

I.

IMAGE AS A COMIC SPECTER

The cult Hindi film of 1983 *Jaane Bhi do Yaaro (Take it Easy, Friends)* made by Kundan Shah introduced a generation growing up in the 80s to the instability of the image.

The Asian Games in Delhi in 1982 saw many flyovers and stadia built everywhere, and there was a sense that some people were accessing and amassing vast amounts of wealth through these building contracts and were gaming the procedure of procurement. This was an old narrative but it gathered tremendous force in the decades following the games. The convulsions leading to the violent killings of thousands of Sikhs in 1984 following the assassination of the in-office Prime Minister did nothing to displace feelings of unfair power, rising wealth, and the rigging of processes.

In this period, photographic images gathered a new urgency. Copies became easier to produce and found newer performative sites and agents. Cheap printing technologies—the Noritsu Quick Service System—QSS—photo printers and Hot Shot point-and-shoot cameras, as well as early VHS video cameras and players—meant that pictures were entering lived experience in unaccustomed ways, and millions of people collected records of the intimacies of domesticity, along with the staged anonymity of public space and occasion. And along with this came the urgency of the photographic as a document, meant to be mobilized in the argumentation of the affairs of the present. The documentary film too made the image enter the post-mortem of the social, even as it sought to transform it. It chased the event, catching trails, at times in unrehearsed and other times in predictable ways. It is a story familiar to many places.

With this new presence—forceful, intimate, and antagonistic—photographs were beginning to be invoked for their potential to disrupt the flux of the real by inserting dimensions hitherto not encountered. Scandal, scam, tragedy, disaster, riot or accident: every ‘event’ had a photograph from which the scale, contours, and actants of the ‘happening’ could be constructed. This was the

power of ‘facticity’ that became available to the photograph in public life.

Within this milieu, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* rode the twists and turns of a plot-line centered around an absurd life of the image; it featured hijinks and capers involving mix-ups, misadventures, red-herrings and co-incidences to do with an eccentric constellation of elements, all connecting to an image. These elements encompassed a missing, and then photographed, then purloined and dressed-up cadaver of a municipal commissioner, a murderous building contractor mafia don on the prowl with a revolver, a blackmailing editor, and two photographers who have somehow managed to take the photograph of a murder—an event that no one should have witnessed—while taking pictures for a photography competition.

While doing all this, we propose that the film introduces a very specific idea: that a photograph is always available and remains as a spectral haunting attached to events, even without ever being seen. The status of the event is irrelevant—it could be a deal, a crime, or a catastrophe. The photograph stays as a clue to the “event-shaped hole” that marks the patchwork of daily life, of both power and counter-power, as well as the inertial.

In a picture an excess of the real strays. It acts as a clue to the not-in-view, or deliberately occluded, surfaces of reality. A picture can then be read as an encoded surface always open to decipherment, or comparison. The ‘role’ assigned to the photograph gives it a performative status as ‘evidence’ in a contest of truth claims. The image function could prove or disprove, and is thus to be called into the arena for disputation.

All those years ago we laughed at the misadventures produced by the spectral tension of the image. Its transactional potency felt comic even as it was enveloping us all.

II.

IMAGE AS A DELIRIOUS ORGAN

The ‘new image,’ the contemporary image, need no longer be a trace of an optical incident. We have entered a world of imagery where pictures can be made simply by recombining pixels from an ever-expanding database of visual information, or of information that can be rendered visually. These pictures may or may not refer to objective realities. Or they may refer to them so obliquely, by sampling, so much so that they may constitute entirely new ‘realities.’ The apparatus that produces them does not act any

longer like a machine that switches on and off by closing the shutter. Instead, it works more like an organ which does not have an 'off' position. The image making and processing capacity happen continuously, just as respiration, or digestion does. The new image machines breathe, digest, dream and excrete pictures, they don't just 'take' them.

A picture need not even 'reveal' an event. It may in fact produce it. If in earlier times, there could be no picture without its event, we can say now that there may not be an event without its picture. Now it is the 'non-event' that has no picture attached to it.

III.

IMAGE AS AN ONEIRIC OBJECT

In the untouched laboratory of the 19th century eugenicist and statistician Francis Galton, in the University College of London, there is a box full of faces. These faces are photographic composites, made by superimposing hundreds of photographs of faces of people. Galton, being interested as he was in 'deviations' from a statistical average of humankind, collected photographic portraits of criminals, the insane, thieves, prostitutes, Jews—anyone he could classify as 'deviant' in the London of his time. Galton was surprised at how "angelic" the countenances that the composites produced were. To him, the individual faces in his collections were exemplars of what he thought was ugliness, but melded together as composites they looked dreamy, other-worldly. The photographic composites that Galton produced disturbed his taxonomy between normality and deviance, and his search for the statistically meaningful face of the average 'insane man' had to yield to the beautiful irony of the visage of angelic madness, seen as if in a dream.

It is said that the faces of the strangers we see in dreams are built out of the elements of the faces of the anonymous crowds and people whom we pass by each day, or whose images we may see in different media. Our 'dream strangers' come to us as composites, stitched together from fragments ensconced in the nooks and corners of our memories.

But we are not the only beings dreaming.

Two years ago, an artificial intelligence algorithm called XDREAM was hooked to neurons involved in visual processing and the recall and recognition of images in Ringo's brain. It was taught to mimic the processes that were already taking place within Ringo, who happens to be a monkey. Gradually, the

algorithm learnt to “see” what Ringo’s brain was imaging. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the algorithm taught itself to peer into Ringo’s daydreams. The elements of these images were somewhat surreal, but constituted recognizable resemblances to the faces of other monkeys, Ringo’s neighbors in the lab. In a few days, the algorithm saw something that looked like the face of a woman who looked after the monkeys. Each of these ‘faces’ had distortions; they had pronounced exaggerations, as if they were the faces of beings that had metamorphosed into monsters. Is this how we learn to recognize, to see, ghosts, demons, monsters, angels, unicorns, and all manner of unknown forms of life. They live, and exist, in our nervous system more vividly than they ever can in reality.

IV.

UNSEEN (DECOMPOSING) IMAGES

A question that has more presence now with the rise of archive fever, and with the fragility and redundancy of data storage is, where do images go? What happens to them after they have been seen, or before they are remembered?

Questions on the afterlife of images are enquiries into the residues, shreds, stains, granules, and patches that may be buried inside many surfaces of holdings. It is at this juncture that the “performative and discursive act” of a person, or a scholar, or an artist, or an enthusiast traces back to life—in a momentary way—the glance of memory, or crime; a suggestive incision or detour into what a photograph could generate.

Or is the question of afterlife giving way to a new state of a decomposed life of the image? When over 400 million photographs are uploaded on just two social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) per day, it is a scale that is not possible to comprehend with known formats of retention.

Here we are still within the perennially unseen of the momentarily-seen images. A subjective eye has punctuated images into social circuits. An image has had a few hours of travel, and then it has become inertial. There remains a universe within a universe of ‘unseen images’—the images in hard drives of millions of machines currently at work are being recorded without an eye. They will probably rest without an eye ever seeing them.

A whole new set of idols, monsters, portraits and landscapes lie hidden under the still waters of the “event-shaped hole” of the new image. Images haunt our dreams, and the dreams of the machines

that are our new companions. They disturb our earlier stable sense of what is 'true,' and how truth could be investigated. What myths, what stories, what philosophies these shadows flickering on the new walls of the screens will engender is something that only time will tell.

V.

IMAGE, FLOODED AND YET MEAGER,
WITH CULPABILITY OR AS CONSPIRACY?

Back in Delhi, now it's end-February 2020. North East Delhi has been wracked by a series of violent attacks by in-power majoritarian politicians and their followers on neighborhoods with high Muslim populations. These attacks had the backing of the state to quell a popular, non-violent, civil disobedience movement led by Muslim women of four generations, who had been protesting against new discriminatory changes to the citizenship law in India.

The people who perpetrated these attacks documented themselves and made their pictures viral on social media channels. This in turn acted as an incentive towards further messaging to mobilize. In these images, we can see armed men attacking helpless victims, and exulting in their attacks.

These phone camera recordings have not been permitted into the realm of evidence by the police. On the other hand, the police have typed literally volumes of text in charge-sheets against those who had actually faced the brunt of the attacks. The police have scant material evidence to support their claim. There are no recordings, there is no CCTV footage, there are no photographs of the prosecuted people doing anything incendiary.

It is the 'absence' of images that is being argued to bolster the claim that a conspiracy was in place. The argument goes, that if there is no photograph, that absence is an evidence of a conscious will to conspire.

Note:

In the Casebook (2014, AGYU Canada), Raqs presented the concept of “Event-shaped Hole”:

A photograph is an image of an event-shaped-hole, and as witnesses to such perforations we could begin to act like protagonists in a Scandinavian crime thriller, building up layers of forensic interpretation on to the cavity of the event in order to transform the event-shaped-hole into a rich account of making and unmaking of ways and forms of living. Usually we find a propositional cavity inside a document or a photograph or a report, an event-shaped-hole, that needed filling in.

RAQSMEDIA COLLECTIVE was formed in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. The word “raqs” in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling, turning, being in a state of revolution. Raqs Media Collective takes this sense to mean ‘kinetic contemplation’ and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world, and with time. Raqs practices across several media; making installation, sculpture, video, performance, text, lexica, and curation. Their work finds them at the intersection of contemporary art, philosophical speculation and historical enquiry. Their work has been shown internationally, and they have curated a number of exhibitions. Most recently, they were the Artistic Directors of “Afterglow”, the recently concluded Yokohama Triennale 2020.