**Small frame politics: Public performance in the digital age**

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In the late afternoon heat of summer, I crossed the busy road with a crew of 15 B-boys (hip hop dancers) from the urban village of Khirki to access DLF construction groups glittering mega shopping center – three conjoined malls that occupy a 54-acre campus in the heart of South Delhi. At the time I met them these young men ranged in age from 12-19 years old. Their parents had moved to the urban village of Khirki from Bihar, East Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, and the Garhwal region of the Himalayas to partake in the city’s economic promise in the late 1990s. Khirki, with its informal housing economy, its central location in the city, and its increasingly diverse population of refugees, migrants, and youthful technology workers, is where these young men have come of age as they explore global hip hop through the digital infrastructures they have access to as Delhiites in the second decade of the 21st century[[1]](#endnote-1).

On that day, as we made our way to the mall from Khirki, they would surge ahead of me across the busy street, running in front of moving vehicles while I struggled to keep up. After we proceeded through the various security checkpoints to enter the mall we would head to one of the open courtyards where piped in pop music competed with the ambient din: the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, the megaphones on a passing car announcing a politicians aspirations, the sound of birds as they flew by singing in the evening sky. There, in the courtyard, the young men would proceed to spend hours B-boyin’ and rhyming/rapping in small ciphas.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The mall, however, was by no means a public refuge for those who came to avail of its spatial features, its possibilities for consumption, or its particular and some would say disconnected and vacuous socialities (Augé, 1995). On my many trips to the mall, I noticed the security guards paying close attention to young people, particularly those who looked different than the mostly middle class ‘Indian’ patrons in the mall. Young men and women who were loitering in the courtyards were told to move along by security who walked inside the mall structures as well as in the outside courtyards, armed with long bamboo sticks (*lathis*). Some young people were not allowed entry into the mall at all. For instance, in the spring of 2014 the mall’s management had decided to enforce a policy that required all foreign nationals to present legitimate I.D.s or be denied entry, a policy the African nationals that I got to know during my time in Khirki argued was directed towards them. For those who did gain entry, in addition to the security officers on patrol in the mall, there were several dozen CCTV cameras installed throughout the complex to keep an eye out for interlopers, troublemakers, and those that generally didn’t belong.

After a few days travelling to the mall with the crew of young men from Khirki to watch them practice, I wondered out loud, “why don’t you guys ever get harassed by the security officers?” One of the young men told me that security guards had kicked them out on several occasions when they first started visiting the mall regularly to practice. But one day, he narrated, a curious thing happened. The head of security came down from his booth where he monitored several dozen close circuit TVs around the mall and said to the security personnel who were harassing the youth and said to his security staff, “Bandh karo. Mujhe aapne nutya ki pasand he Dusrevaleko abhi pasand he.” “Leave them alone. I like their dancing. Others like it too.” After that, they were not harassed again.

And who were these others that the head of security referred to? On every occasion I came to the mall with these youth and they proceeded to practice a small crowd of shoppers would gather to watch. Small families. Young couples. Grandparents with what seemed to be their grandchildren in tow. The youths’ hip hop performances, in effect, became something to devour in the already crowded field of consumption that the mall offered. Interestingly, as the head of security suggests, it is this production of a *likable* spectacle for consumption that underwrote the possibility for these youth to stay in the mall, to return on a daily basis to practice. However, it was this very same spectacle that made the security guards who patrolled the grounds nervous. Indeed, while the security guards, mostly migrants to the city themselves, left the youth alone, they maintained a close eye on them, pacing a perimeter around the space that the young men claimed. It was not just the security guards that were gripped with the desire to do something in the face of the spectacle. The audience, myself included, also not content to occupy the role of passive spectator, quickly retrieved their smart phones or cameras and began documenting what they saw.

In this essay I focus on these young mens’ performances of hip hop’s dance forms in the mall just across the street from their urban village to engage two distinct yet intertwined theoretical arguments. One the one hand, the young men utilized global hip hop to claim to space in ways that disrupt the normative visualities of Delhi’s public urban spaces. These performative disruptions can be seen as inherently political, a tactic these young men deployed to establish a right to their city as the children of migrants who occupy caste, class, and ethnic positions that limit their access to Delhi as a global city in the making. Yet, because these claims are produced in the aesthetic and the affective, they are prone to capture, recirculation, and (re)narrativization. These processes of mediatization, processes which link physical space and the bodies that occupy it to a larger public sphere, work to tame these initially political tactics of recognition and effectively render them part of capital’s performance. In other words, the very performances that serve as political disruption are subsumed within the flows of capital that cycle back to potentially marginalize the youth anew.

In the first section, I explore how these youth’s public performances are a means to think through Ranciere’s provocative discussions of public art and its possibilities for the political. Specifically, I engage with my observational accounts of these youth’s performances to critically reflect on Ranciere’s (2010) concept of dissensus. For Ranciere (2010), dissensus is the rupture of visual norms and art, at is most fundamental level, functions as a political force precisely because it distends and disrupts the visible fields that produce knowable horizons of the possible. To understand the significance of this potential rupture we must first acknowledge that the migrant Nepalis, Biharis and other intranational rural migrants to the city are normatively as service laborers inscribed into the social fabric of Delhi. For instance, male Nepali migrants are known in Delhi as security guards and night watch men (Valentin 2013). Indeed, many of my youthful informants who are from Nepal have relatives, fathers, uncles or cousins, who are security personnel or chauffeurs.

Other migrant communities coming from near and far to the city, in similar fashion to the Nepali migrants, fulfill other labor needs of the city in flux. These migrant groups who serve as the labor force of the city often live, side by side, in the same urban villages, of which there are approximately 36 in the greater Delhi area (Delhi Master Plan, 2014). This migratory and settlement phenomenon creates a spatialization of difference in the city and produces a trajectory of development that links migrant bodies, labor, urban housing for the working class, and malls in complicated ways. For instance, parts of Khirki have been a migrant enclave since the early 70s, when local landlords (*zamindars*) would hire seasonal labor from Bihar and Easter Uttar Pradesh to till the adjacent fields and then rent these laborers and their family’s flats that were shoddily built in the village. In the early 2000s this farmland was acquired by DLF construction in partnership with the DMC and DDA, for a one hundred year lease agreement. The mall was constructed on this land and the seasonal Bihari laborers who previously provided agricultural seasonal labor were hired on to provide the labor for the construction of the mall. As the mall and its several complexes were being built, other migrant groups arrived to work in the large number of jobs this infrastructural project created. This influx, of course, has spawned the construction of more informal housing within Khirki. After the mall was completed in 2007 it acted as a beacon for newer migrant groups to establish themselves in Khirki as it provided a central location within the context of the expanding city as well as offered cheap rents.

In the last few years, the community has witnessed yet another influx of new residents; young technology and IT workers from all over India, expatriates from several western nations, Afghan refugees fleeing the instability of their home country, and African nationals from several countries who come to Delhi as students, refugees, and entrepreneurs. The youth in Khirki I spent over two years with have, thus, grown up interacting with difference. They have also grown up in a digitally enabled urban India, where the influx of popular cultural forms from all over the world, mingling with popular cultural forms from India, has shaped their lived experiences in ways which was impossible even a decade ago. Yet, despite the unanticipated cultivation of an emergent urban Indian cosmopolitism, these diverse youth are still perceived as migrant labor and social others in the dominant discourse and the normative spaces of the city where they live. Critically, the youth I got to know in Khirki, by taking up the artful practices of hip hop, challenge the aesthetic norms proscribed by capital that casts them in particular social roles and produces new representational possibilities – putatively exemplifying Ranciere’s (2010) notion of dissensus.

However, upon closer scrutiny the possibility for dissensus seems to twinkle in and out of existence. That is the performative acts of the immigrant youth to shake themselves and their audience out of a collective social torpor determined by rigid class, caste, gender, and ethnic sensibilities that pervade Delhi seem, all too quickly, to be captured within the ‘flows’ of the mall. In other words, the mall, as a node of global consumerism, traffics an overwhelming array of semiotic material and changes the very nature of the spectacle for both the audience and for the youthful performers as it quickly transforms these youth’s acts into a commodity. I ask, if dissensus and its subsequent possibilities hinge on tearing bodies out of their social roles in particular and normalized spatial regimes of relationship, how then do we assess the potential politicality of these immigrant youth’s performances if they are so quickly tamed by and within the very space in which they are instantiated? As important as the material context of the mall is the role of small frame technology in the dual process of taming and amplifying the political. Chow describes the small frame as the exponential increase in visibility made possible through the advent of cheap readily available hand held recording devices. For Chow (2012) these devices problematize the very nature of visibility precisely because they capture, abstract, and redistribute their subjects in ever expanding trajectories of circulation made possible through web 2.0. Chow (2012) argues the redistributive nature of image making technologies forces us to return to the chimerical statement posed by Foucault (1977): “visibility is a trap” (p. 200). How can the ethnographic case I describe in broad brush strokes above allow us to critically assess Foucault’s (1977) statement, particularly when read against Ranciere’s (2010) suggestion that “politics consists in transforming this space of moving along, of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject (p. 41)?” I suggest and develop the idea in this essay that small frame devices introduce the possibility that the ostensibly politically valent performativities of socially invisible bodies, in this case the children of migrant labor dancing in the mall, are not only tamed by the space in which they occur but in their circulation vis-à-vis small frame capture precisely because they are utilized in projects of value[[3]](#endnote-3) that exceed the event (Miller, 1997).

In the last section of this essay I delve more deeply into the complicated relationship between space, bodies, and images made possible through digital technology and take the first steps towards theorizing what I call *small frame politics*. Small frame politics is an attempt to engage with the ways in which technology has reframed the possibilities and politics of capture to complicate naïve arguments that this sort of readily available image making technology either democratizes representation or, that it, like the technology that has come before it, poses an imminent threat to sovereignty. Rather, I suggest, that it is the through small frame, a view of the world that is only inches wide, that allows us to see the tangled relationship between strategies for visibility and capitals’ necessity for new images of possibility at several temporal and spatial scales. Small frame politics, as developed and detailed in this essay, is instantiated in the relationship between the aesthetic proclivities of otherwise marginalized bodies in the developing world city of Delhi and the capacity of the images that are generated in their creative play to simultaneously rupture social norms while providing a tantalizing view of Delhi as a global city, a city where even the working poor are enmeshed in capitals’ expansion. It is this doubling of interests, I suggest, that retrieve the possibility of the political in the performances of these young people even as they limit the political possibilities of these forms.

**The mall and spatial thresholds of Dissensus**

The mall space, secured by multiple layers of security, could be called, drawing from Augé (1995), a veritable non-place where the deluge of images, signs, symbols dis-identify subjectivities and displace history (Favero, 2003). Here, in this climate controlled environment, shoppers can feel a part of the globalizing trends in India and, supposedly, can rest assured they are safely tucked away from the threat of the so-called subaltern. However, unlike the sister development of the mall, the multiplex cinema with huge entry costs, the masses are not so easily kept out because the mail does not have an admission cost (See Ganti, 2012 for a discussion on the emergence of the multiplex and its relationship to the production of social class in urban India). Its entertainment is free. Open to the public.

Indeed, the lack of public space in the city coupled with an equally strong desire by youth from other class, caste, and immigrant positions, to partake of the cities changing built environs, make the mall a desirable destination for more than just the middle class. The mall can be imagined, rather than a middle class oasis (Voyce, 2007), a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) precisely because provides a public space where contact and the reevaluation of social meaning become possible. The possibility for contact, however, is unevenly produced, mediated through surveillance both in the literal and figurative sense. The symbolic power of the mall as a middle class space, the sign that evinces the very discourse that produced the mall in the first place, disciplines those that enter into its spatial field. The literal surveillance and disciplining is evidenced by the dozens of security guards and hundreds of cameras in the mall complex. In the figurative sense, the surveillance is self-generated. In Aravind Adiga’s novel White Tiger (2008), he shows something of the social changes being wrought in India’s cities through the intensely personal first person narrative of a fictional farmer from a rural village who has recently migrated to Delhi. In Delhi he lands a job as a chauffeur with a nouveau-rich family. This chauffeur, as he takes his employers to the mall regularly, struggles to convince himself that he is worthy of entry and over several chapters finally comes to the conclusion that if he just wears certain attire no one will notice him at the security checkpoint as different, an outsider.

Next morning, as I drove Pinky Madam to the mall, I felt a small parcel of cotton pressing against my shoe clad feet. She left, slamming the door; I waited for ten minutes. And then inside the car I changed. I went to the gateway of the mall in my new white T-shirt. But there, the moment I saw the guard, I turned around – went back to the Honda City (151).

The strategy, for Adiga’s protagonist and, similarly, for the young men who populate this essay, is to engage in tactics that rearticulate the externally visible to validate entry. However, this strategy, for the chauffeur and the youth in my study, is always precarious precisely because of the markers of difference inscribed on their bodies and a habitus of difference etched in their consciousness. What, then, can a moment of dissensus created by the children of migrants turned B-boys and MCs, a moment of disruption of the norms that link the mall to Khirki largely through the laboring bodies that built and now maintain its edifices, make possible?

Let us return to the mise-en-scène of the mall. I, if you recall, have set up my tripod to film the youth as they take turns in the center of the circle demonstrating their dance moves. The other denizens of the mall surround the young men and watch them perform. Some pull out cameras to record the event. The security guards uncomfortably pace in the background. They had been told to leave the youth alone yet it was clear that they do not, for one minute, believe these youth were meant to occupy the space. The only thing that prevents them from ejecting these young men is the word of their boss, who watches the CCTV live feed of their performance and recognizes the free spectacle it provides shoppers. Here, then, lies an interesting intertwining of interests and interpretations that reveals the possibilities and limits of critical art to create dissensus, which, for Ranciere (2010), is the possibility for creative acts, even for only a moment, to rip bodies from their assigned social roles.

In any public generating display of art, there will be a heterogeneous group that will come into contact with the visual, aural display. This heterogeneity will, necessarily, spawn several reactions to artistic performance. That is to say, it is not just the performance that dictates the reassignment of social roles. Any assessment of public artistic performances ability to create a ripple in an aesthetic-political regime must also include its audience. Ranciere (2010), in his discussions of the political possibilities of artistic practice, is not unaware of this. In a particularly rich passage he suggests, drawing from Lyotard (1979), that art’s resistance, its ability to upturn representational norms, “consists in providing a two-fold testimony: A testimony of the impassible alienation of the human and of one of the catastrophe that arises from misrecognizing that alienation” (182).

At this juncture a few words must be said about hip hop, a 30 plus year old artistic form that originated in Black urban America as a political and celebratory cultural practice that has, at its foundations, African American cultural traditions that go back centuries (Rose, 1994). Hip hop’s aesthetics can now be found in the streets of Berlin, Germany, in the rural farmlands of the American Midwest, and in the shantytowns of Mogadishu, Somalia, and Sao Paolo, Brazil. In all of these places, corporate sponsored hip hop music and its styles have ensconced themselves as part of a youthful visual and aural landscape. However, Hip hop’s practices have also, along with its already produced forms, made the journey to places far and wide. Youth across the world are not content with simply consuming corporate sponsored hip hop products but have picked up hip hop’s dance, musical, and visual forms to create cultural products of their own, products they claim have held onto the original values of hip hop which stressed a reportage of ‘the real’ and a do it yourself attitude. As hip hop’s artistic forms are picked the world over, they offer the possibility to represent alienation while creating the conditions of possibility for misrecognition. This poses a complicated relationship between the potential for the aesthetic to enact a politics that makes the marginal visible and the realization that this potential opens precarious and uncertain possibilities for circulation and reception.

This was certainly the case for the young Nepali, Bihari, Assamese, Sikkimese, Nigerians, Somalis, and Punjabis who I met in Delhi’s hip hop scene. Because the aesthetic undergirding of the forms they practice has such global appeal as a quintessentially American subaltern and Black urban aesthetic, their value exceeds a facile politicality. And so, it follows, that as the immigrant youth I spent time with in Delhi perform these globally available forms, perhaps inadvertently connecting their struggles as invisible migrants in Delhi to the struggles of Black Americans in urban contexts in the U.S., the aesthetics of resistance supposedly internal to hip hop is only part, if at all, of what is apprehended by its audiences. Rather, what draws these onlookers in to a spectacle performed by immigrant youth, what allows them to relax their internalized social reservations towards ethnic others that, in other settings, would limit their engagement, is that the space of the mall tames these performances, remakes them another commodity on offer in the mall. The appropriation of these young peoples expressive talents to, if we take the argument to its limit, sell the mall as an experience, speaks to the power of how space create the conditions of possibility for ‘audience’ uptake.

Just as Ranciere (2009) argues the creation of the gallery and the museum in a European historical context creates the conditions for art to become Art, the mall plays an equally powerful part regarding what is seen, what *can* be seen, within its enveloping features. Ranciere (2009) argues precisely this as he states, “...a medium cannot be reduced to a specific materiality and a specific apparatus. A medium also means a milieu or sensorium, a configuration of space and time, of sensory forms and modes of perception”(185). When I spoke to onlookers in the crowd watching these young men and asked them to describe to me what they saw a few remarked at their athleticism, one questioned whether they were paying enough attention to their schooling if they were spending all their time dancing, but the overwhelming majority of the people I spoke with said, “it is wonderful the mall sponsors performances like this.”

What becomes interesting is how the political and social roles proscribed to the migrant youth in my study are inconsequential precisely at the moment where they produce themselves as an ethnic/exotic product for consumption. Just at the moment, in fact, when they put their bodies, molded by hip hop and an American Black aesthetic, on display is the moment where they become socially viable. I will explore this disquieting visibility predicated on consumption, particularly in the face of the immediate possibilities for the circulation of the image of these young men’s now commoditized and perhaps fetishized bodies, in the next section. However, before I conclude this section with some final thoughts about political performance and the potentiality for misrecognition, I wish to ask the question: Are these youth engaging in hip hop forms to overtly make political statements? Does, at least for most of these young men, their lack of explicit interest in politics suggest that their actions do not fall into the realm of the political?

Ranciere (2010) speaks to this very issue, suggesting that for art to be political, it does not necessarily require its producers to establish predetermined effects. The youth in my study, in making their way to the mall to perform their practices, did not necessarily go to change peoples’ beliefs about them, their spatial located community that lies just across the street from the mall, nor to challenge ethnic stereotypes. Rather, theseyouth take the practice of their globally travelling styles across the street to the mall precisely because they want to be seen. Heard. Represented. And not only do they want to be seen, heard, and represented, but they wish to be seen heard and represented within the social milieu of the mall where, as one B-boyer suggested, “everyone comes to look and be seen.” We can conclude, then, their lack of explicit political intent and their undisguised desire to, first and foremost want recognition makes the representational forms they generate more vulnerable to cooptation. This becomes particularly true in the mall, which over-determines the meaning of their performances as product.

If we end our analysis here, we are left with my participants’ performances as everyday practice that calls into question social fabric of the world outside of the mall while, inside the mall, these very same performances are restricted to an ontological possibility of what Debord (1968) pessimistically calls the spectacle. Yet, there is another curious feature of this tale that must be taken into account; the capacity for audience members, myself included, to capture and re-broadcast the performances that were consumed in a specific time and place. If we surmise, from the discussion above, that the political valence of these youth’s performances are rendered, at the very least, opaque because of the location in which they are staged, what happens when they are rebroadcast to a wider audience?

**On capture and visibility**

It is perhaps fitting to begin with the interrelated concepts of capture and visibility as they become central to the next section where I assess the role of small, readily available camera phones in the production and dissemination of political subjects. Capture is a muscular term that opens the door to many instinctive interpretations, most of them, at first blush, unpleasant. However, capture could also be read as an affective entrapment, a means to engage desire; a way in which friends and lovers are made. How, in our 21st century moment does capture function, what are its mechanisms, and what is its relation to visibility? How does smart phone capture and social media circulation, for instance, reformulate how we understand the politics of visibility?

In his ruminations on historical change and the emergence of so-called modernity in the European context, Foucault (2010, 1977) suggests, using the prison and the clinic as his metaphors and empirical touchstones, that visibility is a trap. Visibility, according to Foucault (2010, 1977), creates the possibility for greater control over subjects precisely because, as subjects come into being, as they are described and counted, that which was irreducible, human life, now becomes knowable. And to be known is to be captured. Moreover, for Foucault, the desire to become visible creates new technologies of self-making that operate on a grid that inextricably links one’s own processes of becoming with the apparatus that influences the conditions of possibility for self-making.

Foucault’s (2010, 1977) notion of the visible, however, seemingly contradicts Ranciere’s notion of visibility. Recall that Ranciere argues (See also Mirzoeff, 2011 on the counter-visual; Puar, 2007 on affective assemblages), that it is precisely at this junction where the collective and individual body can disrupt and change the matrix that conditions the possibilities for life in the first place. This seeming absolute incommensurability, this either or proposition regarding visibility as a trap or visibility as a potential for social change, is rendered mute when we consider the relationship between what Rey Chow (2012) describes as the seeable and the sayable. For Chow (2012), reading Deleuze’s (1988) reevalution of Foucault’s thoughts on visibility, the seeable is what we directly come into contact with such that our senses are engaged fully, our historically affective bodies are made, at least for a moment, permeable to what we apprehend. The sayable, in contrast, is the rendering, the narrativization and reduction if you will, of what is directly apprehended.

Rather than putting the seeable and the sayable in opposition to one and other, I argue that it is the distance between the two that we must assess when we consider how political subjects are made and unmade in our current moment where the hyper-circulation of text, images, and moving images are the norm. I began this section discussing the concepts of capture and visibility precisely because I suggest that it is the moment where the seeable is captured that allows us to make any speculations on what might be sayable. Put another way, I argue that by being present to and even capturing images as they are being made available in the mall, I will be able to say something about their trajectories, how they might circulate and coagulate into a discernable discourse about, in no particular order, migrants, hip hop, the mall, and Delhi. I will be able to gesture towards what may or may not fall out of the story line as these images are harnessed into a story or stories. But before I postulate what stories small frame technology make possible for broader circulation, let us return to the performative event to assess precisely what is being captured and what ‘tools’ for capture, aside from the camera as an obvious instrument of confinement, become visible in their own right.

**Small Frame Politics: Laying traps**

Earlier, I argued that the mall, as a milieu that is oversaturated with the flow of global capital’s visual and material detritus, tames the performances of these youth for their immediate audiences such that their political valence is muted for most, silenced for some, and made very apparent for others. In the latter category, I would count the security guards in the mall and myself, as we noted the significance of these young men’s social transgressions in a way that was not readily available to the other spectators. Yet, there is no doubt that these other denizens of the mall, the shoppers with their families, the college students in large groups, were pulled in, captured if you will, by these performances even if they weren’t able to apprehend its political valence. What are the factors that lead to their capture? We can suppose they were attracted to the sensoria that these kids put on offer precisely because of its spectacular or exotic character on three counts. For the most part, these groups had never seen B-boys before. Never encountered hip hop’s styles or forms except, perhaps, for in the syncretic Bollywood dance numbers where hip hop dance and music have been incorporated in the last decade. Also, it would seem likely that these spectators have never come into contact with young migrants in any capacity other than in a service exchange. And in this instance, this moment of performance, they are confronted by migrant youth who confidently, athletically, gracefully make themselves visible, which, while it doesn’t necessarily feel politically charged, certainly creates a new value sign that becomes attached to these young men’s bodies. Finally, the mall, as a context for the two conditions of visibility stated above, allows them a safe place by which to interact with the content from a position of relative safety.

Why? Because capitalism in its current incarnation renders social difference as a unit of consumption, harnesses difference as a means to inculcate desire and thus generate demand. Put simply, the mall allows shoppers to interact with difference as it presents itself in spectacle such that any discomfort that would occur in what could be considered a political confrontation is rendered null and void. The question arises, then, as to who or what is actually being captured in this moment? Is it the boys who are on display, the audience who are attracted to the initial performance, the mall itself as a media for the possibility of capture, or is it the ever-expanding public that comes into contact with the images that are generated by the audience as they travel out of the mall, or all three? More importantly, what are the consequences of these moments of capture?

Rey Chow (2012) asserts that the trap “is an index to a type of social interaction in which one party takes advantage of the other by being temporally preemptive, by catching the other at unawares”(45). Certainly, these youth, in deploying aesthetically robust performances in the quasi-public space of the mall intelligently lay a trap that succeeds in attracting an audience, capturing them if you will. Yet, performance as a trap, as I have argued, cannot simply be seen as the performance devoid of its spatial context and must, in this case, include the milieu of the mall. This begets yet another rendering of the trap. Here the mall comes into visibility and becomes a second order trap, reassigning meaning to the performances and rendering them visible as a commodity spectacle to be consumed. Put more emphatically, the mall becomes a trap in and of itself.

The appearance of small frame cameras, however, complicates my reading even further. As the cameras are pulled out and trained on the object of interest they capture the performance and the context. Even I am captured in the gaze of the audience myriad cell phone cameras, the anthropologist, lurking in the shadows of a palm tree in the middle of the cement courtyard with my own camera in front of me. Thus, a third order trap is introduced that, once again, reassigns meaning. As the images of the performance of other bodies are captured within the context of the mall, they are eventually circulated. I argue that it is precisely at this moment, where migrant youth are once again decontextualized and travelling, that there exists the potentiality for new political subjects to emerge. In my most cynical estimation, these political subjects are aesthetically fetishized in ways that reify the economic and social narratives that valorize the remaking of Delhi as a so-called world-class city.

Taking this rather cynical stance, we can then imagine the camera as a mechanism that creates a visibility for the youth that does not offer any new political valence for its subject; but rather, the camera harnesses their images into the making of narratives of a future oriented Delhi that seeks a growing presence on the world stage. These images of these young men B-boying, hats backwards, wearing knockoff brand name sneakers, importantly posit an inclusive Delhi, a diverse Delhi. A Delhi that can compare to the postcolonial cities of the west insofar as it too has youth who partake in subcultural worlds, consume the hippest styles, youth who spend time together and simultaneously represent several different backgrounds based on visually apparent differences, youth who represent a developing world picture of a post- racial, post ethnic, post difference society – a frictionless, multicultural world.

Indeed, when people I have met in Delhi who are not connected to my research ask me what I do, their first response is to say, wow, I didn’t know there was anyone doing hip hop in the city, completely eclipsing the narrative of migration. When I show them my images of young migrant youth performing hip hop’s forms, wearing hip hop styles, the first remark of some is that these kids look remarkably like kids one would see in any western country. It is precisely this image that becomes a powerful means to create a narrative of Delhi as a city that has come of age because it now has urban youth from various class, caste, and ethnic positions who participate, like their western counterparts, in projects that underscore the emergence of western liberal notions of individuality and self-expression. Moreover, these images of inter-ethnic, inter-caste, and inter-racial friendship, images that counter the continued discourse of India as a nation where religious, caste, and ethnic difference continues to fracture a politics of possibility, act as a powerful means to attract and produce capital. This, I argue, is where the seeable and the sayable converge, where the discourse of development takes up the sensoria of the experienced.

I argue that once this suturing of the seeable and the sayable becomes mobile through digital capture and circulation, the images that connect Delhi to hip hop become a new trap, one that coheres with the projects of value of those who utilize images to, as William Mazzarella (2003) eloquently suggests in his late 20th century work on the Indian advertising industry, shovel smoke. But who in the 21st century, precisely, are the entities that traffic in these images? To be sure, these mall onlookers with their small cameras do not necessarily participate in creating a new image of Delhi that can be explicitly marketed to a global audience. However, their interest in the spectacle, their trafficking of these images in public domains, such as the internet, brings the attention of others to what the marketing and branding experts call content: a sumptuous and thick digital capture of sensoria. This content, I argue, is capable of providing branding agents a futuristic rendering of Delhi and of India; a way in which to sell lifestyles to youth in the subcontinent while simultaneously signaling that India represents a new version of hip, youthful modernity that has yet to be fully realized[[4]](#endnote-4).

However, branding agents and marketers are not the only interested parties who are engaging with, taking up, and rebroadcasting the images of the emerging youth subcultural scene in India. In my time in Delhi journalists, academics, and filmmakers all gravitated to the image making projects of the hip hop involved youth I introduce you to in this chapter. All of these different actors hold these aesthetic performances valuable for two main reasons, one, because of their potential politicality, second, because of their aesthetic rendering of Delhi. These two reasons to seek out hip hop in Delhi, of course, are not mutually exclusive. Evidently, both the corporate interest in these images to sell a place and the interest of those who see hip hop as a political vehicle, a means to distend older images of the needy poor, the migrant worker and so on – both gravitate to and are seduced by images and sounds of the brash, vital and energized young men and women I met in Khirki who are caught in a moment of small frame capture. This intertwining of interests creates a tangled, contradictory narrative that reduces the visible, though while in places contradictory and polarizing, into a singular story that does a particular kind of place-making work. Thus the small frame, with its unlimited image making and image re-broadcasting capability, creates a politics that cannot help but inhere to an already established discourse on Delhi – one that reveals the largest trap of all, the discourse of modernity itself.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, let me first quickly review what I have argued. For the youth in my study, the spectacle they produce when practicing hip hop’s forms underwrites their possibility to use the mall space. This spectacle of performance, however, while putatively producing what Ranciere (2010) calls dissensus and what Mirzoeff (2011) terms a countervisuality, a break from the visual hegemony that places these migrant bodies in particular social positions, also folds these youth into the purposes of the mall. That is, the mall as part and parcel of the media by which the performances are delivered renders the performances as a spectacle to be consumed, not unlike all the other offerings in the mall. However, the wrinkle in this argument is that this performance is not solely limited to its temporal and spatial specificity. These spontaneous performances, rather, are captured by many in their small smart phone cameras and are redistributed far and wide through the virtual networks they belong to. I have suggested in this essay that this circulation of the image once again decontextualizes the very event it captures, no longer is the mall the over-determining force for interpretive possibilities. What emerges in this aesthetic reproduction of creative performance are image commodities that buttress the master narrative of urban development underwritten by global capital, one that promises social and economic opportunity for those on the margins while representing a city familiar to the western gaze.

Aiwha Ong (2007) argues, when discussing the emergence of Asian cities dubbed megacities, the mega in megacity refers less to the sheer enormity of the city than to the ambitions of its elite as they seek to attract creative know how and ‘foreign talent.’ Ong’s (2007) play on the term megacity is an interesting and important rejoinder to this conversation on small frame capture as it opens up an avenue to think through the import of small frame politics as the ways in which the unruly urbanity that emerges in the developing world, is articulated and made available and intelligible within and outside its borders. While Ong’s (2007) essay focuses more on the advent mobile transnational labor as a symbol and mechanism for Asian megacities’ global ascendance, her allusion to creativity and foreign talent suggests that critical to the production of the Asian megacity as a world city is the production of its image as a creative hub. The arts, then, become central to producing the cities of the east as global cities in their own right and, certainly, the high art scenes in Delhi, Mumbai, and other emerging cities (Bangalore, Hyderabad and so on) have flourished in part because of this recognition for the necessity of local creative capital to attract mobile labor capital. However, it is not just the high art scenes that are gaining recognition in these cities, but the popular subcultural worlds that are attracting interest and recognition as well.

The capture and dissemination of images of Indian youth engaging in cultural practices that are familiarly western, even if they are putatively oppositional, only serves to create an image of the Asian city as ascendant. Importantly, it is not the formal media estate that is capturing these happenings. While there have been several articles in boutique magazines and weeklies about the hip hop scene in Delhi, the primary vehicle that this scene is becoming visible is through small frame capture and the subsequent virtual dissemination of these images as they are embedded into short narratives that circulate on web 2.0. Several blogs and websites dedicated to broadcasting the up and coming urban subcultures of Delhi and Mumbai have sprung up, some dedicated specifically to the hip hop scene, that publish images taken by ‘locals.’ Equally important to note is that the young men from the crews I got to know from Khirki as well as the middle class youth in Delhi’s emergent hip hop scene, use the small frame to produce and disseminate narratives of their own on Facebook or on YouTube. This intentional broadcasting of images create a circulation of organic content that is ripe for more mainstream promotion – of a city that has indeed become world class because of its youth cultural life and the burgeoning youth cultural industry that it promises to create. The small frame, then, emerges as the site where the disruption and reproduction of capital are simultaneous.

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1. The young men I introduce you to in this chapter are the subjects of a longer exploration and analysis of their engagements with digitality and global hip hop in Delhi. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cipha (cipher) is a term used in hip hop to describe the creative collective space in which dance moves and raps are shared and evaluated (See Spady et al., 2006 for a theorization of cipha not only as a situated space but as a concept that gets at the mass mediated collectivities that hip hop, as it travels globally, produces). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Miller (1997) argues for an attention to how the narratives of the marginalized are taken up by others who seek to utilize these narratives to support their projects of value, their efforts to invest value in an emergent discursive formation. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I tackle advertising and branding in digital urban India in a chapter in my forthcoming book. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)