I'VE BEEN DUPED: REDUCING THE HOME-MODE TO DATA

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Introduction

In 1967 the African Studies Program at Indiana University established a slide archives which now includes thousands of slides duplicated from the private collections of amateur photographers who have lived and worked in Africa. The primary purpose of the archives is to provide teaching materials not otherwise available. Its secondary purpose is to obtain, protect, and document slides which might be of value to persons doing research on Africa.

In 1971 part of my private slide collection was selected for duplication and included in the archives; when, several months later, I began working in the archives, one of my first projects was to catalog and classify the slides which had been duplicated from my private collection. My project was part of an experiment which involved indexing slides using computer technology. While handling my own slides I became aware of some of the implications of transforming amateur photographs from a home-mode to a data-mode.

Slides are made, handled, and viewed in many ways; here I am concerned with a home-mode and a data-mode. A home-mode of visual communication includes (among other things) making, handling, and viewing slides of, by, or for family and friends; it is used to communicate within the context of small groups of significant others. In this context it is more than visual communication in that it is accompanied by other modes of communication such as speech. Home slide shows are essentially "showing and telling" events. In contrast, a data-mode of visual communication includes the making, handling, and viewing of slides for purposes of research and instruction. Like a home-mode, a data-mode exists in a context augmented by speech or writing.

I have chosen to analyze my slides because I have for them both a home-mode and a data-mode perspective. But since the transformation from home-mode to data-mode has occurred with many other collections at Indiana University and elsewhere, the present analysis may be read as a case study of what often has been done with amateur photographs made by people who have gone "Up the Zambezi" for one purpose or another. Because of my experience with my slides I now disagree with the cataloging procedures by which I transformed them into a data-mode and I have been working to correct the situation. This paper is part of that self-critical process. In what follows I describe my slides in their home-mode, I describe how I transformed them into a data-mode, and I suggest less reductive ways of transforming a home-mode to a data-mode.

A few cautionary remarks are necessary. First, despite the implications of my title, I am not suggesting that the home-mode slides acquired by
the archives are useless as data. Rather, their usefulness depends upon whether the viewer has access to information regarding the photographer and the circumstances in which the slides were made, handled, and viewed. Furthermore, whether the slides are useful as data can be addressed only within the context of a problem. In what context do the slides make a difference? Second, although I am focusing on home-mode slides, not all slides acquired by the archives were originally made, handled, and viewed in a home-mode. "Field-note" slides by researchers and professional slides by photojournalists and commercial photographers also are included. Although on the surface such slides might seem more appropriate for the archives than home-mode slides, our experience has shown that "field-note" slides are similar to home-mode slides and that professional slides usually lack documentation. Furthermore, researchers usually lack photographic skills and professional photographers usually lack research skills.

**Africa in a Home-Mode Perspective**

Between 1964 and 1970 I went to Africa three times, spending a total of two and a half years working, going to school, and travelling in nine countries. During that period I made approximately three thousand slides. Except when I settled into a place for a long time, I took my camera wherever I went and made slides of both familiar and unfamiliar people, places, and things; I photographed subjects to show and tell about when I returned home. I tried to make slides which were technically proficient and aesthetically pleasing. I intended to use slides to communicate my African experiences to family and friends. To make that easier I made slides of various stages and aspects of my experiences for later editing into visual sequences which would mark and guide story-telling events. In addition to slides of breathtaking scenery, native life, and wild animals, I made slides of family, friends, and co-workers, of the places in which I lived and worked, and of special occasions in which I participated.

After each trip to Africa I sorted my slides and edited out those which were technically poor or not aesthetically pleasing. On each mount I wrote a brief description of what the slide depicted, trusting memory to provide context and details. I then arranged the acceptable images for slide shows.

My slide shows were structured by fixed sequences of slides. The slides were arranged in roughly chronological order and were presented as travelogues. Since the primary purpose of showing slides was to share my experience in Africa with people who had never been there, the slides put people at ease by providing "concrete" references; they were "the palm-oil with which words are eaten." What I narrated and how I narrated depended in part upon the audience. The slides, of course, limited and focused what I said, but since photographs do not speak for themselves, I had a lot of freedom to elaborate in ways I thought would be appropriate to the various situations in which I performed.
When stock-phrases and often-told anecdotes became the rule rather than the exception, I grew tired of performing and put the slides into deep storage.

To what extent is my experience in making, handling, and viewing my slide collection similar to the experience of others who have contributed slides to the archives? Aside from collections made as "field-notes," the subject matter of the private collections I have seen in the course of my work has conformed to my own collection in the sense that these collections are a mixture of pictures taken at home in Africa, pictures of personal friends, pictures taken on the job, pictures of local sights and events, and pictures taken while travelling in Africa. The private collections I have seen are usually organized in either chronological or geographical sequences and are kept in the boxes in which they arrived from the processor or in special trays or files. Usually there are a few words written on each slide mount describing the subject of the slide. These other private collections were used in much the same way as I used mine. On the basis of seeing approximately twenty slide shows by people who have contributed slides to the African Studies Slide Archives, it seems that my performance of showing-and-telling events was not unusual.

From Home-Mode to Data

The most important steps in transforming my slides from reflections of my experiences in Africa to reflections of Africa and Africans were the initial selection process and the cataloging-classifying process. Approximately twenty percent of my collection was chosen for duplication. Based on the selection and on what is included in the slide archives from other collections, I have isolated five criteria which guided the selection process. The criteria were not followed consistently; there were exceptions and some criteria were more important than others.

The criteria for selection, in order of decreasing importance, were as follows: (1) Slides had to be of Africa and Africans. "Personal" slides of family, of American and European friends, and of myself were inappropriate. (2) Slides which stereotyped Africa and Africans were not selected. Sunsets, exotic animals, and naked people, for example, were not wanted. (3) Slides had to be accompanied by verbal information which included a brief description of the slide, the geographical location, and the name of the ethnic group. Slides without this type of information were not selected. (4) Slides had to be relevant to the needs of the archives. They were selected with attention to what was and was not already "covered" by the archives as a whole. Thus the number of slides of any given place, people, thing, or activity was determined by the idea that the collection should be broadly representative of Africa and Africans. (5) Slides had to be good technically (i.e., in focus and properly exposed). Photographs in which the subject (i.e., the intended subject) could not be seen clearly were not selected. The implications of these criteria will be discussed below.
The cataloging-classifying procedures used in the archives further transformed my slides to a data-mode. Without going into great detail, this process involved a description of the slides so that they could be located and retrieved from the files by means of written clues. There were six types of clues: Country, Community, Ethnic Group, Description of Content, Source, and Subject. Each slide was filed according to one of forty Subject categories: computer technology cross-referenced all the written clues except Description of Content.

The cataloging-classifying procedures were based on several assumptions. First, it was assumed that slides could be cataloged and classified as if they were "reality substitutes." In fact, slides represent a photographer's attempt to perceive photographically and to translate (encode) his non-photographic perception. "Objective" is meaningless in this context. Second, it was assumed that slides could be adequately documented by recording a few facts about the subject matter. This assumption flowed from the first. Knowing what, where, who, and when is undoubtedly important for some purposes, but it is not all one needs to know in order to understand the meaning of a slide. Slides are mediated representations of reality; photographic communication is grounded in history and sociology. Mediating factors include the photographer's intentions, cultural conventions, technical limitations, and abilities. Information about these factors, as well as about the relationship between the photographer and the reality represented, is important in order to infer meaning from slides. The third assumption was that slides could be handled as individual bits of information. The relationship between one slide and another in a sequence or collection was not considered important. For example, series of slides made at one time and place were systematically dismantled and filed according to subject. Thus, slides of houses were put in one place, while slides of domestic activities, agricultural practices, and topography were put in other places. What resulted was an "infinite catalog of random observations."

The selecting-cataloging procedures discussed above greatly reduced the usefulness of my slides. In the first place, by eliminating visual and verbal information about the circumstances in which the slides were made and by assuming that the slides were objective representations of reality, the selecting-cataloging procedures made the slides less useful as data since informed interpretation of the procedures used in making the slides was impossible. Furthermore, the selecting-cataloging procedures made it impossible to compare my slides made in different times and places; I made slides under a variety of circumstances and my relationship to and knowledge of the subjects I photographed varied a great deal. In the second place, the selecting-cataloging procedures eliminated information concerning my handling and use of the slides in a home-mode. The structures of my showing-and-telling performances were destroyed by selecting and cataloging only those slides which met the archives' criteria for inclusion; that my slides were previously narrated with "true experience" stories was likewise ignored. Showing-and-telling events were reduced to a random
set of duplicate slides and bits of factual data. And third, the selecting-cataloging procedures made my slides useless as sources of information about American life in Africa. My photographs of American missionaries, students, Peace Corps volunteers, tourists, and researchers were not selected for the archives. Furthermore, slides which reflected my personal experience usually were not selected; if selected, they were depersonalized in the cataloging process. For example, my personal relationships with the subjects of my slides were ignored in cataloging.22

Toward a Better Data-Mode

I have briefly described a home-mode and a data-mode and have shown how the value of my private collection was reduced by the selecting-cataloging procedures employed in transforming them from a home-mode to a data-mode. It remains for me to suggest less reductive procedures.

It is impossible to completely eliminate reductive procedures, but slides can be selected and documented in ways which enhance their value for research and instruction. In particular, I am concerned that persons who use the slides in instructional contexts have something substantive to narrate about the slides aside from what can be obviously seen on the screen.23 For example, a slide of smouldering bush does not denote agriculture; such information is connotative and must be provided by adequate verbal documentation. Otherwise, "the blanks are filled in by fantasy."24 I am also concerned that the archives be researchable in the sense that slides be used as sources of fully-documented visual information. The information is limited, of course, by what can be perceived and translated through photographic technology. This limitation is partly overcome by verbal information. Besides providing certain kinds of information on Africa and Africans, the archives potentially can provide photographically mediated information about American life in Africa and American perception of Africa and Africans. In addition, it has the potential to provide information about American home-mode presentation of Africa and Africans and of American life in Africa.25

In order to achieve the above goals and maximize the value of private slide collections acquired by archives, the following general guidelines for selecting, cataloging, and classifying materials are recommended:

The photographer should be interviewed to learn about the circumstances in which he made his slides, about his intentions in making them, about his professional and home-mode use of them, and about his other photographic experiences.

The photographer's entire collection of slides should be examined carefully prior to selection. The whole collection provides contextual information for the selected parts. The slides should be kept in the order preferred by the photographer, especially if they have been
arranged for showing-and-telling events. If slides are not arranged in any particular way by the photographer, a chronological (the order in which the slides were made) or geographical arrangement may be imposed. The photographer should narrate a showing of his entire collection. Selection may be made on the basis of what is seen and what is said about the slides.

After a selection has been made and the selected slides arranged in an order suitable to both photographer and archivist, the accompanying narration should be tape-recorded. The main purpose of this is to give the collection coherence and to relate it to remembered personal experience. Then, with the cooperation of the photographer, factual information such as the names of people, places, and things should be recorded on standard cataloging forms. This information is used primarily for locating and cross-referencing particular items in a collection. Likewise, classifying items by subject can provide additional access. But, unlike previous data-modes, neither the factual data nor the subject classifications are to be considered adequate descriptions of the slide collection. The narrative account and the interview with the photographer are necessary for the optimal use of the collection for research and instruction.

Conclusion

A depersonalized data bank for photography, at least, is relatively meaningless and therefore of limited value for either instruction or research. While there are severe limitations to what can be done in public archives to maintain the integrity and personal significance of private collections, the African Studies Slide Archives is actively engaged in constructing a less reductive mode of the type just outlined. The possibilities for using private slide collections as a means for personalizing knowledge is not being ignored.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Karin Ohm and Steve Feld for detailed criticism of an earlier draft.

2. A description of this project is found in Steven Ohm, Cataloging the African Studies Film and Slide Collections (Bloomington, Indiana: African Studies Program, 1974), 3-15.

3. The "home-mode" is discussed in Richard Chalfen, "Cinema Naivete: A Sociovisistic Approach to the Home-Mode of Visual Communication," PIEF Newsletter 4:3 (1973), 7-11. For the purposes of this paper I have compressed his descriptive framework. [See also Chalfen's article in this issue.]

4. For other cataloging systems see Ohm, Cataloging, 15-20.


13. This confirms, I think, what Ruby has suggested in "Up the Zambezi."

14. The manner with which slides were handled in the archives is similar to genre, type, and motif distinctions made in folklore. Doubtless such distinctions are practically necessary, but "they are analytically valueless." See Robert P. Armstrong, "Content Analysis in Folkloristics," in Ithiel de Sola Pool, ed., Trends in Content Analysis (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1959), 154.


17. Sekula, "Invention of Photographic Meaning."


19. The importance of knowing the circumstances of collecting is discussed in relation to the ethnographic situation by Scholte, "Reflexive Anthropology," 438-44.

20. Chalfen, "Cinema Naivete."

21. Dégh, "Folk Narrative," discusses true experience stories and points out the influences of mass media on folk narrative. She does not, however, discuss the use of media in story-telling events. The showing-and-telling events with which I am familiar are structured by the photographs. The factual elements of the photograph are denoted briefly with a phrase such as "this is a..." or "this is when..." and then the connotative aspects or associations are told in anecdotal fashion. Such anecdotes may have little direct bearing on the content of the photograph itself. John Collier, "Photography in Anthropology," American Anthropologist 59 (1957), 843-59 found this phenomenon useful while interviewing.

22. See Gouldner, The Coming Crisis, 493.

23. Slides presented in the context of a classroom must be narrated and students often ask questions. I hope the archives can give teachers more to say than the opening denotative formula of a home-slide show: "This is a...".


25. The possibility of a reflexive photographic archives should not be overlooked. It opens the way to an ethnography of Americans in Africa.