

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

The First-Year Papers (2010 - present)

Trinity Publications (Newspapers, Yearbooks,
Catalogs, etc.)

2018

Postmodernism and the City: The Changing Realities of Cities

Nayantara Ghosh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ghosh, Nayantara, "Postmodernism and the City: The Changing Realities of Cities". *The First-Year Papers (2010 - present) (2018)*.

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers/84>

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Postmodernism and the City: The Changing Realities of Cities

Nayantara Ghosh

“When you dress up, you really are the best, the king of color. When I wear my bright suits, I look splendid. In my area, people start shouting, ‘The God of Clothes, The God of SAPE!’”

– Congo Dandy, “The Congo Dandies: living in poverty and spending a fortune to look like a million dollars” (RT Documentary)

There had once been a marvelous kingdom – its people filled with the joy of art, learning, and science; its king so greatly impressed by his territory and people that he would commission a map so wonderful, it would lead all to venture to see its beauty. Working relentlessly, the cartographer would produce a map, as large as the king’s courtroom, its lines depicting the intricacies of rivers and valleys, hills and lakes. Yet, it lacked the complexities of the streets and houses, the characteristics making the kingdom what it was. And so, the cartographer was sent to work again, this time, returning with a far more exquisite iteration, showing the houses, their streets. Yet again, however, it lacked far too many details – where were the delicately sculpted doors, or the leaves adorning the trees, the details of beauty through which the kingdom was to be understood? Again, the cartographer was approached, his work spanning decades, the king nearing the end of his life. Reemerging, there was the map: perfectly in 1:1 scale, with the kingdom as it had been all those years ago, each detailed street and path, each home and each carving. By now, the kingdom had fallen to its vices – disease and marauders, the map now a mere memory of what the kingdom had once been.

While this fable is to be attributed to J. L. Borges’ ‘On Exactitude in Science’, it is Baudrillard’s interpretation and re-imagination of the parable-esque story, which holds particular intrigue. It is in his version of this idea, that the map transcends its space of representation, crossing into the realm of reality, as it eventually becomes the reality the citizens of our proverbial kingdom occupy (Baudrillard 166-184). It is, more importantly, this conceptualization of reality within which it is possible to examine post-colonial identity-making within cities by the otherwise subjugated and the globalization which appears at times, to intensify its conspicuousness. Examining specifically societies in Liberia and India as regions of the global south creating for themselves what Baudrillard would have considered simulacrum, as well as African American communities during the period of the Great Migration of 1916 – 1970 (History.com Editors 1), the following essay will seek to expound upon the creation of foreign and at times fictitious realities, as a result of these identity-making processes. Here, while the creation of simulacrum is perhaps endemic to the ascription and transmission of symbols, there is a clear pressure enacted upon subjugated groups seeking to construct identities following periods of subjugation and identity repression (as is often the case within colonialism), that appears to intensify the distribution and extensiveness of simulacrum. At its most basal level, therefore, this paper will attempt to argue that simulacra are hardly specific to societies which have long ago transitioned to modernity. Instead, they may exist within the global south, within regions and peoples restrained in their trajectory towards modernity, and within places themselves on the road towards it.

We begin with a broad theoretical understanding of postmodernism, Baudrillard’s framing of the concept, as the distinctive phase of society to be characterized by the replacement of the trade of material goods with the buying and selling of signs and symbols often divorced from material realities. While Baudrillard approaches this with some ambiguity, this is perhaps

best understood as the disparity separating essentialist identifications of goods (such as bespoke neon suits, identified substantively through their cloth and tailoring), from their associated images of wealth, prosperity and in the case of the Sapeurs of Congo, membership in the elusive Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, the SAPE (RT Documentary). Here, the images – all-encompassing. The reality – nothing. (Baudrillard 166-184).

The Baudrillardian stages of sign development, therefore, follow four primary stages, such that signs – given to be words or images, for example – begin as a ‘reflection of a basic reality’, subsequently becoming distortions of reality, with partial separation from their true origin (the masking and perversion of reality). It is in the third stage of sign development that signs begin to disguise the absence of a basic reality – icons, for example, seeking to disguise Baudrillard’s perceived reality of God’s non-existence. In the final stage of the development of signs, thus far an exercise in segregating stages of detachment from original meaning and basic realities, signs exist in utter severance from what they had originally been signifiers of. It is at this stage, that signs are transfigured into simulacra, bearing “no relation to any reality whatsoever”. They are their “own pure simulacrum”, “copies that depict things that either had no reality to begin with, or that no longer have an original” (Baudrillard 166 – 184). Importantly however, it is not solely the detachment of signs from reality that remains the pervasive concept through Baudrillard’s work. It is instead, the reflection and mimicking of that which has never truly existed – in Baudrillard’s terms, hyperreality. To Baudrillard, modern society is distinguished from pre-modern society by this stage of sign development such that society produces and exchanges these untethered signifiers – signifiers once inextricable from the basic realities they had represented. It is, therefore, in the stage following the creation of simulacrum, in its replication and implementation within reality, that hyperreality abounds. In this final self-addition of a stage, we occupy Borge’s map of the kingdom, rather than the now decrepit facsimile of it.

It is within this framework that we analyze the simulacra creation of the subjugated – of the Abidjanian youths (Hoffman 41-42) and Congolese dandies for whom monetary surpluses are inevitably tendered towards conspicuous consumption; of the representations of idealism arising from the Indian post-independence crises of identity (Ghosh, speaking at IAD); of the newly diasporic African Americans of 1916 – 1970, for whom stories of migration practices would become shared societal property through the “American Grapevine” (Hunter et al. 27).

Postmodernism appears largely similar within the first three aforementioned contexts. In Monrovia, ex-combatants of fallen status construct fictions of wealth, purportedly separate from their realities, à la General ‘Human Garbage’ (Hoffman 33-38). Yet it is not these performances of bravado and wealth which are of particular significance within the context of postmodernism, given Hoffman’s argument that it is the relative lack of possibility for conspicuous consumption which results in the consistent desire for movement and circulation by ex-combatants. In the wake of limited means of demonstrating ostentation, movement by the individual is its panacea. It is rather Hoffman’s contention that “urban practices of invention are often practices of the body”. These are personal externalizations of urban practices present in the Congolese dandies of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, in the Abidjanian bluffeurs for whom reality intertwines effortlessly with the ‘fake’ and imaginary, and in the Ghanaian practice of photoshop visualizations transporting them to alternate hyperrealities of a New York skyline, or a painted set mimicking 1950s American living as seen in image 1.1 (Hoffman 41-42). In Congo, it is these men, intending membership in La SAPE (La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes), at the opportunity cost of land, better living conditions, and often, the well-being of more distant

family members (RT Documentary). In the wake of inhibitory paths towards demonstrated social mobility lies traditional Ghanaian culture, familial ties, and our once-prosperous kingdom.

Simultaneously, the Indian conception of identity and its associated aspirations are also characterized by the complex intertwining of new, outside perceptions of the country and the internal politics of forging self-identity. While in Congo these are images of the dandies, an altered conception of Western formality and fashion, the aspect to be explored within this context is that of film and architecture. Posters of films from the 1970s, mere years following Indian independence perhaps typify this confused duality of the west and the east. Featured in these posters, as seen in images 1.2 and 1.3, are western attired women typical of an alternative perception of the Western 1970s – one that while undeniably existent, did not function in the way their portrayals depicted them to, and were instead ideations of a culture foreign and in certain cases, derided at the time (Ghosh, speaking at IAD).

This quest for identity was further played out through architecture. Today's Indian cities exist as curious collages of influences – begged for by newly consuming citizens, borrowed haphazardly, and typifying pieces both stolen and replicated. The UB City building in Bangalore (see images 1.4 and 1.5) harkens clearly to the Empire State building. Simultaneously, ever-growing apartment complexes are entitled with exotic names, purportedly Spanish or even Moroccan. They are, 'Estilo', 'Salvador', perhaps even 'Cirocco'. In their entirety, they are wholly divorced from the realities they seek to mimic, despite the wonders of a modernist steel frame, Spanish arches, or Moroccan-inspired patterning replicating ideations of symbols, rather than what the symbols truly embody.

As put forth by Hoffman, "It is not that people are unaware that these fantastical images are unreal. It is that phantasms can, and often do, bring about new realities for those who perform them". In considering the aforementioned examples, there is perhaps irrefutably, evidence of the replication of divorced symbols or reality – symbols through which cultural capital may be traded and exchanged as signifiers of what ostensibly, does not exist. Through these symbols, one is escorted to upper echelons of society, as a Sapeur, as one belonging to a cultural context outside of one's own. Certainly, the described examples may be criticized as anecdotal.¹ However, there appears within these subjugated groups to be a crisis, or at the very least, an exploration of the concept of post-colonial identity – one necessitating the seemingly haphazard borrowing from the culture of the 'other', despite the borrowed symbols being perversions of a reality which has ceased to exist. It is here, perhaps more so than within hegemonically dominant groups and sub-groups, that symbols are most often aspirational. Each developing country, city, or municipality presents a wholly different regard of what it may mean to be postmodern.

Such differential experience is also reflected in the history of a subjugated group situated in the global north: that of African Americans committing themselves to the arduous journey towards the promised land of the free 'North'. Its existence had been etched into stories told by generations, the great American Grapevine, telling of the lands safe for the peoples slowly escaping towards better prospects. The claim that the 'North' (as the land of sworn equality) truly exists, is contentious at best – it was to be pilloried by Malcolm X in his declaration of all beneath Canada as the South, to be promulgated as the fabled lands of Eatonville, and other "pure Negro towns" by Hurston, herself claiming (falsely) to write biographically (Hunter et al. 15-17). Eatonville, as other towns intended as Black spaces, had been purchased by the wealthy and free veterans among the community, a short-lived experiment in the protective segregation

¹ This is further a criticism to be extended to Baudrillard as he attempts the description of Disneyland and LA as examples of simulacra.

of self, marketed by pernicious dominant forces as havens of Black existence. Yet, the pre-World War I golden age of these towns was to decline, be interrupted by war, interwar racial violence, and the Great Depression. Yet to many, “Eatonville... still persists”. Furthering Hunter’s quote, “Most incorporated black towns either no longer exist as independent towns or no longer exist at all... In Eatonville’s mythical afterlife, Hurston’s work resonates as a rare archive of everyday Black life away from the daily drone of the commonplace uncomfortable racial interactions Black people have with Whites in city space.”

These continued perpetuations unequivocally deviate from the traded commodity-like exchange of symbols described by Baudrillard and exemplified through the countries of the global south described below. However, the types of pervasive stories and oral histories surrounding spaces such as Eatonville encompass and overshadow the mere realities they had once been, entering here too, the realm of hyperreality.

However, it is not solely groups of the otherwise oppressed which are laid fodder to the promises and temptations of simulacra and the hyperrealities they create. Baudrillard’s postmodernism appears to arise from the formation of a fiction, not necessarily as a formulated, escapist reality. Theoretically, Baudrillard finds Disneyland and its quite literally constructed worlds to be simulacra, alongside aspects of reality television – LA too, being considered hyperreality. Much of this essay has dealt with the examples of hyperreality and simulacra existent within oppressed groups and the factors of globalization, politics of space, and urban practices of invention. Nevertheless, it would be incomplete without a minute digression such as to demonstrate that subjugated groups may not claim monopoly over the existence of simulacra.

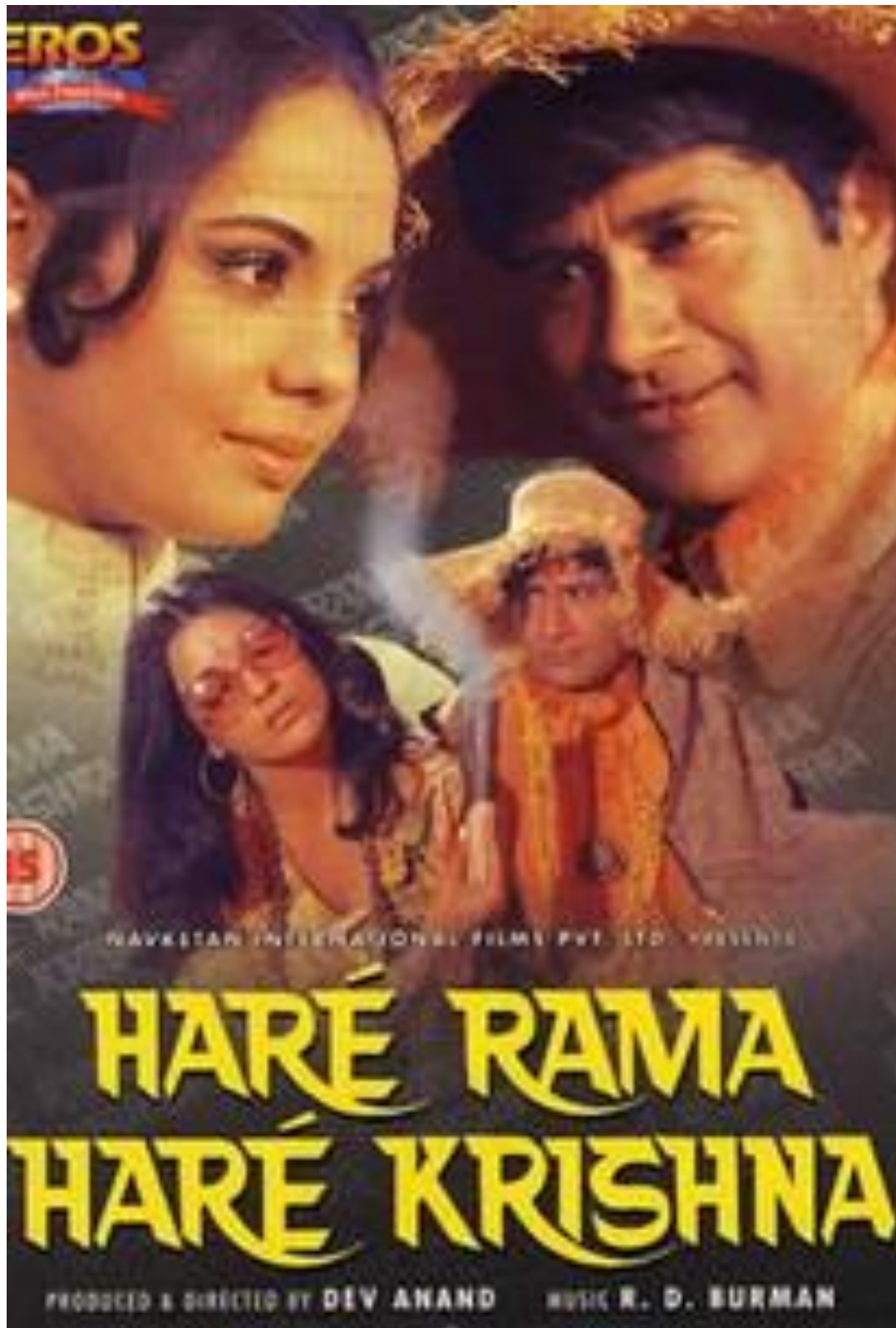
Considering Edward Soja’s work on the discourses of the postmetropolis, there exists self-admitted Baudrillardian influence in the definition of the Simcity as a space wherein “simulations of a presumably real world increasingly capture and activate our urban imaginary and infiltrate everyday urban life.” Here, Orange County – a space of the highly affluent, educated and Republican – is given to be archetypal of a Simcity, such that the associated simulacra encourage illicit scamming in the wake of the steady blur of reality and the imaginary (Soja 46). It is therefore not so difficult to see oppressed groups, seen to be at a lesser and disadvantaged position in the progression of development, as characterized by one of the facets of a postmetropolis, itself a late capitalist invention of urban functioning. It would be fallacious to attempt to draw a conclusion on globalization and the influence of the staunchly capitalist Western powers over the global south as allowing for the increasing influence of such modes of existence and thus the increasing mode of simulacra. Yet, it is an intriguing consideration nonetheless.

More than this however, it remains that the seemingly oppressed, subjugated and ‘backward’, are patently capable of functioning (at least in segments of their societies) through what is given to be postmodernism, simulacra, hyperreality, and the postmetropolis. Admittedly, this is not to argue that each of the given examples are to be characterized strictly as such. More so, it is hoped that such explorations have instead (in true postmodernist fashion), rejected and nullified any metanarratives on the perceived restriction of postmodernist functioning to societies far ahead in the trajectory of modernity. Instead, perhaps we all inhabit our proverbial map, interacting through forms of simulacra regardless of the stage of a place’s development determined according to Rostow or Kuznets; the increasing ease in and out of globalized and less globalized spaces enabling such varied experiences of both reality and hyperreality. Perhaps still, it is not reality that we experience at all.

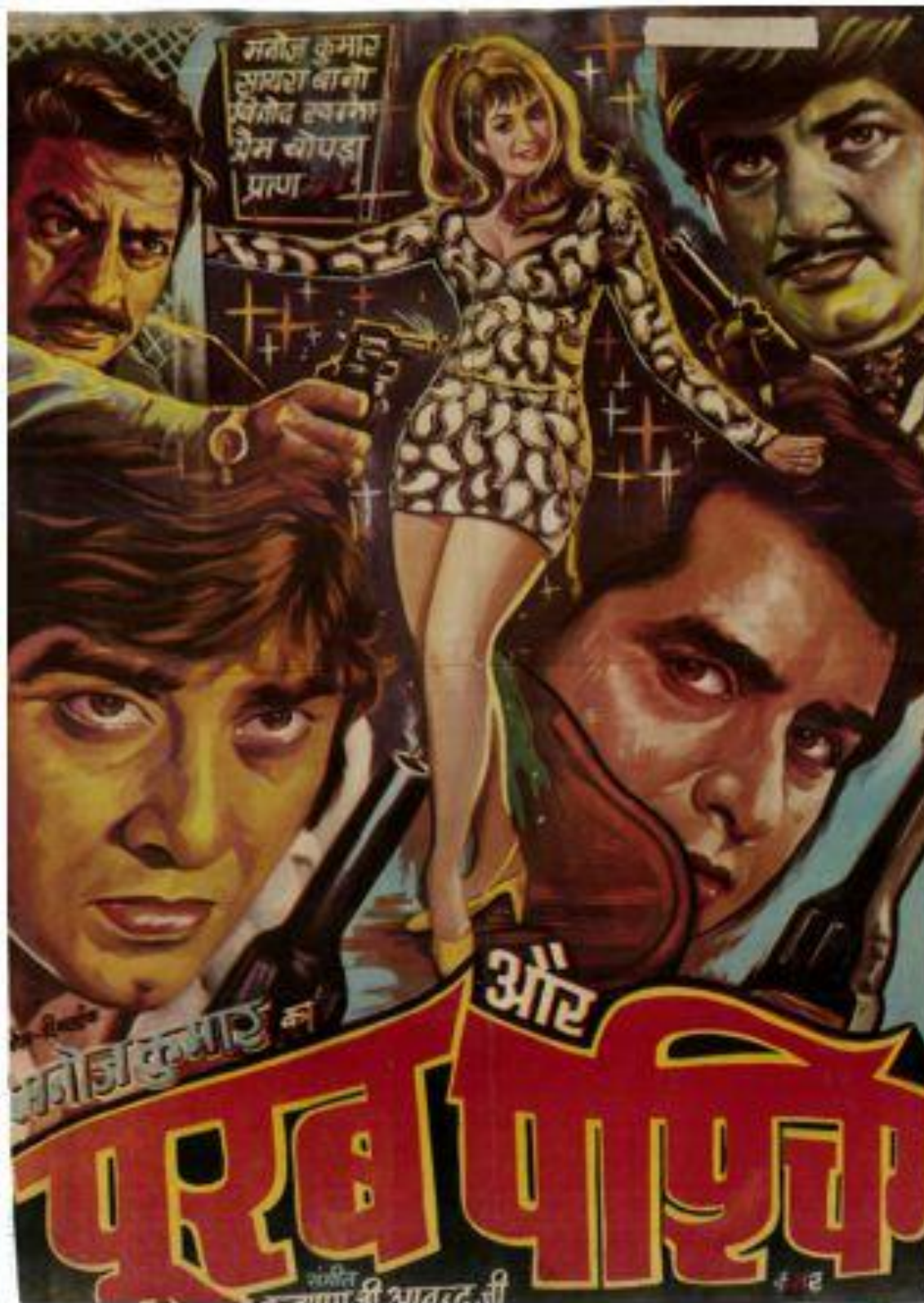
(Images presented below)



(1.1) Photoshop visualizations of American Life in Ghana.
Apagya, Kwame Philip. "Ghetto (Blaster)." Image, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003.



(1.2) Poster of Bollywood Movie – ‘Hare Rama, Hare Krishna’, 1971
Eros Multimedia. “Hare Rama, Hare Krishna.” Image, The University of Iowa, Iowa City.



(1.3) Poster of Bollywood Movie – Purab Aur Paschim, 1970
Vishal International Productions. “Purab Aur Paschim.” Image, The Hotspot Café.



(1.4) Left: UB City, Bangalore

Trip Advisor. "Picture of UB City, Bengaluru." Image, Trip Advisor, 2017.



(1.5) Right: Empire State Building, New York City

Krystek, Lee. "The Empire State Building." The Museum of Unnatural History, 2011.

Bibliography

Apagya, Kwame Philip. "Ghetto (Blaster)." Image, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2003, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/524190>

"Architect Soumitro Ghosh speaking at IAD 2018." YouTube, uploaded by FCML Design Initiative – FCDI, 20 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKXVafp2pzM>.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulation." University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994.
Borges, J. L. "A Universal History of Infamy (translated by Norman Thomas de Giovanni)." Penguin Books, London, 1975.

Eros Multimedia. "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna." Image, The University of Iowa, Iowa City. <https://uiowa.edu/indiancinema/hare-rama-hare-krishna>

History.com Editors. "Great Migration." A&E Television Networks, 4 March 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>

Hoffman, Danny. "Monrovia Modern: Urban Form and Political Imagination in Liberia." Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017.

Hunter, Marcus Anthony and Robinson, Zandria F. "Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life." University of California Press, Oakland, 2018.

Krystek, Lee. "The Empire State Building." The Museum of Unnatural History, 2011. http://www.unmuseum.org/7wonders/empire_state_building.htm

Soja, Edward W. "Six discourses on the postmetropolis." *Imagining Cities*. Routledge, 2003.

"The Congo Dandies: living in poverty and spending a fortune to look like a million dollars." YouTube, uploaded by RT Documentary, 16 November 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W27PnUuXR_A

Trip Advisor. "Picture of UB City, Bengaluru." Image, Trip Advisor, 2017. https://www.tripadvisor.com.sg/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g297628-d3807223-i257628645-UB_CityBengaluru_Bangalore_District_Karnataka.html

Vishal International Productions. "Purab Aur Paschim." Image, The Hotspot Café. <http://thehotspotcafe.net/blog/index.php/2016/10/22/purab-aur-paschim-1970/>