

'THE TRANSPARENT PHOTOGRAPH'

REFLECTIONS ON THE ONTOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHS

IN A CHANGING DIGITAL LANDSCAPE



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Anthropology & Photography No. 7

ISSN 2397-1754

Anthropology & Photography

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First published 2017

*Cover image: Photograph from the performance 'Seen at Secundarbagh' by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS.
Photo credit: RAQS.*

ISSN 2397-1754

ISBN 978-0-900632-49-5

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No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories walk, like animals or men and their steps are not only between narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word. Every step is a stride over something not said.

(Berger 2013:102)

In a world increasingly flooded by images, photographs enter our lives today in new unexpected modalities. They gather new functions, roles and meanings. We seem to have left behind the fears regarding the death of photography (see Richtin 1990) as well as the panic of the supplantation of reality by the hands of its various mechanically produced representations. In all likelihood, as Howard Becker (1978) suggested long ago, we also seem to have finally abandoned the habit of looking for an ultimate truth in photographs. Leaving behind naïve ideas about the photograph as a ‘transparent window on the world’ (Mitchell 1984:504), we have become more aware of the possible deceptions and mystifications that these items can generate. At the same time we have, however, not abandoned our fascination with them. Quite the opposite in fact, we are more than ever caught in their magical web, attracted by what they represent and do to us, and by the stories they tell and instigate.

The insertion of photography in a vast scenario of visual practices including smartphone applications, cheap or free editing software, online archiving and sharing platforms etc., has undoubtedly generated a greater exposure to, and awareness of, the multiple possibilities at our disposal for producing and editing (read ‘photoshopping’) pictures. Amidst HDR

applications² and ‘Tiltshift’ generators,³ GIFs, ‘snapchats’, timelapses and timelines we seem to have become, as Robins anticipated a couple of decades ago, ‘more reflexive, more “theoretical”, more “knowing” in our relation to the world of images’ (1995:4). As our ways of engaging with photography have changed, so has, in the present scenario, the ontology of photographic images. Photographs are becoming new items, ‘new tokens’ (Mitchell 1992:223) endowed with a set of new qualities. Their meaning is increasingly to be found beyond the realm of representation and indexicality, and in a terrain conscious about questions of multimodality, materiality and relationality (cf. Favero 2014 and 2016). Ongoing performances in constant flux, photographs threaten, today more than ever, our conventional understanding of the world of images, forcing us to rethink some of the assumptions characterizing our engagement with visual culture at large.

In this paper I aim to enter this theoretical landscape from the vantage point of one particular performance centered on a 1858 photograph by Felice Beato, a war photographer who spent a large part of his career serving the British Empire. ‘The Transparent Performer/Surface Tension’ is a performance written and directed by Zuleikha Chaudhari in collaboration with famous

1 I acknowledge Elizabeth Edwards for the notion of ‘digital landscape’.

2 HDR (High Dynamic Range Imaging) is a technology allowing to produce a greater range of luminosity into an image than is conventionally obtained with regular photographic tools

3 TiltShift generators allow users you to produce images that make the world look like a miniature model, a playful way of morphing reality into a product of fantasy.

Delhi-based RAQS Media Collective.⁴ Based on the performance ‘Seen at Secundrabagh’ (also by Chaudhari and RAQS), this project offers a privileged platform for entering the terrain that I have just delineated. I will hence engage with it as a prism through which to explore broader questions regarding the transformations that photographic images are going through in the contemporary digital landscape. In ‘The Transparent Performer’ (from here onwards TTP) the photograph is in fact exploited not as a historical document narrating or illustrating a ready-made historical event, but rather as a multimodal, material, relational item capable of triggering particular instances of meaning making among the viewers. Rather than an object to look at, I will suggest that it stands here as an object to look through. Projected on large screen, this photograph turned computational image (see below) is as a kind of passage, a portal, a channel linking objects, stories and people to each other. It becomes a producer, an instigator of stories rather than a visual representation of history. Mirroring the title of the piece, we may perhaps say that the photograph too is a transparent performer.

This paper will start with a quick exploration of Chaudhari’s performance and then explore the extent to which some of the changes identified in TTP are mirrored in the world of contemporary digital practices, one that is dominated by notions of multimodality, relationality and

materiality. In the last and concluding section, I offer some reflections on the changing meaning of photographic images in the contemporary landscape.

Performing the photograph

A multimodal performance designed for art galleries and museums, TTP welcomes the viewers with what looks like an empty screen. The projection light is active but the screen is grey, incapable of communicating a definite meaning. What the viewers see is a kind of magma, a morphing haze that changes shape irregularly; acting like clouds in a black-and-white sky. In front of and behind the screen, an orange plastic surface defines what looks like a temporary stage. Backlit black-and-white photographs hang on the walls all around it. Two actors suddenly appear behind the screen, like flat puppets in a shadow theatre. One of them progressively steps to the front of the stage declaring abstract phrases; I identify the words ‘voice’, ‘sound’, ‘authority’ and ‘multitude’. The haze on the screen has started lifting, and we can identify the shape of a column (Figure 1). It seems to belong to an old palace and it invites us to enter a space of melancholia, of loss. However, an invasive sound, a kind of industrial, metallic buzz warns us against this fall into a benevolent nostalgia. At moments this sound overtakes the speeches of the actors; in other moments it fades, leaving us to their scattered sentences again: ‘an acoustic reason is equal to authority and voice multiplied by echo’.

As the performance proceeds we get to see more and more of the photograph; the fog slowly disappears, a palace is revealed (Figure 2). In parallel to its unveiling we witness a progressive dismemberment of the stage, obtained through the co-intervention of different elements. The lights keep expanding and contracting the

4 ‘Seen at Secundrabagh’ was co-produced by Weiner Festwochen, Vienna 2012, KunstenFestivaldesArts, Brussels 2011 and Festival D’Automne, Paris 2011. It was performed on stage by Kavya Murthy and Bhagwati Prasad at Chronus Art Centre, Shanghai in 2013. ‘The Transparent Performer/Surface Tension’ was staged in its performance/exhibition format at the Triveni Gallery, Delhi, in January 2014. ‘The Transparent Performer’ is basically a broader project that incorporates ‘Seen at Secundrabagh’ within an exhibition setting.

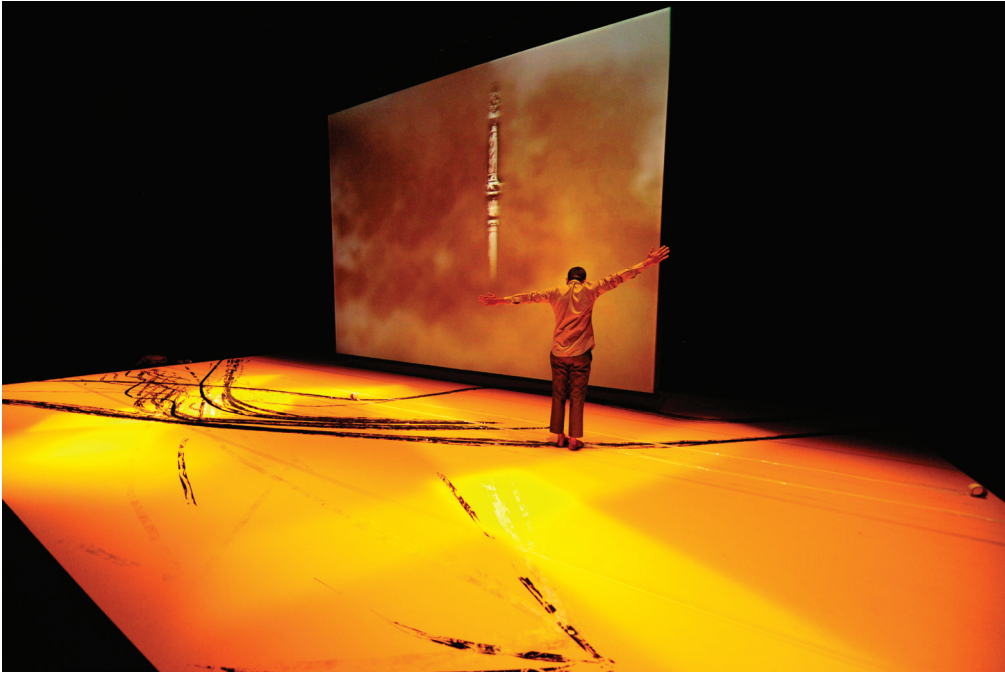


Figure 1 Photograph from the performance ‘Seen at Secundarbagh’ by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS.
Photo credit: RAQS.



Figure 2 Photograph from the performance ‘Seen at Secundarbagh’ by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS.
Photo credit: RAQS.



Figure 3 Photograph from the performance 'Seen at Secundarbagh' by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS. Photo credit: RAQS.

space, revealing (or perhaps generating) new depths and boundaries. A dark tape pasted on the orange plastic carpet transforms the stage into a fictitious map. New objects are introduced to our attention: a television set brought onto the stage on a trolley; a panel made up of light bulbs composing the word 'seepage' (Figure 3); cardboard silhouettes of a reflecting human body and its shadow.

The boundaries of the stage are also acted upon by the actors' constant movement behind and in front of the photograph, by the sounds and by the photographs hanging on the walls of the gallery. Together, these elements contribute to shrinking and enlarging the space of narration in an on-going dialogue between the photograph at the centre of the stage and all that surrounds

it, between what is contained by the frame and what the frame leaves out.

I will return to this performance, but first I want to tell you something about the kernel of this piece. The photograph was taken in March 1858 in Sikandar Bagh, literally 'gardens of Sikandar', the summer residence of the last Nawab of Oudh in Lucknow, Northern India (Figure 4). A witness to the aftermath of the so-called 'Indian mutiny', this image offers us a glimpse into one of the most tragic events in the history of the East India Company, and one which helped consolidate British rule over the subcontinent. Following the revolt of the so-called sepoys (the Indian soldiers in the service of what was about to become the Raj), the British retaliated by massacring more than 2,000 men who had sought refuge in the magnificent palace of Sikander. The bones in the picture supposedly



Figure 4 Felice Beato. *Secunda Bagh after the Indian Mutiny*. Wellcome Library, London, no.: ICV No 38229.

belong to these dead soldiers. This photograph tells different stories simultaneously. It appears to us today as a testimony of British cruelty. Yet, it was shot with a quite different purpose. Felice Beato, the British-Italian war photographer who authored this image, opted to put it at the service of the British. His photo was most likely publicized in order to discourage Indians from resisting colonial rule. A piece of propaganda, this photograph was, we believe today, the result of a

careful *mise-en-scène*. Beato had most likely made his servants disinter the corpses of the murdered soldiers, and perhaps also collect other cadavers. He then choreographed the distribution of the bones so as to generate a dramatic effect.⁵ He

⁵ Such insights have been offered to me by the Alkazi Foundation, the largest archive of colonial photography in South Asia and the owner of a vast amount of photographs by Felice Beato.



Figure 5 Photograph from the performance 'Seen at Secundarbagh' by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS. Photo credit: RAQS.

finally placed the living servants in it, and ... click! Photography as theatre.⁶

Chowdhary's performance succeeds in communicating the vulnerability, performativity and shifting nature of this photograph (and of photographs at large). As mentioned, the meaning of Beato's photograph today is intrinsically different from the one it had when it was taken and distributed. In the context of contemporary India this image (and the events leading to the transformation of the East India Company into the British Empire) can, however, still be the matter of much debate. The term 'mutiny' for instance (which is still the one conventionally used by historians and archivists for defining

the uprising of the sepoys) is a contested one. I once used the term to describe the performance quickly to a friend in Delhi and was immediately attacked: 'Mutiny? Are you buying into that argument?' A debate among my friends followed regarding the meaning of colonial memories in the present. Echoes of India's announced revenge on the West embodied by the Tiger India agenda were aired, amidst other comments pointing out India's capacity to absorb all such influences and critical phases and still develop into a coherent nation-state. I will not go any further into this here, but only mention that the use of Beato's photograph is part of a wider scenario of reflections on the meaning of cultural memory and history in the context of contemporary India.

In the context of TTP, however, Beato's photograph is also the object of a different type

6 For more readings of Beato's photography, see Chaudhary 2012.

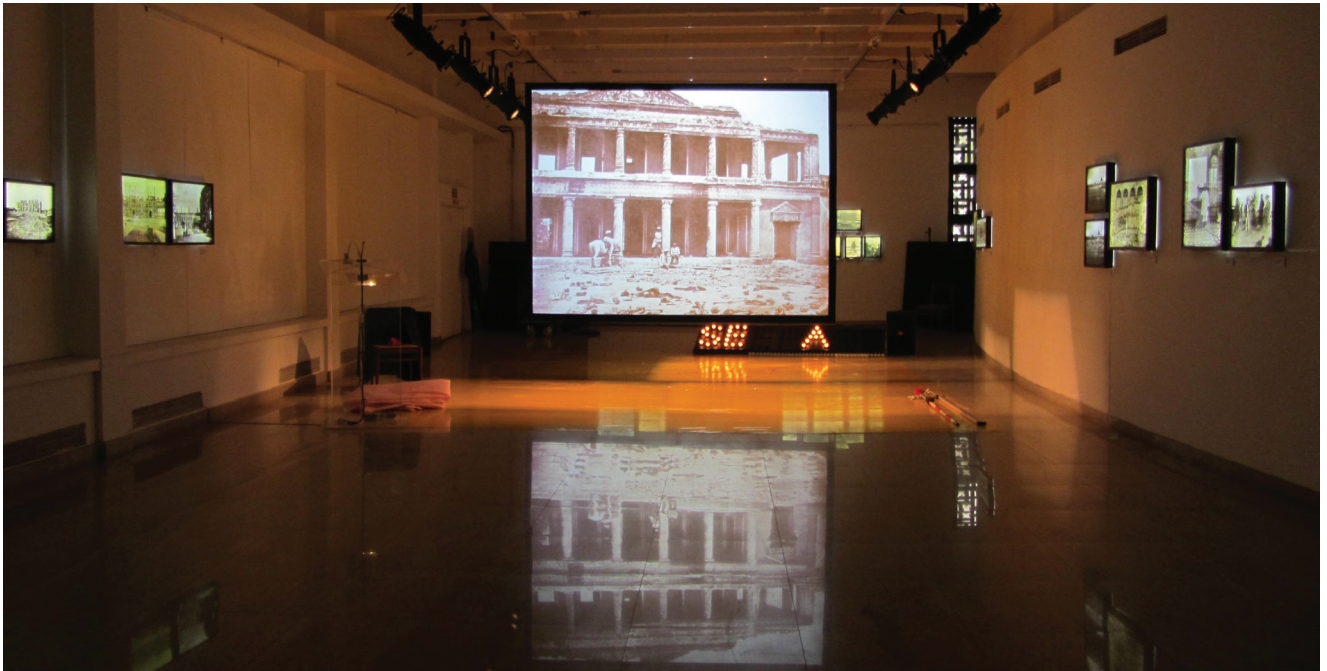


Figure 6 Photograph from “The Transparent Performer/Surface Tension”. Permission to use from Zuleikha Chaudhari.

of transformation. No longer just a ‘photo-graph’, that is an object whose production is the result of the material imprinting of light onto a chemical surface, this object has gone through a series of important transformations/translations. It must first have become a digital photograph or a scan, that is a computational image resulting from a process of decomposition and re-composition of the original image filtered by the algorithm of a processor. This computational image has then most likely been copied, compressed etc. and transmitted via a memory stick or an email to a set of different users. It has then been re-edited to fit the needs of the technologies at the disposal of the designers of the performance, including those of the venue. After this it has been morphed and animated with the addition of the haze (the foreground fog moving on top of a still background, the photo), hence becoming almost closer to a moving image than

a photograph. Through these transformations, Beato’s photo is removed from the reassuring boundaries of photography and inserted into the terrain that I anticipated above, where, ‘new images’, to paraphrase Mitchell, ‘disturb and disorientate by blurring comfortable boundaries and encouraging transgression of rules on which we have come to rely’ (Mitchell 1992:223). In this context Beato’s photograph is indeed a dynamic object; it is a performance (twice a performance I would say, given the evident constructed nature of the scene portrayed) telling one or many stories at the same time (see Figures 5 and 6). Dialoguing with the status of images in a digital context, which are always the result of performance (we engage with them dynamically, clicking on them, saving them, re-editing them by zooming into them etc.), the treatment of this image also does justice to the way the original photograph (just like many other war photographs) is also the

result of a performance, a carefully enacted *mise-en-scène* generated vis-à-vis a specific political agenda (the submission of the Indians to the British Empire).

Beato's photograph gathers a variety of meanings that go well beyond the indexical plane. It becomes an object with many functions. It is a backdrop, almost like a painted canvas, in front of which the performance takes place; it is a screen allowing the actors to hide from the view of the audience and to transform themselves into ghostly, sound-producing shadows; a map over which experiences are shared and tracked; a part of a broader archive of memories materialized by the other images surrounding the viewers, by the stories narrated, the letters of soldiers read by the actors etc.; and indeed it is also light, an element directing the attention of the viewers to particular details on the stage. Almost like an ornament in a living room, it is asked to accompany, as a background, the movements of the actors and the props, the sounds and voices that constitute the *mise-en-scène*. Rather than explicating and informing, this photograph surrounds, 'backgrounds', hides, highlights and counterpoints. It is at moments pure dialogue, a beacon collecting and redirecting gazes, and a tool for bringing elements in touch with each other. Transcending its semantic meaning, this image becomes a passage, a tool for allowing viewers to trespass (and reconstruct) history, memory and the senses. Appearing at moments like a frame without content (a transparent performer itself), this object functions as a generator of relations and connections. Rather than the container of a ready-made story, a historical document, it instigates the production of new stories through the viewers' own 'knowledge-seeking-strategies'

(Färber 2007).⁷ It nicely sums up, I suggest, the multiple transformations that images have gone through in their migration into a digital landscape.

That digital thing

In order to enlarge the issue with which I closed the previous section, let me now make a quite big leap and take the reader into a discussion regarding the meaning of images in the contemporary digital scenario. For the sake of simplicity, I propose to offer a brief overview of the main trends that can be identified in this terrain by focusing on three main aspects: the notion of multimodality (or media convergence); spectatorship and non-linearity; and materiality. While not being exhaustive of the changes that characterize the world of digital imaging, I suggest that these aspects are central to identifying the extent to which TTP taps onto the changing meaning of images in the contemporary context.

Let me start with the first aspect, multimodality. A quick look at a conventional smartphone would immediately reveal the variety of different formats that we adopt when producing images in a digital habitat. To mention but a few, we take conventional photographs in horizontal, vertical or square formats; we can also use the panoramic mode in order to capture broad views (again vertically or horizontally). We may also produce videos (again in horizontal or vertical format), increasingly in slow motion (an effect previously only available in high-end products). We can also access that particular

⁷ Perhaps it could be said that TTP addresses (and uses) Beato's photograph in a fairly desecrating, philistine manner. An iconic image from 1858 that has become a symbol for the brutality of the British retaliation for the so-called 'mutiny', that contains the traces of interrupted human lives and that belongs to the largest archive of colonial photography in South Asia (the Alkazi Foundation), is treated here with irreverence, as a mundane object that is part of a wider material landscape.

combination of still and moving images that is conventionally called time-lapse. On top of these pretty standard modes, we have access to a plethora of other ‘apps’ accessing our camera and producing special effects such as HDR or TiltShiftGen. Once taken, the images produced with such phones (or also with many contemporary cameras) will most likely be re-edited and/or distributed through a variety of other possible applications. Images today, as we all know, can be explored through maps (on the basis of the geolocate metadata that they contain), or through the timelines provided by Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram and the like (hence incorporating and producing relational metadata in the shape of the comments of the people looking at them, of the tags bringing people literally into the image, of the @ and # opening up a conversation topic etc.). In both these territories, maps and timelines, a variety of spatial and relational metadata accompanies these images. Such information tells us when and where the images in question were taken, with whom, what network they belong to, what topics it addresses etc. Such layered diversity of information is today typical of many forms of image consumption on the web. The most instructive example, which I have discussed extensively elsewhere (Favero 2013 and 2014), is the i-doc. Probably the most vibrant terrain of contemporary avant-garde filmmaking, the i-doc is a fairly new visual language that blends the tradition of documentary film with the principles of interaction that characterize Internet-based communication (cf. Goggin 2009; Leadbeater 2009; O’Reilly 2005; Quiggin 2006; Shirky 2008.). I-docs provide a generative, complex, non-linear viewing experience very much centred on the user’s own choices (I will get back to this in a second), while capitalizing also upon the coexistence of diverse materials. It is, in

fact, typical for an i-doc to bring together in the same space still and moving images, sound, text and graphic, and animation and gaming, hence offering a viewing experience that transcends conventional media boundaries. Entering this space, viewers must progressively learn to suspend the conventional distinctions on which their visual culture builds. When addressing this emerging visual language we, therefore, have to shift away from conventional media definitions. Elsewhere (Favero 2013), I have suggested how Rancière’s notion of ‘imageness’ can come to our help in this. In ‘The Future of the Image’ (2008), he suggests that the end of images is today behind us, and that we need to think of them in novel terms, as ‘a regime of relations between elements and functions ... relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect’ (ibid.:6). Inserting images into this conceptual space may allow us to grasp and acknowledge the imaginative and polysemic function of all such media units while avoiding, at the same time, reducing them to raw data.

Such transcendence of media boundaries is today far from exclusive to the world of i-docs. Contemporary art and popular culture are characterized by the same phenomenon, and are intensely questioning our conventional assumptions regarding what images are. I could give many examples. One is Radiohead’s 2007 video-clip for the song ‘House of Card’. Produced with the help of scanners, this video shows an image that is the result of the visualization of the physical encounter between particles of information bouncing against material obstacles (a process called pointcloud). Another is the work of David Szauder, who, for his series ‘Failed Memories’, created an algorithm capable of transforming images without intervening upon them at the level of the visible. Rather, the

morphing of faces that we see as viewers of these images takes place at the very moment of recomposition of the image in the processor, i.e. basically by morphing the algorithm producing the image. These examples demonstrate how we must today refashion our understanding of images. We must acknowledge the computational and performative character of the images that we produce and look at, reflecting on the extent to which they are the result of an on-going act of composition and re-composition happening also beyond the visual field.

Let me now switch to the second aspect characterizing the digital image (which has been a matter of much debate). In the context of contemporary image-making practices, spectators/users/viewers are increasingly becoming authors/designers/producers of the works they engage with. I-docs, as well as other forms of digital storytelling, offer a fertile terrain for exemplifying this. Designed within the logic of hypertext, i-docs ask, as I hinted above, viewers to construct the narrative by themselves and hence actively to produce meaning as they explore the materials. Here, authorship is a collaborative endeavour generated together with what we must consider, borrowing again from Ranciere, to be an 'emancipated' spectator (cf. Rancière 2009). In line with this, the role of the authors/makers is being decentralized and transformed into something new. No longer 'directors', they must now envision their mission as that of orchestrators, facilitators, archivists and curators. Their duty is to create and curate a space in which viewers can share their own experiences and reflections, rather than guiding them through a linear path of the narrative. This act of dialogic or shared narrative-construction conventionally translates into an act of community-making. Addressing the hybrid space between life 'off-line' and

'on-line' (cf. de Sousa 2006, Kabisch 2008), i-docs have, as do other creative image-making platforms, the potential to connect social actors in different locations with each other, turning, through the shared use of digital images, scattered individuals into a community. These platforms can function as generators of new social relations and new forms of participation in the material, physical and social exigencies of everyday life. Elsewhere (Favero 2013), I discuss how such new imaging practices seem to offer a precious window onto the social and political transformations that are affecting contemporary capitalist societies.

These first two aspects of digital imaging clearly show how matters of relationality, just as Bourriaud suggested with his path-breaking *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), are a key feature of the engagement with images in the contemporary scenario. While in the case of the first aspect (multimodality) we are talking about relations of objects to objects, with the second we enter the terrain of relations of object to viewer, viewer to viewer, and viewer to community.

A third aspect concerning the changing meaning of images in a digital landscape relates to the question of materialization. The digital, as I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paper, has long been seen as a negation of a truer, more direct, 'more real' experience of the world surrounding us, and as causing a detachment from everyday life (see Nichols 2001; Wellman 2001). Such detachment can already be confuted by looking at i-docs. The potential of i-docs to connect social actors in different locations with each other, turning, through the shared use of digital images, scattered individuals into a community, is already a proof of this. I-docs can, in fact, be seen as generators of new social relations and new forms of participation in the material, physical and social exigencies

of everyday life. I would, however, like to push this idea even further and explore the extent to which contemporary technologies also seem to foreground the question of materiality in a different way, moving in the opposite direction to mundane notions of 'digitization' that conventionally imply the progressive translation of material items into virtual ones (music records into MP3 files, books into PDFs, images into JPEGs etc.). Today, the digital is actually pushing for a radically opposite transformation, that is for the translation of abstract ideas and images into material items. This is the tendency of the moment and something that can easily be observed in the consumer-technology market. The 3D printer is probably the most evident example of this material shift. A leading item in this market, the 3D printer literally inverts the above-described principle of digitization. With the help of 3D-design software, such as CAD, it allows users to turn an abstract idea into an image. Later, with the help of a stereolithography file (capable of splitting the image in horizontal layers, creating a image/path for each layer), this image can be translated into an object made up of a specific material, called printing ink. Designers, artists and architects have all recently found a passion for this tool. But so have also other types of professionals and scientists. 3D printers are in fact today being exploited for the production of three-dimensional biological structures, such as patches for heart muscles, livers, skin etc. in a movement which closes the distance between technology (the digital) and the body.

Another set of examples relating to the shift towards material engagements can be found in the world of wearable technologies. In parallel with the growing popularity of smart clothes and fibres (bringing data and technology in direct contact with the bodies of users), visual

technologies are also closing the gap with the human body. Google Glasses (an item soon to be brought back into the market after an initial failure) were the first popularly recognized vision-based augmented-reality technology. Juxtaposing 'virtual' data (projected on top the lens/screen) with the direct perception of the world 'out there', the glasses were designed to insert the information that conventionally can be found on smartphones (such as directions on a map, information about places to visit, arriving calls and messages etc.) into the visual field of the user. Google Glasses constitute a brilliant example of how new visual technologies force us to go 'beyond the frame' (Favero 2014).⁸ The tendency to bring together the image and the sensory richness of our mundane perception can, I suggest, be found in a variety of different terrains. It can be read in the growing popularity of multi-sensory cinema halls (the so called 4D, 5D or even 7D movie theatres), where the act of viewing is accompanied by sound-, touch- and motion-related stimuli, and in some cases also by the use of smells and temperature changes. Returning here to the above discussion on 3D printing, it can also be detected in the ongoing popularity of 3D portraits. Companies like Twinkind, Omote 3D, MiniMe etc. are today promoting the large-scale production of personal 3D portraits. With the help of a photogrammetry 3D scanner, a technician takes a full 360-degrees image of a specific subject. This is then converted, with the help of a printer, into a small doll representing the subject. The commercial (and at times also technical) fortunes of such technologies has been characterized by ups and downs, and for the moment they seem to mostly constitute gimmicks. However, they contain the

⁸ Indeed the actual reasons behind the failure of these glasses could perhaps provide us with some critical insights into this process.

seeds of a number of transformations. Besides signalling the material shift that I have been discussing here, they also speak to the loss of the privileged point of observation on reality (hence marking a step away from the Renaissance perspective, see Cray 1990; McQuire 1998) and of greater immersion of viewers in and of images in the fabric of everyday life (I will return to this at the end of this paper).

A further look into the contemporary camera market can be instructive in exploring this decentring of the relationship between vision, the body and the senses at large. The GoPro, for example, is a camera that implements a range of possibilities for engaging with materiality. Originally designed for filming in the context of extreme sports, this camera mounts a shield protecting it from water, scratches and bumps. Mounting a fixed lens capable of producing a 170-degrees image, the GoPro permits the capture of a richness of detail. Popular among non-professionals, this camera is also increasingly adopted by professional filmmakers. A good example is the Harvard-based ethnographic-film-making duo Lucien Taylor and Verena Paravel. Their award-winning *Leviathan* (2012) offers a sensorial exploration of the world of an open-sea fishery and documents life on and around a boat. Fishes and men, it could be said, are equally at the centre of this film, something that has been made possible due to the use of GoPro. An important characteristic of them is that they are designed to be mounted, with a help of straps, on the body of the user. Along with the absence of a viewfinder, this poses a number of interesting challenges to photography and filmmaking. In the first place, it dissociates the act of image-making from the intentionality of the image-maker, that is, from the processes of selection and interpretation that are an intrinsic part of the act of making pictures (choosing the right angle, framing,

moment etc.). This constitutes a movement towards a somewhat 'purer' form of mimesis. Foregrounding the mundane movement of the body of the user as a kind of viewfinder, it also constitutes the final form of disentanglement of the gaze of the director and of the camera, hence completing the transformation that was begun by the introduction of LCD screens on digital cameras. This is what happens, for instance, in some moments in *Leviathan* when the camera is not guided by the intentionality of the filmmaker, but rather by its various engagements with the materiality of the elements surrounding it – the bodies of the fishermen, the flow of the water etc. Inviting users to engage with the physicality of the world surrounding them, the GoPro opens up an interesting and intimate dialogue between body and matter, body and body.

The move towards un-intentionality (or towards a greater negotiation of intentionality between the will of the filmmaker and the contingencies of her/his body) is more evident in the case of life-logging cameras, tools that also raise some other issues regarding contemporary images' shifting connections to time and space. Let me explain this with the help of one particular product, the Narrative Clip.⁹ Formerly known as Memoto, the Narrative Clip is a Swedish-made, small, lightweight, wearable and fully weatherproof camera. Armed with a clip allowing it to be pinned to a jacket or bicycle etc., it takes two shots every minute. Such shots are recomposed, with the help of a narrative algorithm, in a time-lapse that the users can view through a dedicated smartphone application. Amongst other things, the Narrative Clip marks out a significant change in our way of conceiving of the relation between time,

9 The Narrative Clip will be removed from the market in January 2017.



Figure 7 Photograph from the performance ‘Seen at Secundarbagh’ by Zuleikha Chaudhari and RAQS. Photo credit: RAQS.

space and photography. Capturing a shot every 30 seconds, this camera marks a shift away from the conventional connections between photography and time that have characterized our understanding. It pushes further the idea that photography today is less about capturing a moment or a memory (as Kodak famously phrased it in the twentieth century), and more, as McQuire has suggested, ‘about commenting on present events as they are taking place’ (2013:226). The Narrative Clip is not only one of the tools allowing for the creation of a sense of, to quote Mizuko Ito (2005), ‘visual co-presence’, it also foregrounds time and the body of the user as the actual producers of the image. Detaching the intentionality of the image-maker, the

images are in fact decided in a dialogue between the sensor and lenses producing the images, the movements of the body wearing it and the time scansion adopted. Google Glasses, the GoPro camera and the Narrative Clip all signal, in my view, the progressive closing of the gap between technology, the body and matter. They indicate how a ‘material turn’ is happening alongside (or probably better within) what Uricchio (2011) and others have defined as the ‘algorithmic turn’ (a notion that largely dominates current debates on digital imaging). In parallel to the variety of algorithm-driven virtual reproductions of the

real,¹⁰ we are, in other words, witness, to play with words, to the real production of the virtual.¹¹

Conclusions: a tacit dialogue

As the previous section may have shown, understanding the meaning of images today requires a capacity to enact a theoretical shift generating new dialogues between visual, digital and material culture. Images seem to insistently invite us to expand our approaches beyond representation, semiotics and indexicality. Highlighting questions of multimodality, relationality and materiality, images speak increasingly of relations (between objects, individuals and communities); of new narratives (and hence stories) build in a dialectic between the viewer and the image-makers (characters promptly transforming themselves into new types of curators); and of material engagements and immersions. 'The Transparent Performer' offers a unique window onto these transformations. Felice Beato's historic photograph, the object that through its translation into a computational image is at the centre of this play/installation, is in this context no longer

just a visual representation but a material item whose shifting meanings help connect different objects and senses to each other. As one of the 'actants'¹² on which the performance builds, this image is no longer a simple bearer of indexical meaning (a representation of an event happening in the past, the container of a memory). Rather, it is also a creative tool that, in the playful hands of the director, the performers and the viewers, translates itself into many things at once: a screen separating the actors from the audience or from each other; a background capable of counterpointing the sentences that the actors declare; one image in a larger archive or collection of images. Beato's photo is hence an on-going performance, an ever-changing object amidst a 'heterotopic' space (see Foucault 1986) that cyclically morphs between being a theatre, a venue for exhibitions and a lecture hall (I must add that as a part of the performance, Chaudhari conventionally organizes introductory talks on topics connected to it). In a way, the image at the centre of this performance closes a circuit, connecting otherwise disconnected elements with each other, behaving (metaphorically and conceptually) like some of the wearable technologies described above. Just like the surface of a computer screen in the viewing of an interactive documentary, Beato's photo becomes the point of suture between different possible messages, allowing the emergence of a dialogic story.

I would like to conclude by pointing in the direction of another transformation. I suggest that the presence of this image in the context of the performance, very quickly gains a transcendental quality. In fact it acts like a 'passage', a 'portal' allowing the viewers to make the above-

10 Such reproductions are materialized, for instance, by sites such as Photosynth or by immersive virtual-reality goggles such as Oculus Rift etc.

11 The extent to which the insights we gather from an analysis of digital visual practices have been anticipated by much scholarship deserves comment. Questions of multimodality have been addressed by scholars of the digital such as Manovich (2001), but also by art historians such as Gombrich (2006); the rethinking of the relationship between author and reader by Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1977); efficacy and transcendence by Benjamin (1931) and Flusser (2005); materiality by Stafford (1997), Edwards (2006) and Pinney (2001); relationality by Bourriaud (1998). While I acknowledge the extent to which the practices I have described bring such considerations to the fore in an explicit manner, much more work still needs to be done in order to grasp the dialectic between practice and technology.

12 'Actant' is a term coined by Latour to comprise the agency of all sorts of autonomous figures which make up our world, cf. Latour 2005.

mentioned connections between the different images, objects, stories and sounds comprising the space they have entered, and guiding them in the act of stitching together a story (with all its discontinuities, see Berger 2013:102 and the opening quote) on the basis of different visible, aural and textual significations. Functioning like a tool for entering and leaving different experiential spaces (a transition underlined by the performers' constant movement between the front and back of the image, see Figure 6), the image highlights the qualities of resonance that Greenblatt, in his analysis of museum objects, defined as the capacity for the displayed item to 'reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand' (1990:42). Leading to the creation of what Greenblatt calls 'an imagined ethnographic thickness' (ibid.:48), the image interpolates directly those shifting qualities that Ranciere (2008), as mentioned above, chose to address through the notion of 'imageness'. Constantly inviting the viewer to trespass and transcend the frame, the image seems to perform through that sense of 'trans-parency' (etymologically, the capacity of 'appearing through') that makes up the title of Chaudhari's piece.

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Acknowledgments

For this paper I am gratefully indebted to Zuleikha Chaudhari for her generosity in sharing her work with me. This paper includes insights and reflections that are very much part of our dialogues and exchanges. I also want to thank Rahaab Allana, from the Alkazi Foundation, for his precious insights into Felice Beato's work and to RAQS Media Collective for their generosity in discussing and sharing reflections.

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ISBN 978-0-900632-49-5

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