviii</sup> Although a portrait may strike us as sympathetic, humanising, or simply beautiful, such qualities can be shown to either distract from, or actively feed into, a set of nineteenth-century imperial suppositions. This was the nub of Nochlin’s argument back in 1983 when she railed against an exhibition for opting to foreground the aesthetic qualities of French Orientalist painting while sidestepping the political significance of such art: a decision which she described then as ‘art-historical business as usual’.<sup>xxix</sup> And it is key to Behdad’s recent criticism of ‘curatorial Orientalism’ in which ‘formalistic and aestheticized approaches to photographic representations of the Middle East disavow the political aims and cultural implications of how the new medium of representation was enmeshed in and developed along modern colonial rule in the region.’<sup>xxx</sup> Considering such critiques of curatorial formalism – and bearing in mind my account of Thomson’s scientific self-fashioning above – how should we think about the heavy emphasis placed on the aesthetic qualities of Thomson’s Orientalist photographs in ‘Through the Lens’?

It should be noted that ‘Through the Lens’ differs in one crucial respect from previous Orientalist exhibitions that have been criticised for privileging the aesthetic: we are not merely reproducing the visual effects originally intended by the artist here. Instead of exhibiting the photographs as Thomson himself rendered them for his Victorian audience – cropped, remediated, and situated within an anthropological framework – the exhibition allows us to see aspects of the unworked visual materials with which Thomson began. So, what can these digitised glass-plates tell us about Thomson’s practice that his more polished public imagery does not?

For one thing, we see more than Thomson ever did: the high resolution of the Wellcome Library’s digital scans means that the photographer’s images provide more visual detail now than any print would have done during his lifetime. This points to the extraordinary ‘data ratio’<sup>xxxi</sup> of photography, its ability to capture more than the photographer could ever have possibly intended – its technics exceed our own conscious visual capacities, inaugurating what Walter Benjamin termed the ‘optical unconscious’.<sup>xxxii</sup> This exorbitant quality of photography – its ability to exceed the bounds of intention – complicates notions of authorial agency. These new digital scans therefore implicitly challenge the capacity of Thomson to fully determine the meaning of his oeuvre. However, advanced digital technology is not required to wrestle the significance of this imagery away from Thomson. Simply tarrying with the negatives, rather than the published output, allows us to get a different sense of the meaning of Thomson’s photography within the Anglo-Sino encounter.

A specific example will help to reveal an aspect of photographic portraiture that Thomson suppressed when he transformed some of his negatives for publication. In ‘Manchu Bride in Her Wedding Clothes’ (fig. 7), we see two women standing in front of a crude studio backdrop. The screen is portable and can be seen in numerous other of Thomson’s negatives, its presence highlighting the theatricality and ephemerality of the image-making encounter. Yet the background of the scene exceeds the bounds of the backdrop: unfocused glimpses of stairs, pillars, and the landscape view from this private Chinese domestic space impinge upon the formally framed area of the portrait. Christopher Pinney has coined the term ‘visual noise’ to refer to the peripheral details one often finds on the edges of a negative, arguing that incidental data of this sort points to the contingency of the ‘pro-filmic’ photographic event: ‘no matter how carefully the photographer tries to arrange things otherwise, the pro-filmic always intrudes.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> When looking at Thomson’s *negatives*, then, we are often given a more contextualised tableau, whether that be through the presence of studio props or the intrusion of environmental aspects that are not arranged by the photographer – which escape his control. The subsequent de-contextualisation of these portraits – the neat cropping of ‘visual noise’ – helped Thomson reclaim his compromised authorship over the scene (fig. 8), while at the same time working in concert with anthropological captioning to position the Chinese actors as static ‘types’ defined by the colonial text, rather

than as affluent individuals who, ensconced in their private domestic realm, participate in a dynamic and transitory space of performance with a foreign guest.

In other words, Thomson's cropping worked to disavow the fluidity of his photographic encounters. As Ariella Azoulay has argued, the photographic situation is intrinsically a 'dynamic field of power relations' that resists being organised under the authority of a single sovereignty: power is always distributed (albeit unevenly) among photographer, subject, space, apparatus, and viewer(s).<sup>xxxiv</sup> We get a better sense of this distribution in the negative 'Manchu Bride in Her Wedding Clothes', wherein Thomson's portable backdrop is shown as an ephemeral supplement to a Chinese domesticity governed by those he is photographing, who appear to be enjoying the encounter. Sovereignty over the image is thus split between the male head of the household, Yang Fang, a government official who had befriended Thomson and invited him into his home (Fang also sat for the photographer); Thomson himself, who controls the camera; and the Chinese woman who commands the attention of both her affectionate servant and of Thomson, a foreign guest in her secluded garden;. Moreover, such power dynamics exist within a complex geopolitical climate in which Qing dynasty sovereignty persists in the face of British imperial encroachments. Thus, while Thomson may have subscribed to an imperial worldview, he did not actually wield domineering power in China, since China was not administered by the British. The photographer's situation on the ground was consequently often one of vulnerability rather than strength, dialogue rather than decree. Thomson adopted what might be termed a tactical humanism: his success as a photographer could not be accomplished on the basis of coercive imperial clout (although memories of British bombardments were fresh) or an established colonial *habitus*, but instead relied on his ability to gain trust, strike up rapport, or enter into negotiation in order to acquire consent from sitters and win access to sequestered domestic spaces.<sup>xxxv</sup>

To a large extent, Thomson's imperial privilege was discursively constructed after the fact, via the strategic selection, editing, and narration of his images in accordance with the aloof, dehumanising terms of Victorian ethnography. Away from the constraining scientific grammar of Thomson's books, we can more easily perceive aspects of participatory and often congenial-seeming image-making events, not mere Chinese submissions to anthropological categorisation. Smiles, intimacy, and an apparent ease before the lens are not uncommon in Thomson's Chinese portraits, marking them out from the standard anthropological photography of the era; and while Thomson himself did not go on to consciously promote such unique traits within his corpus, the recent exhibition does. We are thus given a different view of Western photography in nineteenth-century China: not as a crude expression of imperial adventurism and ethnographic mastery, but rather as a potential site of collaborative performance and reciprocal recognition: a dialogical space. In this sense, it allows for what could be considered a sort of 'reparative' (to return to Sedwick's terminology) approach to the material, in which elements of this Orientalist oeuvre are read in terms of a kind of unrealised potential: there are portraits here that contain elements of cultural sympathy and traces of Chinese agency that were stifled by the imperial ideologies and anthropological visual conventions of the Victorian era. 'Humanism' is not straightforwardly opposed to 'ethnography' here, but rather – as with Sekula's account of the 'honorific' photographic portrait containing within itself the shadow of the 'repressive' mug-shot – Thomson's humanism is always-already compromised by his ethnographic aspirations.

## **Conclusion**

The Wellcome Trust's digital scans of Thomson's negatives enables us to see a history of these photographs that runs counter to their author's intentions. As an exhibition, however, 'Through the Lens' ultimately leaves one with the impression that Thomson *did* actively intend and nurture the humanising aesthetic that is on display. This perhaps explains why the exhibition adopts a fairly lionising tone with regard to Thomson, something that reaches its apogee with their hagiographic funding campaign to restore the photographer's London gravestone so as to 'provide a lasting legacy'.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In fact, though, the large-scale prints of the exhibition embrace aspects of Thomson's practice that he considered to be extraneous – or at least not of use to the scientific discourses within which he was building his photographic career. 'Through the Lens' encourages a shift in attention from the historic dissemination of Thomson's photographs to the processes of making them. The means of photographic production are evidenced both by the presence of blemishes that attest to the fraught and delicate materiality of the technology, and through the negative's frequent inclusion of the *mise-en-scène* of photography, the 'visual noise' that points to the contingent, constructed, and negotiated nature of the photographed event. We are thus given a more nuanced perspective on the photographer's (limited) authorial and imperial authority, and a more sympathetic picture of cross-cultural

relations, than Thomson – as an ambitious ethnographer and swashbuckling geographer – actually intended to display. In focussing on the aesthetics of the negative, we find a way of reading imperial photography against the grain.

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- <sup>i</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.
- <sup>ii</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'The Imaginary Orient', in: *Art in America*, vol. XX, May 1983, 119-191.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East*, Chicago and London 2016, 8.
- <sup>iv</sup> I went to see 'China and Siam: Through the Lens of John Thomson' at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London (12 April - 22 June 2018). For a full list of venues from 2009 to the present, see: <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/venues>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>v</sup> See Phaisān Pīammētāwat (ed.), *Siam: Through the Lens of John Thomson, 1865-66*, Bangkok 2015; and Betty Yao (ed.), *China: Through the Lens of John Thomson, 1868-1872*, Bangkok 2015.
- <sup>vi</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/fascination-china-betty-yao-victorian-photographer-john-thomson>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>vii</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/installation>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>viii</sup> See Mirjam Brusius, 'Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs', in: *History of Photography*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2010, 342-355.
- <sup>ix</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/fascination-china-betty-yao-victorian-photographer-john-thomson>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>x</sup> John Thomson, *Illustrations of China and its People*, III, London 1873, Plate IX.
- <sup>xi</sup> John Thomson, 'Practical Photography in Tropical Regions', in: *British Photography Journal*, 12 October 1866, 404.
- <sup>xii</sup> John Thomson, *Through China With a Camera*, London and New York 1899, 253.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford 2001, 63.
- <sup>xiv</sup> John Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China; or Ten Years' Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad*, London 1875, 463.
- <sup>xv</sup> The camera was often interwoven with wider networks of modern infrastructure. See Simone Natale, 'Photography and Communication Media in the Nineteenth Century', in: *History of Photography*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2012, 451-456.
- <sup>xvi</sup> John Thomson, 'Photography and Exploration', in: *Proceedings of Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, vol. 13, no. 11, Nov 1892, 669-675.
- <sup>xvii</sup> James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, London 1997, 165-166.
- <sup>xviii</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/john-thomson-annie-liebovitz-19th-century-china-siam-phuong-lecocq>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>xix</sup> Allan Sekula, 'Traffic in Photographs', in: *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983*, Nova Scotia 1984, 79.
- <sup>xx</sup> Indeed, figure 1, a similar study, was chosen for the front cover of the exhibition catalogue. See Yao 2015 (reference 5).
- <sup>xxi</sup> See John Thomson, *Illustrations of China and its People: A Series of Two Hundred Photographs, with Letterpress Descriptive of the Places and People Represented*, Volumes 1-4, London 1873-74.
- <sup>xxii</sup> See Geoffrey Belknap, 'Through the Looking Glass: Photography, Science and Imperial Motivations in John Thomson's Photographic Expeditions', in: *History of Science*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2014, 73-97.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Thomson 1899 (reference 12), 32.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/biography>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>xxv</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/john-thomson-annie-liebovitz-19th-century-china-siam-phuong-lecocq>> (22.08.2018).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Thomson, 'Introduction', in: *Illustrations of China and its People*, 1873, unpaginated.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Behdad 2016 (reference 3), 25.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you', in: Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank, *Touching feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, London 2003.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Nochlin 1983 (reference 2), 119.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Behdad 2016 (reference 3), 8.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography to India*, London 2008, 5.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in: *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1999, 513.

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Christopher Pinney, 'Seven Theses on Photography', in: *Thesis Eleven* vol. 113, no. 1, 2012, 149.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York 2008, 112.

<sup>xxxv</sup> I am referring to Christopher Pinney's use of the term 'colonial *habitus*' here: a matrix of imperial permissions, bureaucracy, finance, transport and consumerism that worked to structure the environment in ways that rendered it amenable to colonials. Pinney 2008 (reference 31), 30.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> <<http://www.johnthomsonexhibition.org/grave-restoration>> (22.08.2018).