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Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*

Diya Mehra



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Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*, Oxford, New York, Routledge, 2010, 224 pages, ISBN: 9780415409667.

Diya Mehra

[1] The field of urban studies is a growing one as Indian cities transform beyond recognition. In his book *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*, Ravi Sundaram tries to capture this transformation, using a theoretical lens little explored in existing literature. To wit, Sundaram is interested in 'the evaporation of the boundary between technology and urban life' which has produced 'a delirious disorientation of the senses' (p. 7). The examples of such evaporation and of a newly technologized urban are many - apart from technology in the form of older infrastructures (roads, pipes, etc.), there is now also the 'the dramatic live experience brought about by flickering film, television, advertizing and mobile screens' (p. 5), electronically boosted soundscapes, endless publicity images, whizzing cars, and mangled bodies in road accidents, in what is a non-stop proliferation of technology-driven urban forms. Following Walter Benjamin and other theorists, Sundaram argues that in such speeded-up hyper-technologized environments, 'city dwellers are subject to a range of shock-like...stimuli, and develop disciplining techniques to deal with distraction, as well as tactile playful appropriations' (p. 5) of technology and circulating media images.

[2] Sundaram's book deals mainly with these two divergent aspects of a media and technology saturated urbanism in the context of Delhi. In the period following economic liberalization, he tracks, on the one hand, the emergence of technologies of urban discipline as the older certainties of a calmer city are eroded by a sense of urban crises, amplified by the 'hyperstimulated' mainstream media coverage of a degraded urban landscape. He suggests that

this sense of crises engenders a discourse of fear around the city and consequent elite attempts at curtailing what he calls a pirate modernity. On the other, pirate modernities of technology and media - ranging from small-scale manufacture and services, to squatter settlements and pirated software, movies, music, hardware - are subaltern urban forms that depend on informal arrangements outside the legal structures of the planned city, and which produce a low-cost, recycled (*jugaado*) while commoditized urban experience for the city's poorer populations, whether this be housing or media entertainment. Historically, the space for such a non-planned pirate city, the book argues, greatly expanded in the time following the Emergency, given 'weaker bourgeois institutions', 'political mobilization by the poor' as well as the poor's greater access to 'urban technological infrastructure' (p.12), appropriated by the large number of migrants who made the city their home in this period . As a main thesis, Sundaram's argument oscillates between these different dynamics – the process by which Delhi emerges as a site of disorientation and disorder in the post-liberalization era, and the proliferation of pirate modernities which even as they have 'created radical conditions of possibility for subaltern populations in the city, brought them to the edge of permanent technological visibility' (p. 13) and hence attempts at control. This, Sundaram argues, is piracy's greatest aporia, reflecting that pirate forms are immanent to, and do not transcend, new capitalist regimes and hegemonic orders; they are disruptive of them, but not outside of them.

[3] In the context of Delhi, to illustrate this, the book is divided into five chapters. The first explores the 1962 Master Plan for Delhi as an example of an urban imagination that embraced most centrally a vision of order and 'rational management' of the city. The chapter is based on extensive archival work and explores the massive planning process undertaken by the Nehruvian administration to imagine a new city. Sundaram highlights the central role of the Ford Foundation in sponsoring this effort, as part of a larger liberal American effort to build front lines against communism by financing Third World modernization. Ford Foundation support and expertise enabled Nehru's attempts to foster the Delhi Master Plan as a version of 'mother art'-the 'utopian' architectural 'signature' (p. 31) of a new sovereign nation dreaming of an Indian modernity. Given the American inputs, fittingly, this planning process was to introduce a prominent 'regionalist' American paradigm to Indian urban design in the form of Delhi, namely an English 'garden city' set in a region - 'a network of decentralized new towns, with green areas and open spaces' (p. 41), with 'cellular neighborhoods, sub-centers and district centers' (p. 50) and most importantly zoning. Such a design produced urban order both by creating counter magnet towns to Delhi

which would absorb future urban growth and sprawl and by allocating separate lands for industry, commerce, living and play in the most appropriate locations, to avoid the worrying chaos that the existing city was experiencing in the aftermath of Partition.

[4] Despite these ambitions, as Sundaram points out, the Master Plan actually never succeeded in the city. Indeed, its importance and inclusion in the book rests on the premise that it has come to be resurrected during the post-liberalization period in Delhi amidst a growing sense of urban disorder, augmented by non-stop media coverage of unbridled populism and unplanned growth. This sense of crises is best documented in the last chapter on 'the Accident', where Sundaram portrays an increasing apprehension in the 1990s as the number of cars and accidents on the city's roads spirals and every day pedestrians appear to leave their homes only to be run over. Accidents, as Sundaram writes, were one example of the new technologized urban dystopia brought forth in the new media environment through endless statistics, and public campaigns; others include traffic, noise and air pollution. In this context, Sundaram argues that the Supreme and High Courts have resurrected the 1962 Master Plan as way of restoring urban order, passing a series of 'landmark' judgments seeking to clean up the city—a new 'civic liberalism', seeking to intervene as a way of reestablishing urban control.

[5] The second chapter of the book focuses on 'pirate' sites that are considered productive of such metropolitan anarchy, largely in the form of the city's bazars, which Sundaram argues are 'important sites for vernacular modernism' (p. 90). In exploring the bazars of Delhi – whether in the Walled city, Palika Bazaar, or Nehru Place, Sundaram points to how these sites were taken over by small commerce and industry, reworking both the Mughul-era and Delhi Development Authority city, into their own design. The third chapter is a specific case study of such pirate appropriation, in the form of small-scale media industries (music and video) that exemplify the proliferation of subaltern technologized forms in the city, producing both an expanding visual landscape of (non-mainstream but commoditized) 'calendar art, film posters, popular advertizing, signage' (p. 124), and extensive productive networks which engender this mediated landscape. Sundaram traces the origins of such small-scale media industries in Delhi to the early 1980s with the introduction of affordable and available 'photo-offset machines', cassettes, video recorders and cable TV, followed a little later by computer-based media expansion-technologies that allow easy replication. In the case of the latter, 'production was concentrated in the Trans-Yamuna area and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana with entrepreneurs importing hardware from East Asia' (p. 120). These networks that have now taken on the shape of cross-cutting Asian networks, with

erstwhile handwritten CD copies giving way to digital printing and high-quality reproductions sourced from Dubai and Pakistan. He shows further, that not only were mainstream media productions pirated, but these neighborhood-based technologies, occupying a series of small-scale workshops and studios, encouraged entirely new audio and video cultures in Delhi - spawning regional and local music producers, singers, and bands popular with the city's diverse migrants. It is in through such a process that you can get a new form of 'Islamic devotional music with a liberal use of remixed tunes' (p. 125), catering to a particular niche city population.

[6] Like the civic chaos of the city – noise, pollution, traffic – that the Courts sought to manage, these pirate cultures are also subject to enforcement of copyright. The latter half of the chapter traces such efforts and the layers of enforcement - legal firms, field detective agencies, local and special police, and the courts that make up the enforcing ensemble for ensuring a legal property regime. However, like the Master Plan, such efforts have yielded modest success in a 'scrambled social landscape' (p. 132) marked by quickly 'mutating networks and public indifference' (p. 132), and a blurry line between legal and illegal businesses as home-based production gave way to the more sophisticated production centers. In conclusion, Sundaram argues that newly introduced regimes brought in to deal with Delhi's 'breakdown' problems, favor technocratic systems of control trying once again to elicit urban rationality. An example of this is the spread of 'informational control technologies (computerized land records, GIS city maps, biometric IDs)' (p. 13), as governments attempt to re-introduce systems of control over proliferating people and machines, trying to fix and capture the 'viral' form that is a hallmark of piracy and pirate modernities, spreading at near lightning speed through city networks, in various forms - originals, copies, remixes - remastered and revised. It remains unclear, however, what such technocratic informational regulation exactly comes to mean for the average road accident victim, the details of whose horrific death circulate endlessly in the newspapers, the man reduced to a mediated image, another statistic in a city saturated with its own breakdown story and with the cars that cause them. This last insistence and conclusion of the uncertainty of the contemporary city for the everyman in the vastly mediated, sensory city is best justified by the style of Sundaram's writing. Eschewing a representative or historical approach, he chooses instead to open up chapters as sites, and archives of the city – the Master Plan, the Bazar, Media production, the Accident - juxtaposing wide ranging materials – ethnographic, mediated, statistical, theoretical, historical - multiple strands of meticulous detail converging to disorient the reader, and make visible the endless urban proliferation that is the center of his philosophical

narrative. The sense of both disorientation, and the mobility of the pirate form, is not only theorized, but greatly enlivened by the book's actual writing.

[7] The book introduces performative styles of writing that are useful for opening up urban spaces (locally, nationally, globally), and for revealing Indian cities as spaces of diverse histories and everyday archives outside of the development paradigm that continues to dominate Indian urban studies, including in its globalized form. In particular, it does this through the lens of media and technology as found in everyday life, a perspective little explored in thinking about Indian contemporary urbanism, despite their rapid proliferation, and the changing kinetics of the city and of everyday life within it.

[8] Theoretically and substantively, the narrative rarely moves out of the zone of the technological, making it possible to suggest that Sundaram's history of Delhi's transformation is dominated by a sense of sensory disorientation and mediated proliferation at the expense of other structural, political and social forces. It can be asked for example, using Sundaram's own theoretical toolkit of the mediated city, whether the newly technological metropolis is only a site for disorienting despair, and what comes of Benjaminian desire and dreamworlds, self-fashioning and becoming? This notwithstanding, Sundaram provides a theoretical framework and a method to read the sensory, media city – the ramifications of which – both present and future, will have to be taken seriously.