The colonial backdrop
Arjun Appadurai
Copyright: COPYRIGHT 1997 Visual Studies Workshop
http://www.vsw.org/ai/
Abstract:

Colonial photographic backdrops reflect the conflict between photographic modernity and cultural fidelity. The backdrops serve as signs that show tensions and contradictions accompanying the dissemination of photography in space and time. The backdrop spurs realism and also deception through the pose. Visual decolonization and medium containment are other common themes of backdrops.

Full Text:

BACKCHAT

As sites for the production of various cultural imaginaries, colonial photographic backdrops testify to the struggle between photographic modernity and the various cultural environments into which it enters. These backdrops are a sort of "supplement" (following the usage of Jacques Derrida) in which we can read the tensions and contradictions that accompany the dissemination of photographic practice in space and time. As a quintessentially modern technique of representation, photography invites its own subversion, exemplified in the playfulness, pastiche, irony and stylized distortions of backdrops and other props. Backdrops can be interpreted as sites of epistemological uncertainty about exactly what photographs seek to represent.

RESISTING THE REAL

While the association of photography with some sort of realism is a widely noted part of its history, and the continuity between early photography and various painterly traditions has also been studied, the place of backdrops in relation to this realist impulse has yet to be closely examined. Photography in nineteenth-century Europe, as well as in the European colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allowed all sorts of "native" subjects to be placed under the imperial gaze and to be collected for a realist ethnography. This realism was generally civilizing at "home," and "orientalizing" in the colonies.

Colonial photographic practices, at least where human subjects were involved, allowed the documentary realism of the token (the particular person or group being photographed) to be absorbed into the fiction of the general "type," most often an ethnological type. The original captions for many nineteenth-century photographs capture this ambivalence in the choice of a definite article before the noun when referring to the subject of the photograph (Indian water-carrier; the Oriental harem; a Civil War Soldier). In this sense, original captions are part of the photo backdrop (which can itself be understood as a component of the overall context of the photograph). Despite the fact that the settings are themselves highly distinctive, these images effectively "typicalize" the subject, even as they represent individuals more realistically. Thus, early colonial photography contains, from the start, an ambivalence about its documentary authority, since it simultaneously seeks to capture individual subjects both as tokens and as types.

Colonial backdrops constitute a peculiar counter-context to the context of photographic practice in these settings. By this I mean that there is frequently a hidden contest between the overt localization of photographic subjects in colonial photography (in scenes such as bazaars, courts, palaces and the like) and the implicit function of these photographs, which is to provide a realistic ethnology of colonial social, cultural and somatic types. This ethnological contextualization of "natives" is behind the imperial eye of the photographer, and whether or not the purpose of a particular photograph is scientific or official, the point of view is decidedly classificatory, taxonomic, penal and somatic. The evidence for this argument from nineteenth-century British photography in India is considerable. The point here is that all colonial photography is in some sense part of a project of archiving and documentation, whether the eye of the particular photographer is part of the gaze of curiosity, of horror, of conversion or of criminology.

In places like India, where official photography gave way to studio photography, which is now giving way to freelance, mobile photography, there was a gradual effort to "singularize" the photographic subject by neutralizing the backdrop. The neutralization or virtual elimination of photo backdrops in some photographic styles does not, of course, mean a straightforward victory for realism, individualism and documentary verite. Body styles and postures, clothing and facial expression, positioning and eye-contact with the lens, all retain culturally stylized components (even if these change over
time). Through such elements, photographic subjects (especially when they are posed) signal their affiliation with social types and contexts as much as with their singular identities as persons, or members of families or other collectivities.

THE IDEA OF THE POSE

The word "pose," with its double implications of posture as deception and posture as stance, provides an interesting additional key to understanding the ways in which photo backdrops constitute a culturally variable counter-realism. If photo backdrops are seen as part of the pose into which the photographic subject is positioned (whether by his or her choice or not), then they can no longer be regarded merely as backdrops, but rather must be considered as deliberately defined elements of the overall context of the photographed subject. Such contexts can themselves be relatively unusual or singular ("unique") in any given cultural and historical situation, or they can be semiotically standardized: for example, natural settings often imply conjugality and romance; palace settings suggest status aspirations; telephones and cars signal technological modernity.

As critical elements of context, photo backdrops, as well as the photographic events that are mobilized before them, clearly have magical, associative qualities. In this sense, backdrops serve not just as "icons" (allegories of wealth, status, romance, respectability, modernity, etc.) for the photographic subject, but they are, in practice, indexical of these realities. This is especially true not when subjects have a great deal of choice about how and where they are photographed, but when they are positioned by the photographer within some staged setting. The best examples of the tyranny of the setting, and its official indexicality, are official forms and documents in which the written text functions as the "backdrop" against which cropped head-shots take up a small space. In such cases, it is very hard to tell whether the text or the photograph is the backdrop. The vagaries of scale, the lack of an internal backdrop in the photograph of the human subject, the sobriety and realism of the written text, create a context that more or less imprisons the subject of the photograph. All official photography (passports, mug-shots, driver's licenses, etc.) has this incarcerating quality in which the realism of the photograph is vastly overwhelmed by the framing or accompanying text. In such photographs, it is the "singularity" of the individual that is the crucial goal, but it is accomplished not through any sort of spontaneous documentary technique, but rather through photographs that are like fingerprints. Such photographs might be called "face prints," and their written backdrops are, in fact, foregrounds.

Some element of this coercive, official surveillance and archiving component is present in all posed photography, especially in photography that takes place in studios or in other public settings (amusement parks, tourist sites, fairs and street festivals). In all these settings, although the element of coercion may be offset by ludic and leisure registers of experience, subjects still have only a limited choice about backdrops and must comply with the ideas of humor, irony or play that are given to them. Posing in these ludic settings, of course, does allow for resistance to the realist pretensions of photography, by distorting or escaping quotidian contexts and predicaments (posing behind a cardboard Cadillac cut-out, for example). Once again, props and backdrops do allow for the documentary claims of photography to be resisted or suspended, if only within very limited parameters, in the interests of foregrounding something else, usually something that is a lampoon of modernity.

THE SUBALTERN BACKDROP

The backdrop resists, subverts or parodies the realist claims of photography in various ways. This can better be appreciated if we widen our view of backdrops beyond what is found in paintings, stage props and other material elements of a "scene" to include the human subjects found in photographs. In many traditions of posed photography it is possible to identify a dominant subject, usually a senior male of some sort. Depending on whether the picture is of a couple or a family, or of a royal scene or an official encounter, such photos usually deploy women, children, servants and other dependents as animate elements of the photo backdrop.

In colonial and neo-colonial settings it is easy to read the language of social hierarchy in the visual composition of photographs. Of course, this aspect of photographs has much in common with earlier traditions of visual representation, notably in painting. But, with photographic posing, especially in the early stages of colonial studio photography, there is a curious loss of an earlier sense of scenic action and human agency and a shift to poses that are consciously static, induced and controlled by the technical requirements of the photograph. Thus, if you consider such pre-photographic traditions as those of Mughal miniature paintings in India (and their many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century derivatives), they frequently capture motion (sexual intercourse, hunting, travelling, warfare). The actors in these paintings are, without doubt, represented as agents. They are, in this sense, frozen, but not posed. In early studio photography, by contrast, especially in colonies such as India, the pose is inherently fixed and immobile. The visual covenant between photographer and subject, and the deliberate elimination of all semblance of motion (partly dictated by the technical
needs of earlier photographic equipment), make for a deliberate conspiracy of pose and posture in which bodily and facial fixity and complete determinacy in the relative position of bodies are central to the technical and aesthetic requirements of the photographic event.

This fixity eliminates earlier conventions used to indicate relative rank and prestige and, thus, creates the need for new methods of indicating social relationships through positioning. Thus, the placing of the wife in a standing position beside the husband, with her hands clasped and her eyes slightly lowered, while the husband sits with his legs crossed and his arms akimbo, is not just a direct reflection of existing social mores. In just such a studio photograph of my parents, taken in Bombay in the early 1930s, my father and mother function as complex interactive icons. In contrast to my father's impeccable Savile Row tropical whites, there is my hyper-traditionalized mother, who is adorned with a heavy gold waist-belt that is almost never worn in public. The semiotic codes of the modern and the non-modern in this photograph interact on numerous levels. At the same time, for all the indexical signs of hierarchy and subordination, the very absence of an elaborate staged backdrop creates a documentary realism that encompasses my mother and puts her in no more (and no less) a position of bodily constraint than my father. In this lies the radical potential of photography to reconfigure social relationships.

The very presence of subalterns in a posed environment, where they are subject to the same rules of decorum and camera-consciousness as a dominant male subject, places them in a potentially democratic visual public sphere. Early studio photography, especially in sex-segregated colonial environments, is one of the central practices through which family, domesticity and reproductive intimacies are moved into the public sphere, first in the studio itself, and secondly in the later "social life" of the photograph.

Posed photographs in studios and in other public settings, because of their generic commitment to a negotiated relationship between posing and verisimilitude, create a set of contexts for subalterns of all sorts who are rehearsing new public roles. Wives with husbands, servants with masters, functionaries with governors, courtiers with kings, all enter official photographic space to create an uneasy and ambiguous relationship between foreground and backdrop. In some cases, certain elements of the pose (clothing, body language, physical deployment) simplify the visual message of hierarchy and authority. But, in most cases, subalterns blur the line between backdrop and subject, as they rehearse their own responses to the constraints of any particular photographic context. In however indirect a way, posed photographs (of which backdrops are a vital part) anticipate the possibility of an increasingly democratic visual sphere. As some photographers, like the itinerant photographers of Guatemala, move themselves and their equipment into remote areas and populations, this democratizing potential is enhanced, although more open access to photographic culture and prestige is not equivalent to, or the guarantee of, broader democratic participation and power.

THE SCENE AND THE BACKDROP

At first glance, it may seem obvious to note that the backdrop is the major site for localizing the photograph. That is, it is through the backdrop, whether it is conceived as interior or exterior, fantastic or realistic, serious or ludic, that the viewer of a photograph gets some important clues about placing the photograph in its geographic and historical context. But, the idea of "placing," like the idea of "posing," is not without ambiguities. It could be taken in a literal or quasi-documentary sense, as if to indicate the actual location of the photograph. In posed photographs, this is almost never the case. More often, the location that is indicated by the photograph is imagined as a landscape, a public space or a ceremonial event. Since backdrops are both partial and stylized (often monumentalized, sometimes miniaturized, sometimes receding, at other times threatening to engulf the dominant subject), they can only be partial representations, even when they strive to be realistic. Thus, even as icons of a setting, they are fragmentary and inevitably metaphoric. What other locations do they allude to? Generally, they reference either nostalgias of some sort of past (pristine, romantic, historical, heroic) or some sort of future (technological, sartorial, official, moral or relational). But, whatever it is that they metaphorize, it is never an actual location, but always a type of location. Thus, in respect to backdrops as much as with respect to subjects, photographs depend on the tension between the representation of type and token to which I referred earlier.

In fact, the role of the backdrop in "locating" the photograph is more complex. Although it often locates the photographic subject in a certain sort of context, it also locates the photograph in a certain sort of public discourse. In the case of photographic backdrops, this public discourse can and does take many forms, but a frequent referent is the discourse of modernity as a visual fact. That is, in one way or another, many photographic backdrops place the photograph in a potential space of debate about visual modernity as it is expressed in clothes and machines, as well as in bodily comportment and bodily accessories. Consider the picture from India of a bride with a red telephone. There is more here than a cute visual parable about the coexistence of the modern and the traditional. The red telephone constitutes a powerful counterpoint to the markedly domestic and objectified South Indian bride in the photograph. It is a metonym not
just for modernity, but for a modern domesticity that is represented as being within the competence of the bride. Shorn of its own context in an ensemble of other household furnishings or activities, the red telephone becomes also a message about communication and communicability, which in the South Indian setting could easily indicate (in this case) the openness of this woman's family to marriage negotiations in the geographically dispersed world of upper-caste South Indians. It is also, in a small way, a proxy for the absent male (the future husband) who in later conjugal photographs would properly contextualize this woman and partly move her into the background. The red telephone is the index of the continuous background chatter of a gendered modernity that is the most culturally salient of the locations in which the woman in this photograph is placed.

All backdrops thus direct the viewer's attention outwards from the foregrounded subject of the photograph to a location represented in it and to the discourse in which the photograph is located, to which it is a potential contributor. These wider discourses, because they are inflected by a medium which is itself "realistic" in peculiar ways, has a complex relationship to the power relations implicit in photography, wherever cultural "others" are concerned.

In Orientalizing or colonializing settings, there are two kinds of "backdrops" that imply two sorts of contexts for photographs produced. One is the context that shapes the power of the photographer and the wider set of practices of observation and cataloging from which he or she emerges. The other is the sort of backdrop, location or context that we have mostly discussed so far, which is the backdrop actually represented in the photograph. One may distinguish these as the visible and the invisible backdrop, respectively. The significance of the visible backdrop (actually represented in the photograph) cannot be assessed without reference to the invisible backdrop (the discourses and images that inform the eye of the photographer). In much colonial photography it is not always possible to say where the dominant subject ends and the visual backdrop begins. To make this distinction, and to explicate the relationship between the subject and the backdrop as represented in the photograph, requires reference to another order that is visual but invisible in any particular photograph. This second order consists of other photographs, visual texts and verbal discourses - ethnological, touristic, bureaucratic and missionary - which, in various combinations, chains and packages, shape the reading competence of particular groups of intended viewers of these photographs. Thus, the photographically rendered backdrop is one part of a double frame in which the photographic subject, as well as photography itself, is contained. The second frame is the wider visual order of colonial Orientalism. It is this second frame to which the backdrops and props in colonial photography are a vital clue.

VISUAL DECOLONIZATION

As photography evolves in spheres outside of Europe and America, and its means and techniques move out of the hands of the rulers into the hands of the ruled, the debate about the modern takes on a different hue. Photography tends to become professionalized, its space becomes marked as studio space and a range of events become marked as real only if they are "photographed" (marriages are perhaps the most universal example of this process). At the same time, indigenous photographers, though hardly free of Orientalist habits and tendencies, tend to work with different visual and social conventions. Photography itself becomes a socially pervasive habit and becomes an active professional possibility for members of the middle and lower classes, just as members of these classes become patrons of photography. At the same time, in the large postcolonies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, there tends to be a noticeable growth in photographic practices and the growing use of video technology in recording public events. Still photography, however, retains its special place, along with the studios in which posed photos, with staged backgrounds, have their market.

In these postcolonial settings, photographic backdrops become less the site for debates about colonial subjectivity and more the place for what I have elsewhere called "experiments with modernity." That is, outside the taxonomizing and coercive techniques of colonial observers and the colonial state, backdrops tend to become part of a more complicated dialogue between the posed photograph and the practices of everyday life. The range and variety of photographic settings increases, especially in small towns and big villages. In big cities, especially for the cosmopolitan middle classes, the backdrop tends to be seen as a somewhat "hick" device, and tastes tend towards what I earlier called the "face print," the sober, realistic photo without any frills, as in a passport photograph. For middle-class hobbyists, staged backgrounds tend to be dropped in favor of "natural," outdoor settings, where the real, the natural and the spontaneous are conflated in an ideology of representation that is part of the global modern.

Yet backdrops are hardly anachronistic, and professional photographers as well as amateurs still create backdrops, whether in the studio, the home or in various outdoor, touristic settings. Some of these settings have actually been deliberately created by entrepreneurs to serve as photographic or filmic backdrops, as in some theme-parks created in
the 1980s in the area of Madras city. But the proliferation of the materials out of which these backdrops are constructed (artificial waterfalls, telephones, cars, temple silhouettes) allow no easy categorization. What we can see is that in these postcolonial backdrops, negotiations over the elements of a visual public sphere are often ludic, sometimes sparse and sometimes luxuriant with props. In the face of this wide range of roles for photographic backdrops, the only safe generalization seems to be that in the postcolonial world, photographic backdrops and props play an increasing role in the work of the imagination, in consumer-driven images of subjectivity and in socially mobile practices of self-representation and class-identification.

CONTAINING THE MEDIUM

In postcolonial societies, photographic backdrops tell us about ways in which the medium of photography (and not just the subject of the photograph and the photographer) is itself contained, contextualized and sometimes contested. This is because photography is a particularly powerful way in which visual modernity enters societies dominated by other forms of visual representation. Because of its affinity with earlier "still" forms of visual representation, its relative technical accessibility and its susceptibility to mechanical reproduction, photography invites indigenous participation and enters everyday life more fully than many other visual practices.

Though backdrops may be described as props, I have tried to show that they are not as passive as that designation may suggest. They introduce partial and sometimes contradictory ideas about the context and location of the subject. Backdrops blur the boundary between subject and context; they provide occasions for rehearsing new positions for social subalterns; they bring domestic and official space into the same visual order; they combine the power of the official with the pleasures of the ludic. For all these reasons, backdrops allow photographers (and their clients) to interrogate the different realisms (scientific, official, everyday) that the medium appears to arrogate to itself, thus claiming a privileged place as a discourse of the modern. Backdrops promote the fantastic, the arbitrary, the partial, the ludic and the utopian as accessories for the subjectivity of the persons in photographs and the persons who view and circulate photographs. Backdrops, thus, remain a place where the meanings of modernity can be contested and where experiments with the means of modernity can be conducted, even by those not well-placed in relation to class and state power. This quality is vital to the continued importance of backdrops, though (perhaps because) it is not always up front.

Acknowledgments

This essay is written without the usual kinds of academic citation. There is a rich body of work on photography and visual culture in India, as well as on Orientalist knowledge, that has informed my thinking. I have also drawn on certain terms and phrases which are more fully developed in my Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). I am grateful to James Wyman for his patience and for sharing with me the materials that form the exhibition. I have also benefited from Carol Breckenridge's unpublished work on tourist culture in India and on the role of various kinds of props, backdrops and stage-sets for photography that are a part of this culture.

ARJUN APPADURAI is Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, where he was previously director of the Chicago Humanities Institute. He is the director of the Globalization Project at the University of Chicago and is currently researching the relation between ethnic violence and images of territory in modern nation-states.

Source Citation  (MLA 7th Edition)

URL
http://libraries.state.ma.us/login?gwurl=http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=mlin_b_northest&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA19291516&it=r&asid=d5c5ff6590f1edbf5910fce975f917a0

Gale Document Number: GALE|A19291516