

## Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India

**Review Number:**

1368

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 24 January, 2013

**Author:**

Zahid Chaudhary

**ISBN:**

9780816677498

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£22.50

**Pages:**

256pp.

**Publisher:**

University of Minnesota Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

Minneapolis, MN

**Reviewer:**

Carla Manfredi

Although photography was introduced to India soon after its 1839 European invention, it was not until 1857 that the new technology proliferated in the subcontinent. In Zahid R. Chaudhary's heavily illustrated study, focused on colonial photographic practices following the Sepoy Revolt by Indian recruits (1857–8), this proliferation is central. Chaudhary's numerous photographic case-studies – portraiture, landscape, commercial and anthropological – untangle the complex and particularly modern relationship among colonial photographers, their cameras, and the represented colonial subject. These compelling analyses foreground photography's irreversible effect on the modern formation of the senses; photography activated the human sensorium by transforming the very way in which British and Indian subjects *sensed* the world – it became a means through which to *make sense* of the world. This volume is heavily documented, and an exemplar of interdisciplinarity: shuttling effortlessly between phenomenological philosophy, photography, literary, postcolonial and affect theory, Chaudhary elucidates the historical, political and aesthetic formation of the senses during the latter half of the 19th century.

While necessarily historical, Chaudhary's study is not organized in a chronological sequence; rather, each thematic chapter traces a different dimension of the photographic medium and its impact on the lived and affective aspect of visual experience under colonial conditions. Chapter one explains the role of the photographic index in the genre of memorial photography that emerged following the Sepoy Revolt; chapter two examines the representation of shock in documentary photography; chapter three argues that landscape photography's picturesque aesthetic manages the senses; chapter four examines photographs produced during the multiple Indian famines of the late 19th century and highlights the fraught relationship between the production of sympathy and the photographic medium.

Though phenomenology represents a significant conceptual strand within studies of visibility, its application to photography theory remains underdeveloped.<sup>(1)</sup> Instead of presuming an alignment between the medium and the rationalist model of the camera obscura – based on the appearance of a conceptual and physical cleavage between the subject and the viewed object – phenomenological approaches to photographic practices consider how the camera mediates, enhances, or distorts the subject's perception. The phenomenology of photographic vision, therefore, goes beyond bleak postmodern assumptions about the observer/object hierarchy by considering the dialectic of photographer and photographed. Recent scholarship's efforts to revise postmodern approaches to colonial photography argue, broadly, for the need to particularize the colonial subject's experience and his/her photographic practice and to understand vision 'as a material engagement in and with the object world'.<sup>(2)</sup> *Afterimage* represents a rigorous contribution to such revisionist projects: Chaudhary rewrites the oft-rehearsed paradigm which correlates the colonial photograph with its ideological context and reduces it to a homogenized instrument of asymmetrical power relations. This approach to the medium is bolstered by the phenomenology of the photograph: because photographic inscription invariably records an excess of visual information, thus going beyond the photographer's intention, the meaning rendered by the medium is unstable and resists the fixity of archival narratives.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of vision and perception directly influences Chaudhary's phenomenological examination of colonial representation and perception. Merleau-Ponty describes the visual experience as a confluence of subject and world, positing an ontological model considerably different from the reifying and isolating experience of modernist vision. He positions the subject as ontologically immersed in a reciprocal relationship with the object of his gaze. His treatment of perception depends on an understanding of the senses in the wider context of a person's physical immersion in the world; this is in contrast to a Cartesian model which posits sensation and the senses as isolated, non-corporeal phenomena. Building on this break with Cartesian duality, Chaudhary considers the colonial photographer as a corporeal, sensate being, and argues that the camera functions as a 'sensory prosthetic' (p. 10). This understanding of the camera's relationship to the photographer significantly underscores the fact that the camera is not necessarily experienced as a discrete object detached from the body, and instead becomes 'an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight' (p. 25). This philosophical approach to the medium offers a striking alternative to the prevailing iconophobic postcolonial analysis of colonial photography; indeed, Chaudhary demonstrates an acute awareness of colonial forms of violence but proposes, nonetheless, that photographs can be more than abstract concepts engaged in colonial violence. Rather, photographs – due to the medium's unique persuasive capabilities – can be considered as active forms of bodily engagement.

Chapter one, 'Death and the rhetoric of photography: x marks the spot' highlights the rhetoric of the photographic index in the post-Sepoy Revolt photographic practices of John Dannenberg and Harriet Tytler, especially their memorializing photographs of dead British officers and civilians. Chaudhary questions the utility of the concept of the index with regard to these memorializing photographs: 'what does it mean to capture absence indexically?' (p. 39). From its very infancy, after all, the photograph promised that the event and people which it recorded actually took place and existed: that the image stood for an indexical trace of the object; as Roland Barthes famously writes in *Camera Lucida*, 'in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past'.<sup>(3)</sup> This undeniable presence is embodied in the term index (devised by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce), which is used by

critics to describe a quality of causal contiguity: the image produced by the photographer is always a record of the event of the entrance of light through a lens.

Chaudhary explains the indexical rhetoric of a series of Tytler's photographs that document the empty spaces in which decisive battles took place. The inclusion, in Tytler's photographs, of 'too much foreground' (p. 39) urges the viewer to imagine the event that occurred in that precise location; indeed, this obsessive recording of empty spaces, Chaudhary argues, is characteristic of post-Sepoy Revolt photography. He explains that these photographs of empty spaces possess powerful rhetorical strategy because – although they do not depict violence per se – they have an indexical relationship to violent events. Moreover, since the object of these images is absence and loss, the photographs also possess allegorical significance: 'the photographs allegorically disclose loss to the spectator and stand in for meanings and correspondences ultimately indeterminate, because they cannot contain the object of loss' (p. 52). Faith in the photographic index, according to Chaudhary, allows such post-Revolt photographs to straddle the realms of the supernatural and the material: even though these photographs deliver 'empty traces' (p. 68), their allegorical meaning allows the viewer to experience a sense of fulfillment since memorial photographs are 'inflected with affect' (p. 68).

In chapter two, 'Anaesthesia and violence: a colonial history of shock', Chaudhary analyzes a series of photographs by the commercial photographer, Felice Beato (1832–1909), documenting the major sites of the Sepoy Revolt. In a peripatetic career that spanned five decades, Beato covered much of East Asia; following in the wake of Britain's vast colonial empire, he was among the primary photographers to provide images of newly opened countries such as India, China, Japan, Korea, and Burma. Since the Sepoy Revolt and its brutal suppression by British troops were widely covered by the press, Beato was eager to take advantage of Western interest in the conflict: he arrived in India in February 1858 to record the rebellion's aftermath. Guided by military officers, he made images of the conflict's main sites – Delhi, Cawnpore, and Lucknow – that he sequenced and captioned to re-create the Revolt's primary events.

According to Chaudhary, Beato's startling exhumation and restaging of native corpses, posed amidst architectural ruins, are examples of a complex 'phantasmagoric aesthetic.' This aesthetic, Chaudhary explains, derives from the phantasmagoria show, which originated in the late 18th century when the mechanism of the traditional magic lantern show was developed by using projection in order to keep the audience unaware of the lanterns. As a concept, phantasmagoria persists through the works of such diverse critics as Marx, Freud, Adorno and Benjamin; the latter two use the spectator of the phantasmagoria as a figurative explanation of the consumer under capitalism. Chaudhary, following Benjamin, explains that the phantasmagoria 'came to designate all manner of mass distraction' and 'floods the senses and strives to construct patterns of wholeness, unity, surface harmony in order to numb the body to reality' (p. 92). Applying this critique of modernity – self-alienation and perceptual numbing – to colonialism's civilizing mission, Chaudhary demonstrates that, in order to manipulate and denigrate the colonized, the colonizer must be alienated from his own pain. He extends this phantasmagoric dynamic to the rhetoric of Beato's work, in which images of massacred Indian corpses are presented to the viewer as if they were an immediate photographic reality, rather than a carefully orchestrated scene. Thus, such photographs participate in the modern subject's experience of self-alienation: colonial photography such as Beato's renders the violence of colonial relations invisible by mystifying the violence of the Sepoy Revolt; it belongs, therefore, to a 'dialectic of (in)visibility' (p. 90), which 'is the precondition for an aesthetic that manages to convert brutality into beauty' (p. 90).

In the following chapter, 'Armor and aesthesis: the picturesque in difference', Chaudhary continues his discussion of how photographs of violence incorporate strategies of sensual manipulation. Analyzing Samuel Bourne's 1860s landscape photography alongside that of Indian photographers Deen Dayal, Abbas Ali, and Ahmed Ali Khan, Chaudhary argues for a perceptible struggle with the period's shifting mimetic practices in each photographer's corpus. He frames this analysis with a discussion of Bourne's conflation of landscape photography and the picturesque aesthetic. Following a lucid history of the conventions of picturesque painting, Chaudhary questions how this aesthetic impacts the photographic referent in colonial India. His argument builds upon studies that stress that the colonial painter/photographer records his

imperialist agenda by turning the world into a picture to be displayed: for Chaudhary, Bourne's photographic picturesque is not only symptomatic of a dominating colonial vision which sees 'land as landscape' (p. 109), but is also entangled with the modern relationship between bodily perception and the image world. In a fascinating discussion Chaudhary concludes that photography's indexicality cannot accommodate Bourne's straining towards the picturesque. Furthermore, he illuminates the paradox which results from the combination of photography with the picturesque convention: if in order to truly experience the world Bourne must set aside the conventions of the picturesque, then he also runs the risk of not actually being able to make sense of, or understand, the world, since the role of the picturesque is to make the unintelligible intelligible.

Chaudhary begins chapter four by questioning photography's affective appeal: 'Just how much suffering needs to be made visible before we are moved to compassion?' (p. 176). In the case of photographic reproduction of Indian famines, he answers, the quantity appears to be 'infinite.' In order to begin an analysis of how photography altered the grounds of sympathetic identification, Chaudhary draws on Adam Smith and Edmund Burke; he examines how sympathy is both an affect and a technology 'that regulates our reaction to the other, to ourselves, and by extension to the social body at large' (p. 173). Photography, however, alters the process of 'mimetic sympathy' – when one imagines oneself in the place of the other. Indeed, with famine photographs, which remind the spectator of his or her bodily limits, the production of sympathy for the emaciated victims is not guaranteed. Instead, this sensationally grotesque representation of the human body highlights the extreme difference between the well-nourished body of the spectator and the victim's deprivation; such photographs do not generate identification, and thus, they do not 'guarantee a referent for sympathetic mirroring' (p. 186). Unlike textual narratives about suffering, these photographs do not have a clear referent for the viewer's stirred sympathy: they are open-ended and offer a range of affective responses (shock, horror, or disgust) without providing anything to stabilize the viewer's emotion.

*Afterimage* grounds itself concretely in the body of scholarship dedicated to colonial photography in India. As I read this volume, however, I wondered about the possibility of transposing the study's methodological and theoretical apparatus to less-studied colonial photographic archives; indeed, this complex illumination of the photographic practices of the British Raj might profitably be applied to other colonial environments, in which photography was an element of colonial power. The South Pacific colonial records of British, French and German imperialism are full of photographic representations that might benefit from a methodology influenced by Chaudhary's *Afterimage*. We might, for example, problematize the sensual manipulation that is at work in photographs of 19th-century Tahiti. Chaudhary's study seems to identify the preconditions for the relationship between the real syphilitic destruction of Polynesian bodies with the popularly disseminated photographs of lithe, bronzed, bare-chested young men and women in idyllic settings, who smile ambiguously towards the camera displaying their heavily tattooed skin. Chaudhary's expert scholarship, while embedded in his own interest in colonial India, offers new avenues for the analysis of Western colonial archives far beyond the Subcontinent; indeed, his study posits novel modes of interpretation for the broader concept of photography's entanglement with colonialism.

This work will not be of interest only to the obvious audience of historians of photography or of late imperialism, but also to those concerned with understanding how sensory practices are marginalized, repositioned and forged during the period of colonial modernity; as such, *Afterimage* can be read alongside Christopher Pinney's *The Coming of Photography in India* (2008), *Camera Indica: Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997), Elizabeth Edwards' *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (2001), and the essays collected in *Visual Sense: The Cultural Reader* (2008), *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Material Culture and the Senses* (2006) and *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (1994). These works prefigure Chaudhary's study: they all, in their own manner, stress that 'visual' studies are moving into a broader domain as scholars engage with more than the disembodied eye of the beholder and consider a bodily engagement with the world. Chaudhary's work not only exemplifies this new approach, but broadens its scope and signals a new place of departure for studies of colonialism, photography and visuality.

## Notes

1. Mikael Pettersson, 'Depictive traces: on the phenomenology of photography', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69, 2, (2011), 185–96.[Back to \(1\)](#)
  2. Jessica Dubow, "'From a view *on* the world to a point of view *in* it": rethinking sight, space and the colonial subject', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2, 1, (2000), 87–102.  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York, NY, 1981), p. 76.[Back to \(3\)](#)
- 

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1368>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/47061>