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To cite this article: Jane Birkin (2023) Separate States, Journal of Visual Art Practice, 22:2-3, 203-210, DOI: [10.1080/14702029.2022.2141425](https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2022.2141425)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702029.2022.2141425>



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Published online: 19 Oct 2023.

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## Separate States

Jane Birkin 

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

### ABSTRACT

This piece separates various parts of a series of readymade archival image descriptions and relocates them into new, categorised spaces. With separation and relocation, the narrative of events apparent in the descriptions and in the album of photographs they define is de-emphasised (although the narrative can, in part, be re-built, due to archival systems of enumeration). The rules, conventions, tropes and repetitions of description writing are exposed in this piece, and this allows new connections to be made and imagined across the unseen images themselves.


### KEYWORDS

Archive; description; enumeration; photography; narrative; separation

## Introduction

This piece is a seven-way breakdown of existing archival descriptions of photographs contained in an album in the Mountbatten papers (**MS62/MB/2/N14**), held in the Special Collections at the University of Southampton. It is a historically important photograph album as it comes from Louis Mountbatten's time as Viceroy and Governor General of India, a period that straddles the Independence of India and Pakistan in August 1947. According to the catalogue, the album of 205 photographs 'commences with his arrival at Palam airfield, Delhi on 22 March 1947 and ends with his return to Northolt in the United Kingdom on 23 June 1948.' The descriptions seen in their entirety tell the story of those months, and events can be pieced together from the situations described. The album is arranged in chronological order. Like the photographs, the descriptions yield a simple narrative that in this rewriting is broken by the separation of parts, although it may be possible to rebuild a narrative of sorts because of the unique catalogue numbers that have been given to each of the images. Enumeration is essential to archival description. It is a logistical device that maintains order (or sometimes disorder) and situates objects in time. With separation, the emphasis is taken away from the narrative of events and instead allows comparisons to be made across the images, and, importantly, across the descriptions themselves, engaging with the rules and conventions of description writing and the various repetitions and tropes they throw up.

The camera comes first. The camera captures people and things in the net it casts: 'they are pictured'. It changes behaviours and bearings. It is even mentioned from

**CONTACT** Jane Birkin  [J.A.Birkin@soton.ac.uk](mailto:J.A.Birkin@soton.ac.uk)  Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK

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time to time, to define a point of view, whereas the photographer is not. Cameras 'tell the time', through the mechanism that is the shutter; freezing time rather than ticking through it; recording moments which come together to build timelines of historical and personal events. The camera preserves, describes and catalogues. It is an administrative and bibliographic tool and parallels archival notions of performativity, accumulation, and stasis.

As well as listing distinct spatial relationships between people and things in a general way, image descriptions are routinely broken down into locations: left and right, top and bottom, foreground and background. The terms 'sinister' and 'dexter' here refer to left and right. These words come from heraldic tradition, where they refer to specific locations on a shield. 'Dexter', indicates the right-hand side of the shield relative to the person holding it, but the left side as seen by the viewer—and the opposite applies to 'sinister'. Photographs are always described as they are seen by the viewer looking towards the scene, unless otherwise stated, for example, '/71 with his right elbow strapped'.

'Background noise' is a playful title. People and things in the background are described with as much care and attention as those in the foreground. Archive descriptions, whether of photographs or other objects, are made for the future but with no specific future use in mind, so to disregard anything at all is to curtail future use. Furthermore, 'noise' is in general perceived as unwanted, whereas the descriptions of things in the background, when seen together as they are here, project rhythm and musicality.

These descriptions also mention things that are not present in the photograph at all, as long as the writer knows that they are there. This is easy in the case of '/201 only one side of the roadway is seen', as we can be sure that a road has two sides. It becomes more difficult in the case of '/196 the house is not seen', and we can only assume that the writer knows that the house is there from seeing other photographs of the same place but from a different viewpoint. When it comes to things that are not clear from the photographic evidence or from other sources: various phrases, such as 'appears to be'; 'there is a possibility'; and 'it is by no means certain' have developed and are embedded in the language of the archive catalogue.

The names and titles of people contained in the descriptions (some of them are very well known) are not used here because they are not knowable from the photographs themselves; they are reliant on the prior knowledge of the archivist or the captions added at the time the album was compiled. I want to focus on the descriptions of people and things without the complication of position and rank. However, we can draw some conclusions from the way the characters are dressed, which is always apparent and is here described in some detail. We may even be able to identify specific characters from their attire: '/156 [...] his familiar small white hat'. I use the title 'Costume drama' for the section on clothing because there is an element of acting before the camera, which is seen clearly in the first section on the apparatus itself, and I imagine this is especially the case where lavish garments are worn and paraded (and I am allowed to imagine, as I am not the description writer here).

I perceive photographs and their parallel descriptions as decontextualized ‘situations’, their meanings upheld by the company they keep, whether in the strongroom or the catalogue. Everything is situated by description, as it is by the photograph itself. ‘Situating writing’ may be an obvious riff on the title of this special issue, but it is important that writing that appears in the image (‘intrinsic text’) is recorded (situated) in the same way as any other visual element.

Thanks must go to the anonymous writer of these descriptions for their work—for their adherence to the rules, conventions and procedures of cataloguing, and for their faithfulness to visual content. This piece can be considered a readymade. The poetic nature of the fusion between human and system is intensified as it is brought out of the archive, into a different space and for a different audience.



**MS62/MB/2/N14/164** Black and white photograph of ‘The Retreat’ at Mashobra. This image and all descriptions reproduced by kind permission of the Special Collections Division, Hartley Library, University of Southampton.

## What the camera does

/10 They are pictured, seated in wicker arm-chairs /11 They are pictured standing on the pavement /12 They are pictured outside the building /15 They are pictured walking over piles of rubble /17 facing the camera, lifting a rifle from the table /20 Pictured is a building, somewhat reminiscent of a baroque Scottish residence /27 They are pictured seated on a sofa /36 They are pictured in casual dress /38 They are pictured, seated with others /39 They are pictured sitting, arm-in-arm, on a sofa /43 walking, towards the camera /49 They are pictured leaving the Constituent Assembly /54 He is pictured standing on a podium behind a desk /61 All four are pictured, seated around a table /72 pictured marching towards the camera /77 They are pictured passing a heavy wrought-iron gate /81 The majority of the others pictured /86 They are pictured at the state banquet /88 They are pictured after the laying of the foundation stone /90 Pictured are 16 mounted men /94 his back to the camera /98 They are pictured standing side by side /108 They are pictured moving towards the camera, through a crowded street /112 Pictured is a large number of people /112 out on the river closer to the camera, which may, itself, be on a boat /114 The family are pictured /116 They are pictured leaving Delhi University /117 They are pictured leaving Delhi University /122 They are pictured walking between two lines of men /124 pictured from a vantage point above the cloth-draped coffins /128 They are pictured, all in stockinged feet /133 The group is pictured in Government House /134 They are pictured sitting in the shade of a tree at the roadside /144 They are pictured wearing the garlands presented on arrival /145 walking towards the camera, beneath an archway made of flowers /151 They are pictured outside a building /152 They are pictured wearing bathing costumes /156 He is pictured wearing bathing trunks /164 The building is pictured from a lower point /171 The artist is pictured holding a palette and brushes /176 They are pictured walking between lush flower beds beside a pool /177 Pictured is a round pool /194 They are pictured descending the main steps /201 facing the camera and saluting

## Sinister/dexter

/1 left to right /4 wheeling to the right /5 on [his] immediate right /6 just visible on the left /9 resting his left hand on [her] right shoulder /14 middle row, from left to right /14 front row extreme left /14 back row right /16 visible at the right /19 from left to right /32 on either side /55 The Jaipur column may be seen on the right /71 with his right elbow strapped /72 mounted on horses in front of the building on the left /73 Two Indian men, one dressed as a servant, are seen on the left /79 front row, extreme left /79 left to right /94 at the extreme right /97 the naval officer second from the right /102 looking down, at centre right /105 visible at right centre /106 Photographers stand on a platform at the extreme right /107 at the extreme right of the middle row /107 second from left, on the back row /121 sitting on [his] right /121 standing immediately behind [his] right shoulder /127 two men at the extreme right of the back row /127 fourth from the right /128 (left) /150 second from the

right /150 standing at the left of the back row /155 left /160 touching [his] left arm /180 just visible at the extreme right /190 seated on the right

## Background noise

/1 Photographers and a crowd of service personnel are visible in the background /2 A mounted bodyguard is visible in the background /3 The dome of Viceroy's House is visible in the background /4 Government buildings and trees are visible in the background /7 Members of the audience are visible both in the foreground and the background /8 Part of one of the doorways is visible in the background /16 The aircraft in the background /18 There are three other persons partly visible in the background /21 Part of Viceregal Lodge is visible in the background /24 Part of the lodge is seen in the background /37 Houseboats and mountains are visible in the background /42 next to a large car which is parked in the background /43 Buildings are visible on both sides and in the background /46 The aircraft in the background /47 A guard of honour, standing to attention with rifles and fixed bayonets at the slope, is visible in the background /48 The Rolls-Royce car in which they arrived is partly visible in the background /55 The guards of honour are drawn up, in the background /55 The Jaipur column may be seen on the right, in the background /70 Trees are visible in the background /84 The City Palace is visible in the background /86 Other servants stand in the background /87 [They] stand in the left background /89 in the background, the columns of the east front of the house are visible /91 other spectators are visible in the background /95 Four army officers stand in the background /96 just visible in the background /98 a single storey building in the background /99 members of the audience are visible in the background /100 four officers, drawn from all three services, stand at attention in the background /101 They are seen reclining on a slight slope with steeper grassy slopes in the background /103 Many other mourners are visible in the background /119 the structures in the background are not obviously airport buildings /122 The steps of Government House, with a presumably red carpet, are visible in the background /123 men and women follow in the background /127 Officials and ADCs stand in the background /130 The lion throne in the background /131 slightly out of focus, in the background /138 an unidentified figure in a clearing on the wooded hillside in the background /141 in the background, descending the aircraft steps /155 Three officers are just visible in the background /163 The head gardener [...] is seen in the background /168 with the house in the background /176 Clipped trees are seen in the background /177 a round pool with the dome of the house in the background /185 The background is very dark /190 in the background behind him /195 The east front and the dome of the house are visible in the background /196 The Jaipur column and part of the north secretariat building are visible in the background /197 Many spectators are visible in the background /199 Indian servicemen, army and possibly air force, are partly visible in the background /200 Soldiers and spectators are seen on the steps in the background /204 Other officers and officials are visible in the background

### That which is not seen

/2 Viceroy's House (which is not seen) /18 the Pathans are not seen /69 The prospective bride [...] is not seen /98 Two cars are partially visible /99 the dancers are not seen /103 The funeral pyre is not seen /124 the cloth-draped coffins, only three of which are seen /127 (neither are seen) /128 the Shwe Dagon Pagoda (which is not seen) /130 The actual throne or seat is not apparent /135 Only the upper parts of the vessel are seen /147 [She] is almost totally obscured /148 [She] is almost totally obscured /164 Only part of the structure is visible /165 an all Indian cast (the members of which are not seen) /168 A group of at least 80 persons (according to the caption only a small part of the total number), is seen /182 almost totally hidden /184 the band (which is not seen) plays 'God Save the King' /185 the Prime Minister (who is not seen) /186 (who is not seen) /196 the house is not seen /199 partly visible in the background /201 only one side of the roadway is seen /202 a close-up, rear view, of [her] from the waist up

### That which cannot be discerned

/4 moving off in a column of threes (?) /7 (believed to be of ivory brocade) /12 probably in the garden, although this is by no means certain /13 presumably in a room in Viceroy's House /16 The aircraft in the background is believed to be the same Avro York (MW102) /27 looking at what appears to be a large photograph album /28 (not specifically identified) /35 at least 19 members (none is identified) /45 probably posed at the foot of the steps of Viceroy's House /46 The aircraft in the background is believed to be the same Avro York (MW102) /63 too distant for identification /48 probably also white /72 too distant to be identified /77 presumably of a golden colour /81 The majority of the others pictured appear to be high ranking Indian officials /97 believed to be /109 The bearded man in the centre foreground appears to have his face painted /110 outside a building, presumably the hospital /112 which may, itself, be on a boat /113 There is, therefore, a possibility that this photograph was taken during a visit to a medical centre and the white garments are uniforms /119 possibly at the airfield /121 believed to be /122 what appears to be /122 with a presumably red carpet /125 It appears to be of gold or gold lacquer, set with precious or semi-precious stones and is attached to one side of the top of an ornate table which is probably an integral part /126 small, circular, thatched structure resembling a summer house /130 It appears to be of gold or gold lacquer, set with precious or semi-precious stones and is attached to one side of the top of an ornate table which is probably an integral part /134 to a destination which is not specified /135 the fact that it is a boat is not immediately apparent; although it does have a life-buoy and navigation-lights /138 There may be an unidentified figure in a clearing on the wooded hillside in the background, but this is by no means certain /139 there is reason for doubt /140 there is reason for doubt /151 probably Government House /152 on or beside the steps of a diving-board /165 believed to be /170 probably Governor General's Lodge /179 the function which appears to be taking place at night, in the open air /185 The group's exact location,

whether inside or outside the building, is unclear /187 None of the guests is identified /194 a carpet (presumably red) /198 These may be ridden by three postilions wearing white shirts and dark turbans, but this is uncertain /199 possibly air force /205 probably because they were accommodated there

### Costume drama

/5 in judge's robes /6 wearing judge's wig and robes /7 white naval uniform /7 a floor length gown (believed to be of ivory brocade) /11 Six wear splendid robes with frogged fastenings and two are clothed more informally /17 one is wearing civilian clothes, two are in army uniform and the others are in tribal dress /22 They are both wearing jodhpurs /36 in casual dress /48 [He] is in white naval uniform and [she] wears a long gown, probably also white /66 dressed in riding attire /73 one dressed as a servant /80 All are dressed formally /82 wearing a light-coloured hat /83 All are dressed formally /87 an Indian wearing an academic gown /92 He is dressed casually in a sports jacket, flannels and open-neck shirt /95 They wear evening dress /101 the ladies are all barefoot /113 All of the Indian women wear white, and two have stethoscopes around their necks /115 a solatopi and dark glasses /118 wearing the robes of Grand Master of the Star of India /120 having overshoes put on /121 wearing the robe of Chancellor /122 are all wearing what appears to be khaki uniform /123 Neither are wearing shoes /123 accompanied by two monks who are completely barefoot /125 in full dress uniforms of Viceregal aides de camp /126 Eight men in tribal dress and carrying spears /128 all in stockinged feet /133 in naval and army uniform, respectively /133 saris /133 two animal furs over a light-coloured dress /144 wearing the garlands presented on arrival /152 wearing bathing costumes /155 All the Burmese wear national dress /156 wearing bathing trunks and his familiar small white hat /157 He is dressed only in bathing trunks /198 wearing white shirts and dark turbans

### Situated writing

/25 [He] sits in a high-back chair at his desk, writing /31 two large microphones which are marked with the letters AIR (All India Radio) /40 the first page of a two-page, handwritten letter /41 the second page of a letter /53 the paper was, in fact, blank /60 three microphones, the middle one of which is marked, somewhat incongruously, 'Chicago' /132 two microphones in the picture both marked, somewhat incongruously, 'Chicago' /189 The photograph is inscribed: 'Dear Magician, Thus was I inducted into trouble by you, Raja' /190 a silver tray inscribed with their signatures



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Jane Birkin* is an artist, designer and scholar. She is a Research Fellow at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton (UK) and has worked in archives for many years. Birkin's art practice and writing functions at the intersection of text and image, combining media culture and techniques of the archive, as well as contemporary discourse on art, photography and conceptual writing. She is specifically concerned with institutional description techniques that define and manage the photographic image, and her academic monograph *Archive, Photography and the Language of Administration*, was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2021.

## ORCID

*Jane Birkin*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6025-9300>