

Seeing Double: Is Old Delhi Modern?

Abstract

What does it mean to be “modern”? Within a post-colonial context, is “modernity” a lost cause—a predominantly “Western” concept that serves as a hegemonic scale on which the global South perpetually remains “less developed”? Or is it possible to compose a multi-centered conception of modernity outside of dualistic East/West, nature/culture and traditional/modern binaries? What would such a formulation mean in a theoretical and political sense? And how can film help us think through both the contextual specificities and broader implications of these questions?

Dekho, Purani Dilli (Scenes from Old Delhi) is an essayistic, experimental film that uses the aesthetics of ethnography to explore the entangled issues of re-presentation and subjectivity of place. The film was produced during a fellowship I was awarded in 2011 and is composed of a series of encounters, where objects and people form part of a material network and a filmic context for the question “Is Old Delhi Modern?” In this paper, I will use the film as both a subject and a resource to first describe the production and strategies of re-presentation of the film in relation to Barthes’ proposal of the “Text.” Building on this discussion, I will use still images from the film as a form of “image thinking” that will be placed in dialog with theoretical discussions of media and modernity. While the question of Old Delhi’s modernity is very much the focus, the overarching goal of this paper is in part to produce a form of hybrid scholarship, where theory and practice work together to produce (if I may rephrase Deleuze slightly) a belief in a multi-centered world.

Introduction

In early 2011, I was awarded a fellowship to attend a design conference in New Delhi, where as a participating artist I was tasked with responding to the prompt “Old Delhi: New Media.” The focus of the conference was an interdisciplinary exploration of “design thinking”—a collaborative, inclusive process of creative engagement with communities to develop products and interventions. The conference featured a diverse range of panels that elaborated the role of design thinking on projects such as the design of an alternative computer keyboard for the *Devnagiri* script that is used for Hindi, and an extensive mapping project of handicraft and toy production in India managed by the National Institute of Design, to mention but two. Beyond the focus on design as a participatory process, a dichotomy between the traditional and the modern emerged as a common refrain across presentations and in ensuing discussions—on one hand, designers must be sensitive to traditional values and ways of doing things; on the other, modernizing these modes of production, distribution and the object itself, ultimately elevates the “value” of things. Within this context, the question “Is Old Delhi Modern?” served as a cogent starting point to work through some of the assumptions of this traditional/modern dualism and address a further lacuna in the conversation regarding the relationship between design and the market.

The Film as “Text”

I decided to work on a short film as part of my fellowship and began recording observations and interactions in Old Delhi over the course of the next few days. While operating within a form of realism in film practice that Bill Nichols calls the “observational mode” (109), my goal was to produce a work that could become part of

the conversation, rather than illustrate a point in the manner that Jill Godmilow articulates with her critique of the “liberal” documentary:

We understand "our" documentary films as residing outside the dirty domain of propaganda -- inhabiting instead a non-ideological, pure information space...By utilizing descriptive footage as evidential proof of social or historical situations; by substituting personal memory for historical analysis; by the use of sentiment to produce audience compassion; by avoiding analysis of the limitations of its own materials; by repressing demonstrations of how audiences are implicated in the situations described, or propositions of how audiences could intervene in such situations -- by all these things, the liberal documentary can be accepted (and enjoyed) as educational at the least, and at the most, inspirational. My question is: is that of any political use? (Godmilow, 91)

In the essay, Godmilow systematically debunks the (non-)ideological “truth claim” made by certain types of documentaries, that is manifested through formal cinematic techniques. By repressing both the medium and the audience’s implication in the subject matter, the “liberal” documentary announces itself as a closed text and produces a purely sentimental response that for Godmilow, is ultimately bereft of politics. To put it in broader terms: rather than dealing with the representation of reality as a question that is constantly foregrounded and in play, the “liberal documentary” pretends that you *can* present reality using film footage as evidence. It is important to note that Godmilow is not merely critiquing the aesthetics of the film, but is diagramming a model where the authorial intent of the filmmaker is crystallized in the formal characteristics of the film and ultimately carries over to the audience as a kind of sentimentality. An adequate response to Godmilow’s critique then, needs to fully consider all components of the model that she describes and cannot be limited to aesthetic interventions that seek to “complicate” the text by revealing the medium. Here Barthes’ essay “From Work to Text” presents a possible framework for thinking through the problem outlined.

Barthes begins the essay by telling us about a new kind of “interdisciplinarity” that has emerged as a result of an encounter with an “object,” where “the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down...in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together” (155). For Barthes that object is the “Text,” which he differentiates from the “Work” in a set of propositions that I have outlined below. A “Text:”

1. “Is not an object that can be computed...*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*” (156);
2. Does “not stop at (good) Literature...(or is) contained in hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres” (157);
3. “Practices the infinite deferment of the signified...the logic relating the text is not comprehensive (define ‘what the work means’) but is metonymic” (158) and thus “accomplishes the very plural of meaning” (159);
4. “Reads without the inscription of the Father...the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*...it is not that the Author cannot come back in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a guest” (161);
5. Tries “to abolish...the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work, but by joining them into a single signifying practice” (162);
6. And finally, “is that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge master, analyst, confessor, decoder” (164).

What emerges from Barthes' propositions is not a formalist/historical/genre-based apprehension of the Text, but a positive re-statement of Godmilow's criticisms as a political model. With the Text, the tyranny of the author is de-emphasized and replaced by the production of a collective critical subjectivity, where the act of reading becomes a form of writing. By moving beyond the delimited meaning that comes with authorial intent ("objective reality" in the case of the "liberal" documentary), the Text opens up to an infinite degree of interpretation and debate that is ultimately social. The Text is a relay for politics because its open form can fulfill the conditions of a collective enunciation: rather than re-present the truth of reality, the Text poses the *problem of reality*.

What does it mean to be "modern"?

Before I begin a discussion of the question "Is Old Delhi Modern?" within the film, I would first like to briefly explore what we mean by the term "modern" itself. As Timothy Mitchell points out:

In many uses, the modern is just a synonym for the West (or in more recent writings, the North). Modernization continues to be commonly understood as a process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across ever-expanding regions of the non-West... To become modern, it is still said, or today to become postmodern, is to act like the West. (1)

If our very conception of modernity, as Mitchell argues, is dominated by the specter of the "West," should we reject the term completely? Or is there a possibility of producing an ontological claim to modernity that both denies the mandate of the West and avoids the trappings of a potentially essentialist, anti-modern position? Bruno Latour's critique of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern* is a step towards a positive recuperation, where he exposes a doubling of vision within the Enlightenment project that is at least partly responsible for the metonymical interchangeability between

the “West” and “modern” that Mitchell refers to. Latour describes modernity in terms of a dual process of "purification" and "hybridization," where purification involves the construction of nature separated off from society and the self, while hybridization involves mixtures of nature and culture that are never recognized as hybrids. This process produces the paradox of modernism, where:

1. “even though we construct Nature, Nature is as if we did not construct it;”
2. “even though we do not construct Society, Society is as if we did construct it;”
3. “Nature and Society must remain absolutely distinct: the work of purification must remain absolutely distinct from the work of mediation” (32);
4. God does not intervene in Nature or Society, but is nevertheless there, personal, and useful (32-33)

Latour concludes that the modern critique becomes invincible through its paradoxes and can dismiss any view as “premodern” without admitting that the basis of its critique is paradoxical. Latour says that we must learn to recognize that “No one has ever been modern” (47) and proposes a “nonmodern” view that accounts for both the paradoxes of the modern constitution as well as the proliferation of hybrids that emerge from the modern constitution.

While Latour destabilizes the project of modernity from within, Mitchell approaches the problem from the outside-in, exploring historical moments where the “non-West” played a critical role in defining the modern project: the principle of self-monitoring embodied in Bentham's Panopticon was designed by his brother Samuel while assisting Russia's colonization of Ottoman territory; the cultural field we know as English literature was constructed as a curriculum and tool of character formation in colonial India before its appearance in England, etc. Mitchell's arguments work from the peripheries towards the center while attacking the dichotomy between the categories

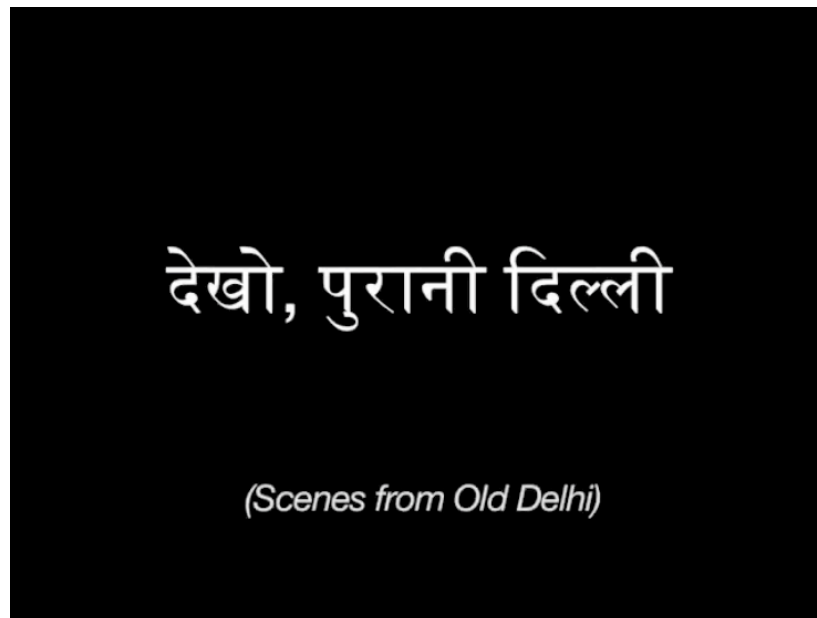
where, “(w)hite and non-white, European and non-European, West and non-West, were identities often elaborated abroad and only later, like nationalism itself, brought to Europe” (6). His point is not to reify the distinction between the West and non-West, but to ultimately argue that these polarized forms of identity were produced by an encounter that was essentially hybrid.

From a position that shares with Mitchell a movement from the periphery to the center, Dilip Gaonkar proposes an extremely broad but useful definition of modernity as “an attitude of questioning the present” (13). However, Gaonkar warns us that irrespective of our location, one cannot abandon Western discourse completely, but must think with and also think against the tradition of reflection that “stretches from Marx and Weber through Baudelaire and Benjamin to Habermas, Foucault, and many other Western (born or trained) thinkers” (13-14). Having come this far, I would like to discuss how the question of modernity is raised within the film.

Construction, Production, Re-presentation

Dekho, Purani Dilli was shot using a consumer-grade point and shoot camera that captured video at a frame rate of 120 fps, which plays back at slow motion. The effect is between the filmic and the photographic, where activities like walking or polishing take up a kind of prolonged temporal-spatiality. Benjamin believed that the forms that are revealed by slow motion can “give us access to the experience of an optical unconscious just like psychoanalysis offers us the experience of the instinctive unconscious” (460). In this sense, knowledge about the world is a matter of a sudden “awakening” to the world and this world can be a cinematic world. Kracauer, working very much within a realist tradition, compared slow motion to “temporal close-ups achieving in time very much

what the close-up is achieving in space” (53). On my part, the sustained use of slow motion in the film was an intentional decision to potentiate a shift from an analogous form of re-presentation to the politics of representation itself and perhaps even demand a certain level of labor and concentration on the part of the audience.



While shooting the film, all of my conversations in Old Delhi took place in Hindi. Given the absence of spoken dialog in the film (I discovered later that the camera did not record sound while recording at 120 fps), it was extremely important for me to preserve a trace of the language as a visible marker. I inserted inter-titles in the film to re-produce an essence of my interactions, but also to introduce certain ideas as open-ended questions. Also, in certain cases, the translation between the Hindi inter-titles and the English subtitles is not exact; for example, the title of the film “Dekho, Purani Dilli” would literally be translated as “See, Old Delhi.” This is less important with the name of the film—the phrase “Scenes from Old Delhi” communicates the essence of the original—but the slippage becomes a vector that positions the viewer in what Rustom Bharucha

terms an intercultural or intracultural sense. For Bharucha, intercultural practices are separated by national boundaries, while intracultural practices are the internal cultural differences that are "more than a two-way street between 'target' and 'source' cultures—it is a meeting point and exposure of differences within seemingly homogenized identities and groups" (128). This is admittedly a simplification of Bharucha's arguments, but one that is extremely useful in maintaining heterogeneity when thinking in broad strokes about what the images might mean to within and outside India.



The film itself is structured as a series of encounters, where the space of Old Delhi is mediated by subjects who look directly at the camera and break the “fourth wall,” in a Brechtian sense. The act of watching the film becomes an act of being watched and puts the audience in a position where they have constantly have to negotiate their relationship with the subjects and space of the film. In “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,” Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak crystallizes the political implications of such a move:

“I want, I can, I will. Throughout this book, my point has been that the subject-position of this I is historically constructed and produced so that it can become transparent at will (even when belonging to the indigenous postcolonial elite turned diasporic like the present writer).” (343)

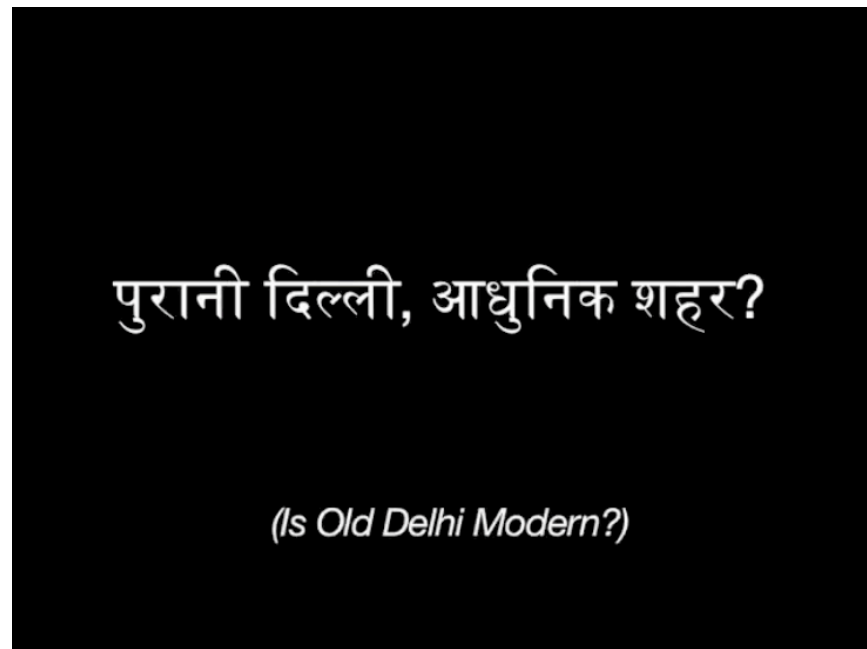
By actively calling attention to the subject position of the “I” that is occupied by the audience, the film makes the historical form of subjectivity visible that Latour locates within the enlightenment project and produces an active presence for the “other” side of the encounter that Mitchell refers to.

A final formal element within the film that I would like to briefly discuss is the “Intermission” that splits the film into unequal parts breaking the aesthetic and narrative continuity of the work.



While not explicitly stated within the film itself, the images tiled in the background are scanned coffee table coasters that were given to me as a gift and typify a “kitschy” form of representation and signifying “Indian-ness.” The intermission itself is a common cinematic practice in India and is a moment of immense reflexivity where the cinematic apparatus reveals itself as a place and a network. When I first inserted the intermission as an experiment, the gesture opened up an entanglement between cultural forms of representation and political economy. When I got to the intermission some time

later, it produced a challenge for me as a filmmaker, in terms of differentiating between the images that I produced in Old Delhi and the background. That said, staying true to the proposition of the “Text,” I am happy to leave the intermission as an open-ended point of discussion.



The sub-title “Is Old Delhi Modern?” appears within the last five minutes of the total running time of the film as part of a sequence where the camera occupies the viewpoint of a cycle-rickshaw passenger moving through the crowded streets of Old Delhi. After a long pan along the left side of the rickshaw, the camera follows the line of sight of a young man to look directly above at a tangle of electric cables overhead. This is followed by a reverse shot, where the camera is now looking down at the traffic on the street below from above the electric cables. However, instead of providing some clarity or further insight in to the context, we see an undulating flow of traffic that the camera eventually becomes a part of, as the next sequence resumes a slow pan on the street level from the other side of the rickshaw. While I had originally used the question “Is Old

Delhi modern?” as a secondary title to the film, I felt that it was important to place the question within the sequence described to foreground the relationship between the audience and the film as central to an understanding of modernity. This was because my goal as a filmmaker was not to illustrate the concepts or theoretical arguments that I discussed earlier, but to present a filmic context that allows the audience to think through the *conditions that produce modernity*. Gaonkar uses the term “alternative modernities” to describe a method where:

One can provincialize Western modernity...by thinking through and thinking against its self-understandings, which are frequently cast in universalist idioms. To think through and to think against mean to think with a difference—a difference that would destabilize the universalist idioms, historicize the contexts, and pluralize the experiences of modernity (14).

All of the formal elements and characteristics of the film that I have described work towards producing this kind of difference. Rather than exacting statements that can be “computed” in purely formal terms, these strategies become vectors that collectively work towards a longitudinal argument where the experience of the film over time open up ways of interpreting the film.

In Conversation

For designers and other participants at the conference, the form of the film was especially perplexing and equally productive to work through. While the structure was very much the same, the film was presented as a form of live cinema—the intermission and inter-titles were inserted in a later version of the work. Confronted by the absence of a clear narrative and images of everyday activities that were in no way classifiable as either “traditional” or “modern” in the strictest sense, the project prompted conversations that went in several directions. Architects and urban designers chose to focus on the

structural transformations of the city and extra-legal forms of urbanism in Old Delhi. This led to a few discussions about what Ravi Sundaram describes as “pirate modernity” (1), which is a shift from informal arrangements of capital, money and markets to formal banking that neoliberal thinkers deem a necessary aspect of the “modern.” Other conversations ignored the question of modernity completely and focused on how the space of the city might be experienced differently in terms of gender and religion. The film itself has been reworked in terms of form and structure because of feedback from these conversations. And as a “Text” it is still very much a work in progress, a point that I will end on as an open-ended note, where I am looking forward to more feedback and discussions about how the film works.

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