

## HIDING IN THE OPEN: PAUL SEAWRIGHT'S AFGHANISTAN

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*"I have often wondered what catches us so sharply in the landscapes of Asia. [...] It is a matter of size perhaps - what the ancient peoples felt obscurely when they carved their human figures so much smaller than their gods. The atmosphere in the Asiatic landscape is not normal to us, its disproportion with the human figure is too vast, and the Hindu Kush soaring behind some tiny gathering makes us feel our own mortality as well as the immortal all about us."*

Freya Stark, *The Minaret of Djam*

*Ex oriente lux.* More than any other continent, it is on Asia that, from classical times, European fascination with the exotic has been fixed - Asia the vast, Asia the inscrutable, Asia the perilous and voluptuous. In its infinite contradictions, Asia represented the perfect Other to Europe, and was duly confirmed as such by writers from Herodotus to Sir John Mandeville and Frederick Prokosh. In the distorting mirror which is Western imagination, each part of Asia takes on a different aspect of the exotic: China, cradle of gigantic and unimaginable cultures; Persia, elegant and corrupt; Mongolia, the heartland from which sprang the West's worst nightmares; Tibet, an austere saffron conundrum perched on the roof of the world; India, bewildering in its variety and sensuality; Malaysia, piratical and treacherous. Perhaps the sole exception to this gallery of preconceived ideas is Afghanistan, which remains in essence an imaginative void; the mirror returns no image, distorted or otherwise, since romantic imagination never succeeded in appropriating its harsh landscape of mountain and desert. On the other hand, what it does possess in abundance is a powerful sense of menace. To enter Afghanistan with hostile intent has never been something to be undertaken lightly, as Kipling warned in the bleakest of his *Barrack-Room Ballads*:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,  
And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains  
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*

Twenty-three centuries apart, the two greatest European colonial powers to invade Asia both received bloody checks in these mountains. In 330 BC, Alexander of Macedon's hitherto invincible troops engaged in what Peter Green describes as "*three years of mountain guerrilla fighting [...] from Afghanistan to Bokhara, from Lake Seistan to the Hindu Kush, against the fiercest, most indomitable opposition Alexander had yet been called upon to face*".<sup>1</sup> In 1842, the British Empire suffered its worst military defeat of the century when an army of occupation under the hopelessly incompetent Major-General William Elphinstone was ejected from Kabul in the depths of winter and gradually hacked

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth 1970, p.338.

to bits as it struggled to retreat across ninety miles of desolate mountain terrain to the fort of Jalalabad. *“Before it had left [Kabul] valley”, according to James Morris’s graphic account, “the army was virtually without food, fuel, shelter or ammunition, and behind it left a trail of dead and dying people, like a track of litter after a grisly holiday – some wide-eyed and insensible, some pleading to be put out of their misery, some stabbed about with knives, for the fun of it, by the Afghan children who swarmed through the mêlée”.*<sup>2</sup> A single exhausted and terrified survivor reached Jalalabad to tell the story.



The British empire did not, of course, propose to take this insult lying down, and the ‘signal disaster’, as it became known, of 1842 was followed by two further Afghan wars – less disastrous, perhaps, but no less bloody and ultimately pointless. An unliterary, and hence all the more powerful, account of the 1879-1880 campaign was published by a private trooper of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers, B.P. Crane: *“Tuesday, [December 11 1879]. They came down in thousands into the valley. Half of ours dismounted with carbines and poured vollies into them, which only caused a momentary check in their advance, their numbers being so great; it was estimated that they mustered 10,000, armed with Snider rifles and long sharp knives. [...] Then commenced some hard struggles; and there were a great many empty saddles. Our colonel was mortally wounded; and a great many of our men went into the charge never to return. It would be impossible to describe the scene that was then disclosed to view. Our number being so small, it only caused them to waver for a minute. Onwards the Afghans advanced in dense masses, pouring shots into our midst. Ours retired, rallied again, and charged again; but only to be repulsed. Checking their advance for a short time, everyone now had to gallop for his life. Ours had to get over a deep ditch, where many of them lost their lives. Horses and riders were lying on top of each other, and they were cruelly hacked by the murderous Afghans. There were riderless*

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<sup>2</sup> James Morris, *Heaven’s Command*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1973, p.109.

*horses galloping over the field, and men, who had their horses shot from under them, running in all directions from the enemy's great numbers. And what made things worse, the treacherous villagers fired on ours as they passed their villages".<sup>3</sup>*

Private Crane's report of this battle is astonishingly similar to Arrian's account of the destruction of Alexander's army by the Afghans' ancestors: "*Caranus, who was in command of the cavalry... attempted to cross the river to get his men and horses into safety; the infantry without orders promptly followed suit, scrambling down the steep banks into the water in a panic-stricken and disorderly rabble. The Scythians soon turned this fatal error to their own advantage: galloping up from all directions, they plunged into the stream; some rode hard on the heels of the Greeks already across and trying to get away; others confronted the fugitives in mid-stream and dragged them down; or flung themselves upon those not yet in the water, while all the time from the flanks showers of arrows were poured in. The Macedonians were helpless, and all who survived took refuge on a small island in the river; but this did not save them, for Spitamenes' cavalry and the Scythians surrounded the island and shot them down to a man. The few prisoners taken were promptly butchered.*"<sup>4</sup> This was incidentally perhaps the first, though certainly not the last time that heavily armed European troops were to be annihilated by Asian horse archers.

In the last quarter-century, of course, the unsuspecting inhabitants of Afghanistan became victims of one of history's most grotesque jokes: having exchanged the rule of a brutal and inept Stalinist regime for that of yet more brutal and inept religious fanatics, they gained the unique privilege of being successively blown to pieces, first by the Soviet and then by the American military juggernauts. Of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's four ideological horsemen of the Apocalypse, the luckless Afghans have within the space of a single generation been visited by three: Communism, Fundamentalism and Imperialism.<sup>5</sup> Rarely can a people have been so thoroughly and ruthlessly driven, willy-nilly, to political and ideological salvation.

Paul Seawright has given the images he made of Afghanistan in the wake of the latest military intervention the collective title "Hidden". I don't know what led him to choose this title, but it seems particularly apt on a number of levels. One of these is the fact that

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<sup>3</sup> B.P. Crane, *The Ninth Lancers in Afghanistan, 1879-1880. A soldier's diary*. London, n.d., pp.38-39.

<sup>4</sup> *Arrian's Life of Alexander the Great*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1958, p.132.

<sup>5</sup> The fourth horseman, Fascism, merely cast an appraising eye upon Afghanistan before passing by; in the thirties, Hitler dispatched at least one pseudo-scientific expedition to investigate what the Nazis believed to be the original cradle of the Arian peoples, but more pressing matters soon demanded his attention, and Afghanistan was allowed to lapse back into the safety of obscurity. In *The Light Garden of the Angel King* (London, 1972), Peter Levi relates a story about a group of Germans turning up for a mid-fifties new year's ball at the Kabul International Club "in full SS uniform including boots and pistols". According to his informant, "there was a fight and all the ex-Nazis were thrown into the swimming bath" (p.81).

unlike earlier wars in the region, this one was waged largely from hiding. As in Iraq, American distaste for body bags meant that for Taliban units and wedding parties alike, death tended to come suddenly and without warning out of the milky blue skies: this was indeed hidden strife, a war of airstrike, guided missile, ambush and buried mines. The primary targets of the Americans, Osama Bin Laden and the Al Q'aida leadership, remained hidden in their mythic (perhaps mythical) mountain stronghold – so well hidden, it now seems possible that they were never there in the first place. A neutral observer of events might also be tempted to regard the objectives and purposes of the American intervention as so wrapped up in moral outrage, self-righteousness and obfuscation that they, too, could to all extents and purposes be regarded as hidden.

It strikes me, however, that there is another and subtler sense in which these images reference the hidden. With the exception of Nuristan, the landscape of Afghanistan, as I remember it and as Seawright's landscapes confirm, tends inexorably to the minimal. The lowland deserts are mostly of the stony *dasht* variety, flat gravel plains stretching endlessly to the horizon, interrupted by occasional dry river beds or low outcrops of rock. The Hindu Kush range which covers the northern part of the country consists of largely barren slopes, often tortuously broken and ridged, between which sometimes nestle threads of piercingly blue water or patches of green vegetation clutched by the rock. The colours are generally muted, greys and light browns, mineral purples and ochres; even the rare greens seem faded. Above all, whether in the mountains or the desert, very little seems to obtrude on the landscape, which is made up of foreground and background, but only rarely of middle ground; when something *does* appear in the middle distance (a rider, a tree, a ruined tower or wrecked vehicle), it does so with unexpected presence. Such open, unvarnished statements of fact ought to suggest candour and guilelessness, but in fact they have precisely the opposite effect: surely, one feels, there is something hidden here after all - beyond that ridge, under that slope, at the far edge of the horizon. The paradox of Afghan landscape, successfully captured by Seawright, is that it always seems to be concealing something.

Many of his images are, precisely, examples of the way simple objects suddenly loom, portentous and solitary, out of an otherwise empty landscape. Given the context of a war-ravaged country, these signs are inevitably read in reference to conflict: mines scattered in the sand like raisins in a cake, unidentified mounds too much like shallow graves to be anything else, the shattered stumps of what was once a small grove of trees, the remains of a mud and brick structure, a battered sign pointing towards Mazar-i-Sharif, a perimeter fence of barbed wire and military meccano, scattered shell cases. The interiors are no less enigmatic: a half-open door leading from darkness into a tiny office or classroom, an Arabic-language map of the world taped to the wall of an otherwise bare space, and a succession of empty rooms, choked with rubble and bathed in the harsh white light pouring from windows and rents in the building's fabric. Most of the man-made structures have been marked, wall by wall and fragment by fragment, with large, white and pedantically neat check marks presumably significant of some kind of successfully completed military activity: "Searched"? "Decontaminated"? "Mission accomplished"?

Whatever their meaning, the very exactitude of these signs in the midst of chaos is disorienting.

The disconcerting stillness of Seawright's photographs echoes the occasionally eldritch quality of Afghan landscape. This is a quality I can vouch for, and one which has been remarked upon before by travellers including, notably, Robert Byron: *"After Akcha, the colour of the landscape changed from lead to aluminium, pallid and deathly, as if the sun had been sucking away its gaiety for thousands and thousands of years; for this was now the plain of Balkh, and Balkh they say is the oldest city in the world. The clumps of green trees, the fountain-shaped tufts of coarse cutting grass, stood out almost black against this mortal tint. Sometimes we saw a field of barley; it was ripe, and Turcomans, naked to the waist, were reaping it with sickles. But it was not brown or gold, telling of Ceres, of plenty. It seemed to have turned prematurely white, like the hair of a madman – to have lost its nourishment. And from these aced cerements, first on the north and then on the south of the road, rose the worn grey-white shapes of a bygone architecture, mounds, furrowed and bleached by the rain and sun, wearier than any human works I ever saw..."*<sup>6</sup> Seawright, too, lights upon furrowed mounds and aced cerements, and though his are more recent than those of Balkh, in another decade or two they will no doubt all be one with Alexander's soldiers and the troopers of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*, Macmillan, London 1937; Picador edition, London 1981, pp.238-9.