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Photography and Tibet

Clare Harris. Reaktion Books, London, 2016. 224 pages, with 60 colour plates and 50 halftones. Softcover £19.95, ISBN 978-1-780-23652-0.

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including Evelin Jonckheere and Kurt Vanhoutte at Antwerp and Joe Kember at Exeter, have contributed important essays to this collection, enriching our knowledge of the inherently transnational nature of the lanternist's work and of the medium itself.

The studies that Jolly and deCourcy have solicited each stress the 'media specificity' of the magic lantern performance, drawing out the unique perceptual and social experiences these events offered for the contemporary reader's attention. At the same time, they trace the evolution of individual performances as they were repeated and adapted to fit their audiences' changing needs. Such emphases encourage us to consider the practices of the magic lantern lecture as preconditions of our own contemporary screen engagements, which – we should be mindful – are also collaborative engagements between a viewer, a producer and a subject. Whether it is in styling the 'background' of a home office ahead of an online meeting, sorting a 'slide show' ahead of a PowerPoint presentation or tweaking the parameters of a curated stream of information – or simply in discussing a screen experience we have shared – this collection reveals that we draw, continually, on the remarkable competencies that lanternists and their audiences developed in their magic lantern lectures.

The Magic Lantern at Work provides a significant contribution to an emerging and interdisciplinary field of scholarship. It casts welcome light on an influential yet often overlooked medium and on the 'sometimes forgotten people who gathered [around it]'. This collection will be of immense value to scholars of culture and media, postcolonial and imperial studies, and screen and photographic history; as it will be for those who care for or seek to present magic lantern material held in public collections.

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Historically, the photographic record of Tibet has been suffused with Orientalism and shaped by the machinations of geopolitics. *Photography and Tibet*, authored by the anthropologist and scholar of Tibetan culture Clare Harris, navigates the tightrope of writing about stereotypes without indulging in them. The result is a lively and lucid narrative that addresses, head on, centuries of misidentification and appropriation in a manner that will engage both specialists and newcomers to Tibetan studies.

Organised chronologically and comprising three chapters, *Photography and Tibet* is a valuable title in Reaktion's well-regarded and growing 'Exposures' list, a series of books focussed on cross-disciplinary themes and regional image-based scholarship. Building on extensive prior research and strong creative networks across the Himalayan region, Harris considers how photographs 'have played a role in defending, inscribing and imagining a place called Tibet'. Her writing is informed by two interconnected questions: 'what motivates individuals to take photographs and what role do the resulting images play for their viewers?' In the case of Tibet, the influences and outputs are both complex and emotive.

As Harris reveals, an interest in Tibetan terrain and topography predated the Western fascination with Tibetan peoples and their cultural practices. To the British colonial imagination, the vastness of Tibet cried out for visual documentation. In addition, its Buddhist inhabitants were deemed worthy of ethnographic classification. For technological reasons (the constraints of the cameras of the era) as well as logistical (very limited access to Tibet proper), the first images of Tibet and its surrounding areas were carefully composed landscapes. But the genre of Himalayan landscape photography – now experiencing a renaissance thanks to contemporary Chinese fascination with imaging and memorialising Tibet – required, as a precondition, the recognition of the very 'idea' of Tibet.

While the allure of visiting Tibet was irresistible to the imperial imagination, particularly to aspiring officers looking to establish reputations for documentary prowess and bravery, a secondary Tibet-related industry began to emerge in the 'periphery'. Hill stations across British India, in places such as Darjeeling, witnessed a mushrooming of photographic studios catering to tourists escaping the heat of the plains. They offered viewers back in the UK an impressive visual record – albeit fabricated and often quite problematic – of having been in or close to the Himalaya through the production and circulation of photographs. No surprise, then, that

important questions of authenticity cut across this study, and it also is worth noting the author's painstaking ethnographic and archival research that has helped to overturn a number of entrenched misidentifications associated with Tibet in museums and private collections across the world.

Just as Tibet stands for something bigger than itself, other places serve as visual and representational proxies for Tibet. For political and logistical reasons, highland Buddhist communities and Himalayan landscapes across Nepal, Bhutan and northern India continue to be leveraged as substitutes and surrogates for Tibet, in print and online. Given this entanglement, exploring what 'photographic veracity' means is particularly relevant in the Tibetan context. Through selective examples, Harris draws out the camera's twin capacities to 'objectivize and subjectivize reality', demonstrating how this tension continues 'unabated to the present day'. The relative absence of first-hand, empirical knowledge of Tibet, Harris convincingly argues, has only served to amplify romantic imaginings. After all, myths multiply most effectively in a knowledge vacuum.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked a turn from staging Tibet at a distance to penetrating it. The entire Himalayan chain was caught up in the political machinations and intrigue known as the 'Great Game', a competitive jostling for influence and control over Central and South Asia by the two most significant imperial regimes of the time, Russia and Britain. Upon entering Tibet, British soldiers and officials were also confronted for the first time with Tibetans, whom they fetishised and disparaged in equal measure. Leading from the top, Lord Curzon, the British Conservative statesman who served as Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, casually dismissed Tibet as 'a miserable and monk ridden country'.

Photography came to be harnessed to establish a putative connection between 'physical markers of ethnicity and a kind of environmental determinism', through which it was imagined that the high plateau and its stark natural conditions would have left visible traces in the physiognomy of its inhabitants. While nose-measuring ethnographic photography is now – thankfully – a practice of the past, romanticised Orientalism remains a dominant genre in Himalayan photography. Outsiders' representations of Tibet have not advanced much beyond what Harris terms, quite fittingly, 'capture and revelation', referencing the dual excitement about being both 'the first' to document a place or people and the rushing sense of rapture in understanding its supposed spiritual dimensions.

Throughout the text, Harris connects the conquest and staging of Tibet to an analysis of the commercial production of Tibetan image-work for a global consumer market. A distinctive aspect of the infamous Younghusband Expedition to Tibet (1903–1904) involved the establishment of postal facilities along the route from British India to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, in order that negatives could be processed, mailed and shared with remarkable speed. Identifying opportunities for salary enhancement, some more entrepreneurial British soldiers began visually documenting their travels and exploits for profit, mailing their pictures to British and Indian newspapers for publication. The gun and the camera, Harris contends with good reason, were the 'two most powerful technologies of the British Empire'.

Two further aspects of the book deserve special attention. First, Harris offers a nuanced interpretation of the aesthetics and semiotics of image production and consumption by Tibetans themselves. Chapter Three, entitled 'Tibetan Encounters with the Camera', is a particularly satisfying and sophisticated analysis, and the author's discussion of the Tibetan concept of *par* ('copies') will have considerable application to scholars and students of visual theory.

Second, the closing pages of the book are devoted to a brief review of the creative outputs of three exceptional young Tibetan photographers: Tenzing Dakpa, Nyema Droma and Jigme Namdol. Harris's prose sparkles when she engages with their work, demonstrating both a profound appreciation and deep understanding of the relevance of their oeuvre. Concluding *Photography and Tibet* with Namdol's poignant 'Road to Tibet', photographed in Nepal's northern district of Mustang in 2012, Harris brings the reader full circle. Speaking to an estrangement and enduring sense of loss that many Tibetans experience when thinking of their homeland, the image documents the photographer's aborted attempt to return to Tibet. In an uncanny representational turn, and in keeping with the surrogate 'as if' images of Tibet taken by so many colonial officers and explorers in India over the preceding century, Namdol's 2012 photograph captures 'an impression of a place that was almost Tibet but not quite', alluding to the 'dream of return'.

A pithy two-page epilogue touches on the transnational reach of social media and its power to create new representational pathways for imagining Tibet, whether as a destination for wedding photographic shoots or as a Chinese colonial project. It would be remiss in a review of a monograph containing over a hundred expertly assembled colour plates and halftones not to speak of the quality of the images. Carefully selected and richly contextualised, Harris's choices of image plates are woven seamlessly into her account, at times elucidating and at others driving her narrative forward. While the glossy card stock

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serves the colour and halftone reproductions exceedingly well, the small size of the serif font used for the body of the text was rather trying on the eyes, at least for this reviewer. This tiny production quibble aside, *Photography and Tibet* is an important, elegantly crafted and most enjoyable survey of the historical context and goals of photography in this complex and so often misunderstood country.

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