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Abstract

The plot of Mukul Kesavan's novel, *Looking Through Glass* (1995), almost presents itself as spectacle. Observation of its central mechanism grants us the kind of elation warranted by the sight of an elephant levitating. The unnamed narrator and photographer protagonist, speaking from the present of the end of the twentieth century, describes his current double mission: to scatter his grandmother's ashes ceremoniously in the waters of the Ganges and to take commissioned photographs of certain architectural features of the ancient buildings of Lucknow, an assignment that would require the use of his brand new, very powerful telephoto lens. Nearing Lucknow towards the end of the long rail journey from Delhi and with the train delayed on a bridge high above a river, he is tempted to use his new 'magic eye' (9). Off the train, standing on a vertiginous girder, he trains his lens on otherwise impossibly small figures washing clothes on the riverbank and then, far below him, spots, in the water, 'a man in a white kurta much like mine ... looking up at the train through a little telescope. Man-with-alens — here was the picture I had been looking for' (10). But when — after, as the narrator puts it, 'we stared at each other through layers of ground glass and I felt a quick affection for this unidentical twin' (10) — he tries to click the camera button, in and at that instant, he unbalances and, preceded through the whoosh of air by his heavy lens, hurtles downward into the green river. When he awakes, abed and cared for by a family that includes the same young man with the telescope, he discovers that he has not only fallen through space, but has fallen through time to August 1942.

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The plot of Mukul Kesavan's novel, *Looking Through Glass* (1995), almost presents itself as spectacle. Observation of its central mechanism grants us the kind of elation warranted by the sight of an elephant levitating. The unnamed narrator and photographer protagonist, speaking from the present of the end of the twentieth century, describes his current double mission: to scatter his grandmother's ashes ceremoniously in the waters of the Ganges and to take commissioned photographs of certain architectural features of the ancient buildings of Lucknow, an assignment that would require the use of his brand new, very powerful telephoto lens. Nearing Lucknow towards the end of the long rail journey from Delhi and with the train delayed on a bridge high above a river, he is tempted to use his new 'magic eye' (9). Off the train, standing on a vertiginous girder, he trains his lens on otherwise impossibly small figures washing clothes on the riverbank and then, far below him, spots, in the water, 'a man in a white kurta much like mine ... looking up at the train through a little telescope. Man-with-a-lens — here was the picture I had been looking for' (10). But when — after, as the narrator puts it, 'we stared at each other through layers of ground glass and I felt a quick affection for this unidentical twin' (10) — he tries to click the camera button, in and at that instant, he unbalances and, preceded through the whoosh of air by his heavy lens, hurtles downward into the green river. When he awakes, abed and cared for by a family that includes the same young man with the telescope, he discovers that he has not only fallen through space, but has fallen through time to August 1942.

This narrative conceit is maintained throughout the novel, and is put to work in every way. At the thematic level, it enables an eye already familiar with the history of post-Independence India to look, with that hindsight knowledge, at key moments in 1942 and the few years thereafter, during the movement towards Independence. Most crucially, it enables an eye already trained in the 'official' Indian history of the nationalist struggle to witness some of the traumatic events that led to the Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. The collision of times that is always present in historical fiction, even if usually in a covert manner, is dramatised by personal involvement and urgency. Incidents that when reviewed from the 'present' had an assigned timbre, order and import, now from the 'past' seem curiously disjointed and, often, surreal. Indeed, several of the events viewed (from the 'present') as having led heroically towards Independence, such as

incidents in the Quit India campaign of 1942, now appear almost inconsequential. They certainly seem contingent upon the subjective desires, even whims, of figures whose true motivations will not be recalled and whose very names will not be remembered. Because of the narrator's intense immersion — in fact, participation — in some of these events, the reader is invited to question their significance in a profound and empathetic way. Most notable, given the narrator's initial word portrait of himself in the 'present' as a secularised, somewhat materialist Hindu, the fact that his past-ward plunge is almost literally into a Moslem (though, importantly, Congress) family who introduce him to 1940s India from their perspective, means that the narrative disrupts any received mainstream (Hindu) history.¹ The personal underlines the political: later the narrator even has himself circumcised according to Islamic custom.

At the level of the plot, the reader remains expectant throughout the book of a return to the present, of getting 'back to the future' — something that must happen if the first-person narration is not to become an impossibly regressive story, like an M.C. Escher stairway that will not allow the eye to get to the top of the stairs without also simultaneously, returning to the bottom. Moreover, as the reader might anticipate of a master conjuror's trick, that return is delayed until, and perhaps beyond, another photographic moment on the very last page of the book. At the level of motif, photography (with all its paraphernalia of lenses, cameras and so on) punctuates the text. In the Banaras sequence of the novel, for example, during the farcical scenes leading up to the narrator's rescue of a young woman from her would-be rapist, he is gulled into operating an old view camera to get still shots of the woman and her seducer/assailant in the sexual positions advocated in the *Kama Sutra*, and the actual narrative becomes one of camera frames within window frames, all to point up the connection between focussing clearly and acting correctly (151–58). In Delhi, working as a waiter at the Cecil Hotel, the narrator serves dinner to the great Jinnah, future leader of Pakistan. 'When I [came] with the soup', he tells us, 'I dropped a fork to peer at his shoes under the table — in the photographs I had seen of him he was always shod in two-coloured brogues. So was he this time' (175).

The novel so circulates the discourse of photography that it permeates the text, if sometimes only in the form of aphorisms, such as 'In the sepia of hindsight, all losers look the same' (336). Photography animates the text until the final page. There, the protagonist, setting his delayed action timer, is able to run in front of the camera and get an exposure of himself, however blurred, taken in 1947, that he can describe in the narrative 'present' of the book. It is this photograph — 'that turning blur' (375) — that registers his presence in the earlier time, in history: specifically, the moment his adoptive family of Moslem characters arrives back at their own home, not in Pakistan, but emphatically in India. It reminds the reader that, since the invention of the medium, photographs have in general been taken as evidence and index of human presence. Indeed, the novel's central plot mechanism marshals all the accumulated heritage of

photographic discourse to the effect that the medium grants access to 'reality'.

It is also literally observable that the book's prose descriptions — ostensibly quite apart from any connection to photography — give a very thorough word picture of the visuality of India in the 1940s. The reader sees aspects of everyday life at the time — crowded railway stations, men huddled in cafés, women sewing and washing clothes, and a host of other things. We see the interior of old Moslem houses in Lucknow, the environs of the Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, the colonial sites of Simla, the Old Fort on the outskirts of Delhi, and numerous other vital landmarks, as they were back then. There is a banal sense in which the reader might expect this of a book produced by a practising historian, someone who teaches the subject in a major Delhi university; but on consideration of possible sources for this intense immersion in the visual properties of pre-Independence India, it seems more likely that they are not written documents but, photographs.

India has been much photographed, both during the Raj and since; indeed, it has an extraordinarily rich photographic history that embraces singular native achievements as well as memorable images by visiting travellers.² Christopher Pinney has described the pervasiveness of photography in modern Indian society and some of the ways in which its practices were and are specifically inflected by Indian culture. The 'look' of India just prior to Independence certainly was and is available in such photographic collections as *The Face of Mother India*, compiled in 1935 by the American journalist Katherine Mayo. This huge book of images is accompanied by a commentary that is notable for the fact that it is both anti-colonialist and sympathetic to a Moslem position not far from that of the Moslem Congressmen whose perspective we assimilate in *Looking Through Glass*. Mayo, in turn, assembled her collection by sifting the offerings of Indian newspapers, various photographic agencies and archives, and the files of private individuals. She took a disproportionate number of her selections from the highly accomplished British photographer and travel writer, Emil Otto Hoppé, (see Hoppé 1934 67–136). *Looking Through Glass*, however, is more than a mere rendering of this photographic data: I suggest that it represents, cumulatively, a truly photographic way of seeing.

MIRROR WITH A MEMORY

Kesavan's extraordinarily rich novel hinges on a plot device that is highly singular. At the same time, in a partly subliminal manner, the novel's representation of photography is reminiscent of a number of familiar and semi-familiar tropes, some of them dating from nineteenth-century photographic discourse. The most obvious of these is the claim that the photograph has a unique relationship to material reality, one that is somehow closer than that achievable by any other means of representation. In 1839, photographic pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot claimed that when he showed some friends the results of his experiment in photographing a piece of intricate lace their response was

that ‘they were not to be so easily deceived’; it was, they said, ‘*no picture*, but the piece of lace itself’ (Talbot 39). In such early photographic discourse the claim for a unique kind — or, at least, degree — of veracity and verisimilitude is attributed to the technological and autotelic nature of the medium: Louis Daguerre merely emphasised the ‘chemical and physical process’ at its base (Daguerre 13), whilst Talbot went so far as to say that the camera pictures of his own home amounted to the first instance of a house making a drawing of itself! (Talbot 46).

It is apparent that these inventors of photography saw the medium as obviating the need for selection and copying by the human eye and the human hand at the direction, of the human brain. Thus it was that Talbot wrote of his calotype process as ‘the pencil *of* nature’ — words he also used for the title of the first book to contain photographic reproductions (published in 1843) — as if its images came into being spontaneously and directly, without human intervention. A close examination of, for example, Talbot’s early 1840s image of a humble haystack — a subject that, because of its very ordinariness, would scarcely have held any attraction for a painter of the time — reveals an extraordinary reproduction of detail and texture. The eye is drawn to the shadow created by the ladder propped up against the stack, as it mark’s the sun’s stilled passage. Similar to the effect of looking through a magnifying glass, it is as though we see every separate haystack. No painter or etcher would, or could, render every stalk. The photograph seems to overflow with ‘stuff’; it is so full of the matter it depicts.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Harvard medic, novelist and wit, not only wrote *The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* (1858) and many other once-popular books, but invented an inexpensive stereo-viewer so that products of the medium could easily be enjoyed by large numbers of people in the comfort of their own homes, and in 1859 he contributed significantly to the discourse of photography by publishing an essay on the daguerreotype process. In this essay, he described the daguerreotype — a form for most of its duration dedicated almost exclusively to portraiture — as ‘a mirror with a memory’ (Holmes 74). The daguerreotype is materially mirror-like: when you turn it under light the captured image on its bright, silver-plated copper surface moves in and out of negative and you may also catch your own face reflected in it. ‘Looking glass’ is, or was, of course, a common synonym for ‘mirror’, as was plain ‘glass’, and these terms, too, had a career in photographic discourse, especially in, but also beyond, the glass-plate era. Often since considered the first ‘conscious’ artist of the medium, Julia Margaret Cameron (who was born in Calcutta, and whose colonial administrator husband Charles Hay Cameron played a ‘progressive’ role in Indian education) titled her 1874 fragmentary reminiscences of her earliest photographs *Annals of My Glass House* (180-87). In 1904, photographer Abraham Bogardus, recalling the daguerreotype effect, wrote, ‘The plate is a looking-glass, and when you sit in front of it your shadow sticks to the plate’ (Bogardus, qtd in Trachtenberg 1991 26).

This aspect of the mirror as a metaphor for the photograph that was probably

most apparent in Holmes' own day, and that has retained much currency since, is the apparent exactness, the visible veracity, of its likeness. Interestingly, quite recently, as if in a direct line of descent from such Victorian-era claims, Roland Barthes (at least in his early writings on the medium) was equally insistent on the photograph's effect of exact duplication. He claimed that, in contradistinction to a drawing or painting, the photograph is 'a message without a code', an 'analogon' of reality (Barthes 523). In such formulations, the photograph is, or embodies, as it were, a double of its subject matter. It is significant then that in Kesavan's novel, when the narrator focuses on his 'twin' through his telephoto lens he registers that, though they are 'unidentical', they wear similar clothes, and it comes as no real surprise that later in the novel, when this 'twin', Masroor, disappears, the narrator assumes a surrogate filial and fraternal role in Masroor's family. In fact, so close is this identification between the two figures that an incidental pleasure of the plot, subsequent to Masroor's disappearance, is the reader's (unrequited) desire that Masroor might have fallen through time in the opposite 'direction', as it were, into the present.

The doubling of the self in a mirror or photograph is employed by a number of nineteenth-century fictions. Alan Trachtenberg notes the particularly telling title, 'The Inconstant Daguerreotype', of an anonymously authored short story published in the popular American journal *Harper's Monthly* (Trachtenberg 1991 26). Sometimes such fiction carries the attendant point that, Dorian Gray-like, change or meaning is registered in the looking glass or image rather than in the original. This is related to the notion, perhaps most nicely put by the photographer protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), that the daguerreotype, instead of capturing 'the merest surface ... actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, could he detect it' (qtd in Trachtenberg 1991 24).

For Kesavan's novel, the most obvious analogue, if one manifestly surreal, is *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), the second of Lewis Carroll's Alice books. Here Alice enters her 'adventures' in another dimension — 'the Looking-Glass House' — through the drawing-room mirror of her own home. At the same time, the view into that 'house' is described in terms that would have been highly familiar to a photographer of that era, for it constitutes the reversed representation visible through the viewfinder of a large plate camera, the reversed image that would be captured on exposure of the plate: 'First, there's the room you can see through the glass — that's just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way.... The books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way' (129). Under his own name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, Carroll was an accomplished photographer who must have experienced this vantage many times as he focused his portrait subjects — including the 'original' of Alice, taken in a variety of rooms — with the lens of his camera.³ This reversed vantage is also the kind of view that Kesavan's narrator, looking from under a black cloth, would have seen

when he tried to frame his sex scenes using the old view camera supplied to him in Banaras. Interestingly, Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* also contains an askance parallel to Kesavan's central device. In the episode on the train, 'the Guard' obsessively looks at Alice — 'first through a telescope, then through a microscope, and then through an opera-glass' — before declaring 'You're travelling the wrong way' (149). As the American poet Horace Gregory observed, Alice's 'adventures are told as though they came from the *inside* of a dream' (Gregory vi), and, at least at first, this must be Kesavan's reader's assumption when the narrator of *Looking Through Glass*, after the fall into the river, tells of his next conscious moment: 'I woke to the sound of someone choking. It was me. Breathing wasn't automatic anymore; I had to be awake to think it through' (11). Of course, even if the fall through time is a dream, as the narrative unfolds in ever greater detail and complexity there is also so much 'reality' in it that, like the stalks of hay in Talbot's exposure, it cannot be just a dream.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Holmes' defining phrase for the photograph, 'mirror with a memory', is truly graphic. As well as the mnemonic nature of its alliteration, it appears at first to be an oxymoron: on the one hand, we tend to associate mirrors with the fleeting glance — unless we are excessively vain and spend hours looking into the mirror — whereas the mention of 'memory' brings to mind the apparently limitless past with its reservoir of experiences. Of course, memory, too, may be transient and elusive, but much of the power of Holmes' definition lies, precisely, in its capture of the conjunction of the fleeting and the fixed. Another paradoxical aspect of Holmes' formulation is that we usually think of the mirror as reflective by nature: it acts automatically, 'mechanically', as it were. By contrast, 'memory', if not unique to *homo sapiens*, is a profoundly human phenomenon and an aspect of consciousness. In other words, Holmes' formulation does not solely valorise the oft-vaunted objectivity of the mechanical in the way that received opinion on early photographic commentary often assumes. In fact, Holmes permits a tension with subjectivity. This allowance for consciousness recurs in the writings of certain later contributors to the discourse. Most telling from my viewpoint is the American writer James Agee.

Let me quote some passages about photography from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), the book which deployed Agee's sinuous and sometimes baroque prose alongside Walker Evans' spare photographs to describe and evoke the lives of poor white Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. In the book's 'Preamble', Agee calls for an art that would not be 'art' or, even, representation at all: ideally, for him 'all of consciousness' would be 'shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is' (Agee and Evans 11). Towards the end of the book he praises the camera for being 'incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth' (234). So it is not surprising that another key passage in *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

Men privileges ‘objectivity’: ‘If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. *It would be photographs*; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement’ (13, emphasis added). ‘It would be photographs’ — presumably photographs like Evans’ renditions of the interior of a sharecropper’s home, in which it seems that the aperture has been opened to just the degree necessary to capture every notch in the wooden walls, the exact sheen of enamelled bowls, and the like. Indeed, in the original edition of their joint work, the Evans photographs constituted Book One while Agee’s prose was consigned to Book Two.

The very syntax of Agee’s sentence — ‘It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton’ — creates the sense of an equivalence between photographs and the actual materiality of the world, as if the photographs somehow also carry in their chemistry an emanation of the world itself. The material presence of photographs (most obviously the heft of the mirror-like daguerreotype, but similar things could be said about later forms of the medium) bears out Agee’s parallel awareness of the material object-hood, so to speak, of photographs, and the fact that they have substance in the same way that ‘plates of food’ have substance. Yet despite this seeming absolute stress on external reality, Agee leaves an interstitial space for subjectivity, made apparent in another key passage from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: ‘[T]he camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weapon-less consciousness, the central instrument of our time’ (11). One way of reading this claim is that Agee, like Holmes before him, intuits that the camera is itself an instrument of consciousness. Indeed, if ‘unassisted consciousness’ is ‘weapon-less’, I am tempted to see the camera as consciousness armed, or even re-armed.

As remarked earlier, when Holmes’ near contemporary, Hawthorne, had his protagonist credit the camera with the ability to discern the otherwise inaccessible ‘secret character’, he was granting it *greater* awareness or consciousness than the eye. This sense of the camera as armed consciousness was rendered in a fascinating way by James F. Ryder at the turn of the twentieth century. In *Voigtlander and I* (1902), Ryder literally personified his camera: ‘the box was the body, the lens was the soul, with an “all-seeing eye”, and the gift of carrying the image to the plate’ (Rudisill 76). Posing similar question marks over agency and consciousness as Annie Leibowitz’ famous portrait of photographer Richard Avedon, Ryder attributed intelligence to his camera: ‘What he told me was as gospel.... He saw the world without prejudices.... He could read and prove character in a man’s face at sight. To his eye a rogue was a rogue’, and so on (Ryder, qtd in Rudisill 76).

If the camera has traditionally been credited with such power, it is perhaps not surprising that in Kesavan’s novel it could also be granted a special purchase on Time. For perhaps obvious reasons, photography has always had a uniquely contingent relationship to time; part of its assumed ‘realism’ has been the sense

that each image is achieved at a specific moment in actual time, that this moment of birth is significant in a way that is not true — or, at least, not true in anything like the same manner — as that of a painting, however ‘realistic’ the painting. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to realise that the significance is not due wholly, or even mainly, to the inherent importance of the moment in which the picture was made. That moment *may* be important in itself — such as the stroke of midnight at which India became independent — but I would rather emphasise the moment endowed with significance by the photograph. This is what the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson had in mind in his celebrated title phrase of 1952: ‘the decisive moment’. Certainly Cartier-Bresson spoke of ‘the significance of the event’ (that is, subject matter), but he mainly recognised and hallowed the ‘precise organisation of forms within the image that give that event its proper expression’ (Cartier-Bresson 51).

Holmes saw the daguerreotype as an entity with a memory — as itself a means of bridging the ‘distance’ between differently located moments. Kesavan’s novel goes a full stage further: it grants the camera power over time. The camera, with its telephoto lens, simultaneously becomes, in a manner both stark and complex, a time machine: a mechanism to transport consciousness into a different time zone. Note that while the transportation is involuntary, as automatic as early commentators on the medium believed it to be, what gets transported is consciousness. This is not so much an imaginative ploy, such as those often offered by the science fiction works with which some reviewers have confused *Looking Through Glass*, as a revelation. St Paul famously wrote of the difference between seeing ‘through a glass, darkly’, and seeing the truth, ‘face to face’. The deployment of the discourses of photography in Kesavan’s novel permits a more paradoxical revelation: we witness whatever truths we see by, precisely, looking through glass.

NOTES

- ¹ There were many Moslem supporters of Indian independence who both supported the Congress Party and had no initial desire for a specifically Moslem state. On the novel’s representation of the complexities of competing Indian and Pakistani histories, see Khair 2000a and 2000b.
- ² See Gutman.
- ³ Recent critics, such as Douglas Nickel (2002) have seen Carroll’s photographic work as a form of ‘dreaming’ parallel to his activity as a writer, a notion strongly supported by Carroll’s own amusing 1855 essay ‘Photography Extraordinary’.

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