

**The New York Times Magazine** | <http://nyti.ms/1qiOi6T>

---

**Magazine**

# A Too-Perfect Picture

On Photography

By TEJU COLE    MARCH 30, 2016

You know a Steve McCurry picture when you see one. His portrait of an Afghan girl with vivid green eyes, printed on the cover of National Geographic in June 1985, is one of the iconic images of the 20th century. McCurry's work is stark and direct, with strong colors, a clear emotional appeal and crisp composition. His most recent volume of photographs, "India," is a compendium of the pictures he took in that country between 1978 and 2014, and it also gives us the essential McCurry. There are Hindu festivals, men in turbans, women in saris, red-robed monks, long mustaches, large beards, preternaturally soulful children and people in rudimentary canoes against dramatic landscapes.

In McCurry's portraits, the subject looks directly at the camera, wide-eyed and usually marked by some peculiarity, like pale irises, face paint or a snake around the neck. And when he shoots a wider scene, the result feels like a certain ideal of photography: the rule of thirds, a neat counterpoise of foreground and background and an obvious point of primary interest, placed just so. Here's an old-timer with a dyed beard. Here's a doe-eyed child in a head scarf. The pictures are staged or shot to look as if they were. They are astonishingly boring.

Boring, but also extremely popular: McCurry's photographs adorn calendars and books, and command vertiginous prices at auction. He has more than a million followers on Instagram. This popularity does not come about merely because of the technical finesse of his pictures. The photographs in "India," all taken in the last 40 years, are popular in part because they evoke an earlier time in Indian history, as well as old ideas of what photographs of Indians should look like, what the accouterments of their lives should be: umbrellas, looms, sewing machines; not laptops, wireless printers, escalators. In a single photograph, taken in Agra in 1983, the Taj Mahal is in the background, a steam train is in the foreground and two men ride in front of the engine, one of them crouched, white-bearded and wearing a white cap, the other in a loosefitting brown uniform and a red turban. The men are real, of course, but they have also been chosen for how well they work as types.

A defender of McCurry's work might suggest that he is interested in exploring vanishing cultures. After all, even in the 21st century, not all Indians go to malls or fly in planes. Should he not be celebrated for seeking out the picturesque and using it to show us quintessential India? What is wrong with showing a culture in its most authentic form? The problem is that the uniqueness of any given country is a mixture not only of its indigenous practices and borrowed customs but also of its past and its present. Any given photograph encloses only a section of the world within its borders. A sequence of photographs, taken over many years and carefully arranged, however, reveals a worldview. To consider a place largely from the perspective of a permanent anthropological past, to settle on a notion of authenticity that edits out the present day, is not simply to present an alternative truth: It is to indulge in fantasy.

What a relief it is to move from Steve McCurry's work to that of someone like Raghubir Singh. Singh worked from the late '60s until his untimely death in 1999, traveling all over India to create a series of powerful books about his homeland. His work shares formal content with McCurry's: the subcontinental

terrain, the eye-popping color, the human presence. Within these shared parameters, however, Singh gives us photographs charged with life: not only beautiful experiences or painful scenes but also those in-between moments of drift that make up most of our days. Singh had a democratic eye, and he took pictures of everything: cities, towns, villages, shops, rivers, worshipers, workers, construction sites, motorbikes, statues, modern furniture, balconies, suits, dresses and, sure, turbans and saris.

The power of Singh's pictures lies in part in their capacious content. But it also lies in their composition, which rises well beyond mere competence, as he demonstrated in books like "River of Colour," "The Ganges" and "Bombay: Gateway of India." Singh has cited Edgar Degas and the American photographer Helen Levitt as influences, and you can see what he has learned from their highly sophisticated approaches (Degas's casual grace, Levitt's sympathetic view of urban oddity and the way both of them let in messiness at the edges of their images — a messiness that reminds us of the life happening outside the frame as well as within it). A photograph like the one Singh made of a crowded intersection in Kolkata in 1987 draws a breathtaking coherence out of the chaos of the everyday. The image, of which the key elements are a green door, a distant statue, an arm and a bus, is slightly surreal. But everything is in its right place. It reads as a moment of truth snipped from the flow of life.

I love even more a photograph Singh made in Mumbai a couple of years later. Taken in a busy shopping district called Kemps Corner, this photograph has less-obvious charms. The picture is divided into four vertical parts by the glass frontage of a leather-goods shop and its open glass door, and within this grid is a scatter of incident. The main figure, if we can call her that, is a woman past middle age who wears a red blouse and a dark floral skirt and carries a cloth bag on a string. She is seen in profile and looks tired. Beyond her and behind are various other walkers in the city, going about their serious business. An overpass cuts across the picture horizontally. The foreground, red

with dust, is curiously open, a potential space for people not yet in the picture. The glass on the left is a display of handbags for sale, and the peculiar lighting of the bags indicates that Singh used flash in taking the shot. The image, unforgettable because it stretches compositional coherence nearly to its snapping point, reminds me of Degas's painting "Place de la Concorde," another picture in which easy, classically balanced composition is jettisoned for something more exciting and discomfiting and grounded.

How do we know when a photographer caters to life and not to some previous prejudice? One clue is when the picture evades compositional cliché. But there is also the question of what the photograph is for, what role it plays within the economic circulation of images. Some photographs, like Singh's, are freer of the censorship of the market. Others are taken only to elicit particular conventional responses — images that masquerade as art but fully inhabit the vocabulary of advertising. As Justice Potter Stewart said when pressed to define hard-core pornography in 1964, "I know it when I see it."

I saw "it" when I recently watched the video for Coldplay's "Hymn for the Weekend." The song is typical Coldplay, written for vague uplift but resistant to sense ("You said, 'Drink from me, drink from me' / When I was so thirsty / Poured on a symphony / Now I just can't get enough"). Filmed in India, with a cameo by Beyoncé, the video is a kind of exotification bingo, and almost like a live-action version of Steve McCurry's vision: peacocks, holy men, painted children, incense. Almost nothing in the video allows true contemporaneity to Indians. They seem to have been placed there as a colorful backdrop to the fantasies of Western visitors. A fantasy withers in the sunlight of realism. But as long as realism is held at bay, the fantasy can remain satisfying to an enormous audience. More than a hundred million people have watched the Coldplay video since it was posted at the end of January.

Are we then to cry "appropriation" whenever a Westerner approaches a non-Western subject? Quite the contrary: Some of the most insightful stories about any place can be told by outsiders. I have, for instance, seen few

documentary series as moving and humane as “Phantom India,” released in 1969 by the French auteur Louis Malle. Mary Ellen Mark, not Indian herself, did extraordinary work photographing prostitutes in Mumbai. Non-Indians have made images that capture aspects of the endlessly complicated Indian experience, just as have Indian photographers like Ketaki Sheth, Sooni Taraporevala, Raghu Rai and Richard Bartholomew.

Art is always difficult, but it is especially difficult when it comes to telling other people’s stories. And it is ferociously difficult when those others are tangled up in your history and you are tangled up in theirs. What honors those we look at, those whose stories we try to tell, is work that acknowledges their complex sense of their own reality. Good photography, regardless of its style, is always emotionally generous in this way. For this reason, it outlives the moment that occasions it. Weaker photography delivers a quick message — sweetness, pathos, humor — but fails to do more. But more is what we are.

Teju Cole is a photographer, an essayist and the author of two works of fiction, “Open City” and “Every Day Is for the Thief.” He teaches at Bard College.

*Sign up for our newsletter to get the best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week.*

A version of this article appears in print on April 3, 2016, on page MM16 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: A Too-Perfect Picture.

---

© 2016 The New York Times Company