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In Line: A Photo Essay on Entering a School in Bangalore[1]

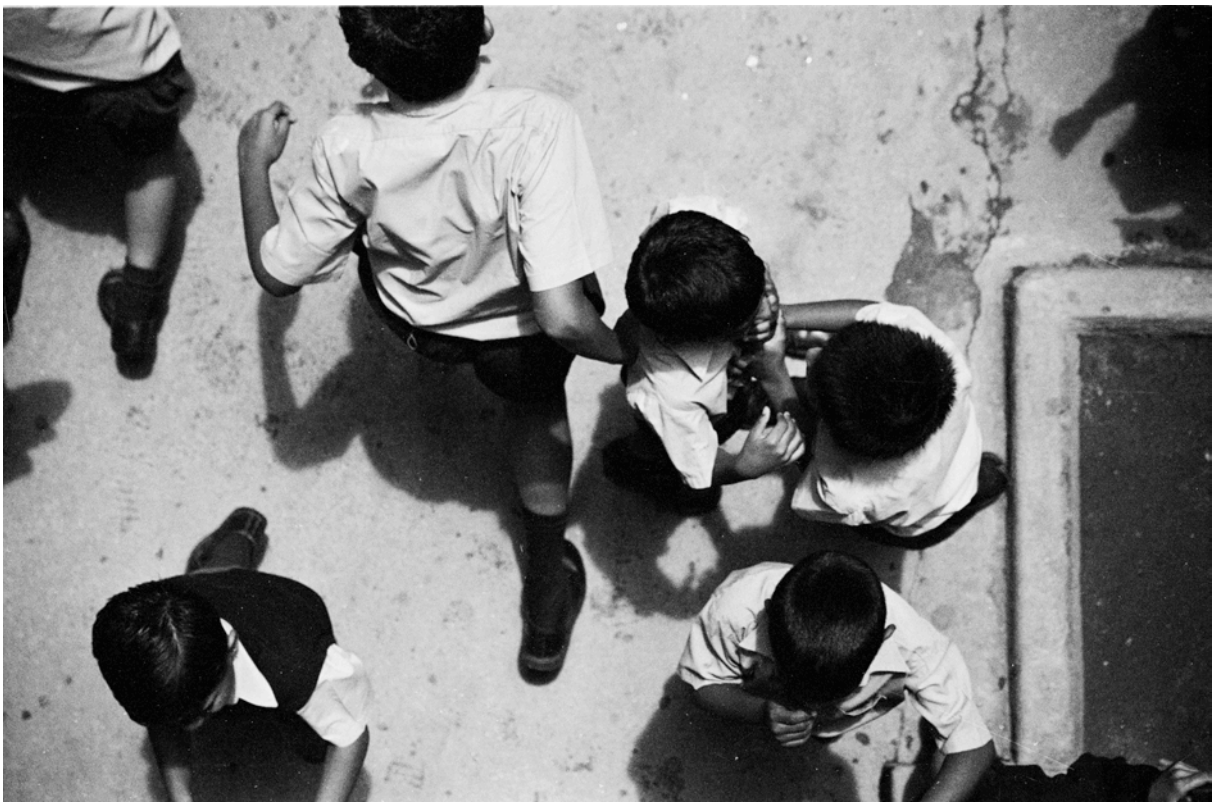

Fig. 1: Pupils play during break.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the processes of applying discipline to pupils who enter the school. In its form, it is a visual study of this process. It is concerned with the mechanisms

[1] The material for this article has been gathered through a research in Bangalore, India, in the summer of 2009, funded by DAAD and supervised by Prof. Christoph Wulf, to whom I'm grateful for offering me this position. This text, however, wouldn't have been published without the invaluable assistance of my co-researcher Martin Bittner who shared his thoughts, his comments and his notes with me throughout the writing of this paper.

[2] The name of the institution has been erased at the request of my research colleagues.

[3] A note on the leaders. The school is divided into four houses. Each house has its team of leaders. Students

that are set in motion in order to apply an order to the pupils at the process of entering a school, lining up for the morning prayers and finally entering the classroom.

The concept of lining up students, either as an embodied practice or as a practice imposed by school authority, seems to be of primary importance for the learning of discipline in general. In following Tim Ingold's problematization of the line, we assume that: "In modern societies, it seems, straightness has come to epitomize not only rational thought and disputation but also the values of civility and moral rectitude" (2007: 2). Straightness represents development. If bodies can be put in order, thoughts can be put in order and eventually a whole society can.

This particular case of line making seems to be of a quite difficult kind. The 'dots' needed to be lined here are pupils, in ages ranging from five to sixteen. Figure 1, above, where pupils are photographed from above (the photographic lens assuming the view of one of many cctv cameras which are installed in the school) during the break, isn't really confined to the borders of the picture frame; the image spreads and it expands; just like its subject, pupils that play during break, is impossible to stay inside a fixed frame. This is what I mean by saying that those are difficult dots to line up.

This is primary a visual study of the subject, and as such it is bound to be confined by the photographers gaze and his aesthetics. It intends not to interpret but to communicate knowledge which may be better communicated through images and has by no means moral-evaluative intentions. MacDougall, in his extensive work in a boarding school in India, has also been concerned with what he conceived as social aesthetics. In his visual study he encounters frequently motives of homogeneity and similarity; instead of turning a blind eye to those reoccurring themes in fear of creating stylized stereotypes, he instead attempts to visually study their importance. There is something at stake here of course, best expressed perhaps in the words of Susan Sontag: "Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience" (2002: 6). MacDougall takes defiance into the act of looking, advocating the importance of observation. "As a filmmaker I cannot separate my aesthetic sensibilities from how I see people, and indeed I think it is our duty as filmmakers to be as honest as possible in how we see. This is very difficult – to put aside all the ways that other people, and documentary conventions, and the established academic disciplines would like us to see. To look, and to look carefully, is a way of knowing that is different from thinking." (2002: 100).

There has been a fair amount of skepticism on the role of photography in science, most of which is centered around the supposed photography's distorting filtering of the so-called real

life. “Life is not about significant details, illuminated a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are” (Sontag 2002: 81). In particular in anthropology, despite the overwhelming initial adaptation of the medium (consider for instance its extended use in the Torres-Straits expedition), photography never played a satisfactory role in anthropological enquire during the 20th century. With some notable exceptions, most of which derive from the last decades, photography was used as illustration or decoration for the ethnographic texts. This uneasy relation is largely due to the stigmatization of photography as an instrument used extensively by evolutionary anthropologists – from whom anthropologists of the second part of the 20th century were seeking to disassociate themselves (Morphy/Banks 1999; Ingold 1994; Morphy 1994). It has been noted rather early, however, by anthropologists such as Mead and Bateson for example, that there are aspects of culture that cannot be conveyed with words alone (Bateson/Mead 1942; Mead 2003). This agenda has been brought forward passionately during the last decades, notably by David MacDougall (1988, 2003, 2006) and Elizabeth Edwards (1999); yet, as these scholars point out, if anthropologists want to address visual aspects of culture, they’ll need to address the image in its own terms as well. In short, to look as well as to see.

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It seems that a desired guideline as well as outcome of education in India is discipline (Pathak 2002). For me, this journey started with a discussion with a group of students (*leaders;* see figures 5, 6) during fieldwork. One day, just after the morning prayers were over, I was approached by two of them; they knew who I was, they knew I was coming from Germany, and they wanted to know what I was thinking about India.

Pupil A: What do you think of India, what’s different from Germany?
Ethnographer: I think there’s a lot of discipline.
P A: (*Looking at the other pupil*) Discipline?
E: Ehm, yes.
P A: Here in India?

They smiled at each other, estranged, conspicuously; perhaps I was calling disciplined something that they considered self-evidently undisciplined. They never bother talk to me again, thinking perhaps I was stupid.

When, later on, I was putting together the pictures for the present paper – a paper supposed to be a study of the morning rituals in a private school in Bangalore – I found myself terribly troubled with sequencing the pictures. Words like 'order', 'sequence', 'narration', were dominating my notes for this paper; gradually, I realized that it were the very images which impose this need for order on my thinking. What I had made photos of was a process of lining, of putting things in order. The very ritual of morning prayers is a performance of unity, which is expected to be expressed through discipline and synchronization. Bittner writes: "The school starts with a ritual, where all pupils are coming together to welcome their teachers, congratulate their schoolmates, sing the state and school hymn. These morning-prayers show in intensification the governing practices of a school. The morning-prayers represent the meaning of schooling, as it is a collective process, where everyone has his or her position and has to behave in a synchronized way within the norms, e.g. in a respectful manner." The mechanisms which are set in motion, from the time of entering the school up to leaving the schoolyard for the classroom, in order to produce or encourage this synchronization, are the focus of this paper.

In discussions after fieldwork, Martin Bittner was concerned about how much of what we saw was set up due to our presence there. However, and since this is a visual study of discipline, if all was a show it was a very disciplined one; if the authorities of the school or indeed the pupils themselves chose to appear in their good clothes, well, this is then how their good clothes look like – or how I saw them.

Fig. 2: Arriving at the school[2]

Around 7:30, the pupils arrive at school. They first have to wait on the street outside of the school, in order to enter the school in order. Entering the school seems to be important for the lining of the morning prayers. The children would arrive either with their parent's vehicles or with hired rickshaws – only a few of them by foot. Parents sometimes stay to overview the process of entering the school, some of them staying until their children are well within the school – adding up to pupils and school staff as the audience of the performance of entering the school. Pupils of the kindergarten are directly admitted to the school and do not have to wait in line.

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Figs. 3, 4: Entering the school in a line

Mostly the security men (rather than the teachers or the students themselves) are directing the operation of keeping the students in line as they enter the school. A significant aspect of the discipline is connected to waiting. It is a very difficult task to maintain a line of young pupils in relative order. The youngsters inventively or by rights of age frequently attempt (and sometimes succeed) to skip the queue.

Fig. 5: Latecomers at the inner gate of the schoolyard

The *leaders*[3] are in charge of guarding the inner gate of the school after the morning prayers has begun – again, pupils of the kindergarten are excluded, as they are not expected to have incorporated discipline sufficiently. Pupils who arrive late are made to wait outside the gates and will afterwards somehow be punished by the leaders for having arrived late. Additionally, there is a sign at the gate, asking the students to turn off their mobile phones. Although one cannot expect such a request to be taken very serious by Bangalore kids from middle class families, it seems to correspond to the closing of the gate; aiming at a control of the flow as well. Closing the door and switching off the phones mark time as well as territory.

[3] A note on the leaders. The school is divided into four houses. Each house has its team of leaders. Students with not only good grades but overall good behavior and leadership skills as well are chosen and asked by their teachers to become leaders, a suggestion which is usually accepted, for, as some leaders mentioned, it is a source of pride.

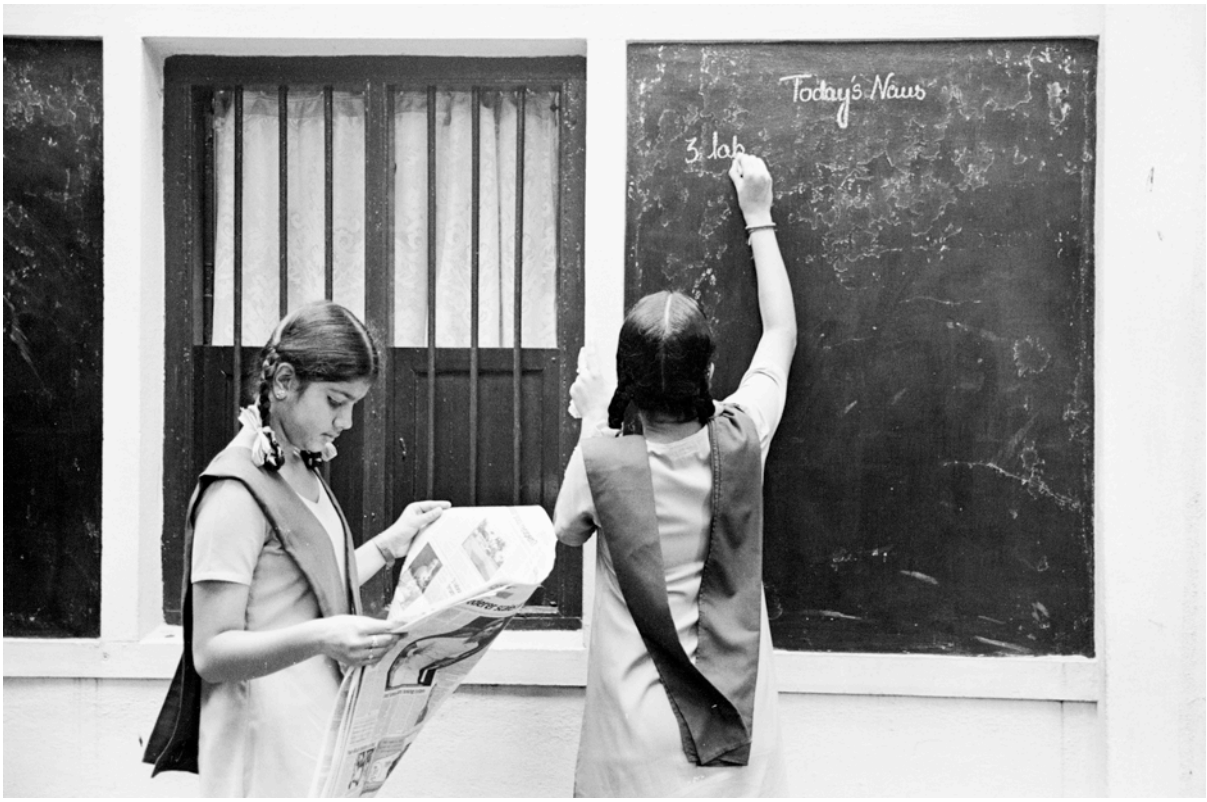


Fig. 6: A pair of leaders writing down the (noteworthy) news of the day

The distillation, selection and presentation of the news is a process of lining up as well. The rules are simple: the leaders[4] should not write about crime – although they will certainly come upon it while reading the paper, as they will come upon politics, etc. They are expected to possess the wisdom which will allow them to separate useful news from uninteresting or harmful ones. Like the control of entering the school yard in a specific flow appears to be important for the shaping of lines, just the same seems to be the case with the flow of information.

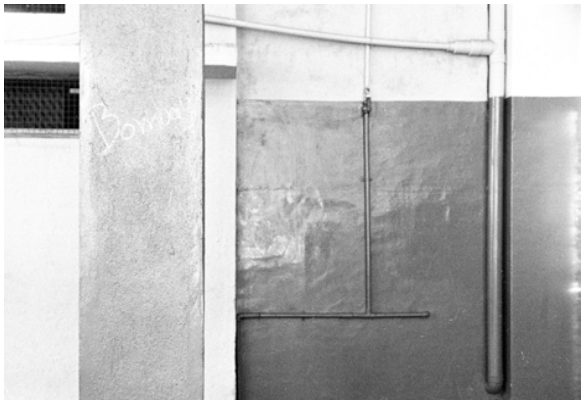
[4] A note on the leaders – continued: the leaders are wearing buttons depicting their function (leaders or assistants) and the colors of the house they represent. They were assigned several duties concerning peripheral aspects of school life and they are expected to maintain an overview of their fellow pupils' activities (see figs. 5, 6). Because of their duties, they are excused from participating in the morning prayers, or of coming late in the class. Yet, a leader who will arrive late at school one day will not do his duties on that day, for others not to follow his example.

Figure 7: Pupil waiting for the morning prayers to begin

His gaze directed towards the schoolyard; outside, the ever-growing city of Bangalore. He sits just on the borderline, on this minimal sitting place that a border affords. A border that separates inside from outside. His gaze at the school, his mind presumably not quite there yet; a schoolyard is a strange place I think when I look at this image. It is an *outside* in relation to the classroom and yet an *inside* in relation to the world outside of the school walls. A space that's changing functions, an inter-space in one sense and a non-place in another. A place eventually suitable for lining and for the learning of lining to take place.

When I mention these thoughts to my colleague Martin Bittner, he agrees; "Yes, of course," he says, "architecture is education."

Interlude: Architecture is Education


Figures 8-11: Details of the school building

> Visible, wild nature is a jumble of random curves; it contains no straight lines and few regular geometrical shapes of any kind. But the tamed, manmade world of Culture is full of straight lines, rectangles, triangles, circles and so on.
>
> (Leach 1976: 51)

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Figures 12, 13: Morning prayers

Figures 14, 15: Morning prayers

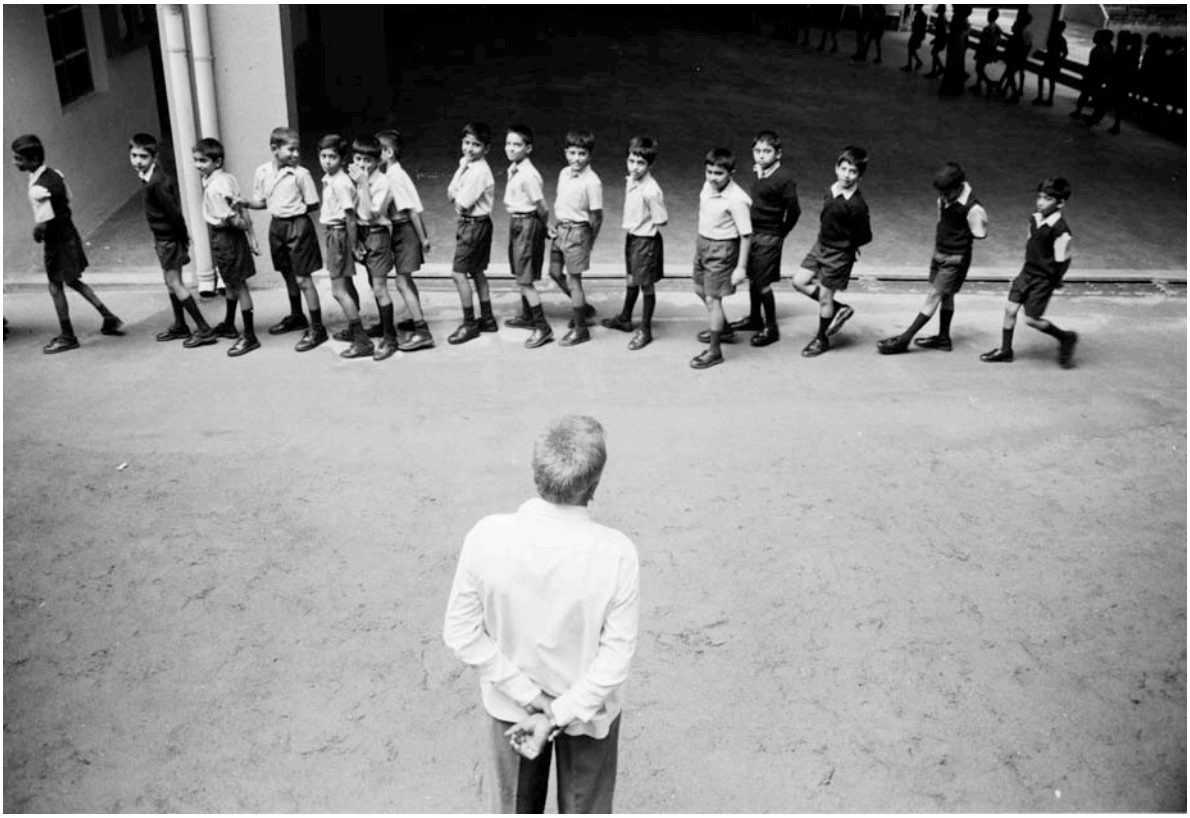

Figure 16: Leaving the schoolyard for the classroom

> The man of reason walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he's going, he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and goes straight to it.
> (Le Corbusier 1924: 274)

The lining of the pupils doesn't end with the end of the morning rituals: they also have to walk into the classroom in an order. As with figure 14, there's someone who overviews this process. In this case, the overviewer's height, in line with the power of his position, allows him to overview the symmetry of the image he has in front of his eyes. Accordingly, the photographer, a bit more elevated, sees another symmetry, where the overviewer balances the line of students. One persistent question however is: who's mimicking whom when they hold their hands behind their backs?

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