

‘Bombay/Mumbai 1992-2001’

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BOMBAY/MUMBAI 1992-2001

Arriving in Bombay

A possible start to this essay could be Bombay’s Hindi cinema in one of its epochal moments: the beginning of Raj Kapoor’s film *Shri 420* (1955), heralding the arrival of a fictional immigrant to the city of Bombay.¹ With his cloth bundle on a stick, Raj, the fabled tramp, enters the city singing a song that was to become a perennial favourite: ‘My shoes are Japani, my trousers Englistani, the red cap on my head is Russi yet my heart is Hindustani’.

The Indian state is less than five years old, the Indian nation still, therefore, in the process of formation when Raj arrives at Bombay’s doorstep to pawn his honesty medal. The song’s ironic, affectionate reference to Nehru’s nationalist *modernism* - the right that the newly formed nation gave to its citizens to view the world as a benign, and in political terms non-aligned, affiliation - comes, significantly, from an ingenuous migrant to the metropolis.

Bombay’s famed film industry offers numerous allegories of survival. Radical theatre workers and poets came to this city during the 1940s and 1950s, many of them displaced during the country’s Partition, to become actors, directors, script-and-song writers. They were celebrated and also assimilated, for survival meant negotiating with a growing industry. This was the period when the post-war boom in industry and real estate demolished the more stable studio systems of the pre-war period, when film production in India more than doubled, and Indian cinema marked an achievement unparalleled in the third world’s cinema history by setting up a national market for a national culture industry virtually independently of State support.

This film industry also developed a distinct narrative mode that has since been theorized as nationalist melodrama: Bombay’s freshly acculturated artists provided a language of exchange for the rest of India - images, prose, songs and sheer *rhetoric* that is about arriving, about survival.

It is in the melodramatic mode that Bombay cinema delivers the city to the Indian public. It is also in the peculiar promise of Bombay that this cinematic genre continues to serve a

¹ While the transition of the city name from Bombay to Mumbai is signalled in the very title, we make an authorial choice to use the name Bombay in the course of the essay. Placed in the heterodox history of this city, this choice can maintain a self-explanatory polemic: about questions of belonging and appropriation and about the larger politics of location. The name Mumbai is used in the post-1995 period in the captions and endnotes.

paradigmatic function: intertwined stories of faith, corruption, love, betrayal help mediate the anguish of a transition from country to city, from feudal to capitalist modes of production. Melodrama engages with the civil society that ensues in the transition; at the same time it promotes subjectivity, among other things through an identification with the highly wrought personae of the stars. In replacing the sacred icon with the beloved, melodrama plays a role in giving the country's internal 'exiles' a hold on their experience of modernity. It also means that Bombay melodrama, featuring modern consciousness as a painful *mastering* of life in the metropolis, becomes ideologically complicit with the male protagonist.

Survivors' Modernity

Here is also a clue about how the existential position of a metropolitan rebel becomes Indian modernism. Take Francis Newton Souza. Goan Catholic by birth, he came to Bombay with his working-class mother, studied at the Sir J. J. School of Art, founded the Bombay Progressive Artists Group in 1947, then migrated to London. Here he became a volatile 'native'-modernist of his time:

Then my mind began to wander into the city I was bred in: Bombay with its... stinking urinals and filthy gullies, its sickening venereal diseased brothels, its corrupted municipality, its Hindu colony and Muslim colony and Parsee colony, its bug ridden Goan residential clubs, its reeking, mutilating and fatal hospitals, its machines, rackets, babbitts, pinions, cogs, pile drivers, dwangs, farads and din.²

Souza's version of 'outsider' modernism can be set against locally pitched forms of modernism such as that of the Marathi playwright from Bombay, Vijay Tendulkar. Introducing a form of urban social realism in theatre in the late 1950s, Tendulkar created a space that his existential anti-hero of the middle class could inhabit. In the plays *Gidhade* (1962) and *Sakharam Binder* (1971) he developed an idiom that spoke of class and caste transgression and touched the territory rightfully occupied by the Dalits.³

The Dalit liberation movement produced an explosive form of Marathi literature in the 1970s. Dalit poets like Namdeo Dhasal, defining their bind with metropolitan space, gave Bombay its wager for a caste war:

Their Eternal Pity no taller than the pimp on Falkland Road
No pavilion put up in the sky for us.
Lords of wealth, they are, locking up lights in those vaults of theirs.

² F. N Souza, 'Nirvana of a Maggot', *Words and Lines*, Villiers Publications, London, 1959, p 15.

³ The liberation movement against caste oppression and untouchability has a long history in India. The twentieth century Dalit movement in Maharashtra spearheaded between the 1930's and 1950's by the radical jurist, Dr B.R Ambedkar (contemporary/ contestant of Gandhi and Nehru; the main architect of the Constitution of India). It involves a rejection of Hinduism/ affirmative conversion to Buddhism. It incorporates militant outfits like the Dalit Panthers. The Dalit consciousness finds its metropolitan expression in Marathi literature especially poetry. See: Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread, Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, Orient Longman, Bombay, 1992.

In this life, carried by a whore, not even the sidewalks are ours.⁴

The Dalits writers spoke about how you arrived in Bombay to escape the civilizational malaise of 'untouchability'. To do so you had to preserve but as likely to win a subjectivity and forge a modernity that could grasp it. And, certainly, you had to invent your citizenship since nobody else was going to do it for you. In the metropolitan encounter, in the struggle to inherit the city, you came face to face with the naked truth of the 'citizen-subject' in India. Or, as Baburao Bagul writes in his best known short story: 'This is Bombay. Here men eat men. And Death is Getting Cheaper.'⁵

Bombay 1992

In December 1992 and January 1993, Bombay raged with a spate of 'communal' riots on a scale it had never seen before. The cataclysmic events of these months were foundational: Bombay became the stage for acting out fierce contradictions in the nation's encounter with modernity.

These riots followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid (the sixteenth century mosque situated in the northern city of Ayodhya) by right wing pro-Hindutva fanatics. This pivotal event in India's political sphere had nationwide consequences. In Bombay the motivated intensity of the riots so crucially transformed the city's complex melange of local, national and transnational groupings that the moment could be seen to mark the end of Bombay's century-old cosmopolitanism.

In the aftermath of the riots, the evidence of the Srikrishna Commission appointed by the State Government for an inquiry proved that the Shiv Sena was largely responsible.⁶ Since its formation in 1966 the Shiv Sena, an explicitly anti-Communist labour grouping, has had a history of strikes, riots and violence against a range of minorities, including Gujaratis, Muslims, South Indians and Dalits. In the 1992-93 riots, the murder and arson directed against the city's Muslim population raised the larger question of the extraordinary fragility of civil society: in January 1993, 150,000 people fled the city that proudly claims to be India's financial capital.⁷

⁴ ~~Namdeo Dhasal, 'Tyanchi Sanatana Daya' ('Their Eternal Pity'), *Golpitha*; translated from the Marathi by Eleanor Zelliot and Jayant Karve. Quoted in Vidyut Bhagwat, 'Bombay in Dalit Literature', Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (eds.), *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996. p 122.~~

⁵ Baburao Bagul, 'Maran Swasta Hot Aahe' ('Death is getting Cheaper'), translated from the Marathi by Eleanor Zelliot and Jayant Karve, quoted in Vidyut Bhagwat, *ibid*, p.121.

⁶ Justice B.N. Srikrishna of the Bombay High Court was appointed by the State government to inquire into the 1992-93 riots. See *Damning Verdict: Srikrishna Commission Report: Mumbai Riots 1992-93*, Sabrang Communications and Publishing, Mumbai, n.d

⁷ Contextualised by the 1956 regional Samyukta Maharashtra movement and the protectionist 'jobs for Maharashtrians' platform, the Shiv Sena, since its formation in 1966, has organized itself to oppose the non-Maharashtrian migrant groups and communities from the different regions of India residing and taking employment in Bombay. At the same time the outfit is geared to contest the Left labour movement. The tragic failure of the textile strike of 1982-83 gave the Shiv Sena a firm foothold in the labour movement; it came to power in alliance with the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and ruled Bombay/ Maharashtra during 1994-9. Its total membership strength is estimated at 40,000 and more members; its vituperative leader, Bal Thackeray, who openly declares a fascist ideology in relation to the Indian minorities, especially the

The reprisals that followed - serial bomb blasts in March 1993 in some of the city's key business centres - suggested that religious difference was only one among the motivations for violence. A gamble had been set apace by the majority community to settle territorial disputes in the city: real estate criminals, smuggling mafias, rivalries within the trade unions, conflicts over caste and region had ignited the riots.

Bombay/ Mumbai: Industrial City

In 1995, a year after the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party government took over power in Maharashtra state, the city's name was formally changed from the colonial 'Bombay' to its vernacular version, 'Mumbai'. This seemingly innocuous move was contextualised by the riots and the rise of a xenophobic nationalism. There is irony here: the Shiv Sena's Mumbai is a city that has pushed its corporate status over the threshold into globalization. Here is an island city, home to 12 million⁸ Indians, rejecting its more capacious cultural cosmopolitanism while bidding for a place in the path of global finance moving eastward from New York and London to Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Shanghai.

Bombay was a major industrial metropolis of the colonial world from the middle of the nineteenth century. The elaborate infrastructure that was put in place by the British colonial power - a mercantile ethos modernised by the establishment of dockyards, cotton mills and the *legendary* Indian Railways - induced complex moves in native trade and manufacture culminating in the establishment of the Indian textile industry offering competition to Lancashire itself. This produced a class of indigenous industrialist-entrepreneurs who later aspired to the condition of a bourgeoisie in its fullest sense and cast a determining gaze upon the city and the nation.

This same infrastructure - then and ever since - became the means of arrival for a working population that gradually gave Bombay its proletarian base. The division of the colonial city into White and Black Towns translates into ever more confrontational polarities in the contemporary city; class divisions can be plotted in the way that the three

Muslim, was indicted in the 1992-93 carnage in Bombay. There are numerous studies on the Shiv Sena and on its role in the Bombay riots. See Sujata Patel, 'Bombay's Urban predicament'; Jayant Lele, 'Saffronization of the Shiv Sena: The Political Economy of City, State and Nation'; Gerard Heuze, Cultural Populism: The Appeal of the Shiv Sena'; Kalpana Sharma, 'Chronicle of a Riot Foretold', in Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (eds.), *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996.

⁸ The (last) 1991 census shows 9.9 million for Greater Bombay and, more relevant, 12.5 million for the Bombay Metropolitan Region covering a 600 sq kilometer area. Projected figures for the Bombay Metropolitan Region: 27.5 million in 2005.

⁹ The story of the rise of a labour movement in relation to the textile industry of Bombay has been very extensively chronicled by Indian scholars and political activists. For the famous 1982-83 textile strike, see: Javed Anand, 'The Tenth Month- A chronology of events, in *The 10th Month-Bombay's Historic Textile Strike*, Centre for Education & Documentation, Bombay, 1983; Rajni Bakshi, *The Long Haul*, BUILD Documentation Centre, Bombay, 1987; H. Van Wersch, *Bombay Textile Strike 1982-83*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1992. For the peculiar phenomenon of Datta Samant, the maverick trade union leader who led - and lost - the strike and was murdered a decade later, see: Sandip Pendse 'Labour: the Datta Samant phenomenon', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.16, nos 17& 18, 1981. See the *Economic and Political Weekly*, during the period 1980-85 for intense analyses of the Bombay textile strike in relation to the larger issues of Indian labour politics.

local railway lines still divide the city into its white collar employees (who take the coastal Western Railway line), textile workers (who use the Central Railway which goes through the heart of the mill areas), and workers who use the Harbour Line (recalling Bombay's ancestry as a port city).

Within the context of its highly articulated class structure, Bombay lays claim to the origins of the labour movement and, from the 1940s, to the activity of the Communist Party of India. The city's history can be marked by famous trade union strikes. The crucial textile sector, dominated by a negotiating Congress Party trade union, saw a retaliatory strike in 1982-83; led by an independent militant, it became the longest, most tragic labour struggle in India. Huge mills closed down and an estimated 75,000 workers lost their jobs.⁹ With escalating real estate speculation, another kind of immigrant labour has poured into the city, as construction workers living like nomads on building sites. The two dominant categories of the working class coalesced after 1983 when mills owners made their profits through selling the land on which they were built, forcing workers back to their villages or into 'casual' daily-wage labour. Meanwhile, the disputes over mill lands, spilling over into conflicts between workers' rights versus property developers' interests, highlight the stark reality of Bombay where an estimated 5 million people - 55 per cent of the city's population - live in 'illegal' slums, interspersed with properties on prime land that counts with the most expensive real estate in the world.

Bombay Modernism: 1940s To 90s

The modernism manifest in the work of Bombay's writers, artists and filmmakers from the 1940s is directly related to the actual experience of metropolitan modernity. We argue that the ability to describe the experience springs, paradoxically, from an underlying realm of realism. In India, as often in other parts of the third world, modernity does not precipitate itself into the modernist canon. Familiar aesthetic categories of the modern - realism and modernism - gain complicity on strange ground. It is their peculiar form of overlapping that requires to be taken into account, not only for understanding specific types of cultural praxis but for large-scale revisions in the history of modernism and of metropolitan culture in the twentieth century.

This paradox is also part of the explanatory method we adopt to designate the epochal transition from colonial to postcolonial society. Within this explanation we introduce the term 'subaltern' and elicit from the compressed history of its use in radical discourse (in the subaltern studies historiography of modern India), a figure subordinated in the social hierarchy but valorized in theory. The figure is a means of description and, as Gayatri Spivak puts it in her explication of the term and the processes it instigates, as the site for the 'production of "evidence", the cornerstone of historical truth'¹⁰

The term subaltern is specifically used in this essay to designate (*not* the peasant but) a dispossessed urban-insider embodying potential agency. We indicate how the metropolitan artist, in the moment of identification with this protagonist, can signal every

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (eds.) *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 1988.

facet of modern life in the city; how this process can then proliferate and become generative of modernism. Equally, seen from a slightly different angle, the modern itself can seem to be elusive, missing, absent. For indeed the modern *here* is always seen as being *elsewhere*, typically of course in the 'West'. And the consequent form of cultural modernism, functioning in unexpected ways around the sense of lack, can be especially befuddling to those who seek ordered categories in practice and in theory.

One straight marker of modernist practice is the Progressive Artists Group launched in Bombay in 1947 by Francis Newton Souza, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara and others. Later affiliates to the modernist ideology included V.S. Gaitonde, Akbar Padamsee and Tyeb Mehta. Though the Group disbanded when some of its members moved to Paris and London in the 1950s, this post-Independence generation of Bombay artists has retained a vanguard status in the chronicle of modern Indian art. They are seen to have mastered the cultural and economic struggle of being Indian while at the same time inducting this experience into the universalist utopia dreamt up by modernists everywhere in the world. It is significant that in India this utopia was envisioned precisely at the point when the Second World War had destroyed the engagement with utopia in western Europe leaving the socialist and the third world to work out the concept in their own terms.

If we bring the modernism of the Bombay Progressives into the 1990s by presenting Tyeb Mehta's recent morphology of his modernist-figurative painting and place this *vis-a-vis* the realist paintings of a younger, Marxist, painter, Sudhir Patwardhan, we will set up one important paradigm for the politics of (self) representation in Indian art. In the last two decades Tyeb Mehta has introduced a mythological element into his oeuvre by painting Kali, the dark goddess of death and resurrection, followed by a series on the theme of the buffalo-demon, Mahishasura, vanquished by the golden goddess Durga - These images are drawn from an indigenous (arguably pre-Aryan) past; they are imbedded in the material culture of India's sub-continental tribes. Mehta's heterodox use of mythology creates contemporary allegories around the role of the 'cultural outsider'. He gives the contestatory figure an iconic stance in the secular culture of modern India. Sudhir Patwardhan also works with the insider-outsider question but, in contrast to Mehta, he disinvests his painted image of the mythic aura to make secular identity an everyday phenomenon. Patwardhan establishes contiguity between the artist, viewer and the proletarian body on plain civic ground. From this classic-realist position he raises putatively postmodern questions about the politics of location.

Raghubir Singh's splendid colour photographs (as for example the series titled, *Bombay: Gateway to India*) also present a double-take on the realist genre. Even as he framed punctual encounters of workers, traders, entrepreneurs to show how they fuel the city-engine, Singh grasped the strange undertow in metropolitan reality - the dread of oblivion. Sharing something of the mythology of the Asian-city-as-spectacle, the photographs show Bombay as a crammed coloured cosmos revealing itself in a frontal, wide-angle view. The pictures are often literal (glass and mirror) reflections that refract the spectacle into multiple views and all but shatter it. Thus deploying strategic framing devices of a modernist aesthetic (based especially on the use of colour and ornament)

Singh, like many eminent Indian artists, opts to *condense* and *contain* the chaos, the kitsch and the conflicting class interests within the city.

India's independent cinema movement shows, further, how a calibrated relationship between realism and modernism helps to produce a compassionate and, in its own way, radical iconography. Developing from the militant politics of the late 1960s and early 70s - which included the extreme-Left (Naxalite) movements, repressive State action in the form of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and the democratic resurgence in its aftermath, including the entry of the Dalits in national electoral politics - a slew of films set in contemporary Bombay assimilated and transformed the pressure of the insurgencies in Indian society.

Films like Avtar Kaul's *27 Down* (1973), Saeed Mirza's *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* (1980), Mohan Joshi *Hazir Ho!* (1983) and Saleem Langde *Pe Mat Ro* (1989), Sudhir Mishra's *Dharavi* (1991) set themselves the task of engaging with the national agenda for cinematic realism while critiquing its Statist ideology. At the same time they critiqued the mainstream Bombay cinema flaunting its mass 'public' but assimilated the melodramatic devices that oddly spelt modernity. It is through a continued transaction between these two cinematic languages that India's independent cinema found a mode to articulate social contradictions. Kumar Shahani's avant-garde melodrama *Tarang* (1984) played out a classic conflict where the bourgeoisie - locked in a tussle between its feudal, nationalist and globalising constituents - confronts a fractious working class divided along uncannily similar faultlines.

Urban Morphology

In order to situate the culture of this metropolis in relation to its infrastructure, we need to signpost the enormously impressive project of colonial modernization.¹¹ With its industry, civic infrastructure, and grand Victorian profile; with its 1930s Art-Deco modernism giving the city a flamboyant cosmopolitan style, Bombay was a model for cities in the British empire. Faced with its historical self-image as an 'urban crucible', contemporary planners and citizens working towards a democratic restructuring of the city's social fabric run into problems of determining authority, style, and priorities: between restoration and development, and further between the interests of well-entrenched classes with pressing claims.

One way to understand the postcolonial phenomena in Bombay is to premise the discourse on national ideology that claims to harbour its own conditions and style of

¹¹ For a seminal study of the city of Bombay, from its colonial beginnings to the 1990s, see: Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay: The Cities Within*, India Book House, Bombay, 1995.

¹² In 1965, Charles Correa, (with Pravina Mehta and Shirish B. Patel, made a seminal proposal to ease the pressure on the island city of Bombay. It entailed developing a twin city, New Bombay, on the northern mainland, with a shift in the very location of the Maharashtra State Government would be relocated. See Correa, Mehta and Patel, 'Planning for Bombay: 1. Patterns of Growth; 2. The Twin City; 3. Current Proposals', in *Marg*, Bombay, vol xviii no 3, June 1965. It is a measure of Correa's authority and power of intervention that the proposal was accepted at the State level and though the State headquarters did not shift, the twin city came into existence. The development strategy for New Bombay (1971-91) has been fraught with problems and opinions are severely polarised over the enterprise.

modernity; that claims indeed to give modernism the mandate of social praxis starting at the ground level of poverty. For Charles Correa, Bombay's (and India's) leading modernist architect and planner, his practice has meant eliciting State interventions in city planning, prefiguring large-scale urban expansion, finding solution to the problems of explosive population growth and narrow traffic corridors.¹² He now extends his understanding to the city's unstructured dynamic:

Every day (Bombay) gets worse and worse as a physical environment... and yet better as a city. [E]very day it offers more in the way of skills, activities, opportunity - on every level, from squatter to college student to entrepreneur to artist...here are a hundred different indications emphasising that impaction (implosion!) of energy and people [really is] a two-edged sword... destroying Bombay as an environment while it intensifies its qualities as a city..¹³

It is a common contention that postcolonial Bombay has few modernist buildings worth the name. Notwithstanding the row upon row of public and private high-rises, it barely offers the kind of contemporary architectural vision that could transform the city's current self-image as anything but squalid, sprawling tenements and slums. What there is in the name of glamour in contemporary Bombay is the vast area of land reclamation with its glittering mass of high-rises built in the 1970s along the southern tip of Bombay's Nariman Point and Cuffe Parade. Most of the city's architect-planners agree that this is the corrupt face of Bombay's modernism; it show-cases the sinister nexus between State politicians and builders' lobbies working in total disregard of the city regulations and citizens' interests.

With the State mandate on public planning rapidly receding in the face of economic liberalization; with the city bourgeoisie disinvesting itself of industry, a speculators' economy contemptuous of both the State and the working class comes to the fore. The signs for this can be picked up - not only from the operations of the land mafia - but from the practice of architects who design signature buildings and developers' housing estates for the new-rich by the kilometer. The high-rises designed by Hafeez Contractor and his clones offer a pastiche of surface/ façade in an apparently postmodern manner. In effect they are styled to convert the constraint of the city's spatial economy into a seductively packaged life-style. Today, with a definitive shift in the city towards real estate gambles, Bombay leads upbeat India (where a 200 million-strong upwardly-mobile middle class dreams of making it in the globe) into the beginnings of a postmodern fantasy.

And, yet, Bombay continues to be a city where the interests of slum and pavement dwellers, represented by architect-activists, by a range of political groups and NGOs, remain as prominent as those of land-owners.¹⁴ Urbanists contend that the very survival

¹³ Charles Correa, 'Great City: Terrible Place', in Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.) *Cities on the Move*, Veralg Gerd Hatje, Germany, 1997, chapter 9, unpag.

¹⁴ Contestations regarding the city have produced a large amount of literature from sociologists and urbanists. See the essays by Nigel Harris, 'Bombay in the Global Economy'; Swapna Banerjee-Guha, 'Urban Development Process in Bombay: Planning for Whom?'; Pratima Panwalkar, 'Upgradation of Slums: A World Bank Programme'; P.K Das, 'Manifesto of a Housing Activist', in Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (eds.), *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996. Important interventions in the city include the work of P.K Das and Shabana Azmi (Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti); A. Jockin (National Slum Dwellers Federation); Sheela Patel (Society for the Promotion of Area Resources SPARC) and Rahul Mehrotra (The Urban Design and Research Institute, UDRI).

of even so besieged a city as Bombay is located in the heart of its so-called slums where no dwelling rights are available to citizens but which are nevertheless sites of intensive production - of labour, services, and small-scale industry - symbiotically related to the city's infrastructure. It is hardly surprising that Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, is inducted into Bombay's globalising economy. To reckon with Bombay we have to begin where the middle-class city and its routine definitions of modernism end; where the other city takes over: a city lodged in the interstices of the wealthy city; a 'kinetic city' in the words of Bombay's architect-historian Rahul Mehrotra.¹⁵ A city in perpetual movement, suggesting an entire subterranean economy of transactions between people, produce and capital.

Globalization and Visual Culture

A decade before the 1992-93 riots, Bombay had already embarked upon its course of economic and cultural globalisation. As the effect of the riots gradually subsided, this entire episode came to be seen as no more than an interruption to the city's apparently 'larger' agenda - of linking up with the global economy. What is most of interest here is the evidence of a series of shifts that took place in the *visual culture* of the city.

Pledged to the task of globalisation, a new entrepreneurial class has increasingly demonstrated its visual presence in the city. For the first time in independent India, the presence of multinationals deploying new technologies in advertising dominates the streets. Enormous, digitally printed posters have all but wiped out hand-painted hoardings - only a few studios like Balkrishna Arts survive. Triggering an unprecedented consumerism, they are matched by an increase in shopping malls. Relentless ad campaigns celebrate on a global ticket, electronic gizmos, film stars, Indian beauty queens and MTV videos, et al. The new media blitz on daily desires produces spectacles, distancing the newly-assembled consumers from the very city they inhabit. The sweeping flyovers smooth over the rough edges of the city slums and provide the symbolic virtue of speed to the outside investors.

On the other hand, there is the dominance over the political space of representation by the Shiv Sena, evident in its own posters, hoardings and street-corner notice boards. This effectively splits the visual experience on the street into two spheres each with safely demarcated signifying territories. Indeed there is complicity evident in the way the globalisers and the political right-wing are able to produce a neo-nationalist address from a combination of market-hype and chauvinist nostalgia. Suitably narrativised in the recent spate of cinema and television, this leads to cultural *excess* where the question of identity, so valorised in the process, has no stable referents and produces simulacra.

Since the 1970s, Bombay/ Hindi cinema has offered a special take on the politics of the subaltern. Flamboyantly played by the biggest star of Indian cinema, Amitabh Bachchan, radical politics is converted into the sheer stance of the anti-hero shown to act out society's ills through the most melodramatic narrative denouement yet seen on the screen. In *Deewar* (1975), for example, Bachchan accomplishes some manner of

¹⁵ Mehrotra used the term in conversation with the authors

psychological nemesis and political revenge colliding with (finally colluding with) family, State and nation. By the 1990s these shored-up illusions of justice start to produce a visual culture based on *hyper*-realism - realism itself over the top, repositioning and mutating its frame. Bachchan is in this sense the direct ancestor to the 'naturalist' films of the Marathi/ Hindi star Nana Patekar (*Ankush*, 1985; *Prahaar*, 1991; *Krantiveer*, 1994) acting out a rightwing charade of subaltern rage that is frankly perverse. The visual culture produced and nurtured in what is now irreversibly Mumbai frequently endorses the Shiv Sena's political claims to the Maharashtrian 'son of the soil' identity/ subalternity.

Another category of the Bombay film has emerged in the 1990s: the new 'Bollywood' scenario, playing to the nostalgia industry generated by the increasingly visible Non-Resident Indian (NRI) market.¹⁶ This has subsumed the great Hindi cinema itself and placed it at the service of a globalised culture industry that today includes cable-TV and the internet and which flaunts a blatantly reactionary cultural nationalism on the world stage. As the Bollywood blockbusters, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* (1994) *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Kaho Na Pyar Hai* (2000), characterised in the industry as 'feel good plus techno' explode on the scene, the (hyper) realist film takes another turn: Mani Rathnam's *Bombay* (1995) and Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (Truth, 1998) promote a new kind of 'belonging' with a citizen-subject adjusted to the changing politics of the nation.

Khalid Mohamed, one of the city's leading film critics, directs *Fiza* (2000), where he straddles the cruel alternatives of local belonging. Hrithik Roshan, the ultimate symbol of late 1990's teen machismo, acts out his own death within the thematic setting of the 1992-93 riots. The hero performs a double patricide of the Muslim and the Hindu politicians before he himself dies in the arms of his sister, played by the star, Karisma Kapoor.

M.F Husain, the 85-year-old artist-laureate of the Indian State has programmed himself to become the artist-citizen adjusted to the changing politics of the nation, and to the visual culture exhibiting this change. When he migrated to Bombay in the 1940s, Husain painted gigantic 'free-hand' cinema hoardings to earn a living. Soon he became India's most successful modern artist and unlike any other artist enhanced his national status by giving himself the persona of a film star. In 1999 he persuaded Madhuri Dixit, the diva of the 1990s Bombay film industry, to celebrate 'Indian womanhood' in the mode of entertainment melodrama and embarked on a feature film, *Gaja Gamini* (2000). He managed to turn the modernist idyll of the artist and his model into a spectacle - inevitably both frames situate the woman outside the pale of the feminist revolution. *Gaja Gamini* invokes what Husain has himself helped put in place as the national/ modern mode of iconic representation within a larger civilizational aesthetic. Husain's 'hand-crafted' feature is a summation of his artistic career: by choosing the stars, writing the dialogue, painting street-length sets, financing and distributing the film, he re-inscribes himself in the narrative of a bare-foot modernist-hobo in a postmodern garb.

¹⁶ The production of Hindi films mostly made in Bombay ranged between 150-200 during the 1990s: this constitutes about one fifth of the total number of films produced in India. For referencing Bombay/Indian films see Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, revised edition, British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999

Citing Popular Culture: A Retake on Representational Modes

This essay considers how the multivocal 'texts' of popular visual culture come to be cited by contemporary artists, and how the citations become an index to map the cultural crossovers within and beyond the metropolis. Bhupen Khakhar who grew up in Bombay but lives and works in Baroda, has developed a painterly genre that can claim to be a key factor in the discourse of high art versus popular culture; of cultural identity in relation to sub-genres in the urban hinterland. Khakhar's sources embellish his innately naïve hand in such a way that when he introduces subaltern figures that are his abject lovers - aging male working-class men (sometimes transvestites), intimately painted, sexually valorized - he unsettles the very locus of (male) subjectivity. He provides a place for the beloved in the wake of the gay revolution, certainly. But, further, while framing the citizen in a democratic norm, he performs a curious artistic manœuvre: he succeeds in wresting the powers of representation from the morally replete realist mode and puts in its place a composite urban/ popular language of sentimental *and* transgressive exchange special perhaps to India.

Atul Dodiya's paintings present a teasing mockery of the realist-melodramatic genre. He maps over images from art history, popular imagery, and textbook parables treating the sources themselves to an egalitarian rule. And though continuing on occasion with the earlier traditions of representation (for example in his watercolours of Gandhi), he positions his art history 'heroes'/ mass culture anti-heroes *vis-a-vis* the masquerading self of the artist. The viewer is invited to make a literal reading of painted images across varied surfaces - canvas, paper, laminates, metal. In the recent double triptych titled *Missing* (2000) he paints autobiographical images on the retractable surface of metal rolling shutters in the manner of street signage; and paints nostalgic image-quotations taken from Bombay's popular culture in a sophisticated montage on the laminates behind. By thus equalizing the signs he offers evidence of how metropolitan art becomes by conscious intent part of that signifying chain we call the visual culture of a city.

The younger generations of Indian painters stretch the choice of identity, ideology, and ethics to the point of near neurosis. Jitish Kallat, adopting the style of an inflated mass-media image, elicits his own 'portrait' in the manner of a virtual wall-boarding and produces a simulacrum. Pictorial self-aggrandisement is used as a strategy to go beyond the postmodern cliché of appropriation; the artist presents himself as a mascot and offers a mock-moral pedagogy about the existential anti-hero in postcolonial society. From such double-edged vanity Girish Dahiwalé took a devolutionary step into (fatal) narcissism: just before he committed suicide in 1998 at the age of twenty-five, he displayed his handsome body in a painting that said in a tone of abject self-representation: *Yes, you impregnated me!*

Artists in the Public Sphere

If on the one hand we read visual culture in terms of the popular, on the other we emphasise its place in relation to the discourse of the *public sphere* and position art practice as a witnessing act. In India, in the decade of the 1990s, such political initiatives converge around the increasingly vexed theme of secularism.

Ever since the communal riots, several courageous initiatives have been sustained by artists, political activists and independent journalists in Bombay. The forum *Communalism Combat* conducts poster campaigns and brings out a newspaper of the same name. Intervening in the now highly regulated public space of the city, the video has transformed the very sphere of the political documentary in the 1990s. Already a decade earlier the Bombay film maker Anand Patwardhan had revolutionised documentary cinema (until then dominated by the state-owned Films Division) with his own practice of guerrilla films. The radical vocabulary of Patwardhan's *Hamara Shaher* (1985), followed by *Ram ke Naam* (1993) and *Father Son and Holy War* (1995) served, in the context of the Bombay riots of 1992-93, an express agenda. Activists working with slum dwellers, legal rights groups and women's groups took to the streets and relentlessly recorded the violence perpetrated in their neighbourhoods to produce testimonies like Madhushree Dutta's *I Live in Behrampada* (1993).

If the call to arms in the socialist mode pitches the artist almost without mediation into the spheres of civil/political society, the 1990s emphasis on public spectacle, refurbished by the market but regimented more than ever before by right-wing commands, has encouraged artists into a critique of the earlier representational modes of protest. Socialist postering on the one hand, and the Shiv Sena's fascistic sloganeering on the other, has forced artists to become more reflexive. The very modalities of the relationship between visual culture and democratic politics is at stake and requires a reconsidered formal response.

Here we present the work of four artists, painters through most of their careers, who have turned to making installations realizing that it has become difficult to thematise politics with the full play of painted images. We will see how these artists make use of documentary photography and video footage in installation art - seeking its relationship to a sculptural support, deferring its semiotic function in a relay of objects.

In his conceptually structured installations, Vivan Sundaram proposes that it is precisely the political that remains unrepresented in the widely used representational conventions of art. His sculptural installation *Memorial* (1993), based on the newspaper photograph taken in the midst of the communal riots by the Bombay photographer, Hoshi Jal, positions the dead man on the street as an icon of political shame. In an elegiac act the artist gives the man a mantle of nails, places the iron coffin on a gun carriage, and buries him on behalf of the State. The act tries to retrieve a political ethic through an acknowledgement of public death. Like Sundaram, Rummana Hussain's installations use the photograph, among other objects, to fix, gloss and defer meaning. In *Home/Nation* (1996), *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal* (1997), and *Is it What You Think?* (1998) she

figured, through her own body, an 'ethnic' representation of a 'muslim woman' and turned it into an allegory of social pain. The chronicle, based on self-inscription, became paradoxical because the installations were conceived as the *mise-en-scene* for an imminent death. Before she died, Rummana Hussain issued a testimony in the name of her own mortality in the installation, *Space for Healing* (1999), which is at the same time a tomb, a *shrine* and a hospital room. It allows an apotheosis, whereby it offers to put to rest the urban nightmare - a nightmare in exact inverse of the dreamers' Bombay - that the city so determinedly keeps awake.

Navjot Altaf, privileging social evidence as moral choice, deconstructs the message in installations like *Links Destroyed and Rediscovered* (1994), *Between Memory and History* (2000). She constructs and punctures real and metaphorical walls by inserting documentary images, confessional recordings, texts that offer informal and participatory states of reparation within the art practice itself. Sundaram, Rummana Hussain and Navjot Altaf suggest that what is possible today is a material re-coding of the concept of struggle. They reintroduce the trope of utopia within and beyond the visual encounter so as to transform the viewer through a shared stake in citizenship

New media give Nalini Malani a place to position the 'victim' in relation to power. Her video installation, *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998) is based on a famous Partition story by Saadat Hasan Manto, and brought head on into the present by the nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan. Recently, Malani translates Heiner Mueller's *Hamletmachine* into a video installation and sets up a theatric space where a Japanese *butoh dancer* is imaged - and receives images on his body - in a stoic performance. In installations, the technology (and ideology) of video animation is used to invoke and confront the ghosts of political criminals. As sounds and images from the fascist moment in Europe and Japan overlap, the threat of suppressed fascism in India surfaces. Malani's political interpretation, with its mandate on reformism, unravels a guilt-ridden gestalt; Hamlet's dilemma catapults into publicly exorcised moral shame at several historical moments. Allowing her artist-subjectivity to be spreadeagled over dangerous terrain, Malani radicalises forms of the 'personal' using well-honed techniques of feminist psychoanalysis wherein the lesson of resistance is continually re-learned.

Photography, Masquerade

In focussing on the *public* nature of cultural self-assertion, we have repeatedly foregrounded a relationship between artistic identity and historical responsibility to the deprived subject. Indeed, the question, who is the *real* subject of representation, haunts the imagination of the third world artist; to it is appended the discourse and practice of a critical anthropology where photography plays an important part. It negotiates questions of authenticity and artifice; it offers different readings to the paradox of presence and absence; it problematises location. Putting to rout the flimsier kinds of representational claims, it realises the desire for masquerade.

The work of two women photographers, Sooni Taraporevala and Ketaki Sheth, relates to social communities in an urban anthropological mode. Taraporevala's subjects are the Parsis who are an ancient diaspora, religious exiles from Persia across the Arabian Sea to

the western coast of India. They are among the most real subjects of Bombay - by the nineteenth century they were active agents of modernisation and among the leading entrepreneurs in the metropolis. Today, in the era of chauvinist nationalism, they appear like a receding sign. Sheth's subjects are the native and immigrant Gujarati Patels, forming an upwardly mobile middle-class spreading out from the western coast of India to Africa, the United Kingdom and the USA. Sheth chooses to photograph the strangely frequent phenomena of the Patel *twins* in different classes and locations. She finds herself losing/gaining the photographer's discreet subject: the twins appear ghost-like in their inadvertent doubling, in their masquerade produced by biological splitting. The pictures work in a paradoxical manner as the Patel protagonists with absent looks nevertheless endorse themselves with the double stamp of struggle and success and 'win' the battle for a future.

If these works deal with real subjects and their hidden masquerades, Dayanita Singh plunges herself into the (il)licit space of entertainment and pleasure, pain and embarrassment, and comes up with an openly performative mode. Her photographs frame the transactions of the urban body - the ungainly queen of Bombay films' song and dance routines, Saroj Khan, or the city's sex workers. The photographer presents her characters dissembling their way into a respectable world even as colonial Bombay, in her recent photographs of the city's landmark museum and theatres, turns into a simulacra. These maneuvers between the real and the make-believe come up-front with the sculptor Pushpamala N., now working with performance and new media. She directs herself as an actress playing a double role to Meenal Agarwals' 'cinematography' and comes up with a series of black and white photographs set in Bombay titled *Phantom Lady* or *Kismet* (1996-98). These are not 'film stills' but a synoptic *film noir* narrative where Pushpamala emphasises the performative as an occasion for transgression. She inverts the conservative regulations that determine public morality by her masquerade of the female artist as a classic/cliché of the good/bad girl.

Photography's investment in tracking the real subject has inducted itself into larger representational issues, and the documentary mode has always played an honourable role in bringing to view previously unrepresented realities. The struggle in realism to define the self through defining what is around one is appropriated by a photographer like Swapan Parekh who takes the documentary image into what many would ironically see as its logical culmination: *advertising*. The context, so assiduously elaborated in documentary images, so consistently upturned in avant-garde photography, is returned to you as your neighbourhood market/ shopping mall; the image advertising the branded products provides a facile interface between consumption and belonging.

New Media, Young Artists

This brings us to new media and a conspicuous slippage of *meaning* in the life of the image. Certainly in advertising, in the extension of the image into video (and thus into special effects), or further into purely virtual spaces such as the CD-ROM or the Internet, the public address of the documentary photograph (to which the artist may still determinedly return) is inverted by programmed manipulation that transfers the image into spectral forms of communication.

New media promotes a cosmopolitanism that is precisely *about* virtual identities: along with 'Hinglish', Indipop, Bhangra rap and the deliberately low-brow remix of Hindi film tunes and other such cultural makeovers of formerly vernacular idioms, the globalised artist can now revisit and reframe conventions of representation to put up a new charade of meanings. Sudarshan Shetty, working with painting, photos, found objects and fibreglass sculptures, mirrors himself in the kitsch and glitzy commodities as a virtuoso male-artist in love with himself and the artwork he deploys to garnish his narcissism. He also makes cherished symbols of Indian culture stand in as a farce: the red fibreglass cow with human babies clinging to it is called *Home* (1998).

In contrast, Kausik Mukhopadhyay, with an ironical self-evacuation, embraces an artisanal ethics by privileging use-value in urban waste. He names modernist readymades as ideological allies to mimic and spoof the increasing commodification of art. Both aspects are matched by younger women who substitute male with female narcissism in the same idiom of indifference. Sharmila Samant concocts objects with an artisanal flair using the city's detritus and records her obsessive hunt for the global found object in mock-documentary videos (such as *Global Clone*, 1999). Shilpa Gupta works with new technology - video, computer and the Internet and like a new kid in the block makes her earnest neighbours in Indian art uneasy with virtual communication. All these artists have a clever take on consumer society but on the basis of the very consumption of the artwork that they mockingly package and proffer.

Part funky, part pragmatic, the young Bombay artists are leveling the field for high and low art. Swimming in the wake of a vanguard, wearing the aura of the global flaneur, these artists can today function in and out of the galleries, the biennials, the institutions, the market. They negotiate literalism and masquerade, they co-relate the self, the spectacle, the empty sign. Is there a new turn in the very premises upon which art has been made in and for and about the city? Recent initiatives suggest that these artists are beginning to look for a definition of collectivity that can pitch them into acts of cultural intervention. It is possible also that they are beginning to recognize and critique a situation that all too easily slips - the more easily after violence of the early 1990s in Bombay - into the field of the 'post-political'.

This brings the argument in this essay full circle. If the equation between art practice and the representational modes that cite/ site the popular; and between art practice and the discourse of the public sphere, is to gain further significance, artists have to grasp the democratic impulse at work in the city's visual culture. The current postmodern celebration of visual culture - often a simple fusion of high art, popular culture, new media - needs a minimum political intent to bring contemporary cultural creativity into a new equation with the historical avant-garde

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END
