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White Lies.

The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal.

Melanie Langpap

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White Lies.

The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal.

Melanie Langpap

1 Note to the reader

2 The following article is based on my audio-visual research which is a film and companion text as presented under the regulations for the MPhil in Ethnographic Documentary at the University of Manchester between September 2012 and April 2014. This edited text can only supplement the filmic output and hence highlight some of the major findings. The original film-/ fieldwork *White Lies* is available online:

3 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/2714>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/melanielangpap/whitelies>

Introduction

4 Prior to this research I was living in Nepal and working as a media consultant in the INGO sector. I was one among many so called development workers, a *bidhesi*, the Nepali word for foreigner. Nepal is a landlocked country, located between India and China. Various national and international donors have been crucial to the so-called development of Nepal for decades. They have a say, for instance, regarding the desperately needed hydroelectric power projects that would reduce ongoing power cuts, funding is expected from China. The UN, World Bank and others continuously refer to Nepal as one of the poorest or least developed countries worldwide (UN 2016; World Bank 2012; Kalpit 2012; BBC 2017). However, contemporary Kathmandu is a "relatively cash-rich region in an otherwise cash-poor country with international aid, tourism and foreign labour remittance as major income sources" (Liechty 2010: 12). And it is only very recently in Kathmandu that a "non-local 'other region' has become filled to overflowing with images of other worlds, other ways of being, other 'possible lives'" (Liechty 2010: 189). Kathmandu's urban middle class may be considered as having the dilemma of reconciling

its "status as modernity's 'traditional' other" with the "desires to claim a legitimate place within 'modernity'" (Liechty 2002: 6)¹. Referring to the different backgrounds of foreign as well as national individuals, tourists or the countless development NGOs and INGOs omnipresent in Nepal, all of them producing and disseminating digital images as much as an image, Liechty notes: "The final (contrasting) images (...) resonate with and reinforce divisions of political and economic power" (2010: 210).

Google Image Search: Nepal

Screenshot of google.de (2 Sept 2017)

- 5 My professional experiences of working with audiovisual media in this particular context made me wonder about the implied meanings of image and power in the English language: power can be authority, electricity as well as strength or capacity; power cuts can be up to 16 hours a day in Nepal. Images can feed into a certain kind of image and as observed imagery of Nepal, present in public as well as private on- and offline media, seems to focus on the snow-covered mountain range as well as traditional, religious aspects of life despite the many other aspects of living and being there. I wanted to find out more on this from the Nepalese point of view (P.O.V.). Visually speaking, how does a photographer based in Nepal make use of his/her power?

Newspaper image of Nepal

KATHMANDU

Morgen ziehe ich weiter

Seite 2/3: Am schönsten ist Kathmandu bei Stromausfall

Offiziell ist Cannabis verboten. Inoffiziell kifft die ganze Stadt. | © Ppakash Mathema/AFP/Getty Images

A German newspaper article headed *Tomorrow I move on* notes: "Kathmandu is most beautiful during power cuts" (Schophoff 2014). The published caption of this picture reads: "Officially cannabis is forbidden. Unofficially the whole town smokes weed". The German journalist got local support by one of the photographers I cooperated with during fieldwork.

Photo by Ppakash Mathema

- 6 I jump ahead in time for now to highlight the relevance of this subject. Even though my research was already completed, I was continuing to screen and compare the published images coming from Nepal when a major earthquake hit the country in April 2015.

Different photographers capture similar images after the earthquake

Published photos by Niranjana Shrestha (4, 6 - left column) and Navesh Chitrakar (5, 7 - right column)

- 7 As shown, two photographers who both participated in my fieldwork earlier, captured and shared a very similar frame and content. The photographers are Niranjana, who is working for the international press agency AP, and Navesh, who works for Reuters. These young men are "friends and competitors" as they stated in an interview during my fieldwork. And both filed a number of images on the same day to their respective news agency who has then chosen to publish identical ones.

Competing photographers as observed during the field phase

The three images (8,9,10) show the befriended photojournalists Navesh (left), Niranjana (right) who is among the main characters of the research and Bikram (centre, right) during fieldwork.

Stills from the video-footage by Melanie Langpap

- 8 During fieldwork among this group of professional photographers, Niranjana was the only one I cooperated with, according to the plan. But wherever he went, the other professionals also appeared, or vice versa, and so they all became a part of my video-footage. Their photographic output demonstrates that they all seem to look towards one direction, namely the West: "The [news media] market is mainly in the West, and that dictates the selection of what makes news. Earthquakes make it, blockades don't. It just takes too long to explain" (Dixit 2016). Referring further to audio-visual media, the Nepalese author notes "The coverage, especially on tv, zoomed in exclusively on the destruction, (...) those visuals were just too photogenic to resist", anything else would not

fit "the prevailing news narrative". Such a prevailing narrative may also be linked to the economic and/or political interests, or authority / power, that editors of media houses obtain while making their choices of imagery along with captions that would be published and spread. Yet the power is also with the photographers who provide an editor with options. On the coverage of the earthquake it was noted: "The international media arrives in herds and hunts in packs. Everything has to conform to a preordained script (...). In Kathmandu (...) it was the arrival of Indian TV journalists that exposed the worst shortcomings of the international media" (Dixit 2015).

- 9 These quotes were published in English by the same writer, either in his own publication, the *Nepali Times*, or at *BBC online*. To my knowledge, interestingly, none of these articles is published in Nepali. And who is he, this Nepalese man who speaks of West and East, who publishes in both of these spheres, who dares to criticise the Indian aloud and who mentions the power of the Western market that bluntly?² It is Kunda Dixit, a well-established figure within national and international media- and art circles. Different from the people I focused on during fieldwork, he belongs to an older generation and is also a *brahmin*. Dixit's work expresses a very direct and enriching opinion on the coverage of events from Nepal within international-/ national publications and that is in contrast to the directness and probably the courage and standing (not to speak of caste or class) of the photographers I cooperated with during fieldwork.

Nepalese publisher Dixit on the media coverage of events in Nepal

[22-28 April 2016](#) #805

[Editorial](#)

Disastrous Coverage

Attention, foreign media covering earthquake anniversary: read this.

Bikram Rai

Given the media industry's short attention span, limited capacity to capture context, and the scripted narrative of international news, reporters cannot be entirely blamed for often [superficial](#) coverage of disasters.

(11) Screenshot of the article by Dixit (2016)

Photo by Bikram Rai

- 10 To return to my research, power relationships have been studied in visual anthropology by a large number of people, in anthropology and across the social sciences. For the purpose of my work I focused on theory of Hall (1997), Berger (1972), Barthes (1980) and Liechty (2002), and Rancière, the latter's work on *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011) also inspired my title. All theory makes it possible to combine photographic practices (or

images) with the notion of power and vice versa. The guiding question however comes from Roland Barthes: "Why out of the vast disorder of objects, chose his object to be photographed, rather than some other?" (1980: 6). Ultimately this work aims to offer an ethnographic and documentary account of how photographers, media producers and consumers in urban Nepal are negotiating their role in the midst of the formation of a new kind of state: a state that is undergoing transition from monarchy to democracy after a decade of violence (1996-2006) and which exists against a background of social, political and economic uncertainty and ongoing contestations of power from across the political and ideological spectrum.

Theory

- 11 Media has long been "one of the most powerful and extensive systems for the circulation of meaning" (Hall 2013: 14), using "print, film, photography, video, television, radio, telephony, and the internet among other things" (Boyer 2012: 383) to communicate to mass audiences. A phenomenon related to the increasingly ubiquitous internet and therefore digital media is that "media acts as an extension of the reflexive self" (Cano-Viktorsson 2010: 2). In the context of Kathmandu, Nepal, "media images (...) increasingly serve as instruments of middle-class self-fashioning" (Liechty 2002). Moreover, imaging as much as aid legitimacy play a crucial role in Nepal (Hilhorst et al. 2012). In any case "visual signs and images (...) carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted" in order to exchange meaning between people (Hall 1997: 19). But there is no law which guarantees "one, true meaning" (Hall 1997: 9) and a photographer's intended meaning does not necessarily match with the meaning applied by the viewer who may also be totally detached from the context in which an image evolved. Using Barthes' concepts (Barthes 1980: 9) throughout this paper, the relationship between "operator" (photographer), "spectrum" (framed content), and "spectator" (viewer of the photograph), is a complex one and finding the 'appropriate' image is a difficult task to achieve. It is a process wherein other subjects and modes of representation are discarded, or speaking with Hall: "What we know about the world is how we see it represented" (2013: 20). A photographer's forms of representation are inherently linked with power. An image conveys meaning and that includes "the power to represent someone or something in a certain way" (Hall 1997: 259). This carries "the power to make people see and believe certain visions of the world rather than others" (Bourdieu 1990: 170).

A Nepalese woman sits in front of a painted map

The photograph (12) was taken on the election day by one of the observed Nepalese photographers. The painted map obviously defines development regions of Nepal and seems to highlight India. Invisible facts are provided within the published caption of this image: "(...) A bomb explosion wounded a few people outside a polling station Tuesday in the Nepalese capital where voters lined up to elect a Constituent Assembly that will attempt again to write a constitution that could bring stability to the Himalayan nation" (apimages.com; Nov 19, 2013).

Photo by Niranjana Shrestha

- 12 Moreover the correlation of capacity, authority and electricity within a photographers' practice stresses the role of photographers as civil society members in an establishing democratic system.

Three perspectives of a wall painting in Kathmandu

(13,14,15) Different frames of a wall painting seen in Kathmandu, from Zoom to Total (left to right)
Stills from the video *White Lies*

- 13 In a competitive field such as photography, there is not only an ever-present danger that a photographer re-creates images that reinforce power, but also that "What is not said is as important to what is said as the things that are actually in the picture" (Hall 2013: 15). In other words, whatever is ongoing outside the photographers' captured frame is of equal relevance to the framed content if one aims to understand the constructed meaning relevant to the photographer. According to Liechty it are deep-rooted historical and cultural trends that "create the experiential frames [through which] Nepalese negotiate the profoundly different social forms (e.g. class) and cultural resources (e.g. consumer

culture) thrust upon them by their rapid integration into capitalist modernity" (2010: 189, my emphasis). And in Geertz's words (1974: 229), "We must, if we are to achieve understanding (...) view their experiences within the framework of their own ideas that differ markedly not only from our own but, no less dramatically and no less instructively, from one to the other". This *frame-work* is understood literally here, with the photographers' framing and underlying choices being the main subject of this research.

A singing expatriate refers to Nepal

(16) A singing expatriate based in Nepal published a song with lyrics like "I can only imagine (...) to speak Nepali" (Mitchell published on *Youtube*; 70.000 clicks as of Oct 15, 2013).

Still from the video *White Lies*

Approach and Method

- 14 *White Lies. The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal* was conceived as an ethnographically grounded response to Barthes' question as quoted above. The medium of film, video to be precise, is the chosen method to generate this knowledge. Following a number of professional and amateur photographers, their photographic choices were documented as well as the decision making processes involved in their photographic practices. The fieldwork / filming was scheduled to take place during the election period. The first Constituent Assembly (CA) election since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008 was scheduled for November 2013. This election would generate domestic and international attention, including that of the photographic media and the production of images. I was also assuming that this iconographic event would bring out issues which are less obvious at other times: the challenges the country and its people are facing, the often rather hidden tensions, might be rendered 'audio-visible'. However, it was uncertain whether the election would take place or not, as it had already been postponed five times. Tension was high among Nepalese citizens, political stakeholders, international observers (e.g. UN 2012) and me, the researcher without a clue about the upcoming events. For a period of three months I had observed three Nepalese (two male, one female) and one expatriate (female), or one professional and three amateur photographers, based in

Kathmandu Valley. Due to my earlier stay in Nepal Niranjana, Roshani, Isabel and Uttam were familiar to me, and vice versa. All were in their early 30s, and except the expatriate all were eligible to vote. I observed their photographic practices through the lens of my video camera. They frame and click an image, or they do not, while I film them and observe what else happens on the spot, around the photographer the moment he/she roams around with a photo camera, frames, edits, deletes or publishes and comments on a picture. This applied method of observational documentary film is a "process of discovery in itself", a process that generates knowledge and understanding through all the various stages of its production" (Henley in press: 3). Static, scheduled interviews were filmed only twice: once on the very first meeting with the photographers (mainly to emphasise the seriousness of my approach, my role as a researcher and the ever recording device), and once again on the very last day of recording. In this last interview each participant watched a rough cut of his/her respective footage and was asked to comment. At strategic points we stopped the film to talk about specific scenes in an explanatory way. I would ask: "Assume I was not with you at that moment, please elaborate: What exactly happened in that situation and why? How were you involved? How did you feel at that particular moment?" These conversations were recorded to use the photographers' audio explanations as narrative in the final film. And as it happened in this process, self-/censoring became a crucial issue that is explained later on. Findings and analysis of the photographers' activities with digital imagery are based on the collection of all photographs taken by them during fieldwork (published and not published) and my video-footage while having observed their photographic practices. One essential platform for the private yet shared publications of the photographers' output is *Facebook*. It "has become a tool for the management of one's self both online and offline" and "people's reflexive relation to their self-identity is made visible through their engagement with this social media" (Cano-Viktorsson 2010: 2). All of the collected data is complemented by associated information gathered off the record. Those written field notes also provide facts and figures that aim to contextualise the audio-visual work.

Fieldwork: Context

- 15 The following notes recount some of the major events during fieldwork. As indicated, within the applied theory this context is considered relevant to achieve a better understanding of the photographers complex choices. Fieldwork took place from November 2013 until January 2014 so as to coincide with the CA Election. This period can be described in terms of three main themes: festival, election and routine. While festivals and routines frequently overlap and are familiar to persons based in Kathmandu Valley, the election was an extraordinary event to the four photographers; none of them had taken part in any of the country's previous elections. Fieldwork started with *Tihar* festival, also known as the "festival of lights" (Nepal Tourism Board 2018). It lasts five days and it is widely celebrated among all indigenous groups. Of special relevance is the celebration of the *Newari* New Year on the last day of *Tihar*. *Newars* are known as the founders of Kathmandu and its surrounding area, they represent the biggest ethnic group living in Kathmandu Valley (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1956: 21). One of the observed photographers, Niranjana, represents this group.

Niranjan during an interview

(17) In a filmed interview Niranjan says though he is *Newar* he celebrates only "Nepali New Year and English New Year", not *Newari* New Year.

Still from the video *White Lies*

- 16 As usual during *Tihar* there was no "load-shedding", which is the common phrase used in Nepal for power cuts, but it would increase massively after the festival. (This time of the year marks the beginning of the cold and dry season where water for powering the hydroelectric plant is in short reply.) Yet unlike previous years, this time power cuts after *Tihar* lasted only one hour per day. As announced in national media, the reason was the upcoming election, scheduled to take place two weeks later. In the run-up to the election, between *Tihar* and Election Day, nationwide protests hindered vehicle movements. Bikes, cars and buses kept on moving but safety was a widely discussed issue. Party meetings, rallies and protests (*bandh*) took place all over the country, schools were closed, international election observers and key figures such as former US president Jimmy Carter came to Nepal. The closer Election Day came, the more bombs were found. Some were defused, others exploded. For instance, on 13 November 2013 twelve people were injured in Kathmandu when a moving bus was attacked at night. Due to his profession as a photojournalist Niranjan captured this event. To him this was a lucky moment and a chance for international recognition as much as it was a very tense, sad and shocking moment.

Niranjan's coverage of a bus attack

(18) Niranjan informs his India-based AP editor of his uploaded images (left), these were not published. (19,20) His photographic output, here filmed from his computer screen, shows victims of a bus attack (two centered images). (21) Similar images of the same event but captured by other photographers were published only within national news (right, *Kantipur*, 18 Nov 18 2013).

Stills from the video *White Lies*

- 17 It was assumed that the 33-Party-Alliance (or *Baydia faction*) was responsible for this and similar incidents at that time, but this was never publicly stated. In any case, there seemed to be no obvious direct target, which led to an ongoing perception of insecurity.

Published image shows Nepal Army

Police: Activists set fire to bus in Nepal strike

11/12/2013

By BINAJ GURUBACHARYA

(22) One of Niranjana's published photographs shows the patrolling Nepalese Army during the election period. The image was spread via several media, e.g. "World News Top Stories" (newsnet.com; 11 Nov 2013).

Photo by Niranjana Shrestha

- 18 The bombings and disruption stopped as soon as the election was over and immediately after the election-offices closed on 19 November 2013, power cuts increased up to twelve hours per day. Soon the Nepalese government, national and international media declared the election to have been "free and fair" (Election Commission 2013; INSEC 2013; European Union Election Mission 2013; Carter Center 2013; BBC 2013). *Reporters without Borders* noted the "Elections lead to violence against journalists, media" (2013). Election results were published within one week. Most important, judging by public/private conversations, was the fact that the *Maoist* party lost the election (80 seats out of 601), and hence no longer held the majority in the CA. Altogether almost 9.5 million votes were counted, representing 75% of the 12.2 million registered voters (European Union Election Mission 2013). I found only one publication questioning these figures of eligible voters in relation to Nepal's total population of about 26 million (Krämer 2014). My following observation is just a side note? Out of the four persons I cooperated with, only one, Roshani, actually voted. Isabel was not eligible; Niranjana had chosen to capture the event as a photojournalist but not to participate with his own vote; and Uttam was denied permission to vote at his local polling station. However, within two weeks after the election most citizens were back at work and followed their daily duties. The most intense

period of the fieldwork was over. International observers left the country, and something like routine entered the lives of individuals. International media continued reporting on Nepal with imagery of World Aids Day and several national festivals such as *Losar*. This New Year for Tibetan people was celebrated on the last day of fieldwork/recording, at the end of January 2014.

Findings

- 19 Findings and analysis of this research are based on three kinds of data: 1) photographs taken by the four observed photographers; 2) the photographic practices of these photographers as observed/recorded on video; and 3) situations that refer to the photographic practice but happened only off the record (field notes).

Photographs

- 20 Comparing the three main themes (festival, election and routine) to the photographers' national festivals and traditional or religious customs provided the greatest photographic output: Most images show landscapes with mountain ranges, clear and bright colours, happy and calm facial expressions along with traditional appearances in terms of objects and people. The photographers often emphasise their own ethical background by framing themselves in front of a *mandir* (temple), during ritual ceremonies, with family members, wearing traditional *kurta* (female dress), *topi* (male hat) and/or having *tika* on their forehead that marks special occasions. This even applies to the foreign photographer; visually speaking Isabel seems to emphasise the fact that she is in Nepal, at a temple, near the mountains etc.

Imagery published by the four photographers

(23,24,25,26) The images show how the photographers presented themselves and/or their surrounding on their respective *Facebook* pages during field phase, from left to right: Roshani, Uttam, Nirajan, Isabel.

Stills from the video *White Lies*

- 21 Most of the clicked images were published and commented on via social media either right after the event or as soon as electricity and internet were available. These framed moments certainly were a part of the photographers' lived experience and seemed to be meaningful to them. The framed content simply reflects each photographers' surroundings. During this cold season there was (mountain) scenery, ongoing festivals, the diverse Nepalese society was omnipresent with influences from Hinduism, Buddhism and several national, indigenous groups. Interestingly, foreign or modern aspects of the photographers' lives hardly appear within the captured frames and this applies for personal encounters too: Foreigners are hardly present in the published images.

Published images of Christmas celebrations

(27,28) Exception from the 'rule': Among the observed photographers only Roshani provides a few images framing rather non-traditional events such as Christmas celebrations, here with her son and friends.

Images published on Roshani's Facebook page (27 Dec 2013)

- 22 Daily routine situations or the (impact of the) election even in its broadest sense, were barely considered within the photographers' frames. Yet, as observed, these aspects provided the most discussed, challenging and/or influencing topics within the photographers' lives during fieldwork (e.g. they could not work, travel was hindered, schools and offices were closed for about four weeks, water and gas shortage was an issue etc.).

Imagery of Isabel

(29,30,31) Before and during the election when Isabel could not work she captured images of the mountain scenery (left). I filmed her hidden behind an English newspaper with the front page, visible to the viewer, showing pictures taken by Niranjana (centre) and in serious conversation about road access and safety with the local Police (right).

Stills from the video *White Lies*

- 23 Out of the four persons only the photojournalist Niranjana captured the events related to politics, and due to his profession he produced the greatest number of pictures. Niranjana was always observed to be on duty, and whenever he framed an image with his professional camera he seemed to think of this agency, based in India, and what they would publish.

Women queued up to vote are covered in international media

(32) The image of women who queued up to vote was taken by Niranjana on Election Day and was published in the *New York Times*, which made him very proud and happy (lens.blogs.nytimes.com; Nov 9, 2013). Can this published content be linked to the fact that gender equality was a major issue within Nepal's development apparatus at that time? The deadline to reach the Millenium Development Goals was about to end.

Photo by Niranjana Shrestha

- 24 Besides his professional approach Niranjana produced a few "arty" images, as he calls them. These pictures appear funny and different. He captured them with his mobile phone and mainly published the photographs on *Instagram*.

Two "arty" images captured by Niranjana

(33,34) Photos by Niranjana Shrestha, published on his *Instagram* page

- 25 Overall, the main content of the pictures taken by all observed photographers throughout the field phase does not vary much. Technical skills aside, there is hardly anything specific that would allow one to distinguish one photographer from another. Moreover, the imagery clicked by the four photographers seems to confirm the image of Nepal as provided in travel advertisements (e.g. Nepal Tourism Board 2013) or even in videos of ancient Nepal (e.g. Vintage Nepal 2012). That is interesting, considering the photographers observed connections to and interactions with foreign representatives (e.g. tourists, employers, friends) along with their materialisations. Concluding the thorough look at all photographic output the given content possibly responds to the evident "increased emphasis on culture, together with the development of tourism" in so called "developing countries" (Cotte 2011:1). Awareness of one's own culture as well as "the importance of preserving it for cultural identity and as an economic asset" (Cotte as above) seems to be visible in the photographers framed / published images.

Video

- 26 Compared to the stills taken by the photographers, my video-footage shows far more detail and diversity by simply observing the photographers' practice. The video shows four traditional as well as modern, multilingual, smart persons in a very complex setting. They face water and electricity shortages, they make use of generators, they have more than one mobile phone, they wear jeans as well as *kurta* and *topi*. They use a power cut-app, they are seen in dirty bars, hunting for petrol, having a flat tire or fancy a coffee latte. They have fun, face work, class or gender related pressures, they experience feelings of love, stress and frustration and resignation too (for instance due to randomly appearing interferences within their daily lives such as *bandh* or the government blocking Facebook), and they even face political threats. Moreover, observing their photographic practice through the lens of my video camera shows four persons continuously negotiating their experiences of an ever-changing environment with vast cultural, social, economic influences from all over. In the observed daily lives of the photographers, the connotations of terms such as East, West, modernity, tradition, caste or class are omnipresent, and mingle with a photographer's often strong national, patriotic, traditional and/or cultural background, and the implied meanings as these become relevant in encounters with the Other. The origins of the associated worldview(s) relevant to the photographers can neither be tackled within the limited scope of this research, nor are these stable. As indicated in Dixits' publications, the word Western is commonly used within Nepal to describe things or persons associated with Europe or the US (not Asia). I suggest speaking of "the West and the Rest" as Hall calls it (1992: 221.), and since the way the cooperating photographers approached me, the researcher, often stressed this distinction.³ It became very clear during the video recording that "informants, filmmakers and film viewers are already enmeshed in preconceived meanings" (MacDougall 2006: 4) and "shifting selves" (Ewing 1990). During film-/fieldwork the photographers referred to me in many different ways that affected their actions and expressions and possibly vice versa. To them at times I was a filmmaker, a researcher, a female and/or a *bidhesi* (Nepali expression for foreigners) representing Europe or Germany, while at other times I was seen and related to as a friend, photographer and/or one of them. Consequently, their actions and wordings changed from one moment to another. For instance, when recording with Nirajan I once asked

about his dreams which he initially declined to answer. When I asked him why, he said "This is something between you and me. Sometimes I really don't know whether we are talking as friends or professionals." Moreover, having known the photographers prior to the fieldwork, rather soon I became aware of a form of self-censorship whenever they realised that my recording device was pointed towards them. This fact appears to be the most promising approach to Barthes' question "Why do they chose this subject and not something different"? It seemed as if the photographers have chosen to express certain issues while others were dropped by conscious choice. And that which they expressed clearly responds to their respective photographic output; likewise, it responds to the imagery representing Nepal which they perceived via various media channels. All of this became most evident and outspoken amid the field phase when I shared a first rough cut with each of the photographers.

Four photographers watching their respective rough cuts

(35,36,37,38) Stills from the video-footage *White Lies*

- 27 These screenings were followed by a feedback session of which only the audio was recorded to enable a more open discussion.⁴ During these sessions the photographers commented on what should and should not be included in the film. Moreover, I elicited feedback on areas the participants found missing in representing them. The observed photographers became participating co-directors and their decisions eventually reinforced the idea that observations gathered off the record, any expression which is from their P.O.V. not intended to enter into the final film, is of great significance. As one photographer, Isabel, has put it, "*There are situations in which Nepalese prefer to lie or simply not to tell [present or express in audio-visual terms] the whole truth, a white lie that is called*". Besides the choices of dropped footage where a filmed protagonist simply considered his/her own appearance as "ugly", all the footage that was deleted by choice of the photographers somehow refers to their very own inner conflicts. And these conflicts could be related to their individual experiences of inequality, pressure, struggle of class and/or gender. Uttam was the one exception, for instance, when he mentioned his experience of vote rigging in the filmed interview. In any case one can hardly generalise the complex choices regarding that which did (not) become an image to the observed photographers or (not) be part of the final video according to the photographers' choices.

The observed photographers who are active media consumers as well as producers seemed to understand that being based in Nepal or being Nepalese also means representing a so-called underdeveloped nation in its broadest sense; that is the image. This seems to imply the representation of something which foreigners, donors or any non-Nepalese do not have but appreciate, and that is the country's diverse culture as well as its (mountain) scenery. To the photographers it may be only consistent to frame exactly this (and not something different), repeatedly within their own photographic practices as well as towards my recording camera. As Dixit suggested a decade ago, "English-savvy Nepali interlocutors (...) naturally have zero incentive to be critical" (Dixit 2011: 75). Hierarchical issues and political threats played a crucial role in the photographers' worldviews, as it did to the observed foreign photographer, Isabel, who had settled in Nepalese society and was fully aware of its challenges. The four photographers are rather cautious and stick to the repetition of stereotypical imagery.

- 28 Considering the method of observational documentary that is very interesting yet thinking of my possible output it is rather frustrating. Respecting ethics, moral and individual choices, and hence following all the photographers' requests for censoring, would I too produce a (stereotypical) output similar to the perceived imagery that made me start this research? Moreover, it is noted that any meaning and all choices also refer to a spectator's own perception of the audio-/visual material and that which happened on the spot, during the recording. In this research I am the spectator, I was the video operator and this describes on a more practical level what Berger called the "reciprocal nature of vision" (1972: 9). I may have been a perfect representative or mirror for the repetition of a certain kind of image during the recording sessions yet interestingly not while we interacted off the record.

Off the record: Fieldnotes

- 29 It remains a mystery whether the photographers would have re-/acted differently to another researcher/filmmaker; someone less female, less white, less German etc. In any case much was said, done, heard, sensed as well as seen by the photographers and me only off the record. Yet I neither approached the subjects nor the subject as an investigative journalist/ filmmaker, but I was interested in the photographers' P.O.V. as a reliable researcher. Hence, with due respect to the photographers' choices, all video-footage that had to be skipped and several situations that happened only off the record remain invisible despite my impression that its re-/presentation would only enrich the commonly shared perspectives of living and being in Nepal, shared in audio-/visuals via diverse media channels. Compared to the photographers' clicked / published images of scenery, traditional and cultural aspects, the generated video-footage does provide a 'bigger picture' so to say including modern and/or challenging aspects. But to me, in audio-/visual terms, the four thoroughly selected characters still appear less reflective, strong and clever than they actually are; their lived experiences are not audio-visually expressed (or re-/presented) in depth. And this unuttered truth really limits the outcome of this research. The 'full picture', would include the photographers' individual experiences of Nepal's political events and the vast impact of the development apparatus but even more. Instead the photographers seem to be performing agents within their own photographic practice as well as towards my recording device and that is due to their own choice. It seems to make most sense to apply Isabel's quote on white lies to the observed

photographic practices. It may also be useful to include the notion of "fatalism" as a part of the understanding of a Nepalese self (Bista 1967; 1991). The photographers applied choices towards their photographic output may highlight their strength?

Conclusion

- 30 The question of what finally becomes an image or not for photographers based in Nepal was the driving force of this audio-visual research. It was surely noted that out of the vast number of objects one only sees what one looks at which "is an act of choice" (Berger 1972: 8). Now, speaking as a spectator, the one who perceives and looks at all photographs as well as the (raw) video-footage gathered during fieldwork, the photographers seems to have a very particular range of vision. And in response to Barthes' question *why* certain content became an image to the photographers (while other content was elided or overlooked), it is noted that biographical and other structural factors are at play. The images taken by the four photographers and the video-footage approved by them amount to a certain kind of image of living and being in Nepal that is a well perceived and established image, omnipresent here and abroad in various on- and offline media since long. The referring images produce(d) identifications as well as knowledge and are largely dependent on practices of stereotyping. This is a "powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, of what they can do, what are the possibilities in life, what are the natures of the constraints on them" (Hall 1997: 257). And "stereotyping occurs where there are gross inequalities of power" (Hall 1997: 258). According to my P.O.V. this responds to the events during the field phase: am I going too far when arguing that the observed photographers have a lot to lose by showing and sharing their wholeness, their complex worldview?
- 31 To this generation of photographers who are based in urban Kathmandu Valley it seems most relevant to keep their current status or to grow even further. And their individual, current status includes dependency from national as well as international representatives. Apart from their very own idea of one's self, their status is judged upon within their specific cultural, traditional and/or ethical background as well as by a rather global community present in Kathmandu Valley. With the re-/presentation and hence repetition of an audio-/visual image that is already out, approved and somehow expected by a complex, global audience the photographers do not take a risk. From what I noticed with all my senses throughout the field phase, little seems to be stable within the photographers' daily lives, neither water-, electricity- or gas supply nor freedom of expression. A lot was dependent on events that were barely subject of an individual's choice. And a lot depends on decisions of others (e.g. family members; religious gurus; employers; politicians; foreign decision makers such as colleagues, tourists etc.). Definitely all of the observed photographers found ways to live different to a rather traditional way of life but this is not supposed to be published. It seems as if they do not dare to share (publish) something different and/or to really practice freedom of expression. The observed photographers may lack role models, best practice examples, they may fear consequences they are well aware of. (The outspokenness of a Dixit family member was well perceived, yet he is not someone who can be compared with, being too established, too high in his birth given rank.) For a practicing photographer it is necessary to formulate an idea of the relationship between certain kinds of images and their potential audiences in terms of a particular social, economic and political context

towards the production and dissemination (of an image). A different or "positive image" approach would ignore "the question of perspective and the social positioning" of the photographers, filmmakers and the audience (Hall 1994: 205). That is challenging not only in contemporary Nepal. Considering my own background too it may be only coherent that the photographers' ways of seeing contrast with my way of seeing them when observing their photographic practice. My video-footage shows their daily lives, including demanding or critical moments, and generally speaking gives an impression of a modern as well as a traditional way of life that is hardly present in the images framed by the four photographers themselves. Most of their output depicts the country's scenery and traditional, religious aspects of life as these are surely relevant to the individual photographers. And eventually these individuals ensure that 'my' video-footage responds to their own photographic practice. Furthermore, the photographers' hidden or unuttered 'issues', their self-censoring, not only gave the film its title ("White Lies") but reinforced the limitations of the observational film method as a means of generating and representing knowledge. In a video it is not possible to me to publish the photographers' complex choices beyond their photographic practice. The findings and analysis of my research mainly seem to illustrate and confirm Nepal's status as a country "in transition" (GIZ 2014; DFID 2017; von Einsiedel et.al 2012), even "lost in transition" (Gautam 2015), "partly free" (Freedom House 2012). Concluding this research I feel the strong urge to highlight that one cannot fight what one cannot see (Prakash 2014). Despite ongoing power cuts the observed photographers found clever options to use electricity 24/7 for instance for their photographic practice. Their photographic output however, hardly reflects a sense of individual power.

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NOTES

1. Following Lichty's argument throughout this paper, the term class replaces the term caste, especially in Kathmandu (Lichty 2010: 9).
2. Kunda Dixit runs a travel blog called "East West" that chronicles "his experiences while wandering across Nepal and abroad" (<http://nepalitimes.com/blogs/kundadixit/> as of 15 Nov 12014).
3. For a thorough, contemporary discourse on tradition, modernity and related terms the reader is referred to Lichty (2002), Anderson (2006), Appadurai (2010), Escobar (2011) and Wade (2007).
4. This audio recording acknowledges the different ways in which the individuals represent themselves with regards to the recording medium: Compared to video-recording, the participants became more outspoken during the plain audio-recording; they were even more open in non-recorded face-to-face conversations.

ABSTRACTS

The audio-visual research asks why certain events, experiences and aspects of everyday life are rendered visible and made public while others are elided or overlooked in contemporary Nepal. This subject is explored from the point of view (P.O.V.) of photographers based in the country. The main output of this research is an observational documentary film, *White Lies, The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal*. The provided imagery highlights how photographic forms of representation are linked with notions of power and recalls Hall's argument that "What is not said is as important to what is said as the things that are actually in the picture" (2013: 15).

Acknowledging the events during fieldwork the research also questions the idea of film as a method to generate knowledge.

La recherche audio-visuelle questionne pourquoi certains événements, expériences et aspects de la vie quotidienne sont rendus visibles et rendus publics tandis que d'autres sujets sont éludés ou négligés au Népal contemporain. Le sujet est exploré à partir du point de vue (P.O.V.) de photographes vivant au Népal. Le corpus photographique fourni met en évidence la manière dont les formes photographiques de représentation sont liées aux notions de pouvoir et rappelle l'argument de Hall: "Ce qui n'est pas dit est aussi important pour ce qui est dit que ce qui est réellement dans l'image" (Hall 2013: 15). Le résultat principal de cette recherche est un film documentaire d'observation; *Pieux mensonges*. Le spectateur émancipé du Népal contemporain (original: *White Lies. The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal*). En mentionnant les événements survenus au cours du travail de terrain, la recherche questionne également l'idée du film comme méthode de production de connaissances.

La investigación audiovisual pregunta por qué ciertos eventos, experiencias y aspectos de las experiencias cotidianas devienen visibles y son hechos públicos mientras otros temas son ignorados u omitidos en el Nepal contemporáneo. Este tema es investigado desde el punto de vista de fotógrafos nepaleses. Las imágenes proporcionadas muestran cómo las formas fotográficas de representación están relacionadas con ciertas nociones de poder, y recuerdan al argumento de Hall: "Lo que no se es tan importante como que la se dice, así como aquello que está realmente en la imagen " (Hall 2013: 15). La mayor parte del resultado de ésta investigación es un documental observacional; *Mentiras Blancas. El espectador emancipado en el Nepal contemporáneo* (original: *White Lies, The Emancipated Spectator in Contemporary Nepal*). Reconociendo los eventos ocurridos durante el trabajo de campo, ésta investigación también cuestiona la idea del cine como método para generar conocimiento.

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Palabras claves: fotografía, medios, poder, auto-/censura, método observacional, representación, imagen, democracia, Nepal

Mots-clés: photographie, médias, pouvoir, auto-/censure, méthode d'observation, représentation, image, démocratie, Népal

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AUTHOR

MELANIE LANGPAP

University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences/Anthropology

After several years working in the areas of fiction, documentary film and news, Melanie Langpap joined *Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) as a media consultant in 2010. Her documentary work focused on the *Nepal Peace Trust Fund* (NPTF) with the idea of making best use of audio-visual media in the ongoing process of democratisation and in close cooperation with the Nepalese government, civil society and international donor agencies. With her vast work experiences in public-/private and international NGO sector Melanie started the MPhil in Ethnographic Documentary. Her research brought her back to the context of Nepal. Since 2015

Melanie has been based in her home town of Berlin, where she currently works as a Creative Producer.

m.langpap@hotmail.de