Seven theses on photography

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Abstract
Benjamin and Barthes provide the starting point for a series of inter-connected propositions which seek to return the theorization of photography to the primacy of the pro-filmic. The index is reclaimed as a trace of the photographic *event*, capable *only* of delivering what Barthes termed the *corps*. The resulting contingency and exorbitance are the basis of photography's prophetic and 'troubling' potential which free us from viewing photography as simply a screen for the social. The argument is advanced largely using material from India and a case is made for a new conception of 'world system photography' which folds 'belated' histories into the 'global'.

1. All photography is part of world system photography

To think and write about Indian photography (as the present writer does) is to be confronted by the problem of ex-nomination. If you study European photography then you are likely to be considered a photographic theorist. If you study Indian photography you are likely to be considered a commentator on India photography. The European placement fades away while, conversely, India is underlined as a location, a 'belated' case study of what has already happened elsewhere in a purer form.

Perhaps an original and paradigm-changing individual working in the 'margin' will one day disrupt this, reconfiguring a very powerful set of expectations. Pending that eventuality, work in the 'periphery' has to confront a deeply-embedded structure of knowledge which distinguishes between normative and variant practices. India (or

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equally Peru or Japan) becomes the site for footnoted descriptions which are intended to counterpoint a core Photographic History, European in its sources and nature, but which declines to name itself as such.

'Ex-nomination' was the term Barthes used in *Mythologies* to describe the process through which an ideological fact disappears. The category he was concerned with was the bourgeoisie, '*the social class which does not want to be named*' (Barthes 1972: 138). For Barthes the bourgeoisie was the source of an ideology which 'can spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk' (1972: 139). This is a set of observations that are quite easy to transpose to conventional histories of photography. For a start we might begin by noting that most histories of photography should actually be called (for the sake of geographical accuracy) histories of photography *in Europe and North America*.

What might be called 'core' photographic history (by which I mean that which describes Euro-American practices) erases 'culture' as a problematic whereas 'peripheral' or 'regional' histories by virtue of their very regionality tend to foreground 'cultural' dimensions of practice. In part this reflects the continuing neo-colonial conditions of global photographic history in which, as Deborah Poole has noted, 'the non-European world and its images have been oddly elided [even] from ... photographic histories that attempt to link photography with the history of disciplinary and ideological systems forged during the height of Europe's colonial era' (Poole 1997: 140). The 'sovereign' Euro-American subject of whom Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) wrote (and who, within conventional historiography, has now been largely displaced) remains – within the history of photography – alive and well. The ex-nomination of the centre endures: British and French photography is just 'photography' whereas African or Indian photography is always configured by an unshakeable 'local' specificity. We now need a 'world-system photography', one which grasps the historical inter-connectedness of practice and ceases to ghettoize 'non-normative' practices. This first thesis is the precondition for taking seriously the following six theses.

2. Photography presents 'always positively, in a certain shape'

Although EuroAmerican folk-ideology assumes that the photograph is an infected mirror of the real, ex-nominated photographic theory in Europe and America, under the influence largely of Foucault, insists that there is no such thing as photography and equates indexical theories of the image with witchcraft.

A Bourdieuian sociology of photography theory might see in dominant class paradigms an anxiety to differentiate themselves from folk ontologies. The dominated articulate a naïve faith in the photographic image as the pencil of nature. Certain deluded thinkers (e.g. Andre Bazin) are also contaminated by these popular delusions. True intellectuals, however, stand opposed to the masses through their rigorous scepticism and understand that photographs, far from being traces of the real, are mere 'paltry pieces of paper'. Thesis Four will elaborate on the ways in which the present writer shares those popular delusions that the dominant class of photographic theorists eschew.

However, the claims for photographic presence rest upon a more general ontology of the image which I outline here. In a fascinating, albeit problematic, book about Theodor

de Bry's late 16th-century copperplate engravings of the Americas, Bernadette Bucher makes a startling claim, namely that, in the visual, negation is impossible: 'it is impossible to portray a thing by what it is not: it is present or absent, and if it appears, it is always positively, in a certain shape' (Bucher 1981: 35). Bucher advances this argument in the context of Montaigne's famous claim about cannibals: 'What! They're not wearing breeches'. Bucher's proposition is that language, with its syntagmatic concatenation, can easily negate (as Montaigne's sentence illustrates). The (single) image (and here we might add especially the photographic image, tied as it is to the temporal moment of exposure) is only able to purvey presence. In the case of de Bry's engravings, Tupinamba bodies were presented as bodies covered in skin. An attempt to describe these bodies in terms of what they lack ('naked', 'nude', etc.) is immediately to have recourse to language's propensity for negation, which the visual completely lacks. Skin-clad Tupinamba bodies can never, at the level of the visual, *in themselves* produce this negation: they can only assert positively the presence of skin.

Consider, in this light, a photographic image and written caption dating from 1856–7 in Lucknow. The photograph was made by an Indian photographer, Ahmed Ali Khan, and depicts a merchant, L.E. Ruutz-Rees, who would subsequently become famous for an account of the insurrection (which would erupt shortly after the making of this photograph), the *Personal Narrative of the Siege of Lucknow*, published in 1858. This very early salted paper print (now in the British Library – see Pinney 2008: 139) is a three-quarter length frontal portrait which depicts the sitter fully clothed, wearing a hat and clutching what appears to be a sword. The pencil caption (of whose authorship we cannot be certain) states: 'Mr Rees in a Native Costume'. Here we can see language subtly implying an anomaly, and engaged in a subtle negation. The caption points to a paradox – Mr Rees (European) is wearing a native costume. Bucher might respond that the image is not capable of this: it simply records a body in clothes and is not able to say anything about the wider social/cultural constructions to which the objects placed in front of the camera are destined to be yoked.

3. The *corps* and *corpus* are different

This is because, to draw on a key differentiation made by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1981), the *corps* of the photographic event has nothing to do with the *corpus*. Barthes' observations about these two concepts are compressed in the following single paragraph: 'In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography)' (1981: 4).

Corpus appears fleetingly here, as that thing 'I need' which the photograph in its indestructible particularity refuses. The corpus is that 'something else' which the particularity of the photograph can never be transcended to provide. The corpus signifies all those normalizing generalities which we expect the real to generate but which in its photographic specificity it is unable to generate. Indeed this is the central point made by Barthes: the particularity of the *corps* cannot generate the corpus. Photography delivers

the *event* ('this photograph') and this cannot legitimately be fused with the broader narrative of the corpus. The camera records what is placed in front of it and on its own is incapable of making distinctions about the relationship of its visual trace to psychic, social or historical normativity.

Ahmed Ali's photograph of Ruutz-Rees thus delivers a *corps* (a body in clothes) and in its particularity and contingency does not permit us to ask questions about appropriateness (what kind of clothes does this kind of body *usually* wear?) It is, as Barthes says, 'philosophically … wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope' (1981: 5). The caption, by contrast, points to the corpus, that thing we 'need', the generalization we desire ('What! He's wearing Indian clothes').

The camera never knows and can never judge whether what it records is typical, normal or true. Consider for a moment a famous image taken by the photographer Felice Beato in Lucknow in March 1858, four or perhaps five months after its recapture following the insurrection which began the previous year. It shows the interior of the Sikanderbagh where numerous bones are scattered. On sound historical grounds, we can be fairly certain that Beato (who had arrived several months after the fighting had ceased) arranged for buried remains to be disinterred and placed in such a manner that they located the event of his making of the photograph mimetically closer to the event of the fighting.

A commonly heard accusation is that Beato has somehow falsified history, or that his camera has lied. Beato has stage-managed a scene, it is argued, he has contrived an irreality purely for the purposes of his camera. The photograph is therefore in some way false. But false in what way? Has the camera lied or has it documented an event (a body) with a certain inevitable optical specificity (for instance, we could take a ruler and a manual of trigonometry and calculate the distance between the recently disinterred skeletons which Beato has had so carefully arranged). If we concede that the camera has not lied, then where would we want to relocate our doubt about the reliability of what has been recorded? Should it be repositioned in the gap between the event recorded in the photograph and the event to which the photograph seems to gesture? This would seem reasonable, for part of our scepticism towards the image derives from what we are asking it to signify. Because Beato's photographs (marketed by the London entrepreneur H. Hering along with photographs of celebrities engaged during the insurrection in India) were being presented as remarkable scenes of historical events, we expect the photograph to be about that historical event rather than about the micro-event of the making of the photograph (which I will refer to below as the 'pro-filmic'). If we consider that micro-event, we see immediately that the camera has not lied (it is, of course, incapable of doing so). Our anxiety can then be seen to be situated in the relationship between 'micro-event' and 'historical event', between *corps* and corpus. Beato's photograph has recorded the event offered to it with considerable fidelity. Our anxiety about the image is a consequence of the manner in which it is being asked to masquerade as another type of event: 'something else'.

This tension between the *corps* and corpus is in other contexts creatively deployed. Tobias Wendl has directed attention to Ghanaian photographers' exploitation of the possibilities of the pro-filmic. Mobilizing sharply-styled clothing and fantastic painted backdrops of 'an idealized society of mass consumption', Ghanaian studios celebrate that fact that it is impossible to deny (to recall Roland Barthes) that 'the thing has been there'. Studio backdrops depict luxurious bourgeois domestic interiors, well-stocked

fridges, international airports, and dramatic cityscapes. One Kumasi photographer, Alfred Six, described himself as a 'king-maker' and he possessed 'all the accessories necessary for transforming ordinary citizens into traditional chiefs of kings, and women into *ohemmaa* (queen-mothers)' (Wendl 1998: 150). Another photographer, Philip Kwame Apagya, offers a studio backdrop with the 'traditional royal umbrella of the Ashanti kings'.

The 'thing that has been there' produces unstable effects. On the one hand it is utterly compelling: Apagya narrates how his successful career ('like a jet taking off') was indebted to his realistic and highly coloured backgrounds. People saw the resulting photographs and gasped: 'How beautiful! A roomful of precious items. Whose house is it?' (1998: 154). Having reluctantly been persuaded that it was taken in a photographic studio, they too flocked to have their portraits taken. Stories circulate of angry husbands who refuse to believe that a studio-posed photograph was not taken in the commodious home of a wealthy lover. On the other hand, photographs are valued precisely because of their phantasmatic character. Wendl positions them within an Akan culture of semiotic ambivalence. He notes a popular motto to be found on Ghanaian buses and taxis: 'Observers are Worried!' Photography enables Ghanaians to wander through 'the frontiers between illusion, desire and reality'. Akan notions of 'reality' invoke a domain which is not visible to the human eye, and it is precisely through 'lines of fracture with "normal" reality that the universe of Ghanaian photography reveals all its richness and multiplicity' (1998: 154)

Wendl provides an illuminating frame through which to view the vernacular central Indian practices which this current author has been observing, intermittently, since the early 1980s. In rural and small-town central India (as in much of West Africa), the studio retains a central place in most people's encounters with photography. Increasingly cheap and easy-to-use cameras have yet to sustain serious practices of self-photography: consumers still opt to surrender themselves to their local studio impresarios, in the hope that under their skilled direction they will 'come out better'. Wanting to 'come out better' in their photographs (*is se bhi zyada acchha mera photo ana chahie*) is the aspiration of every visitor to the studio, and they denote by this the desire not to replicate some pre-existing 'something else' (for instance that impossible subjectivity of who they 'really' are), but to submit themselves to masterly pro-filmic technicians who are able, through the use of costume, backgrounds, lighting and camera angles, to produce the desired pose, 'look', *mise-en-scène*, or expression. One such technician is Vijay Vyas of Sagar Studios who noted that 'everyone wants to look their best' and then proceeded to catalogue the activities and interventions that fed into the transformative zone of the pro-filmic: 'they hope they will look their best in photos. They don't want to wear their everyday clothes. Just like you – if you want your photo taken, you'll brush your hair, wear your best shirt … They don't want *vastavik* [realistic] photos. They always say I want to look good … everyone says I am like this, but I want to come out better than this in my photo. So we try' (cited in Pinney 1997: 180).

I cannot help thinking that both the small-town photographic consumers and the professional studio photographers I know would understand perfectly why Beato ordered all those bodies to be disinterred. They are equally uninterested in the historical record of the something else, of the corpus, choosing instead the specificity and freedom offered by the 'sovereign Contingency' of the *corps*.

Coming out better occurs in the space of the pro-filmic: it is the actuality of the studio space that matters for it is that which is deposited for the future in the photographic image. As in Ghana, images explore the lines which cross-cross the 'real' and the 'pro-filmic'. Consider for instance the only photograph which Ramachandra, a village carpenter, could afford to mark the wedding of his eldest son. The group were ushered into the backroom of a photographic studio in the nearby town and asked to choose a backdrop. Ramachandra opted for a position between two backdrops - one depicting Dal Lake in Kashmir, the other a blue wall against which identity photographs were usually taken. The photograph – the result of a quick decision in the face of economic hardship – provided two backdrops for the price of one but also deliberately shattered any 'realist' pretence. The photograph became a record of a pro-filmic ambivalence, positioning its subjects between two possible worlds.

Pushpamala N., an Indian artist who has worked in collaboration with the British photographer Clare Arni, explores in much of her work precisely this specificity and productivity of the *corps*. In their series *Native Women of South India – Manners and Customs* their critical re-enactment of anthropological objectification focuses initially on M.V. Portman's anthropometric studies of the Andamanese from 1894. This is signalled by the use of Portman's unmistakable customization of the Lamprey grid (which he converted into a painted chequer-board black-and-white backdrop). However, this is quickly subverted in *The Ethnographic Series: An Exhaustive Scientific Analysis and Anthropometry of the Female Inhabitants* by the diversity of Pushpamala incarnations that appear against this backdrop: she is in numerous different guises, none of them 'Andamanese'. She appears, anomalously, as a Toda woman from South India (rather than that of a Bay of Bengal Andamanese), and later as Nadia, the whip woman of Hindi film, and as iconic figures from Ravi Varma's late 19th-century paintings. The photographic aesthetic – indebted to Portman (and explicitly signalled as such in her accompanying documentation) – is tested to destruction by a superfluity of perverse enactments. This directs our attention to the tension between the classificatory frame established by Portman's colonial aesthetic and the 'sovereign Contingency' of Pushpamala's specific restagings. A Toda woman standing where we expect to see an Andamanese person forces us to contemplate photography's inability to transcend the *corps* in favour of the corpus: the event is never transcended 'for the sake of something else'.

Pushpamala recreates earlier images to ask complex questions about the body that the event deposits. Her carefully staged *Flirting,* a C-type print on metallic paper, made in 2001, re-enacts a 1990s Kannada language film still. In the re-enactment, Pushpamala N. adopts a youthful guise and holds a tiffin carrier in her left hand as she flirts with the male bearer of a rose. The viewer immediately apprehends this image as *filmi*, part of the cinematic grammar of India's public culture, that is, as referencing in some act of secondary homage a filmic original. Pushpamala N. engages the nature of the pro-filmic, that is, the object or event that is placed in front the camera. As Pushpamala N.'s captions make clear, however fanciful we might assume the image's presumed corpus, it is always, ineluctably, a body, tied to the material conditions of its own making. Hence *Flirting* is dependent on numerous physical acts which she meticulously documents. Among these are an eight-foot by eight-foot set painted by K. Sampath at Pushpamala N.'s studio in Bangalore, canvas cloth from a wholesale market at

Okalipura, and linoleum flooring from JC Road. Pushpamala N. documents the source of the studio lights, and of the various costumes and props (*inter alia* the man's wig from Nataraja Dress Co., spectacles from Avenue Road, and tiffin carrier from Gandhi Bazaar market). This insistence on the pro-filmic – on the body which photography produces – is then subject to a recursive further enframing in *The Process Series*, subtitled *A Complete Record of the Procedures and Systems Used for Study*, which documents the creation of each *mise en scène* recorded in Clare Arni's photographs. This series visually directs us to that peculiar space of the *corpus*, a space which may contradict expectations generated in the corpus but which in its own logic is indisputably real.

In her *Bombay Photo Studio* series (2000–3), Pushpamala N. mimics the conventions of 19th-century portraiture. From the 1860s onwards, numerous studios clustered on and around Kalbadevi Road pictured customers within highly formalized *mise-en-scène*, frequently conjured by a carpet, table, or pillar, and a vase with flowers. These constitute the repertoire for Pushpamala N.'s *Triptych* (*Portrait of a Mohammedan Woman, Portrait of a Hindoo Woman, Portrait of a Christian Woman*). A refusal within the space of the pro-filmic by means of veiling and turning away (the Muslim and Christian women are veiled, the Hindu woman sits with her back to us) problematizes our role as viewers and seems to internalize the photograph's own space. As Pushpamala N. has recently said in an interview, 'One is inside the image, not just outside, looking'. *Bombay Photo Studio* is a commentary on the act of making the photographs: establishing the *mise en scène*, placing furniture, arranging lights and diffusers to create the appropriate mix of stark shadow and brooding depth. This concern with the pro-filmic – its apparent disinterest in anything outside the space of its own making – is heightened by the occlusion of veiling and turning away which emphasizes the peculiar relation of the sitter to the camera in the act of being photographed, rather than to us the viewer.

This trajectory from Felice Beato in north India in 1858, to late 20th-century photographic studio practices in India and West Africa, and to a 21st-century Indian art practice leads us finally to the work of the contemporary German photographer Thomas Demand, and in traversing this journey demonstrates the argument advanced in the first thesis concerning the necessity of grasping photography in its global frame. Demand's huge coloured photographic images may at first sight seem like Brechtian critiques of naturalism, for they lead the viewer through a journey involving several stages of estrangement. At first encounter one senses that the images are in some way photographic but that the referent recorded is anomalous. Demand's subjects are frequently locations of contested historical events. For instance, *Yellowcake* (2007) recreates the aftermath of the CIA intrusion into the Embassy of Niger in Rome in 2001. Fake documents concerning the export of uranium to Iraq were planted as part of the effort to sustain WMD claims in the lead-up to the war on Iraq. Sometimes his subjects are more obvious signs of valorized truths (such as 'nature' and 'gold'). Upon closer inspection of the image and with the help of textual exegesis, the viewer will understand that Demand makes elaborate paper sculptures of his subjects and then photographs them before destroying the model. Crucially, he photographs with a plate camera, and all manipulation is confined to the manufacture of the model.

This systematized and repetitive protocol which lies at the heart of Demand's work suggests that we should view his project as concerned with the rupture between *corps*

and corpus rather than as in any sense a critique of photography. His images invite us to contemplate the relationship between the *corps* of the model and the corpus of the wider events (the 'something else') to which we 'need' (to recall Barthes) it to correspond. Like Pushpamala, Demand's work proposes an analysis – through art practice – of what vernacular studio practitioners have long been aware.

4. The referent always adheres

The event-based nature of photography reflects the fact that, as Barthes noted, 'the referent adheres' (1981: 6). As I suggested in Thesis Two, a Foucauldian paradigm which denies the primacy of the referent has recently prevailed in photographic theory. Most influentially advanced by John Tagg, this has persuaded a generation of students that 'Photography as such has no identity ... its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such' (Tagg 1988: 63). For Tagg, photography emerges as an epiphenomenal reflection of discourse and power. However, as we will see in Thesis Seven, the logic (or perhaps better, 'propensity') of photography is not always that of the state. Tagg focused on photographic practices which demonstrated 'not the power of the camera, but the power of apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth' (1988: 64). In Tagg's account the power of the image has everything to do with the power of the state and nothing to do with the power of light.

Accounts of photography (such as the one presented here) which stress indexicality (of the *corps*: remember that only the pro-filmic *event* is indexed, not anything as impossible as 'reality') have conventionally been derided as providing an impoverished view of its practice. The assumption is that if photography can *only* offer an index it will all be very dull. Foucault, psychoanalysis and all the other antidotes to Peirce (the father of the index) bore the promise of making the whole affair more fascinating through the importation of power and desire. But it turns out that that dreary index infiltrated an even more fascinating richness into the image.

This richness can be grasped through contingency and exorbitance. When Barthes wrote about the 'sovereign Contingency' of the *corps* he was perhaps deliberately recalling Benjamin, who had linked contingency and the event much earlier. His much cited observation in the 'Little History of Photography' essay marks a key breakthrough and needs to be quoted at length:

> No matter how artful the photograph, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (Benjamin 1999: 510)

Here Benjamin provides a description of what E.H. Gombrich would later have described as a visual filter. Benjamin starts with an account of that filter through which the photographer attempts to screen the real through 'artfulness' and 'careful' posing.

Benjamin of course does not deny that the photographer is likely, perhaps certain, to attempt to massage or finesse the pro-filmic. But the crucial point is that this will never be wholly successful. The screen or filter will never be complete because the complexity of the *mise-en-scène* in its minute and infinite details will always evade the anxious control of the photographer. The image is 'seared' with the event which deposits more information than the photographer can ever control. It is this searing which deposits those 'tiny spark[s] of contingency' which make the photograph such a rich resource for future viewers.

Consider this in relation to a large albumen print in which five Sudanese males face the camera. Made by the commercial photographer Hippolyte Arnoux, c. 1880, it is titled *Tiralleurs Soudanienes*, Sudanese 'sharpshooters' or light infantry. The photographer has given expression to his primitivist fantasies through the creation of a redoubt made from various cork logs and placed his sharpshooters in front of two superimposed studio backdrops which give the space a very cluttered feel. He appears then to have instructed them to perform the sort of ferocity that would appeal to the colonial expectations of the day. Two of the figures perform enthusiastically: one bends at the waist and rests his left arm on part of the studio assemblage and gestures aggressively with a spear held in his right hand; another crouches low brandishing a spear behind a small shield and gazes purposefully. However, the other three appear diffident, quizzical, and perhaps straightforwardly resistant: one stands erect with his head crooked, staring in incomprehension at something the photographer appears to be doing at the moment of exposure (presumably the sudden movement of the lens cover), and two appear more generally perplexed by what is expected of them in this strange confined space. The moment of exposure captures these sparks of contingency. The technics of photography (which require that live – and possibly non-co-operative –bodies are brought before the camera) ensures that every 'portrait event' will be uncertain. This is an uncertainty with which other representational tactics (such as painting) do not have to contend.

The sticky referent also appears in many images in an archive on which I am currently working. Suhag Studio in central India, about which I have written extensively in the past (Pinney 1997), has been in business since the late 1970s. When it first opened, all its images were shot by the proprietor, Suresh Punjabi, on medium format (6cm x 6cm negative stock) using a Japanese Yaschica. For many years these lay filed in numbered sequence in a rented room until 2010, when a monsoon downpour flooded the premises and destroyed many of the negatives and associated studio paraphernalia. In salvaging and attempting to print these negatives, I've found myself increasingly attracted by the visual noise (consisting of studio lights and costumes) which lies on the edges of the negative. The effect is frequently reminiscent of Samuel Fosso's work in the Central African Republic: a standing figure is usually positioned at the centre of the space in front of a painted backdrop and flanked on either side by tall studio lights.

Suhag Studio is a very small space, essentially a lock-up on a busy main street in a bustling town. The customer reception area is about 10 by 8 feet, behind which lies the studio space measuring approximately 10 by 10 feet. Many customers, especially villagers, want full body poses and so the photographer, having established the *mise-en-scène*, raises the camera and then steps back to create sufficient distance between the sitter and the lens to accommodate the full body. Because of the square

medium format, operating in this cramped space in which the studio lights cannot be placed further apart, the photographer of necessity finds himself exposing negatives which deposit a record of all the noise on the edges of the studio. This then appears in the margins of the negative but not in the final cropped prints that are presented to the customer. I have described these images at length because they so clearly embody the contingency about which Benjamin wrote. Suresh Punjabi would doubtless have preferred 'clean' negatives without the clutter, but the materiality of his apparatus combined with the materiality of his studio inevitably 'seared' them with the noise of the pro-filmic.

The Suhag negatives might be described, to use terms deployed by Barthes, as 'exorbitant' ('the exorbitant thing'; 1981: 91) or 'crammed' ('[t]he photographic image is full, crammed: no room, nothing can be added to it'; 1981: 89). Like William Klein's photographs of Moscow which Barthes suggested teach us 'how Russians dress', so the Suhag negatives yield up details which constitute the 'very raw material of ethnological knowledge'. They are able to do this because the photographic filter is incomplete: no matter how carefully the photographer tries to arrange things otherwise, the pro-filmic always intrudes.

5. Photography is prophetic, acting in advance of social reality

Anyone studying photography in India during the 19th century must immediately confront the disjuncture between the narrative that photography provides and the more familiar one provided by the established social and cultural history of the period. This disjuncture can be stated in the following highly reductive terms: photography writes a history of individuals and conjugal couples which is at odds with a social history dominated by collective social entities. Photography seemed to produce better results when photographing individuals (or at a pinch, couples) than when confronted with large collectivities of the sort by which – so one kind of historiography would claim – India in the 19th century was still largely constituted. One does not have to agree with the extremity of the anthropologist Louis Dumont's (1965) claim that the individual as such did not exist in India to recognize that the obvious subject for the photographer in India might have been *jatis* (castes), *biradaris* (brotherhoods), work groups or other collective expressions of social solidarities. In accordance with Thesis One my suggestion is that this points to a general 'disturbance' generated by photography which is not confined to India.

Individuation – the differentiation of the person from wider social solidarities – was the result of two related dimensions of early photographic practice. One reflected the aesthetic force that single bodies – as opposed to multiple bodies – were able to deposit in the image. The other reflected slow exposure times and the difficulty in marshalling collective bodies in front of the camera. This second dimension is explicitly commented on by John Blees in his *Photography in Hindostan; or Reminiscences of a Travelling Photographer* (1877). He stressed the complex preparation that must be made to photograph groups successfully: 'Make it a rule to inquire the day before of how many the group will be composed. Trace an outline in your mind, and try to realise your plan the next day on the negative.' Very large groups pose further problems: 'When there are as many as 30 or 40 to be portrayed on a 10x8 or 12x10 plate, a fancy design must be abandoned. Here the difficulty encounters you of getting the lens to see them all at the

same time' (1877: 100–1). There was also the problem of movement in large groups: 'Some people will move notwithstanding their best endeavour to the contrary. ... Always seat as many as you conveniently can.'

Blees' text then went on to demonstrate that what he terms 'the picture of a gentle-man' is what we might term the default setting of 19th-century photographic apparatus. Suppose 'that a bust of a gentleman is to be taken', he suggests. For this all that is needed is a posing chair and a headrest in which the sitter is positioned. The photographer then focuses and the sitter is told that 'he may ... do whatever he pleases, whilst you are preparing the sensitized plate – he may even get up and walk about' (1877: 100–1). Blees' practical manual, confronting the highly material limitations of apparatus, makes explicitly clear some of the forces encouraging photographic individuation.

In this highly prosaic material circumstance (groups were very difficult to photograph) we can diagnose a rupture, the beginnings of the 'disturbance' which so concerned Barthes ('Odd that no one has thought of the *disturbance* [to civilization] which this new action causes'; 1981: 12). This rupture opened up a prophetic space in which forms of identity (individuated and conjugal) were fast-tracked in advance of social reality. To restate the point in explicit terms: photography represented society not as it was but *as it would become*.

This understanding of photography's prophetic quality derives from Jacques Attali's (1985) proposal concerning music. He argues that music, in certain circumstances, acts in advance of social reality – its code is 'quicker' than that of society as a whole; its prophecy operating on a semiological frontier. Photography, likewise (in India as elsewhere), also seems to often act as prophecy, as a tactic of enquiry and imagination, precipitating behaviour which otherwise remains latent, encouraging a faster exploration of possibilities, as with Attali's music 'which makes audible what will gradually become visible'. Photographic self-presentation also seems to often act as prophecy, as a tactic of enquiry and imagination. This is a quality again perceptively engaged by Roland Barthes: 'once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image' (1981: 10).

6. It causes disturbance, prying aura from its shell

We have already touched on the claim that photography is troubling or disturbing. This is to suggest that photography is something other than simply a subsidiary zone onto which (to take my own particular interests) either colonial or anti-colonial ideology is projected, or a mere mirror for the aspirations of an emergent anthropology as 'science'. My reluctance here is in part inspired by Bruno Latour and his insistence that we not reduce representation to a mere reflection of something else ('the white screen onto which society projects its cinema'; Latour 1993: 53) but also to Homi Bhabha and his stress on performative deformation, on the manner in which, following Derrida, iteration names an inevitable repetition *with difference* ('colonial specularity does not produce a mirror ... it is always [a] split screen'; Bhabha 1994: 114). Early anthropologists may have thought they were developing a great new science and that photography was the perfect mirror for their aspirations, but *in practice*, when it actually came to using

photography and trying to make it tell the stories they wanted, it all got rather complicated. In part (as I stressed above) this was because of the necessity of the *event* in the making of photographs.

But there are also reasons to suppose that there are troubling aspects of the photograph as it presents to the *viewer*, subsequent to the event of its making of the photograph, which also need to be considered. In an Indian context a celebrated response to the disturbance that photography can pose was voiced in a letter in 1869 from Syed Ahmed Khan, the most significant Indian Muslim of his time. He narrates a disturbing episode during his stay in London:

> In the India Office is a book in which all the races of India are depicted both in picture and letterpress, giving the manners and customs of each race. Their photographs show that the pictures of the different manners and customs were taken on the spot, and the sight of them shows how savage they are – the equal of animals. The young Englishmen ... desirous of knowing something of the land to which they are going ... look over this work. What can they think, after perusing this book and looking at its pictures of the power or honour of the natives of India? One day Hamid, Mahmud [Syed's two sons], and I went to the India Office, and Mahmud commenced looking at the work. A young Englishman ... came up and after a short time asked Mahmud if he was a Hindustani? Mahmud replied in the affirmative but blushed as he did so, and hastened to explain that he was not one of the aborigines, but that his ancestors were formerly of another country. Reflect therefore, that until Hindustanis remove this blot they shall never be held in honour by any civilised race. (cited in Graham 1885: 188–9)

This celebrated response to colonial photography has been subject to much discussion. One interpretation might stress Syed Ahmed's discomfort in the face of a photographic egalitarianism. His family (as Mahmud eagerly points out) came from Herat and were not to be confused with indigenous Aborigines. Syed Ahmed inhabited a hierarchically enormously differentiated social landscape. Within a photographic-scape this space was compressed – all groups inhabited the same rectangular frame and were likely to be juxtaposed within the confines of a new intimacy.

Syed Ahmed had described *The People of India* as 'a book in which all the races of India are depicted both in picture and letterpress, giving the manners and customs of each race', locating quite precisely what Walter Benjamin termed the 'sense of sameness in the world' that photography uniquely engendered (see also Poole 1997: 119ff.). In his 1931 'Little History of Photography', Benjamin wrote that 'The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness – by means of reproduction' (1999: 519).

We can see this sense of the sameness of things in the north Indian based surgeon John Tressider's remarkable 1857–63 album of Agra and Cawnpore in the Alkazi Collection of Photography in Delhi. Tressider photographed many different Europeans and Indians from all strata of society with great care, and on one page he presents a mixture of individuals and couples, and one group, some Indian, some English. At the top left of this page, side by side are two images, captioned (on the left) 'Lala Jootee Persad (The Richest man in NW India)' and to the right of this a smaller blurred shot of a figure shot

against the same background captioned 'The Poorest man in NW India (an insane fakeer or religious mendicant)'. Here photography makes possible a new kind of fundamental juxtaposition –individuals who outside the studio might not inhabit the same terrain are here brought within a common epistemological space 'divested of [their]uniqueness – by means of its reproduction' (Benjamin 1999: 519).

Syed Ahmed's anxiety provides a pathway through which we might think about practices – such as over-painting – which appear to operate in a world free of the 'aesthetics of the same' and which might be taken as a sign of the triumph of the kind of territorialized narratives which I argued against in Thesis One. But it makes more sense to understand this as a complex experimental negotiation around the technical practice of photography: selective over-painting of figures within images reinserts that very heterogeneity that the camera has banished. Let us consider a further two images from the Alkazi Collection. They form an intriguing pair and can help lead us towards a clarification of the logic of photography and the logic of painting. One of the images shows three men from Rajasthan and the other, from the 1920s–40s, shows six Swetambara Jain monks with three attendants. Some of the figures are over-painted and some of them are not. In the case of the three Rajasthani men two – we assume higher status – Shaivaite figures are heavily over-painted while their Vaishnava attendant is not. Photography deposits the three figures equivalently, unable to impose a hierarchy between them. The painter, however, wields his brush selectively, demonstrating through the time and precious substances invested in the figures on the right their differential value. The ratio is inverted in the image of Jain monks whose status claims proceed from their renunciation of the life of the householder. The camera again was unable to register difference between these various figures and certainly not able to understand the claim made through the absence of ornament. Only the painter can impose these gradings, signalling through the opulence of the attendants how much the monks have left behind.

Here we see Indian painters struggling to overcome the disturbance created by photography. Their addition of colour reveals perfectly what photography does – what it is that photography insists upon – and how painting is able to countermand it. What Syed Ahmed called the 'blot' – photography's systematic inability to discriminate, and the potential it has to write new histories in its radically different prophetic epistemological space – is here over-scripted by a different hierarchizing language of signification. For some Indians, paint – as a supplement to photography – was attractive because it bore a similar promise: the promise of an added value and discrimination. Photography's radical – and dangerous – egalitarianism could be tempered (in a way that might have pleased Syed Ahmed) by the archaic and hierarchical potentiality of paint.

7. It is both poison and cure

In the battle between dominant class ex-nominated Eurocentric histories of photography and the alternative (which the current seven theses are attempting to map), recourse is frequently had to metaphors of plurality and dispersal. Approaches which eschew Foucault (or other constructivist narratives which foreground the question of social inscription at the expense of the question of apparatus) are highly likely to be denounced for their 'narrowness' or 'rigidity'. Furthermore, they are likely to be reprimanded with

the complaint that they have simplified the object at the centre of the debate: if an attempt is made to formulate a theoretical approach to 'photography' the response may well be that the endeavour is misguided because of a category error. There is no such thing as (a singular) 'photography', it will be claimed, only multiple 'photographies'.

However, if we want to restitute theoretical and conceptual productivity to camerawork, we have to engage this issue with vigour. The eroding of photography as a (singular) category is one of the strategies through which it is relegated to the status of secondary representational screen. If the interests it serves (in its ideologized de-materialization) are fragmented then it too, of course, will also be fragmented.

How do we account for the divided and apparently contradictory nature of photographic practices if it is indeed a photography (singular)? Answering this must involve the foregrounding of the changing nature of apparatus: the single descriptor 'photography' also names a succession of techniques which are still of course in the process of becoming. Daguerreotypes, to wet collodion, to dry plates, to nitrate to 35mm and on to digital, then post-digital and so on. Grasping the protean transformations that occur under the descriptor 'photography' is the starting point for an understanding of photographic practices which, far from being narrow or rigid, are fluid and exceptionally complex.

From the announcement of photography in 1839 until (very roughly) the beginning of the 20th century, photography was perceived in India – by agents of the colonial state – as a cure. As the 20th-century progressed, however, photography was increasingly viewed as a curse, or poison. Deployed by agents other than the colonial state, it revealed its dangerous ability to store evidence of a problematic kind. To compress a complex history of over half a century we might say that whereas the archetypal location of photography in the mid-19th century was the foothills of the Himalayas, that of the 1920s and the 1930s was the street.

Elsewhere (Pinney 2008) I have described what I term a 'colonial habitus' that cemented apparatus with world-view. Samuel Bourne, for instance, photographing in north India in the 1860s, required up to 30 coolies and the co-operation of numerous government agencies and colonial corporate interests to arrange transport and accommodation for his photographic 'expeditions'. However, as photographic technology became increasingly miniaturized and increasingly mobile, especially in the early 20th-century, its *habitus* changed. It was no longer dependent on the kinds of official support or financial investment that were so central to earlier photographers such as Bourne. A mobile photographic technology was more easily able to document chaotic public spaces in which colonial hegemony appeared increasingly fragile.

Amritsar, in the Punjab, became a central site of political struggle after the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre in 1919. Photography's 'civil contract' was mobilized a few days later when the Bombay-based photographer Narayan Vinayak Virkar travelled to the site of the massacre and photographed the aftermath. In a series of haunting images, survivors point to bullet holes in a wall against which many hundreds of protestors had died. Two images similar to these were subsequently published in the Indian National Congress's Punjab Inquiry report in 1920, one with the caption 'Western walls in-Jalleanwala [sic] Bagh showing holes caused by bullets even six inches deep' (1994 [1920]: n.p.). Other photographs showing survivors' injuries were a prominent feature

of the report. An image of a seated young boy whose left arm has been amputated near the shoulder is captioned 'Sardari Lala of Gujrunwala wounded in arm by bomb from aeroplane'. The report also reproduced a series of images of public flogging at Gujrunwala which had preceded the massacre and which had featured in *Amritsar and Our Duty to India*, published in London by the recently deported newspaper editor B.G. Horniman in the same year. Horniman opened his account with a reference to the 'Congo atrocities' (Horniman 1920: 7) with which the Amritsar images may well have resonated in British public conscience, not least as a result of Arthur Conan Doyle's championing of E.D. Morel's and Roger Casement's campaign in his 1909 *The Crime of the Congo*. Horniman then notes that 'Floggings took place in public, and photographic records of these disgusting incidents are in existence, showing that the victims were stripped naked to the knees, and tied to telegraph poles or triangles' (Horniman 1920: 155).

As with Plato's *pharmakon* as understood by Jacques Derrida (1981) as the untranslatable zone of the remedy, drug, philter, cure, and poison, this transformation reflected not a distortion of photography or the fragmentation of diverse and incompatible photographies, but a set of potentialities and propensities latent in photography itself. A technology dependent on a colonial *habitus* initially found itself reproducing that *habitus*'s 'structuring determinations'. As this protean technical practice found itself freely roaming the streets it located new subjects through which to construct new publics. A protean photography proved itself capable of generating several directly opposed outcomes. From cure to poison, and all the while the same.

'Photographic records . . . are in existence': here we see compressed, in this political claim made in 1920, much of the argument presented in these seven theses. What happens in the Congo connects with what happens in India which all foretells what happens much later in Abu Ghraib and the occupied Palestinian territories (Azoulay 2008). This is world-system photography. The 'referent adheres'. The photograph is mobilized to prophesize a different political future, and what was once greeted as 'cure' by the colonial state had certainly become a poison (there were extensive official discussions in India in 1922 as to whether unauthorized street photography could be criminalized). Clearly this cannot be reduced solely to apparatus and technics: the changing nature of the public and emergent 'counter-publics' need to be factored in. However, something is happening here *photographically* which would not, and does not, occur in other media that lack the index and the event. Photographic theory is starting to get interesting again.

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