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Interview with Christopher Pinney



Christopher Pinney, Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture at University College London, was a **guest professor at the CEIAS** in February 2019.

Here, he answers **Zoe Headley's** questions about his recent work, his current project and the field of visual studies in South Asia in general.

ZH : You have recently added to your vast and very rich publication record, two new volumes: *A Waterless Sea* (Reaktion Books, 2018), which delves into the theories and history of mirages, and *Lessons from Hell: Printing and Punishment in India* (Marg, 2018), which documents a specific genre of prints, the *Karni Bharni* (reap as you sow). Could you tell me more about the political history of these hellish images and how they contribute to what you term the “tenacious presence of messianic thought” in contemporary India?

CP: Like most of my work its origins lie in the village in Madhya Pradesh that I've been visiting since 1982. That was where I first encountered these amazing “karni bharni” prints, which show the punishments enacted in hell for sinful acts. The images were clearly powerful pedagogical tools for the villagers and they would use them to instruct me in the principles of (their version of) Hinduism, pointing to different transgressions and their punishments. I was immediately struck by the images' ambivalence: the clarity of their moral condemnation seemed to be at odds with the obvious fascination of the artist with naked bodies being tortured.

Over decades of collecting as many images as I could and talking to their owners I came to see that the images have a complex history and politics. The politics is perhaps a little more straightforward than the history: in essence they articulate a clean-caste vegetarian code that prescribes punishment for eating meat and fish, and for cruelty to animals. The code is also highly patriarchal, even misogynistic one might say. So one of things I explored in the book was this politics and social positioning, or rather the sociology of the anxiety. Much of the imagery also seemed to speak about the frontier between the rural and the small-town market (the sin of “overloading a bullock cart” is for instance a stock motif). It was also possible to see that what appeared to be unchanging concerns (e.g. about the sin of theft) were inflected with anxieties about change. The thief is often depicted as an Adivasi for instance, and one can begin to glimpse how these apparent changeless images might also be viewed as historicized vignettes testifying to anxieties about a newly mobile workforce and so on. So looked at in the right light the image can be seen to have a history and to express an awareness of historical change alongside what appear to be epochal cosmological and eschatological divides.



So on the one hand the images can be seen to embody a subtle history of changing (and remarkably tenacious belief). But they are also material evidence of a history of changing media, especially of the rise of lithography. The sins and punishments in these popular printed images have several deep textual antecedents (most notably the Garuda Purana). But within Hinduism there is no deep tradition of visualizing these punishments (except within various Swaminarayan texts which are relatively recent). The images seem to be indebted to a Jain manuscript tradition, part of which is co-opted by early Calcutta presses. So it is possible to detect various continuities between how 17th century illustrators of Jain manuscripts were conceiving of punishments and the motifs that early lithograph entrepreneurs looking for new saleable material c. 1880 were encountering. Sometimes this continuity comes through very clearly as with “the fruit of killing birds,” which was always a distinctively Jain trope.

These images are supposed to evoke horror and condemnation: their task is to mimetically convey “badness” but the skills of the artist and printer are usually such that one is left admiring, and sometimes enjoying, the terrible scenes depicted. This is where (to echo Homi Bhabha) the intentionally “pedagogic” mutates into an unpredictably “deformative-performative.” The instability of these images interested me a good deal and I suppose connects with my interest (following Walter Benjamin) in the role of contingency in determining photographic possibility. The 1952 Film Censorship Directive (which I discuss at length in the book) provides an interesting exploration of what Ravi Vasudevan called the “exhilaration of dread,” and I also found M. Coetzee’s discussion of the “Problem of Evil” in his novel *Elizabeth Costello* highly productive. Coetzee wonderfully describes the prurient compulsions of such forms of obscenity, the addictive pleasures to be had from observing what should be abject and which after all ensures the survival of these images of atrocity.

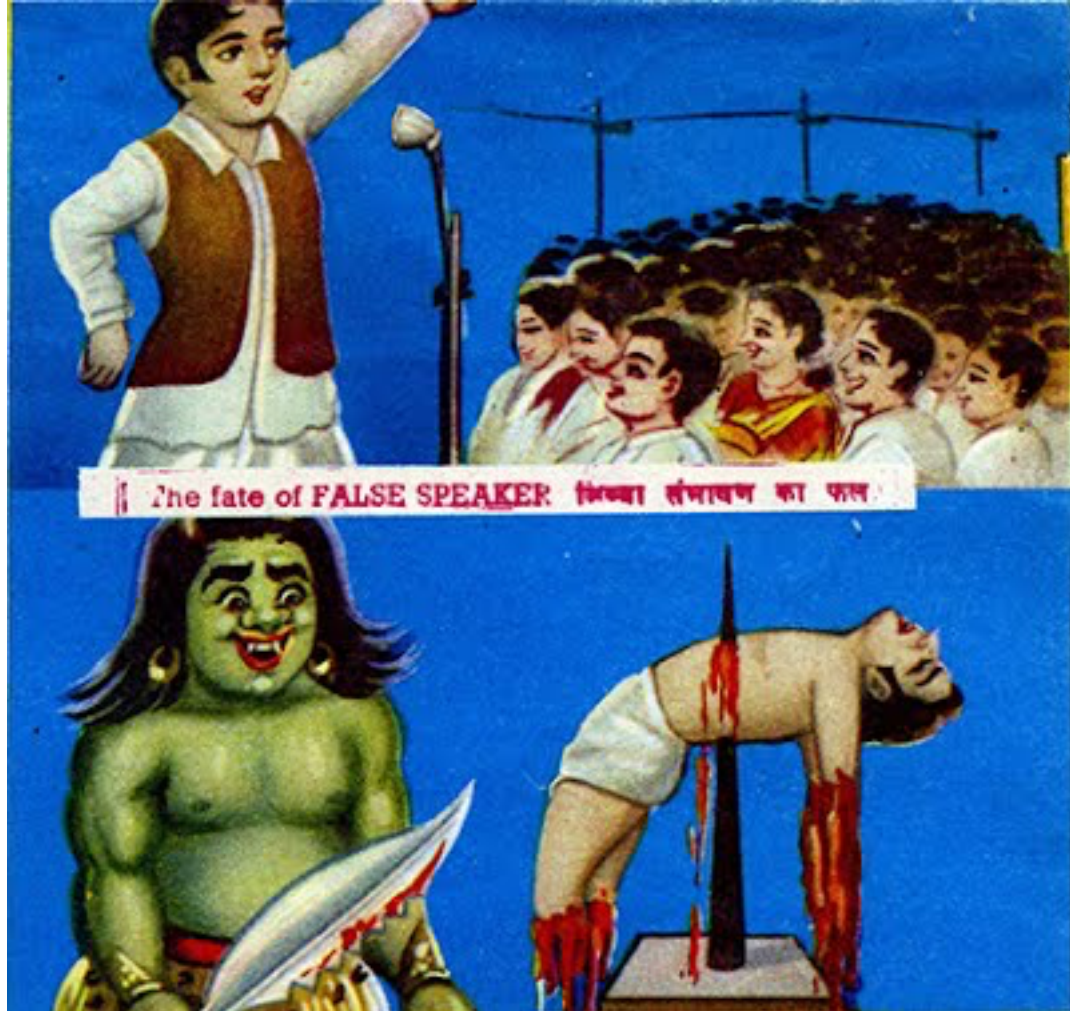
A further historical twist occurs from the 1970s onwards when the cellular *karni bharni* template gets co-opted into series of “Ideal Boy” (*Adarsh Balak*) posters and large format Nehruvian-style exhortations with titles like “Good Citizen” or “Our Duties towards Our Government.” Like the original *karni bharni*, these were intended to be hung in schools as charts offering moral instruction. The Ideal Boy images, together with their complementary pairs, “Bad Habits” (*Buri Adaton*), have since acquired a retro appeal and been subject to several recent parodies (as well as found their way into the Mumbai artist Atul Dodiya’s work).

One of the features that first attracted me to *karni bharni* images was the crowd scenes that featured in the “false speaker” vignette. This was initially a lying Brahman who over time as the images evolved became a politician speaking (usually through a microphone) to an assembly of people signifying the “public.” The vignette is very similar to an episode in the Hindi film *Pratighaat*. Initially I thought that this was a manifestation of the “public sphere,” of a new axis of evaluation in the sphere of morality. My hunch was that one could see the signs here of a new “horizontal” dimension of judgment and that accompanied the rise of a new model “citizen” who supplanted the religious devotee. At the end of my study I had to conclude however that this was illusory and that the cosmological axis remained totally vertical, i.e. predicated upon a visible material world underneath which lay vengeance (performed by devilish *rakshasas*). In the false speaker vignette the politician is certainly speaking to an assembly that looks as though it could form a public but in the end they don’t have any role to play in the matter: the punishment is performed on the vertical, cosmological, axis. In this sense the world of *karni bharni* remains violently enchanted, this is the “tenacious presence of messianic thought” to which I referred.

Karni bharni still just about survive in rural markets and several Indian publishers still produce them. I was amazed on a recent trip to Bangladesh to discover that in the first rural house I entered near the border with Meghalaya that pride of place was given to a karni bharni image! I also encountered many near Barisal in the south of the country. Maybe in the future I will be able to study the valence of such images of retribution as part of a fragile minoritarian religious culture.

ZH: You are currently leading the ERC-funded project “Citizens of the Camera: Photography and the Political Imagination” (2016-2020) for which you are conducting fieldwork in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. This project also involves researchers working on Nicaragua, Nigeria, Greece, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. I am curious, are there at this stage any striking facts or findings which allude to a specificity of South Asia, as compared to the other regions under study, in the interplay of images, citizenship and politics?

CP: Well if I may be permitted a rather contradictory response I think that the evidence from South Asia points to something specific in the formal potential of photography which however, once identified, turns out to be a feature of practices in other regions as well. This was crystalized for me recently when responding to the Mumbai photographer Ketaki Sheth’s recent project on Indian photo studios. Her photographic documentation of these provincial spaces, and some of their remaining customers, plays with what Andre Bazin termed the camera’s “screen” as opposed to a painting’s “frame.” Bazin imagines the screen, characterized by arbitrary edges and “cut-off-ness” as something like the default setting for photography (Benjamin also has something similar in mind, I think, when he writes of what is “native” to the camera). Ketaki Sheth’s project underlines the extent to which Indian studio practices resist this default, favoring instead symmetry and frontality, i.e. features associated with the frame.



It would be tempting (and quite easy in fact) to see this as characteristic of South Asia but actually once identified in an Indian context it becomes possible to identify it elsewhere (e.g. in Nicaragua, Nigeria, and in other locations where studios survive). This is the cultural space that I’ve described in the past as “more than local, less than global.” It’s not peculiar to South Asia, although it is very marked and visible in South Asia. It is very striking how iconophilic India and Nepal are, and how tenaciously local studios survive (due in large part to the bureaucratic state’s demand for ID photographs and also the continuing importance of wedding photography). Thinking about this extra-regional space is driving our thinking in the project about “demotic” photography rather than “vernacular” photography. Demotic suggests a ground up, often shared subaltern practice as opposed to reactive practices determined through their opposition to dominant class practices) as in Bourdieu’s account of 1960s French peasant photography.

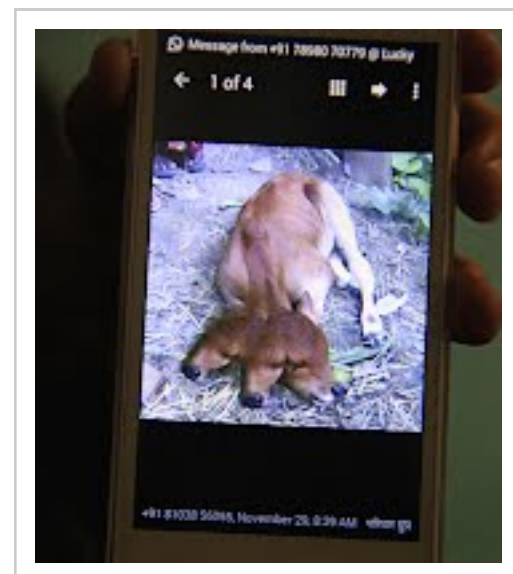


The emerging comparative themes in the project concern (among others) visual representation as the precondition for political representation, the emergence of “proleptic” photographic identities, and the role of social media and these curricula, which intersect and overlap complexly across the different fieldwork locations.

ZH: The so-called “visual turn” in South Asian studies, heralded by Diane Eck’s *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* is closing into its third decade. In your opinion, what are the new frontiers of this field of study?

CP: Well the first thing is that I think that the “career” of *darshan*, post-Eck says something about the unfulfilled need for anthropologists to cling to over-arching concepts in the wake of the collapse of the culture concept. I think part of the appeal of “darshan” as a tool was that it was a means of restoring coherence. In this sense I think we should be skeptical about its hegemony. In the part of Madhya Pradesh I know, you are just as likely to hear the term “barkat” (from the Arabic “baraka”) in relation to (the fruits of) Hindu image worship but maybe because it’s too hybrid it doesn’t get invoked by scholars in the same way.

However, I think the study of visual practices in South Asia still has a long way to go. *Lessons from Hell* indicates that there are whole genres of south Asian visual culture which are focused on problematics of looking that have never been properly investigated and there are entire communities and traditions about whose visual practices we still know next to nothing. There have been many important contributions to the study of visual practices in South Asia that show the continuing fecundity of the field. For instance, I think of Andy Rotman’s study of early Buddhism *Thus Have I Seen*, Clare Harris’s almost detective investigation of photographs produced in the Younghusband Lhasa Mission, Yousuf Saeed’s and Jamal Elias’ tantalizing work on Muslim image practices. Then there are important works investigating visual history, which problematize the role of the *visual* as evidence (*The Camera as Witness*, Joy Pachuau and Willem Van Schendel’s book on Mizoram and Sugata Ray’s forthcoming book on eco-aesthetics and Krishna imagery. I take all these as evidence of a field that is still really only starting to open up: it’s not nearing completion or exhaustion.



ZH: Narrowing into the field of the study of photography in South Asia, would you agree with Sophie Gordon’s characterization that scholarly output in this field is largely caught in an “aesthetics versus context” debate? Or would you say that since her statement (2007) the field has diversified, and, if so, how?

CP: To be honest I don’t understand that distinction: it seems to me that context determines aesthetics. If you crave the subtleties of John Murray’s wax negatives (huge, amazing records of north Indian buildings made in the 1850s) then painted photographs infused with Bollywood excess will probably repel you. With any aesthetics one needs to get inside a context, learn a code, learn what matters, what is beautiful and what might be less so: these are never self-evident superficial matters. All learning and appreciation involves what Nelson Goodman called “world-making” through which you come to understand internal coherence and consistency: context helps open up new aesthetic frontiers.

Sophie worked as the London curator of the Alkazi Photographic Collection at a time when the collection was moving away from its focus on canonical 19th-century colonial photography (John Murray, Samuel Bourne etc.) towards demotic Indian practitioners and she may well have been reflecting on that institutional shift of direction.

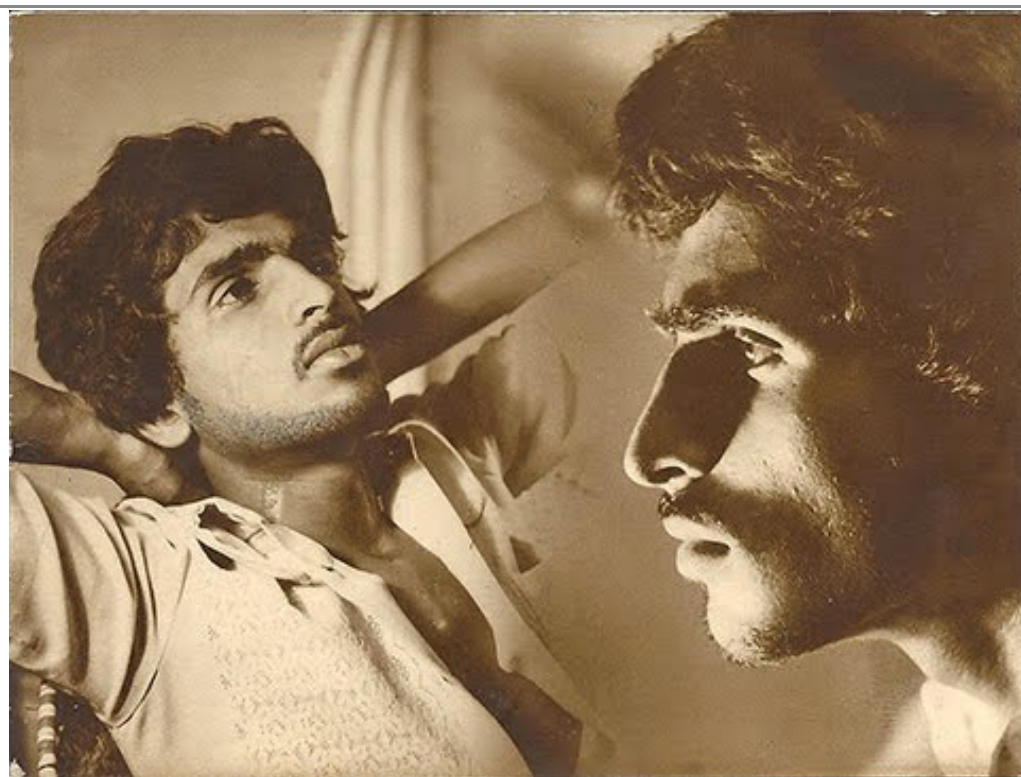
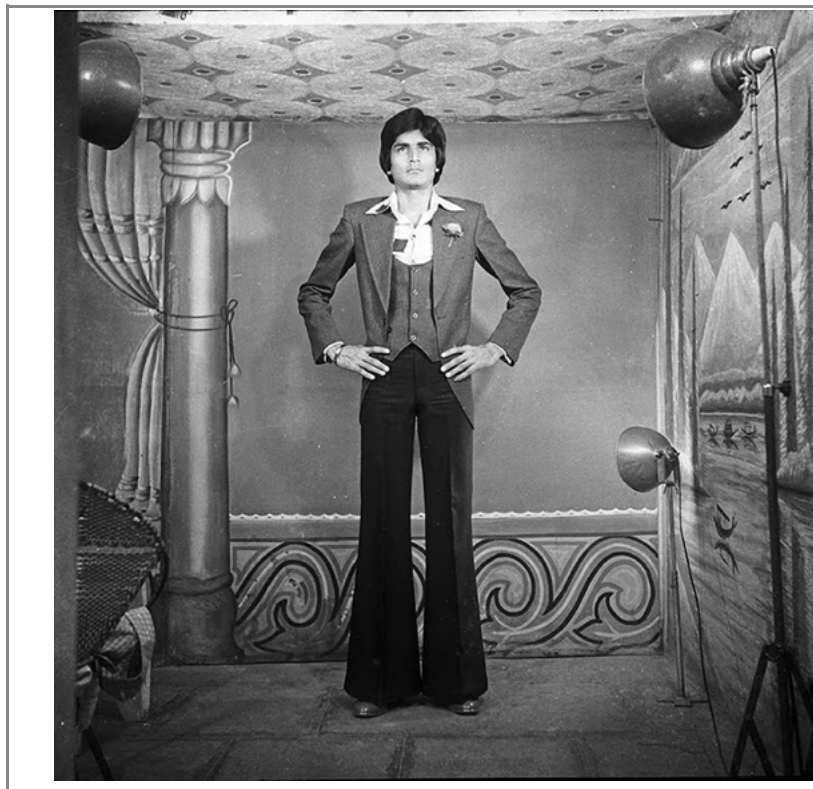
The flip side of this distinction involves subjecting bodies of images that were previously inoculated from political scrutiny by their “aesthetic” status to political critique. This was one of the objectives of my *Coming of Photography in India* (2008), which explored how work by photographers like Murray and Bourne was produced within a “colonial habitus.”

ZH: Leaving aside academics, but staying in photography, could you share with me which contemporary photographer(s) working in the South Asia you most appreciate, whose vision you find particularly significant?

CP: Well largely thanks to Shahidul Alam’s inspirational vision there is an incredibly strong contingent of committed photojournalists in Bangladesh. Shahidul’s own work on migration provides a compelling example of how photography can

be used to investigate process and movement. Taslima Akhtar (perhaps best known for her images of the Rana Plaza disaster) shows how the camera can be yoked to activist causes and Munem Wasif has produced an arresting study of the increasingly politicized forms of faith in Bangladesh.

In India Ronny Sen produces images of mysterious evanescence, and Ketaki Sheth's recent *Photo Studio* is a wonderful study of small-town aesthetics. Cop Shiva from Bangalore shares with Ketaki an interest in how subjects present themselves performatively. I've recently come to a new appreciation of the late Raghbir Singh, and like him Cop Shiva is a master of color who shoots in the street but whereas Raghbir was fascinated by the contingency and improbable alignments of the street, Cop Shiva approaches it very much as a formal theatrical space.



I like Ishan Tankha's quiet and reflective work on Naxalism in Chhattisgarh. His focus on the symbolic and material lexicon of peasant struggle puts me very much in mind of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects*. Sohrab Hura is probably the most remarkable young South Asian photographer/film-maker. His short twin-screen video piece *The Lost Head and the Bird* is truly remarkable both as a creative invention and a documentary record. It trawls social media images to produce a prophetic account of the intertwining of political sentiment with the personal in contemporary India. It's exhilarating and scary. Finally it's been good to follow the trajectory of Suresh Punjabi's work as it has orbited from a small town in Madhya Pradesh (where I've been working intermittently since 1982) into the art world. Both Punjabi's work, the wonderful Ajmer photographer Ran Chand (recently documented by Christophe Prebois), and the Tamil studio world you yourself have documented are the tip of a still submerged iceberg of demotic photography.



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