

## **WORKSHOP REPORT**

### **VISUAL SOUTH: USING VISUAL SOURCES AS ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES**

**MAPUTO, 13-19 SEPTEMBER 2004**

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#### General observations

This workshop entitled Visual South was the first of its kind. SEPHIS and CODESRIA have organized workshops on social history in Dakar for several years, which have brought together postgraduate students from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean to develop their methodological skills and present the early fruits of their research. But this workshop was specifically aimed at highlighting new kinds of sources, namely the visual, and facilitating ways of productively incorporating them into historical scholarship. The engagement with photographs, art and film (to name the most obvious visual materials) has opened up new fields and questions for historians, and one of the main anxieties experienced by young scholars is to legitimize their use in the discipline. It is fascinating to see visual history encountering similar kinds of questions as to reliability and evidence that oral history in Africa faced in the early 1960s. But there is no doubt that visuality is gaining more and more acceptance on a wide disciplinary front.

The timing of this workshop indicates a real vision on the part of SEPHIS and CODESRIA to put the South firmly at the forefront of historiographical innovation. Our Cameroonian participant Nkwi Walter Gam aptly described the impact of the workshop announcement as 'a time-bomb'. It was a great privilege to be invited to act as convenor of this path-breaking postgraduate workshop, in which students came to try out their ideas and to absorb new ones, and in which we all had to stretch our minds.

The period of one week made the workshop very intense, especially as thirteen student presentations had to be fitted into the time available. It also made the task of revising the short papers that students initially presented quite a challenging one, which was the required assignment of the workshop. However the limited time had the virtue of admirably focusing everyone's energies and attention. Teaching objectives also had to be very clear. Thus although there was so much we could not do, I was pleasantly surprised at how much ground could be covered in such a short span of time, and how productive a workshop of this length could be. But one area in which much more time would have been welcome, I suspect, was in the student consultation sessions with convenor and resource persons. Here one gained a sense of a great student demand for individual feedback and guidance, given the difficulty of access to literature on visuality, the newness of the field for historians, and for those more advanced students, the complexity of the issues they have raised in their work. As convenor, it was a battle to find enough time for each student, especially towards the end of the week.

#### Workshop preparation

In terms of planning, I had the great advantage of meeting with Dr Sokhna Gueye in Maputo two months prior to the workshop itself, which gave us the opportunity to discuss

the programme and develop some working principles. Thus we could agree on inserting visual literacy sessions as a core element of the workshop, and prepare for a range of equipment needs that included for example hiring two small digital cameras for students to use during their time in the city. (I attach a few samples of their photographs with this report.) With certain principles established, the details of the programme were left in Dr Gueye's very capable hands in Dakar as the applications were finalized. The final programme was well-balanced thematically and regionally, leaving some room for manoeuvre when last-minute changes were necessary.

I must also add that the preparatory July meeting in Maputo allowed us to make contact with key Mozambican academics and archivists, which translated into a degree of local participation in the workshop, and enabled us to identify important local sites of visual culture and history. I had consulted historians of Mozambique for contacts, and Dr Gueye had brought CODESRIA network lists, which together led to a series of fascinating meetings. Though there was much more that could have been done to make Mozambican history known to workshop participants beforehand (see below), I do not think the workshop could have been run at all satisfactorily without such preliminary meetings.

Still on the subject of workshop preparation, one definite area of difficulty turned out to be the appointment of resource persons. Ideally, given the diversity of visual media, this workshop should have included one expert on photography, one on film and one on art or some other medium such as architecture. There should also have been a regional spread of expertise. Unfortunately this was difficult to accommodate, especially when shortlisted candidates withdrew from participation at the last minute. The next time such a workshop is arranged, it is strongly advised that a fuller list of applicants be solicited and selections made and confirmed well in advance. One resource person, Leslie Witz, was only able to remain in Maputo for two days because of the late invitation he received. In this situation we greatly appreciated the additional scholarly presence of Willem van Schendel, to represent the SEPHIS Board and to assist in the chairing and substantive discussion of the sessions. Unfortunately the constant demands of workshop organization prevented Sokhna Gueye from actively participating in most sessions, though her inputs were very valuable when occasion arose, especially given her archaeological training.

The selection of students also raised some unique problems, given the wide range of visual sources they research. Many were at different stages of research, with different levels of skills. In the selection process next time, perhaps more attention can be given to the specifics of the visual media that students research. Visual turns have been more successful in some fields than others, for example photography is better understood by historians than sculpture. Student research topics need to be more balanced against the expertise of the resource persons and convenor employed in such a workshop. Other interesting signs of uneven development of higher education in postcolonial countries also emerged, especially around historical and methodological training, but this is no doubt a regular feature of the SEPHIS-CODESRIA workshops across the South.

#### Academic programme

The three striking issues to emerge from this workshop were:

1. the challenge of making the discipline of history attend to ‘sources’ that may not fit the conventional requirements of evidence, e.g. photography, film, art
2. the crucial importance of visual literacy as a skill that must be developed for historians and scholars in other disciplines, independent of any other considerations
3. the need to apprehend and articulate different **ways of seeing** around the world, as opposed to the hegemony of western/eurocentric histories of vision and looking.

These matters exercised participants over the course of the workshop, chronologically in emphasis as I have listed them. In my outline of the academic programme, I will return to these issues several times.

The week was structured around four formal lectures, two by the convenor and one by each of the two resource persons, with four visual literacy sessions. In addition, Professor Joel das Neves Tembe of the National Archive of Mozambique and the History Department of Eduardo Mondlane University gave an opening lecture that introduced important aspects of the country’s visual arts and history. A final workshop lecture was also given by Antonio Sopa from the National Archive, on the history of photography in Mozambique. Thus the lecture programme was very rich, with a limited time available for discussion after each one.

My first lecture as convenor addressed the visual turn in history, focusing mainly on photography, exploring notions of time and the different narrative implications of text and image. My main examples were drawn from colonial photographic archives in Namibia, which were familiar to some students already from the 1998 publication *The Colonising Camera*. The next lecture was given by resource person Leslie Witz, who spoke on film and African history, using three different television series about the continent (Davidson, Mazrui and Gates) to critique film and representational practices. Professor Witz from the University of the Western Cape kindly joined the workshop at late notice, and was unable to stay longer than two days given his other commitments. This was unfortunate as a more sustained discussion of film would have been enormously useful. In addition, he dropped quite a bombshell in his lecture by arguing - in the context of a critique of discourses around truth and the real - that history per se does not exist, a proposition that caused considerable angst. In fact in the early unsettled state of the workshop, as students were still finding their feet, it brought out symptoms of anxiety around the evidentiary status of visual images, as putatively demanded by the discipline of history. In their individual ways, the two film studies postgraduates (Paleker and Ogunleye) showed distinct signs of nervousness around this issue, where they could have been more productively engaged in sizing up theory and historiography. A shift in emphasis over the next few days towards more visual and methodological skills helped to alleviate this anxiety. But what Professor Witz also offered that day was a personal account of his development as a historian, originally rooted in social history and positivism, then later attracted to the ‘production of history’ approach. A number of students identified with the kind of training he put into words here, and found it useful to have it articulated self-consciously in this way. The lecture and screening of film clips generated so much discussion that no formal visual literacy session was possible that day.

The first substantial literacy session happened by the third day, which was quite late in the programme. It involved projecting a number of photographs and asking

participants to engage firstly with the content (denotation), and then move to an interpretive level (connotation). There was no doubt a bias towards African documentary photographs generally in these sessions, but all students came with pretty limited knowledge of the works involved. The idea was to make it an experimental and non-threatening space, to get away from any single authoritative voice, and to develop some common vocabulary for the discussion of images. All were free to engage empirically and associatively, and the level of participation was much higher than was generally the case with lectures and student presentations. Several photographs by Ricardo Rangel (dubbed the father of Mozambican photography) were included in an attempt to connect more meaningfully with Mozambican history, and here the local participants were very much on home ground. Despite a lack of confidence in English, or with the help of colleagues translating, we at last had contributions from almost all participants. The two literacy sessions using photographs allowed for the exposure of pictures that were not tied to presentations or lectures, and Rangel's work in particular recurred in the poster exhibition that the workshop visited, and the wonderful closing lecture by Antonio Sopa. This at least gave some small sediment of Mozambican visual history the opportunity to sink in.

There is no doubt that setting time aside for visual literacy, which also gave space for more general historical literacy to develop, was very useful in sparking a different kind of workshop energy and to some extent putting all participants on the same footing. More could have been done with this. Also, the exercise was obviously easier with photographs than other media, but for any future workshop, ways need to be found to run effective literacy classes with film, art, sculpture, urban space, architecture and more. In addition, time did not allow for students to come forward with their own material for these sessions, which would have been far more interesting and exposed the workshop to a wider range of visual archives from the South. But the positive discovery here was that the method has potential.

As convenor I gave my second and last lecture on documentary photography and the parallels with history as a discipline. On Friday, our second resource person Bhaskar Mukhopadyay gave a lecture on folk art in India, and touched on debates concerning the older aspects of India's visual culture and recent globalisation. Dr Mukhopadyay's approach was more theoretical and sociological than historical and visual, and his interventions throughout the workshop proved to be provocative. This had its benefits in challenging students to articulate their responses in more theoretically informed ways, or to find ways to dispute the efficacy of this. Dr Mukhopadyay in his turn was challenged to provide more intensive visual readings of the artworks in his research, and those selected for his visual literacy session. Here the presence of a number of Indian students and Willem van Schendel enriched the possibilities, as they all brought their different knowledges of the subcontinent to bear. In particular, the workshop began to engage with the notion of *darsan* (explained as the sacred gaze in India) which opened up possibilities of a critique of Eurocentric approaches to visual studies. The workshop started to ask questions about African and other ways of seeing, which in some ways neatly tied this workshop into some of the debates raised at the August workshop in Cape Town on *Gender & Visuality*.

### Student presentations

The student presentations began with photography, running through 19<sup>th</sup> century Barbados, 20<sup>th</sup> century Argentina and colonial Kerala in India. It is clear that research and innovation in the field is happening in all three sites, though in many ways Maria Guembe's work on the centrality of photographs to the Memorias Abiertas campaign was the most remarkable in linking past and present, and in recontextualising ID photos of the Disappeared. But India and Africa share important agendas in historicizing photographic practices and questioning colonial categories, and it is clear that this should be built into future collaborative research frameworks. I have briefly mentioned the student presentations on film that occurred on the second day, and more time would have been welcome for the viewing of Paleker's documentary on Cissie Gool, especially for purposes of building film literacy. In addition, some members of the National Archive screened footage of a traditional ceremony in a rural area, offering the opportunity to see how culture and history are filmed, but again time did not allow for proper discussion to develop around this work.

On Wednesday Farabi Fasih and Sushmita Sridhar gave extremely interesting presentations, on city maps and artistic sketches respectively. Sridhar offered one of the most suggestive ways of approaching different visual media, by arguing that theory developed in one area might throw light on others. In her case she showed the relevance and limitations of photographic theory, and how sketches might extend certain issues. This could offer important methodological possibilities, as there is frequent inter-textuality (as it were) between different visual registers, and her bold move to apply this was very refreshing.

The Thursday student sessions continued with Babacar Ba's penal history in Senegal, dealing with forms of graffiti and spatialisation, followed by Mozambican student Paolo Lopes José who spoke about the early stages of his research on cultural patrimony in areas with rock art. Mary Ntabeni had been struggling with how to research issues of aeroplane names and pictures from World War 2, paid for by the people of Lesotho. Over the course of the workshop she made some interesting breakthroughs. Ntabeni had also attended the *Gender & Visuality* workshop in Cape Town, and reported that methodologically the Maputo workshop was of much greater assistance. On Friday student presentations were rounded up by two research pieces on sculpture, with Mukhopadyay giving a very accomplished paper on Khiching in India, and Gam setting out some initial parameters on the Kom Fandom. Anna Villarba-Torres arrived late from the Philippines and showed considerable fluency and competence in catching up with workshop debates. She presented her work on Cordillera postcards in this last session.

This outline of student work is not intended to be a report card, but to give a sense of the range and unevenness that extended across the workshop. As convenor it was very challenging to give meaningful feedback on all papers, especially with time so limited. In addition, the library resources in Maputo were necessarily very limited, given the Portuguese language medium and the fact that the workshop took place in a hotel. To compensate for this, and to try and provide an equal range of basic readings to all, I arranged for a small reader to be printed in Cape Town prior to my arrival in Maputo. This was distributed to all students. In addition, I brought a suitcase of loose photocopied articles and books that might be of relevance, to which Bhaskar Mukhopadyay and Leslie Witz also contributed items, and which ultimately became our resource box. Students

were encouraged to borrow from this box every evening during the consultation sessions that I arranged in the spacious hotel lobby in the absence of an office. Inevitably these readings could not address all the specifics that arose, but they went some way towards providing further reading within the time framework. Students did report that they found it hard to read all the workshop material, in the short afternoon and evening time available. This also made the chances of holding seminar-type sessions (instead of lectures) very slim, within our time frame.

Despite these problems, however, nearly all students did considerable revision of their short papers and submitted improved versions by the deadline on Saturday. It emerged that outside the formal workshop sessions, peer discussions in the shared computer room set up by Dr Gueye provided a good sounding board. I was impressed at how certain students solved difficult problems in the course of the week – notably Sujithkumar Parayil – and produced much sharper work in a short space of time. It suggested that for a number of participants, motivation was high, ideas were taking root, and confidence was growing. If this is the case, then the workshop was a success.

#### General arrangements of the workshop

Translation during the entire workshop would have been ideal, allowing for more genuine participation by Mozambican colleagues who attended. In practice, translation was only provided on the opening day of the workshop and this prevented sustained dialogue with our counterparts. The presence of Paolo José in the student body mitigated this problem to some degree, as he interfaced easily between the anglophone and lusophone contingents.

The study facilities were limited to hire computers in a hotel room, which were adequate for the most part, but printing caused a constant headache. Email facilities were difficult, except through a small internet café outside the hotel. These were site problems rather than the fault of any CODESRIA organization, and participants soon adjusted to the situation. The audio-visual services arranged were more than adequate, and the hotel facilities in terms of meeting-room and catering were very satisfactory, if not luxurious. Ditto the comfortable accommodation. The location of the hotel was very convenient for city walks, exploration and outside meals. There is absolutely no doubt that despite Mozambique's recent difficult history, Maputo is a very pleasant city for a workshop exercise such as this and I would have no hesitation in recommending it again. Travel to Maputo was not terribly complicated for most, given the proximity of a big international airport in Johannesburg – though the latter insisted on losing our luggage repeatedly. This problem was quickly solved however with the help of the hotel.

I must conclude these remarks on the general arrangements by expressing my appreciation for the work done by Dr Gueye. She relieved the convenor of any responsibility for organizational matters, which was doubly welcome given that our previous SEPHIS-sponsored workshop on *Gender & Visuality* ended only two weeks earlier in Cape Town, and had greatly overextended my capacities. Despite being overloaded herself at times, Dr Gueye remained warm and practical, and made sure I remained answerable for the intellectual programme alone. This made it possible for me to really enjoy the workshop.

### Activities outside the workshop & the Maputo context

A weakness of the workshop was the lack of some kind of orientation literature, film or lecture about the last few decades of Mozambique's history, which could have made the urban environment much more meaningful to the workshop participants. I made considerable attempts to obtain *Kuxa Kanema*, an excellent documentary about the history of film and revolution in Mozambique. The film producers in Lisbon did not respond to my emails, and a film festival organizer in Cape Town could not send the video in time to Maputo to enable us to see it. The overwhelming need to focus on visuality during the workshop meant that we had little time for studying local history, and this was unfortunate in terms of helping participants understand some of the public art and monuments they were seeing in the city, as well as in galleries, especially when public texts were in Portuguese. However it must be said that given the backgrounds of our participants, most of them were able to read the city in many interesting socio-economic and cultural ways despite not having a detailed knowledge of Mozambique's colonial and postcolonial history. A number of digital photographs by students attest to this.

Besides the workshop dinner at Costa do Sol, a popular family restaurant north of Maputo, and another social event at the hotel on the Saturday evening, two formal outings were arranged. The first was an afternoon visit to the home of Malangatana Valente Ngwenya which also serves as a gallery in the Aeroporto neighbourhood, on Wednesday 15 September. This was on the recommendation of Professor Tembe, who assisted at the opening of the workshop and who had highlighted a number of Mozambican artists. The visit was extraordinary for the steep immersion into Mozambican art and history that it allowed, as the rooms of the house were kindly made accessible by the artist's son. Large canvases both competed and resonated with a range of sculptures placed strategically against the visual backdrops. Digital photos were allowed, creating a remarkable set of studio backgrounds for workshop members to photograph each other and the work. It was a fantastic and theatrical space, raising many questions about Mozambican history and artistic traditions in the country. Malangatana's work certainly conveyed a sense of the horrors survived (or not) by Mozambicans during the liberation and civil wars, for he is an artist equal to a history that remains in many ways unspeakable. The scale of his work over time however also offered a sense of hope and efflorescence. The vividness of the work seemed to leave a profound impression, but it was not something we could easily put to straight to use in the workshop. Perhaps that is one of the complexities of such painting, and of being in the presence of so many astonishing canvases: it takes time to absorb any part of it.

A second outing was organized to an exhibition of posters called *Up Front and Personal*, sponsored and developed by the British Council in southern Africa. This had been prepared in advance for Saturday morning before the end of the workshop, with local bilingual guides and materials available to the workshop. The exhibition looked at satirical portrayals of history and politics in the UK, South Africa and Mozambique. Participants were given questionnaires to complete, but these were more appropriate to school students, and more oriented towards historical awareness rather than visual literacy. The visit however was useful in making some further historical and visual connections for the workshop. Finally, one of the guides referred me to the memorial site of slain journalist Carlos Cardoso when we raised questions about his poster: this led to a

very illuminating visit on my last morning in Maputo, with the last remaining student, Nkwi Walter Gam.

Final comments and recommendations

The workshop was timely and appropriate in addressing a growing level of concerns among young historians and scholars in the South who have taken the visual turn. The encounter offered some support and suggestions for further theorization, and exposed students from different parts of the world to visual cultures they would not normally encounter. I would thus recommend that the exercise be repeated again at a later stage, with some refinement and revision in its planning. This should include:

1. more thoroughgoing and timely procedures for selection of students and resource persons, to allow for tighter focus and feedback
2. strategic reading on visual theory and history in advance of the workshop by all selected participants, giving the latter a similar reading background when they arrive, and ensuring that more seminar-type sessions will be possible as opposed to the constant lecture format
3. more regular and wide -ranging visual literacy sessions
4. orientation material that informs participants of the most important aspects of recent Mozambican or other history (depending on next venue), enabling a deeper understanding of the workshop location, more meaningful interaction with Mozambican counterparts, and greater appreciation of local visual culture.

Again I thank CODESRIA and SEPHIS for giving me the opportunity to participate in this lively and enriching workshop.

Signed: Patricia Hayes

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