

# An Image-based Multimodal Approach to Post-colonial Everyday Visual Experiences: A Case Study of *Superimposition (UK-HK)*

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## Abstract

The colonial history connects the United Kingdom and Hong Kong culturally. Even today, colonial objects and architecture are still ordinary in Hong Kong, creating post-colonial visual experiences. This paper proposes an image-based multimodal approach to explore new embodied post-colonial visual experiences. The approach aims to enrich the existing historical way of examining such experiences. Starting from examples of post-colonial space and objects in Hong Kong, the paper discusses colonial history and its impact on everyday visual experiences. Following is a literature review on multimodality as a speculative approach to anthropology, which establishes a theoretical framework for the later discussion. Lastly, the paper introduces and elaborates on an image-based multimodal approach by discussing a collaborative artwork *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, which uses film swap and photogrammetry to examine post-colonial everyday visual experiences.

## Keywords

Multimodality, Post-colonial Visual Experiences, Film Swap, Photogrammetry, Photography, Artistic Research

## Post-colonial space and objects in Hong Kong

Ruling for over a century, the British Empire (now the United Kingdom) has left many British architecture and facilities in Hong Kong. Even now, it is easy to find British-style architecture or public facilities in the city. As an artist group from the UK and Hong Kong, we sometimes overlook the colonial traces in Hong Kong since they are ordinary to us. Being commissioned by the Peer to Peer: UK/HK 2022 with the theme *The Power of Place*, we take the opportunity to study the post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong that we had missed. As an art-based ethnographic project, our work focuses on the experimental use of lens-based media for capturing the post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong. We have referenced multimodality in anthropology, which will be further discussed in later parts and developing our image-based multimodal approach in the research. The approach will offer new angles to understand the colonial history and post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong through images. After the handover in 1997, the use and appearance of many colonial-era buildings and public facilities changed. The changes

testify to the shift of Hong Kong's sovereignty and the start of the post-colonial chapter. In the following parts of this section, we will discuss the post-colonial changes of Murray House and colonial post boxes in Hong Kong.

## Murray House

Murray House is a Victorian-era building built in 1846. It served as 'the barracks of the British Forces in Hong Kong and offices of various Government departments.' [1] The building was demolished due to its structural issues and the replanning of the central district in 1982. The remains of the building had been preserved and used as the material in its reconstruction project in 1998. Now, it is located at Stanley Plaza and become a landmark there. [2] Murray House has an international chain store and a restaurant now. As a typical example of a renovated heritage in Hong Kong, its outlook is preserved, but the content is irrelevant to its original context. The decontextualising conservation strategy deprives the cultural significance of old buildings. This former government office is just an old building in the regional shopping area now.

## Colonial Post Boxes

The remaining British-style post boxes are iconic colonial public facilities in Hong Kong. In 1878, The British government imported the first two cast-iron post boxes to Hong Kong. [3] Until the handover in 1997, almost 1,200 post boxes were in the city. Most of the post boxes were in red and black and decorated with column linings inspired by Greek pillars and the time-specific royal cypher. Apart from the standalone pillar boxes, some colonial post boxes were embedded into walls and lamp poles. After the handover, Hongkong Post repainted the still-servicing colonial post boxes green and purple (Hongkong Post's brand colour) and gradually replaced them with the new rectangular design. 59 out of 1148 currently functioning post boxes in Hong Kong are still colonial pillar boxes. [4] The Antiquities and Monuments Office collects nine colonial post boxes for conservation while the others are still in service. [5] These rare physical remnants testify to the city's colonial past and post-colonial development.

## Multimodality: a speculative approach to visual experiences

The examples above are post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong. When we study these visual experiences, we tend to only focus on the historical background. However, our embodied experiences are also essential to these experiences. Thus, the right way to study post-colonial visual experiences is to examine both the colonial history and the embodied experiences. Yet, how should we integrate historical information and sensory experiences when comprehending post-colonial visual experiences? This paper suggests multimodality, an anthropological method for field studies, as a possible solution for studying post-colonial visual experiences. In this section, we first review Multimodality: Reshaping Anthropology by Mark R. Westmoreland. Following that is a study of the image-based multimodal approach used in our artwork *Superimposition (UK-HK)*. It is a thematic commissioned project under Peer to Peer: UK/HK 2022, an online art programme ‘designed to inspire and encourage meaningful cultural exchange between the UK and Hong Kong’s visual arts sectors and to forge enduring partnerships.’ [6]

### Literature review – Multimodality: Reshaping Anthropology

In the article, Westmoreland claims that multimodality is an emerging practice in anthropology used to tackle text-centric and visualist problematics in anthropology. [7] Thus, multimodality has no solid definition, while its ambivalence allows ethnographers to research more inclusively. After the declaration, Westmoreland suggests three frameworks for multimodal ethnography: graphic foundation, expanded sensorium, and reflexive in/mediacy. These frameworks aim to make ethnographic practice ‘more-than-text’ and reflexive, unlike situational observation in traditional ethnography. [8]

The graphic foundation is a ‘more-than-textual’ anthropological approach that ‘encourages kaleidoscopic combinations of objects, text, images, and sounds in ways that unsettle lexical hierarchies’. [9] It uses visual elements as a starting point to raise anthropologists’ awareness of inquiring in multiple ways. As an inclusive framework involving different media, the graphic foundation provides a less discriminative foundation for ethnographic practice. Expanded sensorium is ‘the way the researcher’s body serves as the primary instrument of investigation’ that requires training. [10] It facilitates ‘sensuous, interpretive, and phenomenological’ studies that result in a ‘less attuned to documenting reality than enacting a form of empathy’ outcome. [11] Reflexive in/mediacy is a framework for developing ethnographic practice with existing data or materials that allows its practitioner to hermeneutic sense with technology. As anthropologists ‘conventionally derive

authority from the unmediated access of “being there”, reflexive in/mediacy enables anthropologists to gain authority by comprehensively studying the data or materials without ‘being there’. [12]

After proposing these frameworks, Westmoreland introduces three disciplinary reconfigurations to ‘reframe stymied/hindered theoretical debates (on multimodality) and outline infrastructural requirements for its disciplinary sustainability.’ [13] He suggests dichotomies for the unruly, multimodality for an anthropological otherwise, and infrastructures for a multimodal messiness to position multimodality in anthropological research. These directions justify multimodality as a scholarly, rigorous, and agile ethnographic approach that can ‘resist geometric reductionism’. [14]

Westmoreland argues that multimodality is an inclusive and rational approach to field studies. As we sometimes overlook the post-colonial context in everyday visual experience, multimodality helps us reconnect the context to our experiences. In the rest of the section, we discuss the application of the image-based multimodal approach with our commissioned artwork – *Superimposition (HK-UK)*. The artwork is supported by the Open Eye Gallery and the University of Salford Art Collection, under the international collaborative festival Peer to Peer: UK/HK 2022 with the theme *The Power of Place*. In response to the theme, our artwork studies the power dynamics from the colonial history of Hong Kong by experimenting with post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong. We used the graphic foundation and expanded sensorium as inspirations. Starting with a lens-based observation, we develop two corpora of images to reflect post-colonial visual experiences in the UK and Hong Kong.

### An Image-based Multimodal Approach

Inspired by Westmoreland’s multimodality, we have developed our image-based multimodal approach. Our approach references the more-than-textual concept of multimodality. Thus, it uses different forms of images to offer a new perspective on post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong. Encompassing multiple models, our approach aims to create a rich, non-linear narrative of the colonial influences in Hong Kong. We employ the approach in *Superimposition (UK-HK)* to explore post-colonial visual experiences in the UK and Hong Kong through two models - film swap and photogrammetry. Both models involve photo shooting as preliminary observation. Nevertheless, the objectives, processes, and results are different. In the film swap, we first design a list of themes for each frame. Then, we shoot with the same roll of film according to the list. The resulting images are multiple-exposed, thematically related, and visually random. We explore the ambiguity between existing concepts and our observations. Due to the

post-colonial context, we discover similar visual experiences in both places. Our work presents the British influences on visual experiences in Hong Kong. For instance, many designs of signage or infrastructure in Hong Kong are similar to the UK in our photos. We do not intend to emphasise the British traces in Hong Kong, but our intentionally unconstructed film swap captures the colonial influences on everyday visual experiences in Hong Kong.

Unlike the unconstructed film swap, the photogrammetry, a photo-based 3D scanning process, is object-oriented. We have studied similar post boxes in the UK and Hong Kong through photogrammetry. To generate high-quality 3D models, we photographed many photos of the post boxes from different angles. As a result, we created two 3D models of post boxes, one from the UK and the other from Hong Kong. After generating the 3D scans, we decolourise the models and render the plain post boxes. Besides, we synthesise new post boxes by merging the scans to create 'double-exposed' 3D models.

The film swap presents connections between both places through post-colonial visual experiences, while the photogrammetry conveys the change of colonial objects in Hong Kong. Derived by different intentions, the film swap uses randomness to discuss the colonial impact of daily visual experiences, while the photogrammetry employs an object-oriented approach to study colonial history. Instead of reinforcing the dichotomy of colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong, we suggest a multimodal seeing of history. Our multimodal approach blurs the colonial boundary of the different periods of Hong Kong. By using a more-than-textual approach, we suggest alternative perspectives for colonial history and visualise the sophisticated post-colonial city.

### *Superimposition (UK-HK): two approaches*

Previous sections outline the principles, objectives, and methodologies used in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*. This section reviews the art-making process and our multimodal strategies in our artistic research. The first part discusses the film swap and its narrative through randomness. The second part discusses photogrammetry and its transformative materiality in the post-colonial context. The review aims to evaluate the strengths and limitations of our multimodal approach towards post-colonial visual experiences.

#### Film Swap

We believe that history is the story of the development of a place. Therefore, dichotomising colonial and post-colonial history is not appropriate to understand of a former colony. Thus, instead of studying colonial traces in Hong Kong, we capture daily street views in the UK and Hong Kong to 'allow something to happen.' [15] As a comparative study, we practise film swap - an approach of multiple exposures

on the same film roll. In the film swap, we design a list of themes for shooting. Following the list, we photographed random cityscapes with the same theme. As a result, we came up with an image sequence of multiple-exposed urban snapshots. In the following part, we discuss two examples of how we consume post-colonial visual experiences from different points of view.

The first example is a double-exposed photo of buildings in the UK and Hong Kong. (Fig. 1) It captures many signages in both English and Chinese. Some signages are commercial, while others are political, such as the British flag and a Russian communist billboard. Those signages blend into the buildings' structure, formulating an overwhelming and informative image. The signage provides much information for audiences to connect the two places, such as our colonial lineage. This double-exposed photo is a strong example of the visual connection between the places. The signages in the UK align with the buildings in Hong Kong, which creates an illusion that the signages are parts of those buildings' structures. It is hard to tell the shooting location of this photo from the details. The sophisticated image confuses its audiences between both places. Although we start by allowing something to happen visually, the result suggests a controlled way of seeing. [16] This way of seeing suggests a visual and contextual connection between the two scenes. Eventually, the image leads audiences to connect the two places from our form to our context.

Different from the lousy aesthetic, the second example employs a simplistic visual strategy. (Fig. 2) We photographed two lamp poles from similar angles and compositions. The image is too general for audiences to tell the place and context. Thus, it leaves room for audiences to imagine its context. As part of the image sequence, this image serves two functions. Its first function is to present the ordinary side of post-colonial visual experiences. When we discuss post-colonialism, imagery of colonial objects (localised or not) pops up in our minds in the first place. Such imagery is just one form of post-colonial visual



Figure 1. A double-exposed photo in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, 2022, photograph, Peer to Peer: UK/HK (© Authors. Photo: Authors)



Figure 2. A triple-exposed photo in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, 2022, photograph, Peer to Peer: UK/HK (© Authors. Photo: Authors)

experience. Post-colonial visual experiences can also be subtle and insignificant, such as this example. Thus, we present this ordinary post-colonial visual experience. The second function of the image is to provide an outlet for the overwhelming image sequence. A multiple-exposed photo is saturated with information since it is a photo of more than one shot. However, this example is rarely simplistic. The intersection of the two light poles is contextually empty but visually powerful due to its simplicity, which refreshes audiences in the middle of a rich image sequence.

We intend to present non-stereotypical images when exploring post-colonial visual experiences. Avoiding stereotypical significances, we suggest an embodied approach to discover nuances in everyday visual experiences and the postcolonial contexts beneath.

### Photogrammetry: The Transformative Materiality

Photogrammetry is a 'process of deriving (usually) metric information about an object through measurements made on photographs of the object.' [17] The objective of photogrammetry is 'to rigorously establish the geometric relationship between the image and the object as it existed

at the time of the imaging event.' [18] In other words, photogrammetry is the method to interpret photos geometrically in the 3D cartesian system. For easier reading, we call the photogrammetric practice 'scanning' and the results 'the scans' in the rest of the paper.

Following the less structured film swap, we shift to an object-oriented approach - photogrammetric scanning of the UK's and Hong Kong's post boxes. The style of the scanned post boxes is the same; both are in British design. (Fig. 3) The colonial post boxes used to have the same colour as the UK's post boxes. However, they were recoloured into the brand colour of Hongkong Post, which is green and purple after the handover.



Figure 3. Photo of the scanned colonial post box in Hong Kong (left), photo of the scanned post box in the UK (right) (© Authors. Photo: Authors)

The recolouring, the handover, and the decolonisation inspire us to explore new angles to perceive post-colonial post boxes in Hong Kong. Therefore, we first shoot many photos from different angles of the same post box to create photogrammetric scans of the UK's and Hong Kong's post boxes. Then, we generate two 3D models, one UK's post box and one Hong Kong's post box. (Fig. 4) After generating the 3D scans, we render the post boxes without applying any shader. As a result, we create two plain, monochromic renderings which cannot inform the post boxes' location but can visualise the subtle connection of both places. Responding to the theme 'Power of Place', we identify that power, especially the political one, is just one part of the formation of history. Therefore, we include details from different perspectives to understand history in our post-colonial research, such as everyday visual experiences.



Figure 4. A rendering of the Hong Kong's post box (left), and a rendering of the UK's post box (right) in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, 2022, 3D rendering, Peer to Peer: UK/HK (© Authors. Image: Authors)

Intrigued by the multiple-exposure techniques in the film swap, we created the 'double-exposed' version of post boxes' scans, also known as 'pseudo-scans'. (Fig. 5) The pseudo-scans are transformative 3D models generated based on the two photogrammetric scans. One transforms from the Hong Kong scan to the UK one, and the other transforms vice versa. The pseudo-scans further decontextualise the post boxes. We blend the two royal cyphers on the post-boxes. These post-boxes had different royal cyphers engraved due to the different production periods. The Hong Kong post box has an Elizabeth II cypher, while the UK scan has a George VI cypher. The pseudo-scans generalise the historical significance of the cyphers and establish a post-colonial discourse. The change of the British throne did not influence Hong Kongers' lives much. However, it left many marks and influenced the visual culture of Hong Kong, such as those post boxes. The pseudo-scans decontextualise historical significances to address post-colonial context.



Figure 5. The HK to UK post box rendering (left), and the UK to HK post box rendering (right) in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, 2022, 3D rendering, Peer to Peer: UK/HK (© Authors. Image: Authors)

### Strengths and Limitations of Multimodality in *Superimposition (UK-HK)*

We suggest several perspectives on post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong by observing, interpreting, and visualising our experiences inside and outside Hong Kong. We demonstrate a diverse and inclusive approach to rethink possible ways to see the post-colonial city through multimodality. From the less structured film swap to the

object-oriented photogrammetry, we use multimodality to understand the 'power of place' from different angles. For instance, the film swap excavates the lingering impact of colonialism, while the photogrammetry analyses the recoloured post box. The observational and analytical approaches complement each other and enrich the definition of the subsiding power in post-colonial visual experiences. The image-based outcomes mediate more-than-textual findings and provide audiences with our embodied experiences in the artistic research. As a result, the artwork enriches our existing understanding of post-colonialism. Unlike traditional ethnographic projects, *Superimposition (UK-HK)* does not involve any textual description for the situational observation. Therefore, the outline of the ethnographic narrative is not explicit. However, the openness of the artwork allows audiences to interpret the colonial context of Hong Kong intuitively, resulting in a deeper impression of history. The non-textual format also makes the knowledge more accessible to people outside academia. Eventually, the artistic ethnographic practice expands the existing anthropological landscape. At the same time, the robust anthropological theory facilitates the conceptualisation of the artwork. Benefiting from multimodality, we express our concern about colonial history effectively and contribute non-textual findings to anthropology.

The multimodality is an effective approach to consolidate artistic practices and diversify anthropological research. Nevertheless, it is hard to outline the subject matter clearly due to its integrated nature. In *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, we only focus on the film swap and the photogrammetry to discuss the colonial impact and the historical lineage between the UK and Hong Kong. Only working on two models, the result is already rich. Imagine if we include more models in our artwork, the narrative will be complicated, or even out of focus. Limiting the research to two to three models can keep the grand narrative clear. The plurality of multimodality is a powerful tool to enrich ethnographic research, however, it may also weaken the research narrative if the presentation of materials is not well-organised.

### Conclusion

The paper starts with the observation of post-colonial visual experiences in Hong Kong. Formulating an inclusive and reflexive framework to observe and interpret, we borrow the multimodal framework for field studies in anthropology. As a result, we propose an image-based multimodal approach for an integrated seeing of post-colonial visual experiences. Following the introduction is the study of *Superimposition (UK-HK)*, which adopts the multimodal approach to study colonial traces and post-colonial changes in the UK and Hong Kong. The two imagery corpora - the film swap and the photogrammetry investigate colonial impacts on our everyday visual experience and suggest the importance of multimodality in post-colonial contexts. The paper ends

with evaluating multimodality in art and highlighting the key to multimodality.

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