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Invented Worlds: India through the Camera Lens of Waswo X. Waswo

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"Sometimes I heard the foxes as they ranged over the snow crust, in moonlight nights, in search of a partridge or other game, barking raggedly and demonically like forest dogs, as if laboring with some anxiety, or seeking expression, struggling for light...They seemed to be like rudimental men, still standing on the defense, awaiting their transformation."[\[1\]](#)

Henry David Thoreau

When a photographer observes and presents slices of another culture through the camera lens, a complex set of cultural forces are set into motion. It is virtually certain in this context that questions of globalization and hegemony come to mind. Globalization has resulted in a re-shifting, in theory if not entirely in practice, of the location of power from a dominant center in Europe or America, to centers throughout the world. This shift involves economic, political, and aesthetic spheres of influence and their attending artistic practices. Hegemony refers to cultural dominance as when a dominant culture, by direct or indirect means, attempts to shape how another culture functions, or is perceived in its essential political, economic or artistic matters.

It is in the light of such considerations that I will look at the photographs of the contemporary American artist photographer Waswo X. Waswo, who lives and works in India. Waswo received his training and initial development as a photographer in the United States. He readily acknowledges key influences on his development from his prior experiences in American. Among these are the work of Edward Farber, a prominent newspaper photographer in the Midwest, and the work of American artist-photographers such as Eugent Atget, Henry Hamilton Bennet, Edward Curtis, William Henry Jackson, and perhaps Cindy Sherman of more recent vintage. Compare, for example, Waswo, "Near the River's Edge-Kerela" and [\[Image #2: Waswo, "Morning on the Estuary-Kerlala\]](#), with works such as Edward Curtis's [\[Image #3: "Kutneai Duck Hunter," 1901\]](#) featuring a boat with shadow extended over the water and surrounded by the misty atmosphere[\[2\]](#)





But of course there are notable differences in the styles and the cultural approaches to a particular subject between the works of pictorialist influenced Waswo and his American influences. Waswo's portrait of [Image #4: "Woman with A Basket-Goa"] appears to have more in common with W. W. Hooper's portrait, [Image #5 : "Indian Girl," 1870-1880][3] than with [Image #6: Dorothea Lang's "Migrant Mother, Nipomo California," 1936.][4] The stark realism found in Lang's photograph taken during the depression era of the 1930s in the United States differs markedly from the soft tonal romanticism of Waswo and the Pictorialist Hooper. Poverty is anaesthetized in Waswo's photographs [Image #7: "Untitled Portrait-Karnataka."], whereas it appears with grim reality in Lang's "Migrant Mother."



The body of Waswo's photographs referred to here is called "India Poems Portfolio." It is comprised of seventy some images consisting mainly of portraits, architecture, genere scenes, self-portraits, landscape and a few still life images created between 1999 and 2004. Many of Waswo's photographs contain a human subject, even when the context is a prominent architectural or natural site. The photographs are intended to complement the verbal images found in Waswo's poems, also featuring his experiences and observations of India and her people.[5]

"...I love sitting outside your temples

watching the old women

string flowers with their hands.

I love walking barefoot

In your dry dusty heat.

I love the noontime shade

Of your grass and mud huts.

Yes, yes,

I'll have some *chai*,

And a plate of simple rice,

Which I know,

Coming from you

Is a fabulous gift.

I'll surrender control,

Abandon my greedy,

Greedy,

Pampered American ways.

India, you take me.

I will learn to do as you say:

Of cross-legged on a straw mat,

wash my but with my hand,

ring the temple bell,

speak with reverence of cricket,

Gandi, Nehru

and Sai Baba.

India,

how is it I can be so infatuated

with you,

my kidnapper,

my captor?"

From Poem No. 44[6]

Initially, Waswo's photographs of Indian subject matter offer few visual clues to distinguish them from images of Victorian British Colonial India made by the Pictorialists a century or more ago. To the untrained eye, they appear at first glance to be vintage pictorialist prints belonging to the late nineteenth century. Their choice of subject, composition style, and sepia toned brown appearance all support this initial perception. Differences resulting from the aging and other features of the photographic paper, as well as those from the benefit of improvements in modern chemical processes, camera equipment and photographic techniques would be evident to a trained eye.

Perhaps overshadowing any current American hegemonic influence on the way Waswo perceives and depicts contemporary India is the intervention of late 19th and early 20th century Pictorialism, an approach to photography developed primarily among Western photographers working in Europe and American at the turn of the last century. Pictorialist photography is a type of representational photography typically based on exotic travel experiences and the photographer's personal experiences. It developed in the second half of the nineteenth century as a move toward establishing photography as a fine art.[7] Pictorialism is created in part with soft focus and brown sepia tones applied to portraiture, dramatic landscapes and architectural scenes. Pictorialist photography takes on some of the properties of the picturesque in painting. It is striking in appearance, charming and prone to romanticize its subjects.



Like the Pictorialists of the earlier period, Waswo draws upon his own experiences as a traveler. In this instance, the photographer's extensive world-wide travels suggest a traveller's eye as an essential part of his pictorial aesthetic. Like the Pictorialists, he uses similar composition and technical processes to produce his works. For example, Waswo's [Image #8: "A Flight of Birds--Jaisalmer."] captures in soft sepia tones a flock of birds swirl around a temple that floats at the center of the space and is reflected in water below. A distant shoreline in the background forms a perfect horizon line giving the piece a strong formal structure that holds its romantic sentiments in balance. Compare this composition with [Image #9: Felice A. Beato's "River Scene, India," ca 1857-8] where the composition with water and foliage exhibit similar qualities of serenity and quietude.[8]

Conceptual differences between the earlier works from the nineteenth century and Waswo's photographs become apparent as the photographer reveals his theoretical intent, which is in part

is grounded in traditional romanticism as was Pictorialism, but extends into post-modernism. Romanticism excludes from the photographs the changes in Indian society brought about by modern technology and industrialization. By omitting modern civilization's technological transformations of Indian life, the artist initially evokes in the viewer's mind perceptions of a past era. As the viewer's experience progresses, this initial response eventually yields to the timelessness of the images.

Thus his work is post-modern in the sense that it obliterates all references to real time considerations and seamlessly appropriates references to the historical past in its subject matter, as well as through its stylistic connections to earlier stages of Pictorialist photography. Post-modern art practices enable the artist to ignore historical time by merging ideas and images of the past into a contemporary statement. Only Waswo does not invoke actual historic images. Instead, he carefully selects his raw subjects and applies photographic means guided by his own creative intuitions to create the illusion of age in the photographic object. For example, [Image #10: "Elephant Festival-Jaipur" depicting four men riding on the backs of elephants, with human and animal subjects both in full dress costume, vividly recalls the splendor of the Victorian age in colonial India. The appropriation of past and present with none too subtle irony is especially poignant in [Image #11: "My Private Driver-Pushcar"], in both the subject matter and (perhaps unintended) in the title. Here a white European female aristocrat elegantly dressed in Empire style, languishing on a chaise lounge of the same period, serves as the background drape for a portrait of the artist's male Indian driver who is positioned in the center-front of the picture plane.



From this body of photographs representing the work of Waswo, we see once again that the camera is not a neutral recorder of persons, places, or events. For the most part, Waswo's photographs are carefully staged scenes rather than attempts to record people as they actually are, "unposed and off guard." What he sees and records in his photographs is a function of the various technological, aesthetic and cultural forces at work, as well as his personal choices, interacting with each other to express the artist's particular vision. Waswo is well aware of these factors. In his own words, he disavows any intent to produce a factual or truthful record documenting particular individuals, cultures, or places encountered in his travels. His work is not documentary photography as its aim is not to be informational or representational with respect to the external world. Rather, Waswo says, "I see my photography as the conscious creation of a

myth. It is the myth of beauty, romance, adventure, discovery and exoticism that once was an unquestioned mainstay in every traveler's lexicon."[\[9\]](#)

Inevitably, an artist from a dominant western culture who chooses to photograph conditions in a post-colonial culture must address social questions of domination and exploitation. Indeed to see the cultures of India through the lens of the camera is already to impose a western invention with its distinctive cultural assumptions about how to view and understand the world. With the camera comes a scientific world view that values direct observations of the world, and visual description and interpretation, [\[10\]](#) over understanding based on metaphysical and religious reflection and understanding dating back three thousand years. The latter is deeply embedded historically in Indian life and extends to the present. Hence, the camera brings with it the tenets that have become central to Western culture's epistemology. In understanding Waswo's works in this context, it is necessary to recognize that the artist is engaging in a form of cultural intervention. His role as the artist in control of the camera is that of a native born American employing a technology and a mind set primarily grounded in Western epistemology. In this instance, his observations are informed in part by a global perspective, achieved through extensive travel in all parts of the world. His travels included numerous journeys throughout India. Subsequently the photographer has become an expatriate who spends at least half of his time living in India. In the course of undergoing such experiences, his own consciousness has undoubtedly moved beyond its initial beginnings.

The artist's desire to empathize, even identify with the people and culture of India is evident; yet the cultural politics of our time, rightly or wrongly, demand that we view his situation with a certain doubt. In the best of circumstances, these photographs raise important social concerns in a post-colonial era. Despite all efforts to show the people and the land in the most sympathetic light, questions of dominance and exploitation remain. As a person of means not dependent on the local economy, the artist wields the camera as an instrument of power and control. In this instance, the artist candidly lays bare this concern in a poem when he asks: "Is it wrong to step from modern life to the Jungle Book?...I must be honest. Do I come to India to exploit, to photograph exotic oddities, to live cheaply, bargaining hard against the poverty of others?"[\[11\]](#)



Perhaps one way to test the extent of the influence of a Western mind set on the artist's perception of India would be to compare his images with the photographs of native Indian photographers. [Image #12: K. L. Kothary, 007 (Man with Bird)], [Image #13: K. L. Kothary,

008 (Two Figures in Street)] [Images #14: Waswo, "Untitled Portrait-Himachal Pradesh," 2003]; [Image #15: Waswo "On a Mountain Path-Dharamsala, 2003." Using our eyes and the visual information provided in the photographs, is it possible to discern which is by a native Indian photographer, and by Waswo? It is not certain. Or is the medium itself including the camera machine and the technical and stylistic tenets of Pictorial Photography rather than the photographer's cultural orientation that controls how the culture is viewed? These are questions which cannot be answered here, but they warrant further reflection.



Another means to gauge the differences in perception would be to examine the critical responses of native Indian critics and observers to the photographs. The artist expresses his aim in these words: "I wish all Indians could see my work as I see it: a loving meditation on a beautiful land and its people, a study of simple things that will soon slip away with time." [12] As to be expected, the responses of Indian viewers may vary, some perceiving the works differently from the artist. The photographer expresses his surprise that always a few visitors perceive his favorite images, for example, [Image #16: Waswo, "The entrances to Homes-Pushkar," 2000] in a negative light. Some Indian viewers asked concerning this work, "Why do you Westerners

always focus on our poverty?" [13] Others objected that Waswo focuses on the poor to the exclusion of the middle class and nouveau riche life. An Indian writer, N. Pushpamana, while recognizing their aesthetic merits, sees in these photographs echoes of the stereotypical images of the Colonial era which sought to show the cultural superiority of the British Colonialists over their Indian subjects. "...When I see the photographs, they are images of the 'Eternal Orient,' stilled in time. It is not as if these scenes are not real, it is only that it seems as if nothing else exists.... India is one of the big manufacturing countries of the world, ...a bustling, diverse country....a large modern democracy, highly politically aware..." [14] Other Indian writers view Waswo's photographs in a more favorable light. Dr. shreeniwasan Ayyar wrote, "Contrary to what some believe, such photographs do not portray India in a negative light. Rather, they reveal India to be what it is: a vast fountainhead that enlightens the human quest for universality and transcendental consciousness." [15]



The photographs themselves, as aesthetic artifacts, are unquestionably beautiful to look at. They demonstrate the artist's good eye and a high level of skill in camera work and processing techniques. Among the strongest composition in the group, from my perspective, are [Image #17: "Young Boy-Old Deli"] and [Image #18: "Self Portrait in A Sullen Mood-Jaisalmer."] The young boy in clothed in white and wearing a white cap is surrounded with rich chocolate brown toned facade with subtle patches of light. [Image #19: "Self Portrait"] is a masterful study in light and shade that lingers in the viewer's mind. Their beauty contributes to their populist appeal. It is likely that both Western and Indian viewers will find beauty in these photographs.

Yet their beauty raises certain problems in the context of twentieth century art. Beauty no longer carries the weight that it once did, even in aesthetics. To some, the pursuit of beauty "may seem a frivolous, even futile endeavor."[\[16\]](#) Given current debates about the place of beauty in art and culture, it is necessary to recognize beauty's equivocal status in contemporary culture. Questions about beauty prompt a more critical look at the artistic processes employed by Waswo. Why, for example use sepia at this stage in the development of photography? The rich sepia tones of Waswo's photographs are indeed pleasing to the eye. But they also offer the potential for being seductive; that is, might they not just as easily cause a viewer to experience nostalgia for the past without enlightening one's view on the present state of life in India? Do they invite the viewer to explore and gain new understanding of life in India today? Or, is it too much to ask of an artist who insists that he is not engaging in documentary work? Why consciously omit traces of "the real world of present day India" where technology and electronic communications have effectively linked India to the wider world through globalization? These are questions remaining unanswered in the search for meaning focused upon the photographs of Waswo.

Setting aside the critical questions raised by Waswo's photographs of India, perhaps there is a deeper insight to be gained from his quest to engage India through his photography, as was already intimated in the comments of Dr. Ayyar. To this end I refer to the words of the American writer, Henry David Thoreau as he reflects on his return to civilization from *Walden Pond*. His message is that to gain self-understanding, as well as understanding of others, it is necessary to place ourselves in the world, to continuously engage in voyaging and discovery.[\[17\]](#) In this respect, Waswo's photographs have an important story to tell; when seen together they flow like a film. On the surface at least, Waswo narrates a romantic view of India as imagined and constructed using poses and frames accessed through his camera. For the artist, they have an important story to tell; they represent *his* story, if not the truth of the people and the land portrayed. Perhaps his story is a universal tale about human beings and intriguing scenes everywhere and not just about India. His photographs thus represent the artist's contribution to his own invented world. And, this may be all that can be expected of an artist.

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (xv) cited in Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp 57, 58.

[2] Reproduced in Edward Lucie Smith's *The Invented Eye*, plate no. 139 (New York: London, Toronto: Paddington Press, Ltd. 1975).

[3] Reproduced in Edward Lucie Smith, *The Invented Eye*, Plate no. 75 (New York, London, Toronto: Paddington Press, Ltd., 1975),

[4] Reproduced in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964) p. 143.

[5] Waswo X. Waswo, *WaswoX. Waswo: Indian Poems*, (Lakdikapool, Hyderabad, India, 2002).

[6] Waswo X. Waswo, *Waswo X. Waswo, Indian Poems*, second edition (Rooftop Vistas, 2005), p. 127.

[7] See Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910-1955* (New York: Norton, 1997).

[8] Felice A. Biato, "Rivere Scene in India," ca. 1857-1858, reproduced in Edward Lucie Smith, *The Invented Eye: Masterpieces of Photography, 1839-1914* (London: Paddington Press, 1975), plate no. 73.

[9] Waswo X. Waswo, "Some Thoughts on what I Do," unpublished manuscript, 2005.

[10] A. D. Coleman, *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), p. 82.

[11] Waswo X. Waswo, *Waswo X. Waswow: Indian Poems, 15* (Lakdikapool, Hyderabad, India, 2002) p.p. 53, 55.

[12] Waswo X. Waswo, *Indian Poems: The Photographs*, p. 17.

[13] Waswo X. Waswo, *Indian Poems: The Photographs*, p. 16.

[14] N. Pushpamala, "Photographing the Natives," Waswow, *Indian Poems: The Photographs*, p. 168.

[15] Dr. Shreeniwasan Ayyar, "An Insight into India," Waswow, *Indian Poems: The Photographs*, p. 170.

[16] Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso, *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late twentieth Century* (exhibition catalogue, Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution, 1999) p. 12.

[17] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1981), pp. 52-55.