The 1857 mutiny-rebellion in India coincided with the advent of commercial photography; its practitioners documented the event and circulated its images in the colonial print and picture market. The coincidence meant that the uprising played an early role in the shifting norms in image making brought about by new camera and plate technology. Captured in the March or April of 1858, Felice Beato’s “Interior of Sikanderbagh” (Figure 1) documents one of the defining encounters in the uprising of 1857 that precipitated the transfer of the administrative responsibility of the colonial territories in India from the East India Company to the British Monarchy. The picture documents a destroyed part of a residential complex foregrounded by human fragments, its composition held together by the cursory presence of four men and a horse. In doing so, the exposure captures the collaborative forces of monopoly capital, military incursions, and technological changes on the surface of the image—an image which then circulated around empire in its commodity form. In this article, I analyze the picture formally in order to map its key elements—the human fragments and the ruined building—onto the context of the forces that rendered the photograph meaningful.

The events of 1857 are hard to summarize into the singular theme of a mutiny or a rebellion. They consisted of a series of military mutinies and civilian uprisings that threatened the East India Company’s grasp of the territories under its command. The Company managed its Indian assets with its British army, whose swollen lower ranks were populated by native sepoys. These low-ranking foot soldiers were socially and economically discontented; they remained segregated, were summarily paid less than similarly ranked British soldiers, and faced constant proselytization and the threat of losing caste. Thus, when rumors spread that the cartridges for the new Enfield rifles on their way up from Calcutta were greased with pig and cow fat both Hindus and Muslims were angered. This attempted somatic pollution evidenced to them the insidious conspiracy to cause their loss of caste, facilitating their conversion to Christianity. A series of quickly controlled, minor rebellious incidents occurred, but the decisive insubordination was that of the Meerut-based cavalry which mutinied on May 10, 1857; the sepoys then marched to Delhi, spreading word of the revolt as they moved along. The worst months for the British armed effort were June and July, with cities like Lucknow and Cawnpore under rebel control, and although British
fortunes improved in August and more so by the end of the year, their counter insurgency continued for many more months. The insurrection was declared under control in July 1858, although guerilla fighting continued in some pockets across the subcontinent. Before the end of the year Queen Victoria issued a proclamation formally announcing the sepoy rebellion as over.2

The specific event referenced in this photograph is the denouement of the infamous siege of Lucknow that lasted six months. By June 1857, the mutinying sepoys blockaded the city from the east, forcing fleeing Britons to retreat into their residency, which was defended by the remaining loyalist troops. Escape was impossible, as rebel groups had also taken over the northern city of Cawnpore, trapping the party in Lucknow. A relief force that managed to break into the city in September with supplies further found itself under siege when rebel numbers swelled around the city. Finally, in November, Sir Colin Campbell made his first (and successful) attack on Lucknow from the east, encountering in his path Sikanderbagh, whose interior we see in the image.3 A bitter battle ensued, with 2,000 rebels killed upon clashing with the Ninety-third Highlanders and Fourth Punjab Regiment, after which the group at the residency was rescued. The city was not taken back until the following March when Beato, finally able to access a now desolate and destroyed Lucknow, was able to make the picture.

The photo was unusual; unlike other images in Beato’s oeuvre, ‘Sikanderbagh’ broke some of the guidelines of picturesque composition that early war photography tended toward. The eighteenth-century picturesque was simultaneously a way of looking, a technique of painting, an idea of nature, a trained aesthetic taste, and many other arbitrary, but particular rules governing the relationship between aesthetics and nature. The ruin remained an important element in these compositions. Colonial documenters, in their imperial excesses, employed the style in their records of the colony, transforming it into its imperial avatar. By the nineteenth century a new ‘colonial picturesque’ dominated the British print market, compelling painters in England to reinvent the mode in a nationalist form, as a “reenchantment of the domestic rural landscape,” which recuperated the British countryside for the local market.4 The colonial picturesque however had developed along another trajectory; it invoked the colony as virgin territory and an untapped expanse of “ruggedness, turbulence and primeval powers of nature,” awaiting imperial extraction.5 One of the earliest purveyors of its imperial and archeological gaze were the uncle and nephew team Thomas and William Daniell, who, in 1789, embarked on a cross-country voyage to draw ancient architectural ruins in the countryside, catering to the market’s demand for images of India. The picturesque also shaped the archeological survey drawings of James Fergusson, made during his many travels across the territory between 1835 and 1842.6 Borrowing the figure of the ruin, Beato’s urban images shunned a rugged and primeval nature, in favor of a different exercise of power: the violence of war. This demanded a deviation from earlier aesthetic codes: The photo-
Figure 1 Felice Beato, Sikander Bagh, Lucknow, Albumen Print, photographed ca. March or April 1858.
graph omitted references to nature and infinity, eschewing the horizon and instead of an unfolding expanse, it ‘contained’ the entire scene.7

War photography, a commercial enterprise—nascent and having few conventions of its own—borrowed from its predecessor, picturesque image-making, to compel the narrative of a distant, yet accessible territory. However, compared to painting, war photography was privileged; by offering documentary exactitude it made the violence of war more palpable, more present. While archeological drawings and imagery of the colony exploited the fantasy of an infinite imperial expanse, the very idea that drove colonial territorial expansion, war photography came with the promise of representing imperial action, the action that executed the task. Beato’s picture in particular, very directly, connotes imperial strength: the barely porous, battered structure fills the frame of the photo almost completely. Within this tightly confined composition, we see the bodies from the same angle the guns saw them. Lost to the modern sensibility is that Victorian image-making never showed the dead, let alone their own dead.8 This photograph is purportedly one of the earliest to document corpses in war imagery.9

Beato’s trade in photographs depended on the economy of the circulation of pictures of far-away British territories in the metropole. He usually funded his own trips, accompanying military campaigns in colonial locations, to then return and organize public displays and exhibitions where he would sell his images to his patrons. This entrepreneurial structure took him to Crimea, as an assistant to James Robertson, and later, independently, to India, China, Japan, and eventually Burma, where he started a mail-order business selling his photographs.10 Beato was one of the archetypal subjects of empire, the small-scale commercial artist in the profession of documenting and circulating unofficial images of the colony. No doubt, some of his patrons were stockholders and creditors of the government and of the East India Company, who, like the infamous imperial apologist James Mill, never visited the territory in which they had invested. These were the creditors and stockholders to whom the Company was answerable and for whose profits the cannibalistic company provoked military confrontations in the pursuit of colonial territory (the most recent was the annexation of Awadh), draining both its primary supports: British state funds and Nawabi wealth.11 After 1857, the state refused to support the military pursuits of the company whose authority now came under question. The British government spent the astronomical sum of £50 million to quell the mutiny-revolt; this addition to the British public debt mandated that the Indian territories be brought under the crown so that they could be taxed to recompense the new administration.

Beato departed from England upon the news of the uncertain, yet escalating conflict in India. He arrived in Calcutta amid continuing violence, but the enemy still controlled key cities, and he only gained access to Lucknow after it was deserted, empty, and ghostly.12 The allure of photography, especially war photography, is that it
makes present and tangible events that are distant and unpredictable, for which the photographer is required to be present, and possess a certain amount of luck: to be in the right place at the right time. The photographer’s implied presence at the scene of battle makes the violence in his photograph palpable. Beato, unfortunately, could not be in the right place at the right time and for reasons we cannot completely know, he chose to stage parts of his images of the city. Some causality for ‘staging’ photographs, that is, having people ‘pose’ for the shot, can be attributed to the technology of photography itself. Beato used the wet plate collodion process introduced in the 1850s. The wet plate consisted of a glass sheet coated in light-sensitive silver halides and gelatin. The required exposure time was around fifteen seconds, registered in the swing of the horse’s tail, and the plate had to be developed within ten minutes of its exposure, while it was still wet. This necessitated a darkroom on the scene of every shoot, subtended within which is the invisible labor of the porters carrying his equipment across war-torn landscapes. This technological constraint resulted in the central conflict of war photography: How do you represent action when you cannot capture movement? In this sense, war photography was even further removed from war scenes than painting, which could approximate movement. To compensate, photographers worked with a set of codes that indexed previously actualized bodies. These codes, such as cannonballs or debris, were surrogates for people, witnesses to motion.\footnote{The photograph in all its successes or attempts at making the colony present in the metropole, always already came too late after the event.}

In this image, which overstates military strength, Beato staged the most compelling detail. He arranged the human remains in the foreground of the image for the photograph. There are various hypotheses for how the photographer acquired the skeletal fragments; perhaps they were piled up inside the structure, and he borrowed them briefly before they were buried. Alternately, since the corpses of the rebels hardly had sufficient time after the massacre to decompose and leave behind clean, white bones, they were likely exhumed from a nearby graveyard.\footnote{Regardless, it is certain that Beato arranged his frame, using the fragments of rebel bodies to reanimate the corpse of the building with the crime it had witnessed.\footnote{This is perhaps a moment of exchange: the subjects of the suppression indexed by this image have been replaced in the image itself. They have been substituted with what we could call accidental witnesses to the photo. Thus, we can think of the act of ‘staging’ a photograph as replicating the scene of action, just after the act itself has transpired. It entailed the arrangement of props to create a narrative that simultaneously concealed and revealed elements of the plot. The theatricality compels us to ask, what reason deserved this labor of staging, and what operation allowed these fragments their fungibility? What reanimated them with meaning that they did not previously possess?}}

I would argue that the economy of photography, although dependent on an authentic subject, dislodges the visual and corporeal body of its signified meaning. The object then, like a figure of rhetoric, evacuated of its connotation, is remade as a
floating signifier—a trope. This, I argue, is precisely the operation that was performed on the bodies in the photo. We do not know to whom they belong, and from which graves they were unearthed, but text and context anchors them to new owners: the sepoys. Perhaps Beato, a commercial photographer, intuitively understood this malleable relationship between the signifier and its signified. Perhaps this is why he exhibited little dilemma in exhuming and rearranging clean, white bones and repositioning not just their physical relation to each other, but their significations, by virtue of juxtaposition. While the bodies, the accidental subjects of the imperial gaze, remain unreliable witnesses of the events they purport to refer to, the photograph remains dependent on the actual event. Photography's privileged status as a quasi-legal document gives this image its power, allowing it to oscillate between exactitude and truth, between precision and authenticity.

But while one half of the photograph fails as a precisely indexical system of signifiers, since the bones reference something that they have no connection to, the other half of the photo, the ruin with its debris does not fail in the same way. The wrecked building fills the frame of the image, containing and constraining it, which is an analog for the tactic used on the day of the encounter. Having seized the bagh and blockaded the entrance to the city to maintain control of it, the rebels were taken by surprise when Sir Colin Campbell’s attack came from the outside. The offensive walled-in the mutineers, who were slaughtered on exiting the building. Pockmarked with ammunition, the building—unlike the bodies—actually witnessed the events of the confrontation. Thus, surprisingly, or even accidentally, Beato’s staged image is true, or at least analogous, to the narrative of the event it hopes to portray. The ruin of the building and the human fragments amid debris are set up as compositional reflections of one another, within which the viewer, like the sepoys, is trapped, with no respite outside the system. Not only did the structure confine the sepoys, its representation now constrains the viewer from the relief of infinity usually offered in images of picturesque ruins. In fact, if there is any hint of continuity available in this frame, it is of the endless field of corpses that possibly spreads out of the foreground, under the feet of the viewer. Perhaps this very gesture of restriction disengages the urban, man-made ruin of Sikanderbagh from the natural, time-ravaged one, and its imperial, archeological cousin.

The figure of the ruin in the English landscape came to signify the power of nature over man’s creations, in response to the hubris of the industrial revolution. Only time and weather could soften the harsh geometric lines of architecture, until, reduced to indistinguishable rubble, the original form was no longer discernable. The ruin in picturesque painting and landscape gardens acted as an object that threw its surrounding countryside into relief. By exhibiting its powerlessness, the ruin reaffirmed the infinite strength of the natural. Arguably, the colonial/imperial ruin did not connote the same thing. Rather, the crumbling stones symbolized the decay of some glorious but decadent and failed empire consumed by wilderness. In contrast, Sikan-
derbagh connotes neither of the two signifieds, denying ‘nature’ completely. David Gissen has argued that the description of damaged architecture shifted from the use of the word rubble to the use of debris sometime in the early eighteenth century. The rise of the word debris coincides with the large-scale use of gunpowder employed to destroy buildings and cities that reached its zenith with World War Two and the annihilating threat of the Cold War.16

Debris is arguably an accurate description for this urban ruin. The building itself was the product of what Rosie Llewelyn-Jones has called “a fatal friendship” between the wealthy Nawabs and the monopolistic East India Company.17 Built by the last Nawab in a collaborative mood, Sikanderbagh’s arabesque decorated tympanum provided a fitting backdrop for the collusion of the various moneyed elite, through whom monopoly capital found its way into the continent. Capital’s ability to impart exchange value, making any objects it acquires fungible, is thrown into relief by the human fragments that have already undergone substitution. Debris itself is interchangeable: anywhere it looks the same. The photograph, tangling together hybrid architecture, indistinguishable debris, and switched human fragments, is a veritable composition of a modern ruin.

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1 “Sepoy” is an anglicized version of ‘sipaahi,’ which in urdu means foot-soldier and in the Company’s garrisons, it referred to a native soldier.
3 Lucknow, the capital of the kingdom of Awadh (Oudh), was founded in 1775 by Nawab Asaf ud Daula on the banks of the river Gomti. The Company had gained a toehold in the kingdom in 1764 when the third Nawab had lost the battle of Buxar. In Lucknow, the British set up a permanent resident, and after that, an entire residency, which was supported by the very wealthy Nawabs. The Company constantly took loans from the Nawab, which were soon converted to donations. Wajid Ali Shah constructed many things one of which was Sikanderbagh (this literally means Sikander’s garden). A bagh was usually a residential complex and Sikanderbagh was the summerhouse of one of the last Nawab’s wives. Banmali Tandon describes it as a typical Indo-European essay. Some elements had an English neopaladian theme, while others were of the free composite order, best typified by the arabesque-covered tympanum that we see in Beato’s photo. See Banmali Tandan, The Architecture of Lucknow and Oudh 1722-1856: Its Evolution in an Aesthetic and Social Context (Cambridge: Zophorus, 2008), 269.
8 Arguably, it is only the knowledge of this sensibility that confirms the identity of the skeletal fragments as being of Indian bodies, and not British ones.
11 The annexation of Awadh (Oudh) formally took place on 7 February 1856, when the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was forced to
sign his kingdom over to the East India Company on the pretext of the decadent rulers, and mistreated subjects. The Nawab, who had long supported the residency and considered the Company his ally, was not ready for armed battle. Within five weeks, he and his mother left for Calcutta where the Queen mother set sail to England to discuss the situation with the Queen on equal terms. The departure of the Nawab, the familiar seat of power, left a vacuum in Lucknow and caused worry to its inhabitants, a situation that played a role in supporting the mutiny. See Llewellyn-Jones, The Great Uprising in India, 98-100.

12 Ebrahim Alkazi, writing about Beato’s eight-image panorama of Lucknow, emphasizes the emptiness of the city to which he was witness. Alkazi writes, “There is not a single human being stirring: the only signs of life are garments hanging limply from a clothes line and a few disconsolate white cows sheltering from the blistering midday sun. The devastations, large scale and brutal, has caused the population to flee in terror.” Ebrahim Alkazi, in Lucknow: City of Illusion, ed. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (New York: Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2006), 89.


14 Pinney makes a case for the piles of bodies being uncovered and arranged for the photo, “As John Fraser has documented, Beato did not arrive in Lucknow until probably March 1858, four or perhaps five months after its capture. So how was it that so long after the event the skeletons of rebels were so evident, so conveniently acting out the ghostly tragedy of the Sikanderbagh? Writing in 1893, Sir George Campbell would recall that ‘There was a first rate photographer in attendance taking all the scenes [and] many of the scenes were really very striking. One horrible one was the Shah of Najaf’ Fraser assumes that this is a misremembering of Sikanderbagh. The great pile of bodies had been decently covered over before the photographer could take them, but he insisted on having them uncovered to be photographed before they were finally disposed of.” For a public desiring of the events themselves this was of little consequence. Photography was, after all, supposed to preserve the very instant shock of contact.” 128-130. Christopher Pinney, The Coming of Photography in India (London: British Library, 2008).

15 Pinney, The Coming of Photography in India, 127-130.


17 Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, A Fatal Friendship: the Nawabs, the British, and the city of Lucknow (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).