

Review of Karen Strassler's Refracted Visions

Strassler, Karen. *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0822346111

Finding good ethnographies for my Southeast Asia anthropology course at St. Olaf College is always a challenge. I look for books that are rigorous, well written, and that fit with the historical materials on my syllabus. There are wonderful books out there, but many suffer from the challenges characteristic of anthropological writing – they assume too much prior knowledge, overuse technical jargon, and/or focus too narrowly to sustain undergraduate interest. How fortunate, then, to find Karen Strassler's 2010 book *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Duke University Press).

Refracted Visions is a history of photography in Indonesia, but it is also much more than that. Strassler works in the subfield of visual anthropology, an approach that investigates the cultural organization of a visual landscape. In short, visual anthropologists ask, what are the peculiarities of our ways of seeing? How are our perceptions shaped by historical developments, political power, and categories like “insider” and “outsider”? In her book, Strassler addresses such questions while emphasizing how technology shapes visual habits in Indonesia. She renders sophisticated theoretical insights and careful ethnographic research in elegant prose.

Strassler's book comprises six substantive chapters along with an analytical introduction that details her theoretical interests and a brief epilogue about digital photography. The core chapters each examine a different genre of Indonesian photography and give the book its chronological structure. The genres Strassler analyzes include colonial-era landscape photography, early nationalist photo studio backdrops, state identification photos, 1970s and 80s family photographs, and student photography in the 1990s protests that brought down Suharto's New Order. Her last chapter is more formally ethnographic, examining the beautifully complex use of photography in an amateur history museum. As fits the subject matter, the book is lavishly illustrated with 127 photographs. From the cover image to the photos that serve as epigraphs to each chapter, the visuals work to train the eye of the reader, leading us into Strassler's ways of seeing.

Strassler's anthropological methodology blends both ethnographic and archival research. Set in the central Javanese court city of Yogyakarta, her research sites include expected locations like photography studios and the weekend outings of photography clubs, but some of her choice insights come from serendipitous encounters with either photographs or photographers. Friends show Strassler their cherished photos and tell the stories that go with them. Studio photographers dig out dusty old backdrops in their shops and share with Strassler the albums full of customers. Most critically, Strassler's research coincides with the dramatic events of 1998, where photographic evidence proved crucial testimony to the violence of the tottering New Order regime. Strassler confidently shifts between these different modes of research, versed as she is in the concepts of visual anthropology and the complex dynamics of central Java.

The core of Strassler's analysis is to take mundane images and refigure them as dynamic

objects. She shows, for instance, how identification photographs work as disciplinary tools of the state to identify its subjects, but she also argues that such images have other lives as tokens of love and affection, and as memorials to the dead. Another chapter explores how cheap cameras became widely available in Indonesia as a result of the 1970s economic boom. Strassler reveals how such a shift more deeply integrated photography into ritual events like weddings, and quickly became required to make such life-cycle rituals seem complete. New rituals arrived in Indonesia to serve the camera: birthday parties, a recent import to the country, function in Strassler's analysis as living backdrops for photo taking.

Finally, Strassler emphasizes the role of photography in Indonesia's turbulent national politics. The events that marked the birth of the New Order in the 1960s, Strassler asserts, were largely not photographed. The few scattered images produced during that time haunt those who lived under Suharto's authoritarian regime. The end of Suharto's reign in 1998 came during an era of mass photography, and was copiously documented by student activist/photographers. The circulation of these images, Strassler argues, helped produce the ambivalence experienced by activists during the tumult of post-New Order politics. In Strassler's view, technology is not a neutral factor in contemporary Indonesia, but rather a dynamic force reshaping affect, ritual, and politics.

Ambitious theoretical interests match Strassler's broad reach into Indonesian history and society. She draws upon Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and the work of South Asianist Christopher Pinney. Part of Strassler's semiotic analysis builds from the work of philosopher Charles Peirce, who analyzed the triadic nature of signs. Symbols, icons, and indexes can be exceedingly abstract for undergraduates, but Strassler conveys the power of a Peircean analysis in a compelling and accessible way. In particular, the indexicality of photographs (their capacity, for instance, to be given as gifts) shows how they are not fixed icons but rather lively processes. An identification photograph taken for the purposes of state management gains a powerful meaning when it is the only personal photograph someone owns. It can also become a token of affection when passed to another person, and even a memorial to the deceased. Strassler shows how photographs in Indonesia transform constantly—as politics, the economy, artistic conventions, and technology change. The photographs and their myriad meanings index the powerful dynamism of twentieth-century life in the archipelago.

Thus, Strassler highlights concepts of modernity and nationalism along with semiotic theories. Her subtitle for *Refracted Visions* references “national modernity in Java” and shows how the visual field she analyzes is shaped by the conditions of Dutch colonialism and the specifics of Indonesia's post-colonial configuration. Her title argues that technology is not a singular process, or merely one with local characteristics, but rather that modern processes like photography and mechanical reproduction unfold in unpredictably local ways. For example, a key part of modernity in the Dutch East Indies and independent Indonesia was the role of ethnic Chinese cultural brokers. Throughout Southeast Asia, ethnic Chinese were crucial figures in developing colonial capitalism. Strassler deftly shows how important they were to other realms of cultural production in the region. Among many such cultural influences, ethnic Chinese helped introduce and disseminate photography in the Indies. Indonesia's alternative modernity was not just a hybrid of Europe, but rather a complex combination of refractions and visions.

Such theoretical and empirical richness makes the book a joy to teach. The course I use it for is called Modern Southeast Asia (for an outline of the course see Williamson 2009), and the syllabus includes texts on the region's engagements with colonialism along with the anti-colonial revolutions that brought about independence. We read Pramoedya's *This Earth*

of *Mankind*, and Strassler begins her book with a passage from *This Earth*. We also discuss the region's bountiful diversity and intensely cosmopolitan character, likewise themes echoed in Strassler's text. Part of the course includes watching feature films from Southeast Asia, including 1995's *Nostalgia For the Countryside* from Vietnam; the 2004 film *Sepet* from Malaysia; and to best connect with Strassler's book, a 2007 Indonesian film directed by Nan Traveni Achmas titled *The Photograph* (2007). *Refracted Visions* helps students to think more complexly about the meanings of such filmed representations of Southeast Asian life.

A course in Southeast Asia taught in Minnesota can only roughly evoke the region's sensory experience. We can't easily take in the smells of a Singapore hawker center or the humid heat of a Bangkok street corner. We can, though, gain a sense of the audio landscape, by listening to Javanese Gamelan music and the beat of Pointe Blanc's *Iphmali*. The visual landscape is also accessible via the magic of the Internet and the treasures found on YouTube. Strassler's book helps us to better interrogate that visual field; it leads students to wonder what British colonialism looked like in Orwell's Burma, to question the sights produced by the Japanese occupation in Malaysia, and to better make sense of the myriad images that circulate of the American War in Vietnam. And, of course, our discussion of the book leads us to wonder what visual dimensions of Southeast Asia are less accessible to those of us far away from the region.

Students learn a lot about Southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular from Strassler's book. They learn about the importance of colonialism, the role of immigrant communities, the tumult of politics, and the pace of globalization. They also get the opportunity to learn about places closer to home, like the university where they study and the sites where they venture off campus. The best books do this work of connecting seemingly disparate entities. Photography is a big part of the twenty-first century college life, both in the United States and in Indonesia. Cameras are built into the mobile phones that seem to be grafted onto the hands of the planet's affluent young. Related technologies like Facebook make the visual field an increasingly photographic one. Thus, throughout our time together discussing *Refracted Visions* we are not only talking about Indonesia and Southeast Asia, but also about our own relationships to technology. For its many rewards of insight, I highly recommend Karen Strassler's text for the liberal arts Asian Studies classroom.

Thomas Williamson, Associate Professor, Sociology-Anthropology, St. Olaf College.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Strassler, Karen. *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Williamson, Thomas, "Teaching Modern Southeast Asia," *ASIANetwork Exchange* 16 (2009): 72-85.