

Plasticity and the Global

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The Problematic of the Global

In the face of the persistent Euro-American slant of Film and Media Studies, the task of globalizing the discipline involves approaching its object of knowledge differently. There has to be a metatheoretical shift not only in the constitution of “theory,” but also in the organization of the “global.”¹ This essay will seek to identify and dislodge certain universalist preconceptions that underlie both concepts. Here I focus on the global, but many of the following observations are applicable to theory as well.

What, where, when is “the global” in film and media theory? For all its frequent invocations, it remains a notoriously contested and vacuous term, plagued by at least two major problems. The first one besets any totalizing concept: if the global is understood to encompass our entire planet, it takes on a universalist ring. Structuralist approaches echoing World Systems Theory are insightful in their attention to the global hegemony of certain industries and their international division of labor. But arguments about the Americanization or McDonaldization of all culture, which raise charges of economic determinism, also lean toward an easy universalism. Claims about media structured by the script of global capital, while compelling in their analytical rigor and empirical cogency, foreclose more nuanced explorations of the cultural field. Studies of Bollywood and K-pop, only recently acknowledged as global culture industries, also face similar pitfalls, with further confusions about the presumed timing: when did Indian cinema, for instance, turn global—in the 1990s, right after World War II, or even before? The challenge, then, is one of conceptualizing the spatiotemporal contours of

the global in a manner that registers its broader imaginative horizons while also grounding it in the practices of the local: a multilateral, fluid, and capacious articulation of the global.

A second problem stems from locating the origins and cores of the modern world in Europe and America. Once modernity is framed as an essentially Western phenomenon, any modern iteration of the global must also spring from the West. A handful of ascendant localisms—British, French, or German—usurp the place of the global, relegating vast segments of the globe to the proverbial boonies. Since the latter's experiences do not match those at the presumptive centers of modernity, they remain the nonglobal, the perpetually stunted locals. Thus French cinema, while no match for Hollywood at the box office, claims preeminence within global art cinema; but cinema of the Maghreb, even when made with French financing and screened at prominent film festivals, gains attention as a cultural curiosity with "local" flavor. The challenge here is one of formulating a paradigm of the global that does not remain beholden to certain hegemonic localisms, but embraces a multisited globalism. To indulge in a bit of productive tautology, at stake is a *globalized* sense of "the global."

The point of these observations is not to instigate a rehearsal of the structuralist vs. culturalist debates of the 1980s, or the center-periphery models of the 1970s, but to move beyond them. The approach I outline below is inspired as much by postcolonial critiques of globalization, stressing historical and cultural difference, as by the ever-increasing significance of the translocal linkages and commonalities. There is an ongoing truck between difference and sameness in the folds of cultural interaction that has to be accounted for by any theory of global culture. One way to attend to this complex traffic is to track the multiscale and multipotent *relationalities* between local nodes that constitute the global. Channeling resonance and discord, inducing amplification and erasure, these spatial contacts lead to a range of outcomes—collaboration, competition, neutral indifference. And under certain conditions, the relationships might develop into genuine reciprocities: in normative anticipations of the global—for instance, in theories of the cosmopolitical—mutualities are taken to be the ideal limit case.²

The nodes of the global are neither absolute nor impervious: whether agents, communities, or locales, they are far more likely to morph than to remain static. The global effectively materializes from the mobile encounters between mutating nodes—as networks of shifting relations between entities that are themselves in process of becoming. A constellation of relations in conditions of chronic *mutability*, the global is best thought of as a fluid emergence rather than as a stable totality. What is at play here is rather distinct from a dialectical process: for the latter would lead to the sublation of difference into sameness, and eventual

homogenization, whereas the global-as-emergence results from the transitory and contingent connections between singular local nodes.

In this formulation so far, the global is characterized by the dual conditions of relationality and mutability: I call this compound spatiotemporal characteristic *plasticity*.

This essay is an attempt to develop plasticity as the core component of a multinodal and fluid understanding of the global. Plasticity summons up the global as a set of relations between units that are in a continual state of transformation. Since the global is neither a naturalized given, nor left to evolve on its own as an organic whole, conjuring it involves an aesthetic dimension just as it entails a politics. In other words, the global emerges out of active world-making practices and processes: in that sense, it is *artificial*. Contemporary media formations such as Bollywood performatively work out the frictions of the global and present it as a somewhat idealized field of shifting mutualities via a self-conscious aesthetic mode, foregrounding the centrality of artifice. Mutuality, mutability, and artificiality are plasticity's defining characteristics.

To provide empirical traction for this conceptualization of plasticity, I will focus on the Taj Mahal, the architectural wonder that, in its iconicity, encapsulates Indian splendor in the global imagination. Following a discussion of the contradictions in the modern category of monumentality, I explore two moments of artistic engagement with the Taj to track changing Indian perceptions about the place of the nation in the world. This marble "ode to eternal love" is a particularly productive site for my inquiry, since it figures as a privileged fulcrum for such negotiations of emplacement across visual media. While both artistic instances index the cinematic implicitly, they spring from distinctive registers of historical urgency. Hence they evince markedly different affiliations with artifice, play, and reflexivity. I conclude by pointing to moments of reflexivity in contemporary Hindi cinema that posit immutable anchors of collective identity precisely at a point when such moorings are seen to be unraveling fast. These reflexive gestures also seek to situate Bollywood and its characteristic idioms within a global account of film history, thereby consolidating the industry's global status.

"Is this heaven?"

About a third into the plot of *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, US/GB, 2008), the two young street urchins of Bombay, Salim and Jamal, end up on trains rattling along the networked tracks of the Great Indian Railways (a legacy of the British Raj, and itself the subject of many a documentary and fiction film). At a pivotal moment in their cross-country adventure, perched on the roof of the train and trying to steal food improbably through a window of the coach, the brothers lose

their precarious footholds and fall off the train. While they tumble through the chaparral and rocks along the slope of the rail embankment, a montage-on-action ushers in a temporal ellipsis: as they dust themselves off, they have grown up into teenagers. Sitting up, Jamal asks: “Is this heaven?” Even before a point of view shot reveals his source of wonderment, now coming into focus through a haze of dust, I—and perhaps many others in the audience—anticipate correctly what this celestial apparition might be.

For films set in India have a way of returning us, time and again, to that marvel of Mughal architecture: the Taj Mahal. While this is particularly true of non-Indian films, with their constitutive “tourist gaze” (signaled in titles such as *Land of the Taj Mahal* [James A. FitzPatrick, US, 1952] and *Biletas Iki Taj Mahal/Ticket to Taj Mahal* [Algimantas Puipa, LT/SU, 1991]), Indian cinema too has its fair share of romancing the Taj—be it a matter of nostalgic investment or historical consciousness, epic spectacle or the fabulation of legends. For instance, the two “Muslim historicals” named *Taj Mahal* (Nanubhai Vakil, IN, 1941) (M. Sadiq, IN, 1963) evoke a glorious Islamic past in a decidedly romantic-nostalgic mode, using Emperor Shah Jahan’s monumental paean to his deceased wife Mumtaz Mahal as the setting for recursive dramas of undying love.

Like all monuments, the Taj remains a dynamic space not only for romantic invocations of reified relations, but also for more critical engagements with history. M. S. Sathyu’s *Garam Hawa/Scorching Winds* (M. S. Sathyu, IN, 1973) deploys the Islamic space of Agra to stage the material and psychic displacements of a Muslim family in post-Partition India. It intimates the potentiality, betrayal, and loss of the ideal of a united and independent nation-state, now figured in terms of the disorienting experiences of Amina, the female protagonist, in the shadow of the Taj. In a key sequence set to soaring *qawaali* music, that shadow materializes as an inverted reflection in the gently rippling waters of the Yamuna river. As the camera pans across the river to reveal Amina adjusting her *kameez* on a boat, apparently after a sensual tryst with her betrothed, the wavering image portends the eventual dissolution of her chimeral dreams.

More recently, *Pardes/Foreign Land* (Subhash Ghai, IN, 1997) transports us to the Taj and its proximate fort-town of Fatehpur Sikri to work out the tensions between nation and diaspora, “authentic” and deracinated Indians. The NRIs (nonresident Indians) arrive at the mausoleum as both tourists and subjects in drift, desperately needing reminder and regeneration of their cultural moorings. Notwithstanding the narrative’s cross wired romantic entanglements, the resuscitation of Indian identities and values emerges as the film’s main event. The Islamicate architectural spaces of Agra, mainstays in global itineraries of tourism and heritage protection, are mobilized as the center of nationalist recharge. Precisely in this vein, *Slumdog*’s hyperhaptic tumbledown brings its protagonists

face to face with a whole world “out there,” at once on the bank of the Yamuna at the center of the national space *and* beyond it as a prime global tourist destination. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Taj belongs at once to India (a mark of national glory) and to the world (a measure of human achievement). It remains one of those privileged sites in the popular imagination around which significant cognitive negotiations and cultural transactions get staged.

In assuring his younger brother, “You are not dead, Jamal,” Salim also brings down the Taj from its heavenly heights with a hilariously prosaic quip, “Some hotel, huh?” His go-getter, entrepreneurial mindset, contrasted to Jamal’s contemplative romanticism, immediately translates the grandeur of the edifice to something like a high-capitalist sublime. But Salim is not that off either, for his dose of realism finds its sustenance in the prevalent practice of naming businesses after the Taj: South Asia is dotted with clothing stores, groceries, photo studios, travel agencies, restaurants, and hotels named after this architectural landmark, the frequent shoddiness of the namesakes not quite able to dim the borrowed, associative halo. The Taj may also well be the most common name for diasporic Indian businesses, particularly eateries. Members of the Taj group of hotels—most famously, the Taj Mahal Hotel and the Taj Land’s End in Bombay, the Taj Exotica in Dubai, and the Taj Boston—seek to capture something of their inspiration’s splendor and update it to fit the needs of contemporary hospitality services. That the original is a mausoleum is no deterrent: the name association transcends its sepulchral ties to generate surplus value.

This capitalization of the Taj into a chic brand is extended into cognate domains: gambling (Trump Taj Mahal casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City), theme parks (the miniature replica in the International Park in Beijing), and popular entertainment (a slew of films; the musician). Tourism and the global process of “Disneyfication” come together to cut up and repackage the Taj imaginary: even as the Taj in Agra (along with the Giza Pyramids and the Great Wall of China) is consistently named one of the seven manmade wonders of the world and remains a tourist hot spot, its singular status is constantly put into question by the proliferation of its nominative copies. The substitutive logic of the simulacrum, whereby global capital harnesses the value of the “Taj,” transforming the rent associated with the one-and-only into an ever-expanding income stream based on its fungible iconicity, is not lost on capitalism’s peripheral others. When Islamicist terrorists took their jihad to Bombay in late 2008, they targeted the Taj hotel: for three days in November, this resplendent site of commerce, luxury, and leisure turned into a blood-spattered battlefield. In the terrorist mind, as in the popular imagination, the five-star hotel with its plush suites and grand shopping arcades epitomizes Western capitalism, not unlike the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center.

Empire and Modern Monumentality

When capitalism seems to have penetrated every part of the globe, how do terrorist enclaves hold onto the fantasy of a radical alterity outside of capitalism—especially when their own operations appear increasingly to exploit capitalist infrastructures and modalities? No doubt, contemporary capitalism still needs to consolidate the inequities that are endemic to its logic of endless expansion; but its others are now simultaneously isolated *and* incorporated as internal exteriorities. The megalopolises of Manila, Mexico City, or Mumbai provide ample evidence of this spatial ordering, with luxury enclaves and gated communities surrounded by ramshackle slums. Heaven and hell in close proximity, each community separated from and yet utterly dependent on the other, the propinquity sustaining the dream of mobility in the face of burgeoning inequalities. In this scenario, why and how does capitalism continue to be associated with the West in Asia or Latin America? The answer lies in the capitalist system's historical roots in the colonial order and its underlying ideological missions, spatial practices, and paradigm of history—not to mention its associations with the dominant, Euro-American version of the global-cosmopolitan.

Take the modern conception of monumentality as instituted by the British Raj in India. When Viceroy Curzon initiated a massive program of monument restoration at the very end of the nineteenth century, he was keen on bringing together the instrumentality of architectural science and the more disinterested appreciation of the sublime. As Santhi Kavuri-Bauer puts it, the viceroy helped transcend “the Mughal monument’s contradictory spatiality” by fusing “the Eros and the Logos.”³ At the same time, the British Empire was able to appropriate and recast the Mughal mystic to serve the project of colonial modernization: what had fallen into disarray was now renovated and spruced up, with the not-so-subtle insinuation that India needed its British rulers even to safeguard its hallowed past. The idea of modern monumentality rested on a building’s ability to bear “lasting witness against men,” to offer “quiet contrast with the transitional character of all things”—indeed, monumentality accrued from the “golden stain of time.”⁴ Here, we see at work the modern penchant for freezing the past in a romantic haze, as perhaps a way of enduring the violent disruptions of modernist progress. In the colonial context, this imperative was overlaid with an express wish to impose British order on Indian space-time by eliminating the “unsettling rituals and economic practices” of quotidian Indian life from the vicinity of the monuments. With any public space, and especially with a site like the Taj, there is an erotics of popular interaction that does not follow state-sanctioned use. Thus the “ageless and sublime beauty of the Taj Mahal” had to be protected “through a series of

conceptual separations and negations that served to render it a modern space of enlightened British imperialism.”⁵

But unruly indigenous practices did not disappear with the imperialist injunction: they persisted in the dark recesses of the mausoleum. Like other Mughal mosques and tombs, the Taj remained a “living monument”; so the state, in its colonial and postcolonial iterations, had to allow “acts of prayer, pilgrimage, veneration, and death.”⁶ To this day, the Taj remains split into two levels: while the sarcophaguses on the main floor are intended for exhibition, the basement crypt houses the actual remains. It is in this basement chamber that one encounters fervent prayers, sacred rituals, and a heady mix of smells—attar, incense, and crushed rose petals. And in spite of periodic clearing drives, peddlers hawking everything from snacks to mementos keep returning to the well-coiffured grounds. Here too, a spatiality of internal outsides comes into play.

Beyond the persistent irruption of local life practices, the modern production of monumentality inspired Indian counternarratives of cultural history. Kavuri-Bauer draws on the writings of historian Jadunath Sarkar and nationalist leaders to record the strategic inversion of imperialist discourse. Sarkar, in particular, challenged the British stereotypical characterization of India’s Muslim rulers as decadent medieval despots in his 1908 essay, “The Daily Life of the Mughal Emperors.” Drawing on primary documents from Shah Jahan’s time, and pointing to the sublime grandeur of Mughal architecture that the colonialists sought to appropriate for their purposes, he argued that unless the “Great Mughals” were visionary promulgators of order and patrons of creativity, “administration, arts and wealth” could not have flourished to such an extent.⁷ There were two significant implications of such a recasting. First, it was the colonialists who now seemed prejudiced, parochial, and opportunistic in their reductive yoking of a glorious past to their imperialist projects. Second, the Mughal monuments remained vital sites “that still carr[ied] the spirit of a time” of enlightenment, of “peace, prosperity and contentment.”⁸ On the basis of this recalibration of history, an architectural site such as the Taj could serve as the pivot of a national cultural renewal.

The nationalist reinscription of architectural landmarks and of their place in history amounted to an inversion—but not a deconstruction—of the presumptive binaries enlightened/despotic, vital/ossified, global/provincial. It sought to stabilize the public meaning, use, and relevance of historic architectural sites with an eye to securing an ideal national subjectivity, community, and space. While such reinscriptions reveal the semiotic pliability of monuments, they shift the slant of the underlying relationalities but not their spirit. In that sense, the plastic potentialities are not fully realized: the monuments get frozen yet again. Not surprisingly, the postindependence policies surrounding the Taj retained

the basic assumptions of the colonial era: local rituals and practices were still so many vexations to be contained in the name of preserving the past and forging a modern-cosmopolitan national Being. The state's consecration of classical and Islamicate Indian sculpture and painting as "national art" also conformed to the colonial administration's selective focus on preserving, thereby ossifying, "premodern" art. The near-total absence of modern art (not to mention the even more plebian commercial cinema) from the cultural pantheon created under the aegis of the state in the 1940s and 1950s reflects the establishment's misgivings about the volatile creativity that emerged from the maelstrom of contemporary life.⁹

The local quotidian always seemed too unruly and messy in relation to the imputedly rational and systematic projects of global cultural restoration and preservation in the name of a universal mankind. UNESCO, which designated the Taj as a World Heritage Site in 1983, deems the seventeenth-century achievement of Indo-Islamic architecture to have "outstanding universal value." If this universality suggests cross-cultural aesthetic equivalences, the technical details charted are all rather specific ("the placing of the tomb at one end of the quadripartite garden rather than at the exact centre," "the four free standing minarets," "the Timurid-Persian scheme of walled in garden").¹⁰ Notwithstanding the insurmountable tension between the universal and the particular, the specificities of Mughal creative vision and craftsmanship—and the subjective, sensorial responses they elicit—are subsumed under objective, rational, and standardized (if contested) values like grandeur and authenticity, symmetry and harmony. What the invocation of a common global heritage, backed by rhetorics of rational expertise and long-term vision, accomplishes is a bracketing of the local, even the national. Paralleling global capital's corrosion of the nation form, its undermining of national economic and political sovereignty under the aegis of the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank, UN-sponsored global heritage now spectralizes local cultural patrimony: national subjectivity is rendered a pale, flawed mimic of cosmopolitan spirit. Inscribed in lack, an anxious cultural establishment in India (like its counterparts all over the global south) rushes to embrace global prescriptions and interdictions to confirm its own globality. No doubt, this relational structure might change with shifting national clout and self-perception in the world arena, but it remains a far cry from the mutuality that the idealized global-cosmopolitan promises and then denies systematically.

The Taj in Modern Indian Art

Not surprisingly, artistic imaginations of the Taj prove to be more diverse and open-ended. I draw on two significant moments in the visual invocation of the

Taj Mahal a century apart to delineate certain shifts in national cultural imagination: Abanindranath Tagore's 1902 painting, *The Passing of Shah Jahan*; and Atul Dodiya's 2002 work, *Tomb's Day*. These shifts signal changing attitudes about collective destiny and national history: the terms on which India envisions and stakes out its place in the hierarchy of nations morphs markedly over the past century. At issue is a broad modality of imagining and emplacing oneself in the world—an inherently plastic modality.

Arriving in the wake of the nineteenth-century cultural renaissance in Bengal, the first moment was deeply invested in consolidating a modern pan-Indian, even pan-Asian sensibility. Abanindranath was the doyen of the Bengal School, acknowledged by art historians to be one of the two earliest formations of modern Indian art. The Bengal School drew inspiration from classical and Islamicate Indian art; internalizing an Orientalist conception of Indian aesthetics, it sought to intimate an essential spirituality at the expense of the corporeal. Abanindranath incorporated influences from East Asian calligraphy and watercolor and Indian tempera to develop an ethereal wash technique. This Bengal School style is frequently contrasted to the late nineteenth-century oil-based paintings of Raja Ravi Varma with their saturated hues, robust physicality, and epic address.¹¹ Varma's style, widely circulated via mass-produced chromolithographs, came to have a profound influence on popular aesthetics; dismissed until recently by the art critical establishment, it lives on in commercial calendar or "bazaar" art, in the visual folds of film and television, and—as we shall see—has increasingly come to inflect contemporary "high art" practices.¹²

While *The Passing of Shah Jahan* (28 cm × 40.6 cm) follows the style of Mughal miniatures, the colors are toned down and large parts of the frame are left as blank areas of solid colors, the ornamental details typical of miniatures now confined to the pillars, the balustrade, and the carpet. The old and ailing emperor, interned in the Agra Fort by his son Aurangzeb, lies on a terrace and looks across the river

Yamuna at the Taj Mahal—a marble ode to his love for his deceased wife Mumtaz Mahal. A female attendant sits at the foot of his bed, looking at the prone body. While his eyes are not clearly visible, the old man's gaze traces a vector of yearning whose object is the white marble mausoleum gleaming in moonlight against the night sky. This diagonal organization of the look, which lends the entire frame a compelling depth-of-field perspective, and which seems remarkably cinematic, affords an anachronistic aperture onto history. Beyond the drama of the specific situation circa 1658, beyond the old man's nostalgic fixation, another scene rises to the surface. The moon is full, yet practically hidden by the dark clouds; we are looking at a great emperor, but in the twilight of his life—when he is a bereaved, incarcerated, broken man. Evoking the poignancy of eclipsed states,



Figure 1. Abanindranath Tagore, "The Passing of Shah Jahan," ca. 1902. Oil color.

the artist perhaps wants us to reflect on the passing of an entire era: the decline that sets in after Aurangzeb culminates in the unceremonious end of the Mughal Empire with the removal of its last representative, Bahadur Shah Jaffar, by the East India Company in 1858, exactly two centuries after Shah Jahan's passing and nearly five decades before the painting. Looking back at a glorious past (but at a precarious point in it), to contemplate the strange melancholy of the moment of the painting's production (an incipient nation at the threshold of modernity, but under colonial occupation): this loaded gesture of looking incarnates a decidedly modern historical consciousness oscillating between continuity and discontinuity, agency and contingency. It also resonates with cinema's layered, nonlinear chronotopes—in particular, the ephemerality, chance, and indeterminacy that sandblast cinematic time.¹³

The Passing of Shah Jahan was first displayed around the time of Curzon's Delhi Durbar (1903),¹⁴ along with two other watercolors: *The Construction of the Taj*, and *The Capture of Bahadur Shah*. An intervention at a moment of stark British triumphalism, the trio evokes the splendor of the Mughals, in content and form, and their unceremonious termination to gently critique imperialist discourses undermining India's past and consolidating the colonial administration. In that sense, Tagore's paintings share the same discursive space and historical intent as Jadunath Sarkar's 1908 essay (all these works having been published in the journal *Modern Review*). I focus on the one painting whose affective force transcends the essentializing propensity of much nationalist discourse, and avoids freezing the Taj into an object of chauvinistic exultation. Tagore's melancholic contemplation on the last days of Shah Jahan conjures the emotions and affects that visitors experience in their haptic interactions with the Taj. More than the awe and the pride about past accomplishments, possibly unavoidable feelings that the monument induces in Indians, the painting invites its viewers to reflect on the meaning of greatness, on the impermanence of things, on lost possibilities, and on our place—individual and collective—in this world. The painting, in that sense, is about the very nature of potentialities: relational, contingent, of our own making and, therefore, plastic.

Shifting Capitalism

The melancholia evident in Tagore's painting continued well into the 1970s. The tourist gaze that had congealed around the Taj, helped by the mass reproduction of images including photographs, travel films, and tourist posters, turned the monument into a shorthand for the wonder that *was* India. Representations of the magnificent tomb, circulated alongside images of poverty and squalor, reiterated Hegel's summation of Indian history—once great, now mired in a lackluster

present. Not even the euphoria of independence, experienced as a “blighted dawn” because of the simultaneous political truncation,¹⁵ could help a national citizenry overcome the sense of inadequacy induced by a colonial modernity. The overall experience of the 1960s and 1970s—a confusing and agonistic drift whose core affect was one of betrayal (instantiated in broken promises, ineffectual policies, and corruption)—only helped sustain a widespread disillusionment.¹⁶ And yet, within these first three decades after independence, the country had made rapid strides in science and technology, was consolidating a vibrant democracy with voting rights extended to all ethnic and religious groups, and had emerged a leader among postcolonial nations, effectively representing their interests at world fora: clearly, there was much to commend about India’s achievements. Therefore, any timeline that claims a radical break in the 1980s, marking a before and after in national consciousness, risks exaggerating the shifts and reducing the complexities of Indian experiences. Even post-1991, after India’s so-called opening up to international regimes of finance and commerce, a hesitant caution marked official adoption of neoliberal prescriptions: what was lethargy in reforms and a lack of political will to some, appeared to be sound sovereign economic decisions to others.

Nevertheless, since the mid-1980s there has been, at both the physical and the ideational levels, a sea change. I am referring to the metaphysical foment generated by contemporary capital, signs of which now provide the most palpable evidence in neovitalist accounts of globalization. Scott Lash makes the useful observation that the phenomenal is increasingly being displaced by—or, rather, being realized and apprehended in terms of—the noumenal.¹⁷ I want to characterize the shift somewhat differently: the very distinctions phenomenal/noumenal, physical/metaphysical, and material/virtual have become less useful in understanding contemporary worldings. The astounding transformations of the national have to do as much with realignments of the imagination as with concrete developments: the transformation of cognitive frames, social attitudes, and economic ideologies are just as important as the IT parks, shopping malls, and condos sprouting everywhere.

While the unrelenting valorization of a profit-oriented market logic and individual enterprise has proved disastrous for community-oriented values and institutions, it has also helped forge aspirations at all levels of society. The capacity to dream, to reach for a better life, is not limited to the upper and middle classes alone. It is easy to dismiss such aspirations as naïve, and ideologically reprehensible: after all, the horizon of aspirations appears to be narrowly determined by a neoliberal ethos that reduces freedom to a consumerist caricature of itself. But aspirations are born of pragmatic considerations, based on a hard calculus of incentives, and informed by increasingly sophisticated practical intuitions



Figure 2. Atul Dodiya, "Tomb's Day," 2001. Enamel paint, varnish on laminate. By kind permission of the artist.

about how the capitalist system works: every so often, they manage to mutate in unexpected directions. Popular, "street" knowledge enables substantial interventions at the local level, in the folds of the everyday, which result in new forms of agency, social relations, and lived environments. Put another way, the creative energy of contemporary capitalism works not simply in a top-down manner along well-established channels, but also musters startling bottom-up momentum along more inchoate capillaries. These energies and agencies—complicit, subversive, or oppositional—do not follow any standardized script of capital. Nowadays oppressive and exploitative structures are confronted not only in terms of resistance, but also via more nuanced and tactical responses tinged with irony, opportunism, and speculation. Media piracy and copy cultures are only two of the most obvious instances of such capricious energies and creativity. My point here: the plasticity of our era finds its most forceful expression in the generation of endless—often unanticipated—potentialities, all of which can probably be connected to capital but cannot be reduced to it.¹⁸

In addition to revealing contemporary capital's novel modes of expropriation, any critique of it has to come to terms with these ancillary affordances and uncharted emergences.¹⁹ The trouble with most extant critical apparatuses is that they begin with established normative idealizations, including presumptive notions of transformative politics, which are not commensurate with the lived experiences in what Partha Chatterjee pointedly calls "most of the world."²⁰ Contemporary popular politics and culture are too variegated and volatile to correspond to clearly articulated, ideologically unambiguous projects. While this noncorrespondence produces warranted apprehensions about the popular, it also

helps avoid the foreclosure of possibilities. It is this productive volatility—plastic as relational worlding, and *plastique* as explosive—that Atul Dodiya evokes in his ludic Taj triptych.

Poof!

Much of Dodiya's oeuvre is decidedly postmodern; its hallmarks are pastiche, simulacrum, irony, high/low obfuscation, lack of depth, play, and performativity. The designation "postmodern" comes with its problems of periodization and mode of production, problems that have been addressed at great length. But the term also suggests a particular aesthetic/epistemological trajectory: while Dodiya is obviously cognizant of it (after all, he is quite successful on the international art circuit), his work cannot be situated only in relation to it. Within the Indian context, aesthetics, knowledge systems, and historical consciousness do not follow any distinct boundaries between premodern, modern, and postmodern.²¹ In particular, in the realm of the Indian popular, there is very little use for modernist distinctions between fact and fiction, and the "truth effects" of history or documentary operate in very different ways.²² One example: photo studios in India routinely offer painted backdrops in front of which their clients pose. These backdrops include not only pleasing landscapes (mountains, oceans, rivers, gardens) but also depictions of tourist spots (the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, the Taj) and historic characters or events (Gandhi, festivals, disasters).²³ It is not that folks who have their pictures taken in front of these backdrops are unaware of the artifice; rather, they are sophisticated enough to accept the artificiality as such, and to be able to wrest a sense of significance for their otherwise humdrum lives by inserting themselves into a prominent landscape or experience. (Tourists who flock to Agra and pose in front of the Taj are engaged in transactions with history and geo-space that are not that different, except they have the resources to travel great distances.) Similar simulacraic tropes, impudent in their embrace of artifice and illusion, are central to Indian cine-aesthetics. The forms of history and globality generated by such practices are part and parcel of Indian popular imaginations, and Dodiya is one artist who derives inspiration and vitality from such worldings.

Tomb's Day (2001, triptych, each panel 191x129 cm) returns us to the Taj, a space of proliferating perspectives and reflections. The mausoleum is recurrently reflected in the garden's shallow fountains and the Yamuna, its dimensions changing with the angle of view. Using metal sheets aglow with the commercial sheen of enamel paint, the kind found in store shutters all over South Asia, Dodiya translates this fecund vista into a curiously flat triptych: there is nothing like the charged depth-of-field of Abanindranath's painting. Instead, the proscenium

effect produced by the gauzy, golden brown curtains framing the three scenes propels us into a world of staging and sleight of hand. The humans that dwarf the Taj in all three panels are recognizable figures: Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin, Bill and Chelsea Clinton, and the renowned Indian magician P. C. Sorcar Jr. By the final panel, the main building has disappeared and only the quartet of minarets remains; but the expression in the magician's eyes sets up the expectation that he might make things reappear at any moment. The organization of looks in the first two panels is purposefully chaotic, while the magician's direct address in the third is all in the here and the now, inducing a disconcerting existential apprehension: is he going to make us disappear too? The magician's gesture, and the playing cards that waft across the three panels, conjure up a realm of chance, enchantment, and speculation. It is this tension between absence and presence, depth and surface, real and virtual, that muster for the work its remarkable plastic brio.

Dodiya invokes an entire range of concerns, largely in terms of gestures, citations, and understated details. There is a longstanding practice of foreign dignitaries having their pictures taken in front of the Taj; the gallery of images, theme and variation around a marble seat runs from Queen Elizabeth II to Oprah Winfrey. While posing for such a photo op, Dodiya's Putins appear to be distracted by something on the ground, and break ideal form. Accompanied by Chelsea in place of Hillary, the ever-gregarious Bill Clinton seems so thrilled to be at the Taj that he breaks into a frisky trot. These sly twists suggest that even world statesmen are not immune to the Taj spell; more to the point, they underscore the diverse interactions that visiting dignitaries have with a historic site, often confounding diplomatic protocols and security arrangements. The vanishing act brings to mind the thoughtless pilfering of gemstones from the inlays of the Taj over the years, and the more recent threat that pollution (from the Mathura oil refinery up the river, and from a general decline in air quality) poses to the marble. Together, the three panels track modulations in the national narrative: the Putins–Clintons–magician progression indexes a passage from the Cold War–era Indo-Soviet alliance to a tilt towards the United States in the time of globalization, and finally points to a future of exciting if uncertain possibilities. Together, these allusions generate a mutable worldliness on the part of the painting and its viewers. It is in such shifting folds of the local, the national, and the global that we might look for ways of imagining and materializing our lives.

Three details make their points unobtrusively, bringing semiotic density to the cheerful triptych. At the top right corner of the panel with the Putins is the replica of a well-known portrait of Mumtaz Mahal, the queen in whose memory the Taj was built. She remains the emblem of undying love—a remote and increasingly impossible ideal that all visitors, especially couples, come under the spell of. A potent cultural script that has drawn lovers and honeymooners to

the Taj down the ages, this exemplar is capable of galvanizing an intense yearning in spite of its utterly reified nature. However, the distractedness of the Putins scuttles the iconicity of this historic image: in this ironic juxtaposition, eternal love seems as unattainable as the model photographic pose. In the middle panel, Clinton carries the *Hanuman Chalis*, a forty-verse devotional hymn in honor of Hanuman, the monkey-god, who has now been politicized as a central icon of *hindutva*. A curious volume to carry to a Muslim memorial site, it enables Dodiya to surreptitiously reference the entanglements of contemporary Indian politics with religious fundamentalism. Finally, at the bottom right of the second panel appears the tiny figure of a janitor, sweeping the geometrically laid out gardens. With its massive tourist presence, the substantial labor that the Taj requires for daily cleanup and maintenance remains hidden from its ubiquitous representations: if the photographers focus on the architectural grandeur and the picturesque setting, the tourism campaigns of the *Incredible India* variety depict happy indigenes whose only work seems to be to add color and vivacity to the white mausoleum.²⁴ With this discreet yet incisive insertion, Dodiya reminds us of the various groups and social classes—guards and janitors, photographers and hawkers, showmen and shamans—that pass through the grounds every day, for whom the Taj is more a workplace than a site of romance or leisure.

Atul Dodiya's formal art education began in Santiniketan, where the legacies of the Bengal School live on. His teachers claim direct lineage to Abanindranath Tagore. But Dodiya was also profoundly influenced by the print images of gods and mythic figures that lined the walls of his family home in the Ghatkopar area of Bombay. He speaks of lying in bed as a child, looking up at these vivid icons for hours, their hues and textures seeping into his incipient consciousness. As he grew up, he became aware of print advertisements, billboard art, wall graffiti, art on vehicles, clay idols: all those kitschy and ephemeral "bazaar" art forms that constitute the vibrant world of South Asian visual cultures. The cinema in its various incarnations—Hindi commercial cinema, European art cinema, Hollywood—was another profound influence.²⁵ What emerged was an unabashedly promiscuous aesthetic, at once drawing on the so-called popular and avant-garde, commercial and alternative, local and global, and scuttling those very categories with gleeful impunity. It is this kind of plastic sensibility—reveling in the connectivity, instability, and artificiality of all things—that is in evidence in *Tomb's Day*.

In disappearing the Taj, the magician at once dispenses with stereotypical perceptions of India *and* confirms them jubilantly. What Dodiya stages here is the utterly bewildering contingency of this global moment: the need to develop the ability to live in—and to endure—impossibility. What vanishes in this double-edged transaction is the anxiety that has plagued Indians and colored their

self-perceptions, most notably their place in the world. In our continually conjunctural contemporaneity, the mise en abyme of loss that marked Abanindranath's *Passing of Shah Jahan*—we observe the female attendant watching over the old man gazing out at his deceased wife's tomb, and acutely experience the passing of a(n) love/glorious/era—is played up and made enjoyable. This ludic relay of losses affects a further loss of the loss itself, so that we begin to sense the possibility, finally, of overcoming a long constitutive lack through the plastic maneuvering of our phenomenological experiences and our historical consciousness. *Tomb's Day* gestures toward the prospect of not having to submit to any universalist project—colonialism, socialism, or capitalism—but of fashioning our own lifeworlds by means of open-ended engagements with our cultural repertoires and material surroundings.

A Bollywood Coda

The credit sequence of the film *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani/Yet the Heart Is Still Indian* (Aziz Mirza, IN, 2000), featuring its eponymous title song (the refrain translates as “And yet, my heart remains Indian”), consists of a series of ironic situations having to do with the vicissitudes of cultural identity in the face of global consumption trends and media flows. The song makes tongue-in-cheek references to the enigma of a paradoxical self that patches itself together through endless negotiation and hoodwinking, selling old stuff (*cheez purani*) in new wrappings (*naye packet*). Shah Rukh Khan, as the popular television journalist Ajay Bakshi, stands in a sleek jacket and necktie behind a state-of-the-art laptop on his work desk, and then steps aside to reveal himself in baggy underwear, sheepishly scratching his buttocks. The initial image of a smart, über-professional media star is quickly replaced by the figure of an uncouth if likeable everyman. The young urban pro may don the trappings of a cosmopolitan public persona, but underneath this veneer, in his heart, he remains a true-blooded Indian—an authentic *paisan*. The efficacy of this duality lies in its simultaneous delineation of an aspiration, to become an urbane and successful media figure; and the democratic possibility of fulfilling it, as the TV anchor is not that different from the average person. In short, the image peddles a glossy, neoliberal Indian Dream. But the ideological operation does not exhaust the potentialities of this visual sleight of hand.

Ajay goes on to pose in a string of tableaux, each of which begins as one thing and mutates into something else: he and a group of rustic women are served fancy cocktails, replete with exotic garnishes and decorative parasols, which they push aside to take up fresh, green coconuts; he stands in front of a screen, flexing his impressive arm muscles, but the arm is revealed to belong to a *palwan*



Figure 3. Trompe l'oeil, Bollywood style: Ajay Bakshi flexes «his» muscles in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (Aziz Mirza, IN, 2000).

(bodybuilder) in *langoti* (jockstraps), exercising behind the screen; he sits on a gleaming motorcycle, surrounded by hip young women, but the entire group turns out to be a stationary tableau on the back of a truck. This switch and slide between different situations, often antithetical to each other, congeals into a playful, liminal, and highly reflexive style: it signals a double consciousness, and conveys the uncanny sense of an intrinsic and intimate self that is somehow, paradoxically, “out there”—an *extimate* self, as it were.²⁶ Stressing the centrality of mediation in contemporary society, and the artificiality of the media world, the sequence conveys the jerry-rigged nature of life “in most of the world.”

These morphing tableaux stage a mise en abyme of subjectivity, capturing the simultaneously tenuous *and* resolute status of an essentialized Indian identity in the midst of global flux. What is most striking about the sequence is its pervasive mood of celebration, feting a resourceful cultural ambidexterity. Unlike the Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s that address the clash between tradition and modernity, there is no melancholia or angst here: if there are contradictions, they are embraced and cheerfully highlighted. The stress is on a plastic interface, an effervescent presentational mode, a wide-eyed self-consciousness in thrall with itself. This playful juxtaposition of the seemingly incommensurate brings various cultural tactics and analytical terms to mind: assimilation, resistance, negotiation, anthropophagy, impersonation, passing, and hybridity are the most obvious. While these categories are all somewhat apposite, they are also limiting in their specificity: none seems adequate to the task of capturing what is going on here, which is nothing short of articulating a more ludic, relational, and fluid mode of being in the world.

Plasticity is the defining characteristic of this mode. Registering at once the commonalities and contradictions of this world; embracing vertiginous transformations while wanting to hold onto a semblance of stability; seeking to materialize life itself as irony, kitsch, and camp, the global culture industry centered on contemporary Hindi cinema—Bollywood—is an exemplary plastic formation. The industry’s self-consciously impossible projections of life, its anxious if spirited negotiation of contradictions, are already distilled in the appellation “Bollywood”—an intrinsically relational, portmanteau, and shifting (i.e., plastic) term. Instead of dismissing this widely accepted if awkward tag, I want to understand what work it does at this historical conjuncture, and what it might have to teach us about the global.

Two concluding observations about Bollywood’s plastic projections of the global are in order. The first has to do with epistemology and industrial exigencies, the second with politics. Contemporary Hindi cinema abounds in certain reflexive gestures that seek to situate Bollywood and its characteristic idioms within a global account of film history. I have written elsewhere about this penchant for reflexivity as both a self-mythologizing mode and a bid to capture global audiences: for instance, *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Kahn, IN, 2007) lovingly produces an affective history of Hindi cinema’s core aesthetic elements while lampooning the hoary question of creative originality in a tale of reincarnation.²⁷ What is important for an understanding of plasticity is the ways in which the industry now deploys highly mediatized (and often tongue-in-cheek) tropes to address the shifting cinematic benchmarks normalized by Hollywood’s evolving practices, and to uphold Bollywood’s relational deviations from such mobile standards as marks of its maturity and independence. At one level, these maneuvers signpost the Bombay film industry’s designs for a new global cultural hegemony; in that sense, these moves tend toward a realigned universal. At another register, Bollywood’s outward momentum has forced a greater reciprocity between the US and Indian industries; in that sense—admittedly a limited one because of the backdoor machinations and restructuring of global media capital—they point toward the possibility of a more multinodal globality.

As for politics, plastic-popular cultural constellations remain volatile and uncertain: there is no guarantee they will help further “progressive” interests. Bollywood’s projections of an unchanging core identity, for instance, have helped the cause of Hindu chauvinist groups in recent years. But the stress on quintessential national qualities now comes with a performative acknowledgment of the limits of identitarian politics, which complicates its alleged connections to fundamentalist religious affiliations and malevolent political mobilizations. If critical cosmopolitical thought reduces all divergences of popular culture/politics from the former’s cherished principles to signs of political capitulation and crisis,

it will keep failing to acknowledge the compulsions on the ground; institutions of global civil society and global governance will keep being confounded in their encounters with the popular “in most of the world.” Popular mediations of local lifeworlds have substantial bearings on the actually existing global; in that respect, they open a critical space from which we may begin to parse the assumptions and limits of critical cosmopolitics, and to relocate the latter’s task of forging a better world in the convulsive here and now. Plasticity names an attempt to think the global in its ideational, material, and affective dimensions, so that such a critical space is not foreclosed.

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NOTES

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1. I have written elsewhere about the need to move beyond hegemonic localisms that usurp the place of the global. Bhaskar Sarkar, “Tracking ‘Global Media’ in the Outposts of Globalization,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 34–57.
2. See, for instance, the special issue on “Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000).
3. Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity, and Space of India’s Mughal Architecture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 70.
4. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1883), 173, quoted in Kavuri-Bauer, 73.
5. Kavuri-Bauer, 73–74.
6. *Ibid.*, 75.
7. Jadunath Sarkar, quoted in Kavuri-Bauer, 90.
8. Kavuri-Bauer, 90.
9. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and*

- Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
10. UNESCO World Heritage List page on the Taj Mahal, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/252>. Accessed January 24, 2015.
11. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation." *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 27/28 (1995): 7–40.
12. Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
13. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
14. The 1903 Durbar marked the coronation of King Edward VII as the emperor of India.
15. This characterization appears in a well-known poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "Subh-e-Azaadi" (August 1947).
16. A detailed account of this drift is beyond the scope of this essay. See the introduction in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *The Wages of Freedom* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–20.
17. Scott Lash, "Capitalism and Metaphysics," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 5 (2007): 1–26.
18. Here, I am echoing Dipesh Chakrabarty's essentially diachronic argument to make a more synchronic point. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
19. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007); Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005).
20. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
21. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2007).
22. Jain, "Introduction," *Gods in the Bazaar*, 1–27.
23. See Nishtha Jain's brilliant film, *City of Photos* (2004).
24. Amitabh Kant, *Branding India: An Incredible Story* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2009).
25. Interview with Atul Dodiya, Mumbai, July 2009.
26. Jacques Alain Miller, "Extimacy," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher et al. (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 75.
27. Bhaskar Sarkar, "Metafiguring Bollywood: Brecht after *Om Shanti Om*," in *Figurations in Indian Film*, ed. Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2013), 205–35.

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