

## Hayden's Histories Through My Viewfinder

Unlike many others here today, I am neither an historian nor a philosopher. It was as a friend that Hayden inspired and challenged me. We overlapped here at Wesleyan when he was Director of the Center for Humanities in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, when my late wife Greta taught at UC-Santa Cruz. When I would describe a project of mine, Hayden would simply say "what's your theory?" Once I thought I had found a trope to use, but he said "not really- maybe a topos." Around 1973 he gave me funding to bring some excited ethnomusicologists to Wesleyan to trade notes about what was going on in the east bloc, including the newly available Red China. Over dinner he said: "this is mostly gossip. Where's the theory?"

In tribute to Hayden, I will not offer any theory today either, but will talk about approaches to history from my angle, with some reference to his work. I won't cover music, a very peripheral topic for Hayden. Though I am relying on photographs as sources, in a short talk, I can't reference the extensive writing on photography's impact; I'll stick to what I imagine to be a dialogue with Hayden's histories.

As I understand it, Hayden was mostly interested in two kinds of history-making: by philosophers and historians. There are other kinds that are closer to my work: personal history, indigenous history, ethnographic history, and media history. I'd like to consider some of those as they emerge around two places I've written about. First, Detroit, my hometown--and Hayden's. I even quoted an interview with Hayden in my 2018 book *Motor City Music: A Detroit Looks Back* (Oxford University Press). Then I'll turn to Afghanistan, the subject of my 1969 dissertation and early publication. Distant as they might seem in both time and space, my interest in both places has been piqued by recurrent pointed phases of public consciousness, strongly driven by photography, the medium I'll turn to here.

Detroit emerged from obscurity to media stardom starting around 2000, first as the city of "beautiful" industrial ruins, the so-called "ruin porn" phase. Then it became the crisis city, climaxed by the cathartic bankruptcy in 2017, and recently it's glibly called the "comeback city." These framings have been illustrated by copious

photographs in the global media. As we'll also see with Afghanistan, what the average information consumer gets are disjointed histories and snapshot summaries of the places' tangled geopolitical, economic, and social histories. There is some work by good historians on Afghanistan, almost none on Detroit, oddly enough. I have my private chronicle that I can superimpose on the general narrative. One site can stand in for the imagery of Detroit where the personal overlaps with the mediated: my alma mater, Cass Technical High School, a nationally-renowned, massive magnet school. Just in music alone, the list of alums runs from jazz greats like Ron Carter through Diana Ross and rocker Jack White. The world, though, has only seen the school's ruins, often as part of Andrew Moore's stunning 2010 portfolio [first photo] The most telling image is of a clock that I probably walked under. [photo] Its decayed face brings me to an almost overdetermined overlap with Hayden's thinking through a term that is literal here: chronotope. We see time arrested in a way that goes beyond the documentary to the metaphoric. Hayden says this: "The notion of chronotope directs attention to the psychological, social, moral and aesthetic, political, economic, and epistemological *ambivalences* of an age.<sup>1</sup> What, after all, are viewers to make of this image when no supporting narrative offers an historical account of the site's previous life, and what we should learn from this elegant episteme, other than that time passes and damage ensues? What are the harder histories around the decline and deterioration of Detroit so nicely packaged in this image?

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden, "The 'Nineteenth Century' as Chronotope," in *The Fiction of Narrative*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, 237-46. (244)



Back in 1968, when the clock was still working and Detroit was still the Motor City, Enrico Natali produced a portfolio of everyday life images. It was a hobby outside of his work in an ad agency. Natali liked to offer the dead-on gaze of his subjects, which makes them hard to turn away from and not easy to read- the direct gaze distracts from the photographer's intentions. To continue the high school theme, let's look at two of his shots. How do we read the boys at Sacred Heart Seminary or the mini-dressed girl by her locker? We can read layers of ambivalence that may or may not be built into the images as we look at them through an ironic viewfinder. 1968 being the pivotal post-riot moment that begins the documentation of the decline. For Natali, not yet.





This mediated history is far from the emotion that exudes from family photos, like this one from my childhood [first lesson] where the documentary facts of the matter—date, occasion—are overwhelmed by the sentiment in a perhaps Barthesian way. My mother hated ambivalence, but the chronotope of this complex photographic object complicates her story, as Hayden suggests.



The kind of history offered by the most viewed Detroit photographs needs to be considered by way of a distinction Hayden made “between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story.” The popular images tend to make the world explain itself, hiding the agenda—conscious or unconscious—of suppressing the back story that a “reporting perspective” might take.

Let me turn to a land far, far away. My own history of Afghanistan overlaps directly with that of Detroit, as my new wife Greta and I flew to Kabul for my doctoral research from our Ann Arbor base in June, 1967, exactly at the time of the urban rebellion, as it’s now called. I joked that we could get to safe Afghanistan if the rebels didn’t take the Detroit airport. Starting in that period of Detroit’s long decline, Afghanistan emerged from obscurity as an isolated mountain kingdom to become an object of media attention through a series of crises. A distant place with no real historical presence in the average western mind, Afghanistan figured first as the victim of a brutal Soviet invasion and occupation in 1979, marked by American support for

the resistance, then as the confused battleground of the ensuing civil war, and, under the Taliban, as ground zero of the war on terror, culminating in the American invasion and occupation of 2001-2021.

Press photos are iconic in the modern sense—so standardized as to become canonical--and also in the religious sense, where the image leads beyond itself to a statement of faith, in this case about American involvement. Below, look at the heroic mujaheddin with a US-supplied missile and a GI handing candy to children, a hearts-and-minds trope from World War Two. These images have a specific mission: to transform the aesthetic pleasure that westerners get from views of the striking Afghan landscape and people into a stage set for propaganda.



As John Michael has said, “The ‘news’ of course, is not about aesthetics but the world. But its messages continuously call that distinction into question. In practice we are hard pressed to distinguish these things.” At an intellectual distance, we can read the ambivalences of this chronotope, but the average reader was not meant to. To compare this media history with personal history, let me offer a photo of Greta enjoying her own non-ambivalent chronotope of life in Afghanistan (melon). Her pleasure, and mine in taking the snapshot, tell a different tale of American involvement and offer another kind of local history, the personal.

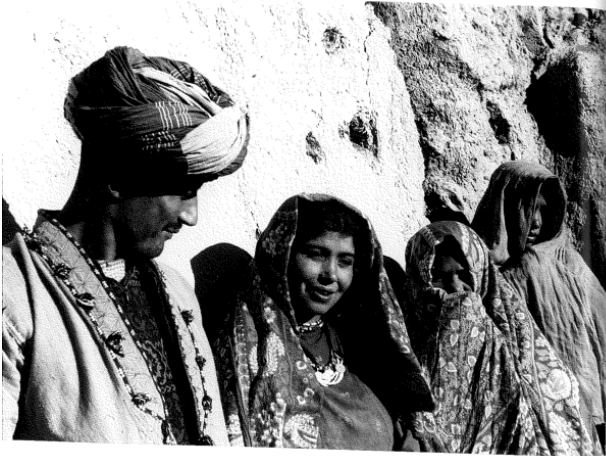


Finally, Afghanistan allows me to touch on a third kind of non-Haydenesque history, the ethnographic. Anthropology believes in the chronotope, or at least its cousin, the ethnographic present, the bracketed time-slice of scholarly observation and journal writing. But the immediacy of the fieldwork moment as described in prose and photography carries a back story and interpretive stance that can grow only slowly grows out of long-term experience in a social environment. My Swiss colleagues Pierre and Micheline Centlivres produced a remarkable book called *Portraits d'Afghanistan*. It's based on their multi-decade fieldwork in the same northern provinces that I briefly shared with them in the late 1960s. Two images can suggest the depth of their work



## Le chef de village et ses épouses

El Kashan (province du Badakhshan),  
8 novembre 1972



Document improbable que cette photographie où un homme s'exhibe avec ses trois femmes. Il a fallu que le mari le demandât pour que je me risquer à la prendre. Les voisins, qui n'ont pas manqué d'être au courant, ont fortement désapprouvé la scène. Cela ne se fait pas, c'est contraire à l'honneur. Que ne va-t-on pas dire d'un homme qui fait voir à des étrangers la partie la plus intime de la maison ? L'*arbab fou* a encore fait des siennes. ■ Deux des trois épouses manifestent leur embarras, mais la plus

jeune, la nouvelle, la troisieme, se montre à visage découvert ; son foulard couvre à peine ses cheveux noirs frisés. On voit bien ses bijoux : un double rang de pierres de couleur porté près du cou et un autre collier, plus long, de perles rouges et blanches où s'intercalent des pièces de monnaie en argent. Elle sourit avec l'assurance d'être, des trois femmes, la préférée. ■ Mal à l'aise dans un rôle qui les place publiquement à côté de la nouvelle venue, les deux premières épouses se drapent comme elles peuvent dans leurs voiles de coton, usagés et froissés, qui ne laissent voir qu'une petite partie du visage. ■ Dans l'homme, sûr de lui, jeune, élancé et prospère, on devine le coq du village. Sous le long manteau doublé, il porte un chandail aux motifs norvégiens. Le turban est volumineux. Il dirige vers sa jeune femme enceinte un regard d' amoureux et de propriétaire. ■

Seuls les grands qui incarnent le progrès et l'évolution des mœurs peuvent avoir de ces audaces, tel l'émir Habibullah qui se fit photographier au milieu des épouses de son harem, vêtues pour l'occasion de longues robes blanches à la mode du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. ■

## La poste centrale

Kaboul, 20 octobre 1990

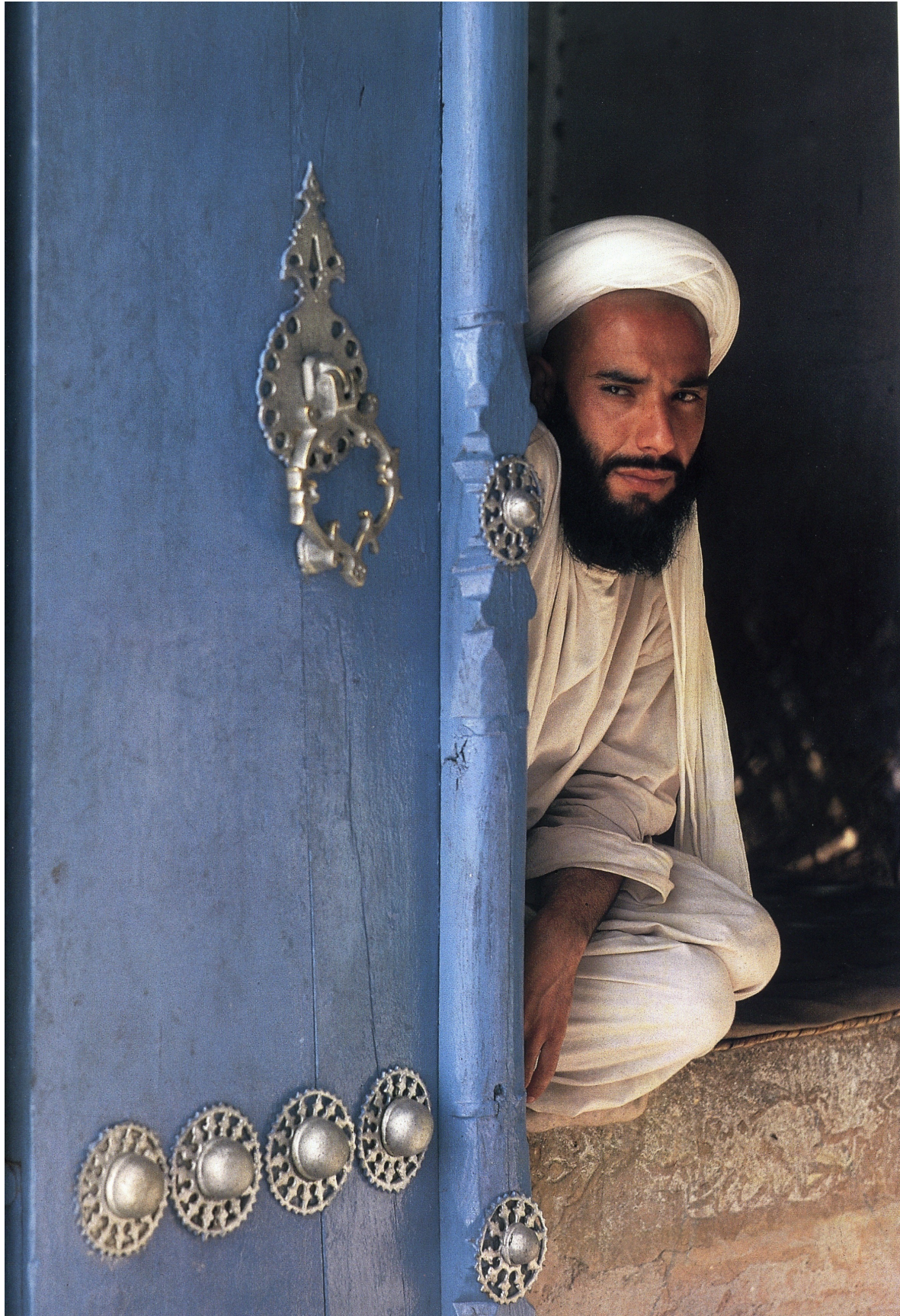


Penchés au-dessus d'une haute table, un comptoir plutôt, dans le hall central de la poste de Kaboul, trois hommes sont plongés dans leur tâche épistolaire. Personne ne fait attention à nous ; il ne semble pas être interdit de photographier dans ce bâtiment officiel. Dans l'Afghanistan en crise, régime après régime, la poste de Kaboul fonctionne. De 1961 à 1998, le courrier que nous lui avons confié est toujours arrivé à destination. ■ Les trois hommes sont un soldat, un commerçant et un mollah. Imaginons

l'arrière-histoire de la scène. ■ Le jeune soldat a sans doute été élève dans un lycée de province. Il est plus qu'un simple soldat, un aspirant peut-être. Il s'applique à écrire une courte missive à sa famille restée en province dans une zone tenue par le gouvernement. Il porte la tenue gris beige, la même que celle du soldat photographié à Balkh, en drap grossier, aux pantalons trop étroits, au ceinturon trop serré (pour s'asseoir, il est nécessaire de défaire la ceinture et de dégrafer son pantalon). ■ La moustache du commerçant est à la mode des jeunes communistes du régime. L'homme est coiffé du *pâkul*, le bonnet de laine à bords roulés qu'arborent habituellement les moudjahidin du Jamiat, mais dont le port n'est pas interdit ni inconnu des partisans du régime. Moustache et bonnet sont peut-être des signes de neutralité, des gages donnés aux deux parties en conflit. Il ne fait pas encore très froid, mais l'homme s'est enveloppé le haut du corps d'un *patu* de laine, porté sur un veston taillé à l'occidentale qui recouvre le *kamiz-o-shalvâr*. À la longue feuille de papier qu'il achève de remplir, on devine qu'il s'agit d'un document d'affaires : commande, lettre à un débiteur, réclamation ou requête auprès des autorités ? ■ Le vieillard doit être un mollah, ce que suggèrent le turban blanc soigneusement noué et la barbe blanche. Il porte des lunettes, voilé qu'il est à l'écriture et à la lecture. Lui aussi s'est enveloppé d'un *patu* dont les plis s'ordonnent parallèlement à ceux du *patu* de son voisin. Il rédige un court message. ■ Le soldat et le commerçant adoptent une position identique, jambes écartées, un pied posé en avant, l'avant-bras appuyé sur la table, la tête penchée vers la gauche. À l'arrière-plan, des hommes attendent leur tour pour accéder aux guichets, seuls ou par groupes. Il y a au moins une femme dans la foule, en *châdri*, que masque partiellement un homme en *pâkul*. Les femmes d'ailleurs ne sont pas absentes de ces lieux : ce sont les préposées aux guichets. Parfois nous jouons un rôle plus actif à la poste : nous écrivons à la demande, en lettres latines, les adresses de messages destinés à des correspondants en Europe. ■

For the local chief, who knew the Centlivres well, the anthropologists can, and feel required to, suggest a range of insights based on prior knowledge and friendship, including thoughts about the photograph itself. For the more detached public space of a post office, they show off their skill in reading strangers, building from details such as clothing and stance that imply social patterns for which they have the histories, with all the ambivalence that knowledge entails. This is chronotope not as flash-frozen moment, but as filled-out formulation.

To round out this image collection, let me contrast the Centlivres' work with the output of the French couple Roland and Sabrina Michaud, who photographed at the same time as the Centlivres and I. They took gorgeous photos of Afghans whose names, backgrounds, and significance they don't reveal to the buyers of their fine-art, coffee-table albums.



It's a colorful and careful composition But just the distrustful look of the shopkeeper is enough to offer a contrast with ethnography. No history here, or even ideology, just aesthetic iconography, not even "news." I can't help going on, with the most famous example, the so-called "girl with green eyes" of 1984 that became one of the most-circulated portrait images ever. Here's a refresher, focusing on the eyes. I probably couldn't get permissions to reproduce it here, but just google it. The story of this stray image extends to a history, the quest by National Geographic photographer Steve McCurry to track down the refugee girl after the image went viral, with highly ambivalent results; the point here of the tale of a photo is the way it shows the shift of a chronotope, from fierce anonymous girl to aged, identified wife, both reluctant to be photographed but fixed forever by an implacable cameraman who is eager to change a purely personal history into a media icon. As the US pulls away from engagement with Afghanistan, I imagine the cameras will be packed up along with the weapons and the place will resume its faraway and unexplainable status. We Americans find it hard to sustain an historical narrative in most cases, especially if we are not actors in an unfolding drama.

A broader inquiry would put these personalized case studies in the context of the abundant literature on the public and private impact of photography. Here, I've just been using pictures that claim to document to real life to explore some modes of historical engagement that lie beyond the professional-historical and the philosophical. Hayden has pointed to "the artificiality of the notion that real events could 'speak themselves'" or be represented as "telling their own story." Media representations do make that artificial claim. Personal photographs evoke history more readily, as the viewer reconstructs and settles the image into an implicit narrative about person, place, and moment, bouncing the present off the past to create a new mental map. Ethnographic visual documentation is rarely offered without a sometimes elaborate backup of contextual information that is historical by nature. Some of those modes might have engaged Hayden's penetrating and agile intellect, but I can still hear him,

right now, in his distinctive voice, saying “that’s interesting, Mark, but what’s your theory?”