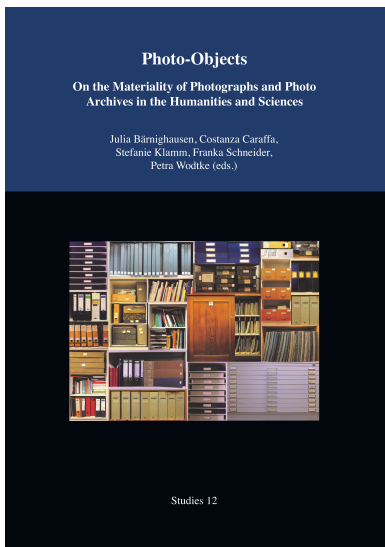


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Studies 12

Christopher Pinney:

Digital Cows: Flesh and Code



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Chapter 11

Digital Cows: Flesh and Code

Christopher Pinney

Grounded and airborne materialities

I recently encountered a highly material photograph in Mumbai's Chor Bazaar, also known as the "thieves' bazaar," India's main flea market. It was a New Year's greeting card from the photographic company of Bourne and Shepherd dating from 1973, a reproduction of an image taken by the English photographer and co-founder of the firm, Samuel Bourne, in Calcutta in the 1860s (see Fig. 1). The edges of the card are burnt, the index I assume of the catastrophic fire on February 6, 1991 that destroyed Bourne and Shepherd's Calcutta premises in Chowringhee. It perfectly embodies the complexity of what Roland Barthes termed "the anterior future" (Barthes 1982, 96)¹ and the complex layering of time and events. The 1860s are reproduced in 1973 and then further indexically seared by the events of 1991, which have left such a powerful trace.



Fig. 1: New Year's greeting image by Bourne and Shepherd. Dated 1973, it reproduces an image taken by Samuel Bourne in the 1860s and bears signs of the fire that destroyed the studio in 1991, collection: Christopher Pinney.

¹ Barthes makes this comment in the context of his discussion of Alexander Gardner's photograph of the assassin Lewis Payne taken shortly before his execution. Barthes memorably captions this "He is dead and he is going to die..." (Barthes 1982, 95).

William Dalrymple has recently provided what may be a fanciful account describing how on the morning of the fire

the people of Calcutta awoke to find their streets carpeted with singed Victorian prints: Maharajas with bird's-nest beards were lying in the gutters... Viceroy's in white ties fluttered across the Maidan... and were washed down into the Bay of Bengal. (Dalrymple 2014, 9)

I do not know what the precise trajectory of this image was, or whether it fluttered over Calcutta. I suspect it was preserved because it was in the middle of a wad of similar images, bundled away and forgotten and that, consequently, the flames of the fire were only able to lick at the external surfaces of this brick of images. In any event, this survivor dramatizes two different materialities: a conventional spatial one, a “strange confined space” that draws attention to the effects of fire at the edges of the photographic “frame” (to pervert Bazin) and a quite different material trajectory (a space of flow) in which the image commences a journey across the city borne by the heat of the conflagration. Two narratives are on offer: one stressing the earth-bound fate of the image, the other stressing its weightlessness. Both are equally material.



Fig. 2: A mother displays photographs of her deceased son and husband for rephotography, Central India, 2017, photo: Christopher Pinney.

Central India, 19 January 2017: as frequently happens, villagers proffer images of past events or deceased relatives for rephotography. A Bagdi widow offers photos of her husband and son, both deceased and preserved only in the weightless form of passport photos (see Fig. 2). She wants something much bigger: laminated and highly colored. Govardhanlal Babulal (whose father I was very close to) produces an image of himself and his wife seated before the main Chamunda Ma image at a shrine by the River Chambal in Nagda. It is perhaps twenty years old and is framed in a rusted tin frame with a glass front (see Fig. 3). In shape, size, and weight, it is remarkably like a tablet—for instance, a larger Samsung of the kind that is popular with richer townspeople—and Govardhanlal holds it up to my camera clasped in the same way that the day before Pratik Punjabi, the son of a leading local photographer, had held a tablet for me to view an opulent “pre-wedding shoot” made at an upscale resort on the banks of the River Narmada.



Fig. 3: Govardhanlal displays an image of himself and his wife at a local Chamunda goddess shrine. The photograph is preserved under glass in a rusted tin frame. It has the uncanny appearance of a digital tablet, photo: Christopher Pinney.

Twenty-first century cow protection

Being forewarned of the heightened emotions around the current cow protection agitation, on recent India trips, I was eager to find out how this war of images was being represented. Cow protection has been an intermittent part of the Indian political landscape since the 1890s when it was mobilized by higher-caste Hindus against Muslims and also lower-caste, beef-eating Hindus (Pinney 2004, 105–144). When I arrived in central India in mid-October 2015, I asked Bheru, a railway station coolie, whether he had seen any new cow protection imagery. He told me he had just received a WhatsApp video that purported to show two cows being slaughtered outside a mosque in Pakistan. We went to my lodging house and I photographed the video as Behru held his phone up for me (see Fig. 4).

I had just read about the consequences of the circulation of imagery like this. In late September 2015, in the village of Bisahra, not far from Delhi, a furious mob of 1,000 high-caste Hindus surged down a tiny alleyway towards the home of Mohammad Akhlaq. They believed that he had slaughtered and eaten a cow, so they killed him as a punishment. His body was dumped next to the cow's entrails (*India Today*, 9 October, 2015).

This killing was one symptom of a resurgence of anti-cow slaughter sentiment surrounding the Indian government's determination of the illegality of beef consumption (a judgement that has recently been defeated in the Supreme Court). The "ideal" of abstention and cow protection becomes the defense for participating in violence against beefeaters, and



Fig. 4: Bheru Parmar displays a video distributed on WhatsApp. It purports to show a cow being slaughtered outside a mosque in Pakistan, photo: Christopher Pinney.

the “protection” of the Cow Mother (*gai mata* or *gau mata*) becomes the rationale for the destruction of those who refuse to participate in this ideological project.

Later, a Jain friend would share an image circulated on WhatsApp of a three-headed calf (see Fig. 5), evidence of divine resistance. I also made a point of collecting cow-related commercially produced images and sensed a ratcheting up of what might be termed “cow erotics,” including images in which milk appears as a kind of semen. This theme in commercial chromolithography, presenting two-dimensional images, builds upon folk practices in which the generative potential of *khir* (a milk-based rice dish) is mixed into cow dung during the annual Gowardhan Puja in highly sensory and material practices.

Political economy of beef

Some knowledge about the local political economy and the material infrastructure of beef cattle farming is required to understand the bovine focus of a paper on the materiality of photographic objects. This will help open up the central paradox at the heart of my discussion: how airborne images energize and ideologically mystify ideas about an ineluctably corporeal and material presence. What Indians think about cows has at some point to confront the facts about cow flesh and bodies.

In the central Indian village that I am familiar with, there are about 150 cows but only 15 to 20 bulls. The number of bulls has rapidly declined with the increased use of tractors and harvesters. There are many more buffaloes, probably in the region of 1,000. Buffaloes produce considerably greater yields of milk, which is much prized for its richness, flavor, and higher monetary value.

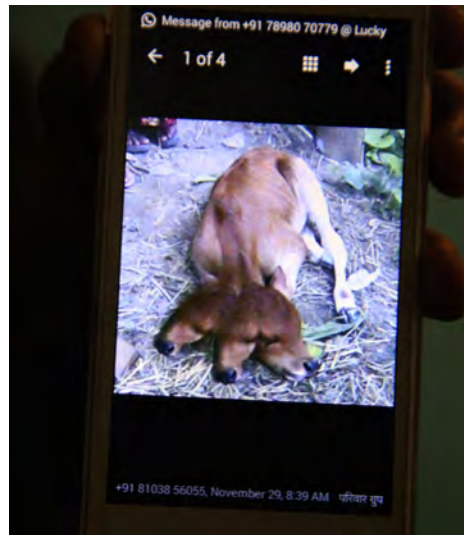


Fig. 5: An image of a three-headed calf distributed on a WhatsApp family group. “Sacred” images like this complement the “profane” images of cow slaughter such as that in Fig. 4.

Bulls are castrated to increase their strength and make them easier to control. However, most villages keep one sacred bull (a *sant*) that is not castrated and is allowed to roam freely in the jungle, returning to the village for food as it pleases. These *bellrajas* (king bulls) are frequently intimidating presences, revered and feared in equal measure. Many villages also maintain an even more sacred *surya gai* (sun cow) which, as we shall see later, has a surprising connection with photography.

Female cattle are obviously prized as providers of milk. Male cattle immediately pose a problem, particularly now that they are rarely required as draught animals. Most villagers used to sell them on to traders and part of the public secret was not enquiring about their ultimate fate. Orthodox religious villagers may well convince themselves that they will all end up in *gaushalas* or cow sanctuaries. Often different accounts of the world inhabit surprisingly intimate spaces. My notebooks record a conversation with a villager, a Jain friend of mine, and his son in which the father describes how he will shortly dispatch an uncastrated bull to roam the streets of the nearby town. The son then tells me that most of them end up in the butcher’s shop. Hearing this, the father disagrees, claiming that they either live happily in the town, or are given shelter in a *gaushala*. This conversation prompted a visit to the nearest *gaushala*, one housing 200 cows in the neighboring village of Bhilsuda. The parlous state of many of the animals revealed the difficulties of maintaining such a large herd on the charity of a few.

The public secret is illuminated by three vignettes collected over the course of two days in late November 2016. First, Jagdish Sharma, the priest of the Krishna temple, who did not really want to speak about the issue but when I pressed him about what happened to all those old cows and male calves that are sold in the bazaar (as opposed to those that are ritually married, which he preferred to dwell on), point-blank refused to contemplate that



Fig. 6: A *bel raja* or “bull king”: uncastrated bulls like this are given a utopian freedom from human constraint, and are both revered and feared when they visit the village, Central India, 2016, photo: Christopher Pinney.

any cattle sold locally (or within India as a whole) could be sold to a butcher’s shop because that is *rakshash kam* (devilish work) and not something Indians do. That only happens in other countries. Second, there was an educated friend, trained in medicine, who finds himself surrounded by practices he struggles not to label as “irrational.” He was keen to direct attention to the 85 percent of the male cattle that, in his opinion, were tacitly sent to be butchered: this was the “public secret” that the “king bull” occluded, almost as though his massive form could throw—at the very moment it was worshipped—a massive shadow over all the other less fortunate male cattle (see Fig. 6). Finally, there was my friend in the town who supported the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and expressed surprise at the information I bombarded him with. But what do *kisan* (working peasants) imagine, he asked, when they sell their old cow or young male calf and are offered 3,000 rupees (40 euros). Where do they think they are going?

Deshi (local) female cattle normally live 20 to 22 years. They can get pregnant after their third year and, consequently, can provide milk (usually for eight to 12 months) from their fourth year. Post-reproductive cows cease to produce milk (generally from age 15 onwards) and then have to be maintained at a cost or released. Banjaras, a powerful Scheduled Tribe community within the village, perform regular biannual marriages between old cows and male calves. They circumambulate the *phera* (the marriage fire at the heart of the rite) outside the Ram temple before being set free to roam the jungle or (more likely) the nearby town. Although there is still one member of the Chamar caste (a caste whose traditional work was leather tanning) in the village who will remove dead cattle, take them to the jungle, and skin them for 500 rupees, Banjaras bury their dead cows and bulls after processing their corpses around the village. They worship these graves several times a year.

Cow tails and photography

It is married cows, those wed in front of the Ram temple, who ultimately become *surya gai*, the liberated sun cows whose tails are the preferred material used to make whisks known as *chanvar*. These first caught my attention when reading M. N. Srinivas' classic *Remembered Village* (about South India) in which he records that he, an enthusiastic photographer, was called Chamara man by the villagers. *Chamara* is the Kannada term for these whisks.

Chamara whisks (called *chanvar* in Hindi and *pichhi* in Malwi) feature in printed images of deities (for instance, of the renouncer king Ramdevji's devotees) and serve not only as devices for conferring value and signaling devotion but, when deployed in pairs, are often a means of establishing frontality and symmetry, which are key elements in local photographic aesthetics. Jains dance with whisks in temple festivals, temples often display them by the deity's throne, and village shamans use peacock whisks to confer protective and curative blessings. The cameraman as *chamaraman* directs our attention to the expectation in rural India that photography, contrary to the view of Walter Benjamin, is usually seen as a mechanism for preserving and consolidating aura, rather than destroying it.

Photography as conceptualized by these villagers involves something very different from the contingency that Benjamin theorized, the exorbitant flow of information that made the optical unconscious possible. Benjamin's approach to photography valorizes practitioners such as Rodchenko and Blossfeldt. He celebrates photography's "optical unconscious," its Bazin screen—its disruptive cut-offness, its surrealistic potential to create new revolutionary alignments, and film's ability to slow things down and speed things up so as to destabilize the familiar reality to which ordinary human vision binds us. These are all aspects of the threat that the Benjaminian camera poses to traditional "cultic" and "auratic" hierarchy.

In village practice, frontality, formality, and re-framing, through which respect is shown to the image, are dominant aspects of local photographic practice. The camera is grasped as something with the potential to present divine and political power in their most potent and perfected form (sanctified, auratic, symmetrical, and, if possible, devoid of contingency).

In central India, I observed the visit of a Jain guru, Lokendra, to the village where I was staying. I found myself photographing Guru Lokendra's *chanvar*—his silver handled whisks, which should ideally, in this part of India, be made with hair from the tail of a *surya gai*, that is, a "sun cow" or free cow that lives in the forest (see Fig. 7). While not exactly "cameras," *chanvar* are devices for looking and beholding. They might be seen as constituent elements of that very re-auraticizing "frame" that Bazin had argued was destroyed by photography's "screen." From the perspective of Bazin or Benjamin, they might be best viewed as "anti-cameras," technologies of representation caught up in an antagonistic relationship to photography.

Cows and photography

As I have indicated, cattle are materially very complex, both in life and death. They also have an intimate relationship to the camera. Throughout my association with the village, from the early 1980s onward, I have frequently been asked to photograph villagers with bulls, well-loved cows, and to document various rituals involving cattle such as at Akhatej and Gowardhan Puja, occasions when the material dependency on cattle is wonderfully



Fig. 7: A Jain renouncer's *chanvar* or whisks. Made from the tails of ritually liberated cattle, they are best thought of as a “framing device,” a means of bestowing value and symmetry, photo: Christopher Pinney.

performatively evoked. In Gowardhan Puja, after Diwali, animals are decorated and worshipped before trampling through elaborate opulent cow dung images of Radha and Krishna which female villagers sculpt with noticeably sensuous care.

This local materiality is mirrored by a large amount of regional and national cow archiving. Pinjrapoles—earlier *gaushalas*—often issued beautiful receipts as material proof of donations, and the various cow protection agitations produced highly significant images that continue to resonate in India's visual culture. These donations have more merit, the more they are secret and immaterial: the existence of such elaborate receipts points to the intimacy of the material and immaterial with which I am concerned.

Cows were also always the subject of local photographic activity: one framed image (also perhaps significantly owned by a Banjara) records a magical bull from Aslod, c. 1980, who refused to be taken to slaughter, speaking out to his owner (Pinney 1997, 164–166). In 2014, a cow called Ganga, owned by a Chamar family, produced twins. At least in this part of India, it was almost unheard of for a cow to give birth to more than one calf at once, until, that is, Ganga managed this. (Inexplicably, it has since happened once again in the same village, causing something of a sensation.) Word spread quickly in the village and numerous villagers came with their mobiles to photograph this *aschary* event. Mobiles clicked away at this true wonder and stored the evidence so that they could confound any future visitor who, for perfectly good reasons, might doubt the truth of such an unlikely story (see Fig. 8).

Ganga's wondrous production provided a stage for the fusion of the empirical event with digital image platforms, perhaps helping establish a local space in which other miraculous, and also outrageous, images could convincingly circulate. Both miraculous and outrageous images quickly followed: multi-headed calves on Facebook and endless videos of cow slaughter, usually implicating Muslims, via WhatsApp and Youtube. Frequently, these take

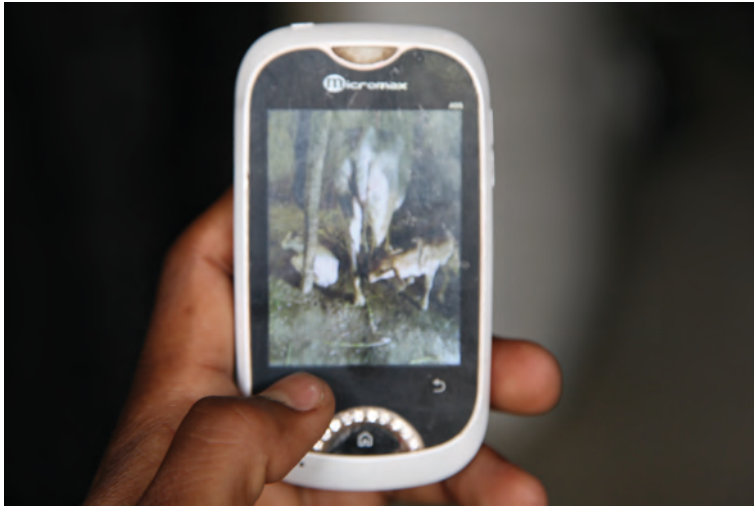


Fig. 8: A villager displays an image, captured on a mobile phone, of Ganga's miraculous twins, born in 2014, photo: Christopher Pinney.

promotional videos from Halal abattoirs and overlay them with religious songs or sermons on the necessity of cow protection.

We might invoke the two materialities and spatialities of the burnt Bourne and Shepherd image mentioned earlier to start to conceptualize the practices described above. The first of these is constrained by the “strange, confined space” of the photograph, to appropriate Mary Price’s slogan (Price 1997). The second opens up an image trajectory characterized by amplification and plenitude. Both these approaches might benefit from Gomez Cruz and Meyer’s suggestion that we “understand photography not as representation, technology or object, but as the agency that takes place when a set of technologies, meanings, uses, and practices align” (Cruz and Meyer 2012, 204).

I began a book called *Coming of Photography in India* with a recreation of a photographic event in which a petty Raja’s henchmen’s swords threaten damage to the cramped confines of a traveling studio. The cabinet card’s material presence replicated the space of the studio and allowed the earlier *mise-en-scène* to be reactivated (Pinney 2008, 1). But what are the “sword effects” of Facebook and WhatsApp in the post-Newtonian space of new media? How does the rapidly multiplying epidemic imagery of new media make itself felt in the world?

Cows upside-down

Gomez Cruz and Meyer note that “giving away a photograph is no longer a subtractive process but an additive one” (Cruz and Meyer 2012, 213). “Sharing” as “flow” hence entails amplification: WhatsApp and Youtube serve as broadcast channels whose “width” contrasts with that of the “strange, confined space” of the analogue photograph. Is this another version of Benjamin’s transition from the cultic to the exhibitional, or is there more at stake?

The additive (rather than subtractive) dimension of social networking has been theorized by Rubenstein and Sluis as a sensual plenitude that they term “pornographic”:

Proliferation and abundance create a pornographic effect whether in the context of the App Store, Facebook timeline or Twitter stream. For that reason it becomes misleading to talk about the photographic “frame” or the singular image for the image is everywhere at once, accessible from any point in the network establishing a regime of intoxication and plenitude through its rapid multiplication and profusion. (Rubenstein and Sluis 2013, 30)

Not a “frame” or a “confined space” but a rolling frontier of superabundance.

Gau suraksha (cow protection) has “representational” effects in the non-virtual world (as Mohammad Akhlaq and many others have learned to their cost) just as conventional critical theory would lead us to believe; but, in this case, (as with Liebig, see below) there is a prismatic ideological inversion (i.e., an inversion through which the apparent weightlessness of information distorts the tonnage of the real). As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura* [...this is an organic process in class society which ...] arises just as much from...historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from...physical life-process. (Marx and Engels 1977, 164)

What Descartes observed of the retinal image, and what Marx and Engels observed of ideology, and Levi-Strauss of myth, I am suggesting is true of digital cows in distress. Digital weightlessness permits the implementation of what in the (inverted) material world is a highly damaging course of action.

Indeed, the costs of digital cows are rather like the price of the digital itself: no longer calculated as a cost per image as in the days of film reels but *phantasmatically* free, the actual costs offshored in server energy consumption and the consequences for the environment.

The weightlessness of information is commonly taken as affirmation of (as Doane characterizes it) the digital conceptualized as “the endpoint of dematerialization” (cited in Seppänen 2017, 115). But as Seppänen puts it, in what I think is a significant and important argument, “in terms of materiality” digitization is, to say the least, “an ambiguous process” (Seppänen 2017, 115). In the case of the NASA images transmitted from Mars, discussed by Seppänen, they possess “no sensible qualities like size, colour, weight, or spatiality. Therefore, the materiality of the photograph could be reduced to questions about the materiality of electromagnetic radiation” (Seppänen 2017, 115).

The digital, Seppänen observes, involves a break from the continuous signal of the analogue to the binary discontinuous code of the digital but, nevertheless, both signals are physical phenomena, inviting no clear distinction between materiality and immateriality (Seppänen 2017, 115). The digital, Seppänen rightly argues, is “material to the core” (Seppänen 2017, 117).

While working on this paper, I also completed a short discussion of the global Orientalist iconography used to advertise Liebig’s flesh extract from the 1860s onward (Pinney 2017). I had no idea these might describe perfectly (doubly) inverse trajectories. Liebig’s aesthetic (produced to market industrially rendered flesh) is seared by the archaic, the colorful, and the mysterious. Everything in the Liebig imagination is intense, excessive, and

heightened. All of this serves to locate the images promulgated by the company as situated, or embedded, in very particular times and places. This embeddedness perfectly suited the needs of a transnational company trading in meat. The company's product was a paste made from cattle, a dematerialized transformation of living meat into a molasses-like spread sold in clinical white glass bottles produced by a company spanning half the world. This "extract," the product of enormously extended supply chains, was the very model of deterritorialized fluidity and dematerialized convertibility, something curiously akin to the rolling digital frontier of WhatsApp. Liebig's aesthetic made possible an embedding through exoticization. It anchored a global commodity (placeless and formless) in a world of hyper-place and hyper-time, positioning it in a non-fluid—essentially static—world of ultra-traditional and heavily material identities.

Liebig's upside-down ideology transformed beef extract into hyper-materialized Arcadian landscapes. The upside-down ideology of contemporary digital cow protection turns the material costs of aging non-productive cattle into a seemingly weightless moral choice. This weightless superabundance feeds an impossibly non-material vision of the moral benefits of cow protection, one that violently feeds into and disturbs the complicated and pragmatic ground where actual cattle live.

Acknowledgment

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