

Home/Transit

Martin Saxer

Introduction

Preparing the final manuscript of my doctoral dissertation, I spent a couple of days going through the archive of images I took during my fieldwork in Tibet, looking for the right ones to accompany the text. I realised that there was a considerable discrepancy in themes and outlooks between my writings and my photographs. The images, especially the ones I liked, captured a set of situations different to my field notes, on which most of my dissertation was based. The stories my images told seemed a bit random a first sight – a fleeting observation here, ambient light that caught my eye there. At the same time, the archive of images was also more comprehensive, more encompassing than my field notes. Systematically going through this archive, a year after I had left Tibet, I saw a plethora of stories, encounters and observations that felt utterly relevant to the world I was trying to describe. This archive of images showed the many sides of my time in Lhasa and Xining. While most of them did not directly pertain to the topic of my research – the creation of a pharmaceutical industry for Tibetan medicine – the experiences from which they emerged had been crucial for understanding my surroundings. Yet, these stories, encounters, observations and experiences did not find room in the book I was finishing.

I felt I had developed some kind of academic tunnel vision, and I did not like it. What to do with the multitude of sides that ethnographic research entails? What to do with the bits and pieces of ethnography that do not fit with the academic narratives we seek to distil?

Once the dissertation was submitted, the book under contract and a postdoc grant secured, I went back to these images and started a visual ethnography blog. I called it *The other image*. I began working on a series of posts on my time in Lhasa. They were a pleasure to write. Unencumbered by questions of academic relevance, and also a little less focused on the omnipresent politics surrounding Tibet, I found myself going back to that precious joy of noticing, which had always drawn me to ethnography.

A radical thought crossed my mind. What if I would give such random visual asides more room and move them to the centre? What if I would base my writing less on discourses, opinions or the search for meaning and more on sets of images that often stubbornly resist being co-opted into elegant concepts and grand theory? Could this help me find a style of writing that would keep things more grounded? Could this, perhaps, become my own approach to ethnography and the discipline of anthropology? Such an approach would be quite different from the strategy I had so far pursued.

My strategy, which I had learned at university, had roughly been this: Be open at the beginning and know that things may not be as they appear at the outset. Be patient and let more layers and aspects come into view. But don't get carried away with complexity. Settle on an angle or a framework, ideally one that has academic merit and ties in with current debates.

This strategy is neither wrong nor bad. However, it comes at a price. The experiences and observations that do not really fit with a chosen angle or framework will fade into the background – often simply because one doesn't have the eyes yet to see how saturated they are with the world from which they emerge.

I felt that *The other image* could help in this regard. The short pieces I compiled for my visual ethnography site were more processed than raw field notes but less ephemeral than social media posts. They were personal – private, even – and yet not focused on me but rather looking outward. I saw *The other image* as an intermediary step between field notes and actual pieces of work. Casual enough not to feel like serious writing, the posts had the quality of bookmarking seemingly random observa-

tions and keeping them in view. They felt like shells and bits of flotsam that form tidemarks on the beaches of memory. Writing a post meant collecting them and threading them up to a simple necklace.

The other image accompanied me through the years, and I got hooked on this short form of visual writing unbound by purpose. Nevertheless – or, perhaps, for this very reason – the blog became the backbone of most of my written academic work.

However, I also found myself writing posts for *the other image* outside any field work or research context but rather following observations in my daily life wherever I was. Right after I came back from Tibet, my daughter was born and the periods of 'proper' fieldwork became shorter. Around the same time, we moved to Singapore and my ethnographic curiosity became attracted to my new surroundings. We travelled extensively as a family, seeking to combine these journeys with research. In between, we spent time with my daughter's grandparents in Switzerland and Russia. As family life and work blended and we kept moving from place to place, the concepts of 'field,' 'home' and 'travel' became less and less distinct. I often felt more like a stranger in Singapore than in the Himalayas, and I started looking at the village in Switzerland where I grew up through the eyes of an outsider, whilst the spacious suburbs of Saint Petersburg felt almost more like home whenever we visited.

The other image was no longer just a vessel for asides during fieldwork but rather an attempt to keep developing my ethnographic eye with the help of a lens regardless of where I was. I started gathering the posts that did not fit within the larger research themes under the label "Home/Transit."

What follows is a lightly edited selection of these posts, roughly ordered chronologically. The selection has no claim to coherence or have a purpose, nor does it seek to answer a larger question. There is no obvious conclusion or an afterword. The posts filed under "Home/Transit," however, did eventually come to an end. We moved from Singapore to Munich, and once my daughter started school, journeys became shorter and the city a more permanent home. The curiosity that comes with gaining, losing and re-gaining familiarity with a place slowly fizzled out. As the boundaries between 'field,' 'home' and 'travel' became clearer again,

my visual interest shifted to other ventures. What remains is a fragmentary archive of an anthropologist's attempt at integrating visual and academic work and making himself feel at home in the world.

Ghosts and other mysteries

12 May 2012. Hungry spirits, rusty oil barrels and awkward disks on top of our housing block in Singapore.



When we arrived in Singapore, we soon found a flat in a public housing block managed by Singapore's Housing Development Board, known as "HDB." More than 80% of Singaporeans live in such subsidised HDB developments, all of which have names. Ours is called *My Buona Vista*.

When we moved in, there were two things I could not make sense of: the rusty oil barrels at every entrance and the giant, awkward disks on top of every building.

The purpose of the barrels quickly revealed itself. They are used to burn offerings of incense and paper money during Chinese festivals –

especially in the seventh lunar month known as “Ghost Month,” during which time the gates of Heaven and Hell are open and the deceased are free to roam on Earth. The offerings appease their hungry spirits.

The purpose of the giant disks that crowned my house, however, remains a mystery to this day.

The illuminated disks and the otherwise functional austerity of HDB architecture, the lived spirituality of my Chinese neighbours chanting in the morning and burning offerings, the omnipresent sports facilities for adults and playgrounds for children – these are my daily vistas of *My Buona Vista*.

HDB architecture, spirituality and recreational facilities probably have little to do with each other. Yet, I cannot help seeing all of these things together; they make the little world I currently call “home.”

Footpath to Biopolis

15 August 2012. Across the jungle between our housing block and Singapore’s incorporated bio-future.

A makeshift path across a defunct railway line links two worlds as different as can be. On one side there is the residential world of government-subsidised housing blocks with playgrounds for children, covered sitting areas for the elderly, small shops, busy food courts as well as ghosts and other mysteries.

On the other side, there is Biopolis, Singapore’s incorporated vision of what a global centre for life sciences and cutting-edge biomedical research should look like. Constructed between 2003 and 2006, Biopolis consists of nine large buildings with names like Nanos, Genome, Matrix or Immunos – linked by illuminated passages with each other.

The old railway was shut down in June 2011. The rails were dismantled and people started using the narrow corridor as a shortcut between Biopolis and the residential housing blocks north and east of it. Several footpaths across this no-man’s land emerged.



These images were taken on a Sunday evening. Biopolis feels eerily empty and silent on weekends. Traffic lights give way to absent pedestrians and imagined cars at the intersection of Biomedical Grove and Biopolis Drive. The distant sound of ventilation systems magnifies the silence. Maintenance staff exit Matrix and head home across the abandoned railway lines.

The caravansary

7 February 2013. Little has changed at Khaosan Road, Bangkok.

Those who have travelled in Southeast Asia will know Khaosan Road in Bangkok, the quintessential backpacker ghetto packed with hotels, travel agencies, street vendors, 24-hour bars and people from around the globe.



While Bangkok has changed tremendously since I first visited in the late 1990s, the area around Khaosan Road has in many ways remained the same. There may be more travellers in their 40s and 50s now, more children, more café latte, Wi-Fi and foot massages. The hawkers selling wooden frogs that sound like frogs, the roasted scorpions for the brave, the hippie clothes, fried noodles and cut pineapples, the music, beer and cocktails, however, have remained exactly as they were.

Passing through Bangkok, I sometimes avoided Khaosan Road, sometimes I found it a convenient place to get things done. And sometimes, especially when arriving late at night, I enjoyed the charm of its hustle.

Khaosan, I think, is the contemporary equivalent of a caravansary: A stable realm of perpetual transit, full of stories and things and promises for a meandering mind. Within 24 hours, you can get a fake driving licence or a university diploma, a henna tattoo or a tailor-made suit, a ticket to the beach, a wedding dress or whatever you may need for the next leg of your journey.

Pandora City

22 October 2012. Visions of a more potent, more stunning and less messy version of Singapore's tropical nature.

A few months ago, Singapore's *Gardens by the Bay* opened to the public, a large park on reclaimed land at the island's southern tip. Advertised with much fanfare as an important step towards the transformation of Singapore from a "Garden City" to a "City in a Garden," the park features cooled conservatories and a grove of "supertrees" – between 25- and 50-metre-high steel structures that will eventually be overgrown and form an artificial canopy of flowers and climbers. The canopy is envisioned to regulate temperature and provide shade, whilst photovoltaic systems mimic photosynthesis, and rainwater is harvested for irrigation.





We buy an 18-dollar coupon for an aperitif in the treetop bar of one of the supertrees. An elevator lifts us up into the canopy. Artificial flowers abound and the golden face of a Buddha looks down on us, embowered in artificial vines. Even the flickering tealights on the table are LED-powered, much to the delight of my little daughter, who touches them carefully, stunned by the magic trick. A large flatscreen shows an eternal parade of young models walking down a runway. The glamour of Fashion TV blends naturally with the surreal treetop shelter and the view of the city's illuminated financial district.

Singapore, just north of the equator, has developed a special relationship with nature. Constant gardening is required to prevent the tropical forest from recapturing the city. At the same time, the city state has invested much in recreational facilities to make the tamed nature accessible – a bird park, a large zoo and several treetop walkways allow for its consumption. *Gardens by the Bay*, however, takes the relation between humans and nature to a new level. The project manifests a vision of a more potent, more stunning and less messy incarnation of Singapore's tropical surroundings. An avatar of nature itself. Welcome to Pandora City.

Avatar was originally a Sanskrit term that stands for the voluntary descent of a deity to the world with all its illusions – its *maya*. But for us contemporary denizens of planet earth, the term “avatar” rather stands for the little images representing our identities in cyberspace, or maybe James Cameron’s Hollywood version of an avatar descending to Planet Pandora to save the native Na’vi. The gaze of Singapore’s skyline from the supertree’s platform, however, feels absurdly real. The canopy bar provides a glimpse into the 21st century’s hyperreal *maya* – the lungs of global capitalism.

And the natives, where are the natives? – That’s us.

Hundwil

12 May 2013. An explosion of green and repeating images of home.





An explosion of green meadows dotted with houses, barns and cows, the finest milk, an oversized church and the occasional human being. This is Hundwil, the place where I grew up. These images are all taken just around the house. Here, twenty years ago, I was sitting on the doorstep, smoking cigarettes and dreaming of the world out there.

Once I moved out, my mother started sending me self-made calendars with seasonal variations of these images – the church in winter, the meadows in spring, the old pear tree in autumn, the barns and cows in summer. She asked me every year whether I really wanted yet another one. I did, and I carried them with me to India, Nepal, Siberia, China and Tibet.

Whenever somebody was curious about the place I came from, I would show these pictures. I would explain that a good Swiss Brown would produce more than 100,000 kg of milk during her lifetime, that such cows would earn badges that peasants proudly displayed, that there were beauty pageants to celebrate their udders.

While I was living there, I was blind to most of these things. It was not my world; my father was a priest, not a dairy farmer. But from afar, it seemed obvious that the grass, the cows, the barns and the milk were what made this place – its landscape, its culture and its people.

My mother continued photographing the house and its surroundings until her old Zeiss Ikon Contaflex finally stopped working a couple of years ago. Whenever the light was good, she would take a picture: to remember that this was a beautiful place, to see it despite its omnipresence, to transcend its immanence – one roll of film after another.

Now, I find myself doing the same.

Moon over Munich

25 October 2013. Stuck between city and suburbia.

Donnersberger Brücke, 7 pm. The moon is rising behind the Munich City Tower. People in the expensive fitness studio across the railway tracks are being watched by those waiting for their train back to the suburbs.

A poster campaign by a local insurance company shows a young couple kissing happily. They have a thousand plans and no reason to worry because of their flexible pension plan.

My train is late. Stuck between city and suburbia on an early October evening that smells of snow, I am captivated by the colours of this uneventful moment. The dark blue sky, the yellow danger signs, the red of Deutsche Bahn. Random, fragile beauty in a city where I am still a stranger.



Fairytale

11 June 2014. As real as it gets.

“Look, a real princess!” my daughter whispers in my ear.

There she stands on a red and yellow cliff overlooking Issyk Kul, the deep blue lake between the two ranges of the Tien Shan in Kyrgyzstan. National Television is shooting a music video with a well-known singer.

They set up a camera crane and are doing rehearsals while waiting for the harsh light of the early afternoon to soften.



The sandstone formations that provide the setting for the scene are called *skaska* – fairytale. Just off the main road that leads along the southern shores of Issyk Kul, they are easy to reach and attract many visitors. We mingle with a group of Kazakh tourists and watch the scene unfold.

The slow pace on the film set, the extensive preparations, the boredom and waiting under the scorching sun are interrupted only by the short moments of focus and ritual when the camera runs. We, the bystanders, acknowledged but ignored, bestow our interest and curiosity upon the spectacle. All this suits the surreal landscape exceptionally well. A princess in a fairytale, indeed – as real as it gets.

Good location scouting, one could say. Or is it more the other way around? That the place lures people to worship it and praise its name around the globe?

Chläus

07 January 2014. New Year's Eve in Hundwil, Switzerland.

In Hundwil, the village where I grew up, a ritual is performed on New Year's Eve. Masked characters known as "Chläus" go round from house to house. They are dressed in elaborate costumes with hats that feature entire landscapes or stuffed birds, they sing songs without words and they dance, shaking the heavy bells they are carrying. If you ask anybody in the village what they are doing and why, you will learn they are chasing away bad spirits. Few believe in spirits these days; ghosts and spirits have disappeared from the lives of most people in Hundwil. But this does not matter. Ritual, I think, is much less about meaning than we may assume. It is first and foremost about being. Going round from house to house as Chläus is just beautiful, exciting and simply feels right. The Chläus are given mulled wine and some money in return.

Some of my former classmates arrive at the house. I do not recognise them.

“Happy New Year!”
“Who are you?”
“Hansueli.”
“Ah, Happy New Year!”
Happy New Year.



Caspian crossing

21 November 2014. Steaks from Paraguay for the Kazakh middle class.

We are on the way to Central Asia, crossing the Caspian Sea from Baku (Azerbaijan) to Aktau (Kazakhstan) on a cargo vessel. Aboard we meet a group of four Azeris working on a refrigerated goods train. Their cargo is frozen meat from Paraguay and their job is to handle customs procedures and deliver the goods safely to northern Kazakhstan. The nitty-gritty of globalised trade.



We spend a day anchored off the Kazakh coast. Two other ships are waiting to discharge, and the sailors say a storm is coming. Much time and nothing to do except watching the weather and hoping that we are allowed to dock before the winds pick up.

The Azeris invite us to their cabin and feed us fresh pomegranates, snacks and vodka.

“Isn’t there enough meat in Kazakhstan?” I ask.

There is plenty, “... but they eat a lot,” they reply. “And the growing middle class in the oil-rich country has developed a taste for fine steaks and tenderloin,” they add.

The four men are in their 50s and led different lives before becoming train attendants. One ran his own shop in Moscow, which paid for his two children’s university education. It was raided and seized, like so many other immigrant businesses. The other one was the director of a fish factory and was responsible for the protection of fish in the Caspian Sea during Soviet times. Now they earn about 240 US dollars a month. Not enough for today’s expensive Azerbaijan. Soviet times were better, fairer and more affluent, they all agree.

Steppe motel

4 April 2015. Tea and dinner in the Kazakh steppe.



Places to stay are few and far in between along the highways that cut through the Kazakh steppe. Weary after a long day of navigating potholes and driving desert tracks, we are happy to find this one near a fuel station outside Sagyz. The house is charmingly illuminated as if it were a film set. The signboard reads "Resting rooms," rather than hotel – maybe out of modesty and maybe just to temper expectations.

Those who travel these lonesome roads usually have urgent business elsewhere. Some work on the oil fields near the Caspian Sea, others are migrant labourers on their way to Russia. Broken axles, loose sands, sudden storms or other troubles are frequent; everybody agrees that the steppe can be a dangerous place. People drive long hours to arrive somewhere safe.

Our room is tiny and the beds are so narrow that I fall out twice during the night. But the canteen is warm and the owner serves us tea and

dinner. The motel soon fills up, and those arriving late are sent away – the last ones at 3 a.m. They get back into their car and drive on till morning.

Prospekt Nastavnikov

28 December 2018. Winter light in Saint Petersburg.



There is something particular about Saint Petersburg during winter. With just a few hours of natural daylight, much of the city days unfold in darkness. Yet, around the clock, there is a glow to the city that I always found intriguing.

While we are walking to a restaurant with friends, it starts snowing heavily. I finally begin to understand: reflected by the snow on the ground, the light of street lanterns, billboards and cars illuminates the city from below. The ground is light and the sky is dark, inverting the natural order of things. Snowfall amplifies this inversion. This is what a stroll along Prospekt Nastavnikov, the Avenue of Mentors, teaches me tonight.



Cockpits

10 August 2018. Breeding roosters in the hull of a Boeing 747.

In Thantip Village, eastern Bangkok, a majestic Boeing 747 and several MD-82s found a resting place on an empty piece of land next to the road. A few European children and their parents – following, like us, online advice on what to do with children in Bangkok – are climbing around the enormous hulls. It is the first and probably the only time I explore the upper deck and cockpit of a Jumbo Jet. Allegedly, the defunct aircrafts were purchased to be dismantled and sold as scrap metal. Now, the family living on the premises has turned the picturesque graveyard of airplanes into a tourist attraction, charging substantial entry fees.

The bigger business, however, may lay in yet a different kind of cockpit: part of the 747's hull, cut in half to form two hangar-like structures, serves as a barn to breed gamecocks – the kind pitted against each other in cockfights. Cockfighting is both an old tradition and big business in Thailand despite efforts to outlaw it for good. I try to take portraits of

the proud roosters but I am not sure how much my interest in them is appreciated. Could I be a spy with a hidden agenda?





A thunderstorm is brewing. The sky behind the yard of pits and cocks turns dark, wrapping the hulls into dramatic light. An unexpected afterword to Clifford Geertz? Or have we just walked into an untold episode of *Lost*? The first heavy raindrops fall. The young woman who sold us tickets waves us off. A picture? – Yes. Smile. Goodbye.

We seek shelter in a nearby 7-Eleven. The sound of the convenience store's distinct bell, ringing each and every time the sliding doors open, wakes me out of this dream.

