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Picturing Life-Worlds in the City
Notes for a Slow, Aimless and Playful Visual Ethnography

Epilogue

Turning the key into the door-lock, twisting it twice, opening the door. Leaving the light of the flat for the semi-darkness of the stairs.

Down the stairs, and into the misty body of New Delhi. A walk down the streets of my neighbourhood. Greeting the owner of the electronic repair workshop who sips tea amidst refrigerators and air-conditioners. Waving at his son playing cricket in the local (HSBC sponsored) gardens.

Inside the Defence Colony market. Shopping housewives followed by bag-carrying servants. Young thuds in baggy trousers and baseball caps hanging in the corner.

Into a rickshaw and out across the neighbourhood. An old British lady, Defence Colony's own living colonial memory, walking out of her bungalow covered by a wide straw hat and a blue flowery dress. Past "Flavours", Delhi's most popular pizzeria, and out on the ring road.

Swallowed by the traffic, zigzag lines… Lajpat Nagar and its busy bazaar on the right hand side and then up on a flyover. From up there the pink façade of the local Hindu temple can no longer hide the view of the cupolas of Nizamuddin's Sufi tombs.

The eye turns left now: some Mughal ruins swallowed by Delhi's Golf Club's artificial hills and trees. The ruins disappear for good behind the white facade of the Oberoi Hotel. Another Mughal monument appears. Preserved in the middle of a roundabout it looks like a table-centre decoration. Around it, and into Rajpath, the true heart of colonial Delhi.

A glimpse at India Gate, tribute to the many Indian soldiers who died in the name of wars that they had not themselves declared. Tourists, dancing monkeys and ice-cream parlours on wheels. Into another lane, the sun breaking its way through the morning mist. From the British bungalows to the citadel surrounding Connaught Place (from now on "CP", the city's symbolic mid-point), the buildings keep growing higher and higher. Five star hotels and offices.

By the crowded tourist market on Janpath, the auto rick-shaw *whalla*[1] stops. Anil spots me and throws the paper mug he was drinking from in the trash bin. That day, as it often used to happen, Anil and I went walking along the colonnades of CP. He and his friends would always gather here, and so would therefore we. Intimate stories, dreams and wishes were shared amidst Kashmiri travel agents hunting for clients and stressed overweight professionals; beggars and well-ironed civil servant; kids desperate to look like video-stars, and backpackers attempting to appear like Indian sages; fancy Italian shirts and bronzes of dancing Lord Shiva; boys looking at girls, and girls pretending not to be looking at boys. The more I walked in this area, the more I got to know Anil, and the more I got to know Anil the more I started wondering whether he was just a daydreamer or a really exceptional character. Son to a civil servant and a housewife (both Punjabi and Brahmins) and raised in an economically backward suburb of Delhi, Anil had big plans for himself. He was soon going to buy a car, a house in South Delhi and live a happy independent life. Yet, Anil came from a relatively poor family. His childhood was all about school, work in the family owned street-shop, and cricket. A brilliant student Anil was, however, admitted to the University. Later on he also began a PhD and then came the big leap, right into that low-status world of tour leaders and tourist guides. That made his fortune. When I first got to know him I was doubtful about Anil's sense of reality, yet, his transformation would happen right under my eyes in the years to come. And it was updated with our regular walks in CP. From a hungry tour-leader, hunting for opportunities on the back of a motorbike, he would become a smart manager and the owner of a two-storey house in the southern upcoming suburb of Noida and, of course, of a luxury AC-car. At that point I revised my doubts, but that happened some time later. For now, I was with Anil right there in Connaught Place, the area designed and built by the British to mark the distance between the Indian and themselves, right there where the white pillars of colonial cleanliness were now covered by posters inviting

you at once to vote for the conservative Hindu right and to buy Levi's jeans worn by luscious (but explicitly Indian) models.

At the eastern corner of CP the fast-food "Wimpy" is crowded with the usual middle class families. Further down, at the coffee-shop "Barista" professionals and intellectuals chat and play chess. Anil flips through the pages of the "Economist", "India Today" and a book of Osho at a newspaper stand. Putting down the book, he starts reflecting loud on how India really opened up only when he was becoming an adult. As a boy he dreamt of Nike-shoes, American movies, blond foreign girl-friends. Then he grew up. He worked hard at hiding his *Hinglish*[2] under a cover of English-sounding English.

Under the CP subway: vendors of funny key rings and India-maps. Out again on Janpath leaving behind our back the dust of a gigantic construction-site. «Once upon a time we had to go abroad or look abroad to find things – Anil says – then suddenly everything was here…». A giant red news sign on the top of a building blinks: «India going to be one of the fastest markets in the world: Ericsson». Passing by the Tata car shop, the pan-vendor, MacDonald's. Anil tells he has bought many pair of Nike shoes now, he has had several foreign girl-friends and seen American movies too (finding them both lousy). «I prefer to speak Hindi among friends than English, I am a typical middle-class Indian». Zigzagging between the cars stuck in the usual Janpath traffic jam, Anil wants to tell me more about the flat that he is planning to buy: «I have the money for the flat now… by the way can you come along to my property dealer in a while?», he asks me. His dream is of a luminous flat facing a green area. Approaching the "Crafts Emporium", the tall modern building filled up with "authentic" Indian souvenirs for sale to tourists and middle class Indians alike. Sitting in the coffee shop, squeezed between a group of Japanese tourist and the peaceful marble feet of a gigantic Buddha, Anil starts showing me maps of flats and furniture catalogues. He explains that his wish is to have a flat containing all modern/Western comforts but which may also respects the principles of Vastu (the ancient Vedic teachings for architecture). Decorated by antique Mughal furniture this home, like its owner too, was aimed to become self-consciously Indian. A dream of India; a search for the meaning of its great civilization; the past brought into the present. This popular tourist guide, recently turned also student of astrology, asks me to jump on the back of his bike and away we go towards South Delhi.

Introduction

The text you have just read above, in the *Epilogue*, is a kind of travel across the city of Delhi lead by a "kino" eye. It is a montage-inspired and dramatized textual translation of video-footage, photographs and other visual impressions that I have gathered in the city across a longer period of time. Such visions are, in the text, brought in contact with the verbalized narratives of my field interlocutors and in particular with those of Anil, one of my key figures. The vignette is, in fact, an attempt at telling his life-story within, and through, the metropolitan-landscape surrounding him and our interactions. Parallel lives, perhaps: Anil, and his social climb in the age of liberalization; his progressive exposure to the 'West' and his growing pride in India (a proper case of 'Indianization' I would say); and Delhi, a metropolis in change, producing its own history by containing, displaying and decorating many individual stories (such as Anil's own).

This vignette draws our attention to the enormous amount of ethnographic information contained in the visual and material culture surrounding the fieldworker and to how such information dialogues with other types of material such as verbalized narratives obtained through life-stories, open-ended conversations, interviews, etc. In other words, the serendipitous (cf. Hannerz 1993) encounter with signs and objects inhabiting the space in which we conduct our research can provide us with precious insights into a field that we are otherwise accustomed to explore through word- and text-based research techniques. The present paper is an exploration of this topic. Based upon my fieldwork in Delhi, I will discuss the extent to which the visual and material culture of the city have, during my research, provided me with important insights mirroring, crystallizing (and at times also putting in question) the verbalized stories that my interlocutors had shared with me. The visual field's own polysemic[3] character and open-endedness (cf. Barthes 1977, Berger 1972) and its capacity to open us up to the sensorial and emotional dimension of everyday life (MacDougall 1997a, Pink 2006, Edwards 2006) are precious tools allowing us to gain new access to, and understanding of, our fields. After all, as MacDougall suggested, an attention to the visual can teach us not only «different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand» (1997a: 287). In the first section of this paper I will explore the extent to which the visual and material culture of Delhi can function as "spies" (Ginzburg 2000) of the local growing popularity of instances of "Indianness". For doing this I will contrast textual reflections with a number

De-constructing the field

Paolo Favero, *Picturing Life-Worlds in the City...*

of selected photographs. Following up on this discussion, in the second section, I will address the importance of a creative use of audio-visuals in ethnographic research. Finally, in the conclusions, I will round up my reflections by making a call for a slow, aimless and playful ethnography. I will suggest how, today in particular, it is important to resist the urge of maximizing the use of time in the field. The field researcher should allow him/herself to slowly enter the rhythm of the field. An approach that may lead indeed also to a sense of frustration, this practice can however also lead to a growing openness and attention to unexpected insights.

Before I go any further I need now to briefly introduce the reader to the context of the research on which this paper is based. I conducted fieldwork in Delhi between 1997 and roughly 2001 on young middle class men, globalization, and cultural identity[4]. My original research aimed at focussing on the cultural changes that had followed the opening of India's economy to the global market, an entry officially sanctioned in 1991 with the economic reforms designed by then finance minister Manmohan Singh[5]. I was interested to understand how the generation that epitomized this entry experienced and constructed their identities *vis-à-vis* the growing number of messages and images reaching the country (at high speed) from all over the world. I created a network of interlocutors among English-speaking, educated, Delhi-based men between twenty and thirty years of age who were enthusiastically 'using' the opening up of India for personal purposes of career and leisure. Tourism, the Internet, journalism, sports, multinationals, etc. became the work arenas in which I met my interlocutors but then I let myself get pulled by each of them into their circles of friends and colleagues and became involved in a web of relations characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity.

To give a more concrete insight into my field, my interlocutors were, besides Anil whom I introduced above, young men like Rohit, at the time a twenty-four year-old manager of the Delhi branch of a Bombay-based family run car dealership. Having grown up in an affluent family in Bombay, after having completed his college studies, Rohit studied for a few months in the US. After joining the family business again he embarked, just a few years after my fieldwork, in an MBA in Holland (which he completed successfully). Rohit introduced me to his best friend, Neeraj. Of the same age Neeraj worked as India correspondent for the Japanese Broadcasting channel NHK. Coming from, and living in, a lower middle class area in Western Delhi together with his father, a retired civil servant, his mother, a retired teacher, and a younger brother,

an army officer, Neeraj had been able, through his parents' sacrifices, to study journalism. During the last phase of my fieldwork Neeraj left for England to take a masters degree. For him going abroad was however not a matter of desire for new experiences but rather a way of securing a better future for himself and his family. Back from England Neeraj would, however, speak with a rather funny British accent. Yet he would still devote the first minutes of the morning to meditate to the chants of the *Gayatri Mantra*. Rohit is today a successful businessman busy with setting up new ventures between Delhi and Bombay and Neeraj, a former UN-diplomat, is now rethinking his career in a shared flat in London.

In the field I also met Jaideep (born in 1973). Because of a coincidence, I happened to meet him on the very same day in which he had returned to Delhi from the US, the country he had migrated to at age 19 and where he had done a career in an international taxation office. «One day I had it enough, I bought a one-way ticket and I'm back home, man!» he told me at that first encounter. In Delhi, Jaideep started making a living out of coaching tennis. This was his big love and it was something that according to him would have been impossible just a few years before. Globalization made his dream true. Jaideep comes from an elite family (the father is a retired army officer and the mother a retired teacher) but not one that can give him much financial support. In contrast, his best friend Pragun is the son of the owner of one of the most successful travel agencies in Delhi. After a few years spent studying in the US, Pragun joined his father's business where he now works full-time holding in particular responsibility over its most expanding sector, outgoing tourism (i.e. local clients purchasing trips to Europe, US and East Asia). Today Pragun is still working in the family business (and has become a father too) and Jaideep is the co-director of the largest and most successful tennis academy in South Asia.

I could give many more examples but the ones above are sufficient to give the reader a sense of the life trajectories and networks I got involved in through these individuals. Despite their differences in backgrounds (all of them privileged in some sense) my interlocutors symbolized, as I anticipated above, the entry into a new era, one filled with great hopes for change. They shared a concern for finding a way of living that most of them defined as "stimulating" and "rewarding". They wanted to avoid arranged marriages and to choose their girlfriends and friends on their own and not necessarily within (caste, class and ethnicity defined) community boundaries. All of them undoubtedly considered the opening of India to the global market as a key-event making it possible for them to

fulfil their career, sexual and leisure dreams. Their involvement in wider networks of both career and leisure was a constitutive part of their identity and part of a "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1990) that they carefully administered at work and in private life and through which they created, and demarcated, their status. Their stories were a window onto a new India, a country that, with all its compromises and difficulties, was dreaming of a new historical phase, a Kalyug[6], bringing the country back at the centre of world history. My fieldwork gave, in other words, birth to an early description of the enthusiasm for a future 'Tiger India'[7]. This was a moment of intense growth in instances of pride in the country and my interlocutors were among the most vivid signs of such a historical phase. In their life-world (Habermas 1997), in fact, being 'cool', 'cosmopolitan' and 'modern' (terms adopted by them) was not synonymous with copying the 'West' but rather with being proudly 'Indian'. Playfully inverting the meaning of the so-called 'colonial dichotomies' (i.e. India *vs* West, tradition *vs* modernity, spirituality *vs* science cf. Gupta 1998), my interlocutors contributed to renew the discourse that had historically functioned as the foundation for debating change in India. Their creative use of 'India' 'West', 'modern', 'traditional' (which given their changing, fluctuating and emotional connotations, I chose to label as 'phantasms'[8]) and their growing faith in India's future intrigued me and became the main focus of my study.

Visible Signs. A Case of Branding India

As hinted at above, the life trajectories of my interlocutors mirrored much wider changes. During the years of my fieldwork, in fact, advertisement, films and TV-programs (addressing young people but not only) all started progressively to promote 'Indianness', increasingly offering symbols able to highlight the 'coolness' of Indian things within a modern, cosmopolitan, globalizing context. A proper case of "India" branding (cf. Mazzarella 2003). Delhi was a very evident arena of display of such changes. A city that had always been a catalyst for people and ideas coming from all over the world, Delhi had, in the nineties, progressively been identified as the «epicentre of India's economic modernization» (Saran 1999) hence embodying at once both the past and the future of the country. A look into its architecture and décor, i.e. into the city as an 'urban gallery' (Bhatia 1994: 32), can be quite instructive for understanding the way in which urban space embodies narratives of cultural change. At a first glance Delhi strikes the observer

for its syncretic character.

As shown in Picture 1, Delhi presents side by side with each other lime-washed surfaces of functionalist and modernist character and futuristic experiments, baroque decorations and Roman details, Mediterranean/American styled villas and wonderful examples of the 'very Delhi' Punjabi baroque style (see Picture 2). The latter genre, born in the first post-independence period as a consequence of the upper classes' desire to react against Nehru's austerity rule, was developed by Austrian architect Joseph Heinz (cf. Bhatia 1994) hence testifying to Delhi's long syncretic history. Moving to contemporary architecture, however, the present popularity of "India" among the metropolitan elites is easily detected in the trends that have characterized the past 15-20 years of private housing design. One young architect that I interviewed in year 2000, told me, for instance, that the expectations of most of his clients were increasingly generated at the interface of 'Western' comforts and Indian values. «They want houses that merge the best of India and the West», he said. Similarly, in an article on interior design in the Hindustan Times we read «if there is a trend, it is to blend the contemporary with the traditional» (Singh 1999). Yet, it is a priority in this blend, in particular among upcoming youth, that their houses look specifically Indian (cf. Prakash 1997). The house in Picture 3, located in South Delhi, is a good example of this, displaying at once both materials and design from village India. In Picture 4 is an even more prototypical example of this, designed according to the shape of classical south Indian houses.

Attached to this phenomenon is also the growing popularity of Indian furniture and design. When he was finally able to purchase his house Anil, the tour leader, filled his house with Agra marble decorations, Rajasthani chairs, Kashmiri carpets, etc. It was with him that I visited Haus Khaz, an urban village built on the remains of a Mughal city, that has progressively been turned into an attraction for all those interested in buying Indian furniture and design (cf. also Tarlo 1996). A gallery of "real, traditional Indian" stuff, Haus Khaz is today one long line of shops selling Indian furniture, arts and jewellery. There you may also find, as showed in Picture 5, amazing collections of (overpriced) posters and covers of soundtrack records of old Hindi films. This recuperation of old Indian memorabilia is indeed a growing business today. During my last visit to Delhi I met Preksha, a young designer (by the way she too had chosen to come back to Delhi after a few years spent in London convinced that only here she could make her dreams come true) who works with re-promoting old objects and ma-

terials (basically junk) in the shape of art installations for hotels and shopping malls. While visiting the junk market with her one early Sunday morning I discovered the amount of film souvenirs that were available in the market (Picture 6) and also the number of young middle class men and women hunting for such objects.

From Haus Khaz the step is relatively short to Dilli Haat, a market for traditional Indian handicrafts born in the late 1990s in South Delhi (cf. Favero 2007). Constructed to resemble a traditional Northern Indian rural market, with forms and materials resembling those of Indian villages, Dilli Haat, while looking "touristic" is actually mostly popular among the local middle classes who flock to the place, as I could discover during my fieldwork there, especially during festivities. Similarly to other institutions such as the Crafts Museum (cf. Greenough 1996) and the Crafts Emporium this market promotes the heritage of rural India in packaged form (Picture 7), a phantasm of India constructed within the logic of consumption. Indian history and culture are consumed by the visitors, who gather here to shop and have fun but also to get a taste of traditional Indian lifestyle and culture. As one man carrying his young child around the market remarked: «At least my son will learn something about India!».

Dilli Haat also hosts a number of small street eateries offering specialities form the different parts of India. Let me use this as a stepping-stone for describing another trend that I observed during my fieldwork. My interlocutors, once again against expectations of a progressive "MacDonaldization" of the world (Ritzer 1996), were all quite active searchers for the best kabab of the city. Among the various places they took me too, let me point out Zila Kakabpur (meaning roughly 'the city of kababs', Picture 8), a good example of a hybrid concept highlighting and marketing itself through notions of Indianness. Looking from the outside design like a cosmopolitan eatery Zila was actually marketing itself though the popular brand of Lucknowy cuisine (Lucknow being considered the heart of Mughlai cuisine). While the servants walked around in red and blue mechanic's overalls and baseball caps the place was filled with small signs of 'India' beautifully mingling with the other modernistic elements: glass containers filled with different types of legumes, a big poster showing Indian varieties of spices and lentils; a menu consisting exclusively of lentil soups (*dal*), different types of North Indian bread (*roti* and *naan*), and *kababs*. Zila's *kakabs* were served without knives and forks (inviting clients to eat in the proper Indian way). However, food would come served on small smart colourful porcelain plates and trays (and not metal ones as in regular street eateries) and the place had also adopted the small paper containers that fast-food dealers used for serving French fries, filling them with the raw onions and raw green chillies that are compulsory in northern Indian cuisine. As Pragun and Jaidee told me when they took me there for the first time, this was one of the 'musts' for *kabab* lovers. In the last year however their passion had turned to another newly opened restaurant called "Punjabi by Nature" (ironically the name of a well-known Canada-based activist movement supporting the cause of a free Khalistan, i.e. an independent state for the Sikhs). Remaining in the world of eateries, Pizza Hut's own 2001 Diwali campaign (Picture 9) offers another interesting example of pride in, and branding of, India. Here, a red (ketchup) *Swastik* (Vedic symbol of prosperity), is topping a pizza (in India a symbol of Americanization). This superimposition is indeed symbolically placing Indiannes on top of what is evidently an imported food item.

During my most recent visits to Delhi I have been able to observe how the process of branding of India has gathered further momentum while also transforming itself into something now. Indianness is in fact now coupled with a progressive narrowing down and particularization of local identities. At Nirula's (one of Delhi's first Westernized fast foods, Picture 10) the new celebration of Delhi's identity looks like one of the many examples of a later and more specific stage in the re-enchantment with, and branding of, locality (in a mix here of Delhi and India). Differently from when I started fieldwork, Delhi has increasingly started branding its own identity and history. The above-mentioned deco of Nirula's is already an example of this with its images of the Qutub Minar (a key monument of historical Delhi), with its white Ambassador (emblem of all politicians and bureaucrats travelling across the city), and with a smiling Sikh (with Punjabi culture being used here to epitomize the city). Even more so there is today an ongoing production of postcards identifying and making at times fun of the city (Picture 11) or of small refrigerator adamants showing various emblems of the city (items that were absent during my previous phase of fieldwork, Picture 12).

During the spring of 2012 I was able to observe how the Indira Gandhi International Airport of Delhi, opted for opening a sports bar dedicated to the Delhi Daredevils, the city's team in the new Indian Premiere League of cricket (Picture 13). It is interesting to notice how the same airport has today become a key arena of display for an updated version of the India brand. Between pacifist souvenirs dedicated to the "Eternal Gandhi", to miniatures

of Gods, t-shirts displaying the message «I have survived! The Great Indian Experience», and miniatures of three wheelers and Ambassador taxis, the airport is becoming a privileged site for branding the identity of the subcontinent and of the city too (Picture 14).

Many more examples of branding of locality could be given but I believe that the examples above may have been enough to show how in the contemporary context Indianness (and new instance of locality too) are emerging with a new strength. In tune with my informants' playful inversion of the meaning of the colonial dichotomies 'India' and 'West', 'modernity' and 'tradition', local (and traditional) identities are being emphasized as key ingredients for the creation of a modern, global image. The notion of the "global *desi"* (a term which stemming from the word *desh,* meaning country, denotes someone or something that belongs to India) is the winning solution. Spicing 'tradition' up with some global elements that can attract the contemporary consumer is the recipe for the successful creation of 'India'[9]. The urban landscape has, hence, offered me throughout these years of involvement with the city a narrative of cultural change running in parallel (and at time contrasting with and commenting upon) the stories that I gathered with and through my interlocutors. Building up on these observations let me now proceed to discuss some methodological implications relating to the use of audio-visuals in ethnographic fieldwork.

Producing Visual Stories

My emerging attention to visual and material culture lead me, during fieldwork, to embrace audio-visuals as instruments for grasping the signs that surrounded me and my interlocutors. In tune with the experiments conducted by many anthropologists (Caldarola 1985, Loescher 2005, Ruby 2000, Pink 2007, Banks 2001, Prosser 1998) I tested the potential of photography first and video later on in many different ways. However, I here want to draw the attention to one specific event that made me reflect upon the meaning of images and image-making in fieldwork.

In Picture 15 Neeraj, at the time a 28-year-old journalist, pretends to meditate under a MacDonald sign in a shopping mall in South Delhi. This photograph, while 'taken' by me, was actually 'created' by Neeraj. It was born as a consequence of our shared interest in photography and of the discussions we had had across the years on the meaning of modernity in India. Neeraj instructed me here about how to compose the image, what should

be seen in it and what not. He told me when to click, what kind of field depth to use, etc. Doing this, he offered me a privileged insight into the re-fashioning of the meaning of the colonial dichotomies in the context of contemporary Delhi (one of the themes that, as I mentioned above, became fundamental in my research). Neeraj had in fact reproduced a scene displaying a stereotypical posture representing 'India', i.e. a meditation posture, within a 'modern' commercial setting (epitomized by the dominating MacDonald's sign). In this way he had recreated visually the idea that 'tradition' exists only (and is shaped) within 'modernity', visually translating Mitchell's (2000) and Rofel's (2001) notions of modernity as a stage within which differences are shaped and generated[10].

This episode was pivotal to my understanding of the re-fashioning of the colonial dichotomies among my interlocutors and offered me a new and unique insight into their life-worlds. However, it also unleashed a series of reflections on the meaning and politics of ethnographic practice. The photographic 'event' (cf. Caldarola 1985) just described was in fact a shared or relational one and not one centered exclusively on the intentions of the photo(ethno)grapher. Suddenly, in the situation above, the roles of subject and object got inverted. I found myself 'into someone else's story' (MacDougall 1994: 35) that is, into Neeraj's own ironical display of his own life. What made this inversion possible was, I believe, the playful and relational use of the camera, a usage detached from realist notions of documentation, description, illustration and explanation. In tune with Adelman's idea that the key concern for a visual researcher should not be «to look for the right time to shutter, but rather to enter into rhythm of the subjects' gestures so as to be apart of the flow of events» (Adelman, in Prosser 1998: 150), I did playfully approach the camera as an instrument of 'truth-making' (Taylor 1994: xiii) and not as a frame through which to gaze at the world from a safe distance. The camera was the very center of my interaction with Neeraj here. A true creator of knowledge, this instrument was the trigger of that unique and contextual process of self-narration.

Image-work at large offers indeed evident advantages for relating to our interlocutors. As a language closer to the experiences of most of the people we come in touch with, photography (and film too) can be useful to interpellate individuals, allowing and inviting them to point out new events, objects and situations to us and hence to involve themselves into our work. If playfully involved in the process, subjects may also, as in the case of Neeraj, choose to act in front of the camera dis-

playing in such way new aspects of their own identities. Such aspects may later on be the object of further exploration with the help of other (and perhaps more conventional) ethnographic means. A creative relational use of the camera can therefore help us in actively involving our interlocutors in the process of meaning-making. It can bring to the fore the nature of knowledge as a "processual aspect of human social relations" (cf. Banks 2001:112) rather than as a static thing 'out there' waiting to be discovered and 'documented'.

Towards a Slow and Playful Ethnography

In this paper I have discussed how an attention to the visible signs inhabiting the spaces in which we conduct research and the (combined) creative use of audio-visuals for exploring such signs constitute precious instruments for gathering in-depth ethnographic insights into our fields. Such practices, as I have shown, can allow us to rethink (or simply complete) the information we have obtained verbally through the use of interviews, conversations etc. Let me conclude now by sharing a few reflections on the requirements of such practices. To explore in depth the material and visual culture surrounding us and to adopt creative and playful participatory image-making practices are indeed time costly activities that require from the researcher also a capacity to temporarily suspend her search for the "ethnographically meaningful".

In my book *India Dreams* (2005) I opened the discussion on methodology with the following sentence: «In the "field" I hung around, I interviewed, I danced, I photographed, I drank, I watched TV, I read the newspapers». Despite its obvious irreverent playfulness, this sentence does indeed fully describe my own way of being in the field (in particular during the first months of fieldwork). In order to be able to understand my interlocutors I had, in fact, to enter the rhythm of their lives. At the beginning, however, I found this a fairly annoying experience. I felt that I was spending time in useless activities that were not providing me with 'material' able to live up to the standards of what I considered to be a "thick ethnography". I was in fact passing my days immersed in endless sessions of gossiping, in commenting at people passing by on the street, in deciding where to go for coffee or *pakoras*[11]. And I was spending the nights watching Western action movies wishing that at least the film was a Bollywood blockbuster (which would have made the experience so much more ethnographic!). The notes that I wrote during my first months of fieldwork do testify to my sense of frustration. I wanted to

understand more and to address more important topics with my interlocutors rather than sitting for hours and hours gossiping and drinking cold coffee. At a certain point, some months into fieldwork, I decided however to let myself go. I allowed myself to get absorbed by the flow of the events characterizing my interlocutor's lives and to be carried away by the rhythm of the city. Walking the streets of Delhi with my "friends" with this new spirit I felt as if I had transformed myself into a proper *flaneur*, a "passionate spectator" (Baudelaire 1964) loosing himself in the aesthetic contemplation of what surrounds him. It was during these moments that I really started paying attention to the objects and signs that were surrounding me. Looking backwards, I consider therefore all such (apparently useless) moments as the most precious generators of ethnographic insight. They allowed me to explore my interlocutors' life-worlds with open eyes, without the hurry of finding "the meaningful" (and hence without the attached risk of forcing onto my field preconceived notions or gate-keeping concepts). The acceptance of a temporary absence of an immediate research goal, i.e. the decision to suspend my search for meaningful information, did allow me to discover the topics and cultural categories that characterized my interlocutors' lives. It allowed my work to shape itself up on the basis of the necessities of the field. It was, in fact, at that particular point of time that audio-visuals emerged as a useful instrument for my research. However, in my usage of such instruments too, I did follow the principles of an aimless action putting the relation between me and my interlocutors ahead of my desire to capture ethnographic evidence. I therefore believe that notions of slowness and aimlessness can be powerful companions to our ethnographic practice. They may allow us to discover new things in our fields while bringing us also closer to our interlocutors. Such a notion, I believe, is particularly important in the current historical moment, one characterized by ever increasing pushes towards faster, more productive, goal-oriented, market- and policy-friendly research projects and study programs. A "slow, aimless and playful ethnography" can function as a fair antidote to such tendencies and bring anthropology in touch again with its own roots.

Notes

[1] "Auto rick-show whalla" is the term for denoting the driver of Delhi's popular three-wheeler taxis.

[2] *Hinglish* is an ironic term conventionally used to address the Hindi-influenced English spoken in Northern India.

[3] With 'polysemy' Volosinov indicated how signs and representations carry varied layers of meaning that may produce unpredicted results (cf. Cubitt 2001).

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[5] I highlight here my usage of the word "sanctioned" given that the India economy has been progressively opened up throughout history and in particular during the 80s under the prime ministership of Rajiv Gandhi.

[6] According to Hindu mythology *Kalyug* or *Kali Yuga* is the fourth and final era in the spiritual evolution of man.

[7] This moment has been recently depicted by many authors (cf. Kamdar 2007, Taroor 2007, Gupta 2009).

[8] The "phantasm" was, in my usage, the 'instrument' through which my interlocutors approached, interpreted, felt and contextualized the images that surrounded them. Following Agamben (1993) who used the phantasm to describe what linked (and at the same time blurred the boundary between) the internal and the external, the real and the imaginary, I approached the phantasm as what mediates not only between agents and their external space but also between the 'here' and 'there', the 'now' and 'then' of our daily experiences, between emotion and intellect, between collective and individual images, hence bringing together discourses and memories (in my case with different geographical and historical roots) that lie unspoken in our everyday lives (cf. also Ivy 1995).

[9] Mazzarella suggests along this line (2003) that the 'New Swadeshi' is a winning concept in contemporary metropolitan middle class culture. The term Swadeshi, which means self-sufficiency, was the name of the pre-Gandhian movement claiming Indian independence from the British, but Swadeshi stands also commonly for a position of pride in India and things Indian.

[10] Rofel (2001) suggests that modernity is at best compared with the "floor of a boxing match" where different "rhetorics, claims, and commitments to modernity get put into play" (2000: 638). In her words, modernity is "something people struggle over" (*ibid.*). It is an arena in which different representations of what it means to be modern are involved. Mitchell (2000) promotes a similar idea suggesting that modernity is basically a staging of differences enacted in a realm of representation. According to him the forms of difference involved here are mainly of two types. One type refers to geo-cultural differences. In its upholding of the divide between the modern and the non-modern, 'modernity' also upholds a distinction between the 'West' and the 'non-West'. Modernity is constructed through the marginalization and exclusion of those elements that question the norm (read 'modernity' and 'West').

[11] The *pakora* is an Indian fried snack.

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De-constructing the field

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Picture 4 (© Paolo Favero)

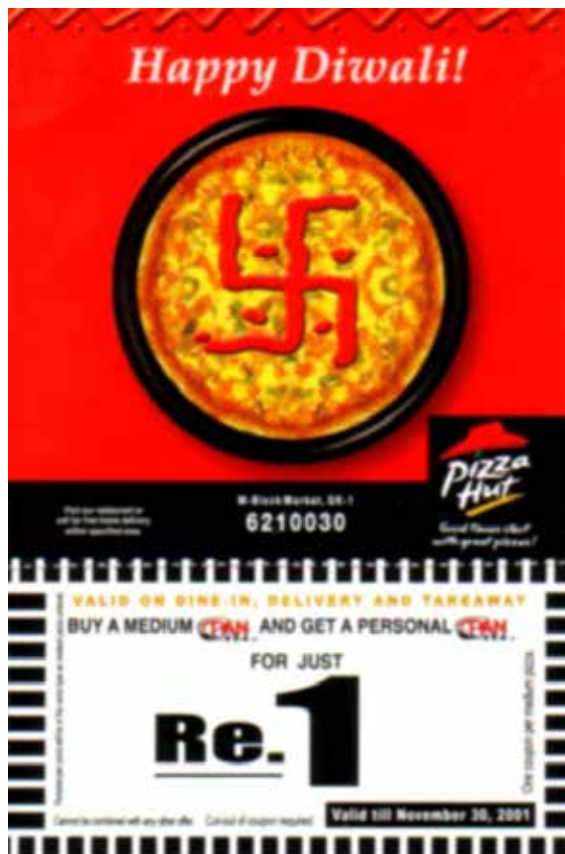Picture 5 (© Paolo Favero)

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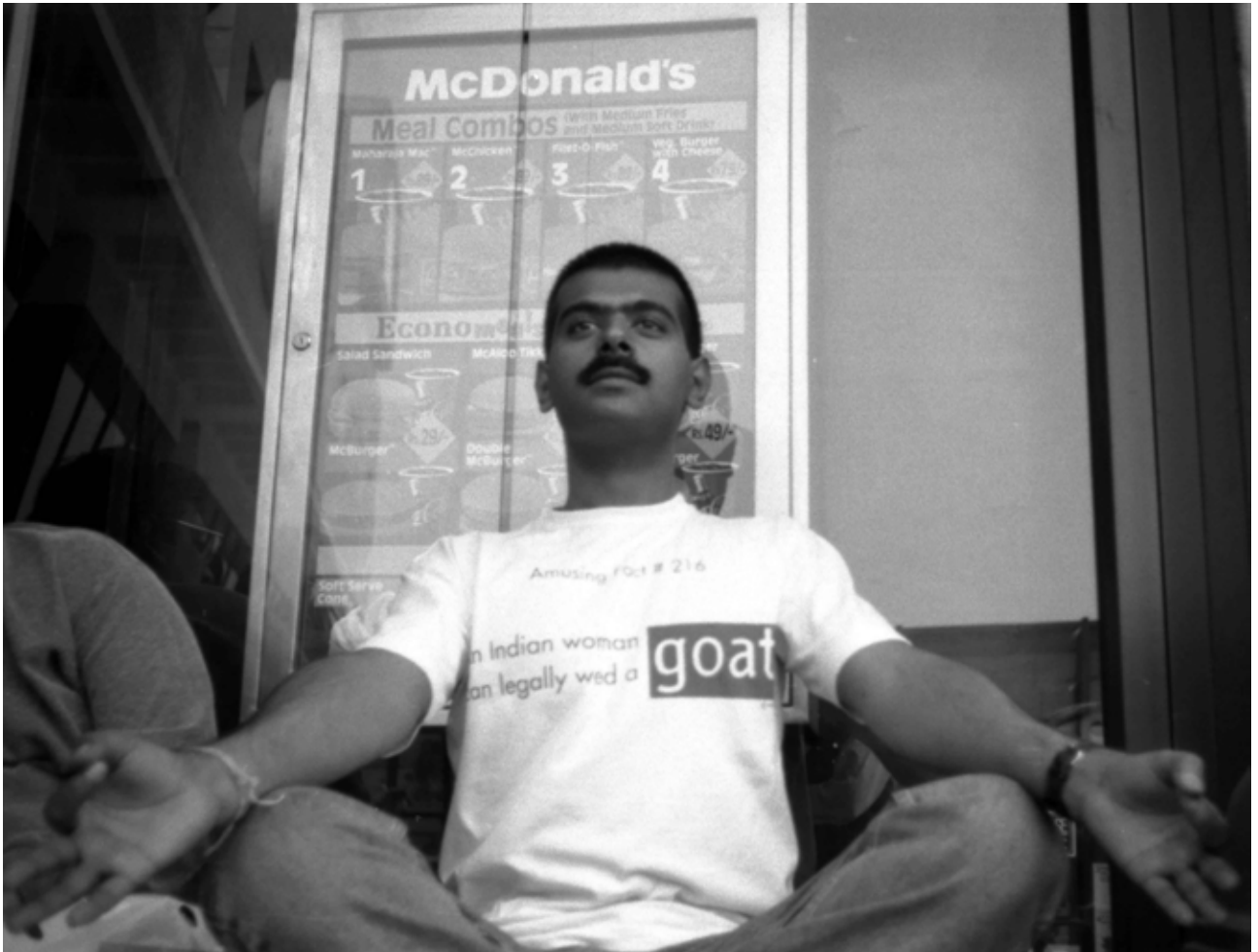
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