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Embodying Colonial Photography: Remembering Violence in *Tabee Toean*

Paulus Bijl

Abstract

This article is about bodily interactions with photographs. Taking an interview with a veteran from the Dutch colonial army filmed for the documentary *Tabee Toean* (1995) as its case study, it focuses on the ways in which this man frames these images of colonial warfare through three types of bodily actions: gesturing, staging, and reenacting. Unlike existing literature on the relation between the human body and photography, this article does not focus on the body as a sensual apparatus for individual perception, but rather as a mediator between the image and the social community. Concentrating on what is called the “production of secrecy”, it demonstrates how the bodily framing of these photographs can be interpreted in light of the difficulties the Dutch society has in addressing photographs and other documents of colonial atrocities.

Introduction

This essay is about an old man and his photography collection. His pictures are from the days when he was working for the intelligence service of the Dutch colonial army, during the Dutch-Indonesian Wars of the late 1940s. In an interview in the 1995 documentary *Tabee Toean* (Indonesian for ‘Goodbye, Sir’) this man, going by the name of Gerrit Kersten, shows his photographs and tells about the situations in which they were made and the roles they fulfil in his life. I am going to focus specifically on how Kersten relates to his pictures through his body: the gestures he makes, the way he stages them, and the way he reenacts what they depict. Current literature on the relationship between the human body and photography emphasizes the way in which the individual body perceives the photographic image. I want to consider a different aspect of the relation between the body and photography and investigate how the body fulfils a social and communicative function in relation to photographic signification. I am especially interested in how Kersten, through his posture and gestures, frames the photographs as ‘secret’. I argue that bodies not only give meaning to photographs by showcasing these images, but also, paradoxically, by hiding them and taking them away from view.
Four Dutch and two Indonesian veterans are interviewed in *Tabee Toean*. Five out of the six were filmed in Indonesia, where the Dutch veterans returned in the early 1990s to the villages where they had searched and killed, while Kersten was interviewed in his living room somewhere in The Netherlands. All the men struggle with the military actions in which they participated during what turned out to be the final major episode of Dutch colonialism, in what is now the Republic of Indonesia. The Dutch had been present in the Malayan archipelago since the sixteenth century, but the Dutch East Indies as a colonial state had only emerged in the early twentieth century, after all the islands had been subjugated during dozens of bloody wars. In 1942 the Japanese invaded the Indies, and when they capitulated in 1945 Indonesian nationalists declared the new country’s independence. It was only in 1949, after years of violence, two wars (then seen in The Netherlands as ‘police actions’) and tens of thousands of deaths, that the former colonizer acknowledged the former colony’s independence.

The documentary gives little background information about the veterans interviewed, but what Kersten tells about his time in the Indies is in line with what historians have written about the activities of those involved in the Dutch intelligence services. Part of small troops of Dutch soldiers in a guerrilla war, they had to extract information from prisoners, and the methods they used included waterboarding and torture through inflicting burns with cigarette butts and electrocution.[2] Kersten says it was common practice to kill prisoners: ‘That is the way you are trained in the guerrilla warfare. . . . Otherwise it will be the end of you, not him.’ Of Kersten’s personal life in the 1990s, we get to know little more than the fact that he is married and has several grandchildren. He has a middle class home and his accent suggests he is from the west of the province of Noord-Brabant, in the predominantly Roman-Catholic south of The Netherlands.

Throughout the almost forty minute film there are six scenes of various length with Kersten, alternating with scenes with the other veterans. It is unclear whether these six scenes follow each other chronologically; sometimes the sound may not have been recorded at the same moment as the images which are shown, and scenes with Kersten talking in his chair are now and then interspersed with shots of old photographs. The production of space within the documentary is also of importance. While Kersten is mostly sitting in his chair in the corner of his living room, the camera is placed opposite him with interviewer and director Thom Verheul to its left. During the interview, Kersten’s body is almost continuously in the picture. Due to his strong visual and aural presence – for it is Kersten who does most of the talking – it is mainly from his perspective that we get information about the Indies and the photographs. At the same time, however, Kersten is also the object of the observations of the camera, making his perspective an embedded one. The camera zooms in on Kersten when he gets emotional, shows him from different angles, and at one point offers various shots of the outside and inside of his house, implicitly characterizing him through showcasing it. We have to take these factors into account, for photographs never reach us in an unmediated or ‘pure’ state: they are both embedding frames and embedded in frames.

The most important themes of *Tabee Toean* are the continuing presence of the past in the lives of the veterans, their struggle to come to terms with what they have done and seen, and the difficulties they have talking about this past. In the beginning of the film, sounds and colour images of a train running through an Indonesian landscape of rice fields are interwoven with archival footage of soldiers arriving in the Indies after the Japanese capitulation. The voice-over of this footage can still be heard as one of the veterans enters the railway station where he had first arrived back then. This mixing up of past and present continues throughout the whole film. The Dutch veterans display various attitudes towards their war past: while one is filled with self-pity and blames the Indonesians and the Dutch government, another calls himself a coward and a bastard for having his men do things he did not dare to do himself.

Whereas the veterans who went back attempt to read the battle fields of forty years ago back into the Indonesian landscape, in Kersten’s situation the photographs function as slices of now alien place-times interrupting the flow of time that is the present. Accordingly, Kersten positions his body in a different manner than the other veterans: the latter have many props at their disposal to replay scenes from back then (‘This is the hut where it happened.’ ‘I stood like this, right here.’), and can restage their bodies as they had staged them back then, but Kersten’s main support is the pile of photographs in his hands. The only other ‘object’ from back then he has at his disposal is his own body, now more than forty years older.
Photographs, Bodies, and the Production of Secrecy

Photography studies in recent years have turned from a strongly theoretically oriented critique and even distrust of the image to investigation of the concrete contexts in which photographs appear. Emphasizing the relationship between photograph and observer as fluctuating and ambivalent rather than fixed, scholars of photography have written about different types of framing of the image, including its relation to orality, language, and material frames such as paint, embroidery, and hair. ‘Framing’ thereby indicates the process through which the photograph gains meaning in the interaction with its contextual surroundings. Following Mieke Bal, I want to emphasize that framing ‘produces an event’ in which frame and framed create each other. In the following pages I will specifically investigate bodily framing: the production of photographic meaning through the image’s interaction with the human body.

Concerning the relation between the human body and photographs, in recent years scholars have started addressing the embodied perception of photographs by their viewers, suggesting that the photographic image is perceived with other senses than sight alone, e.g. hearing and touch. Emphasis in this line of research has been on vision as something sensorially integrated, embodied and experienced, on investigating how different sensory modes present the photograph to the mind, and on how these modes are entwined with each other. Addressing photographs’ ‘sonic effects’, for instance, Marta Zarzycka has argued that photographs can suggest sounds, for instance by depicting screams or explosions, and that we need to move beyond visual and textual analysis to understand the affective and cognitive effects of these images.

In the present essay I extend these investigations into the relation between photographs and the human body, but I focus on a different aspect, namely the body’s mediating role between the photograph and the larger community. I want depart from conceptions in which the body is only seen in terms of a sensual apparatus for individual perception and make the argument that in the production of photographic signification bodies also fulfil a social function. I will draw attention, moreover, to an often-overlooked aspect in the framing of photographs, namely that it is not only positive statements and gestures which semanticize the image, but also those manoeuvres through which bodies seem to want to keep pictures away from the communal gaze, for instance by covering them or making dismissive gestures, thereby framing them as secrets.

To start understanding the social function of secrets it is important to distinguish them from miscommunications. A recurring theme in Tabee Toean is that of miscommunication. Near the end of the documentary, for instance, one veteran and an Indonesian woman walk through a village where he and his fellow soldiers had killed 786 people. Looking for forgiveness, he says, ‘We can only forgive each other.’ The woman responds, ‘Yes, forget. What’s in the past is in the past.’ In Dutch vergeven (forgive) and vergeten (forget) are only one letter apart. A rather different communicative issue can be found in the interview with Kersten. After he has claimed that he never killed people because he was ordered to do so, the interviewer says, ‘Why do you find it difficult to talk about this, because I am sure you did it.’ To which Kersten answers, ‘Yes, but I will never talk about that.... Those are the military secrets.’ Interpreting this last comment as a miscommunication would be missing the important point Foucault makes, namely that ‘[silence is] an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies’. Silences and secrets should not be seen as voids or lacunae, but as present absences that are just as much discursive statements as verbal utterances.

Secrets do not occur naturally, but are discursively produced. As Ann Laura Stoler has written, secrets name and produce privileged knowledge as well as privileged readers – in the case of photographs, privileged viewers. What can be called the ‘secrecy effect’ is therefore just as important as the information designated as secret. Stoler points out that it is rarely the case that those items classified as ‘confidential’ are secrets at all. By framing a photograph as ‘secret’ observers are invited to imagine they had no knowledge what it depicts: secrecy is not so much about concealing knowledge, but about concealing the knowledge of knowledge. Calling a photograph ‘secret’ simultaneously hides and reveals it, and gives selected viewers an antithetical position towards the rest of the community, for it is only those who know the secret who can expose it.
The production of secrecy plays an important role in colonial memory in The Netherlands, where colonial violence over the last century has regularly been represented as hidden, forgotten, and subject to cover-ups by the government, the media, and historians. In these debates, photographs, particularly of colonial atrocity, often function as icons of both forgetting and memory: critics position these images as everything the Dutch population should remember, but precisely also as what it has forgotten. Archival research, however, shows that photographs of, for instance, massacres in Indonesian villages have consistently been present in the Dutch public sphere since the early twentieth century, and have been exhibited, distributed among archives, printed in magazines and books, and have regularly appeared on television and in feature films. Framing such photographs as ‘secret’ thus sets the stage for revealing what has in fact been always already available to the public eye. Using a concept developed by Stoler, we can say that the Dutch situation is not one of colonial amnesia, but of colonial aphasia. The traces of colonialism are not and have not been absent in The Netherlands, but there is rather a difficulty addressing them: Dutch people mostly have no language available to discuss their country as a colonial perpetrator. It is exactly because of this lack of language that documents of colonial violence are framed as secret. This ambiguous positioning of colonial photographs between sound and silence can also be seen in the scenes with Gerrit Kersten. Through his words and body, Kersten makes these fifty-year-old photographs into a crossroads of his past, present, and future: for the things that happened, the things happening in his life today, and the things that will and might still happen. Depictions of the past he had lived in, they are also representations of the nightmares he has, of people he meets in the street in the present-day Netherlands, and of the future he is expecting when he dies and enters the afterlife. They are figures of his experiences and expectations, of his memories and the possible worlds he encounters at night or when he thinks about his impending death, Kersten positions these images in time and space invoking various senses such as sight, hearing, and touch. Three areas of bodily framing of photographs are discussed in the following pages: gesturing, staging, and reenacting.

**Gesturing**

Gestures are, David McNeill writes, ‘everyday occurrences – the spontaneous, unwitting and irregular accompaniments that we see in our moving fingers, hands, and arms.’ Gestures, moreover, ‘are active participants in thinking and speaking. They are [...] ingredients in an image-language dialectic that fuels speech and thought.’ In this section I will look at how Kersten’s gestures frame his photographs as objects that need to be both seen by and kept away from those he is addressing.

The first time we see Kersten’s photographs they are in the hands of the interviewer who is holding an unevenly fanned-out pile of about thirty pictures. These are small, black and white images, approximately six by eight centimetres each. The photographs curl slightly, with the upper one having a vertical fold from top to bottom. Light from a nearby window reflects on them and makes it hard to see what they depict, though the folded one shows a young man, his head bowed, standing in a cemetery in front of a freshly dug grave. The hands slowly re-arrange the photographs, and finally flip over the top two images to read the words on the back, written in pencil. The hands do not gesticulate, but the effect of them handling the photographs in this particular way is the conveyance of a sense of puzzlement. The thumbs touch their smooth fronts with the photographic emulsion and the fingers the somewhat rougher, papery backs. As the hands reshuffle the photographs, the images rustle like the pages of a book written in an unknown language.
Then the older hands of Kersten enter the frame. They have a wholly different relation to the photographs, for they quickly rummage through the pile, pull pictures from it, and point and swipe across their surfaces. To these hands, the photographs are familiar both as pictures (objects) and as images (representations). Unlike the interviewer, Kersten does not use his thumb to touch the front of the photographs, but his index finger: his are gestures are deictic. Before gesticulating like this, however, Kersten makes a gesture which is just outside the frame, but which, judging from the way he moves his shoulder, is a quick movement with his hand towards the pile in the interviewer’s hands and back. He makes this gesture while saying, ‘Those are of no use to anybody else.’ At the start of this sentence, he directs his gaze downwards to the photographs. The deictic element ‘those’ coincides with the hand gesture, while at the pronunciation of the word ‘no’, Kersten briefly closes his eyes.

It is through examining these two gestures – the rejecting hand and the confidently pointing index finger – that we can fathom the central ambivalence at work here. In a contradictory move, after dismissing the pile like this, Kersten immediately reaches out to it, saying, ‘For another they mean... there are photographs among them that represent nothing.’ Here, language and gestures reinforce each other, and the gesticulative fort-da game is replicated on the verbal level with a claim that a pile with deadpan photographs in fact has nothing to show.[13] As he goes through the pile, Kersten first comes across the image with the young man in the graveyard, after which he searches on and finally puts a photograph of a street with heavily damaged houses on top: ‘Look here: the politics of scorched earth, or what do I see here? Yes, look, everything in pieces, destroyed maybe not even by us; by them themselves, because they applied a politics of scorched earth.’ All the while, Kersten’s index finger moves across the photographs to indicate what he is talking about, and the interviewer’s hands have trouble keeping the pile from falling because of the fervour with which it is handled.

Kersten shows a strong awareness of the lack of narrative possibility of individual photographs, for in answer to the interviewer’s question ‘But for others this does not have a meaning?’, he says, ‘Look if you look at this photograph what do you see? A couple of broken houses. That means nothing to you.’ When the interviewer then asks ‘And what is it to you?’, Kersten says, ‘For me it’s a whole story. For me these are whole stories.’ Kersten dismisses the photographs with a throw-away gesture, because they mean nothing to others. Yet this rejection can also mean the opposite: that they mean too much. Pointing at the broken houses, Kersten says that ‘they’ had done that, probably to make sure his witnesses do not think it was done ‘by us’. Taken all together, these gestures show ambivalence: while the one positions the photographs as talking points, the other seems to want to take them away from view.

In a situation of colonial aphasia, as is the case of Dutch colonial memory, problems with speaking occur, and even more important, problems with listening. Kersten’s ambivalent gesturing stems from this double inhibition. This is also the paradox of this interview: whereas Kersten starts by saying that his photographs will go with him in his coffin and be burnt together with his body, they are also preserved and commemorated with this same body by being filmed. By positioning photographs in a documentary and making them part of a narrative, these images are no longer isolated moments, but brought into a flow of images, words, and gestures that position them in time and space. As representations of uncomfortable pasts these photographs appeal to their reluctant owner who physically struggles to come to terms with what they depict and to find a language and gestures with which he can start communicating about them.

Staging
Whereas gestures, in active cooperation with speech, frame the already visible photograph, staging concerns the act of putting on and taking off a photograph in the first place. Through invoking the theatrical stage I want to emphasize the dramatic aspect of photographs that, through a series of manoeuvres, go through various degrees of visibility.

The way in which Kersten stages some of his photographs from the Indies can be contrasted with the presence of family photography in the documentary. Behind Kersten, on a large television set, three white plastic frames are visible, with the one on the right containing a large portrait photograph of a child. When, during the third fragment of the interview, he points to these photographs and briefly mentions his grandchildren, we learn that this is one of Kersten's grandsons. Though his living room is filled with visual embellishments – e.g., decorative statues in the windowsill, framed art reproductions on the wall, a lamp in the shape of a ballerina – these photographs have a relatively prominent location because of their elevated position. Although Kersten is sitting with his back to them, he is well aware of their presence and confidently indicates them by pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

Whereas family photographs are present in the background during most of the interview, the photographs from the Indies are stored in various manners, making it necessary to stage them in the sense of the term as I discussed above. Kersten's colonial photographs are present in two formats in Tabee Toean: on the one hand in the pile in the hands of the interviewer, and on the other hand in a brown leather folder with which Kersten at one point enters the living room. This entrance is the start of an elaborate choreography in which one particular photograph goes through various stages of perceptibility. First, Kersten takes a small pile of photographs from the folder, carefully blocking their images from view by hiding them behind the flap of the folder and his hands. Next, he selects one of the photographs and hands it over to the interviewer, saying, 'You may see it for a bit.' For about three seconds, the interviewer, the camera, and the viewer can see the image, but before the camera has adjusted its angle and zoomed in, Kersten has already ripped the photograph from the interviewer's hands with the words, 'And then I take it away again.' He puts the photograph back on top of the pile and hides it behind his hands again.

Compared to the photographs standing on the television set, a paradoxical situation arises here in which the family photographs are almost invisibly on display while these colonial photographs are spectacularly hidden. The production of this photograph as secret sets the stage for a revelation of this particular image through which Kersten simultaneously makes a confession and exonerates himself. The confession he makes is that he has been part of the type of colonial atrocity the photograph depicts – I will return to this in the next section – while he can also position himself as breaking through the secret he has just himself set up.

Staging photographs is a serious game of hide and seek. It makes it possible for individuals to perform broader yet unresolved social tensions. Through an intricate composition of bodies and photographs these tensions can be enacted and alliances of innocence, confidence, and confession can be formed. Photographs thereby start functioning as icons: signs for uncomfortable pasts with which the community has not yet come to terms.
Reenacting

Whereas through gesturing and staging the body performs and frames the photographic image as a material object, reenacting, the live embodiment of the scene that the image depicts, is a move away from the object of the photograph. A reenactments is a repetition with a difference: on the one hand it is deemed to be as close as possible to the past it repeats, but on the other hand the fact that it cannot be an exact copy produces a potential for change.

During the interview, Kersten tells about a reenactment he has repeatedly performed in the streets of The Netherlands. In this reenactment, he stages a particular photograph from his collection – the one produced as ‘secret’ in the previous section – giving himself and people he meets in the street the roles of those depicted. This reenactment is partly repeated during the interview itself. In the scene in which he enters his living room with the leather folder, he says to the interviewer, ‘You are a hajji, right?’, thereby positioning the latter in the role he needs for his performance. Kersten then says that hajjis (i.e., Muslims who have been to Mecca) can easily be found in the streets of The Netherlands in the shape of Turkish people with specific white caps on their heads, just as in the Indies, where the majority of the population was also Muslim. After having given and taken back the photograph from the interviewer in the manner I described above, Kersten says: ‘You are the Turkish hajji […] and then I come around the corner and I say: “la ilaha ilAllah, Muhammad rasulullah.” And then the guy looks at me with big eyes and thinks: “He knows the Koran!” Because then I speak Arabic from the Koran, which they speak. You are a hajji, right? Then he says “yes”, but maybe he does not speak Dutch very well, because mostly those people don’t know it so well. […] Do you often go to the mosque? […] “Yes”, he says. Do you pray a lot? And again he says: “Yes”. […] Now I have a question for you. I may not be able to say it without tears.’

The interviewer, now taking on the role of hajji, says, ‘Which is?’ To which Kersten again puts forward the photograph he just retracted, hits it with his index finger over and over again, and says: ‘Could you then, seeing this, seeing what these boys have done, because these people are no longer alive, would you nevertheless pray for these boys so that they will go to heaven? Because back then they did not know what they were doing.’ The photograph shows two hajjis from the Indies sitting on the ground, surrounded by soldiers from the Royal Dutch Indian Army, one of whom is kicking one of the two men against the head. Kersten tells they were burnt with cigarettes, forced to look into the sun, given unripe bananas to eat, and were eventually killed. ‘And you were there?’ the interviewer asks. ‘I was there,’ Kersten answers.

By casting Turkish-Dutch hajjis in the roles of the Indonesian hajjis in the photograph, Kersten collapses past and present. He thereby unhinges the photograph from the particular past in which it was produced and attempts to position it in a narrative with a different outcome than the one he has just given himself. Dislodging the photograph from its history of violence, he opens up its semantic potential and seeks to transpose it to a history of redemption.[14] In this reenactment, the colonial power relations are reversed in the sense that it is no longer Dutch soldiers maltreating hajjis, on the contrary, the hajjis are given control of the situation here by being requested to pray for forgiveness.

Reenacting photographs is reinscribing their histories. In a mixture of acknowledging and rewriting the past, reenactments can lead to both taking and avoiding responsibility. Just as in the case of gesturing and staging, the body functions as a mediator between the photograph and the larger social community. Through probing the possibilities of alternative histories, reenactments hold promises for aphasic presents and deadlocked futures. Reenactments, however, also run the risk of erasing certain pasts by overwriting histories of suffering with endings of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Conclusion
The way in which individual bodies relate to photographs cannot be separated from larger social structures of signification. It is therefore that I have discussed gesturing, staging and reenacting as primarily social activities. The three types of bodily framing of photographs that I discussed, with their complex manoeuvres of hiding and revealing, presenting and absenting, rewriting and erasing, can be seen as a microcosm for the macrocosm that is the post-colonial condition of The Netherlands, in which the colonial past is discovered again and again, but has not reached beyond the level of a seething presence.[15] Like Kersten in his living room, critics have concealed and uncovered documents on colonial atrocities, but have found that not only are they not experienced as true revelations (as they never were secrets), but also that they do not fit more dominant self-conceptions of The Netherlands as moral guide in international affairs or as victim (e.g., of Nazi Germany, or, more recently, of immigration). Still, in a society in which the violence of the colonial past is very much an oubli de réserve, the concept Paul Ricoeur coined for those pasts that are not erased but for which ‘conditions for . . . expression no longer (or do not yet) exist’,[16] these embodiments of colonial photography can be seen as calls upon the body politic to start more thoroughly addressing the uncomfortable pasts that keep haunting it.[17]

**Noten**

3. The main texts instigating this turn are: Mitchell (1994); Batchen (1997); Edwards (2001); Mitchell 2005.
4. I am thinking here specifically of Langford (2001); Scott (1999); Batchen (2004).
13. The *fort-da* game was described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: a young boy makes his toy disappear (*fort* or gone) and appear again (*da* or there).
14. For the notion of reenactment as redemptive, see Schwarz (2010).
15. The concept of the seething presence is derived from: Gordon (2008).

**Literature references**


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