

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

Zahid R. Chaudhary

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Zahid R. Chaudhary's *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* participates in a growing body of scholarship regarding the role which photography has played in colonialist endeavours. Although photography's function in subject-formation has been long explored—Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag providing early entries into the discussion—Chaudhary's book, in focussing on photography's role in colonial India, takes its place specifically among a growing discussion of colonial photography in India. While Chaudhary draws on this growing body of criticism, his project expands discussions by arguing that photography serves to alter modes of perception. Suggesting, in particular, that photographs construct reality rather than merely representing it, Chaudhary casts photography as a prosthetic enhancement which “extends and transforms sight for photographers and the body politic” (1). As such, rather than just considering photography as a tool of dominance, Chaudhary seeks to establish that it has “something to teach us about the political formation of our own senses” (194).

Chaudhary's exploration of this argument is divided into six chapters, including an introduction and a coda. In the four main chapters, Chaudhary predominantly focuses on such British photographers as Harriet and Robert Tytler, Felice Beato, Samuel Bourne, and Willoughby Wallace Hooper, but offers a discussion of three Indian photographers—Lala Deen Dayal, Darogha Abbas Ali, and Ahmed Ali Khan—in Chapter Three. Chapters One and Two both concentrate on post-Sepoy Revolution photography, a photography that largely depicts the emptiness of former sites of death and destruction. In these chapters, Chaudhary first explores how photography constructs allegory and rumour; he then establishes that photography manifests what he deems a “phantasmagoric aesthetic” (80). He defines this aesthetic as involving the “technological mediation of vision, the penetration of reality with apparatus that in turn transforms our understanding of what counts as reality” (80). Thus, in Chaudhary's conception, post-Sepoy Revolution photography was used by the colonial apparatus to render “invisible the violence of colonial relations of production” (81). It thereby served as a means of erasure and/or justification of that violence. Photographs, as they were used in the colonial endeavour, could, in other words, motivate “[a] subtle surrender

of any responsibility for the ruins [which included skeletal remains] placed on display” (98).

Chapter Three moves its attention away from the sites of the Sepoy Revolution and onto landscape photography. In doing so, this chapter contemplates the expectations of the picturesque. As presented by Chaudhary, the pursuit of the picturesque involves a certain assumption of hubris; the picturesque is, after all, “the *practice* of seeing landscape as a picture and altering the landscape to make it more ‘picturelike’” (112, original italics). Therefore, as Chaudhary argues, the pursuit of the picturesque in India functioned to further entrench the binary between the familiar (British) and the foreign (Indian).

Chapter Four similarly establishes photography’s role in constructing the “us” vs. “them” binary required by colonialist thought. In exploring photographs of the 1876-79 Madras famine, Chaudhary develops a discussion of sympathy’s uses and possible abuses. Questioning whether sympathy necessarily provokes kindness, Chaudhary observes the complexity and contradiction of affect, noting that viewers of suffering are often “carried away by this strange mixture of compassion and delight in the face of mass calamity” (176). Chaudhary consequently argues that photographs, in their ability to motivate a sympathetic response, serve as “a mechanism that regulates our reaction to the other, to ourselves, and by extension to the social body at large” (173).

*Afterimage of Empire* is impressive in the vastness of its scope and its discussion of a range of theorists including Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to name a few. However, the vastness of this scope at times causes Chaudhary’s line of argument to become obscured, the focus on photography disappearing. At these moments, Chaudhary’s book becomes more about theoretical concepts or historical events than about photography’s relation to such concepts or events. Furthermore, although *Afterimage of Empire* is impressive in its incorporation of numerous, often quite powerful images, including thirteen coloured plates, a few flaws in the handling of these images occasionally emerge. Firstly, there seems to be a slight error in the presentation of Figure 1.5: either the third skeleton mentioned in Chaudhary’s discussion has been cropped out, or Chaudhary’s discussion is in fact based not on Figure 1.5—a photograph of a lithograph—but on the lithograph itself, which appears as Plate 8. More importantly, there remains throughout the text little specific close reading of the images, with a few notable exceptions, the discussion of Samuel Bourne’s *Mary Bourne under the Banyan Tree at Barrackpore Park* (Figure 3.17) representing perhaps the most compelling attention to detail. It is likely unfair to wish for more interpretation of the images themselves from a text that sets itself up more as a project about photography than a project about individual photographs, but with such a powerful archive of images at hand, it seems a missed opportunity not to put the images to more complete use.

Where the tendency towards a lack of specific discussion actually becomes somewhat problematic is in the section on the photographs of the

Madras famine. Without specific analysis of the images, their inclusion in the text drifts rather close to perpetuating the sensationalization of suffering that Chaudhary critiques when discussing their original role in “satisfy[ing] a latent sadistic desire” (176). Similarly, the inclusion of Beato’s *The Hanging of Two Rebels* (Figure 2.14) —a graphic image of two lynched men and a crowd of onlookers—at the end of Chapter Two, when it does not receive any mention in the text until nearly fifty pages later, likewise creates a problematic and likely unintended sensationalization of the victims. Even though such an image fits well within Chapter Two’s focus on scenes of violence, without being offered any immediate reference to or commentary about the image, readers are left uncertain of its purpose and uncomfortable that it may appear merely for its shock value.

As an exploration of the phenomenology of perception and the role photography has played, and continues to play, in governmentality, *Afterimage of Empire* achieves an in-depth and insightful discussion. The slight criticisms that have here been raised come predominantly from a desire that this text better balance its focus on the big picture (pun unintended) of theoretical matters with the small picture of the images themselves. Regardless, Chaudhary’s text succeeds very well in making available a wonderful selection of images. This achievement offers readers the chance to begin where Chaudhary himself has left off. Thanks to this book, an engagement with the specific visual qualities of these images can continue and grow.