



MEDIA SATURATION AND SOUTHERN AGENCIES

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PERMEATIONS

A few years ago, on a trip to the northeast Indian state of Manipur, I visited the Ima Keithal, or Mother's Market, run exclusively by women (some three thousand of them). Among the vegetables, meat, and poultry; the garments and the yarn; the pottery and the handicrafts, I noticed a woman selling *moa*—crunchy balls made of puffed rice and molasses—alongside video compact discs (VCDs) (figure 11.1): the low-cost, low-resolution format that has been the primary conduit of video media distribution in large parts of the global South.

The VCDs, along with the flash drives and micro SD cards, often carrying pirated media, are available all over India: at tobacco and *paan* shops, fast food vans and strip malls, petrol pumps and phone charging stations. They index the informal and somewhat illicit proliferations within a media world already hyper-saturated with several parallel and linguistically distinct film industries, hundreds of radio and television channels, thousands of newspapers and magazines, ubiquitous roadside billboards, and so on. Plebeian supplements to the hi-tech entertainment



FIGURE 11.1: Pirated VCDs and puffed rice treats. Photo by Bhaskar Sarkar.

promised by tony multiplexes and home theater systems, they mark the spurious trickle-down of lifestyle aspirations projected by stars (mainly film actors and cricket players) who do double duty as brand ambassadors, peddling everything from luxury watches to carbonated drinks, vacation trips to gated condominiums. The ubiquity of some cultural icons—most notably, Shah Rukh Khan—would raise serious concerns of overexposure in the West, but in iconophilic India, media saturation seems only to augment their rent capital.

In spite of this pervasive media presence, the prosaic propinquity between the rustic sweets, which I had relished as a child, and the VCDs, the format in which I can readily access local, grassroots media productions, was striking for its uncanny folding of temporalities and social dimensions. In this matriarchal haven, the offhand mingling of edible and audiovisual treats was notable for its own homespun logic. The encounter underscored for me, once again, the extent to which media had infiltrated daily life in South Asia; and yet, it was precisely this intensity of saturation that rendered the phenomenon unremarkable.

What if we pause for a second here and, in a Wittgensteinian move,¹ shift our perspective to argue that it is everyday life and practices that



FIGURE 11.2: Goddess Kali presides over pirated media. Photo by Bhaskar Sarkar.

intrude upon the media world, and not the other way around? Consider, for instance, figure 11.2, which shows contraband media being sold on a Kolkata pavement. What interests me here is the image of Goddess Kali amid the VCDs and audio CDs (top left of image). While the image itself is a media object, it refers back to a religiosity materialized in a set of ritual practices—here, seeking Kali’s blessings for this itinerant, para-lit street side business—that has little to do with the media world per se.

Rather than insisting on an epistemological separation between media and nonmedia realms, we need to recognize that each permeates the other thoroughly. Consider the ways in which television and online media infiltrate domestic space, or how nonmedia structures interfere with media technologies and communication systems; examples of such intermingling are legion. “Media-saturated” may be usefully rethought as this mutual permeation in the realm of the sensible, rather than as the saturation of an imputed “real world” by radically autonomous, and somehow less real, “media.”

The postmodernist celebration of simulacraic or mediated ontologies suggests that somehow a threshold was crossed in the second half of the twentieth century, shifting the nature of reality itself. But in spite of this

rupture, a key marker of the onset of postmodernity, the presupposition of a “natural” world as ground zero, as anchoring referent, persisted. Indeed, the concept of simulacrum gained traction precisely because of its contradistinction from the natural. Thresholds and ruptures, contagions and crossings: the transgressions that supposedly *post*-ed the modern transpired and took on significance only because of modernism’s obsessive standardizations and neurotic separations (truth and fiction, surface and depth, self and other). Thus reframed, the postmodern now seems to have been a step toward the present conjuncture in which attention has shifted from the need to maintain strict boundaries and pure categories to a recognition and acceptance of the ubiquitous, and thus mostly unremarkable, interpenetrations and interfaces that shape experience. And if interfaces constitute our worlds, then multiple registers of saturation—having to do, for instance, with density, pitch, and temperature—collide, converge, and transform each other to produce yet other orders of plenitude or overload, depending on one’s perspective. That is to say, forms of saturation keep cropping up, proliferating the ways in which the event of *being/becoming saturated* is experienced.

Consider, for instance, India’s labor surplus economy: it indexes a type of saturation that is typical of the global South, and that leads not only to high levels of unemployment but also to widespread *under*employment. The challenge of making a living instigates desperate forms of creativity and enterprise—often bordering on the illegal, mustering mostly low levels of efficiency and productivity. Disadvantaged folks, with limited skill sets and even more limited capital, toil away in labor-intensive occupations. One such endeavor, usually the refuge of women and underage workers, is the making of paper bags from old newspapers and magazines. All over India, a wide variety of street food, from vegetable chips to cut fruit to *bhelpuri*, are served in these bags made of recycled print media. Headlines from a few months ago, snippets of society gossip, models selling cosmetics and household appliances, op-ed commentaries: such sundry media “objects” stare in the face of the customer, generally meriting no more than an absent-minded glance. Once again, media—this time, print media—cross over into another realm, that of snacks and treats, now inducing a low-brow form of saturation by media residues. There is direct correlation, if not quite causality, between this relocated register of media saturation and the saturated state of the labor market. The interface between two domains generates yet another level of saturation: sometimes the newsprint ink, released by oils and

saucers seeping from the food into the paper bag, produces an order of intermingling/contagion that would be unacceptable in advanced societies. But in the global South, economic exigencies trump such concerns, the utility and familiarity of the cheap and ubiquitous paper bags helping to allay fears of low-grade chemical contamination.

The informal sectors of “southern” societies, with their highly developed practices of salvaging, recycling, and repurposing, have always articulated media and nonmedia in creative ways: old magazines and books, conked-out radios and computers, discarded film strips and advertisement banners have found some new use, not always related to media. Presenting *Project Cinema City*—an archive-based, collaborative “research art” initiative exploring the intersections of Bombay the city with Bombay the cinema—mediamaker and activist Madhusree Dutta describes her team’s encounter with Chiranjilal Sharma, “a dealer in waste celluloid who burnt, boiled, and cut up discarded film prints to make assorted commodities.” His livelihood consisted of “transforming the utility of the base material . . . celluloid,” isolating the silver in an earlier era and, more recently, putting rejected film strips to esoteric uses like fabricating lamp shades and reinforcing shirt collars. The encounter put the entire archival project into crisis: while Sharma expanded “the utility of the *thing* into myriad possibilities by continuous conversion,” the research team’s “impulse was to confine the *thing* by freezing its material utility in an archival space.” Dutta and her associates were faced with a provocative question: Was Sharma a “cinema-citizen” who, like the archivists, curators, and artists, intended to preserve and expand the material vitality of the medium of cinema in quotidian urban life, or was he a desperate and opportunistic “immigrant with no attachment to the local culture and its past,” who would resort to “any sly tactic for survival in the present”?²

It is this improvisational, make-do creativity—now widely touted in the paradigms of *gambiarra* (Brazil), *jugaad* (India), or *shanzai* (China)—that collates, presents, and often commodifies the saturation of the sensible world in configurations that seem unexpected and innovative, particularly in relation to the hegemonic frameworks and standards of a universalized global modernity (including contemporary archiving and curatorial practices). The sale of VCDs amid artisanal bazaar merchandise surprised me because, for me, the electronic/digital domain was distinct from the humdrum world of homemade confections and handicrafts. From a ground-level perspective, selling traditional homemade

treats alongside locally pirated media made perfect sense within autochthonous logics of low-priced leisure and entertainment merchandising.

A "SOUTHERN" PROBLEMATIC

Besides the balmy weather, Kolkata winters are known for spectacular sunsets. An intense concentration of dust and other pollutants in the air produce refraction, catching and diffusing the mellow orange light of the setting sun. There is a word in the Sanskrit languages of North India, harking back to agrarian communities, that captures this filtered light: *godhuli*, literally, the dust rising from the hooves of cows returning from the pastures, refers to twilight. Every winter, I encounter an urban variation of it at the Kolkata Book Fair, an annual international event attended by hundreds of thousands over a ten-day period. While there are no cattle in the regulated fairground, the heavy footfall of bibliophiles dislodges enough dust to produce a hazy glow in the late afternoon; while easy on the eyes (so to speak), it is not easy on the nostrils. The book vendors wrap the more expensive volumes in transparent plastic sheets (a common practice in these parts of the world), as protection against the dust.

If the arid winters bring dust, Kolkata residents have to cope with other elemental and microbial proliferations all year round. Algae and mold spreading on damp building walls, bathroom floors, roofs, and courtyards, as well as fungus growing inside electronic equipment and on camera lenses, remain perennial vexations. The tropics, which overwhelmed European colonialists with inconveniences of the "heat and dust" variety, also pose challenges for the indigenes: it is a saturated ecology teeming with life forms that fester, infect, cause trouble. Attempts to keep things tidy, clean, and antiseptic seem futile in the face of this overpowering fecundity. Excessive moisture makes book pages curl up and turn yellow within a few years; fungus growing inside media equipment renders them inoperative. Cleansing and disinfecting rituals produce new snarls; neurotic use of soaps, sanitizing agents, and antibiotics (material indices of "too much" development) lead frequently to more resilient microbial life. Inoculating oneself against such infiltrations/contaminations remains a tenuous goal.³

But the "problem" of proliferation, so rampant in the tropics, is not entirely climate-related; once we consider technological and social conditions in their intersections with the biological, climate-specific expla-

nations broaden out to arguments focusing on environmental factors. In general, the global South seems to have *too much* life: it is too crowded, too noisy, too polluted, too chaotic, and too corrupt, a super-saturated world always careening toward yet another crisis. Saturation, rethought as a *southern* problematic, points to a deep ecology of proliferation. This ecology is fundamentally historical: it stems from the material conditions of exploitation, appropriation, and inequity that have been constitutive of colonial and neocolonial denouements of modernity.

It is not that economically advanced societies (the North) are free of the concerns arising from saturation/proliferation. But they have the capacity to fund, figure out, and operationalize some panacea for it, be that a novel technology (e.g., blight-resistant seeds with high yield), a regulatory rule (industrial emission reduction targets, to take a currently salient example), or social service institutions (say, of family planning). And they have the resources and the clout to patent and capitalize the technology, enforce the rule (perhaps even at a global scale), and ensure the social efficacy of institutions via appropriate education and training. In contrast, southern societies start from a position of disadvantage: besides lacking the budget or the power to find viable solutions, when they do figure out an answer or cure locally, they come up against statutes of global commerce and law designed to serve northern interests. Even contemporary global regimes governing international transfers of technology, as well as global intellectual property laws, perpetuate—and often exacerbate—historical discriminations and imbalances.⁴ Because of these structural continuities across the colonial, postcolonial, and global moments, southern societies have to contend with more acute instances of the saturation problematic. In light of this hyper-saturated global South, the ecological is revealed to be fundamentally historical.

A HISTORICAL DETOUR (A FAMINE IN EASTMANCOLOR)

A slight detour through colonial Bengal might help flesh out my point about the knotty historicities of southern proliferations. Annexed by the East India Company in the second half of the eighteenth century, at a conjuncture when the Mughal Empire was already in decline, Bengal was the first outpost of British colonialism in South Asia. The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, one of the earliest major colonial diktats in the region, sought to consolidate sustainable land holdings in the wake of the devastating famines of the 1770s. A colonial version of the En-

glish enclosure of the commons, it allowed local landlords, or *zamindars*, to own land on a permanent basis and levy taxes at known fixed rates while maintaining their local prestige, thus providing them with substantial incentives to take care of the land and the agricultural workers. If this far-reaching land settlement legislation promoted agrarian stability, its positive effects were largely offset by the extreme modalities of colonial expropriation, including a long-term shift to cash crops like cotton, jute, and indigo, and more contingent wartime commandeering of food grains. In the very last decade of the British Raj, as World War II raged across the planet, Britain's war efforts combined with the callous opportunism of a colonial administration in retreat to produce the calamitous Bengal Famine of 1943. As the public distribution of food grains shrunk in the face of massive military requisitions and local speculative hoarding, and trade barriers restricted emergency imports from other provinces and international sources, some three million people perished in Bengal. Refusing concrete action that could ameliorate the shortage of food supplies, Winston Churchill ascribed the crisis, in a decidedly Malthusian vein, to crop failure as well as to undue population growth resulting from Indians "breeding like rabbits."⁵ With this flamboyantly racist invocation of a primal scene of saturation, the celebrated statesman reframed the tragic outcome of his government's genocidal policies as the fault of the starving natives.

That the Famine of 1943 did not transpire from "natural" causes has been well established. As Amartya Sen demonstrates in his seminal work, *Poverty and Famines*, neither crop failure nor a sudden rise in fertility rates produced the famine; rather, it was the legal and institutional hurdles to accessing grain supplies that caused widespread food shortage and starvation. Central to Sen's empirically grounded arguments is the concept of individual "entitlements": one's ability to command commodity bundles on the basis of one's rights and prospects, both of which were rather limited for the average colonized Bengali of the early 1940s.⁶

While Sen was developing his arguments about shrinking entitlements during the famine of 1943, the renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray also turned his attention to this man-made disaster, interpellated no doubt by scenes of privation and massacre during the Bangladesh War of 1971. Adapted from a well-known literary work focusing on a young Brahmin priest and his wife in a rural milieu with its cast of characters—a rich farmer and his landless laborers, a city transplant overseeing a brick and mortar construction, a needy woman willing to "go wrong" for

a better life, a destitute elderly Brahmin from a neighboring village—Ray’s film *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) produces a trenchant critique of the famine-as-natural-catastrophe thesis, at times appearing to presage Sen’s arguments at an expressive register. And yet, that critique comes cloaked in Ray’s signature subtlety: here, at once disguised *and* mounted in terms of the lush opulence of the “Bengal countryside . . . almost heavy with color, with golds, yellows, umbers, and especially with the greens of the rice fields,” in the words of *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby.⁷ The reviewer goes on to describe the film as an “elegiac” work “which has the impact of an epic without seeming to mean to.”⁸ Perhaps the film’s epic-ness stems from Ray’s startling use of dazzling colors in depicting one of the worst famines in human history. While bringing a verdant Bengali landscape to life, the film’s chromatic resplendence also takes on an allegorical function, gesturing toward something that remains less visible—the historical forces that loom in the distance as *ashani sanket*, as ominous portent. Absolving Nature of all charges of precipitating the famine, the “almost heavy,” that is, saturated hues of Eastmancolor enable Ray to deflect critical attention onto the role of socioeconomic structures, as well as the protagonists’ unwitting complicity in such configurations.

Ray’s sophisticated take was not lost on the jury of the Berlin Film Festival of 1973, which honored the film with its top award, the Golden Bear. But not all viewers were ready to accept a film about starvation and death in such a vibrant palette, and wondered if Ray had not lost his bearings in the heady experience of working with color.⁹ His detractors within the Indian film industry took *Ashani Sanket* to be another instance of Ray peddling spectacles of Indian penury in the festival circuit. As Ray himself stated in an interview, “. . . I believed that it was important to make this point which is made in the original novel—that all this suffering took place in surroundings of great physical beauty.”¹⁰ A rare and unfortunate oversight on the auteur’s part—the meticulously plucked eyebrows of the female lead, utterly inconsonant with the role of a housewife in 1940s rural Bengal—brought further credence to perceptions about the film’s cosmetic packaging of a traumatic historical conjuncture.¹¹ Audiences that expected a more literal realism, shored up by modernist criticality’s general fear of the image and a more contextual chromophobia, missed Ray’s finely modulated reflexivity about processes of mediation that framed his keen analysis of the famine.¹² Take, for instance, the following sequence: roughly midway into the plot, Ray

offers a close-up of a newspaper announcing the acceleration of grain prices, followed by the quick staccato edit of individual Bengali words in extreme close-up, forming a syncopated sentence: market . . . from . . . rice . . . vanishes. As the word *udhao* (vanishes) goes out of focus, a jump cut takes us to the close-up shot of two bright orange butterflies fluttering on the ground, an image that, through its judicious recurrence, takes on the force of a visual leitmotif (its potency most evident in a later scene, when the butterflies hover near a dying woman, indexing, as Ray puts it, “nature’s indifference to human suffering”¹³) (figures 11.3 and 11.4). Next, as a dragonfly lingers above reeds, we hear a plaintive female voice, still off-screen, calling out “ma”—a globally legible cry for succor. Cut to the female lead, the priest’s wife, standing at the gate, looking out at a group of famished women who have abandoned their villages, now begging for the *phyan*, or excess starch water drained from a pot of boiling rice.

The film turns the idea of saturation on its head—promoting a shift of perspective from a Malthusian link between population saturation and food shortage, to color saturation intimating a lush countryside where sources of nourishment ought to be ample—to launch a critique of the larger and remote forces that produce such acute privation. Meanwhile, the community of women is shown not only to be in touch with nature’s largesse but also to have an intimate relationship with a resource commons. Women in this film can access and participate in another dimension of saturation: a fuller range of potentialities, beyond the foreclosures of privatization. This affirmative saturation is presented in gendered terms: the priest’s wife is far more willing than her husband to feed and look after the itinerant old man. In a pivotal scene, the men rebel against the local landlord and loot his granary, not as a unified mobilization against hoarding but more as a desperate, bickering mob. In contrast, the women look after each other, forage for edible wild greens and freshwater mollusks in groups, and even share hard-earned food grains on a few occasions, thereby presenting a more caring and perhaps more feasible paradigm of daily sustenance. Within the film’s narrative arc, such local practices escape channels of official procurement, wholesale distribution, and market exchange to carve out a utopian fringe that persists in the face of the burgeoning crisis. Indeed, in a direct echo of the Greek roots of economics as “household management,” customs of cooperation and care emerge as homegrown ways of managing the crisis: by the film’s end, the priest overcomes the gender divide and learns the virtues of



FIGURES 11.3 AND 11.4: Butterflies flutter in the vicinity of a dying woman.
Ashani Sanket (dir. Satyajit Ray, cinematography Soumendu Roy, 1973).

sharing from his wife. In effect, the film's narrative economy points to the continuing possibilities—and largely discounted modes—of a quotidian and informal “southern” economy grounded in the common.

PROLIFERATIONS, FUNGAL AND FUNGIBLE

For colonial and neocolonial imaginaries, the eco-rich southern commons register as wild and riotous frontiers, waiting to be tamed and settled via exploration, categorization, and appraisal. The story is all too familiar. Exploration gives way to prospecting, which eventually leads to the appropriation of natural resources, depriving local communities of their livelihood and habitation. In a parallel maneuver to this process of capture, Indigenous knowledge structures, practices, and institutions are consistently devalorized, so as to stamp them out over time. The objective of this two-fold operation of enclosure/erasure is to deliver the South—whether it is the Amazon or Zomia forests, the slums of Lagos or south-central Los Angeles—as *tabula rasa* territory: uncomplicated, docile, and primed for modernization. Armed with an Apollonian ethos of *planning*, development initiatives then seek to reassemble these southern terrains, eliminating friction, imposing order, and reducing future risks.

Notwithstanding the cycles of evacuation, deracination, and supersession that have shaped southern experiences of development and progress, the South has never been reduced to a state of basic, primordial goo, without any bedrock, contour, or proclivities of its own. As scholars of the decolonial remind us, traces of the past persist within the contemporary: displaced cosmologies and lapsed ways of life haunt modern existence, unsettling rational arrangements with their obdurate presence.¹⁴ Such entanglements of the nonsynchronous lead us to yet another dimension of saturation, whose munificence now enriches the domain of historiography. With spectral fragments permeating—indeed, rending through—the screen of universal History, jostling for legibility and salience, the restitution of a lost fullness to southern histories endures as a possibility. Moreover, the traces are not inert vestiges of the past; many are essential to contemporary popular experiences, adaptive and creative in their own right. In the language of biology, these specters are totipotent, like cells and spores that are capable of not only reproducing themselves but also mutating into other types of cells. Generative of unauthorized energies and forms, they hold the promise of futures be-

yond projections provided by the official blueprint. However, for the proponents of formal planning, who design sequences of action to achieve specific goals of modernization efficiently and on time, such emergences are unproductive and disruptive, their unheralded potentialities clouding the future.

This anxiety of planners and developers regarding wayward irruptions is not altogether unfounded. Like any supplement that threatens the primacy and authority of the imputed core, irrepressible southern energies tend to congeal and spread like parasitical vegetation, taking over terrain, crowding out or covering over what is ordained to be there. This opportunistic, rhizomatic expansion, which is at the heart of southern saturation, invites speculation about a *funga* model of proliferation, in sharp contrast to the orderly and programmatic processes envisioned in developmentalist paradigms. And an intrinsic aspect of fungal growth is the *fungibility* of the emergent: it supplements/supplants what is already there as the lawful thing, deploying capacities such as adaptability and mimicry, imagination and cunning. Think of the sheltering structures and fitful extensions found in cities of the global South, encroaching upon public land, violating building codes, and poaching electricity from the main lines: sprouting like mushrooms in the damp woods, these unruly add-ons reduce sanctioned drafts and maps into quaint, obsolete figurations. While the terms *fungus* and *fungibility* come from different etymological roots, their mutual resonances help us understand saturation as a southern problematic. Fungi usually grow parasitically, indiscriminately covering the ground, tree trunks, and branches. The dictionary meanings of fungible include “taking the place of” or “performing the role of,” implying a propensity to impersonate, displace, usurp. The latter word can also be traced back to other Indo-European roots that mean “to benefit,” “to be of use,” “to break, to harvest,” and “to feed,” thus tying up with this chapter’s interest in food, nutrition, and sustenance.¹⁵ If the two terms now seem to diverge in their association with power—the fungus conjures bottom-up, opportunistic irruptions congealing into unplanned and often illicit emergences, while fungibility is routinely invoked with high-stake transactions in finance based on rigorous mathematical models and elaborate digital infrastructures—the shared implications of substitution and usurpation remain.

Governing schemes versus errant irruptions: if both sides seek to erase, commandeer, and supplant, the former has power structures, most notably the Law, on its side, while the latter’s achievements are enabled

via transgressions, some habitual and others willful, ranging from furtive code switching to categorically illegal actions. This gap becomes particularly stark and enters public debates at certain critical moments. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement and its powerful resuscitation, during the summer of 2020, of the language of abolition with respect to police forces across the United States. A decade earlier, the massive public bailout of financial institutions and the simultaneous home foreclosures by the same banks and credit agencies instigated broad popular outrage, whose most powerful expressions were the dispersed Occupy movements. The power imbalance that legal codes shore up inspired many a homily about rapacious Wall Street brokers and speculators who went unpunished and the average citizen—the evicted family man, the retired worker with wiped-out savings—who had to bear the fallout of the greed. This is why, within popular discourses, the blueprint and its attendant legal firmament, widely understood to have failed the people, enjoy only a tenuous legitimacy. Fungal/fungible agencies emerge as a matter of practical recourse, from within plebeian struggles for survival involving appropriation, improvisation, and making do. These contingent, fringe agencies, whose desperate and frequently devious tactics hover between the licit and the illicit, intimate the diffuse coming-together of a rogue system seeking a massive redistribution of resources.¹⁶ Put differently, the widespread disaffection with state machineries and official policies compels the masses to counter official corruption and indifference with grassroots opportunism and risky moves, effectively seeking reclamation of the malappropriated resource commons. At the same time, the subversion of order, method, and system corrupts, and thus derails, political theory's promised transformation of *the people* into idealized *citizen-subjects* with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities.¹⁷

In *Malfeasance*, Michel Serres draws on the multiple meanings of *propre* (French for “clean,” “one’s own,” or “characteristic of”) to offer the enigmatic proposition that our cleanliness is also our filth. Living beings often appropriate what is theirs through dirt (often, their excreta: for instance, wolves marking their territory with urine); it is *in their nature*. But since the Industrial Revolution, human beings have taken pollution to unnatural, alarming levels because of the modern economy’s recourse to intemperate expropriation in the service of unlimited growth. One might say that equipped with an arsenal of technologies, “the unbound Prometheus” of modern economic history¹⁸ mutated into

a rapacious pollutant.¹⁹ Serres argues that we have to check our drive to appropriate—to own everything as private property—and reestablish a “natural contract.”²⁰ It is interesting that the translator Anne-Marie Feenberg Dibon renders the original French title (*Le mal propre*, literally, “clean evil” but also “dishonest, sleazy, despicable”)²¹ into English as *malfeasance*, which literally means “a violation of public trust.” Extending Serres somewhat, could *malfeasance* then refer to the production of cleanliness/property/security through acts of sullyng/vandalizing/terrorizing? That is, the production of something deemed to be of value through the treacherous deployment of something else that is exactly its opposite, an act of devaluation? In each case, an idealized category—cleanliness, property, security—is sold to the public as a common good, for the ultimate legitimization of an act of violation.

If the public is the collective stakeholder of the commons, what is the nature of the underlying public violation? Is it not the expropriation and enclosure of the commons for its total appropriation? And what is the role of the state in this expropriative violation? Is not the state, the representative of the people and the trustee of the common, also the violator of public trust—as the authority that expropriates, or at least the authority that legitimizes the violation of the commons? The state machinery’s collusion with global capital and finance, orchestrating the takeover of land and resources belonging to Indigenous communities and agrarian populations, is well documented. Land grabs sanctioned by the state, and backed by the police, enable the setting up of mines and factories and the launch of real estate projects, all in the name of industrialization and progress. The fast pace at which marshes and lakes are being filled up around Kolkata, displacing fisheries and agricultural farms to build industrial parks, high-rise condominium buildings, and lucrative shopping malls, is unsettling the delicate ecological balance of this metropolitan area.²² As the mechanisms of planned development seek to impose order on the ad hoc, fungal proliferation of activities and structures arising out of local initiatives, the underlying violence/violation becomes apparent from the aggressive measures of containment: for instance, the periodic cleanup drives razing shantytowns and other unsanctioned erections to bring the cityscape more in line with the planning blueprints. Such raids seem particularly egregious in the absence of any official provision for affordable housing or a guarantee of means of minimum livelihood.²³ This violence against decentralized fungal growth indexes a shift in the collective notion of the common

good, and a transformation of the public responsibilities of the state. Mimicking a central aspect of contemporary finance, namely, the fungibility of assets, public trust and responsibility have turned more liquid, while the role of state leaders has become transposable with that of the captains of capitalism.

THE PIRATICAL

Saturation as southern proliferation unleashes a two-fold geopolitical torque: one strand has to do with control, the other with emergence.

In its fecundity, the global South presents an alluring array of opportunities waiting to be realized. But given its long history of subverting northern, Euro-American modes of capitalization, its chaotic deferrals and detours from a universalized script of capitalist modernity, it needs to be reined in, regulated, even disciplined. Enter a long list of instruments and agencies—from modernist planning to administrative bureaucracies, from the Scramble for Africa (1884–85) to the World Trade Organization (WTO) (1995)—seeking to categorize, parcel, and redistribute this unruly terrain in the name of order, efficiency, and enterprise.

Of course, capitalization and control are not exclusive to the South: expropriative institutions are continually under threat from below; order is hard-earned everywhere. The complex history of media (de)regulation, from the Statute of Anne (1710) to the privatization of radio waves to the current onslaught on net neutrality, bears witness to this ongoing tussle. The cat-and-mouse game between control and emergence, which is structural, rages across many a social field beyond media: law and order (legislation and the search for loopholes), economic enterprise (monopolistic agglomeration and competitive diffusion), public health (inoculation and new microbial strains), sexuality and reproductive functions (“family values” and nonnormative desires). Media (from nineteenth-century demographic data to contemporary surveillance systems) plays a constitutive role in these biopolitical contentions: to the extent media saturates life itself (and vice versa), it becomes both an instrument *and* a target of biopolitical interventions.

Because saturation from proliferation appears to multiply the threats from crime and contagion, adding to volatility and uncertainty, control mechanisms in the global South—from within the nation-state and without—tend to be draconian. The contradictions of resource-scarce societies, many of which were once colonies, accentuate the challenges

of governance. With the attenuation of the institutions of civil society and rule of law, biopolitics gives way to necropolitics.²⁴ As far-flung parts of the world get entangled via processes of globalization, the rapid transmission of peoples and commodities, possibilities and risks, puts borders and boundaries under erasure. The resulting paranoia about potential infiltration and disruption engenders neurotic attempts at securing the self from the other, the inside from the outside. Efforts to establish protocols and standards in the service of global governance assume planetary equivalences that are not yet in place; indeed, such equivalences must continue to be unattainable if capitalism, contingent on fundamental inequities, is to remain functional. Increasingly dependent on foreign dispensations such as loans and technological know-how, and progressively outdone by transnational corporations, southern ruling blocs capitulate to the demands of global institutions for structural adjustments and obligatory legislation, comprising national sovereignty and interests. Not only is the balance of power between regions skewed, but the economic growth that follows is accompanied by a widening chasm between the privileged and the dispossessed. In short, differential saturations (of people, resources, power) across the globe induce geo-biopolitical hierarchies.

With a few oligopolistic conglomerates taking over the entire media world, the conduits for creativity, communication, and information are becoming more centralized and constricted. Big media, in collaboration with big pharma and through institutions of global governance such as the World Intellectual Property Organization, is dictating the terms under which imaginative expressions can take place and knowledge can be disseminated. But this highly orchestrated top-down apparatus is constantly under threat from the myriad activities on the ground via which media forms get recast, rewired, rerouted. There is a gulf between what is instituted as legal and what is felt to be legitimate: the piratical is the realm of potentialities that emerge in this gulf.²⁵

Saturation is what attracts big media with its fecundity—its untapped creativities, its market potentialities. Saturation is also the precondition for the innumerable dividual agencies that irrupt to deflect, dis-tend, and transfigure all overarching logics of mediation. This is where southern deflections part ways with practices such as sampling, collage, and p2p file sharing. These interventions, normalized and legitimized within “northern” artistic and critical circuits, actively seek alterity, resistance, or sabotage: they are interventions that operate according to an

already legitimated logic of negation. There is nothing grandiosely utopian about the southern agencies/interventions that become so *by default*, that emerge from a rather prosaic need to make do or make a living. Unabashedly opportunistic, they index a different register of resourcefulness, ingenuity, and enterprise.

Put another way, while utopian impulses are registered as still emergent, still to come into their own, still virtual even, the teeming domain of the saturated South is full of activities and mobilizations that are *already underway*, and that often trump organized enterprises and political programs in terms of the sheer number of people involved. A line of thinking that might allow us to frame these desperate agencies and political subjectivities as utopic follows from Ernst Bloch's notion of a "utopian surplus,"²⁶ that which persists around and at the fringes of mainstream normativities and systematizations. We might consider, for instance, the women in *Ashani Sanket* figuring out a mode of surviving-in-common in the midst of a man-made famine. However, inserting diffuse southern agencies within an idealized horizon of possibilities would amount to an act of cooptation, whose only justification would be the sustenance of hope as a resource for the future. Even Bloch's imaginative take rests on a conception of the "not-yet-conscious" that, in effect, patronizes actually existing agencies as embryonic, immature, disorganized. How might we consolidate a more robust approach to valorize and learn from these grassroots impulses without slipping into romantic idealizations and elite discountings?

Saturation begets its own material resilience by dint of sheer mass and density, and the vitality of a saturated *socius* springs from the everyday interactions of the living and the nonliving. If command and control seek to impose a particular organization on the social, its legion constituents push back not out of some deliberate agenda but habitually, because their own proclivities and interests are seldom in alignment with the master plan. In oversaturated India, all kinds of piratical activities flourish precisely because the official blueprint for development effectively bypasses its masses and fails to provide for them. In the vast informal sector of the national economy, most enterprises—which, from our academic habitus, may be called *DIY*—spring from popular inventiveness that can flourish only by circumventing standards and laws deemed illegitimate at the local level.

But what, precisely, does this ability to improvise, build around, and make do *do*, what form of agency does it foster? For, at one level, this

very resourcefulness—now celebrated as *jugaad*, a homespun low-tech *techné*—also promotes a giving in, a getting used to, a resigned acceptance of the state's recurrent letdown of its citizenry. It gets the masses inured to everyday, “slow” violences: dust and vermin, lack of proper sanitation, lack of potable water, lack of minimum provisions for food, shelter, clothing, and so on.²⁷ In that sense, private self-help enterprise develops only by evacuating public dissent: it allows, as it were, for anti-bodies to develop against the pathological failures of the state. This dissipation of a revolutionary—or even effectively critical—consciousness is the price of subaltern creativity and quick wit. It is the downside of southern saturation.

If we were to wonder about the upstream and downstream of commodity chains (as economic sociologists are wont to do), we might note that the beguiling mix of merchandise offered by the woman in Manipur's Ima Market conjoined the charming world of homemade confections (firmly within the Gandhian paradigm of “cottage industry”) and the sinister channels of contraband goods abetted, in this instance, by the so-called golden triangle of smuggling extending across the India–Myanmar border. This uncanny collision of worlds that, for the woman vendor, was utterly banal and commonplace speaks of an inventive and resilient, if partly illicit, vitality that is the double-edged promise of southern saturation.

NOTES

My thanks to volume editors Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz, the participants of the Saturation Workshop, Pooja Rangan, and Bishnupriya Ghosh for their comments and suggestions.

1. I am referring to Wittgenstein's discussion of the “duck-rabbit paradox.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 194–197.

2. Madhusree Dutta, “The Travels of a Project,” in *Project Cinema City*, ed. Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik, and Rohan Shivkumar (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), 17. In referring to Sharma's status as an immigrant (possibly from the northern hinterlands, as his name would suggest), Dutta is pointing to the competing claims to space in Bombay. A contestation amplified by demographic saturation in the megalopolis, perhaps its most politicized contemporary iteration has focused on migrant workers and the fraught questions of cultural roots, social belonging, and political citizenship. The nativist renaming of the city to Mumbai in the mid-1990s seeks to expand the tussle over space to a struggle over history.

3. As Bishnupriya Ghosh writes in chapter 7 of this volume, human bodies sometimes reach a tenuous compromise with microbial life through multispecies accommodation.

4. Peter Drahos and John Braithwaite, *Information Feudalism: Who Owns the Knowledge Economy?* (New York: New Press, 2007); Laikwan Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy, and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

5. Madhusree Mukherjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 205.

6. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

7. Vincent Canby, "Satyajit Ray's Moving 'Distant Thunder,'" *New York Times*, October 12, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/12/archives/satyajit-rays-moving-distant-thunder-the-cast.html>.

8. Canby, "Satyajit Ray's Moving 'Distant Thunder.'"

9. While Ray had already produced one full film and several key episodes in color before, this 1973 work marked his transition to working exclusively in color.

10. "Los Angeles Times Reporter Kevin Thomas Interviews Satyajit Ray," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FERd4Dmsyjs>, accessed October 2018.

11. A mistake that was lampooned by Mrinal Sen in his critique of art cinema and various "progressive" filmmaking practices, *Akaler Sandhane* (a.k.a. *In Search of Famine*, 1980).

12. For a discussion of the specifically modern Western fear of contamination/corruption via color, which enters Indian discussions of Ray's realist "art cinema" in the context of representing poverty, see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

13. "Los Angeles Times Reporter Kevin Thomas Interviews Satyajit Ray."

14. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

15. *Fungus* comes from Latin *fungus*, "a mushroom," and the cognate Greek *sphongos*, "sponge." *Fungible* comes from Medieval Latin, *fungibilis*, derived from Latin *fungi*, "perform," and phrases such as *fungi vice*, "to take the place." These roots of *fungible*, in turn, are related to various Indo-European roots such as *bhung*, "be of use, be used," Sanskrit "to benefit," Irish "to break, harvest," and Armenian "to feed." www.etymonline.com.

16. Among scholars who have written about such emergences, see Paolo Virno, *The Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, 2004); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

17. Dilip Gaonkar, "After the Fictions: Notes towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude," *e-flux* 58 (October 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/58/61187/after-the-fictions-notes-towards-a-phenomenology-of-the-multitude/>; Bhas-

kar Sarkar, "Theory Stranded at the Borders, or, Cultural Studies at the Southern Fringes," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16:3 (September 2019): 219–240.

18. For David Landes, this exemplary subject of history is Western Europe. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

19. My argument here has strong and obvious resonance with Janet Walker's observation in the afterword to this collection that pollution and climate change may be understood as "matter out of phase," riffing on Mary Douglas's formulation of dirt as "matter out of place," as that which thwarts cleanliness and order. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1966]), 43.

20. Michel Serres, *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?*, trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

21. Serres, *Malfeasance*, 3n1.

22. Jenia Mukherjee, *Blue Infrastructures: Natural History, Political Ecology, and Urban Development in Kolkata* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020).

23. The callousness of the state reached new heights during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government of India declared a national lockdown without any effective measures for securing the basic sustenance of the poor.

24. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

25. For a more detailed development of this argument, see Bhaskar Sarkar, "Media Piracy and the Terrorist Boogeyman: Speculative Potentiations," *positions* 24:2 (2016): 343–368.

26. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), especially 144–177.

27. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).