

All That We Saw

It was sometime last year that the news of a mysterious event began to trickle in. By early this year, it had become a topic of intense discussion amongst photographers, archivists, hobbyists, and almost everyone who kept and looked after vintage photographs. Very soon, it became obvious that what had been predicted in fictional stories, in Sci-fi that dealt with the existence and proliferation of low tech and analogue pasts, was shockingly precise and prescient. Images were beginning to disappear.

No one quite knew exactly when, or how, it began. But one after another, news of mysteriously vanishing photographs appeared on social media. Old photographs began to show bizarre signs of erasure before the new ones did. At first, we dismissed it as a hoax; as yet another cheap stunt by the conspiracy-loving fringe to gain traction online. But soon, big tech and media began to report the inexplicable event that started somewhere in a small, quiet town, and soon spread across territories and borders across the world, like a virus.

From archives across the world, stacks of newspapers, the walls of galleries and museums, in warehouses, personal albums and smartphones, photos had slowly and permanently begun to vanish. Their ink, their colour, their imprint had begun to evaporate, and it left no trace behind. Photos were becoming irretrievable, somehow. The hanging frames were getting emptier; albums were turning despairingly pale; digital files were turning corrupt. There seemed to be no order, nor pattern to this inscrutable event. Within months, this mysterious contamination had spread across all continents, leaving millions of frames barren, walls empty, folders vacant, boards bare, exposing what the people in the photographs had masked with their presence—furniture, trees, curtains, fruits, sky, appliances, waterfall, wires, mountains, billboards, rain, the horizon.

This devastating phenomenon unleashed mass hysteria and public chaos, leaving millions in shock, distress, and disbelief. There were those who turned to scientists to explain the riddle of this disappearance, while hoards of people turned to shamans, priests, and religious books for answers. People found it difficult to stop mourning this incredible and unprecedented loss—of the past, of all times imaginable. The photo of an inconsolable young girl refusing to let go from her arms an empty, bare photo-frame is arguably the very last image the world saw. And that was the end of it—all gone!

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that it started as a tiny speck of contamination in the digital wild before it passed through hundreds of millions of computers and smartphones trailing havoc upon being downloaded into our systems, our devices. At the time of writing this, almost all of the 21.5 billion interconnected devices are infected by this virus. Whether it is a virus or not is not known yet, but if it is, its total weight, all of it circulating and residing on our devices across the world, could be collected to make a mound of dust to keep in no more than the palm of my hand. It didn't make anyone sick—thank God for that—but it brought in its wake another kind of illness, an illness for which we have no word, yet.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the images were all damned to vanish from the start; they were meant to darken over time. Silver salt, asphalt, mercury, copper, all the plates and later, the pixels, carried the exact same annihilation date. Their expiry was encoded into the exquisiteness of every image, because, as some knew, light when molten into 'form' and 'shape,' frozen in a frame, was bound to burst into flames one day. And, that day was upon us. How are we to resolve the pain of love living in the absence of images? How are we to reconcile with the utter absurdity of our existence, in which we are now cursed to live, forever, in the terror of the present?

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the ghosts of all the dead people, which lived in photographs, had longed for freedom. They had yearned to escape the visible level in which they had had the misfortune of being arrested in. It took them decades of struggle and labour to establish 'hearing routes' between photographs, an intricate web of listening threads, invisible to the naked eye, which helped them find common cause in their misery, and gather momentum to burst through the images together, all at once! Many people claimed that they witnessed an apparition when it happened: Spectre, a spirit, a shadow leaving the photograph in front of their eyes, freeing itself from its captivity. Not every figure appears to have left its picture in the same manner. Some took off screaming like a banshee leaving the slipstream of a speeding train; some bleached and got washed out; a few others pixellated into a block of colour before departing; others, melted and dripped away.

Why had the images disappeared?

In an ethnographic research done a few years after the phenomenon, it was found that people did not believe in the disappearance of images to be an aberration or a mystery. They saw the 'death of images' as a divine intervention, an automated reprieve requiring no explanation nor extensive investigation. Mechanisms of control like personal data, CCTV surveillance, biometrics identification, face-recognition, electronic frisking, device-searches and others frequently produced situations where anxieties would run high, rules would break, and violence could occur. The rules of circulation—where, how, and when to share images, or how to associate with them—were too elaborate and constantly shifting that people were bound to break them at some

point or the other. Most people had suffered from or witnessed “image-violence,” a term that had become commonplace for violence that was inflicted in, through, or as a consequence of images. This violence often took the form of beatings or other cruel bodily punishments.

Many reported that they had, at several points in their lifetimes, barely escaped death at the hands of the police, or sometimes a mob, because they couldn’t explain the presence of a certain image in their phone, in their house, or in their wallet. This nerve-wrecked society had actually produced a population which was no longer able to understand what an image was—noone was able to describe any image anymore, nor wished to for the fear of being beaten. By threatening people with death in this way, everyone had begun to deny the existence of images to escape this condition of a subjugated life. The society’s material infrastructure exacerbated this precarity of life. Image-violence was often administered at points of contact composed of a dense architecture of stationary and mobile establishments. Over time, public and private infrastructures began to align itself to further this kind of subjugation with highways, bridges, roads, streets, and airports becoming “dual-purpose” spaces of circulating images and bodies, and also of arresting images and bodies that did not align with each other. Until one day, all images disappeared, leaving no trace in data, no residue in the massive server farms that contained them. The image died—they tell it like a folktale—so people could continue living.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that a great dictator had ordered a restructuring of the world. In the new world, he wanted us all to begin again, afresh, from a clean, imageless start. A group of extremist vigilantes carried out a series of image-destructions, especially of photographs that displayed an “anti-patriotic spirit.” Enthusiastic crowds chanted and witnessed these burnings—they started with setting fire to many well-known photographs at public crossings and intersections, but later, and puzzlingly so, they continued to do it in the privateness of their homes as well. The largest of these bonfires occurred in a city not so far away, where an estimated 40,000 people gathered to hear a speech by a propaganda minister, who declared that the new shining world can become manifest only when the debris of the past is cleaned up. The response to these burnings was immediate and widespread. Gripped by fear, people began destroying all photographs in their possession without mercy or thought, and as they did so, they pretended—to each other and to themselves—that they had little volition in carrying out this brutal act of destruction. They were convinced that the photographs had caught a plague, and needed to be set aflame.

Why had the images disappeared?

Guards stationed outside a museum in my hometown shot dead the chief archivist of images one day. I did not witness the event, but I vividly remember how his death was described. He was a middle-aged, scraggy person with a sincere demeanour about him, but he suffered from a mental illness. His condition sometimes caused him visual hallucinations and other forms of sensory misperception, all of which brought with it acute pain. During moments when his pain would become unbearable, he would run out of his office and wander

the streets. The evening he was shot, he had walked deliriously and come unusually close to one of the guards stationed at the entrance of the museum.

No one had come to ask about his dead body up till late that night, so his body lay in the museum's morgue (assigned for mummies) unclaimed. The next morning, in news, we heard several accounts of the shooting. People were angry with the callous way in which the guard had shot him, but beyond privately simmering in impotent rage, no one knew what to do. Many indirectly blamed the archivist for not being able to find a cure of his hallucinations. A day later, when they re-opened the museum to public, they realised that the images had gone missing from its walls. The frames were there, hanging right where they had been all this while, only the images had gone missing from within them. Not one frame, whether up on the walls, or in the cellar downstairs, showed any image that it was meant to possess. The museum director called her colleagues in other museums across the city, and they all reported the same inexplicable incident—the collection of images had vanished overnight. Not stolen, not erased, not rubbed off, not burnt; images had become air. It was as if the walls, the windows, the doors were all in place, but the building of the museum itself had evaporated. No one knew how or where to begin looking for the collection that was worth millions. And this phenomenon gradually spread to all images that existed in the world. The body of the image archivist still lies unclaimed, though.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that the age of the Great Collapse is upon us. Photographs had retained a certain power that was no less than sorcery: Otherworldliness. A photograph made accessible that which was impossible to see with the naked eye—a technology of bringing the unconscious to the fore—and in doing so, brought uncountable worlds into existence, worlds that ought to have had been left, perhaps, undiscovered. The quantum spectrum of time—our time, in which we exist—had become overburdened with the presence of too many worlds (an eternity!), and this excess baggage needed to be shed, to be strewn across the space in the dark out there, be flung to other worlds and galaxies, where it might belong, in an effort to help this luggage find its rightful place in the universe, where it belonged—elsewhere. We needed to live lighter, in our being, on our planet, without the hope for eternity.

Why had the images disappeared?

Right before the image crisis, a group calling itself “Metaphor Army” had been holding weekly demonstrations in front of the State Theatre. The group's core initiators were also involved in a previous occupation of the Opera House in protests against the extensive use of screens, projections, painted curtains, and visual technology that had come to dominate culture. This radical new group continued to attract a mix of people including conspiracy theorists, subterfuge aficionados, and self-declared fascists. The demonstrations became increasingly aggressive as shows in the theatre continued with state-of-the-art infrastructure, attracting attendees in large numbers to the performing arts experiencing a resurgence after the pandemic. The demonstrators had ignored social distancing measures and even attacked members of

the press alleging that the coronavirus was a mere pretext, a scam to upend democracy, and to keep members of public glued to screens, to (fake) images of other people.

As the demonstrations in front of the state theatre gained momentum, the Metaphor Army started campaigning for an 'image-less world,' arguing that the current culture had become obsessed with "showing everything" (intimate acts like kissing, having sex to show passion; bareness of the body to show nudity; photo/statue of God to show the divine) leaving little to the imagination. "There was, it is to be said, just too much artistic freedom!" said the demonstrator's leader in his conclusive remarks in an interview. "Many people seem to have a deep yearning that someone will take them by the hand and lead them somewhere, where there is no need to see. A place as pure as the ancients had built; a sacred place where there is only light (but no images); a holy place where the only thing to see is to look within." This "mania of the middle-aged people" as the young began to describe it, led us to the rhetoric of the militant anti-imagers and other conspiracy theorists for whom every photographer was a criminal, every viewer a stray child who needed to be reined in. Young activists resisted the Metaphor Army all they could, but in the end, the elders won and managed to stamp out every image with their hardened religionism.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that an old woman who sits knitting on the moon had begun to chew on images one night. She ate them all, one after another, over a long night of darkness, stuffing her mouth, her belly, ingesting them with body fluids that had taken a millennium to build. And when she was done eating the last image, she self-combusted from the terrible intensity of light that a trillion images had contained in them. And since, moonlight has been nothing more than the light of all our pictures that are lost to us now, shining down back on us, every night.

Why had the images disappeared?

They say that it was not the images that had disappeared, but our own sight. Somehow, we have all gone blind—the horror of it! This was a sickness of sight that had been waiting silently, showing little symptom, gnawing at the optic nerve, at its health, raising its pressure ever so slowly that we didn't notice, eventually to a degree that was abnormally high. It was not the images, but humankind that was the cause of its own blindness. The disappearance of images was only the beginning of this fateful affliction, the first stage of an outcome that will manifest as the infliction of total and utter darkness. Some remembered the wise words that were uttered once, long ago:

You have never looked enough
upon that you ought to have looked
upon. To have eyes, and not see
our own peril? Eyes, they cannot see
what truth hides in the world. Only
when they are gone—the sea in your skull,
it might see better;
the true blank in your eye.

In the absence of the image, and worse, if we are indeed losing our sight progressively, how do we retain the power of seeing without being considered delusional by everyone around? If we are to survive in the future as a civilisation and as cultures, now is our moment to find ways to restore our 'real' sight, and in doing so, restore a future for the image. Because, if we don't, we wouldn't know how else to remember anything. And so, we must begin preparing for it. We must begin by reaching into the recesses of our collective and individual minds to inquire how photos take root, and call upon ourselves as witnesses of images, as mental archivists, as contemplative nodes in the memory of a collective, and as participants in the act of restoring the image.

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This piece is an expansion of an essay originally written for the Chennai Photo Biennale Journal in December 2021.



Amitesh Grover, *All That We Saw*

27.94 x 27.94 cm

Photo Rag Paper, Ink, Wood, Glass