

A Political Ontology of the Affective Image in India

Amit S. Rai

The embodiment of media in postcolonial cities returns us to the project of an ontology of the affective image. In these contexts of global and local relations of power and mechanisms of value extraction, questions of bodily intensities, techno-perceptual assemblages, and urban piracy infrastructures insistently pose the question of the ontological relations of image ecologies. Recall that, for Bergson, an image is half-way between a representation and a thing, and if it has a “life,” it is through the temporal and material correlation of non-coinciding resonant unities, or moving wholes, which could be durations, a neural network, or assemblages of assemblages, or many other things besides. In diagramming practices of the image as sensory motor circuits in ecological feedback with assemblages of matter, bacteria, speed, and technology (and so on), what is at stake for the question of a method of experiments in affect? Here I want to turn to the collective assemblages of these experiments, and consider their political ontologies. One of the great challenges of Gilles Deleuze’s work on affect is to resituate the question of the political ontology of capital, what Massumi calls its specific ontopower.¹ Hence, if affect is autonomous, one line of flight for this multiplicity is the political itself. In this short piece, I would like to follow the autonomy *in* affect through a consideration of political subjectivity in a film about media piracy in Mumbai, *Videokaaran* (2011).²

Jagannathan Krishnan’s *Videokaaran* begins with a scene of a get together between working class male fans of Indian cinema. Later in the film this clip is re-situated through a recursive unfolding of a vibrant, largely male subaltern media ecology. The “hero” of the film is a wedding video maker and former video parlour entrepreneur, member of what he refers to as a “criminal” network (with its own Don!); he is active in the Christian community. Sagai Raj, a thirty-something tenth standard pass (high school), media entrepreneur in a slum of Bombay, once owned a video parlour but now runs his own photography studio, and on the side helps run a porn video smuggling network through assorted video piracy practices.

The clip shows Sagai sitting in a darkened room with the filmmaker and his own friends discussing the “*janoon*” (madness) of film. He discloses that his own connection to cinema (and to kriya yoga) is through Rajnikanth, the popular Tamil film star. He

immediately contrasts him to Hindi film brand Amitabh Bachchan, hoping to draw his friend out to deliver some famous dialogues. The “somewhat forced” conversation turns to the two’s co-starrer *Hum* (a triple bill with comedy star Govinda) which revitalised Amitabh’s flagging career back in the early 1990s; in it they had some chemistry, they all agree. Soon, Sagai brings the focus back to a comparison of Rajnikanth and Amitabh; he contrasts their trademark entries into films in terms of their speeds (fast and slow, respectively) and what qualities of the actor’s style they allow to be emphasised (action vs dialogue).

It’s a shrewd observation: certainly, everyone knows the signature of Rajnikanth’s sonically weaponised and lightning fast gestures. Throughout *Videokaaran*, the viewer pieces together a precarious ecology of image, movement, media technology, class/caste, masculinity, intellectual property, and law.³ Through it we glimpse the traces of social struggles to common resources that are trapped in the monopoly rents of private property (attempts to release them through piracy). In an urban dialect of easy misogynist masculinity (mothers and sisters figure heavily in scatological swear words punctuating each sentence), the entrepreneurs of affective style discuss the gentrification of cinema—ticket prices certainly (talkie vs multiplex) but also the destruction of subaltern video parlour culture due to copyright policing.⁴ This was Krishnan’s initial intuition in making the film: the cinema is being taken away from the poor (others have documented how the poor have been taken out of dominant Hindi cinema: see note 3). The story of the demolition of the video parlour in *Videokaran*, in a strange haunting of the demolition of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya that sparked the nationwide resurgence of Hindu chauvinism in 1991, presents one act in this history of the gentrification of cinema in India. The mise en scene is almost claustrophobic: extreme closeups of mouths laughing with shining teeth, grey shapes against a vaguely glowing suburban night, greenish nightvision ghosts, slips of an unsteady handheld camera glancing over naked male torsos, missing actants (the woman who is repeatedly named but only fleetingly filmed), the dangers of visibility for the ones who follow the path of *jugaad* (work-around), blurring TV screen shots of movies, reaction shots of Sagai watching TV (sets of sensory motor circuits linking facial expressions and bodily comportment to pornographic cliché), and the social and economic daring of living in poverty.



Videokaaran (Jagannathan Krishnan, 2011), clip via criticalcommons.org

What image is this? Is that a well-posed question today in India, or anywhere else for that matter? Deleuze's Cinema books develop a typology of Bergsonian images as they circulate through and create sensory motor effects. An effective history of affect is centrally at issue in a striking early passage in *Cinema One: The Movement-Image*. This image concerns time-as-duration, but also an artistic practice that experiments in the affects of the interval of durations, an image that would be relegated to the humanism of the dialectic in Deleuze's subsequent analysis of Soviet montage, but one that points to a way of encountering what Sagai Raj expresses in *Videokaaran*. This is the pathos-image, which is not sadness but rather some kind of mixture of intuitive, immanent firstness and relational secondness, images that flash out untimely zones of indeterminate intensities and nonlinear processes.⁵ "Kya bolunga main? What can I say?," Sagai Raj asks Jagannathan through a face that conjoins the intensity of cinephilia with the recognition of the obstacle of someone who doesn't know Rajnikanth in Tamil.

Deleuze speaks of the pathetic image as involving two aspects, simultaneously the transition from one term or quality to another, and the sudden emergence of a new quality which is born from the transition accomplished: the pathetic image is both compression and explosion. He writes of the acceleration of qualities moving through the movement of the montage, and in so doing the image passes to a "higher power" or a passage into a new dimension, raising it to the N+1 power.⁶ What are the implications of this morphogenesis into a new dimension? It is the interval, as affective passage, which now takes on a new meaning: the interval is the qualitative leap into the raised power of the instant.⁷

I take Deleuze's treatment of the pathetic as part of a certain proposition that reflects on affective intervals. In *Sagai Raj*, we see clearly the expression of a style of masculinist piracy. He narrates, in breathless yet measured Bombay Hindi, his many attempts to produce and capture value in and through media. Sagai has worked as digital image massager for others, wedding video maker, photoshop expert, curator of a machinic assemblage of interpolated bits of porn, as designer of a largely masculinist social centre for the exhibition of the pan-genres of Tamil cinema. He has developed practices that keep viable the parlour's logistics of recirculation, its existence against a surround of surveillance, the litter of the anthropocene, and privatised property.⁸ The parlour opens space-times to socialities of commoning and extracting value, or sharing and exploiting, managed through the organisational practices of counter-surveillance—watching for police, direction of the parlour away from the train tracks, the organisation of illegal weed and liquor supply under the radar of the police, cameras, communications, and image-production—that undergird and/or facilitate piracy ecologies. The director's camera has come after the catastrophe of the demolition of the video parlour—the camera both commemorates and circulates: using the device that records the memory of this injustice, *Sagai Raj* shoots the director trying to light a cigarette (Jagannathan had originally intended to hire Sagai to shoot the movie, but quickly realised it would be better to have Sagai as his hero).

I think of this film in a sense as speaking to the world described so well by David Harvey, that world in which capitalist rent is an art.⁹ *Videokaaran* tells the story of those who practice another quasi-capitalist art: jugaad, work-around, or virtuosic precarity, whatever you want to call it today; in the infinitely spongy giddiness of *Sagai Raj* describing his extra-legal escapades is an ecstatic embrace of the necessary contingency of movement and action in the capitalist and proto-communist ecologies in which they operate. But already *Sagai Raj* takes the question of media practice to a higher level, beyond just the vagaries of the work-around to the philosophy of virtuosity, which is also a philosophy of technique or pragmatics. *Sagai Raj* celebrates his criminal activities as a style of creating images, for others, for himself. Both his activities and his images take him into the realm of the pathetic: not sadness, but into the pre-individual potentiality of affect, in rhythmic motions of compression and explosion. In one scene, Sagai describes the best strategy to take a beating from a cop. After a particular threshold, he crumples his body, expressing a physical limit. Indeed his image streams express his different practices, as each practice seems to have its own but sometimes overlapping image domain. He shows that in subaltern media ecologies, whose own domain is organised through increasingly arcane arts of the extra-legal, we are witness to an important law of capital. Property is expropriation. The commons is the future anterior of capital. The passage from law to jugaad to the ethics of the extra-legal involves the analyses of rhythms, the effects of which are sometimes indiscernible yet real, in so far as they are virtual. These virtual, abstract

rhythms link the speeds and gestures of favourite heroes to the cycles of extra-legal entrepreneurship that mark Sagai Raj's career negotiating beatings by the police, while working the pirate kingdom to his own advantage.

Harvey's work opens another question: the monopoly advantage of both intellectual property and first-mover advantage, on which such IP is occasionally based, is the source of licence rents that overwhelmingly favour oligopolistically-configured multinational corporations based in the Global North, and continue to be intense sites of social and political struggle throughout the world.¹⁰ For Jagannathan recounting his experiences making the film, copyright did not figure as a major obstacle in Sagai's media practices.¹¹ Indeed, intellectual property in today's distributed piracy kingdoms is increasingly seen as merely a historical phase of organising and controlling the creation, distribution and consumption of experience (for example, in the creative industries or smart cities scheme).¹² However, in the economies of the Global South, low wages, desperately precarious agricultural conditions, urban ecological disasters, chronic water shortages, and poor access to poor infrastructure continue to characterise everyday life.¹³ India has been fairly quickly integrated into the service and creative industries of the Global North and has developed brand presences for Indian companies, for instance as CGI render farms. Going by the blustery hype of the current chauvinist and revanchist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and their plans for smart cities, the future seems to be bright for India's creative industries.

But Sagai's pirate kingdom is the excluded center of India's *Acche Din* (Good Days), as Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls our era of falsely imprisoned students, censored histories, corruption rule, heterosexist stigmatisation, murdered Dalit intellectuals, and might-is-right politics in India. The forms of life in poor urban communities developing today suggest another dimension to the passage of the interval, but one that traverses political subjectivities.

Sagai Raj reads the signs of affect. He tells the director, I can read your face and body and know your presence before you approach me. Sagai analyses the behaviour of policemen, and studies people so closely that, "even when I look at a shadow I know who it is. When we were screening films we had to monitor the audience and be alert all the time." He and his friends have been so influenced by movie stars that they are already natural performers—the swagger and the smart lines come easily to them."¹⁴

Videokaaran does not shy away from the pervasive presence of the conservative Hindu Shiv Sena throughout Bombay life—the final scenes are of Sagai Raj walking through one of their boisterous processions, seemingly both within and outside this other masculinist assemblage. The extra-legal image of the *jugaadu* (master of the work around) does not disclose a politics, but the conditions of possibility of politics as

such. Those conditions suggest that media and affect are twined in the body, compressing and exploding habituations continually.

Amit S. Rai teaches New Media, Creative Industries, and Business Ethics at Queen Mary, University of London. His study of new media in India, entitled *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage*, was published by Duke UP in 2009. He is currently at work on a monograph on Indian urban mobile phone cultures tentatively titled, *Jugaad Time: Media, Sensation, and Value* to be published by Duke in 2017.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, transl. B. Habberjam and H. Tomlinson (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy*, transl. R. Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988); Brian Massumi, *The power at the end of the economy* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014); Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, powers, and the state of perception* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2015). Massumi defines ontopower in these ways: "The mechanisms for inflecting outcomes must be affirmative of the dividual, and operate in an open relational field. Relative consistency of results is attained by triggering a subset of activity in the environment. This special activity is set off against the surrounding activity in the open field without being divided from it by a strict dividing line. It is focalized, without being segregated. ...It brings something to life in the situation, rather than carving away at life to make it conform to a mold. Priming is an inductive mode of power. It induces. It allows things to come out, rather than battering them down. It brings to be rather than making conform. It effects, rather than negates. In a word, priming is a mechanism of ontopower" (Massumi, *The Power*, 30)

² *Videokaaran*, directed by J. Krishnan (2011), film. The clip in question is also available on: <https://vimeo.com/162351859>

³ R. Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2009); Lawrence Liang, "Piracy, Creativity and Infrastructure: Rethinking Access to Culture," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (July 20, 2009), doi:10.2139/ssrn.1436229; David Harvey, "The Art of Rent" in *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (London: University of Edinburgh Press, 2001), 394-411; Geert Lovink, *MyCreativity Reader: A Critique of Creative Industries* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007).

⁴ Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Amit S. Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalisation and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema One: The Movement-Image*, transl. B. Habberjam and H. Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 97-105. Drawing on Pierce's semiology Deleuze makes several important points about firstness and secondness: secondness is when there are "two by themselves"; something is in relation to something else, a second; examples here are oppositions such as exertion-resistance, action-reaction, excitation-response, situation-behaviour, individual-milieu. Secondness is of the category of the Real, the actual or existing relations; in secondness power-qualities become forces, are actualized in a state of things; it is also the context of the birth of the action-image. But firstness is of an entirely different kind of image: difficult to define, felt rather than conceived, firstness concerns the new in experience, fleeting, fugitive, eternal. In firstness, powers and qualities are understood immanently, without reference to anything else, independently of any question of their actualization. Recalling with irony a certain Hegel, Deleuze argues that, "It is that which is as it is for itself and in itself" (98). This is where the affection-image, a quality or power considered in its potentiality for itself as expressed, finds its correlates in firstness which gives a certain consistency to potentiality. The affect in firstness is impersonal and independent of all determinate space-time, but none the less created in a history which produces it as the expressed and the expression of a space or a time; affective firstness is distinct from every individuated state of things, but new affects are created ceaselessly for instance in the work of art; it is indivisible and without parts; "but the singular combinations that it forms with other affects form in turn an indivisible quality, which will only be divided by changing qualitatively (the 'dividual')" (98-9).

⁶ Deleuze, *Cinema One*, 35-42

⁷ Deleuze, *Cinema One*, 35-42.

⁸ Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

⁹ Harvey, "The Art of Rent," 394-411.

¹⁰ Peter Nolan, Jin Zhang and Chunhang Liu, *The Global Business Revolution and the Cascade Effect: Systems Integration in the Global Aerospace, Beverage and Retail Industries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹¹ Personal correspondence, April 7, 2016.

¹² Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*.

¹³ Mahendra S. Dev, "Water Management and Resilience in Agriculture," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51:8 (20 February, 2016); Ash Amin and N. J. Thrift, eds. *The Blackwell Cultural Economy Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); D. Hesmondhalgh, and A.C. Pratt, "Cultural industries and cultural policy," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11:1 (2005): 1-13.

¹⁴ J. A. Singh, " 'Jabberwock': Cinema and the Underdog", accessed April 11, 2016.

<http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2011/12/cinema-and-underdog.html>; see also:

<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reviews-and-essays/cinema-and->

[underdog#sthash.1ryKOIUb.dpuf](#) and <http://jaiarjun.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/on-documentary-titled-videokaaran-and.html>)