Knowledge, Nation and Colour in the Documentary Photography of Luigi Ghirri, Raghubir Singh and Susan Meiselas

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An old philosophical problem fixes on the relation of knowledge to perception; since we are sometimes deceived by optical illusions, hallucinations or even dreams, how can we rely on our senses? As the philosopher AJ Ayer put it, characterising the sceptical position:

> […] the object imposes its appearance, like a sheet of glass, between itself and the observer. The glass may be so frosted that we are left in doubt as to the character, or even the existence, of what lies behind it: or it may be so transparent that we hardly realize that it is there at all.[1]

Photography seems to dramatise and intensify the problem. You may use photography to gain knowledge of objects that you had not previously grasped; but equally so many things about the medium are deceptive and disturbing, in its mechanical treatment of light bouncing off surfaces, so that shadows take on the density of objects, while glare annihilates them. Photographic colour, especially in its early days evanescent, arbitrary and unreliable, an effect of mere surface, only compounded the problem.

Colour appeared to work against the depth and reliability required of knowledge. The view was expressed in eloquent if extreme terms by the photojournalist, Philip Jones Griffiths, renowned especially for his coverage of the Vietnam war, who noted the difficulties of mixed lighting conditions that could produce bizarre colour oddities, or the significant moments that are ruined because of the presence of incidental primary colours in people's clothing or in gaudy feeding bowls supplied to a refugee camp.[2]

This essay will examine three contrasting cases of photographers who chose to use colour—Luigi Ghirri (1943-92), Raghubir Singh (1942-99) and Susan Meiselas (b. 1948)—and will attempt to elucidate the relations in their work between colour, knowledge and the image of a nation. In their work between the 1970s and 1990s, each of these photographers were active at a time when colour photography was often looked down upon because of its associations with advertising and consumerism. While working in very different circumstances, each of these photographers engaged with the issue of how to make colour yield forms of knowledge related to humanism, as commercial culture intensified alongside political reaction.

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[1] A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1956, p. 89. It should be noted that this essay was written under the conditions of Covid-19 lockdown, and without access to the usual range of library resources. Many thanks to Zehra Jumabhoy who made acute comments on a draft.

[2] Philip Jones Griffiths, 'The Curse of Colour', in Julian Stallabrass, ed., *Documentary*, Whitechapel Gallery/ The MIT Press, London 2013, p. 38.

False Colour?

Le Corbusier, Maison La Roche, Paris, 1923-4

The long-term prejudice against colour photography was founded on a wider disdain for colour as such. It is mapped through David Batchelor's book, *Chromophobia*, and while hardly universal, it is an insistent minor strain that runs through Western thought from Plato onwards.[3] Batchelor is most concerned with the modernist turn and a contemporary vogue for monochrome décor in which white often predominates. As with Le Corbusier's white walls and long horizontal windows, the banishing of darkness, decoration and colour was seen as a rational, healthy and moral victory over nineteenth-century intricacy, dust, miasmas and mysticism.[4] It had its photographic analogue, both in the imagery of such architecture, and in the ordered, clear black-and-white still, both commercial and documentary, as they sat together in the pages of the illustrated magazines of the day. It led into a long and for many years unquestioned use of black-and-white film in documentary as the purveyor of knowledge.

[3] David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, London 2000. John Gage's books give a detailed and more balanced account of Western attitudes to colour: *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Thames and Hudson, London 1993; and *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*, Thames and Hudson, London 1999.
[4] Such attitudes run through much of Le Corbusier's writing of the 1920s; see particularly *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James Dunnett, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1987.

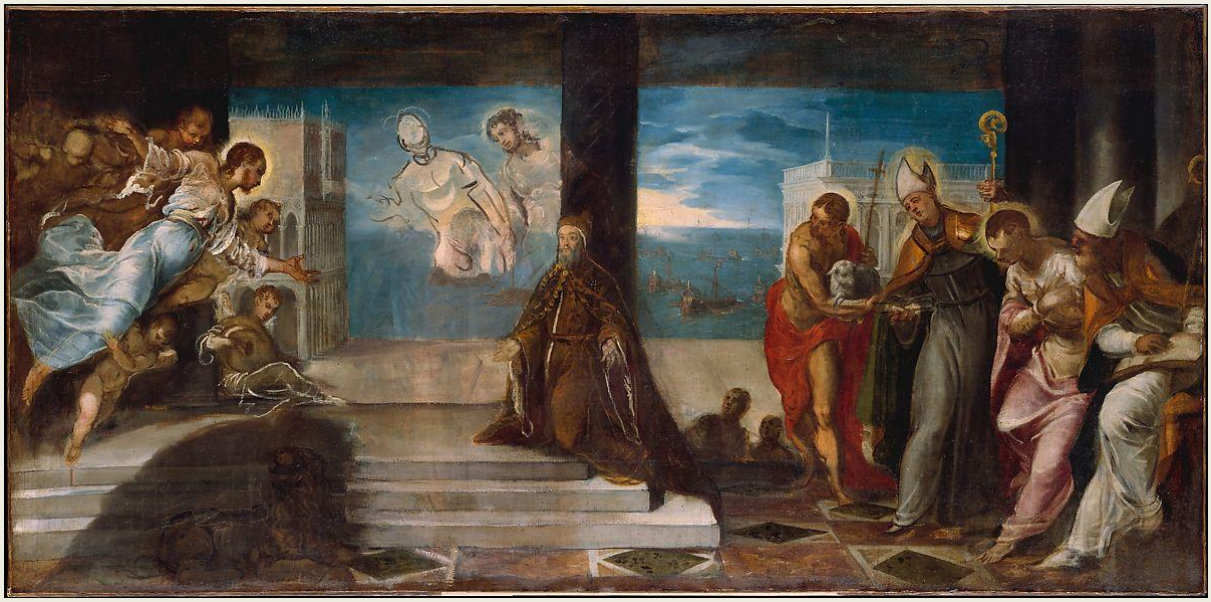
As Batchelor argues, the prejudice against colour was based on an association with various suspect categories—the cosmetic, the feminine, the infantile, the oriental, the queer, the vulgar and the deranged: 'Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both.'[5] This set of attitudes was extended to much modern photography, so that in 1975 Max Kozloff could describe how the 'typical Kodacolor print' was 'tainted with the stigma of misuse, triviality, and extravagance.'[6]

Yet even in the modernist age colour had its defenders: one prominent theorist and critic was Adrian Stokes who opened his book, *Colour and Form*, with quotes from Bernard Berenson and

[5] Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, pp. 22-3.
[6] Max Kozloff, 'Photography: The Coming Age of Color', *Arforum*, January 1975, Vol. 13, No. 5, pp. 30-35.

Roger Fry disparaging colour as incidental to the great significance of making art.[7] The terms of his defence were particular, not to say eccentric, and lay in the contrast between 'film colour' and 'surface colour'.[8]

It is the attention paid to film colour, Stokes argued, which is smooth, spongy and indefinite in location, leaving the eye searching for a resistant surface, that has led to the view that colour is a mere embellishment and can offer no profound aesthetic experience. Surface colour, by contrast, unites texture and colour, and contributes to the sense of a palpable world of permanent structure in which 'the otherness of objects is best perceived'.[9] Lustre, sparkle, glitter and shiny surfaces ('a smoke-screen of light') tend to destroy the surface colour effect, as do dramatic contrasts of light and dark.[10] There is an implicit moral dimension to this account, which seeks to rescue one type of colour as a true effect of otherness, while discounting the other as tainted with deception.[11]



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Doge Alvise Mocenigo (1507–1577) Presented to the Redeemer*, c. 1577, oil on canvas

In surface colour, ideally, the object seems to be inwardly glowing with soft colour. The model here is the Venetian painters who achieved that effect by painting darker tones over light grounds, or the illumination of the stone surfaces of Renaissance buildings soon after the sun has gone down. Two features of this account are of interest here: the first being that surface colour has an affinity with the colour transparency—with the photographic slide held up to the

[7] *Colour and Form*, 1937, in Lawrence Gowing, ed., *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Volume II 1937-58*, Thames and Hudson, London 1978, p. 8.
[8] Stokes drew the distinction from an influential book of the period, David Katz, *The World of Colour*, Kegan Paul, London 1935.
[9] Stokes, *Colour and Form*, pp. 17-18.
[10] Ibid., p. 21.
[11] At this stage, Stokes' view is also allied to conservative views, particularly on gender: see for instance his view that 'Carving creates a a face for the stone, as agriculture for the earth, as man for woman.' Ibid., p. 22.

light. Venetian painting, says Stokes, is like a coloured piece of glass through which light shines, and indeed the artists had been inspired by the glass makers of Murano.[12] Stokes also notes the long influence of Aristotle's views on colour, taken up by Goethe, which rests on a similar idea of mitigated or obscured light. On this basis, European painters took it as their paramount concern 'to realise a warm effect of shape glowing with inner life' like blood beneath the skin, and they turned it to a 'humanistic purpose'.[13] So here we have a conjunction of surface colour as revelatory of depth, something very like the effect of a photographic transparency held up to a window, and humanism.

Alfred Wallis, *St Ives Harbour*, c. 1932-3, oil on board

What is more, this relation of surface to depth relates to knowledge. So, in puzzling over the grey and earthy colours of the sea in the late paintings of Alfred Wallis, Stokes claims that the old seafarer's vision is based on knowledge of what lies beneath its reflective and glassy surface:

[12] Stokes, *Colour and Form*, pp. 51-2.
[13] Ibid., pp. 55-6.

rocks, sand and fish. There is, then, an affinity between surface colour, humanism and knowledge.

In these terms, the cause of colour photography was hardly helped by the career of its first major celebrity, Ernst Haas, the champion of 'film colour', and the subject of the first solo show of colour photography at MoMA in 1962.[14] While he is in some ways a complex figure, and his statements about colour photography are often highly perceptive, Haas consistently favoured impression over reality, feeling over thought, and the transformation of the photographed object 'from what it is to what you want it to be'.[15] His was a world of glitter, mobile reflection, transient light effects and dramatic contrasts of illumination and shadow that break up form. Haas said that he wanted to celebrate the post-war world 'filled with new hope', that colour is a joy that one does not think with but are borne away by, and that colour photography was fitted to depict the 'new brightness' of a world of 'fashion, food, travel, cars, flying'— in short, a new world of consumerism.[16] The MoMA press release said of his work that it was not journalism but 'visual poetry'.[17]

Ernst Haas, New York, 1962

[14] *Ernst Haas—Color Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1962.
[15] Haas quoted in Bryn Campbell, *Ernst Haas*, William Collins Sons, London 1983, p. 57.
[16] See Pamela Roberts, *The Genius of Colour Photography from the Autochrome to the Digital Age*, Goodman, London 2007, p. 139.
[17] The press release may be found at https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3432

Haas used Kodachrome, a film with remarkable qualities. It is made up of layers of black-and-white film which have sensitivity to different coloured light, and a series of filters. Only during processing are the appropriate dyes added to each layer to produce a colour transparency. Compared to other colour films, at least up until the 1990s, Kodachrome had unique advantages: its colours were rich and naturalistic, its blacks did not have the greyish cast of so many colour films, its greys were subtle, it had remarkable contrast, and the lack of colour couplers between its layers (which tend to diffuse light) gave the film extraordinary sharpness.

At the time when Haas adopted it, Kodachrome was only available at 12ASA, markedly slower than most black-and-white film. Haas played up the qualities of this slow, high-resolution film with images that were necessarily marked by shallow depth of field and motion blur, and by choosing to pan the camera when photographing moving subjects. Objects were frequently dissolved by the movement of the subject or the camera, surfaces were obscured by reflection, and (because the film was intolerant of over-exposure) by the contrast between saturated colours and deep shadow in which all detail is lost.

Our case studies here, Luigi Ghirri, Raghubir Singh and Susan Meiselas, in their work from the 1970s onwards, also used Kodachrome—though in faster versions than that used by Haas. All had a more complex view of consumer culture, and each developed work that created new confluences of colour, humanism and knowledge.

Luigi Ghirri

Luigi Ghirri, *CSAC, Università di Parma*, 1973

While in his extensive writing about photography, Luigi Ghirri very occasionally mentions Haas' photography, his work could almost have been made in overt opposition to it. If Haas' colour is intense, dramatic and expressive, Ghirri's is calm, subdued and carefully regulated. This opposition is no mere exercise of photographic taste. For Haas' celebration of the new consumerism issued from the land of its origin, the United States, while Ghirri saw the incursion of consumer culture in Italy as an invasion, and sometimes wrote of it in colonial terms.

Ghirri, Bitonto, 1990

In Ghirri's book, *Italian Landscape*, the well-known author Gianni Celati writes of the photographer's hometown of Modena, surrounded by flat farmland, and looking like a US suburb of detached houses with their gardens. Except for an enormous expanse of asphalt which the houses border:

> It is not possible to see it as a square, for it is too vast and no one ever goes there; only at night is it used as a parking lot by trucks. On the far side of this sea of asphalt stands a solitary bar, it too almost always empty. I think its name is Bar Las Vegas. Thousands of

> places like this are springing up all over the world. They are almost all marked by that strange fixity assumed by empty space, space which for some inexplicable reason no-one can ever find a use for.[18]

Ghirri's photography issues out of what he took to be a crisis of the environment and the image world, and the intimate connection between them: that in Italy's rapid post-war industrialisation, the land had been rapidly transformed by roads, traffic, heavy industry and industrial farming, leaving isolated physical fragments of the past, standing amidst the wider ruination. Any affective connection with this landscape had been broken.

Ghirri, *Engelberg*, 1972

Furthermore, this desolation was festooned with and mocked by commercial imagery—especially photography—ranging from billboards to postcards which presented false images of

[18] Gianni Celati, 'Fictions to Believe in, an Example', in Luigi Ghirri, *Paesaggio italiano/ Italian landscape*, Electa, Milan 1989, p. 32.

an ideal present: alluring youth, charismatic landscapes and products to cure every ill. Where could an independent, critical photography position itself between this deadened landscape and its blanket of propaganda?

Michelangelo Antonioni, *Red Desert*, 1964

Ghirri, who was active from the late 1970s until his death in 1992, made work in dialogue with literature, film and music. He knew Italian neo-realist cinema well, and drew upon the senseless *terrain vague* in which its lost and sometimes picaresque characters played out their dramas, and in which cars so often appear as agents of homogenisation, domination and disenchantment; think, for example, of the artificially painted scenes of Michelangelo Antonioni's first colour film, *Red Desert*, a polluted industrial wasteland in which the protagonist played by Monica Vitti loses her mind, and in which false, tainted colour is an index of alienation and derangement.[19] And of literature, especially Italo Calvino with his opposing characters, Marcovaldo and Palomar. The first cannot adapt to the modern city which he treats as a mutation of the countryside, tracking down mushrooms or following cats across rooftops; the latter is an obsessive and meticulous if deranged observer of modern life.[20]

Or we may think of Gianni Celati (who, as we have seen, wrote for Ghirri) whose characters stumble about a world stripped of significance, exiles both at home and abroad. For instance, two children who try to help a woman find her flat amid endless identical blocks are eventually enveloped in a homogenous white fog in which it is impossible to know which way to move; or of characters who wonder what makes the world persist, and find that nothing—not even a

[19] Michelangelo Antonioni, *Red Desert*, 1964.
[20] Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo or The Seasons in the City*, trans. William Weaver, Picador, London 1985; *Mr Palomar*, trans. William Weaver, Secker & Warburg, London 1985. The parallel with Palomar is made by Paolo Constantini, 'From the Inside onto the Outside: The Photography of Luigi Ghirri', in Ghirri, *Italian Landscape*, p. 70.

plausible answer—can hold against the ever growing parade of words and adverts that obstruct thought and meaning; or of a photographer in the Po Valley Delta, seeking the voices of the dead, who is abandoned on a sandy dune called Nuovo Mondo.[21]

Ghirri, *Scardovari, Strada Sull'argine*, 1988

Italy's theatrical modernisation under Mussolini had been cruelly exposed as a sham in the Second World War. Defeat was followed by a rapidly administered dose of the real thing, especially in the North, as the nation was transformed from a relatively poor, traditional and rural society to a full participant in global capital. Writers, photographers and film-makers responded with a range of highly charged responses which spanned political agitation, melancholia, and the cultivation of the absurd.

Ghirri's response was distinct, involving no retreat to the past, or to black and white, but instead using colour film in an echo of commercial imagery to make work that might stand apart from it. First to engage in very close and non-ironic visual readings of the new environment—to map out the forms of suburban housing, regulated nature and modern infrastructure with great precision of framing and composition. Ghirri claimed that while to the traveller the new towns dotted along a highway looked the same, this was not at all so for their inhabitants who insisted upon

[21] Gianni Celati, *Voices from the Plains*, trans. Robert Lumley, Serpent's Tail, London 1989; the relevant stories are 'the Commuter Children Who Got Lost', 'What Makes the World Go On', and 'How a Photographer Landed in the New World'.

small but significant differences. Ghirri tried to do the same, looking for 'creases' or 'folds' among the apparent homogeneity of the flattened landscape.[22]

Ghirri, Modena, 1973

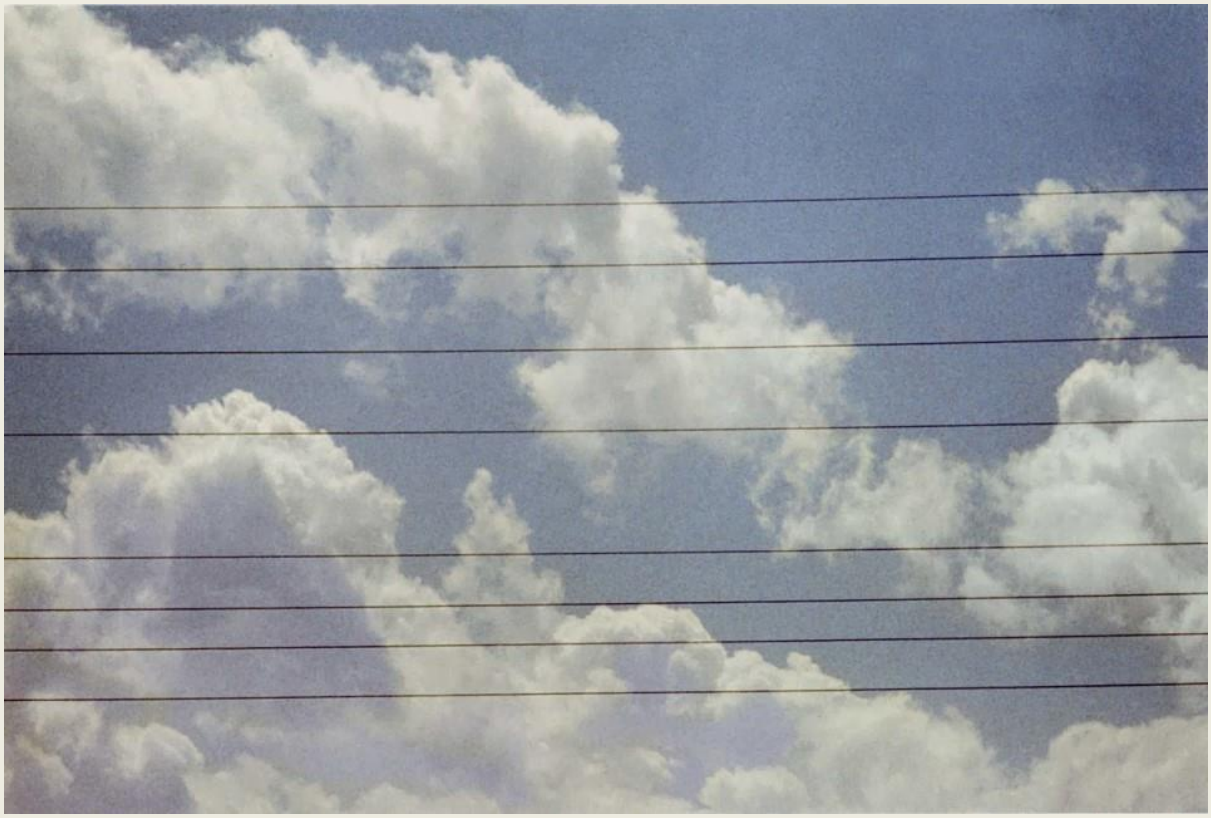
Ghirri had a background as a surveyor, and brought that objective, measuring temperament to a photography of affective scenes. The result is supposed to be a knowledge that synthesises objective and subjective elements. There is an affinity here with Walker Evans' version of the pastoral, in which the mundane constructions of ordinary small-town or rural folk are recorded by the most sophisticated photographic technology, and with the eye of a high artist, rather as Flaubert expended his arduous artistic labour on the run-of-the-mill sentiments of Mme Bovary.[23]

Yet there are important distinctions, too, despite the avowed importance of Evans for Ghirri.[24] In his most celebrated images of the 1930s, Evans documented capitalism in crisis—the victims of the Great Depression and the environmental devastation of the Dust Bowl—and thus looked (as many did) to alternative resources, finding them in a folk culture reprieved by the brief halting of the engines of modernity. And, of course, Evans was, at least in print, a famous enemy of colour, which he declared corrupted photography with its vulgarity, although he allowed that it might be used in the limited circumstances when the point to be made was the vulgarity of the

[22] Ghirri often referred to creases or folds; see for instance, 'A Minimal Adventure', 1984, in *Essays*, pp. 75-6.
[23] This applies particularly to the second part of Evans' *American Photographs*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1938. On Flaubert and Evans, see James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans*, Basic Books, New York 1999, p. 119.
[24] Ghirri writes about Evans in 'Vincenzo Castella', 1984, and 'The World Caressed by Walker Evans', 1985, in Luigi Ghirri, *The Complete Essays, 1973-1991*, trans. Ben Bazalgette/ Marguerite Shore, MACK, n.p. 2016, pp. 83, 99-102.

subject.[25] Kodachrome, which Evans had occasionally used in large format, was the probable target of this attack.[26]

In both respects, Ghirri was different: the landscape that he surveyed was newly dominant and settled, and colour was central to his project. In an essay, tellingly entitled 'King Midas in a Blind Alley', Ghirri laid out how his work differed from his US counterparts who worked in colour, noting the poles of William Eggleston's romantic nostalgia, and the 'hallucinatory and vertiginous precision' and 'diabolical coldness' of Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz and Joel Sternfeld.[27] Writing of another photographer as if the work was his own, Ghirri praises images that have 'no chromatic straining, no forcing of the spatial construction, no exaggeration of contrasts, of lights or shadows. It is a space within which we can *read*.'[28]



Ghirri, from *Kodachrome*, 1978

In his book, *Kodachrome* (1978), the renowned sharpness, high contrast and saturated colour of the film are subdued under generally flat lighting or hazy sunshine, in which subjects are seen through screens or in reflection, in subtle observations that bear on image and reality, modernist

[25] Evans' remarks were made in 'Photography', in Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, Atheneum, New York 1969; discussed in Jerry L. Thompson, 'Walker Evans Color', in Josef Albers Museum Quadrat, *Walker Evans: Depth of Field*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2015, p. 320.
[26] Jerry L. Thompson, 'Color Saturation: Kodachrome vs. Ektachrome' in ibid., p. 323.
[27] 'King Midas in a Blind Alley' (1982), in Ghirri, *The Complete Essays*, p. 70.
[28] 'Vincenzo Castella', 1984, in ibid., p. 84.

regulation and its imperfections. The elements of unexceptional beach resorts are calmly ordered across the photographic frame; boxed-in plants against the geometric arrangements of suburban property. Any vestige of the sublime is tamed, as in the opening images in which the sky is bound by telegraph wires or fixed against the red flag of Coca Cola; and later in a mountain sky scarred by a contrail, or mountains themselves as rendered in miniature in a Rimini theme park. Commercial photography is also prominent, in tart compositions that place it in its regulated environment, analysing those contradictory elements so as to force open the armour of the capitalist glacis.

Ghirri, from *Kodachrome*, 1978

This was an explicit project to recover knowledge from behind the spectacular façade: Ghirri writes of moving beyond already defined, symbolic representations to decipher the 'hieroglyph' of reality, in which photography acts as a path to knowledge, and can make images to which we can attribute 'a value of truth'.[29] This is an analytical view, a mapping of the terrain, and an attempt to order its diverse elements, especially through endlessly reconfigured series, which are responses to the effects of previous interventions.[30] Ghirri was obsessed with the visual form of

[29] Ghirri, 'Kodachrome—Introduction', 1978, in ibid., pp. 18-19.
[30] See Ghirri, 'Italia Ailati', in James Lingwood, ed., *Luigi Ghirri: The Map and the Territory*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia/ MACK, Madrid/ London 2018, p. 250.

the atlas, which one of his series reproduces in much-magnified form.[31] It was also a rearguard project, or a holding project, to provide resources for a better future that may or may not arrive.

In the later 1980s, the tone of Ghirri's writing grows more desperate, the descriptions of the image spectacle his photography was pitched against became more lurid and alarmed, and the prospects of resistance are driven away from knowledge and towards the realms of mystery. The image world, Ghirri laments, is 'cut to pieces, chopped up and pulverised into a smooth pap of paper or celluloid', devoid of narrative, a hyper-world which encourages 'an insatiable, all-devouring, pornographic gaze' in which the viewer is lost in a 'murky, suffocating quagmire.'[32]

Ghirri, *Formigine*, 1985

This development is reflected in his book, *Italian Landscape*, the subject being a focus for Ghirri from around 1983. This book marks a sea change in Ghirri's work away from the detached and lucid mode, the Walker Evans ideal, and towards a vision that draws more heavily from art history, has much more play of light and dark, and allows itself a heavy dose of romanticism.[33] If the light in *Kodachrome* often offers the uniformity and clarity of surface colour, the images in *Italian Landscape* more often play with obscurity, transient light effects, veiling and mist. Light takes on a life independent of objects, as its rays are materialised by the damp in the air, or as atmospheric perspective dissolves forms, or as blinding light obscures the scene. There is a

[31] See Ghirri's series, 'Atlante', 1973, reproduced in ibid., pp. 185-205.
[32] 'Thinking of a Necessary Image', 1987, in Ghirri, *Complete Essays*, pp. 159-60.
[33] See Constantini, in Ghirri, *Italian Landscape*, pp. 68-9.

greater concentration on the survival of old Italy, seen uninterrupted by modern intrusions, and on its sympathetic interaction with scenes of agriculture and careful cultivation, especially the forms of trees. These scenes are complemented by photographs of painted images, old and new, of that harmony, as in one taken in the Villa Albergati of a villa and pergola obscured by the burnt-out form of a lit chandelier. It is seen across the page from an actual villa at night, spot-lit in the distance and surrounded by darkness and mist.[34]

Ghirri, *Bologna*, 1987

The soft sunlight of *Kodachrome* remains one resource used among many, but in *Italian Landscape* the colours tend to be further subdued, as befits their aged and weathered subjects, and are subject to fewer bright interruptions. Those elements of the modern that are present—a Sol LeWitt mural, scenes in the studio of Giorgio Morandi—are in quiet sympathy with the old. In all this, mapping is abandoned, and Ghirri describes his work on the Italian landscape as being like 'mutable drawings, lacking a precise cartography, without compass points'. They are more about perceiving a place than describing or cataloguing it, and form 'a sentimental geography'.[35]

Ghirri's project becomes more explicitly one of restoration. He talks in an interview about 'trying to see as if for the first and last time', an attempt then to strive for the aura of the interweaving of unique time and space, which is constantly undermined by standardisation and repetition.[36] Yet the broken character of the relation to landscape and environment is not denied: Ghirri writes of his reaction to a series of agreeable and picturesque scenes around Sorrento which he

[34] Ghirri, *Italian Landscape*, pp. 36, 37. The captions read: Zola Pedrosa, Bologna, Villa Albergati, 1986/ Bologna, 1987.
[35] Ghirri, 'Italian Landscape', in *Complete Essays*, p. 205.
[36] Interview with Emmanuela Tiatini, 'A Song of the Earth', in Ghirri, *Italian Landscape*, p. 49.

cannot help but see as mediated through films with a sense of déjà vu, and as if the landscape is always seen through a windscreen.[37]

In all of this, Ghirri, in his endless reconfiguration of his various photographic series—with the use of index cards onto which individual positives were stuck—began to despair of deciphering the vastly complex and ever-changing hieroglyph. He may remind us of Hans Christian Anderson's abducted child, imprisoned in the palace of the Snow Queen, his sight corrupted, condemned to turn over ice shards unceasingly in pursuit of the elusive word that would grant him freedom.

As we have seen, in photographic terms, night falls, shadows encroach, colour is subdued, fog blurs and occasionally light does not reveal but blinds. Why this shift from wry analysis to a melancholy wandering through the broken remains of the past? Ghirri saw his work as waiting on and providing resources for an alternative future. In the unstable Italy of the 1970s, with its strong Eurocommunist and union movements, radical and creative dissent, and violent attacks on the status quo, the capitalist armour might have been thought to be melting. By the mid 1980s those possibilities had passed, and the atmosphere had congealed into an individualist and consumerist conformity. As Lucio Magri puts it in his remarkable history of European communism, the decline of the Italian Communist Party led to a mass exodus from active politics, especially among the subaltern classes. The void was filled by television, which opened the way for populist demagogy.[38] It is little wonder that Ghirri retreated.

Raghubir Singh

In lectures published in 1917, Rabindranath Tagore wrote of how the 'clear sky' of aesthetic thinking in Bengal had been smothered by the 'meteorological disturbance' emanating from the West, that had brought with it mist and clouds.[39] Similarly for Raghubir Singh, an admirer of Tagore, the West had driven out light and colour. Singh gave a programmatic view of his use of colour in a retrospective volume of his work in India, *River of Colour*. Here Indian views of the world are not haunted by Western alienation and guilt, which so often finds expression in a heavy use of black; indeed, the term 'colourist' is redundant in India, and black, associated with evil and the West, is shunned in *darshan*, sacred sight, in which colour, touch, feel, contact and intimacy are integrated. Photography, a tool of colonialism, the 'black demon' responsible for the death of miniature painting and the destruction of 'the colourful goddess of Indian art', could nonetheless be turned—using colour—to mirror the nation's diverse geography, ecology, morality, art and culture.[40] In doing so, Singh claims, he never took as his subject 'beauty in

[37] Ghirri, 'Return from Sorrento', in ibid., p. 104.
[38] Lucio Magri, *The Tailor of Ulm: Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller, Verso, London 2011, p. 382.
[39] Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, Macmillan, London 1959, p. 6. Tagore also claimed that colour was essential for Indians to 'see ourselves', like the staining of a specimen on a microscope slide. Natasha Eaton, '"Swadeshi" Color: Artistic Production and Indian Nationalism, ca. 1905–ca. 1947', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (December 2013), p. 630.
[40] Raghubir Singh, *River of Colour: The India of Raghubir Singh*, Phaidon, London 1998, pp. 8-10. These views may be considered tendentious in their sharp separation of East and West, on the hostile relation of photography and painting, and on the role of photography as an exclusively colonial tool, but they have a partly rhetorical clarity in the delineation

abjection', so common a feature of art in the West, and instead looked to the lyric poetry and 'the high range of colouratura' of Indian everyday life.[41]

Raghubir Singh, *A Model, J.J. School of Art, Bombay, Maharashtra*, 1991

As adopting the colonial image-capture apparatus suggests, this was a meeting of India and the West, in which both may benefit from the resulting synthesis. Such an exchange was based on the model of the Bombay Renaissance (a nineteenth-century adaptation of Western humanism and culture by Indian intellectuals and artists), of Tagore, and of Singh's hero, the film director Satyajit Ray, who likewise bent Western technology to the Indian melding of 'beauty, nature, humanism, and spirituality'.[42] It is telling, too, that Singh took Henri Cartier-Bresson as his photographic lodestone, following a trip he took around Jaipur with the famed photographer in 1966. This is because Cartier-Bresson had not merely photographed India but had been deeply changed by it, seeking to understand its society, culture and religions, particularly Hinduism.[43]

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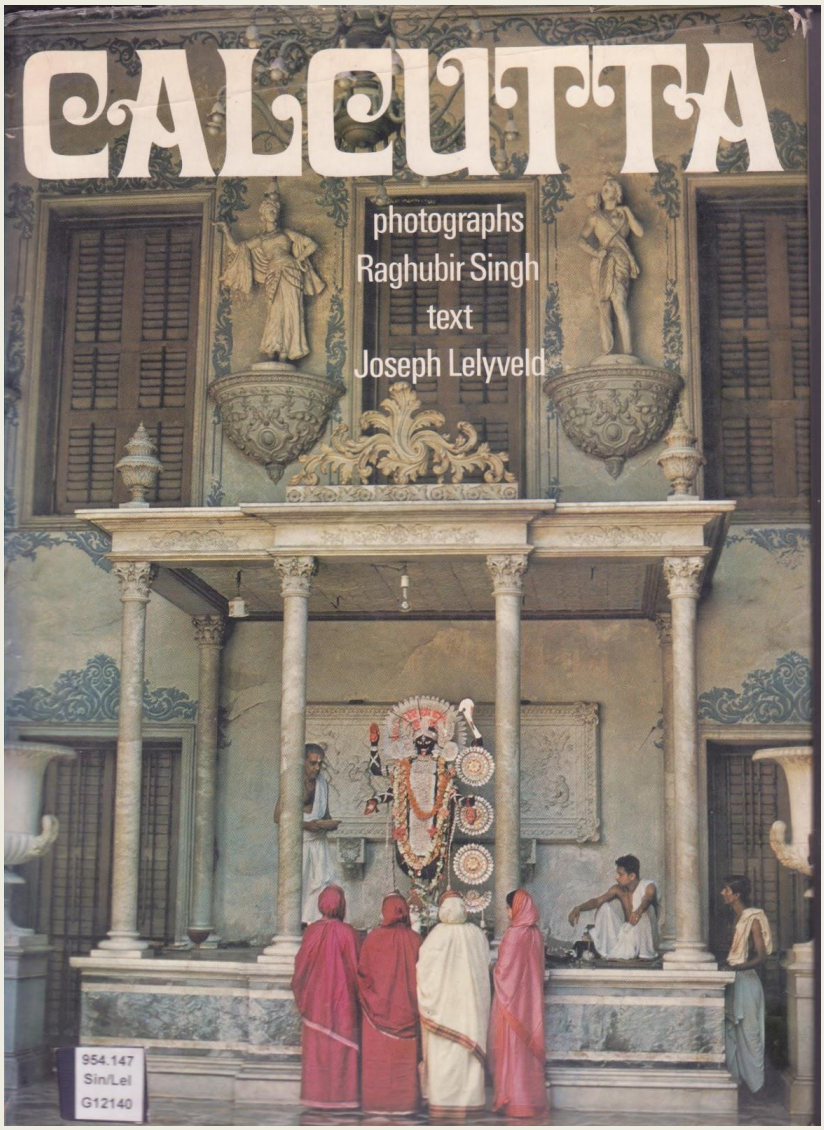
of what Singh took to be his cultural project.

[41] Ibid., p. 12.

[42] Ibid., p. 13. On Singh and the Bengal Renaissance, see Amit Chaudhuri, 'The Ambiguity of Decline and Renewal', in Mia Fineman, *Raghubir Singh: Modernism on the Ganges*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2017, pp. 58-71.

[43] An indication of this engagement is the essay on Hinduism by Yves Véquard that opens Cartier-Bresson's collection, *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India*, Thames and Hudson, London 1987. Jean-Pierre Montier provides a detailed account of the photographer's engagement with the East; *Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art*, Thames and Hudson, London 1996.

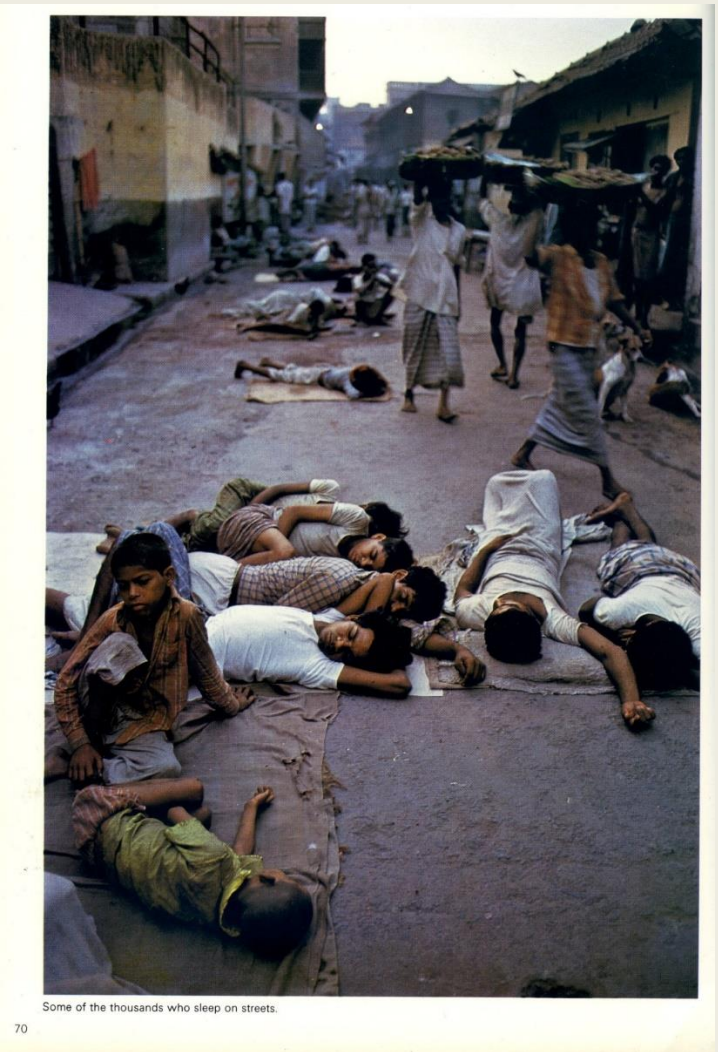
Singh says that Cartier-Bresson looked on Indians as individuals—indeed he was the first artist photographer to do so—and through the lens of humanism.[44] Singh takes up Cartier-Bresson's insistence on not interfering with the subject, a humanist focus on everyday life, and the significance of social performance and gesture as seen in finely ordered compositional arrangements.[45] Again, as in the divide of Ghirri from Evans, the crucial differentiation was colour. Through his work for *National Geographic*, Singh was supplied with Kodachrome, which was otherwise unobtainable in India due to the protectionist trade policies of the post-colonial governments, which were not abandoned until the 1990s.[46]



Raghubir Singh, *Calcutta*, 1975, cover

[44] Singh, *River of Colour*, p. 10.
[45] The photographer's famous statement on the coincidence of social and formal coherence is the essay, 'The Decisive Moment' (1952), in Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writing on Photography and Photographs*, Aperture, New York 1999, pp. 20-43.
[46] Mia Fineman, 'The Ganges Side of Modernism', in Fineman, *Raghubir Singh*, p. 21.

Singh's great skill with this film is seen in his early book on Calcutta, published in 1975. This book opens with a world-weary, impressionistic text by the journalist Joseph Lelyveld who notes that the city was founded by British traders in 1690 on a malarial swamp, and 'has been dying ever since'.[47] While noting its gridlocked traffic, catastrophic infrastructure, lack of schools and hospitals, and predatory government, the text does register the extraordinary past and current intellectual and political life of the city amid the poverty and decay.


Some of the thousands who sleep on streets.
70

Homeless people, from Singh, *Calcutta*, 1975

Despite what Singh says later about not dealing in the abject, he includes scenes of people living amid detritus and trash. The last part of the book, but for the final three images, is given over to cultural activities, both popular and elite, and includes portraits of painters Nirode Majumdar and Jamini Roy, and of Satyajit Ray at work. The three last images are of huge rallies, one of Muslims at prayer, and the others of a gathering for Indira Gandhi.

[47] Raghubir Singh, *Calcutta*, The Perennial Press, Hong Kong 1975, p. 12.

Singh, Stately house, Pathurighata, from *Calcutta*, 1975

In photographing statues of various leaders, mansions given over to the poor, and faded political icons, Singh's treatment of the city reflects some of its dichotomy: subdued tones predominate, there is much use of backlighting, little sunshine, and much griminess and dampness. This was one answer to Evans' charge of vulgarity and to Griffiths' strictures on arbitrary colour: choose subjects in which the colour range is limited, and use backlighting or subdued natural light to temper what is left. With an intimate knowledge of Kodachrome, Singh produced scenes with rich saturated local tones set against predominant backgrounds of greys and browns; all under natural light. In its account of the crisis-ridden city, the book interweaves decay, dirt and poverty with scenes of labour, skilled craft and religious practices; entropy against activity.

It is hard to overstate the ambition of Singh's photographic project, taken as a whole. He published thirteen photographic books on India, the first in 1974 and the last in 1999. As in the early book on Calcutta, they continually interweave contrasts of rich and poor, ancient and modern, elite and mass culture, diverse religious practices, labour and craft, political activity and its often tatty and disregarded propaganda, and above all life on the streets.

Photographically, Singh's remarkable achievement was to take the daunting standards of social and compositional coherence found in Cartier-Bresson and successfully render them in colour: to control an additional element that presented very difficult formal, technical and symbolic challenges. He did so across very complex figure compositions, at first through the suppression

of tones but then, as his work developed, in orchestrations of bright light and colour in scenes of unparalleled skill.

Singh, *Morning on Panchganga Ghat, Benares, Uttar Pradesh*, 1985.

India was of course an independent state for barely two decades before Singh first took up the camera. A vast, multitudinous and diverse nation, it was united by a democratic central government and divided by wealth and poverty, religion, language, culture and caste. Singh took it as his task to represent the nation to itself in a celebration of its very diversity, and in an impressive range of wanderings from state to state, and across routes laid out by rivers and highways. This was an explicitly Nehruvian vision to map the new nation in flux and formation with the implication that anyone—no matter what their status—could be included. In contrast to Ghirri who dealt with minor departures from a colonising commercial homogeneity, the protectionist Indian state offered vast variety and incident to set against an encroaching modernity.[48] Singh paid much attention to groups who were denigrated and threatened with exclusion from the national narrative and participation in democratic life—especially Dalits and Muslims. This was tailored to the new democracy, which was and remains very unusual because

[48] See Singh's statement about rendering this diversity in *River of Colour*, p. 10; Nehru's 1946 book, *The Discovery of India*, is cited as a model on p. 13. See also Alisha Sett, 'Learning to Read Raghubir Singh: Kodachromatic Iconopraxis in India', MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute, London 2018, p. 21.

of the political engagement of the masses, so that the poor outvote the rich, and the villages the cities.[49]

Singh, *A Family, Kamathipura, Bombay,* 1977

Such photography was for Singh an explicitly democratic act—committed to the Nehruvian vision of a synthesis of democracy, nationalism, modernisation, secular government and socialism, and to a path between the two Cold War blocs—to map and enact a national vision that would celebrate diversity. In his book on the Great Trunk Road, Singh writes that he looks upon the subjects with 'a democratic eye' that cuts monuments down to size and gives equal importance to people such as truck drivers, itinerant musicians and housewives in a weave that repeatedly moves from the monumental to the everyday and back again.[50]

[49] See Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, Verso, London 2013, pp. 110, 164.
[50] Raghubir Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road: A Passage Through India*, Andre Deutsch, London 1995, p. 7.

In that these are books of documentary photography, they partake of the imperial origins of the term, and address the same conundrum: in the 1930s John Grierson, the writer and film-maker who formulated the term 'documentary', believed that democracy was in crisis because of a lack of visual self-knowledge. In his work for the British Empire Marketing Board, he tried to get nation and empire to see themselves as a benign unity in which everyone had a place.[51] Singh set out to learn from a detailed study of the imperial photographers who traversed India, including Felice Beato, Samuel Bourne, John Murray and Linnaeus Tripe. In his work on the Grand Trunk Road that traverses the subcontinent, he moved at their pace and in their tracks, and sometimes photographed from the same spots.[52]

Singh first made his living as a photojournalist for the major illustrated magazines, and was formed by the narrative photo-essay that they carried. Like other photojournalists, when they came to assemble their images into books, he multiplied discrete picture-stories into a larger whole.[53] For Singh, the book became his primary way of working because it could contain a highly complex essayistic form, over which he had complete control.[54] But what is this essay form? Adorno laid it out in a complex and dialectical meditation that views the essay as suspended between the systematic forms of science (of methodical, foundational thought) and the irrational heights of art. The essay, says Adorno, is a local opinion piece, both artful and open to evidence, but viewed with utmost suspicion by both art and science. This suspicion is partly to do with the essay's serendipitous nature, in which error is a constant risk; lacking the systematic foundations of knowledge, it playfully explores its subject, and what it chances upon is down to luck as well as judgement. Unlike the pure playfulness of art, it delves beneath the surface, and is bound by a view of what the world is. Although it is necessarily partial, the essay can critique an entire system—and indeed that critique emerges from its fragmentary nature.[55]

Furthermore, some of what Adorno claims seems particularly suited to the essayistic photo-book, although it was a form of which he never directly wrote about, and it also has an affinity with Blake Stimson's analysis of the photo-essay as lying between scientific description and Hollywood fantasy.[56] Adorno writes of the primacy of experience—in its details and texture, the density of which determines the fruitfulness of the essay—which is interweaved like a carpet, yielding a thought which is as complex as its object.[57] Singh's books, which interlace complex contrasts across their image sequences, and usually contain parallel texts of some literary quality which lay out an impression of the places and circumstances in which the photographs were

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[51] John Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary' (1932-4), in Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary*, Collins, London 1946, p. 80.
[52] Singh, *The Grand Trunk Road*, p. 4.
[53] One exemplar here is Philip Jones Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, Collier Books, New York 1971, which takes discrete photo-stories and places them in a larger narrative frame.
[54] See the conversation with VS Naipual, in Raghubir Singh, *Bombay: Gateway of India*, The Perennial Press, Bombay 1994, p. 8.
[55] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form' (1954-8), in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, vol. I, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, pp. 4-9.
[56] Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2006, Introduction. There are also affinities with the essay film: see Nora M. Alter, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*, Columbia University Press, New York 2018, pp. 12-27.
[57] Adorno, 'The Essay', pp. 13, 15.

taken, play up detail and texture over concerted analysis, and leave the reader much room for interpretation.

Raghubir Singh, *Pavement Mirror Shop, Howrah, West Bengal*, 1991

Like many photojournalists, Singh was affected by the decline of the illustrated magazines, and in the 1980s moved away from photojournalism towards gallery showing and more expansive books such as *River of Colour*, no longer fixed on a particular locale. It is not coincidental that this move took place as India's economy was being deregulated, both being diverse products of the same neoliberal turn. Singh's work came into more explicit dialogue with museum photography, cultivating multilayered, puzzle-like spaces, and the frequent use of reflection.[58]

This was accompanied by more informal compositional arrangements, and above all by the use of flash, which transformed colour with its strong frontal lighting, reaching into dark areas, abolishing shadow, and intrusively peering under the veils worn by Muslim women. Flash also broke open the unity of the scene under natural light, cutting out those illuminated against darker backgrounds, sometimes with an effect that approaches photomontage.[59] By using flash, Singh took on a more interventionist position in which many subjects became more aware of his presence, as can occasionally be seen in their reactions.

[58] See Mia Fineman, 'The Ganges Side of Modernism', in Fineman, *Raghubir Singh*, pp. 30, 34-5.
[59] See, for instance, Singh, *Bombay*, p. 57.

Singh, *Cartpullers, Bombay*, 1989

Singh remained a complex photographer, and the new techniques did not replace but overlaid the old. Even so, it may be tempting to read the fragmented spaces of this new mode as a radical disorientation in the new setting, and even as disillusionment with the pace of change. We may think of Tagore's regular disappointments when Western liberal values clashed with imperial material interests, always to the victory of the latter. Towards the end of his life Tagore lost faith that any positive influence would issue from Europe, and he wrote that when the British had to give up their Indian Empire, when 'the stream of their two centuries' administration runs dry at last, what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them!'[60] But Singh was in fact content with the development of his own synthetic view: in a conversation with VS Naipaul, he says that in his work since the late 1980s he had moved towards a more self-conscious project to grasp a visual and emotional relationship to India.[61] This was indeed to cultivate reflections and ambiguity alike in the 'contemporary and mysterious' element of glass, to put a stress on incongruity and even add a dose of surrealism.[62] His work remained optimistic, and even in photographing India's worst slum, the Dharavi in Bombay, as his flash illuminated the dark interiors, he saw in at least one inhabitant's look a suggestion of 'things to come'.[63]

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[60] Tagore, *Crisis in Civilization* (1941); quoted in Krishna Dutta/ Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, Bloomsbury, London 1995, p. 364.
[61] Singh, *Bombay*, p. 5. He says that this development is evident in his previous two or three books, i.e. *Banares* (1987), *Calcutta* (1988) and *The Ganges* (1992).
[62] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[63] Ibid., pp. 9, 109.

Singh, *Slum Dweller, Dharavi, Bombay*, 1990

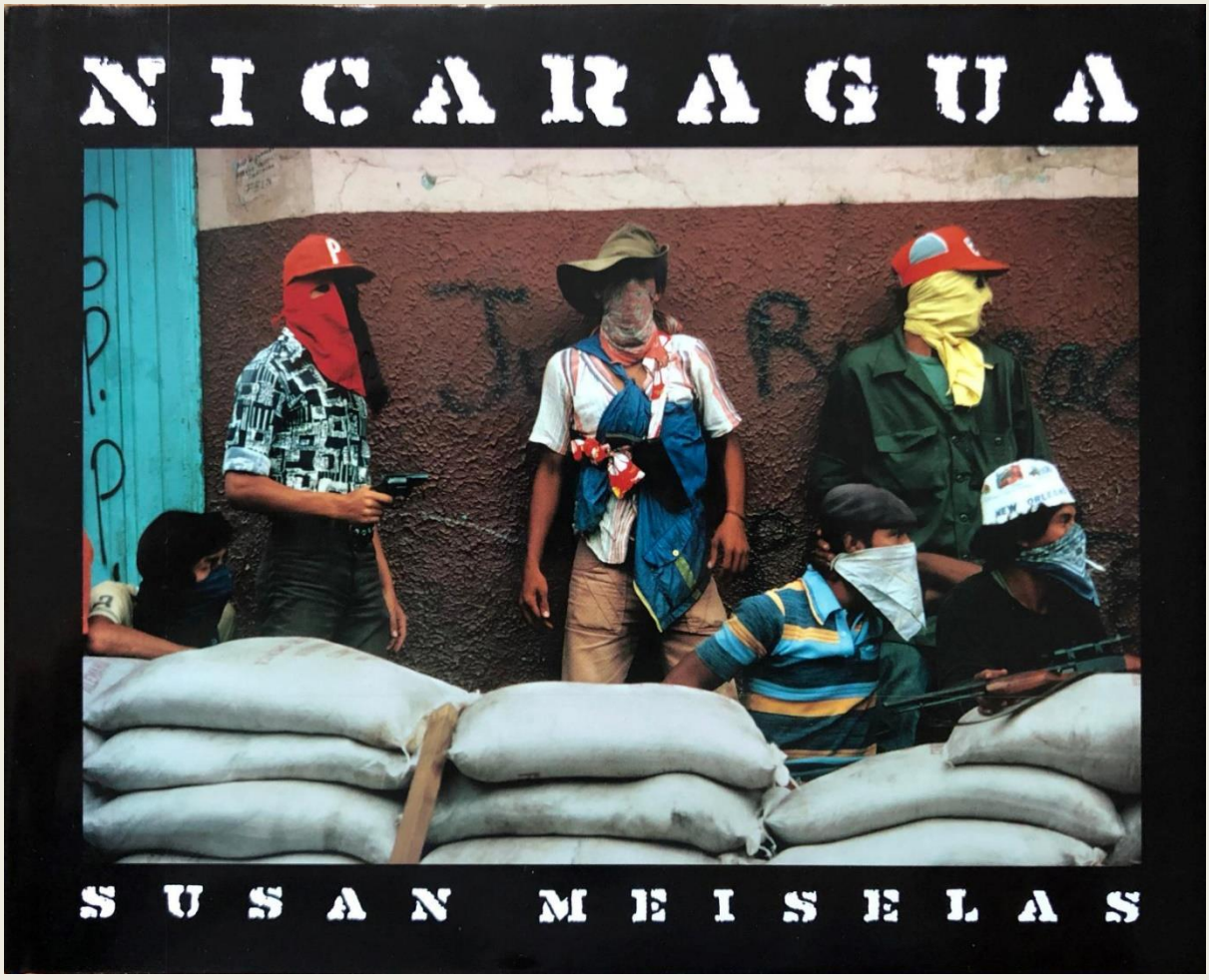
Those things were not, perhaps, what he had anticipated. Economic liberalisation coincided with the long rise of Hindutva. The demolition of the historic mosque, Babri Masjid in 1992 was a harbinger of the deadly identity politics that was to come. Privatisation and the deregulation of trade, pioneered by the Congress Party in the early 1990s, were taken up by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when it came to power in 2014, as it yoked an antagonistic nationalism with neoliberal policies (in a common configuration, shared by Reagan and Thatcher, among others).[64] Singh made two books on Calcutta (published in 1975 and 1988) and both end with views of the same political gathering—a vast rally addressed by Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of Bangladeshi independence, and of a compact between nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism; by the time the second book was issued, both had been assassinated.[65]

If the Congress Party's array of attachments was an unstable one—and foundered in corruption, authoritarianism, sluggish economic growth, and its mere lip-service to socialism—this is reflected in the paradoxical fate of Singh's work: as Alisha Sett recounts, his mapping project through photo-books had little exposure in India and among its subjects, despite Singh's active efforts and generosity in giving books to friends and acquaintances. Outside of Bombay cultural

[64] On the parallels between Hindutva politics and neoliberalism, see Arundhati Roy, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, Hamish Hamilton, London 2009, pp. 34-5, 38.
[65] Singh, *Calcutta*, 1975, pp. 124-7; Raghubir Singh, *Calcutta: The Home and the Street*, Thames and Hudson, London 1988, fig. 95.

elites, who displayed Singh's books on their coffee tables, these finely printed full-colour volumes were priced beyond the reach of even middle-class Indians, and marketed to tourists and those outside the country.[66] The Tagorean synthesis was missing half of its mixture.

Susan Meiselas



In the United States, Susan Meiselas' 1981 book on the Nicaraguan revolution, in which the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FLSN) ended the long reign of the Somoza dictatorship, appeared, like the event itself, as something inconceivable within conventional frames of thought. The look of the young, brightly clad rebels, seen in full colour, was as surprising as their very existence.[67]

[66] Sett, 'Learning to Read Raghubir Singh', pp. 14-15. This dissertation also contains a fine reading of political and religious colour symbolism in Singh's work.
[67] Both the revolution and the book may be thought of as 'events' in Badiou's terms. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An*

Susan Meiselas, *President Anastasio Somoza Debayle opening new session of the National Congress*, June 1978

Dedicated to the act of memory, *Nicaragua, June 1978-July 1979* has a clear and unusual structure.[68] It opens with a tripartite image section—The Somoza Regime, Insurrection, The Final Offensive—in which the images bear only numbers which refer to captions at the back of the book. While most images are seen in juxtaposition across each double-page spread, key images are marked by their isolation against a blank page: for example, the famous image of a corpse dumped on a hillside, or the Somoza regime on display in full dress uniform. In the latter, colour is a clear signifier—the clean white clothing, in the light what is seen in the rest of the book, becomes an ironic gesture of purity and elite distinction, and is matched against the bright colours of the rebels' dress. White is here the colour of death, just as it was in El Salvador when Meiselas photographed, at great personal risk, white hand prints on a red door—the mark of the death squads.

This is followed by a text section comprising quotations, captions and a detailed chronology of the long conflict with the Somoza regime. The diverse collage of quotes includes resistance texts from the FSLN going back to the 1970s, texts from state sources, churches, opposing parties, ordinary people, resistance activists and fighters (many since killed), offering detailed information about the regime and the tactics of the opposition. Captions and the quotations are skilfully assembled so that they speak to one another. For instance, in the opening image section on labour, the captions are set against US Agency for International Development's statistics on

Essay on the Understanding of Evil, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London 2001.

[68] Susan Meiselas, *Nicaragua, June 1978-July 1979*, Pantheon Books, New York 1981, epigraph, n.p.

Nicaragua, showing the lamentable condition of its education, health and infrastructure; and the caption for the image of the Somoza regime in their pomp is set against an absurdly long list of the dictator's titles and supposed accomplishments.

Meiselas, Returning home, Masaya. September, 1978

Why use colour? Meiselas says that she was not pressured to do so by editors, and that for her colour did a better job of describing what she was seeing, particularly the 'vibrancy and optimism of the opposition' and the 'physical feel of the place'.[69] The book contains much play on the contrast between rebel dress and the often dowdy environments in which they live and fight. The opening image of the main sequence shows a pig wandering around in heavy rain down a drab rural street of makeshift buildings; the last image shows the painting on a Managua wall of revolutionary propaganda, set against a blue sky.

Initially, *Nicaragua* had a rough reception: this was partly because photojournalism itself was out of intellectual fashion, and because Meiselas, an American citizen, was both an outsider to Nicaragua and a member of the renowned photographic agency, Magnum. Yet it was her use of colour that was held up to particular critique. Andy Grundberg was plainly disturbed by the beauty of Meiselas' colour renditions of terrible subjects, and by what he took to be a tension between her photographic rhetoric of objectivity (in the use of middle-distance views) and her

[69] See Kirsten Lubben, 'An Interview with Susan Meiselas', in Kristen Lubben, ed., *Susan Meiselas: In History*, International Center of Photography, New York / Steidl, Göttingen 2008, p. 116.

support of the revolution. He also thought that the photographs failed to impart information, being 'completely ambiguous'.[70]

Meiselas, Street Fighter, Managua, 1979

Martha Rosler, in a detailed and astringent review, argued that the general public need the principles of realism to convince them of photographic truth, and that Meiselas' work contained 'disturbing qualities' that had an anti-realist effect.[71] The book looked liked an art catalogue, and the appearance of the revolutionaries, who dress like ordinary youth in the US, and are seen in the colours of tourist photos, raise troubling questions: are they really like us or are they imposters?[72] The use of colour brings the images close to photographic trends from which Meiselas is far separated, including 'fashion bizarrerie and color fantasia'.[73] This is made worse, Rosler argues, by the unreadable character of many of the images, the unfathomable nature of the movements and gestures which they capture, which may the result of posturing for the camera, and carries with it an undertow of sexualisation and even carnival. Lacking concrete

[70] Andy Grundberg, 'The Foreign and the Fabulous', in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989*, Aperture, New York 1990, pp. 181-2. This essay was first published in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1981.
[71] Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2004, p. 246. This review was first published in *In These Times* in June 1981.
[72] Rosler, *Decoys*, pp. 249-50. Similar issues are raised today by the use of phone cameras and digital filters to photograph contemporary conflict. See my account of the work of Michael Christopher Brown in *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2020, pp. 259-60.
[73] Ibid., p. 250.

political analysis, the book operates on a fantasy moral plane, 'anointed by the blood of the innocent.[74]

Meiselas, *Awaiting counterattack by the Guard in Matagalpa*, n.d.

Part of the problem was indeed context: William Eggleston's landmark show at MoMA was fresh in many people's memory, and had offered a vision of colour as exaggerated, over-heated, sexualised and steeped in a suspect Southern nostalgia.[75] Even so, Rosler's typically incisive comments set high demands for any photographic book: that it should take in view its place in the culture of anomic street photography and fashion images, without much idea that it could be changed; and that it engage in a Gramscian analysis of the forces at play in the revolutionary conjuncture. I can think of no book of photojournalism that contains such an analysis, which is (unfortunately) rare enough in journalism as a whole.

[74] Ibid., pp. 252-3. Both revised their opinions later; Grundberg saying that the unsettling nature of the colour—as if the aesthetic of Eggleston had been taken to war—unmoored them from established photojournalism and made the revolution seem 'complicated and ineffable'; and Rosler coming to admire Meielas's commitment and modesty. See Grundberg, 'The "New Photojournalism" and the Old', in *Crisis of the Real*, p. 186. This essay was first published in the *New York Times* in 1987; Rosler, *Decoys*, pp. 245-6.

[75] *Photographs by William Eggleston*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, May-August 1976. This show of colour photography took on great significance because, unlike earlier exhibitions, it had a finely printed catalogue.

Meiselas, Traditional indigeneous dance mask from the town of Monimbo used by the rebels to conceal their identity, 1978

Meiselas herself stressed the radical unknowability of the situation with which, as an outsider, she was particularly afflicted. Even the FSLN had no idea that their victory was so near: the lack of any objective assessment of the situation was a product of a fast-moving conflict in which the media were hobbled, and fear was pervasive as death squads hunted down the opposition. Given this, there is another way of thinking about the troubling visual performance of the rebels as they were shown by Meiselas: it is indeed a performative response to the deeply uncertain circumstances of the insurgency, in which a new way of living, fighting, caring for and aiding others, and exhorting them to action, was in evolution. While it could not be unaffected by mass culture, as Diana Taylor points out, this is Brecht's *gestus*, the performance of an evolving

political hope.[76] It is the performative forging of a people and indeed a new state through action, in provisional and experimental forms.[77]

Meiselas has since talked insistently about what knowledge meant in that situation. Firstly, of course, much had to be concealed, out of fear, but also to deceive the regime: information, people's views, weapons and supplies, the rebels themselves, to the extent that Meiselas felt herself to be watching a mime that she could not interpret.[78] Secondly, she saw herself as gaining knowledge through experiment: for example, by walking down a street, trying to discover the most militant areas in a situation in which 'everything seemed secretive, unavailable, just tension and the heat.'[79] She speaks of a search for 'another kind of knowing, which is produced by sign-reading'.[80] She found that knowledge was eventually gained not through simple observation but through an engagement in which she abandoned journalistic objectivity to serve the rebels.[81]

Such knowledge was a riposte to the insistent lies of the regime: among the quotes gathered at the back of the book, there is this from a peasant meeting in Matagalpa in 1975:

> With lies they tried to make us lie.
>
> As if they did not know
>
> that the mouth was made to say
>
> the eyes to see…[82]

Meiselas saw her book as being of use in both the US and Nicaragua, in the former to collect scattered magazine images into a concerted view of the revolution, and in the latter to serve the new government, especially given that the censorship of the media and the school curriculum meant that most Nicaraguans knew little about their long history of resistance to US economic and political domination.[83]

To go back briefly to Adorno, we may think of *Nicaragua* as an essay book, composed of visual and textual fragments that do not seek to hide their nature as fragments, and which is open about its ambiguities and uncertainties, and about its author's commitment to a cause. It is a testing of a collective subject in formation, as guided by its own actions. Compared to the essay form, systematic, foundational thought, says Adorno, produces views that are generally friendlier to the status quo, particularly because such a logical order 'deceives us about the antagonistic nature of what that order is imposed upon'.[84]

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[76] Diana Taylor, 'Past Performing Future: Susan Meiselas' *Reframing History*', in Lubben, *Susan Meiselas*, p. 235.
[77] Much of the theory about the formation of assemblies, classes, and 'the people' are of relevance to this situation. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2015, and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London 2018.
[78] Susan Meiselas/ Mark Holborn, eds., *Susan Meiselas on the Frontline*, Thames & Hudson, London 2017, p. 67.
[79] Ibid., p. 64.
[80] Ibid., p. 65.
[81] Ibid., pp. 67, 73.
[82] Meiselas, *Nicaragua*, n.p.
[83] See Lubben, 'An Interview', p. 116; Meiselas/ Holborn, *Susan Meiselas*, p. 83. *Nicaragua* was also issued in Spanish, published by Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana in 1983.
[84] Adorno, 'The Essay', pp. 15-16.

Indeed, Meiselas' visual fragments sometimes take on a forensic character, as they speak to an uncertain whole, and may serve as evidence (as the corpse on the hillside photograph does of the activities of the death squads). Her later work, in assembling the history of an imagined nation state, Kurdistan, in building an archive of its photographic history, and in unearthing the graves of victims of Iraqi atrocities against the Kurds, made her turn to forensic knowledge more explicit.[85] Allan Sekula points up the dichotomy between the grand narratives of imagined nations (existing and putative), replete with myth, abstraction and their attendant dangers, and photography's salutary grounding in the particular, and its 'incapacity for abstraction'. Meiselas, Sekula continues:

> begins, not with images that already exist, that overwhelm us with familiarity and ennui, and can only be made strange by relentless categorization and repetition and the judicious suspension of normative sharpness, but with the sense that where bodies are buried in secret there must also be a buried archive […] waiting for resurrection. An archive but not an atlas: the point here is not to take the world upon one's shoulders but to crouch down in the earth, and dig.[86]

A modest form, then, geared to less heroic times.

Regarding Nicaragua, Meiselas has made further well-known works in which she takes her images back to the places in which she photographed, revisiting her subjects, and photographing and filming the results.[87] As with the original book, this is to stimulate memories, and to learn from the changing context: as Meiselas says, the image is only a starting point which must be woven into 'something more' in an ongoing dialogue to widen the personal story into a national or cultural history.[88] In this way, her images may serve as 'souvenirs or landmarks' in a situation threatened with forgetting.[89] On her return ten years after the revolution, Meiselas was discouraged to see that social conditions had not improved under the Sandinista government, which remained under trade embargo and continuous attack by US-funded terrorists to produce that very result. A wider regional recession made matters worse.

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[85] Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, second edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008; the reference to the imagined nation is of course to Benedict Anderson's famous book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1991.
[86] Allan Sekula, 'Photography and the Limits of National Identity', in Lubben, *Susan Meiselas*, p. 343-4.
[87] Meiselas made the films *Pictures from a Revolution*, 1991, and *Reframing History*, 2004.
[88] Meiselas/ Holborn, *Susan Meiselas*, p. 16.
[89] Ibid., p. 96.

Meiselas, *Reframing History*, Nicaragua, 2004

Even so, the FSLN programme placed stress on education and the development of a national culture from which neo-colonial influences had been rooted out.[90] This led to a remarkable programme of mural-making in which a few of Meiselas' most famous images came to play a part, being altered and reproduced in elaborate compositions and series.[91] In an often repeated association, the forces of repression were also those that repressed memory: when, under the threat of continuing war and blockade, the FLSN lost power in the 1990 election, the new government marked the break with the revolutionary past by systematically destroying the murals.

Conclusion

One view of these projects, as tied to their political circumstances, is that they all ended in failure: Luigi Ghirri provided a flimsy prop against an ever-increasing deluge of consumer imagery and environmental despoliation producing a nation in thrall to television which, under Berlusconi, enthusiastically embraced a hedonistic consumerism; Raghubir Singh's secular nation is no more, and the advance of neoliberalism is matched with the inflammatory fundamentalist populism of Narendra Modi; the revolution documented by Susan Meiselas' was brought to its

[90] Carlos Fonseca, 'The Historic Program of the FSLN', in Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *New International: The Rise and Fall of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, no. 9, 1994, p. 133.
[91] See David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995. For an example of the quoting of a Meiselas photograph, see fig. 75b.

knees in just over a decade, and as we have seen its memory was erased by the incoming regime. While the FSLN has since come back to power, it has had to bow to neoliberal 'realities'.

Another view would, however, look to the models of documentary knowledge that each of these photographers represented, bound by humanism and colour, and their life in the present. All three have substantial reputations in the art world and beyond; and their practices have much to say about how different forms of photographic knowledge—analytic, synthetic and experimental—are geared to the circumstances which they described. In Stokes' modernist defence of colour, as we have seen, there was the association of humanism and surface colour as intimating a knowledge of the depths, in an effect that could be likened to an illuminated photographic transparency. The light that emanates from photographic renditions now mostly does so through screens, and their colours are entirely manipulable. Yet, despite the pall one might expect this to cast over photographic knowledge, colour has become expected in documentary photography, and it is now the choice of black and white that has to justify itself. In a reconfigured multi-polar world, the use of colour is often linked to a renewed and globalising humanism, which labours to find forms of visual connection to speak across the divides of nation, race, religion, class and culture.