

## Framing a Sikh Priest: A Bourke-White Photograph in Changing Contexts

Ira Sarma



On September 9, 1946, a black-and-white photograph appears in *Life* magazine. In the photo we see a medium close-up frontal shot of a middle-aged man – turbaned and bearded – holding a shiny, slightly curved sword upright in his right hand while with his left he sets out to wipe the blade top-down with a white piece of cloth; the man is standing in a room with ornately decorated walls and looks, with half-closed eyes, directly into the camera which captures him in this pose from a low angle perspective. The photograph is part of a photo-essay on “the Sikhs of India”, shot by the US-American photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White in the north Indian cities of Amritsar and Lahore in the same year, and the caption identifies the man as a “Sikh granthi, or priest”. (Anon. 1946a: 137) Sixty years later, after a fitful journey through the labyrinths of a multifaceted media landscape, the “priest” will have turned ‘ethnic’ military hero, commodity, hateful murderer and, lastly, blood-thirsty madman.

Photographs, once they have been taken by a photographer, live their own lives. They grow into their first material shape – a sum of pixels, a negative, a print or diapositive; and they may make their way out into the world in a published form, assuming multifarious roles while wandering from context to context, clothed in

manifold titles and captions, and telling us the most diverse stories. Photographs are polysemous, and the idea of a universal readability of photography – famously articulated by the German photographer August Sander in 1931<sup>1</sup> – has long been deemed a myth: Photographs change their meaning according to the environment within which they are displayed but also, simply enough, according to the visual socialisation of the beholder who reads the information within the realm of his own experiences and knowledge of the world. Merely *looking* at an image does not yet guarantee that we *see* it, as argued by Knieper and Müller: The act of seeing (Ger.: sehen) involves prior knowledge and visual competence; the act of looking (Ger.: schauen), on the other hand implies a heuristic and more associative act of perception. (Cf. Knieper & Müller, 2006: 1)

Nevertheless – and in spite of the fact that our understanding of images is determined by our cultural background – photographs transcend cultural borders much more easily than texts because, as Knieper and Müller point out, at least superficially no translation involving the knowledge of vocabulary or grammar is necessary in order to read a photograph. (Cf. *ibid.*) Images are, therefore, powerful and at the same time highly problematic, precisely because photography is often taken to be factual – even in the digital age where the manipulation of images has become easier than ever before. In addition, as we will see in the following, the old-fashioned means of contextualisation and captioning also continue to be employed to literally frame a photograph in order to assign it a particular meaning. In an increasingly visual world that overflows with images floating freely from context to new context, it is ever more important to be aware of the pitfalls of de- and re-contextualisation of this apparently truthful medium.

### Contexts and captions

A photograph is “a paradox”, as Roland Barthes proposes in his well-known essay on *The Photographic Message*: It can be, at the same time, objective and invested, natural and cultural; while structurally autonomous it is still subject to various connotation procedures.<sup>2</sup> (Barthes 1977 [1961]: 17 & 20) Besides, any text that accompanies an image bestows, according to Barthes, a second meaning to it. The text, and in particular the caption constitutes “a parasitic message designed to connote the image”: Words exist only at the expense of the image which becomes drained

---

<sup>1</sup> In a radio lecture series Sander states that photography may be seen as a universal language as it can “communicate our thoughts, conceptions, and realities, to all the people on earth”. (Sander & Halley, 1978 [1931]: 675) Unlike verbal expression which has, over time, become so complex and abstract that “intellectual training” is needed to understand it photography, according to Sander, “has the advantage of being instantly and immediately perceptible” and can be understood even by the “broadest, intellectually least trained masses of people”. (*Ibid.*: 676)

<sup>2</sup> Such procedures include those that modify reality itself (e.g. by ‘faking’ situations or having the subjects in the image ‘pose’) and those that involve photographic techniques and modes (e.g. lighting, exposure or aestheticisation) as well as the photograph’s “syntax”, i.e. its position within a sequence of images. (Cf. *ibid.*: 20-25)

of its multiplicity of meanings – its very lifeblood. No longer does the image illustrate the text, it is now the text which “loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination”. (Ibid. 25-26) Importantly, Barthes argues, the influence of a piece of text varies depending on how (physically) close it is to an image: The caption “has a less obvious effect of connotation than the headline or accompanying article” because the latter two are “palpably separate from the image, the former by its emphasis, the latter by its distance”. (Ibid.: 26)

Proceeding from Barthes’ idea of ‘closeness’, I suggest different connotative levels. The caption can be seen as working on a primary connotative level. As it “appears to duplicate the image” it comes to be included in the image’s denotation. (Ibid.) Through the layout it is directly and clearly connected to the photograph and pretends to “belong” to the image. (Cf. Chaplin 2006: 45) Since the caption chooses one of a multitude of potential meanings it suppresses the photograph’s ambiguity because, as Elizabeth Chaplin remarks, “visual ambiguity almost always loses out to verbal clarity”. (Ibid.: 51; cf. also Barrett 1985: 53) The interpretative character of the caption becomes elusive – it pretends to offer a perception that is ‘correct’.

On a secondary connotative level we find narratives that are further removed from the image. This may be, for example, surrounding running text, labels as used in a visual-art context, or simply the general layout on a page. A secondary connotative narrative may confirm the message of the caption, expand it or sometimes complement it with new information, e.g. technical data like the name of photographer, size of the photo, date and place when/where the photo was taken etc. Secondary narratives are easier to identify as connotative since they present us with information that clearly exists on a plain different from that of the image. They are an addition to the image and are *not* part of the image’s denotation.

Lastly, the physical context – in Roland Barthes’ words “the channel of transmission” (Barthes 1977 [1961]: 15) – may be counted as a tertiary connotative level: A ‘second meaning’ provided by a newspaper differs markedly from that of a glossy magazine or the exhibition hall of a museum.<sup>3</sup> Passing from one such context to the next often constitutes, according to Terry Barrett, a “category displacement” of the photograph: Photos may switch, for example, from moral categories to aesthetic categories – a process that gives Barrett “cause for concern” since the aestheticisation for instance of photographs showing agony or disaster must be seen critically. (Barrett 1985: 55) He refers to both Susan Sontag and Walter Benjamin who have cautioned against turning the “pain of others” (Sontag 2003) into something pleasurable – without even considering the special case of contextual displacement. (Barrett 1985: 55) The “presentational environment” of a photograph, Barrett points out, is in itself a “form of interpretation that is sometimes vague and lacks specificity [...] and sometimes unequivocal”. (Ibid.: 57) Every photograph,

---

<sup>3</sup> Not only the medium of the newspaper as such but also its very name affects the way the photograph is perceived: A photograph, Barthes asserts, can change its meaning simply by passing from a conservative paper to a communist one. (Cf. Barthes 1977 [1961]: 15) The same holds true for any medium – magazines, books, exhibitions etc.

thus, needs to be ‘read’ while taking account of the various connotative procedures which accompany it.

In the following I will trace the journey of the photo above through the interpretative spaces of a glossy magazine, a personal reminiscence, an online archive, an illustrated novel and a review of this novel in order to see how the connotative meaning changes in line with the photograph’s de- and re-contextualisation – attesting to the ubiquity of a politics of connotation.

### **Margaret Bourke-White and *Life***

When Margaret Bourke-White set out for India in 1946 she had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity for almost five years as she points out in the preface to *Halfway to Freedom*, her reminiscences of her Indian stays. (Cf. Bourke-White 1949: x) The time had arrived in the early months of 1946 when Wilson Hicks, the executive editor of *Life* magazine who, according to Bourke-White, “had an unfailing gift for sensing a coming story”, decided that she should finally set off to document the country’s journey to independence. (Ibid.) Throughout her stay, which lasted almost nine months, Bourke-White toured the country extensively, visiting the metropolitan centres (Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta) and a range of smaller cities (e.g. Simla and Amritsar) as well as the countryside in North and South India. During both this first assignment to India and a second one in the following year she took some of her best-known photographs, including the pictures of the aftermath of *Direct Action Day* in Calcutta in 1946<sup>4</sup> and the now iconic photo of Mahatma Gandhi sitting, against the light, slightly to the right behind his spinning wheel reading.<sup>5</sup> Among the lesser known photo-essays is Bourke-White’s “The Sikhs of India” which provides the original context for the photograph to be discussed here.

The photographic essay is a genre literally invented by *Life*’s founder Henry Luce who had conceived of it as a visually coherent narrative: a series of photographs on a single theme which was to be deliberately arranged “to convey a mood, deliver information [and] tell a story”. (Edey 1978: 1; see also Luce 1936: 2) Luce wanted to end the tradition of photographs being taken, published and looked at “haphazardly”; his photographers were to become “camera editors” who should “use their heads as well as their legs”. (Luce 1936: 2) Accordingly, in *Life* the captioning, too, followed a meticulously calculated pattern: Every word and also the formatting must be seen as following the requirements of the genre ‘photo-essay’. Moreover, the photo-essays’ captions are always also a part of the politics of *Life*’s founder Henry Luce who was, from the beginning, intent on using the new format

---

<sup>4</sup> The *Direct Action Day* (16 August 1946) had been called for by the Muslim League as a general strike to demonstrate for a sovereign Pakistan. The protests got out of control and the “great Calcutta killing” as it was later called left several thousands of Hindus and Muslims dead. Bourke-White’s article titled “Vultures of Calcutta” appeared in the same issue that carried the feature on the “Sikhs of India”. (Anon. 1946b)

<sup>5</sup> For the photograph see Ben Cosgrove’s article ‘Gandhi and His Spinning Wheel: The Story Behind an Iconic Photo’ on the *Time* website: <http://time.com/3639043/gandhi-and-his-spinning-wheel-the-story-behind-an-iconic-photo/> (last accessed on 10.1.2017).

of a visual magazine to impress upon his readers his own ideas of the ideal American way of life.<sup>6</sup>

Henry Luce had launched *Life* in 1936 as “the biggest picture show on earth”. (Luce 1936: 2) As the magazine quickly rose to extraordinary success Henry Luce began to see himself as a spin doctor for American middle and upper-middle class popular opinion.<sup>7</sup> He openly spoke out against the idea that journalism should be ‘impartial’ and ‘objective’ and followed this principle throughout his career. (Cf. Vials 2006: 85) Luce thus wanted to educate his readers – but in his opinion they also had to be entertained: They were “to see life; to see the world, to eyewitness great events; [...] to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.” (Luce 1936: 1) This double agenda of pleasure and education found expression in the hybrid format of the magazine: a wildly mixed potpourri of pieces designed to be instructive on the one hand, and, on the other, articles featuring ‘exotic’ subjects or ‘tabloid themes’ as well as a dense jungle of advertisements to entertain readers. In this context, the captions of the magazine’s photo-essays served a multiple purpose: They were deliberately designed to provide Luce’s interpretative framework for the photographs, serve as catchphrases and, at the same time, allow for a quick and fleeting reading of the magazine.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, they connote the images – in the context of *Life*’s photo-essays – both on the primary and secondary level as we will see in the following.

### *Life visits the Sikhs of India*

“The Sikhs of India” appeared in the earlier-mentioned issue as part of the magazine’s “*Life visits...*” series which started as a regular feature in 1940 and introduced the magazine’s readership over the years to countless destinations which were, thereby, connoted as particularly interesting, unusual or ‘exotic’ – ranging from “an English Village” to a “Stork Club”, a “Haunted House” or “a German University”. With most places being in the USA or, at the most, in Europe (mainly

---

<sup>6</sup> For Luce’s policy see Vials 2006; also Sarma 2015: 276-277.

<sup>7</sup> Even though magazines were the least popular of the mass media, *Life* had, in 1940, a circulation of 2.86 million and the highest ‘pass-along’ factor among the mass-circulation magazines: At the end of the 1930s each copy was passed along to and read by around 14-17 additional people reaching up to 48.62 million US-Americans (ca. 36% of the population). (Cf. Baughman 2001: 42) Earlier, in 1923, Luce had already co-founded the magazine *Time*, revolutionising journalism by developing a new narrative mode of reportage that was both witty and concise. (Cf. Vials 2006: 74) By 1946 Luce and his company Time Inc. reigned supreme in the US media landscape.

<sup>8</sup> As we have to navigate through the maze of advertisements in order to find the articles our reading experience becomes one of simultaneity rather than linearity, undermining the narrative coherence of the magazine but also that of the photo-essays themselves. (Cf. Vials, p. 88 & 89) According to the cultural critic Sally Stein, magazine reading is rarely a straight, linear process. Magazines are not organised “along a single continuum”, they invite us “to pick and choose, to move backwards as well as forwards, in a way that suggests that we not only will the process to continue by physically turning the pages [...] but that we ‘freely’ negotiate a ‘personal’ path through the magazine labyrinth”. (Stein 1985: 7)

Britain), the “Sikhs of India” would have represented one of the more exciting destinations within this series. The essay consists of eight black-and-white photographs, seven of which are captioned, and one block of text, all together spread over four pages (two full and two half pages).




THE TRUNK OF A PLUM TREE (RIGHT), BELIEVED THE OLDEST TREE IN AMRITSAR, SHAD BATHES IN THE SACRED WATERS OF THE GOLDEN TEMPLE

### Life Visits the Sikhs of India

The sturdy warriors of Punjab bathe before their great golden shrine in the sacred Pool of Immortality

The warlike Indians, bathing tranquilly on the opposite page in the holy waters of the Pool of Immortality by the great Golden Temple in Amritsar, in one of the 3,700,000 Sikhs who by tradition are some of India's best warriors. Now, in Amritsar, they face the presence of Punjab, whose great Sikhs live, according to the tradition in Calcutta and Bombay, by their Sikhism and Singar. The Golden Temple in their Indian shrine. Since the 16th Century these warriors, coming from a spring with supposed healing powers, have been sacred.


Founded in the 16th Century by Guru Nanak, a great Hindu, the Sikh sect is a composite movement among religions. Nanak was a student man, who professed to Mohammed's Moses and sought with his own religion to bridge the divide gap in India between Hinduism and Mohammed. Like Mohammed, the Sikhs worship only one god and one book. Like Hindus, they have their dead, and their land and its soil are sacred. Like Mohammed, they eat pork and have found themselves from the caste system which hinders India like a yoke.



A SMALL DAGGER is used for this key to reach their shrine in the water but they may not carry them.



SINGIT HAIR is distinguishing mark of Sikhs. Beards must be kept in the water but they may not carry them.



HOLY TEMPLE WATER, serving health, is drunk by all who visit the shrine but they may not carry them.

### 4 Reasons Why Fleischmann's makes America's Most Delicious Martini!



- Fleischmann's Dry Gin** is made from the finest, purest, and most carefully selected grain in America.
- Fleischmann's Gin** is distilled in a continuous process, which gives it a smooth, mellow, and deliciously pure character.
- Fleischmann's Distillation** is a process which removes all impurities and gives it a smooth, mellow, and deliciously pure character.
- Fleischmann's Whiskey** is a product of the finest grain in America, and is distilled in a continuous process, which gives it a smooth, mellow, and deliciously pure character.

ESTABLISHED 1858 AMERICAN OWNED & PRODUCED

You find all 4 only in

## FLEISCHMANN'S ...

America's First Gin

THE FLEISCHMANN DISTILLING CORPORATION, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK.

### Sikhs of India continues



**PRAYER & SIKH BAPTISM** in Lahore, capital of Punjab Province, western and northernmost city in the Indian subcontinent. A Sikh Sikh man, with his arms and other offerings in their arms, for the water intended for these Sikhs whose paths are steeped in prayer, a process of purification for the Sikh.



**HOLY ROOM**, called Gurdwara and occupied in Gurdwara since in 1589 by Sikh leader of Sikhs in early Sikh events. There are several Gurdwaras in the Golden Temple. At least one must be read for and night by a Sikh with another Sikh visiting or in house. Father is an independent in Sikh.



back, which is covered by a silver cloth. Several strings of beads hang from the platform. At the top are pictures of great Sikhs, including Guru Nanak (top) showing from the right, who are founders of the sect and present that God belongs to all men. Any Sikh can enter a temple and read the holy book.



**A SACRED SWORD** is placed by a guru, or priest. The sword symbolizes the power of Sikhs and that one may not separate. Many symbols of Punjab. The Sikhs are among the best fighting troops in the world. They made up half of the Indian army and were recognized as the British Crown.



7 OUT OF 10 TISSUE USERS SAY

## "Of all brands I like Kleenex best"



Now! MORE KLEENEX being made than ever before. (Always asking for it!)

One tissue needs for about all other brands in public preference...and that one tissue is Kleenex! But, yes, only with Kleenex can you get a tissue and have the next one pop up ready for use. So keep asking for Kleenex—America's favorite tissue. Each and every month there'll be more and more Kleenex tissues for you.

And only Kleenex of all tissues gives you the handy Seven-Tissue Box. Yes, only with Kleenex can you get a tissue and have the next one pop up ready for use. So keep asking for Kleenex—America's favorite tissue. Each and every month there'll be more and more Kleenex tissues for you.

There's only one Kleenex AMERICA'S FAVORITE TISSUE

On the first two full pages of the photo-essay we see five photographs of Sikhs of different ages taking a bath in (or being given water from) the *sarovar*, the holy tank of the Golden Temple complex. The latter two half pages show three pictures flanked by two black and white advertisements for *Fleischmann's Distilled Dry Gin* on the left, and *Kleenex* on the right. A large photograph at the top depicts a community of devotees seated around the *guru granth*, “the holy book” of Sikhism, in a Sikh temple at Lahore, as the caption tells us; two smaller pictures underneath (without specified location) show the *guru granth* as it is being ritually attended to by two priests, and a priest holding up a sword, respectively. The last image of the photo-essay is the one whose journey we will trace in more detail in the following. It presents us, according to the caption, with the aforementioned Sikh “granthi”, shown as he is about to perform a ritual act, viz. the cleaning of a sacred sword. Just as the photo-essay on the whole takes care to highlight the tolerant religiosity and the bravery of the Sikhs through both the images and the text, the caption of this photo, too, emphasises both these aspects. It reads:

**A SACRED SWORD** is cleaned by a granthi, or priest. The sword symbolizes military valor of Sikhs and this one was used against Moslem invaders of Punjab. The Sikhs are among the best native troops that the British have. They made up a tenth of the Indian army and won an eighth of its Victoria Crosses. (Anon. 1946: 137; capitalisation and bold print in the original)

On the primary connotative level the capitalised first three words of the caption, first of all, single out the sword as the central motif of the image, and they indicate that this sword is not to be seen primarily as a weapon but as a sacred object – in spite of the second clause which states that it was once used against “Moslem invaders”. Both our gaze and our understanding are thus initially directed to the object rather than the person in the photograph – the “granthi, or priest” – who is introduced only briefly and solely with regard to his role concerning the object. The focus then revolves back to the sword as we learn about its symbolic value and its former purpose. The mention of the previous employment of the sword in a warlike situation also draws attention to the military morale of the community and the last two short sentences of the caption emphasise the central role they played for the success of the (Indian) British Army, calling our attention, once more, to the Sikhs’ martial character and courage.<sup>9</sup>

However, when seen in the context of the secondary and tertiary connotative level (i.e. of the photo-essay as a whole and within the physical context of *Life*

---

<sup>9</sup> *Life* was interested in documenting the breakdown of the British Empire as the freedom movement in India gathered speed. Luce had an imperialist agenda and clearly saw the twentieth century as “The American Century” as he pointed out in an editorial with the same title published in *Life* on February 17, 1941. In this opinion piece he vehemently propagated America’s claim to economic, technical, artistic and moral leadership of the world: “As America enters dynamically upon the world scene”, he claimed, “we need most of all to seek and to bring forth a vision of America as a world power which is authentically American and which can inspire us to live and work and fight with vigor and enthusiasm”. (Luce 1941: 65)

magazine) the image and its caption, particularly the capitalised signal words, assume a slightly different role. As indicated earlier, the readers of *Life*, depending on their level of interest, can obtain information in different forms – a superficial skimming, a cursory reading, and a thorough reading – each demanding a different grade of attentiveness and functioning on a different level of connotation.

Thus, especially when superficially skimming the magazine, information will mainly be taken in on the tertiary level: The articles and photo-essays are, from the very beginning, connoted by their presence in *Life* magazine; the medium itself augurs yet another set of exciting and possibly unique stories – narrative commodities within a feast of consumer goods on offer, ready to be enjoyed and possibly providing us with some new insights into the world out there. In this context the photographs of the “Sikhs of India” create an ‘exotic’ ambience – the US-American readers of the 1940s see a number of men with top-knots or turbans bathing, sitting or standing in front of an ‘oriental’ background (signified e.g. by various onion-shaped domes or ornately decorated walls). The ‘Exotic’ as a second meaning of the images is also emphasised on the secondary connotative level: The title of the photo-essay positions the text in the predetermined category of the “*Life* visits...”-series which promises to lead the readers to a marvellous destination where, in our case, we find men who are called ‘Sikhs’ and who belong to faraway India. In the subheading, the readers are then presented with the two major themes of the essay – war and religion – as they read; “The sturdy warriors of Punjab bathe before their great golden shrine in the sacred Pool of Immortality”. Importantly, these two connotations emerge, once more, in the capitalised first three words of the caption, “a scared sword”. In the context of *Life* these signal words not only suggest the appropriate reading of the corresponding image – they also serve as a bridge between the secondary and primary connotative level because they can be taken in by the cursory reader as key words linking the title with the running text. Thus in the “Sikhs of India” the signal words read “a small dagger”, “uncut hair”, “holy temple water”, “inside a Sikh shrine”, “holy book” and “a sacred sword” – once again referring to the major themes of war and religion which appear in the textual narrative. Interestingly, even in the images centring on humans the signal words refer to objects rather than persons – instead of individuals we see ‘types’ of the ‘oriental’ Other. Only upon reading the complete captions, are the readers presented with additional ‘ethnographic’ tidbits referring to the community as a whole as we have seen in the above example. The photographs in combination with the signal words of the captions, here, serve as ‘pegs’ on which to hang those pieces of information that make up the “story” of the photo-essay as demanded by Luce. In the text block this story is expanded with, yet again, a focus on religious matters, some aspects of the religious history of the Sikhs, the military character and selected general facts about the Sikh community.

Thus, our photograph, in its first published form, was sent on its journey with a focus on the object of the sword rather than the person in the photo. Our protagonist – ‘identified’ as a Sikh granthi – has no individual traits, he is connoted as an exemplary embodiment of the Exotic (on the tertiary level) as well as religiosity and, importantly, military prowess (the latter two both on the secondary and



primary level). Praising the military strength of the (soon to be) former British colonial subjects, the caption indirectly takes a sideswipe at the declining power of the British Empire while caption and photograph combined satisfy the American middle-class readership's desire for thrilling entertainment.

### *Halfway to Freedom*

The next stop for our photograph is Margaret Bourke-White's *Halfway to Freedom*, published some three years after the photo-essay, and about two years after her second trip to India during which she witnessed and recorded the turmoil of Indian Partition. Bourke-White had made it a habit to write about her assignments early on in her career<sup>10</sup>, and she wrote *Halfway to Freedom* in the desire "to understand this complex country" and to "make it clear to others". (Bourke-White 1963: 286) In the book she records the impressions from her Indian journeys which she later calls "a most stimulating part of my life". (Ibid.) In her autobiography, Bourke-White states that, at some point in her career, writing had become ever more important to her to sort out her ideas as it allowed her to have a "rhythm" in her life, a chance to live through a "period of tranquillity" after "all the excitement, the difficulties, the pressures" that characterised her work as a photographer. (Ibid.: 300) "Writing a book", she says, "is my way of digesting my experiences". (Ibid.) *Halfway to Freedom*, thus, allowed her to relive and possibly deal with events of which she says that they had affected her more deeply than anything else in her life and whose memory would never leave her. (Cf. *ibid.*: 299)

Thus, *Halfway to Freedom*, which Bourke-White's biographer Vicki Goldberg has called "the most politically aware of all her books" (Goldberg 1987: 309), is a very personal work which does not pretend to deliver history and its stories 'objectively'. In twenty-six chapters and twelve photo sections with captions Bourke-White paints the picture of a nation "shining with hope on the threshold of a new life". (Bourke-White 1949: xi) India, she suggests – assuming the position of a superior (if not derogatory) Western spectator – is an ambitious country that learns fast and will soon play an important role on the international scene, once its struggling people have reached "the light". (Ibid.) In line with the personal character of the work, the captions are highly suggestive throughout; for the most part they are not employed as an aid to identifying what is to be seen in the picture, they rather serve as subjective and sometimes moralising comments on the scenes, often employed to melodramatic effect, and at times only to be understood in connection

---

<sup>10</sup> Her first book written in this vein was published after her first trip to Russia (*Eyes on Russia*, 1931) and consisted mainly of photographs and only a short text. As she recalls in her memoirs, it was later, in her three books on the Second World War, that the significance of images and writing was reversed: in *Shooting the Russian War* (1942) "words and pictures began to be more evenly balanced", and in "*Purple Heart Valley*" (1944) and "*Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly*" (1946), on Italy and Germany, respectively, the written text eventually became the more important part of her books. (Cf. Bourke-White 1963: 191)

with the accompanying chapter.<sup>11</sup> If the running text does indeed bear signs of Bourke-White's "effort to understand India" (Bourke-White 1963: 300) the captions certainly show that writing the book, for her, is also a social activity – that she writes for an audience.

Margaret Bourke-White begins *Halfway to Freedom* with a chapter on the partition of the subcontinent and a corresponding picture section called "The Great Migration"<sup>12</sup>, and then moves back in time, leading the reader – in a conversational tone – through the political landscape of pre-Independence India and then back to the present. In the course of the book these political chapters alternate with a range of 'ethnographic' chapters which give information on highly diverse topics like the working conditions of "The Mill Workers of Delhi", "Coeducation and Islam" or, very generally, "Caste, Custom, and Law". All texts are furnished with personal stories drawn from her own experience or from an apparent wealth of anecdotes told to Bourke-White by her Indian informers and friends.

For the most part, the picture sections correspond with the surrounding chapters, only the section which features the photograph of our "Sikh granthi" is found in the context of an unrelated chapter titled "Sons of the Sun and Moon" (chapter 18) which deals with the wealth of the Indian princes. Stretching over four pages, the photo sequence is one of the shortest in the book: It contains only four photographs, three of which were also part of the photo-essay in *Life*.<sup>13</sup> At first sight, thus, it seems to stand for itself, with its narrative resting entirely on the combination of title, images and captions. However, since the lack of physical 'closeness' of a text, as Barthes has argued, does not mean that it does not connote a related image, we also need to look at the sequence in the context of a two-page description of the Sikhs in the first chapter (p. 8-10) and some stray remarks scattered through the book. In these passages Bourke-White portrays the Sikhs in the context of the massive migration taking place in the months preceding and following Independence. While pondering the violence that accompanied the exchange of

---

<sup>11</sup> Bourke-White had, from early on in her career, followed a debatable policy of captioning. The work most openly accused of a downright unethical handling of captioning was the documentary book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, published in 1937, in which Bourke-White, together with the writer Erskine Caldwell, portrays poor farmers in US-American South during the Depression. In an introductory note to the book they state that it was not their intention to lend the persons in the photographs a voice but rather to express their own ideas about the situations pictured. (Cf. Stott 1973: 221) The resulting – sometimes condescending – captions were, at the time, strongly criticised by other photojournalists.

In *Halfway to Freedom* Bourke-White thanks Edward Stanley "for his perceptive and informative captions" in her acknowledgements. (Bourke-White 1949: vi) This shows that she has not formulated the captions herself, but her explicit appreciation suggests that she approved of them and that they express her personal opinion. Edward Stanley, himself a journalist and editor and also a long-term close friend of hers, had already provided the captions for other books of Bourke-White's, including "*Purple Heart Valley*" (1944) and "*Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly*" (1946). For a discussion of Bourke-White's policy of captioning see Stott 1973: 220-223.

<sup>12</sup> "The Great Migration" quotes Bourke-White's famous photo-essay in *Life* (3 Nov 1947) which ran under the same title and also featured several of the photos included in this section.

<sup>13</sup> The photo sections in the book do not have page numbers. This may be due to printing requirements – the photos are reproduced as plates on special photographic paper which is bound into the book. Nevertheless, the lack of page numbers connotes the photographs as additions – bonus material which is not an integral part of the story.

populations between the new-born nations India and Pakistan, Bourke-White recalls a scene in “Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs” which she found to be “the center of an especially militant form of fanaticism”:

I remember visiting the frightfully littered railroad station after an attack which had cost the lives of a thousand Muslim refugees, and seeing a row of dignified-looking Sikhs, venerable in their long beards and wearing the bright blue turbans of the militant Akali sect, sitting cross-legged all along the platform. Each patriarchal figure held a long curved saber across his knees – waiting quietly for the next train. The Muslims were not always the victims. Trainloads of Sikhs and Hindus emigrating to India had hours of equal dread when passing through Lahore, the last great rail junction before they escaped from Pakistan. Hindu-Sikh convoys on the Pakistan highroads were a constant temptation to Muslim raiders. (Bourke-White 1949: 6-7)

Clearly, Bourke-White takes care to keep a neutral stance, not only in this chapter but throughout the book: She does not put blame on any one of the three communities and recounts stories of suffering from all walks of life. Nevertheless, as her visual perceptivity shines through even in her texts, she creates here, through words, an image that connotes, on the secondary level, our photograph which is displayed around 160 pages later within the photo section. It is the image of a community whose male members are visually imposing, wearing “patriarchal” beards and turbans (as she says elsewhere; *ibid.*: 12), and carrying equally imposing weapons – the “long curved saber[s]” we now see in the photograph – intent on putting their militant attitudes to the test. Later on in the first chapter, the Sikhs are painted as a community of sturdy, particularly hardworking and successful farmers, and Bourke-White also emphasises their monotheistic religion.

The photo section itself is again connoted on the secondary level by the title: Not content to use a neutral heading as employed in *Life*, Bourke-White calls the section “The *Bearded* Sikhs” (my emphasis) – focusing once more on the outward appearance which seems to have left a lasting impression on her as she refers to this characteristic time and again throughout the book. The special mention of the Sikhs’ “beardedness” in the title can be seen as an act of essentialising the community; besides, the title also clearly exoticises the Sikhs, referring back to the first chapter where she describes the beards and turbans of the “warlike Sikhs” as “picturesque”; their using a “long curved saber”, too, will have connoted the community – and by extension our photograph – as ‘archaic’ and ‘exotic’. (Bourke-White 1949: 4)

Our photograph – again the last of the series – now moves into a position different from the one it held in *Life*, not least because Bourke-White has changed the approach to the way the narrative operates. Even though she compiles sequences of images which – in the given constellation – tell their own stories, she does not present the reader with a full-blown photo-essay furnished with complementary captions, but rather with a story that runs through the captions and is complemented by the photographs. The narrative focus, too, has changed: Instead of concentrating on two major themes – religion and military valour – Bourke-White presents us

with a range of very diverse pieces of information regarding the Sikh religion, politics, or the organisation of the community. Therefore, our protagonist has now turned into an entirely unspecific ‘ethnic’ representative of the community – and an allegory of military prowess; the only direct connection between the caption and the photograph is – again – the first two capitalised words which echo *Life* and read “SACRED SWORD”. Thereafter the text proceeds into a different direction as it ignores a potential ritual context of the photograph as well as the original spatial environment, i.e. a temple – it focuses, instead, exclusively on the military referentiality of the sword:

SACRED SWORD: Sikhs have a reputation for military prowess, were not conquered by the British until the middle of the 19th century. Enshrined in the Golden Temple are antique battle swords. The Sikh should cover his hair in public, let his beard grow, wear a comb in his hair, an iron bracelet, short trousers. (Bourke-White 1949: opposite page 167)

If we leave aside the running text of chapter one, it is in this last picture that the title of the photo section is explained as we now learn that “the Sikh” lets his beard grow. Apart from that the ‘sacred sword’ has become a ‘battle sword’ and the reader is left in the dark about what kind of action the man in the photograph is performing. Moreover, in the caption commenting on the second photograph of this section, showing the Golden Temple in Amritsar, we learn, that “Sikhs have no priests”.<sup>14</sup> The man in our photograph is no longer a “granthi” and, what is more, is no longer acknowledged at all. Upon entering *Halfway to Freedom* he has been deprived of his function; his act has been shorn of its rituality. On the primary connotative level of the captions he has become an ‘ethnic’ specimen and military hero – now in the role of a supporting actor rather than a protagonist.

### The LIFE photo archive

In the following decades the photograph was not published again until it was digitised and reappeared in the online photo archive of *Life*<sup>15</sup> where it can be seen in its digital form in the middle of the webpage against a white background. A column

---

<sup>14</sup> This is correct in so far as there exists no hereditary or ordained priesthood in Sikhism; the position of the granthi equals that of a priest only insofar as he is responsible for reading from the *guru granth* and leading the service.

<sup>15</sup> For the LIFE photo archive see <http://images.google.com/hosted/life>. Our photograph is also part of the *Life Picture Collection* of *gettyimages* (see <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/collections/lifepicture>). In the following I will deal exemplarily with the LIFE photo archive because it addresses the private non-commercial user, and therefore the same group of recipients as the other media discussed here.

Suffice it to say that the website of *gettyimages* caters exclusively to commercial users and therefore understands the images mainly as technically connoted articles of merchandise. As a consequence, *gettyimages* provide more technical information on the photographs (e.g. editorial numbers which make it easy to retrace photos, a barcode or a technical ‘object name’); they offer various types of licences and provide users with ready to use preselected connotative search terms.

on the right hand side of the page supplies, under the red logo of *Life*, selected information and metadata, the latter including the name of the photographer, location and date taken plus the size of the picture given both in inches and in pixels.

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "Life Visits The Sikhs Of India - Hosted by Google - Internet Explorer". The address bar shows the URL "http://images.google.com/hosted/life/aa1875bcb371c19.html". The page content includes a search bar, a large image of a Sikh granthi cleaning a sword, and a sidebar with the following information:

- LIFE** logo
- [Buy framed image](#)
- Life Visits The Sikhs Of India**
- Sikh granthi or priest, cleaning the ancient sacred sword of the Sikh faith, the symbol of their valor that was once used against Moslem invaders, in the Golden Temple.
- Location: Amritsar, W. Punjab, India
- Date taken: September 1946
- Photographer: Margaret Bourke-White
- Size: 1020 x 1280 pixels (14.2 x 17.8 inches)
- Related images: Four small thumbnail images.
- Search LIFE Images:

At the bottom of the page, there is a copyright notice: "© 2008 Google - [Google Home](#)".

For an idea of what the photograph is about we can turn to the caption which is given above the metadata:

Sikh granthi or priest, cleaning the ancient sacred sword of the Sikh faith, the symbol of their valor that was once used against Moslem invaders, in the Golden Temple.

The focus now lies for the first time on the person rather than the object, even if only briefly; besides the indefinite article has been turned into a definite one – a “Sikh granthi” is said to be cleaning “the” sacred sword, implying that it is an essential ritual object of the Sikhs. Unlike the photo-essay in *Life* this caption locates the scene “in the Golden Temple”, and the metadata just below the caption localise it in “Amritsar, W. Punjab, India”. The mention of the “Moslem invaders” hints at a possible historical antagonism between the communities but without further context leaves the viewer alone as what to make of this piece of information.

Importantly, in the column on the right we are also informed that our photograph belongs to the category “*Life Visits The Sikhs Of India*” (quoting the original title of the article in the magazine). At the bottom of the column we are given the option to find “related images”, four of which are always visible simultaneously in a small format, granting us a preview. Clicking through these images we find 40 more photographs of the series, exhibiting mainly Sikh men, often in close-ups,

with their turbans specially accentuated.<sup>16</sup> The photographs are thus pooled under a heading but they are no longer held together by the original narrative frame of the photo-essay. The heading is no longer the title of a story but has become an umbrella term under which a number of diverse photographs have been grouped. Therefore, as far as their narrative quality is concerned the photographs remain isolated items.

Interestingly, among the photos of the series there is also a second picture of our protagonist, this time presented in a medium shot; he is wearing the same clothes and we see him holding the sword up and apparently waiting for Bourke-White to take the photograph.<sup>17</sup>



The caption tells us that he is about to start cleaning the sword and thus positions the image on a timeline just before the photograph under discussion:

Sikh granthi or priest, holding up ancient sacred sword of the Sikh faith before cleaning this symbol of valor that was once used against Moslem invaders, in the Golden Temple.

<sup>16</sup> There are more photographs in this series but for unknown reasons they are not grouped together in such a way as to be accessible in one go. The system of classification is far from transparent, and getting access to more images of the series requires a complicated search procedure.

<sup>17</sup> Bourke-White is known for her unscrupulous approach to 'modifying reality', as Barthes has phrased it, in order to get the perfect shot: She often staged the scenes she wanted to photograph, re-arranged objects, or asked people to adopt a certain pose. She was, even at the time, often harshly criticised for being exploitative. (Cf. Sarma 2015: 278-279, and Goldberg 1987: 311)

Thus, our photograph is still very much part of a larger connotative context, in spite of the fact that normally the act of digitising a photograph that was “not originally digitally created” involves a substantial de-contextualisation.<sup>18</sup> (Hove and Brindle 2015: 137) The LIFE photo archive constitutes a channel of transmission that comes with a completely new range of connotations: The *Life* images went online in 2008, hosted by Google, and the website proudly offers its users the opportunity to “search millions of photographs from the LIFE photo archive, stretching from the 1750s to today”.<sup>19</sup> The new channel of transmission – the ‘digital archive’ – thus carries several connotations: Because it is ‘digital’ it promises to provide for its users a substantial repository of digital visual sources that are universally accessible; the term ‘archive’, on the other hand, indicates the historical value of its materials, promises access to a ‘past’, and points to a certain degree of academic integrity and a potentially critical handling of the sources.

In line with these implications the official Google blog declared in 2008 that the aim behind the mission of launching the archives was “to organize *all the world’s information* and make it universally accessible and useful” (Google 2008, my emphasis) – a statement that overshoots the mark as it proclaims *Life* and its photojournalists to have captured all there was to know about the world during the time of *Life’s* publication. This is a highly debatable stance in any case but even more so in the light of Luce’s policy of deliberately subjective reportage. In addition, the LIFE photo archive, unlike some professional historical archives, does not handle its materials critically. They make indiscriminating use of the old captions, in contrast, for example, to the *British National Archives* which ask viewers on their webpage to note that “the pictures and captions attached to them are representative of their time and may use terms that would not be used today”. (Quoted in Hove and Brindle 2015: 149) Instead of offering their users historical material that could (and should) provide “the opportunity for source criticism” (ibid.) the makers of the LIFE photo archive understand the images yet again as commodities:

Once you are in the archive, you’ll also notice that you can access a rich full-size, full-screen version of each image simply by clicking on the picture itself in the landing page. If you decide you really like one of these images, high-quality framed prints can be purchased from LIFE at the click of a button. Think of the holiday gift possibilities! It doesn’t get much easier than that.

So please take a look for yourself and experience these great photos. Your exploration will be limited only by your imagination and your desire to keep on clicking. (Google 2008)

Looking at the photographs is made into an act of fleeting and superficial enjoyment, very much true to *Life’s* original politics. Clicking through the pages now

<sup>18</sup> See Hove and Brindle, 2015, for an excellent exploration of the way the digitisation of archival materials changes the ways historical research is done.

<sup>19</sup> <http://images.google.com/hosted/life> (last accessed on 13.1.2017)

replaces flicking through the pages – complemented by the new feature of the option of instant purchase: Every photograph is now, on the website, embedded into a context of ownership and digital rights. Joanna Sassoon calls this context the “new discursive space [...] of the marketplace” which is “created to exploit and commodify the aesthetic qualities of image content rather than to promote either the research potential or polysemic nature of the photographic object”. (Sassoon 2007: 312)

Looking at our photograph in the “marketplace” we thus find it immediately openly connoted as a commodity because the user is informed in a line directly below the image – a space that is usually reserved for the caption – that it is “for personal non-commercial use only”, with the copyright holder given as “Time Inc.” to the left of this line. As the photograph has lost its materiality, any non-commercial user can now ‘own’ it, de- and re-contextualise it, and easily add connotations. Moreover, in the column on the right hand side the user is given the opportunity to buy the “framed image” and the link directs us to the website [www.art.com](http://www.art.com), inviting us into another tertiary connotative space. Here however our photograph is, eventually, not available. Apparently a small range of photographs have been preselected – those that are deemed worth reproducing by an unknown authority. The very absence of our photo in this group connotes it, in the context of the website, as not being counted as “a piece of history”, as “immortal” or “unforgettable”.<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, *Life*’s ownership of the photograph is ascertained through a link to the right of the photo which offers a full size view (which can also be obtained by simply clicking on the photograph). Once this view has opened, the logo of *Life* appears in the lower right hand corner of the image in the form of a digital watermark, branding the photo and connoting it once more as belonging to the exclusive club of *Life* photographs. As this watermark is superimposed on the image itself it must be seen as a direct encroachment on the primary connotative level. In its digital form the photo cannot be separated from its first ever channel of transmission and connotative context – it is for better or for worse connected to its history within the *Life* universe.

### ***Train to Pakistan***

The last part of the journey, at least for the time being, has transported our photograph into the novel *Train to Pakistan*, which was written by the Indian author Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) and deals with the events surrounding the partition of India. After its first publication in 1956, *Train to Pakistan* went through various editions until it was honoured with a golden jubilee issue in the year 2006. This issue was conceived of and edited by Pramod Kapoor, owner of the Indian publishing house Roli Books, which specialises in fiction and non-fiction in English as well as high-quality coffee table books on arts, photography, lifestyle etc. In order

---

<sup>20</sup> Other photographs of the “Sikhs of India” series are available; they can be found via the search terms “Sikh” or “Bourke-White”. See <http://www.art.com/asp/landing/lifephoto/?rfid=784762> (last accessed on 21.1.2017).



to celebrate the novel and its author appropriately – and well in line with the principle of producing flashy books that are being talked about – Kapoor decided to illustrate the new edition of the novel with some of the photographs Margaret Bourke-White had taken during her second time in India when she was documenting the turmoil of Partition. Accordingly, the original text of the novel is complemented with 66 photos selected by Kapoor himself from the Getty archives in London – our photograph one among them.<sup>21</sup> (Cf. Kapoor 2010: 8) The photographs are interspersed throughout the novel and are presented “as single entities or as loosely arranged groups”. (Sarma 2015: 279) Only a few photos have been employed to illustrate particular passages of the book; most stand for themselves and complement the book with a secondary narrative.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, as we will see in the following, 62 of the 66 photographs are furnished with captions that have been chosen by the editor himself. In addition, Kapoor has also supplemented the novel with a whole range of paratexts (statements on the book cover, introductory passages, short biographies of author and photographer, an editorial foreword, and introductory remarks by the author) which create a maze of connotations for the photographs, as will be seen in the following.

First of all – on the tertiary connotative level – our photograph is now part of a book and has wandered into the connotative realm of belles lettres. The environment of a novel, a famous classic at that, implies that Bourke-White’s photographs, too, will be valued especially for their aesthetic qualities – even more so as the editor Pramod Kapoor, in the short biography of Bourke-White, praises her as “one of the most important photographers of the 20th century” who had pioneered “a new art form: photo journalism”. (Singh 2006: vi)

However, since *Train to Pakistan* is a work of fiction the photographs need to be read, above all, on the secondary connotative level: the narrative of the text surrounding the images. *Train to Pakistan* belongs to the category of ‘Partition literature’, a body of texts that negotiate the disturbing events accompanying the creation of the two states India and Pakistan (forced mass migration, massacres etc.) as well as their long-term consequences (uprootedness and traumatising). The novel recounts the fate of a number of people in a small village near the newly created border, and it is this historical context that forms the new connotative background for the photos. Kapoor states in his introductory remarks that in the novel “truth meets fiction with stunning impact, as Khushwant Singh recounts the trauma and tragedy of Partition”. (Singh 2006: iii) Trauma and tragedy are, indeed, two major connotative categories of this presentational environment, and Bourke-White’s photographs, as Kapoor implies in his paratexts, ‘illustrate’ these aspects. Moreover, the photos are now connoted as historical documents that ‘show’ or even ‘prove’ the elements of truth in the textual narrative as claimed by the editor. Kapoor sees Bourke-White as a “chronicle[r]” of the “trauma of Partition”, implying that photographs are “transparent, unmediated, mechanical transcriptions of reality” (Barrett 1985: 57); he does not take into consideration the connotative procedures

<sup>21</sup> Of these 66 photos only 60 could, so far, be attributed to Bourke-White with certainty.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis of the way the combination of novel and photographs works see Sarma 2015.

photos are subjected to prior to their ‘materialisation’ and, above all, does not reflect on Bourke-White’s well-known disposition towards “tendentious melodrama” (Raeburn 2006: 215) and her inclination to make ample use of the fact that “the photograph allows the photographer to conceal elusively the preparation to which he subjects the scene to be recorded”. (Barthes 1977 [1961]: 21) Moreover, Kapoor ignores the tertiary connotative context for which the photographs had been taken in the first place – *Life* magazine and its agenda.<sup>23</sup>

Our photograph was taken in 1946 and if we are to believe the information given in the various captions and metadata the image had so far been furnished with, it was not connected to the violence of Partition. In its new presentational environment, however, it has been deliberately incorporated into a new narrative that revolves around just this theme: very generally, as it is part of a novel dealing with this theme, but also in particular with regard to its immediate connotative environment. The photograph is now part of a sequence of nine photos stretching over ten pages: The first two images each show a man who is raising his hand (the second one being our protagonist), the remaining seven photos show brutally murdered Partition victims and in some of the images we see vultures hovering over the corpses. A research of the photographs’ provenience shows that most of them stem from contexts not related to each other. Nevertheless, they are grouped together and present us with a ‘micro-narrative’ in its own right, held together by a visual similarity of motives – a pattern regularly employed by Kapoor – and a connotative narrative in the captions.

Kapoor’s politics of captioning resembles that of Bourke-White in so far as he, too, employs highly suggestive wording in order to “convey his personal reading of the images”. (Sarma 2015: 286) In 43 of the 62 captions in *Train to Pakistan* Kapoor uses his own words; in the remaining 19 he either quotes from Bourke-White and her biographer Vicki Goldberg, implying that he echoes a second party’s objective and factual comment, or he quotes from the novel itself which suggests that the respective images can be seen as illustrations of scenes described in the book. In this vein Kapoor incorporates, in sum, 24 photographs into the novel which were not originally taken within the context of Partition, among them our photo.<sup>24</sup> It is paired, on a double page, with an image (on the left) showing a man who at first sight seems to be the very mirror image of our protagonist as far as posture and photographic point of view are concerned.<sup>25</sup> The captions for both photographs are

---

<sup>23</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, in the illustrated *Train to Pakistan* the visual narrative does not correspond with the textual narrative. This underlines, once more, that it is the general context of Partition rather than the book’s story which provides the connotative context for our photograph. (Cf. Sarma 2015)

<sup>24</sup> Of 65 identifiable photographs in the novel 7 have been taken from contexts not connected to Partition at all and 17 are photographs of the aftermath of Direct Action Day; the latter images may be considered as belonging to the story of Partition violence but are taken out of their original context and passed off as scenes connected to a different (‘new’) narrative.

<sup>25</sup> This photograph, too, was taken in 1946. At *gettyimages* it is connoted with the words: “Indian in green uniform which is Moslem color, as he leads cheers of ‘PAKISTAN OR DIE’ at various intervals during speeches at Moslem League rally for autonomy in the British govt’s plan for India’s Independence, at Anglo-Arabic College.”

placed directly on the images themselves – thus emphasising their allegedly denotive quality as indicated by Barthes. One after the other they read:

Both sides spread hatred. Both had to pay a price. Some who witnessed their kith and kin being butchered lost their minds, never to recover.

Margaret Bourke-White: ‘Hatred had been so whipped up by the political pressures which had divided the nations that a new morality had developed. All members of a different religious group were fair prey for loot and murder.’ (Singh 2006: 168-169)

Clearly, the men in both images – a political activist shouting at a rally and our protagonist getting ready to ritually wipe a sacred sword – are connoted as primarily imbued with hate, intent on taking bloody revenge on all those that do not belong to their own community. As the captions speak of “hatred”, “butchering”, “loot” and “murder”, a shout for a politically independent Pakistan becomes a fierce battle cry and the “sacred sword” a murderous weapon. The caption connoting our photograph even states that the desire for taking unbridled revenge constitutes “a new morality” – a person thus interpreted is quintessentially vicious. Consequently, the photographs on the following seven pages seem to show the results of such hatred: brutally slaughtered humans disposed of like “debris”. (Ibid.: 171) By connotation the men in the two photographs that have started this sequence are identified as the perpetrators. The fact that the second caption is a quote from Margaret Bourke-White’s *Halfway to Freedom* lends this interpretation further weight: As we see Bourke-White’s photograph it implies that it is her caption we are reading.<sup>26</sup> Unmistakably, in *Train to Pakistan* the very layout contributes to the imposition of a secondary meaning. No longer just amplifying “a set of connotations already given in the photograph” Kapoor’s politics of de- and re-contextualisation has led to the invention of “an entirely new signified which is retroactively projected into the image, so much so as to appear denoted there”. (Barthes 1977 [1961]: 27)

### **Epilogue: *India Today***

The possible dangers springing from of such acts of de- and re-contextualisation become apparent in a review of the novel published in *India Today* in 2006. Here the reviewer Dilip Bobb writes with regard to our photograph: “The images in this book are brutal in their viewing: [...] in one [of them we see] a Sikh, wiping the bloodstains from his sword, the look in his eyes reflecting the madness of Partition”. (Bobb 2006) The reviewer has clearly allowed himself to be carried away by Ka-

---

<sup>26</sup> The text of the caption quotes from the first chapter of *Halfway to Freedom* in which Bourke-White describes the “Birth of Two Nations”. In the original context the lines describe the situation for those who travelled on foot in the convoys; the sentence preceding the words used in the caption reads: “More fearful than flood and starvation was the ever present threat of attack by hostile religious hordes along the way.” (Bourke-White 1949: 6)

poor's politics of connotation – his use of captions and context. Ultimately our protagonist has completed his connotative journey from “Sikh granthi” to “bloodthirsty madman”.

While, in *Life* magazine, he has to stand back as an individual and present the viewer, above all, with an ‘exotic’ “sacred sword”, he is at least acknowledged as a person performing a ritual act that bestows on him the role of a granthi; in *Halfway to Freedom*, on the other hand, Bourke-White has picked up on *Life*'s caption by directing our attention to the sword, but she has chosen to ignore the person holding it: our protagonist serves as an ‘ethnic’ and ‘picturesque’ representative of the community; in the LIFE photo archive the photograph is no longer part of a coherent story but becomes an isolated commodity, offered to the interested recipient as a “passive object” to be enjoyed and deprived of its potential historical value – the ‘viewer’, in the digital archive, has incidentally become a ‘user’<sup>27</sup>; and in *Train to Pakistan*, finally, we find our protagonist at the forefront again – this time, by implication, as a prime player in the violent, hate-filled turmoil of Partition; from here it is but a stone's throw to seeing the bloodstains on the sword and madness in our protagonist's eyes.

However, Dilip Bobb's comment also demonstrates that it is not only those who bring photographs out in the open and create captions and contexts who carry responsibility. In 2015 the German photographer Daniel Etter took a photograph in Kos, Greece, of an Iraqi refugee who had just landed on the beach in a boat – a father who carries on his right arm his daughter, a girl of about four or five, while clutching with his left his son, about seven or eight years old, against his breast. In the picture we see the man's face convulsed with feelings; he seems to be crying both with fear and relief while looking towards someone or something outside the frame of the picture. Etter was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this photograph in 2016. In an essay in a German magazine he describes how the photo went viral on the net after had it been published in the *New York Times*, how he received notifications via Twitter and Facebook literally every second and how the image was re-tweeted, liked and shared for weeks on end. (Cf. Etter 2016: 28) At some point Etter realised that he had lost hold over his photograph; he could no longer keep track of its re-contextualisations. We cannot prevent a photograph from being politically exploited, Etter admits in his essay, but he eventually wonders about his own role within this process of instrumentalisation and to what extent he is responsible for the image's fate. He eventually decides to tell the story of the photograph in his own words in order to reinstate some of the ‘original’ meaning.

In the digital age, the age of social media, the alienation of images from their denotative meaning increases with, literally, ever click. Images take on a second afterlife when those who *view* them make their own meaning from them. However, re-contextualisation of photographs is not always about ‘true’ or ‘false’. An interpretation can be more or less likely; a new context or caption may just as well reveal an inherent but hitherto unseen meaning. This makes it even more vital that we

---

<sup>27</sup> Sassoon argues that digitisation transforms a photograph from a “material document that has played an active role in history” into a mere “image” and therefore “passive object”. (Sassoon 2004: 199)

assess photographs in the media – any media – in a critical and discerning way; that we take care to ‘see’ them rather than just ‘look’ at them – precisely because images do not have fixed meanings, just as they are not stationary. They are vagabonds: Always on the go, they change garb in accordance with the environments they are moving through. This fleeting nature of pictorial ‘truth’ needs to be kept in mind when reading photographic narratives.

## References

- Anon. 1946a. Life visits the Sikhs of India: The Sturdy Warriors of Punjab Bathe Before Their Great Golden Shrine in the Sacred Pool of Immortality, in: *Life*, 9 September 1946, 134–137. [https://books.google.de/books?id=UEkEAAAAM-BAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.de/books?id=UEkEAAAAM-BAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed 10 January 2017.
- Anon. 1946b. The Vultures of Calcutta: Carrion Birds Feast on Victims of Bloody Religious Riot in India, in: *Life*, 9 September 1946, 38–39. [https://books.google.de/books?id=UEkEAAAAM-BAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.de/books?id=UEkEAAAAM-BAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed 10 January 2017.
- Anon. 1947. The Great Migration. Five Million Indians Flee For Their Lives, in: *Life*, 3 November 1947, 117–125. [https://books.google.de/books?id=r1EE-AAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.de/books?id=r1EE-AAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=de&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed 10 January 2017.
- Barrett, Terry. 1985. Photographs and Contexts, in: *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19 (3), 51–64.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977 [1961]. The Photographic Message, in: *Image Music Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, London: Fontana Press, 15–31.
- Baughman, James L. 2001. Who Read Life? The Circulation of America’s Favorite Magazine, in: Erika Doss (ed.), *Looking at Life Magazine*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 41–51.
- Bobb, Dilip. 2006. Photographic Memory: Haunting Pictures and Classic Prose Come Together to Revive Memories of Partition’s Bloody Birth, in: *India Today (online)*, 21 August 2006. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-of-khushwant-singh-train-to-pakistan/1/180715.html>. Accessed 23 January 2017.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1931. *Eyes on Russia*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1942. *Shooting the Russian War*. Written and Photographed by Margaret Bourke-White, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1944. *They Called it "Purple Heart Valley". A Combat Chronicle of the War in Italy*. Written and Photographed by Margaret Bourke-White, New York: Simon and Schuster.

- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1946. *Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly. A Report on the Collapse of Hitler's "Thousand Years"*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1949. *Halfway to Freedom. A Report on the New India in the Words and Photographs of Margaret Bourke-White*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. 1963. *Portrait of Myself*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Caldwell, Erskine & Margaret Bourke-White. 1937. *You Have Seen Their Faces*, New York: Modern Age Books.
- Chaplin, Elizabeth. 2006. The Convention of Captioning: W. G. Sebald and the Release of the Captive Image, in: *Visual Studies* 21 (1), 42–53.
- Edey, Maitland A. & Constance Sullivan. 1978. *Great Photographic Essays from LIFE*, Boston: New York Graphic Society.
- Etter, Daniel. 2016. Ein kurzer Traum, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, no. 49, 9 December 2016, 26–34.
- Goldberg, Vicki. 1987. *Margaret Bourke-White. A Biography*, London: Heinemann.
- Google. 2008. *Official Blog. LIFE Photo Archive Available on Google Images Search*. <https://googleblog.blogspot.de/2008/11/life-photo-archive-available-on-google.html>. Accessed 13 January 2017.
- Hove, Jon O. & Jonathan A. Brindle. 2015. Digital Archives and Ghanaian History: Potential and Challenges, in: *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 3 (2), 135–156.
- Kapoor, Pramod. 2010. *Witness to Life and Freedom. Margaret Bourke-White in India & Pakistan*, New Delhi: Roli Books.
- Knieper, Thomas & Marion G. Müller. 2006. Editorial, in: Thomas Knieper & Marion G. Müller (eds.), *Emotionalisierung durch Bilder: Herausgeberband der Publizistik*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1–2.
- Luce, Henry R. 1936. *A Prospectus for a New Magazine*, New York.
- Luce, Henry R. 1941. The American Century, in: *Life*, 17 February 1941, 61–65.
- Raeburn, John. 2006. *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Sander, August & Anne Halley (transl.). 1978 [1931]. From the Nature & Growth of Photography: Lecture 5: Photography as a Universal Language, in: *The Massachusetts Review* 19 (4), 674–679.
- Sarma, Ira. 2015. Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan and Margaret Bourke-White's Partition Photographs: Clash of Narratives or Postmemory Project?, in: *Cracow Indological Studies (Crossing Over "on the Birds' Wings": South Asian Literature in Local and Global Contexts)* 17, 269–292.
- Sassoon, Joanna. 2004. Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction, in: Elizabeth Edwards & Janice Hart (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, London, New York: Routledge, 186–202.

- 
- Sassoon, Joanna. 2007. Photographic Meaning in the Age of Digital Reproduction, in: *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1 (0), 299–319.
- Singh, Khushwant. 2006. *Train to Pakistan*, New Delhi: Roli Books.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador.
- Stein, Sally. 1985. The Graphic Ordering of Desire: Modernization of a Middle-Class Women's Magazine, 1919-1939, in: *Heresies* 5 (2/18), 6–16.
- Stott, William. 1973. *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vials, Chris. 2006. The Popular Front in the American Century: *Life Magazine*, Margaret Bourke-White, and Consumer Realism, 1936-1941, in: *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 16 (1), 74–102.