

Day 3: 2 December 2006

Panel 1: Censorship and Memory

Moderator: Nivedita Menon
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Conversing the Cut: A Chronicle of Censorship in Egyptian Cinema

Babak Afrassiabi
Artist/Media Practitioner, Teheran/Rotterdam

Thus, paradoxically, through the cut and its manipulations, absence becomes a marker of presence; we could say that removal becomes a marker of insertion; negation becomes a marker of affirmation; and denial becomes a marker of acknowledgement.

Babak Afrassiabi described the process of creating his video work *Conversing the Cut* (for details of installation, see Art/Media Works section of this report). This documentation was developed in Cairo over two months in 2004 and finalised in 2005. It consists of a series of interviews with various people associated with the terrain of film censorship in Egypt. Through the interviews, the work tries to address the “cut”, the censoring act/action “as an instance of both sociopolitical suppression and recognition”.

Using video footage from the interviews, Afrassiabi remarked that the research focused on the effects of the “cut” on film, in terms of both its narrative and its reception. The interviews “inevitably” shift between perspectives that see censorship as a “cinematic” as well as a “sociopolitical, cultural and religious” trait. “On the one hand, the dialogue is concerned with specific censored scenes from a film – from the points of view of the director, the critic and the censor, often contradicting one another; and at other times it focuses on the layered sociopolitical and cultural drives for censorship, which are equally incongruous.”

“During my research in Cairo, I came to realise that the initial motivations for censoring films happen to be quite unpredictable and layered,” Afrassiabi commented. “These motivations simply do not follow a predefined track. There are some written rules, but there are many unwritten ones. And this very ambiguity partly defines the multifaceted nature of the ‘cut’. The censor is not the only one who decides what should be cut and what should be retained... Moreover, the actual censoring of films does not happen only in the screening rooms/editing studios of the censorship

department. There have been cases where scenes were cut out of films even after the films had been approved by the censors. Objections from the press, or certain communities, to ‘inappropriate’ scenes in a film during its public screenings, have obliged the censors to withdraw the film or recall it for modifications.”

There are of course the other, more ‘usual’ modes of censorship – from self-censorship (imposed or voluntary, deliberate or unconscious), to censorship enforced by producers in the interest of maintaining a good relationship with cinema owners, to what is finally asserted by the censorship department, that applies the ‘cut’ at different stages – from scripting to shooting to editing, and even thereafter...

“In short, the ‘cut’ may be a device for discharging different motivations. It may even become a means for *subverting* censorship.”

Afrassiabi explained that when the Egyptian censors decide on deletions in a film’s visual or audio track, they offer the choice of either re-editing it in their own editing room, or letting the filmmaker do the work. Some directors prefer to do the re-edit themselves, in order to keep the film from suffering a bad cut. Others choose to let the censors apply the cut, or leave it disturbingly visible or audible. “Interviewing Ali Abu Shadi, a former censor, I was stunned when he said it is better for directors to apply the cut themselves, since in the long run the audience may not even remember that the film has been censored, but they will definitely remember the cut as a ‘bad’ editing cut...”

“Foregrounding the ‘cut’ through retaining it as an overt presence is a means of subverting censorship – a very formal example of displacing the cut, transforming it into a means for social recognition. “It is by way of displacement, this uncensored mark of censorship, that the cut becomes an encounter with and thus a recognition of a social force, however distorted and altered that encounter and recognition may be.”

Afrassiabi asserted that in Egypt, as in many other places, censorship is not simply a “linear” manifestation of the power of the state over the author, but rather a “layered complexity” of sociopolitical forces and motivations superimposed upon and modifying one another. “The cut may also become, for some, a point of identification, a point at which the suppression of the ‘inappropriate’ scene becomes a moment of acknowledgement for a community’s ethics.”

Thus, paradoxically, through the cut and its manipulations, absence becomes a marker of presence; removal becomes a marker of insertion; negation becomes a marker of affirmation; denial becomes a marker of acknowledgement.

“It is first the filmic body that is affected by censorship. It is true that the cut introduced onto the film has a purpose beyond the film itself. While watching the film, the experience of the cut, of the withheld sequence or frames, immediately forces us beyond the film’s narrative,” the speaker declared. “Yet I believe that this disruption is part of our cinematic experience as a whole... the censorship cut is detected only if the loss of sequence or break in the narrative or montage is experienced during its reception. By this detection, something is passed on to us as viewers. This displacement seems to have transferred the absence back into our cinematic experience in the form of a ‘representational cut.’”

Afrassiabi offered the French film critic Christian Metz’s account of censorship, which claims “the existence of censorship is suspected not only because something is blocked and deflected by it, but also because that something is not blocked and deflected completely: if it were, censorship would be undetectable by virtue of the very perfection of its result...”

The speaker reiterated that only when it is detected can we identify, analyse and critique censorship. “As such, the cut is not only a sign of erasure (that something didn’t pass the censorship barrier), but also its displacement into a positive charge of recognition (that something *did* pass the barrier). One clear example of this is in my interviews with the directors Dawood Abd El Sayad and Yussri Nasrallah: both had decided in specific instances to comply with the censors’ demand that they erase parts of the soundtracks of their films; but their method was to directly scratch over the surface of the track at the specific points. The result was a sudden noise, a conscious distortion at the moment where the ‘removal’ of the sound had been mandated.

“It is within this superimposition of cuts and displacements on various social and political levels that censorship becomes an instrument of suppression for some, and of subjectivisation and recognition for others,” Afrassiabi concluded. “The interesting and positive dimension is that state censorship can take on a mediatory role, facilitating a dialogue between the filmmaker and the public, where the cut becomes, as it were, a device for political negotiation.”

The ‘Silence’ of the Arabs

Mansour Jacoubi
Activist/Information Practitioner, Beirut

“... I wish, in fact demand, that we write on the cover of each Arab book and the first page of each Arab newspaper and on each Arab pen and mouth the following recitation or glorification: ‘Oh moronic lies, oh shameless hypocrisy, oh ignorant stupidity, oh stupid ignorance, oh lowness, oh intellectual, psychological, moral, artistic and expressive shame: all the glory and sovereignty to you.’”

Mansour Jacoubi began his presentation, which was accompanied by slides, by acknowledging that it was “difficult” and “daunting” to research modes of censorship in the various public domains within the Arab world. “One would have to study psychology, study fear that is deeply ingrained, as well as ‘deep state’ logic; I feel incapable of doing so...”

Throughout the last century, stringent state control over media was to be a prevalent feature of Arab regimes, Jacoubi explained. “Military dictatorships, states of exception and absolute monarchies not only decided what was acceptable speech and what wasn’t; they produced and moulded public discourse. Yet state censorship was not the primary form of censorship, rather, the primary form was its ghostly and immeasurable after-effect, self-censorship. Writers, poets, filmmakers and musicians who went against the current not only feared government repression, but also worried about public reaction and estrangement.”

Official censorship revolved around three themes: content that was sexually explicit; content that was critical of the state; and content that was critical of religion, specifically Islam. One of the most notorious examples of state censorship of scholarly work in the 20th-century Arab world was of Taha Hussein’s controversial study, *Fi’l Shi’r al Jahili (On Pre-Islamic Poetry)*, published in 1926. This work critiqued Jahili poetics and raised questions about the historical truth of some sections in the Quran. The book created a storm in Al-Azhar (the supreme Muslim authority in Egypt and for much of the Sunni Islamic world). Legal charges were brought against the author, who then under duress published a “toned-down version” titled *Fi al-Adab al-Jahili (On Pre-Islamic Literature)* in 1927.

“These state-sponsored intimidations, suppressions and occasional killings continue,” Jacoubi added, citing the oppression endured by

the Egyptian feminist novelist Nawal al Saadawi and the Syrian writer Hyder Hyder. “The Egyptian minister of culture in a recent statement said the *hijab* was backward; this generated loud protest, and there was a sting operation at his house. In all these cases, the state is not interested in what the accused are saying, or in prosecuting them as such – the state is responding to well-organised pressure by Islamist groups.”

“What is the opposite of a silent intellectual?” Jacoubi asked. “A screaming intellectual, someone who would write the most unacceptable things?”

According to the speaker, the Arab intellectual is always contextualised in a situation of fear and persecution; hence the prevalent general ethos of self-censorship, amid censorship, in public life. “There is a saying that in any café in the world you can read your newspaper alone, but in an Arab city you read it with twenty other people...”

Jacoubi explained that in the contemporary Arab world the internet had become a means to circumvent censorship, but the deep fear of the state in the offline world was reflected in how the net was being used. “People are paranoid no matter how much assurance is given... they feel they are being watched, or seen as would-be suspects, when they are posting.” This partially explained the timidity of the currently exploding blogging community.

The speaker reiterated that without exception, all Arab countries practice some form of internet censorship and restriction. The Internet Service Unit at the King Abdul Aziz Centre for Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia was the main centre to first introduce the internet in the late 1990s. It then “conveniently” became responsible for monitoring and blocking other sites – and it provides links that explain how internet sites work. Moreover, it has added a button that invites users to send in names of “objectionable” sites from an international list; so it is a form of “collaborative censorship”.

It also gives the main criteria for blocking sites, censoring any content that goes against Islam and any content that goes against the security of the state.

Jacoubi explained that all blogs, whether in English or in Arabic, were under government surveillance in the deep state mode; and that there was an Official Community of Saudi Arabian Bloggers (OCSAB), whose aim was to set up a “good” digital community. According to the group’s

guidelines:

- > the blog cannot treat Islam improperly in any way and shape (this therefore rules out blogs aligned to secularism and liberalism)
- > the blog must be run by a Saudi national
- > the language of the blog must be Arabic (non-Arabic blogs are included if they respect Islam and present a “positive image” of Saudi Arabia)
- > the blog has to have a certain direction and focus – Islamic, scientific, technical, medical, social, etc. (“We apologise for not accepting purely personal blogs”, states the OCSAB)

Despite these monitoring protocols, bloggers and other net users maintain dissident websites, share knowledge and create networks. “The offline and pre-net worlds function on the same principle,” Jacoubi asserted.

According to the speaker, the expression “silence and fear” in relation to state surveillance was very frequently referenced when *Republic of Fear* by Iraqi-American academic Kanan Makiya was published in 1989. The book strongly criticised Arabs for their silence about atrocities committed by the Baathist regime in Iraq; it also catalysed an exchange between Makiya and the scholar Edward Said in *Al-Hayat*, a leading pan-Arab newspaper. The dialogue developed into a personal argument, with Said alleging that Makiya himself had been “silent” till he wrote the book.

“Makiya is not referring as much to the silence of Arab intellectuals as he is to the clamour of Arab intellectuals who were very excited about the Baathist regime,” Jacoubi stated. “In other words, the silence is not the absence of speech as much as it is a muting of other crucial things by loud rhetoric about various subjects.”

Repression is a central characteristic in the “demise” of the Arabs, as well as in the failure of liberal/secular/socialist projects and in the rise of religious intolerance. The speaker cited Samir Kassir, a leftist Lebanese journalist who wrote in his book *On the Arab Malaise* (Verso, 2006):

It is not pleasant being Arab these days. Feelings of persecution for some; self-hatred for others; a deep disquiet pervades the Arab world. The picture is bleak from any angle, but even more so when compared with other parts of the world. ‘Arab’ itself is so impoverished a word that it is reduced in places to a mere ethnic label with overtones of censure, or, at best, a culture that denies

everything modernity stands for.

Kassir was killed in 2005 by a car bomb that was amongst a series of bombings that killed or attempted to kill certain public figures in Beirut over the last few years, Jacoubi explained. "With the 2006 Israeli bombing of Beirut, and the intensified sectarian tension, the city regained its double personality: simultaneously a place of exile and refuge, as well as a place of violence and war...

"For many, Beirut had always been the Arab 'exception'. In the 1960s and '70s, it became a safe haven for many dissident and exiled Arab intellectuals, and at the same time became the object of their mourning... During the 2006 bombardment of Beirut, I was reminded of the poem *A Song for Karbala-e-Beirut*, written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz on the eve of the 1982 Israeli invasion; this translation is by Subah Dayal:

*Beirut, an adornment of the universe's gathering.
Beirut, a substitute for heaven's gardens.
The mirrors of children's glittering eyes
are crushed into pieces.
Now, their fiery stars illuminate
the nights of the city,
And the land of Lebanon dazzles.
Beirut, an adornment of the universe's gathering.
Those faces become more luminous
by the elegance of smeared blood.
Now, their colourful reflections light
the city's streets.*

"But the resignation of the intellectual and the pronouncement of the city's death was best articulated more recently, in a controversial 2003 public lecture by the Syrian-born poet Adonis, one of the best known literary figures in the Arab world," Jacoubi asserted. "Adonis lived in Beirut from the late 1950s onwards, until he was compelled by the intensifying civil war to leave in the mid-1980s; he chose to settle in Paris. In his lecture, titled "Beirut Today: A veritable City or a Mere Historical Name?" Adonis delivered a scathing critique of the city – Beirut as 'a shelter, not a homeland... a city without civility, a place of commerce, not civilisation. A meeting place of politics, but without politics.' He lamented the demise of its intellectual life, its confused identity, its sectarianism, its architecture of 'endless replication'; he even declared its death and the death of its inhabitants."

Jacoubi then narrated the detailed history,

'silencing' and 'screaming' of another significant literary figure and friend of Adonis, the intellectual Abdullah Al-Kosaimi "who also took refuge in Beirut and was later to lament its demise". Al Kosaimi left his native country of Saudi Arabia and lived in various countries (including India where he stayed at an Islamic school in Delhi in the 1920s); he took refuge in Beirut in the late 1950s. In 1967, the Lebanese government was pressured to deport Al-Kosaimi. In response, Onsi Al-Hajj, then editor of *Annhar*, the largest Lebanese newspaper, wrote an editorial in defence of Al-Kosaimi in the 16 April issue:

We protest Abdullah Al-Kosaimi's deportation. We consider his deportation an exile, and a stab to the dignity of every writer in Lebanon. Al-Kosaimi didn't do a thing. His thoughts were put in a book, and books are responded to with books. Dealing with a writer through police-like measures is a cowardly act. Abdullah Al-Kosaimi had the courage to state in his books his opinion about Arab institutions, conditions and inheritance... He told me, 'I told your officials that I prefer being killed in Lebanon to being killed outside of it. I pleaded with them to let me stay. I told them, "Lebanon is the only and last coast in this desert," but they did not hear me... We are living now in the country of fear... we are now in jail. We were in it before, but we thought we had begun to forget it!'

Al-Kosaimi loved Beirut, and considered it an ideal other Arab cities should emulate. The Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, eight years after his exile. Devastated, he wrote to his Lebanese publisher and close friend Kadri Kalaaji with whom he sustained a voluminous correspondence for thirty years; their exchange has since been compiled (*Explosive Letters*, ed. Jihad Kalaaji, Arab Diffusion Press, 2000):

...Oh Lebanon, I want to be kicked back to you as I was kicked out twenty years ago, so that I can find you the way I found you and so that I lose myself, and find, and confront, and be fascinated, and love, and know... and then to leave you so that I come back to you, and come back, and come back to you... so that I find, and read, and explain my self, and announce it to you in all my voice and capacity... and also to then be kicked out from you in the manner in which I was kicked out... and then to return to you and return, so that I can find, and read, and explain myself and announce it to you with all my love, desire, voice and capacity... and is there an Arab country where a person can find or read

or explain or talk to himself other than you, Lebanon?

“Al-Kosaimi was an exceptional intellectual – in his writing style, which was long, repetitive, ironic and often trivial; in his life-choices; and in his *will* to say all that was forbidden to be said about the Arabs, their identity, history and religion,” Jacoubi declared. “The 1920s were his ideological starting point, when he joined Egypt’s Al-Azhar university, the seminal religious educational institute for the entire Islamic world. For the next twenty years he engaged in religious debates and published several books, amongst them *The Wahhabi Revolution*, a defence of the newly established Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the orthodox religious doctrine it followed...

“However, by the 1940s Al-Kosaimi entered what was described as a ‘period of doubt’, that ended in a stage of profound unbelief,” Jacoubi added. “He published his famous book *These Are the Fetters*, which he dedicated to King Abdulaziz Al-Saud, then supreme ruler of the Saudi kingdom. This was Al-Kosaimi’s first public expression of revolt against orthodox Islam, and was considered by leading religious scholars in Egypt to be a foundational reformist work, even while it was attacked furiously by the Saudi religious establishment.”

Jacoubi explained that Al-Kosaimi later moved from Cairo to the quieter environs of the city of Helwan, where he met, befriended and influenced many Yemeni students on scholarship; some of these were later to be central figures in the 1962 revolution in Yemen. Concerned about the writer’s influence on Yemeni students, Imam Ahmad, the ruler of Yemen, pressured the Egyptian government to expel Al-Kosaimi from the country. Consequently, Al-Kosaimi was imprisoned by the Nasserite government in Egypt and then deported to Lebanon.

“When the plane carrying Al-Kosaimi landed in Beirut, he did not even know which country he was in,” Jacoubi remarked. “He knew no one in Beirut, save one Saudi acquaintance working for the Saudi embassy. Through him, the writer was introduced to a circle of Beirut intellectuals; of these, the publisher Kadri Kalaaji was to become a lifelong friend, mentor and partner...” His letters to Kadri, an intense outpouring over three decades, are marked by the same emotional and repetitive style that was characteristic of his writings:

To a friend, a lover, the glory of my heart and thought, consciousness and history... I want

to fall and watch and listen and know and find and touch and seek comfort and confront and dialogue... and be drowned, drowned in the heart and thoughts and love and vision and listening and energy and looks and hopes, my first, first human. I want, I want, I want... I am burning, burning...

According to Jacoubi, Al-Kosaimi stood out among Beirut intellectuals, not only because he was “a man from the desert” (i.e., Saudi Arabia), or because he was a Wahhabi sheikh turned ardent atheist and “self-hating Arab”. Al-Kosaimi did not ride the two ideological waves of Marxism and Arab nationalism that preoccupied many Arab intellectuals of that period. He became fervently anti-Communist, anti-Islamic, “and in his descent into despair, anti-Arab”. In the introduction of his “last, most known and most tempered” book, *Arabs are a Voiced Phenomenon*, published in Paris in 1977 while Beirut was embroiled in civil conflict, he wrote:

In all of Arab history, and in all of the Arab nation, one never heard and will never hear from any pulpit – with all the courage, strength, freedom and feelings of security and pride – except for the voice of ignorance, hypocrisy, idiocy and impudence. That is why I wish, in fact demand, that we write on the cover of each Arab book and the first page of each Arab newspaper and on each Arab pen and mouth the following recitation or glorification: “Oh moronic lies, oh shameless hypocrisy, oh ignorant stupidity, oh stupid ignorance, oh lowness, oh intellectual, psychological, moral, artistic and expressive shame: all the glory and sovereignty to you.”

“Al-Kosaimi’s despair, especially in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and following the eruption of civil war in Lebanon, was one filled with immense agony – and a hatred so jarring, it overshadows any humanist intention,” Jacoubi reiterated. “Despite the assassination attempts, deportation, and the banning of his books in almost all Arab countries, he continued to write – in fact, write almost as if he was screaming. Al-Kosaimi wrote in a language and for a people he considered to be nothing more than a sound, i.e., subhuman creatures incapable of speech. Their sounds were even worse than the benign ‘hissing of bees’, because they (the Arabs) in their blabbering voices produce sounds that ‘kill or exile or silence everyone who can speak’...

“Al-Kosaimi was particularly disturbed by the tenor and thrust of language that described bygone civilisational glories, and the parallel rhetoric that

promised imminent Arab victory over Israel,” the speaker added. “Arab ‘silence’, the antipode of Arab ‘speech’, became a common household phrase referring almost exclusively to the inaction of Arabs and their regimes with regard to the atrocities committed in the region by Israel. And by extension, perpetual silence would become the predecessor of perpetual killing, and not just its consequence.

“Accordingly, when eighteen Palestinians were recently massacred in Nein Hanoun, Palestinian leaders blamed ‘Arab silence’ and not the Israeli perpetrators. The expression ‘Arabs are a voiced phenomenon’, famously coined by Al-Kosaimi, becomes by analogy a widely used expression referring to Arabs’ noisy self-incapacity – i.e., lots of talk but no action.”

Al-Kosaimi’s “self-flagellation” and piercing, inexorable scream was so disturbing that many Arab intellectuals, including secular ones, could not bear his articulation and actually wished he had not spoken, Jacoubi concluded. “At times his text shrieks as if being written over a bench in a slaughterhouse, and directed into the ears of a people he believed had descended into a state of muteness and hopelessness resembling the silence of the lambs. And in response to the accusation of being too harsh, Al-Kosaimi wrote of himself, ‘He is saddened and pained to the point he appears violent... his criticism is nothing but a lament of this world, and a lament of himself; in fact, his criticism is nothing but a self-rupture...’”

Author’s Note

For the text of Adonis’ lecture “Beirut Today: A Veritable City or a Mere Historical Name?” see Home Works II, www.ashkalalwan.org.

Al-Kosaimi’s book *Arabs Are a Voiced Phenomenon* was published with the help of Ibrahim Al-Hamdi, the leader of the military coup that overthrew the Al-Iryani regime in North Yemen in 1974. Al-Hamdi became President and tried to push for social reforms and closer ties with Marxist-Leninist South Yemen. He was assassinated (allegedly by Saudi-funded agents) in 1977, the year the book was published.

Listening in the Archive, Listening for the Archive: History, Memory and the Archive

Sadan Jha
Sarai-CSDS

The process of constructing an archive simultaneously implies the construction of

memory. The key issue in this regard is whether memories should be organised in the service of the archive, or whether archives should be built in the service of memory.

Sadan Jha clarified that his paper explored the space between the mode he termed ‘critical nostalgia’, and the formal discipline of history. “The word ‘archive’ is used in many ways, and outside the discipline of history, the word and the concept it underpins have their own life and meaning. One convenient way to deal with these varied usages is to reject them as improper. Another way might be to claim that the domain of the archive is not essentially a territory of the discipline of history. But we can posit a third possibility where the archive is both a territory of history and simultaneously is outside it...”

Jha’s account was based on his fieldwork with Partition survivors in refugee camps post-1947. “There is a folk saying in north India – a kind of social warning given to a person in pain. Perhaps it could be understood as the kind of advice a psychologist could offer, albeit with a difference:

*Rahiman nij man ki vyatha, man hi raakho goye
Sun ithalaiyehian log sab baat na linhe koi*

(O Rahim, keep your suffering to yourself
Listeners will only laugh at you, no one will share your pain)

“I am not interested in the moral economy that this proverb represents,” Jha stated. “Nor am I interested in deconstructing it. I am interested in thinking about the ways in which this fragment of folk wisdom renders the act of speaking of and listening to pain a serious interpersonal affair. The social fear of being exposed as vulnerable makes the act of speaking and sharing a difficult one. The stigma of being laughed at makes the process of soliciting listeners even more difficult... In addition, people do not want to have their deep scars negated, risk the erasure of the wounds and memories that are part of their bodies. Vulnerable and fragile, survivors are afraid to open up to any stranger who wants to reduce their lives to an entry in the archive register. They fear destruction, they fear ridicule, they fear the appropriation of their subjectivities. They believe that they will once again be betrayed by those who knew them intimately...”

Jha then offered various examples of what constituted an archive in India. A magisterial residence; a public office; a location; a storeroom; family documents; a database; a record room; an administrative building pertaining to the state as well as to the estates of landlords and

moneylenders; *kachehries* (local courts) documenting *mauza* (revenue) transactions, family documents; in Mithila in north Bihar, the house of a *panjiar* (custodian of genealogical records, oral and written, of Strotiya Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas); the houses of *pandas* (priests) at Hindu pilgrimage centres. "My father always verified the identity of our family *panda* only after checking the names of my grandparents in those registers; the archive was a marker of identity in the *yajman* (patron)-*panda* relationship..."

"Along with the material content of archives, we also have the contemporary digital archive. Traces, sources, clues, repositories, representations, images... The archive emerges crucially as an institution defining our relationship with knowledge of a subject, and not merely determining the nature of the knowledge produced," Jha asserted. "This is particularly crucial in cases pertaining to memory. The body as an archive of memory is an obvious example – but the question is, what happens to memory within the frame of these various archives/archiving practices?"

Jha cited the French historian Pierre Nora, who claims that there are "*lieux de memoire*" (sites of memory) because "*milieux de memoire*" (actual environments of memory) no longer exist; "...with the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history". In this "seizure of memory by history", we then find that "modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image... What we call memory is in fact the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled." Nora further states, "... one of the costs of the historical metamorphosis of memory has been a wholesale preoccupation with the individual psychology of remembering. Indeed, the two phenomena are so intimately linked that one can hardly avoid comparing them, down to their exact chronological coincidence."

The speaker explained that this particular requirement of memory, the personal remembrance, was critical to his experiences as a listener during his field research. "This process of constructing an archive simultaneously implies the construction of memory. For me, the key issue in this regard is whether memories should be organised in the service of the archive, or whether archives should be built in the service of memory."

Jha clarified that while conducting interviews with Partition survivors, he and his co-researchers "were quite convinced" that they were creating an archive. "During my fieldwork I would introduce myself to respondents in the refugee camps in this manner: '...I am collecting actual life stories of those like you who survived the violence of 1947.' The word 'archive' had no resonance with my respondents. 'We are writing a book, we are doing research, we are gathering stories...' This is how we freely described our work to our respondents, in our efforts to convince them of the usefulness of their narrating their experiences to us."

The speaker reiterated that his particular interest in the dynamics of listening emerged out of his involvement as a field researcher with the project 'Reconstructing Lives', initiated by Ashis Nandy of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. Jha's interviews were carried out in Delhi, Ajmer and villages of Jammu during 2001-02. "The 'historical discourse' of this turbulent event, as historian Gyandendra Pandey has pointed out, 'continues to bear the stamp of rumour, aggregating the power not so much of verifiable truth as of a rumoured statistic – extravagant, expandable, unverifiable, but credible.' In the scholarship on Partition violence, little attention has been paid to the act of listening. A shift of emphasis from the speaker to the listener in the course of exploring the speech act helps us to get another perspective on the dynamics of the sharing of the burden of violence, and the way in which the memory of violence occupies the field of the production of knowledge," according to Jha. "This shift then enables us to understand the ways in which violence is transmitted during the course of an interview. We begin to think about what happens to people who encounter violence through the experience of listening."

Jha then cited the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who commented in the context of bearing witness to Holocaust testimonies that by extension, "the listener of trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself".

Following from Laub, we can ask how listening to narratives of mass violence affects the listener, and how the state of victimhood gets transmitted from the situation ("one might even say the body") of the respondent to that of the interviewer.

"As a result of the encounters that I had in the course of research, I have come to believe that making the presence of the interviewer/archive builder more visible helps resist authority

formation within the space of the archive,” Jha remarked. “In the case of my research, the issue of listening became more relevant, as interviewer and respondent generally entered into dialogue in a semi-structured environment, and the fear of ‘half-listening’ loomed large over respondent as well as interviewer... I gradually began to realise that these exercises of structured listening, memories of incomplete interviews and the vivid accounts of the violent past that I was listening to regularly had also begun paying me visits in my dreams. I felt the need for a narrative presentation of these experiences for myself, in order to come to terms, critically and empathetically, with the subjectivities I was encountering (in myself and others). I also felt the need to confront the pathological aspects of the discursive space of the reconstruction of memory that I was facing in my work.”

Jha then read an excerpt from an interview with a Partition survivor named Shanti Devi, conducted in Malka Ganj, Delhi. She began the narrative with the following description:

Jo hum Pakistan mein se nikle the... azadi... pehele chacha [sic., may be achha (well)] aisa hoye ki hamne socha ki kapare utaar kar, sab samaan rakh kar chale jayenge, phir raat ko aa jayenge. Hamaare aadmi the, jeth bhai the, bete the, unko kaat diya. Kaat kar ke... unhone kaha musalmaan nahi bante, musalmaan nahin bante. Unko kaat diya khatam. Jo janaaniyan thi unko le gaye. Jungalon mein le gaye, hamaare ko. Samaan loot paat kar le gaye. Achha, jungalon mein le gaye hamaare ko, koi kithe, koi kithe... Wo achha tha. Hum chhah [6] saat [7] janaaniyan thi. Ek ladka achha tha uska... Ek ladka tha aur koi rishtedaar tha, biyaah karba diya. Aur jo koi ganda kaam karta tha, ganda kaam... ek ladka tha uska. Uske ghar musalmaan daka marne aata tha. Usne kaha main mar jaaunga tumhare ko nahin marna dungaa. Usne hamaare ko apne ghar mein bithaya... ghar mein... [not audible] ghar mein... [not audible]...ghar mein sabko jagah di. Gaay ka gosht khilate the. Humne kahaa kabhi khaya nahin, mar jayenge...

Usne kaha mata ji jo tumhaara ji kare wohi karo.

Usko maarne ke liye musalmaan aa jaate the, daku aa jate the, badmaas aa jaate the...

(When we left Pakistan... Independence... First, well it so happened that we thought that we would take down the clothes drying on the line, put everything inside the house and then leave, and return at night. My man [husband] was there, his elder brother was there, sons were there. They were butchered. They had refused to be converted as Muslims. They had refused... They were butchered, finished [she uttered this last word with great intensity]. All the women who were there were taken away [abducted?]. We were taken into the jungles. They looted and took away our things. Well, we were taken into the jungles, some of us here, some of us there... He was good. We were six or seven women. He had a beautiful [achha, ‘nice’ is used, rather than the usual *sundar*, for ‘beautiful’] son and other relatives to whom he got the women married. And all those who used to do filthy things, filthy things... he had a son. Muslims used to come to his house for purposes of dacoity. He said, I will die but I will not let you die. He sheltered me

in his house... [not audible] in his house...[not audible]... in his house he provided space to everyone. He used to serve beef. I said I have never eaten beef, it will kill me...

He said, mother, you eat whatever you like...

Muslims used to come to his house seeking to kill him, dacoits used to come, hooligans used to come...)

Jha explained that he had asked the respondent, “Was he a *musalmaan* (Muslim)?” She replied:

Haan, dekho sab Hindu aaye, musalmaan aaye, sab ek hain, barabar nahin? [not audible]. Ab tum ho, kisi ke maathe pe likha nahin hota hai...

(Look, Hindus came, Muslims came, all are the same, equal, is it not so...? [not audible]. Take your own case, it is not written on anyone’s forehead...)

Achha chacha [?] wo achha bichaar ka tha...

(Well, he was a person of refined thinking...)

After this start to her narrative, Shanti Devi went on to describe how on her appeal, her saviour contacted her only surviving relative living in the town (*bua ka ladka/cousin*), and how her protector, after double-checking the identity of this relative, escorted her and the cousin up to a safe distance and handed them over. Jha commented that he had been struck by the absence of any typical markers of space and time in the account of the abduction, but that the respondent told him about the journey to India in graphic detail. “She described the paths and ditches in all four directions filled with blood and corpses, and having to quench her thirst with water mixed with blood (*gaddhon ka paani piya, naali ka paani piya, chaaron taraf khoon tha... gaddhon mein khoon ka paani tha...murde bhi pade the*). She also witnessed a man axed to death in front of her... She said ‘he’ [her abductor/protector] took a gun and escorted us in the night, ‘ensuring that we crossed the border’ (*usne hamaare ko paar karbaya*). Was she referring to the newly-carved national border between India and Pakistan, or to the line drawn within her own mind between the zone of violence/violation and the return to safety?”

Jha remarked that the interview was only 90 minutes long; the respondent talked almost without pause, and answered questions in a very spontaneous manner. The only significant pause came after she answered the question, “*Aapke jeevan mein sabse dukh-bhare pal kya rahe hain* (What have been the most painful/sorrowful moments of your life)?” The question preceding this had asked what she considered the happiest moments of her life: her answer was, “*Hamen to gham hi gham mila hai* (I have encountered nothing other than sorrow).” To the question about

the most painful moments, she replied, "*Sabhi gham hi mila hai* (I have only experienced sorrow)." Then she re-narrated the killing of her husband and entire family; it was followed by an extended, excruciating silence. "She was completely absorbed in her inner self, the self of victimhood, in the whirlwind of the past. She forgot the moment and the occasion of the interview. This silence lasted almost a minute, after which she regained a grip on the present, and our dialogue."

Jha pointed out that during the course of the interview the respondent repeatedly described this particular killing, and the sequence of actions and the phraseology/syntax of the description remained more or less the same on each occasion. "The respondent was lamenting, in the psychoanalytical sense – repeated mental occurrences of the moment of crisis became ritualised in this formal manner. Despite her flat tone and lack of emotional affect, she was in a state of deep mourning. The experience of witnessing her lamentation was so intense for me that I could barely stay focused. As she spoke, the structure I had prepared for the interview crumbled. I was stunned at the power of her own imagination of her victimhood..."

"For purposes of quantitative analysis, the data generated by my fieldwork was a total failure," Jha acknowledged. "The categories are not properly filled in the interview form, and responses to most questions are fragmented, elusive, brief, very general. The respondent witnessed horrific violence, was a widow for a short time, and the second marriage was almost an imposition. Yet in her specific narrative of victimhood, the traumatic 'events' are not that many – even as they are spread all over in the terrain of the interview. The violence spills not just from these particular few events – it transcends events. But the event that brackets her narrative and tries to freeze it within the wider flow of generalised violence is the one with which she opens her story – the account of how her first husband and her entire family were butchered."

Jha described how he confronted his own responses as a listener. "She broke down. I saw tears descending into her eyes and coming out of them. I realised that tears were descending into my own eyes. They pushed me towards self-consciousness – I became aware of my own position as the interviewer. Despite my powerful conviction that I wanted to move with the flow of the narrative and be guided by the impulse of emotion, I also longed for the authority to dominate the field, and slowly began asserting it.

And since the day of that interview, I have found myself engaged in a series of primary methodological research questions. Why did I aspire to control the field in that moment of crisis? Was that really a moment of crisis? Is it that in the act of self-questioning I have begun to glorify that moment, to the harm of the overall textual construction of the interview? Am I fixing the entire interview within the frame of merely one difficult moment, and denying the whole its larger complexity and mobility?"

Jha added that in the course of such listening, he initially developed a "peculiar numbness" towards the narratives of violence and displacement that he was absorbing. In contrast to the expectations that had been generated by his academic training in the field of modern Indian history, and by theoretical readings about Partition, during his fieldwork he found that he was not encountering case histories embedded in acts of violence that could be distinguished because of their great magnitude.

"The direct agents of physical violence were not always clearly identifiable. But the terrain was certainly very rich, and the bodies of the narratives themselves were tortured enough to keep me occupied. I conditioned myself to be hyper-conscious while listening to the accounts; I was resisting my numbness. Very soon this took its toll," Jha remarked. "I developed persistent symptoms of cough and allergy; these would not go away, and I realised that coughing came whenever memories of violence and pain made their way into the course of interviews. I would have an uncontrollable coughing fit each time a respondent began narrating his/her trauma. With this came a strange restlessness. Incomplete interviews, rejections and denials of requests to meet with potential interviewees would bring nightmares and insomnia in their wake..."

"I realised during my fieldwork that there was a storm of feelings within me – I would experience strong outbursts of emotion, directed at myself as well as against my respondents. I also came to believe that my participation in the dialogue I was having was subjecting my respondents to violence in a number of invisible ways in each encounter; I know they could not notice this overtly, yet it was a fact. Also, whenever I was refused an interview or had to abandon it midway, and especially during those long hours when my respondents wanted to tell me about what I came to think as the 'boring and unwanted' details of their lives, this violence would spring up from the dark corners of my training in the social sciences..."

"I now realise that this violence within me became even more critical whenever I failed to understand the nature of my own reactions – a failure which was frequent. Somewhere, my body was registering the violence but was unable to understand and articulate it. I began to be fascinated by abstract questions. I started believing that I was doing great harm to my own body and my own self. In the course of processing the information contained in narratives of violence, I somehow developed a mindset in which I was both a victim as well as a perpetrator."

Jha concluded by acknowledging that he did not remember his respondent's face any more. "Those who know me say I have a short memory. However, it has been a long time since I saw her. In fact, for me there has been no reason to meet her again. That was the first and only meeting, and it was complete in every respect. I have not forgotten my emotional image of her, nor has the intensity of my impressions reduced even a fraction. The meeting remains a perfect one in my memory. The romance of such a powerful encounter, the warmth, the pain – nothing has betrayed me. And that is why I have never thought of meeting her again. I do not remember the exact moment of our parting. Perhaps my memory has not registered my departing gestures. However, I can graphically build the entire sequence of events preceding our dialogue. The amnesia about the end of the meeting follows a different logic, lends itself to other interpretations."

A version of this presentation was published in *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence* (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2006, Delhi), pp. 467-71.

For Reader 06 online, see
http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader_06.html

Nivedita Menon initiated the discussion following the presentations with the comment that while Afrassiabi had counter-posed censorship/the "cut" to visibility, and Jacobi had counterposed self-censorship/"silence" to "screaming", Jha had posited that *all* forms of self and all fashioning of the self are produced through self-censorship, i.e., the rejection and suppression of some elements and the highlighting of others. Memory was thus the "quintessential" mode of self-censorship; and in order to understand the latter, it was necessary to take into account the ways in which censorship and self-censorship are productive, rather than merely seeing them as repressive.

Ravikant asked Afrassiabi if it was possible that there is a "larger world" of legitimacy/illegitimacy within which he studied the effects of the "cut"; freedom in one domain, for instance satellite television, may then become an argument for freedom in another. How did other media worlds influence the world of film censorship? Ravikant then remarked that Jha appeared to be "practicing" critical nostalgia through "rewriting" it. In the context of Partition statistics, he remarked that Jha was attempting to show "the other side of numbers"; scholars such as Gyan Prakash had also made an effort to point out "inaccuracies" in the projected numbers of victims. "There is a larger story in which statistics and numbers become exercises in rhetorical wars between communities, and between secularists and communalists, and with the state. Figures have to be used in a way that re-humanises the victims..."

Ravi Sundaram asked Jacobi if he felt there was a sense of "lament" at the core of his argument about the silence of the Arab intelligentsia, "with Beirut as the publishing hub that refracts this lament and the historical tragedy manifested through wars, nationalism, Zionism, etc. Is there a way in which the current constellation actually extricates us from that space, or is it a rehearsal and a revisiting of that space in different forms, via blogs?" Sundaram identified two strands in Jha's presentation: the personal archive of the self/family, and the formal archive. Was the former organised differently, and what was its connection with the latter? "In the history of 20th-century trauma, and in the history of philosophy, the revisiting of the event and the artefact recalls trauma: it is a moment you inhabit, either affectively or through representation. Are you setting up the archive through the affective, via your field experience?"

Jeebesh Bagchi invoked the couplet Jha had quoted, which articulated a fear of ridicule. "We should not disregard this, for to be laughed at is a condition of possibility that may enable the production of an image of the world." Bagchi described an incident narrated by Primo Levi in his memoir of Auschwitz. Levi was standing in a huge line of very thirsty camp inmates, and the only water available was filthy. The prisoners approached it and then drew back, while the guards laughed. "Levi reflects on the laughter of the guards, and produces a fascinating set of propositions on what it is to be human, and the terms within which the transformations take place." Similarly, the couplet is not a "caution": it could also be an "alternative to a fixed notion of things..."

"Your act is based on listening and its therapeutic relationship to the research project – you take the culture of listening based on psychoanalysis into a space which has its own culture of listening. Somewhere in your staging of this, it appears as if this culture of listening is incapable, in its own way, of accommodating and negotiating its own traumatic/traumatised content; and the encounter of the two cultures of listening is what produces something..."

"The encounter needs more critical attention. It definitely disturbs the hierarchical field within which listening is produced in any culture..."

"Censorship is about the amplitudes of audibility – about listening."

Bagchi then asked Afrassiabi to clarify the relationship of the "cut" to the body. He pointed out that in the 'morning shows' in Delhi cinema halls, of which he had seen many, were B-grade European films "that are very generously not cut", and that display "a lot of alien bodies"; the 'morning shows' also sometimes screened brilliant art films such as *The Beekeeper*, *The Lacemaker*, etc. "The cut is intended to titillate, to extend your entry into the film, rather than function as a command for the withdrawal of imagination." In Afrassiabi's understanding, did the relationship between the cut and the body itself change, depending on where the film originated – in the Middle East or in Europe?

Ravi Vasudevan asserted that it was very interesting how the notion of censorship in Afrassiabi's work was "placed as a network" rather than centred in the one single space, that of formal censorship protocols. "Other spaces, including other media worlds, are calibrated in a different fashion – for instance, the reception of uncensored material via satellite television. Cinema, being one node, acquires a kind of intensity when it comes to regulatory practice." What is the "publicness" of the institution of cinema, that lends it a certain weight? And what did the cut facilitate in terms of reception? Vasudevan then pointed to the difference between identification and recognition. The former enables a point of contractual engagement – there is an acceptance on the part of the receiver and audience as binding, as acceptable, as building a consensus. The latter, however, is more open – it acknowledges the space of the cut, foregrounds it as something *to be* recognised. "That creates a different nexus, one of interrogation as to exactly what the contract is about, its terms."

Vasudevan's question for Jha concerned his listing of various kinds of archival forms, prior to

his "coming to rest" in the specific form of memory. "The material trace was one kind of register, which was part of existing archival convention but which also obviously exceeds it in different ways. How can these material traces in the archive that you refer to be animated into some kind of sensual form, where they actually start speaking, when they are no longer just documents – photographs, tickets, letters, ration cards, identity cards, etc.? Is that something which you do outside the archive, or is it part of the archival project, something for the historian's duty to embody in some way?"

Vasudevan then brought up Jacoubi's focus on the "highly prescriptive format" of Saudi blogs, in the "constraining sense" – i.e., they should not be anti-Islamic, and so on. But within this, were there practices "which *seem* to abide in that space, but actually function differently?"

Sophea Lerner pointed out that in the context of listening and speech, we should also keep in mind the wider question of "what it means to remember sound". Vazira Zamindar inquired whether Jha was using nostalgia and romanticism interchangeably. "You refer to nostalgia as romantic, whereas nostalgia has a particular genealogy and is tied to knowledge produced about homesickness. It is a particularly modern form of knowledge." Would that alter how Jha conceptualised nostalgia? What kinds of productive ideas were embedded here? Zamindar commented on Jha's postulation of the archive as something "based on relationship". How much had Jha's own subjectivity mattered in the interviews he conducted? "As a Muslim woman interviewing Muslim families for my own research, I was shocked at how dramatically different from the typical pattern my subjects' conversations were, on the day a non-Muslim friend accompanied me on my fieldwork. And this was a group I had been working with for 18 months..." Would healing involve the assimilation and negotiation of difference as well as of similitude?

Jean Mathee invoked the extreme figure of Giorgio Agamben's 'Muselmann', and the fact that "the fullest testimony is always that of the drowned, not the saved". Linking this to the clinical topology of psychoanalysis, she asked what constituted the unconscious, in this topology. "We don't know what it is, but we know it speaks... What's being addressed in the clinical situation is always the suffering of the body that has gone through so much, and it's not what is said – the subject in this topology is always the divided, unconscious, decentred subject..."

"The part of the subject that is privileged is always the one on the side of the fiction that is reality and the misrecognition that is identity, the construction of history and memory that is on the side of the pleasure principle; and that switches off all the gaps and breaks where the trauma might reside..."

"It actually *blocks* the path to trauma that it is a defence and protection against."

According to Mathee, in the analytic situation it is not what the patient says that is crucial; instead, the analyst "literally has to listen for what *can't* be said" – this unfolds on the unconscious level and from a kind of embodied level, into embodied speech. "And the analyst has to have an ear to hear this, 'the ear of the other', as Derrida calls it..."

"If one takes this topology into the work of art, or any act of creative sublimation, the analyst/work of art are in the place of the unconscious. The analyst comes to incarnate this material trace that is literally beyond mediation – it is a painful lesion at the limits of mediation. And this material trace is literally a blind spot in identity and history and memory; a fantasy which is literally a defence against the trauma which has to be foreclosed for the ego to function.

"Analysis is about trying to bring into the topology what is foreclosed because it is too traumatic, or to produce an epistemological break... And the way that this is done is through the incarnating, or through the work of art that literally hears what can't be said through the analyst."

Mathee explained that this produced a kind of "destituting effect" that she then linked to notion of the cut. "Within traditions that are on the side of the metaphysics of lack – for instance, the theories of Jacques Lacan – one of the most important analytic techniques is to produce a 'cut' – it is literally about finding the right moment to 'cut' the identifications, misrecognitions, fantasies and memories which place the subject in a safe and secure way. And within that topology, with art and ethics, in order to go to that foreclosed coordinate you have to cross the limits of embarrassment and shame – which is one of the most important things in Lacan's topology of ethics – on the path to bringing in the foreclosed signifier, the material trace, in order that it can be destituted so that something *new* can take place where it has colonised the subject..."

Clarifying further, Mathee stated that within this topology, the object of desire, "which has never existed but it always retroactively constructed and always comes in the modality of loss", is well understood by Luis Buñuel, as demonstrated in

his 1977 film *The Obscure Object of Desire*.

"There are countless scenes of a man wanting to consummate his love, but each time the couple get into bed, something happens to defer it – the window curtain gets in the way, the shutter makes noise... Each night they go through this process of delay. Finally he undresses her, to find that she has a corset on that is tied very tightly at the back. And he just cannot undo it..."

"Buñuel's imaging is reminiscent of the theorist Slavoj Žižek's claim that the whole economy of desire is really dependent on delay because there is no fundamental rapport in *any* relation, especially an erotic relation. All films/works of art have this kind of libidinal economy: in order to approximate the object of desire, one has to produce delays which in a way conceal the fact that there is a fundamental *lack* of rapport."

Afrassiabi stated that he was not an expert on Egyptian censorship "or any censorship at all"; as an artist, he was interested in the idea and practices of censorship, and had developed the interviews project in order to read into censorship for himself "a certain conceptualisation" of the cut. In the context of materials received via satellite in "private space", versus films shown the "public space" of cinema halls, the question was of the ownership of public space. "What I felt strongly in Egypt as compared to Iran is that in Egypt, people own the public space and cinemas. There is a history of this, and people want to decide what kinds of films are shown. Through my fieldwork I learnt that when the satellite dish arrived, there was increased pressure to censor from the older, conservative institutions and Islamic institutions..."

With regard to the relationship between recognition and identification, Afrassiabi replied that for him the former was an open term and he liked to keep it that way. "It has two sides – on the one hand you *recognise* the cut as a suppression, and then you articulate for yourself where it originated. The recognition is also a presence. But on the other hand the cut is also a plea *for* recognition. In my text I tried to take into account this other aspect, i.e., the community's ethics that demand recognition by the state, by the upper and upper-middle classes, etc. This second aspect is where the identification takes place, confirming that there is a community that *identifies* with the cut, with censorship."

"As we all know, in Iranian cinema it is forbidden to show women without the *hijab* (veil/headscarf), even when they appear alone in their private spaces. An interesting example of how directors confront this restriction cinematically, yet subvert it

into a political critique, is a scene in the 1998 film *The May Lady*, directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemaad,” the speaker explained. “The protagonist enters her house, walks into her bedroom and pulls off her headscarf while walking out of the frame. Instead of seeing her without the *hijab*, we see the scarf falling on the floor in front of us. Again we experience a displacement of signs. This is clearly the symbolic embodiment of the unveiled, off-screen protagonist, achieved by way of denouncing the scarf on-screen. In other words, some object has to be disregarded on-screen to make space for the symbolic presence of something else which is off-screen...”

Responding to the query about the “lament” of Beirut, Jacoubi invoked the figure of Adonis, “the most important Arab poet living today”, who had given a controversial lecture some years earlier, titled “Beirut No Longer Exists”. This created a debate in the city’s intellectual community about whether Beirut had “receded, or been superceded”, in the sense of a certain kind of politics in cultural metropolises – “they have moments when activity is accelerated, when there is influx, thought...” He added that his interest in Kosaimi is because the writer is living in Beirut and producing his work there; much of it would not have been possible had he stayed on in his native Saudi Arabia.

“To assume that people who are able to converse and collaborate online have an environment in which to produce and think critically, is to believe in the promises of the net, i.e., that it would change the Arab world,” Jacoubi remarked. “My argument is that space is very important; so is the option to travel, as well as the freedom from intimidation. The story of Al-Kosaimi, who travelled to Iraq, India, France, and then settled in Beirut, is the story of many Arab intellectuals. Those who are persecuted in their homelands frequently opt for self-chosen exile in Europe. But Beirut has somehow often hosted many prominent dissident émigrés. This ‘Beirut phenomenon’ angered many Arab regimes – they wanted to destroy the powerful culture via devocalising the dissent that was emerging.”

Jacoubi added that there were no “subtleties” with regard to banning and censorship of print in the Arab world, though it was common to use invented names and places in ‘fictional’ critiques of the state. One of the most famous banned texts in Saudi Arabia was *Mudum al-milh* (*Cities of Salt*). This monumental quintet by Abdelrahman Munif, published from 1984-89, is set in an imaginary desert town. The narrative is entirely in

classical Arabic, but every character speaks in the colloquial Arabic of the tribe to which he or she belongs. The story chronicles the transformation of a traditional desert society following the discovery of oil. The five volumes give a picture of the deep transformation of Arabia from the tribal societies before the age of oil to the contemporary petrodollar society.

There are many other examples of political allegory in Arabic literature, according to Jacoubi. “But you find the real subtleties of censorship in the digital sphere. For instance, in context of the discussion boards that have tens of thousands of members – religious authorities and people working for the state pose as participants and establish trust... there is a whole dangerous game of surveillance being played.”

Jha reiterated that he wanted to hold on to the term “critical nostalgia”, even while he worked through its ambivalences; he acknowledged that he was not sure whether he had derived the term himself, or whether he had assimilated it from theoretical readings. “The whole exercise hinges on a rigorous sifting of the phenomenon. But the moment you move from ‘nostalgia’ to ‘critical nostalgia’, and to thinking about it, you are forced into being coherent. It becomes a history-writing project. It is also a ‘fruitful’ term because it helps you to recover the entire domain of memory; to extract, to think about it in a critical way and not just in a romantic fashion.” Jha added that in the 55 years since Partition, political parties had been using survivor statistics to stake a range of communitarian claims; it would continue to be a fraught area of research.

“I am tracking the shift in meaning and usage of the word ‘archive’... the shift from a space-based understanding of the word to a relationship-based one,” Jha asserted. “The archive is not about a relationship that determines the *nature* of knowledge. Historians have written extensively on how the archive is influential in shaping the knowledge project. But in reality, it is about a perception – i.e., how to *relate* to a particular object of knowledge...”

“This relationship crucially helps me to understand my memory and my act of listening. It is not about an event; it is about an act.”

Jha made reference to the work of Pierre Nora, who had been cited in the presentation. “Nora says memory is erased in the archive, in the sense that it becomes a historical memory, and takes material forms. I’m trying to explore what happens to those experiences that *cannot* be

converted into material forms – in this case, experiences of listening...

"In terms of material forms, I have the interview questionnaire, etc. But there is no site that embodies the act of listening, which is always a joint exercise. This 'archiving' is a collaboration between interviewer and respondent. Can the interviewer's memory be reduced to field notes? Or can we look at it differently?"

Taking up Mathee's comments, Jha stated that an imperative of psychoanalytic practice is that the trauma be remembered in detail, via the analyst and patient in collaboration, so that it can then be coped with – "which then leads to it being forgotten". However, "sharing" in the Indian context is far more complex; it is not clinical, and consists of collaborating in terms of inhabiting a shared cultural environment as well. "Listening is not a one-to-one transfer..."

Jha added that he was not sure about the therapeutic potential of the project he had described. "The phase of research I was associated with was explicitly committed to making an archive, hence it was done in the survey/questionnaire mode." It was thus very different from the "long, open experience" of empathetic listening.

Panel 2: Network Effects

Moderator: Monica Narula
Sarai-CSDS

Imagined Networks: Rhetoric, Poetics and Politics in Electronic Communities and Online Networks

Wendy Chun
Associate Professor, Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, Providence

Networks are not nets... What slips through a network now is not what is too fine to be caught in its mesh, but that which refuses to move or to move others.

Wendy Chun clarified that her presentation was a work-in-progress, the beginnings of a collaborative project called *Imagined Networks*. "The term 'imagined networks' draws upon Benedict Anderson's analysis of the nation as an 'imagined community'. However, rather than

focusing on the nation state, it tries to comprehend imagined groupings that are both less and more than communities, less and more than nationalist..." Chun explained that by calling these groupings 'imagined networks', she was both engaging with and trying to displace the "banal, tired cliché of our current social formation as a network"; in linking together lived experiences and networks, she was not arguing for the distributed network as the "diagram" for our social interactions, or bureaucratic organisations, or even our technologies.

"Rather, it asks what needs to be in place in order for us to understand our interactions as networked, for us to understand ourselves and our technologies, the 'we' and the 'they' that are part of a social network. It asks how social and technological abstractions coincide, diverge and inform each other; and it asks *how* these abstractions – *whether* these abstractions – can be experienced, sensed and felt."

Taking up the colloquium title, Chun pointed out that the ligature of 'sensor-census-censor' is linked to 'changes of state'. "However, based on our understanding of the word 'state', I suggest that the first hyphen indicates a need to cleave, rather than effect a joining: i.e., sensor *versus* census/censor, since the latter are national phenomena, and the agents that perform the census, act as censor, are national. 'Censor' and 'census' stem from the same Latin verb *censere*: to estimate, rate, assess, which were official acts; during the Roman Empire, the censor not only officiated the census (used mainly to determine taxation and military conscription), but also the supervision of public morals."

Chun argued that in contrast to the 'state' approach, liberal democracies "try to cleave the 'census-censor' hyphen. "If liberalism's fear is, as Foucault argues, fear of governing too much, the existence of censorship is almost an embarrassment. It is a throwback to sovereign power and thus evidence of failure of liberal discipline, for if discipline worked successfully, there would be no need for an official censor – it would be an intimate part of each individual."

The census, on the other hand, is a prime resource of liberal "governmentality". Like the state-based practice of fingerprinting, the first "modern" census (one designed to assess a "population"), took place in the colonies – namely in "New France" (now Quebec) in 1666. Chun stated that this census coincided with the transfer of New France from the then-bankrupt company chartered to administer it, to the *Conseil*

Souverain, thus making the territory a province. “The first census linked to proportional representation was the US census of 1790. This census also the difference between registering of a population and registering to vote – in a bizarre concession to slave-owners, slaves counted as three-fifth human.”

‘Sensor’, on the other hand, “seems far more intimate”, the opposite of ‘census-censor’, according to the speaker. Senses deal with individual or minute perceptions; sensations other than official evaluation. Its borders thus seem both larger and smaller than the nation/state, soul/body, human/machine. Sense – if not sensor – “is intimately intertwined with the disciplinary society, the making of individual subjectivity, the sensing of one’s soul, through the objectification of oneself, one’s ‘inside’...”

“‘Sensor-census-censor’ thus seems to reveal the contours of liberal discipline-governmentality-sovereignty; or, more provocatively, the limitations, because something happens when the three are brought together using the same hyphen that attempts to link the nation to the state. This tightening of ‘sensor-census-censor’ and loosening of the link between ‘nation’ and ‘state’ is intimately linked to information regimes brought about by transnational capitalism, as well as to the military-industrial-entertainment complex.”

Chun then defined a sensor as a device giving a signal for the detection or measurement of a physical property to which it responds. “In other words, it can sense only what it has been *designed* to register.”

Census is also tied to technologies of control. “The continuation of the census in the 20th century was made possible by IBM; and IBM was made possible by the census. The US government employed Herman Hollerith’s machines in 1889, when it was still struggling to analyse figures from the 1880 census. Hollerith’s card system, the forerunner of the IBM card, is based on the ‘punch photograph’ produced by railway companies,” Chun explained. These photographs on railway tickets were “punched out” by the conductor, providing a description of the individual in terms of hair, eyes, nose, etc. Each “punch photograph” verified that the passenger occupying the seat was in fact the same who had originally presented the ticket. Soon businesses from railroads to department stores adopted Hollerith punch cards to track customers and cargoes. In the 1890s, voting machines also began to use the technology. The evolution of mechanical tabulating systems based

on punch cards led to the IBM Corporation. Hollerith called the census a ‘national punch photograph’.

“Thus the question of identification in trains, which in the US is always tied to questions of racial segregation, also operates at a much finer level of identification, driven by monetary concerns and anxieties over a duplicitous public,” Chun declared. However, sensor-census-censor is not only linked through bureaucratisation to automation, mass control or information panic, but is also linked to something beyond normal modes of governmentality, something “both less and greater” than national borders – namely, imagined networks.

As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, networks are “diagrammatic representations of interconnected events, processes, etc., used in the planning of complex projects or sequences of operations”. Networks, “teetering between the singular and the plural, is/are the new universal concept... they seem to be timeless and placeless, and yet their status as universal theoretical constructs is grounded in our present age,” according to Chun. “From high-speed financial networks that mortgage states and thus erode their sovereignty, to networking sites like myspace.com that transform the meaning of the word ‘friend’; from complex biological flocks that operate via simple generative rules, to viruses that threaten global catastrophe, networks are not only the content of society, but also allegedly its structure and message.”

Networks assume we experience technology directly, rather than feel its impact through the ways it helps us navigate and comprehend our daily actions, Chun reiterated. Networks are sensed – “humanly and inhumanly”, they are felt, envisioned, negotiated. In addition, one often first believes in networks when one is excluded or persecuted; and some of the best network analysis is “arguably paranoid”. And as all networks are differently stylised, they are “not an easy universal”.

The speaker then invoked Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an “imagined political community”. Such a community is “imagined”, not “imaginative”, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”. This imagined

community is inherently limited because the nation “never includes all peoples, but rather a particular people”. Imagined communities are also viewed as sovereign because, conceived during the age of Enlightenment, sovereignty enables freedom. “Nations dream of being free... the gauge and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.”

Sovereign freedom is thus the hyphen between the terms ‘nation’ and ‘state’, Chun remarked. “Crucially, this imagined political community depends on print capitalism, which makes time seem homogeneous and empty. The nation coincides with realist novels that fuse the time of the novel with the everyday life of the reader. Newspapers, due to their regularly planned obsolescence, create an ‘extraordinary mass ceremony’, according to Anderson, that vast numbers of anonymous individuals participate in, within the privacy of their own homes. While reading the newspaper, ‘each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands or millions of others whose existence he is confident of, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion’...

“Anderson argues that newspapers make possible an imagined community based on unbounded seriality, or empowering identifications that go on to infinity. This is because newspapers take the ‘world of mankind’ as their domain and put in place a ‘natural universality’, an unselfconscious standardisation of vocabulary that overrides any formal division between the local and the foreign... Against this type of seriality, he describes ‘bounded seriality’, which is the logic of the census.”

The census is based on three conventions:

- > impermissibility of fractions and the mirage-like integrity of the (racial/ethnic) body
- > anonymity (the census maps a stable social field rather than identifying a particular individual; names are the most protected part of any census)
- > totality (a census seeks to provide a complete picture of a population)

“This bounded statistical logic and politics shears off every series at the same temporal edges,” Chun asserted. “As such, it is linked to notions of identity and identitarian politics, i.e., based on proportional entitlement rather than action. Anderson claims that ethnicity refers back to a previous nationality, and is thus not a meaningful cosmopolitanism; and that rather than staking claims to citizenship, migrations are simply an

extension of the census-style, identitarian conception of ethnicity, and lack any universal grounding.”

The speaker critiqued as simplistic Anderson’s assumption that ethnicity is always a looking back to a previous nationality, and his notions of seriality, “bounded or unbounded, too limited or too vast”. Rather than a series of identifiable units, or a deep horizontal fraternity, in actuality one engages in “a complex web of connections that make the world seem both small and infinite – infinite not in its seriality, but in its combinatorics”. Networks, as opposed to communities, emphasise flow, movement and the constant adding and pruning of connections; they lay stress on relations rather than identities.

“Networks are not nets,” Chun clarified. “This difference is linked to the rise of electronic telecommunications networks. Networks (social, political, neural, biological, chemical, ecological) privilege flows that are equitable – or at least seem comparable and exchangeable – *because* they flow.

“What slips through a network now is not what is too fine to be caught in its mesh, but that which refuses to move or to move others.”

This “capture of ourselves and others” is enabled by the claim that networks themselves draw upon the logic of the “other”; that they inherently threaten patriarchal, hierarchal systems of power. They have proved to be effective tools of the socially disempowered, and are “force multipliers”. The time of imagined networks “is neither empty nor homogeneous, but rather an odd mix of past, present and future”, simultaneously distant and immediate.

“Real time is present 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; and memory is equated with storage... network time is in so many ways the time of the enduring ephemeral.”

Chun explained that stored programme computing is based in “regenerative memory” – “that which can be clocked to regenerate only *because* it can degenerate”. For instance, the serial mercury delay line – one of the earlier forms of computer memory – took a series of electrical pulses and used a crystal to transform them into sound waves, which would make their way relatively slowly down the memory tube. At the far end, the sound waves would be amplified and reshaped. One tube could usually store about 1000 binary bits at any given moment. Core memory, another aspect of computer memory, erased the value it sensed. To bypass this, ‘reading’ was linked to ‘writing’ elsewhere.

"Memory does not equal storage, but rather the diligent and repetitious regeneration of the ephemeral," Chun asserted. "The fact that we now think of computers as conflating memory and storage is the result of an archival dream and nightmare, unthinkable to those working on memory in the 1940s and 1950s."

The speaker added that the content of the medium also followed this temporality. "Blogs contain within themselves archives of their posts, making the blog perhaps like the epistolary novel. And however banal, the novel was focused around a plot or a moral, there was some theme or suspense that held the readers' attention. But the only thing that links blog entries together is the so-called author and his/her daily actions... What makes a blog 'uninteresting' is not necessarily its content, but its immobility. The ever-updating, inhumanly clocked time in which our machines are embedded and constantly refreshed makes their contents stale. This archiving also makes it seem as though everything is visible: if one cannot, through the collectively timed reading of blogs, view society as operating in an empty homogeneous time that moves up and down history, the archives make it seem as though the blogs themselves follow some chronological order."

Chun pointed out that because of the nature of these archives and the "uncertainty of their regular reception", an older post/text/video can always be "discovered" as new. "The non-simultaneity of the new, the layering of chronologies, means that the gap between illocutionary and perlocutionary may be dwindling, but – because everything is endlessly repeated – response is *demand*ed over and over again.

"This non-simultaneity of the new – this enduring ephemeral – means we need to get beyond speed. Just because images flash up all of a sudden doesn't mean that response is impossible. What we need to figure out is how and why the ephemeral endures."

According to the speaker, imagined networks are not based on the regular obsolescence or disposability of information, but rather the rescuability ("or the undead") of information. "Even text messaging, which seems to be about the synchronous/the *now*, enables the endless circulation of forwarded messages; and reliability is linked to deletion, in that a database is considered to be unreliable if it does not adequately 'clean', get rid of, older inaccurate information."

Chun insisted that this "non-simultaneous new" has profound effects on discipline, and keeps the

internet from becoming a panopticon, as it is very difficult to separate inmates from one another (there was to be no horizontal communication, in the Foucauldian paradigm). In contrast, networks involve constant volitional and non-volitional communication. "Not only is separation impossible; but the panopticon relied on initial swift action to prevent perceived misdoings. The inspector was to react quickly at the beginning, so that the inmate would internalise discipline. The internet and its archiving mechanisms (Google stores every search performed and ties it to an IP address) do not allow any certainty about when a misdoing – sexual predation on the net, for instance – will be caught; given the rate at which data is constantly regenerated, it could be viewed anywhere at any time..."

Chun cited the political theorist Jodi Dean: "One is compelled to make oneself visible precisely because of the uncertainty as to whether one registers at all... One is driven by the sense that one *is* known, combined with the unbearable excess of ways in which one *might be* known, to repeatedly make oneself visible, accessible... Most people in technoculture know full well that they aren't *really* celebrities. In fact, this anxiety about not being known, this tension between the conviction that one is known and not known, is a key component of the celebrity mode of subjectivisation..."

"So even if one knows she isn't a celebrity, she *acts* as if she believes she were... The technologies believe *for* her."

Chun remarked that in this anxiety over whether or not one is known, "becoming known is a heartfelt experience, with which comes the burden to confess, the burden to be worthy of such attention". She underscored her point with clips of two YouTube videos, one titled *Cheaters*, projecting a *barrio* ethos through Loca, a working-class Latina protagonist. "Intriguingly, and not surprisingly for anyone who perhaps understands the force of stereotypes, Loca was herself a 'cheater'; she was using a counter-identity and false accounts to subscribe to herself. She was not anyone's 'homegirl', but rather a Caucasian actress who was brought up on the outskirts of Los Angeles, in a neighbourhood dominated by *cholas* (girls involved with *barrio* gangs)..."

"This push for recognition illustrates not only that making oneself visible is a fictional act, but also that the imagining of an audience is itself a generative process," Chun stated, adding that the uncertainty about the breadth and actions of networks also leads to "paranoid accountings" of 'darknets', a term coined by researchers at

Microsoft. These private-invitation-only networks supposedly exist in a “vaguely criminal underbelly of the internet, enabling piracy and dubious information flow”.

Chun reiterated that imagined networks are not just about connections between people, but also about the connections between people and their technologies. Citing a study of cell phone usage, she commented on the “middle-class desire” to “be as free as one’s technology, as mobile as one’s phone... Although this is a reformist dream, one that reduces the crowd to a voiceless repeater station, it also carries with it the dream of being part of the horde, of erasing class difference in this merging together, as ‘we’ become ‘our’ technology: the cell phone, the crowd.”

This is an important formulation, Chun concluded. “Technology and its operations are a rich source from which we imagine – or cannot imagine – our own actions. They are at times enabling violations. But it is important to remember that it is *we* who imagine our technologies, in however mediated a fashion. If there are technologies of control, it is because there exist decisions to be made, and sometimes automated. Automation, however, does not automatically mean traumatic repetition. One of the most pressing political tasks we face today is that of imagining networks otherwise.”

Resisting System Subjectification: Paranoia as a Culturally Specific Affect of Network Use

Tapio Mäkelä
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The emphasis on the control of systems over subjects, and thus inadvertently granting an almost mythic agency to networks and interactive systems as a means for transgression or control, leads to mystified system theory emerging as post-humanism; and the call for materiality boomerangs back as a kind of network metaphysics.

Tapio Mäkelä questioned the degree to which system theory/human-computer interaction models are useful in addressing users as subjects, and how the “paranoia” of network use is culturally and politically specific, and thus not inherent in technology. He also analysed the links binding surveillance to affectivity, and attempted to “destabilise” notions of state.

Mäkelä described his responses to a CNBC telecast that he watched in his hotel room in

California during ISEA 2006. A smiling news anchor announced, “And now, some news about how new technology is being introduced to make air travel much safer. A new kind of lie detector has been tested on passengers at an airport during random checks. Passengers are asked questions about their itinerary, and the test determines whether they are telling the truth or not... And now, onto our next topic: young mothers and their diets...!”

The speaker explained that within the news culture in his native Finland, “a system of surveillance would not be delivered in the news as if it was a new type of cereal, let alone a great improvement in our lives.” He followed links about this system to find that the technology in question comes from Israel, where the state is considering implementing it at checkpoints as a counter-terrorist practice. “The website BoingBoing informs us that there are at least two types of Israeli systems, one set up in Moscow, the other being tested in the US. I am critical of conspiracy theories, but in this case, the insinuation of the military-entertainment complex in civilian life is a fact. The company called NEMESYS produces surveillance technologies not only for government agencies, but also for personal use.”

An instance of the latter is the Love Detector, which can be used to detect, via phone or wearing a wire while on a date, whether the new partner has potential to get sexually involved: “...certain things happen. Pupils dilate, lips take on a reddish tint, facial skin becomes flushed... all biological changes that help us appear more attractive to a potential partner”. There is also the technology called eXSENSE, “a new vocal emotion analyser” that claims: “Imagine knowing what your friends and clients think... Imagine... No one can LIE to you any more... Old Truster 2.4 users can upgrade to eXSENSE at a favourable discount!”

Another Israeli company, SDS (Suspect Detection Systems, headed by former Mossad director Major-General Amiram Levin) offers the Cogito1002 Test Station. Makela said he “much appreciated” their site front page, where a “techno-orientalist image of a woman with a radiating fingertip stops an unwanted international terrorist from entering a country”. He also quoted a Microsoft ad from the website Security.ITWorld.com: “Target Security Threats before They Target You”; “Arm Yourself against Attacks”, etc.

“The production of paranoia regarding technologies of border control, software and

access to networks is based on an affect of anxiety rather than that of panic,” Mäkelä asserted. He cited media theorist Sara Ahmed, who contends that emotions play a crucial role in the “surfacing” of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs. “It suggests that emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’, but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.” In this schema, uncertainty/ambiguity may also correspond with anxiety. Discussing hate as an “affective economy”, Ahmed argues that emotions do not necessarily inhabit any body; instead, “the subject” is a “nodal point” in the economy, “not an origin or a destination”.

Aligning with this notion of circulation, rather than the sender-receiver model, disrupts models of traditional communication theory, Mäkelä added. Ahmed also talks at length about fear as linked to the ‘passing by’ of the object: fear responds to that which is *approaching*, rather than already here. “It is the futurity of fear, which makes it possible that the object of fear, rather than arriving, might pass us by... In anxiety, one’s thoughts often move quickly between different objects, a movement that serves to intensify the sense of anxiety... Anxiety tends to adhere to objects... Anxiety becomes an approach to objects rather than, as with fear, being *produced* by an object’s approach.”

Transposing this logic to fear of the internet, Mäkelä suggested that one needed to reduce it into a fictional, almost material, entity. “As an abstract communication and representational environment and archive, the internet allows one’s thoughts to move quickly between objects, albeit virtual...” In locations and contexts where fear is a real/political and not a paranoid condition, “it feels ridiculous to talk about paranoia in relation to internet use as a general state of affairs, a kind of structuralist paranoia”. Also, information panic regarding data superabundance is an overstatement, according to Mäkelä. “Since the 1990s, sociologists and urbanists have theorised the ‘space of flows’ (internet, telecom, the globalising economy) that is overcoming cartographies and cities (Saskia Sassen, Paul Virilio, David Harvey, Manuel Castells). However, urban geographer Nigel Thrift points out that this myth is ungrounded: first, because it has been repeated several times in history since the Victorian era, with each new medium; and second, because changes in communication and transportation do not replace, but only augment, existing urban and media experience.”

Network usage cannot be reduced to a singular history or the analysis of a singular medium; political practices and their discourses have a specific relation to each medium and each local history, Mäkelä added. He cited media theorist Lisa Gitelman, who argues that media “tend unthinkingly to be regarded as heading in a certain coherent and directional way along an inevitable path, a ‘History’, towards a specific and not-so-distant end... The overdetermined sense of reaching the end of media history is probably what accounts for the oddly perennial newness of today’s new media. It lingers behind the notion that modernism is now ‘complete’, and that familiar temporal sensibilities are at an end... media are the disappearing subjects of the very history they motivate.”

Gitelman reminds us the “specificity is the key”, and that new media are “less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites of the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such”, Mäkelä explained. The way the term ‘media’ is used often converts them into “intentional agents”, i.e., “as if media purposefully refashion each other and ‘do cultural work’... Agency is difficult to specify in technologies that appear autonomous, only to the extent that we fail to identify and challenge its *real* agencies.”

Governments have taken on the information society as a genre necessitating policy formation, the speaker declared. However, user cultures on the internet emerge around popular culture, web curiosities, sexual practices, theoretical minorities, artistic affinities; these dispersed communities are uninterested in the concept and the rhetoric of “nation”. Yet their communication-oriented virtual functioning remains within borders defined by language and identity. And at the same time, user cultures are marketed in globally viable forms. “American web companies dominate as entities in mainstream media, and media studies research; and they slip in as desirable norms for internet use, while in actuality there is a spectrum of choices. Why is so much network theory stemming from US user cultures, or based on corporate usage of intranets or the internet?”

Mäkelä clarified that in Finnish, ‘cyberspace’ translates as *kybervaarus*, literally referring to cybernetic outer space, as there is a different word for physical space. ‘Information society’ as a term does not resonate in Finnish, since information is considered an abstract, decontextualised and material unit. The word used instead is *tietoyheiskunta* (‘knowledge society’). By and large, the perception of networks has been primarily bound to their use value and

economy, and second, to their capacity to enable social and cultural practices in Finland.

Commenting on the hegemony of the English-speaking world in the context of network theory and research, the speaker acknowledged he was speaking from a “minority language perspective”; but when this had to do with technology and user-culture history of the internet and mobile networks, “the position of both geographical and cultural periphery transforms into a central, initiating culture of innovation”. The success of Finnish telecom, led by Nokia, and the invention of Linux and IRC, are classic instances of this. The speaker added that he was a strong critic of nationalist identity politics, and in no way wanted to glorify Finland’s technologically-driven past two decades of social progress; “xenophobia and racism” were still crucial issues in Finland as in all of northern Europe, and concepts of “nation” were crucial and relevant frameworks for understanding the influence of network-enabled practices.

Mäkelä invoked the work of cultural theorist Mieke Bal, who suggests that instead of a single methodology, concepts travelling across different disciplines may be “clashed” against one another to produce new knowledge.

“Bal claims that interactivity between subject and object without a binary or a vertical opposition between the two is the foundation for the methodological shift to concepts she is proposing. In her view, there is a dynamic oscillation between being a word and being a concept. Concepts are about focusing interest, and this process is connected with *intersubjectivity* (as opposed to objectivity). Concepts should not have definitions that can be consensually agreed upon. Bal’s motivation to work with the concept of intersubjectivity was due to its insistence on the democratic distribution of knowledge,” the speaker asserted. “While her theory does not stem from a close reading of new media, it is still interesting to propose that perhaps interactivity as a site of meaning and experience can gain its potential when an interactive situation is described as intersubjective, not as *intermachinic*.”

Negotiating experience with others forms an intersubjective situation, according to Mäkelä. For a theory of networked experience, this could mean that it is an extension of interactive experience. If this situation of producing meaning or knowledge is described as a non- or semi-human network, it can be thought of as non-dynamic. “But if networks remain tied to subjects, they do not ossify.”

The speaker then analysed the critiques of system theory as offered by

media/communications scholars Wendy Chun, Tiziana Terranova and Matthew Fuller, all focusing on the internet as a cultural phenomenon. “With them, I hope to understand what might constitute a desire to produce a metaphysics for technology, either virtual or technologically invisible sites for meaning that are not present in the daily life of an experiencing subject...”

“These theorists take technological allegories as analytical concepts and position technological aspects of networks and software/hardware interaction as culture. But it can also be claimed that a technologically deterministic approach may significantly undermine the generative potential of user cultures, popular cultures and everyday perceptions of what computers, software and networks enable...”

Taking up Wendy Chun’s theoretical arguments – that the information computers and software sent involuntarily to the network constitute the user as subject, before actual usage; and her emphasis on the system as constituting subjectivity, rather than it being constituted by the user’s experience of use – Mäkelä asked whether, if the user was not aware of this “subjection”, it could be considered a relevant component for constituting subjectivity. “From a system theory point of view, the involuntary data traffic may be seen to constitute an implied user position. If one were to position the ‘user’ into the system diagram in the same manner as Umberto Eco or Wolfgang Iser in their models of reading, models which are themselves a result of an unfortunate coopting of technological communication theory by the humanities, agency in the form of interpretation is displaced from the embodied subject to the disembodied ‘marker’ of subjectivity within the system, or even bestowed upon the computer...”

According to Mäkelä, Chun takes fibre optics as a central metaphor, declaring that fibre optic networks “enable uncontrollable circulation... they threaten an infinite open circle of the ‘representable’... they melt and stretch the glass so that nothing screens the subject from the circulation and proliferation of images. At the same time, they displace representation by code... they relay data in a non-indexical manner...”

This characteristic of code, generating images pixel by pixel, makes supposed representations over the network “involuntary and voluntary user events, sent silently and invisibly”. Dismissing this often leads to readings of media that concentrate on the appearance of user interfaces, and neglecting aspects of human-mediated communications. Code is an “ideology”, or

something that mimics ideology; it produces users by “benign software interactions”. Makela pointed out that Chun embeds her logic in the allegory of the different invisible “packets” that hardware and software send to the network, invisible to the user, making the user visible to the system; these “expose and involve us with others – human or otherwise – before we *emerge* as users”.

Users are used as they use, according to Chun. Pointing to her insistence on the optic, Mäkelä asked whether a “Debordian approach” underscored her Foucauldian trajectory, since “technology appears as a spectacle, and users are used regardless of whether they *will* this or not”. From the perspective of system analysis and Web 2.0 machine-to-machine communication, however, “the act of use is quantified, and sometimes archived. The politically decisive act here is interpretation, where it is assumed to take place, and whether it is conducted by humans or reduced into computed filtering.”

Mäkelä suggested that rather than emphasising “invisible fibre optics and involuntary code”, Chun might usefully envision the user as a subject with agency among the “materially tangible representations” of cyberspace – images, audio, navigation tools, information architectures, databases. “Perhaps the possibility to manipulate, to alter, to modify, to produce, is primarily also an affective aspect of technologically-mediated experience – a potential to impose control. And through network games and chat rooms, for instance, there is equally the potential to abandon control, something fundamental to human communication and play.”

The speaker remarked on Chun’s conviction that the totality of discourses of control and freedom are central to a paranoid response to and of power, which “stems from the reduction of political problems into technological ones”. The vast amplitude of these oppositional and yet interdependent discourses is culturally and politically specific to the United States, according to the speaker. These discourses travel across disciplinary and cultural boundaries, finding themselves either “marooned”, or able to make “crippled leaps” across thresholds of language. “Information society rhetoric, in particular produced by Manuel Castells, was quoted and transferred to many national policies with very different practical outcomes; and one such outcome is that nations and user cultures tend to look at these questions as if they emerged from or through network technologies, and not from the site of US paranoia.”

Mäkelä then took up concepts articulated by media theorist Tiziana Terranova, who describes network culture through the terminology of informational dynamics: i.e., “with the relations between noise and signal, including fluctuations and microvariations, entropic emergencies and negentropic emergences, positive feedback and chaotic process”. She suggests that communication “is concerned with the problem of noise and contact”, and that the cultural politics of information go beyond privacy, property and copyright, addressing the problem of the virtual as “the relation between the given and the (allegedly) unlikely”. In addition, she posits, somewhat radically, that information flows “displace the question of linguistic representation and cultural identity from the centre of cultural struggle in favour of a problematic of mutations and movement within immersive and multidimensional informational strategies”. Informational culture is a domain where meaningful experiences are “under seige, continuously undermined by a proliferation of signs that have no reference”; informational *milieux* are dominated by the channel and the code, “not by the exchange of ideas, ethical truth or rhetorical confrontation”.

Mäkelä explained that Terranova reinserts identities into the theory of network cultures by describing them as “micro-dissected and modulated”, data within databases; information that bypasses altogether “the self-evident, humanistic subject”. Terranova draws upon the cybernetic tradition of mathematicians John von Neumann and Stanislav Ulam, combining frameworks of biological computing with network culture to envision “an abstract machine of soft control”. The “biological turn” is not just a new approach to computing, but also aspires to offer a social technology of control to explain and replicate not only the collective behaviour of a distributed network such as the internet, but also the complex and unpredictable patterns of contemporary informational capitalism. Thus, the simulation of the behaviour of “a multitude of simultaneous actions” is also seen as the key to understanding the behaviour of stock markets, and fashion/fads.

“The ‘natural’ that emerges out of biological computing is as artificial as the social – thus ending in a rather Baudrillardian argument of the implosion of the real,” Mäkelä declared. “The emphasis on the control of systems over subjects, and thus inadvertently granting an almost mythic agency to networks and interactive systems as a means for transgression or control, leads to mystified system theory emerging as post-

humanism; and the call for materiality boomerangs back as a kind of network metaphysics.”

The speaker then commented on theorist Matthew Fuller’s argument for the need to understand the ways in which software operates “beyond the blip”. Blips are “events” in software, “meaningful sequences”, “processes and regimes that data is subject to and manufactured by”; they provide “flashpoints at which these interrelations, collaborations and conflicts can be picked out and analysed for their valences of power, for their manifold capacities of control and production, disturbance and invention”.

A blip could also be described as an “expected” sequence in software, which is decipherable at an instant. Fuller links these to the concept of “speculative software”, i.e., that which “refuses to believe the simple, innocent stories that accompany the appearance of these blips”; such software “skews, misreads and takes them for a little walk, but that not only reinterprets but leaves an invention of blips in its wake”; it operates reflexively upon itself and the condition of being software, “to go where it is not supposed to go, to look behind the blip; to make visible the dynamics, structures, regimes and drives of each of the little events to which it is linked...”

Mäkelä explained that for Fuller, the role of software critique is to understand software and hardware “beyond what an average user would experience”; this approach is also characteristic of software art created/deployed by writers of code, some of them artists, who consider code “beautiful”, and self-written code to be invested with “authenticity”. Linus Torvalds, the creator of the Linux kernel, commented that the internet is “a great way to have a community, but to the hacker a computer is also entertainment. Not the games, not the pretty pictures on the net. The computer *itself* is entertainment.”

Thus, programmers and engineers who navigate past the blip may often share “a perverse affective relationship”, Mäkelä added. “However, Fuller acknowledges the limits of interface metaphors, stating that they reach a point where their ability to either provide structure or explanatory advantage collapses, in the face of the capacity for mutation in the universal machine, the computer, and what it connects to...”

The same can be said about technological metaphors addressing interaction or networks, or about the move to position users as subjects endowed with agency within systems, the speaker

concluded. These metaphors, “crafted from a system-down, machinic/inside-to-out perspective”, do not sufficiently or effectively accommodate the local languages and culturally specific practices that have a huge impact on how the internet and various software environments are perceived and used today.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta initiated the discussion following the presentations, remarking that it was also possible to take the “engineering or systems metaphor” as a “cultural metaphor”; while understanding the limitations Mäkelä had pointed out; i.e., if the systems metaphor becomes a “universalising explanation”, so much falls out of the ambit of the latter. “But just as you indicated the Finnish nuances with regard to the knowledge domain, what if we take systems engineering to be a language, just like Finnish? What would be the result?”

Kirstie Ball said she took issue with the Matthew Fuller argument analysed by Mäkelä, i.e., that the materiality of code is sometimes not present or relevant to the user. She invoked current theorisation in the field of surveillance studies, and the scholar Steve Graham’s *Software-Sorted Geographies* (2005). “He talks about the materiality of code and of computer algorithms producing social sorting and social exclusion effects – these are not completely visible to the user, yet have effects on users’ lives, life-chances and ability to access certain products. Facial recognition algorithms, for instance, are based on the contrast between light and dark, and finding landmarks on the face with particular lighting effects. To put it very crudely: obviously these will be very different if your skin is not completely white. A high degree of false positives have been found in tests involving facial recognition systems; people of colour have been pulled wrongly aside at airports, etc...”

Geert Lovink reminded Chun that Benedict Arnold was “haunted by the rise of nationalism; he didn’t want to write about the problems of nationalism. So there is a flip side to the argument – the ‘imagined’ networks may turn into a project that deals only with the pathologies of networks. This means we leave out its schizo-productivity, so to speak... We have to look at the ‘positive’ side of this – actually, I don’t want to use a binary term, ‘generative’ is a better word. There must be an art and politics of scaling up, for instance, and there are some people who know how to do this very well.” Lovink added that he was also interested in

the capacities of networks to expand. "You can look at it in two ways, as you can with a crowd. When the crowd grows, you might join it or you might turn away."

Florian Schneider stated that he was involved in a digital project titled *Imaginary Property*, and that he was very interested in the concept of the "imagined", and "imagination". He asked Chun for a clarification of the terms. "What is so 'imaginary' about Benedict Arnold's 'imagined' networks? What does 'imagination' actually mean, what is its role? There are many interpretations – the existential, for instance in Sartre, who conceptualises our power to imagine as the reason why we are ontologically free. Or the Lacanian notion, in which the imaginary is a state of mis-recognition – the child in the mirror stage, and the passage to the symbolic order, as opposed to the 'real'. Or the imagination/imaginary as just a fabrication of images – a rather banal notion, or what Kant and Deleuze both called 'reproductive imagination'...

Schneider linked this to Chun's earlier evocation of the "degeneration"/ "regeneration" of memory. "It is the kind of 'productive' imagination that is 'creative' in the Kantian-Deleuzian flow of thought: the creation of a spatio-temporal domain in conformity with its concept..."

"The danger is that if we just use the term 'imagined'/'imaginary', one might misunderstand and think we are saying that something is not real..."

Jeebesh Bagchi commented that after 9/11, the commission of inquiry in the US had to negotiate the hard fact of the arch-enemy "operating from the space of a cave, the lowest in the denomination of indices that mark human development, and from there creating a powerful, particular imagination of the world". Though living in the most networked segment of the globe, Americans had not even been able to imagine that such an enemy existed. "It would be interesting to take this relation between the network, the imagination and the community, and look at how the imagination is then placed in a proliferating network density..."

Babak Afrassiabi took up Chun's assertion that exclusion "is one way to experience a network", citing a news report's claim that several thousands of mobile phones were left in taxis in Delhi each year. This made him think of the idea of users consciously or unconsciously wanting to be excluded from the network, "of feeding a kind of 'real' into the 'imagined'/'imaginary'. Negotiating the traffic and the encounters between networks

is also a significant way of feeding the 'real' into the imaginary."

Responding to Sengupta, Mäkelä agreed that contemporary networks were continuously expanding as all the areas of cyber-practice underwent forms of amalgamation. "There are no clear boundaries between disciplines, and systems *are* being seen as a cultural metaphor. Many areas of fantasy too are developing via the technology. But the language of users has a specific location and various cultural specificities, including stereotypes." Responding to Ball, the speaker concurred that Matthew Fuller did very interesting work on speculative software and the critique of software, which was clearly called for. "My critique is not of software per se, but of the fetishisation of code as materiality. So in software critiques, what one should look at is the *effect* of code on users; and one should recognise that code is always designed *for* someone, there is always an agency."

Chun asked Mäkelä whether, in terms of his own argument, "specificity" becomes "a new universal". Was he talking of the "user" in terms of the general user? Could affect also become a new universal? Was there a difference between a "user" and a "subject"?

"Talking about information and mistakes about information, I would argue that computer science itself is mistaken when it talks about information," Chun declared. "This fantasy about information drawing upon information theory is itself problematic. I would not claim that code is material, but when we talk about having agency – the fact is, no matter how diligently you programme, effects happen that are not in your control. And the question changes, to: 'Isn't this notion of programmability and agency a fantasy of certain notions of control...?'"

"A little technological determinism isn't a bad thing," Chun added. "But a lot of it just unfolds with the technology itself; the determinism that is part of the technology is revealed."

The speaker said she agreed with Lovink about the need to pay attention to the "generative" dimension of networks. She explained that she found Benedict Anderson interesting as a theorist because his argument concerning imagined communities was a defence of nationalism *against* cosmopolitanism. "For him, 'cosmopolitanism' is the wrong term – it is bounded, whereas nationalism is unbounded; and therefore it enables an unbounded seriality, and makes possible certain liberatory movements that are closed down by cosmopolitanism."

Chun reiterated that there were different understandings of the term “imaginary”, and that Anderson drew “a very strict line” between “imaginary” and “imagined”, because he didn’t want people “to make the mistake of thinking they don’t exist”.

“But I think that reflects an anxiety which can never be completely allayed,” the speaker concluded. “The clean separation of the two terms is not possible. And exactly that slippage is what is productive. One can ‘imagine’ something; and the ‘imagination’ can then open up something else. It’s precisely that ambiguity which is so ‘generative’ about networks, letting us think through our experience.”

Panel 3: The Accession Register: Information Abundance, Scarcity and Libraries

Moderator: Geert Lovink
Institute for Network Cultures, Amsterdam

The Class Library of Babel: Digital Librarianship and Copyright Circumvention

Sebastian Lütgert
Writer/Programmer/Artist, Berlin

Maybe there is a silent agreement about the technical aspects of ‘sensor-census-censor’ that shape us... an agreement to touch the surface, not go too deep. But we *should* go deep – the concrete technological functionality of these systems *does* matter, and we should care about it...

Sebastian Lütgert began his audiovisual presentation with the remark that he had spent the last several years writing in German, English “and php”, i.e., computer code. “I was lured into programming because writing code has this great quality: you write something, and then something *happens*... I really like this particular aspect, this particular effect of programming practice. I have been doing both kinds of writing commercially, and I am still interested in other kinds of writing – diaries, notes, fiction – forms of text that don’t serve an immediate, concrete, positive purpose. As a code writer, I sought occasions where I can programme in the very same way, i.e., *coding* without a direct purpose.

“It is also as much fun, and instructive, to read code, and learn about it. The contemporary descriptions applied to this practice, such as ‘software art’, ‘artistic software’, are erroneous

because they are insufficient to describe this kind of writing/coding.”

The speaker clarified that his presentation was an effort to unfold the terminology of its title: “The Class Library of Babel, Digital Librarianship and Copyright Circumvention”.

The library is conventionally understood as an archive of books, but the technical/class library is a collection of “functions and methods and computer instructions that can be re-used by anyone else to write a computer programme”, according to Lütgert. He drew a symbolic parallel with *The Library of Babel*, a deeply philosophical short story by Jorge Luis Borges, which is “an account of the complete analog library, i.e., it contains every book written or ever to be written.

“Is this total library a blessing or a curse? The story keeps this ambivalent. The librarian in this text theoretically has access to every book – but in practice, it’s a nightmare because a lot of the material is garbage; you might find a paragraph of meaning once every thousand years. But it is a complete universe of analog texts – thus, it is utopian, even while it is dystopian.”

The digital librarian has much in common with the analog librarian, but there are differences – in conservation, for instance. Lütgert explained that technically, any book may be written as a number, zeroes and ones, “the form of all digital data, in the end”. The book then is essentially a large number. Borges’ story can be reduced to a five-letter book titled *Babel*. Demonstrating the operations of this code via slides, the speaker added that if the binary numbers were translated to decimals, “then this book *Babel* can be written as 285 billion, 101 million, 679,980”: this was its digital equivalent. It was similarly possible to do this the other way round, i.e., take any number and translate it into a possible book.

“What is the ‘digital library of Babel’? To paraphrase Borges: it is the art of the variation of zeroes and ones. The digital library is still a wasteland, in the sense that it is megabytes, gigabytes, terrabytes, pentabytes, whatever-bytes, of pure nonsense, garbage, meaningless noise – but the very fact that it is essentially an enormous collection of very large numbers makes it different, and interesting to compare with the analog library...

“Numbers are well understood by mathematicians but by all of us as well, in terms of doing simple operations, that can be applied to creating digital books,” Lütgert declared. “But if we can imagine the digital library of Babel existing, as numbers,

the first thing that would happen is that it would get sued, since it contains lots of books without having the right to collect them. This is also an issue for the analog library, as will be corroborated by archivists and librarians – they all know that what they collect, even in official archives, may be stolen goods. Not all copies are legitimate – they are collected over time and then, via archiving, acquire legality and official status. But with digital books, it is a grey zone...

The speaker critiqued the “fantastic new invention” called Digital Rights Management (DRM), an umbrella term that refers to any of several technologies used by publishers or copyright owners to control access to and usage of digital data or hardware, and to restrictions associated with a specific instance of a digital work or device. The term is often confused with copy protection and technical protection measures; these two terms refer to technologies that control or restrict the use and access of digital content on electronic devices with such technologies installed, acting as components of a DRM design.

“Instantly, without much effort, you can reintroduce scarcity in that domain. You are able to create a whole new generation of documents that can’t be shared via copying and modification; and they can only be read by a select few legitimate readers,” Lütgert stated.

“This mode also implies that the material technically has the potential to expire – it is a horror for the digital librarian to deal with these types of media. But there is a benefit of keeping books as numbers. You can make calculations and create them mathematically.”

Lütgert invoked the pdf file of the online *Sarai Reader* as an example of what could be accessed through the manipulation of code. “I would love to have a copy of the last Reader; but even more than that, I would love to possess a copy of the latest James Bond movie. To get from the pdf to the James Bond movie, all I have to do is add a number. It may be difficult to find this number, and it would be insanely huge, and thus a practical problem, but it can be done. It is not a theoretical problem, as such. It will take time, but it will work...”

The speaker defined this as a “special version of Luxemburg’s law”: every digital book is the exact binary difference of two other digital books and can best be generated from these two books via a “trivial” computer programme.

“In the general version of this law, you can even leave the books out as a term – the application is the same for every type of media,” Lütgert clarified.

He stated that a few years earlier he had made a screenshot of his computer screen, and in the process intuited that he was “on to something”. It contained a very small computer programme; he typed it up, and as soon as he ran it on his screen shot, it transformed the digital image file of the screenshot into the full unabridged version of a May Stevenson novel, which was a “massive volume” compared to the digital form of Borges’ short story.

“Now, this digital image is obviously my intellectual property – I made the screenshot. But if the source code is open source and published under General Public Licence (GPL), the result is someone else’s intellectual property. It would be very difficult to argue in a court of law what exactly I was infringing in terms of copyright.”

Lütgert, who founded the initiative textz.com in 2000, asserted that rights holders of texts didn’t appreciate his innovations or commitment to publishing “in this way”. Through a sequence of slides, he explained that with textz.com, he had wanted to be “a kind of anti- amazon.com”. He took the icon of the amazon.com shopping cart, and “inverted” it via code so that it demonstrated “a different relation”.

“It is not a commodity relation: it is more about stealing,” the speaker explained with irony. “Later, Amazon did something that made me a bit jealous – they published a button which said ‘Search Inside’. By clicking on the button, you can read inside the book – but only a few pages.

“Here the ‘censor’ comes into play, but also the ‘sensor’, because your reading patterns will be analysed, and the next bit of information given will be ‘people who read this also read that...’

“This motivated me to make a better-looking function,” Lütgert stated, showing the result of his coding through a sequence of images. “You can open a book; the cover will be transformed into full text. And this currently works for the thousand books on textz.com...”

The speaker pulled up an image of the code “that does it all”. It is “relatively short” free software published under GPL.

“It is all very obvious – you should no more be intimidated by this than I was by the Arabic script in Mansour’s presentation this morning. It is not a mystery. And it works.”

By way of conclusion, Lütgert offered two remarks. First, that he had observed a “certain tendency” in the colloquium by which the fields of the digital

information and numbers/statistics were “easily and directly” associated with paranoia, panic and regimes of control. “If that’s the case, I disagree...”

Second, he had observed a “peculiar moment” during Jane Caplan’s account of digital signatures in her “brilliant” lecture. “She explained precisely and accurately how public/private key inscription works. And even though the explanation was only of the upper two layers of a seven-layer process, it was a rare case of a historian actually going to the technical sphere of coding and doing some research there. Though I as a programmer may sound as if I could do this myself, I actually cannot explain the process of the other five layers. However, a few moments later the whole room seemed to agree, everyone with a smile on their faces, that we should not go into further technical details...”

“Maybe among ourselves – not just us here, but an extended ‘ourselves’ – there is a silent agreement about the technical aspects of ‘sensor-census-censor’ that shape us... an agreement to touch the surface but not go too deep. But I think we *should* go deep – and what I have demonstrated here is shallow, anyway. The concrete technological functionality of these systems matters, and we should care about it...”

“There is a solution against network paranoia and, for what it’s worth, the fetishisation of code. And that is – to put it bluntly, simply and in the most banal way – computer literacy. Yes, technology is deterministic, but only until the very moment you start to mess with it. Then you start to apply exactly the ‘raw desire’ mentioned in the title of Felix’s presentation. And as the title claims, you apply it exactly ‘because it’s there’, ‘because you can’ – and because it’s fun.”

Rapporteur’s Note

Excerpted from “Blindness”, in *Seven Nights* (Faber and Faber, 1986), a compilation of lectures by J.L. Borges:

“In my life I have received many unmerited honours, but there is one that has made me happier than all the others: the directorship of the National Library. For reasons more political than literary, I was appointed by the Aramburu government...”

“I received the nomination at the end of 1955. I was in charge of, I am told, a million books. Later I found out it was nine hundred thousand – a number that’s more than enough.

“Little by little I came to realise the strange irony of events. I had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library. Others think of a garden or of a palace. There I was, the centre, in a way, of nine hundred thousand books in various languages; but I found I could barely make out the title pages and the spines. I wrote *The Poem of the Gifts*, which begins:

No one should read self-pity or reproach/ into this statement of the majesty/ of God who with such splendid irony/ granted me books and blindness at one touch/...

“Those two gifts contradicted each other: the countless books and the night, the inability to read them.

“I imagined the author of that poem to be Groussac, for Groussac was also the director of the library and also blind. Groussac was more courageous than I: he kept his silence. But I knew that there had been moments when our lives had coincided, since we both had become blind and we both loved books. He honoured literature with books far superior to mine. But we were both men of letters, and we both passed through the library of forbidden books – one might say, for our darkened eyes, of blank books, books without letters. I wrote of the irony of God, and in the end I asked myself which of us had written that poem of a plural I and a single shadow.

“At the time I ignored the fact that there had been another director of the library who was blind, José Mármol. Here appears the number three, which seals everything. Two is a mere coincidence; three a confirmation. A confirmation of a ternary order, a divine or theological confirmation...”

“We have, then, three people who shared the same fate...”

“A writer, or any man, must believe that whatever happens to him is an instrument; everything has been given for an end. This is even stronger in the case of the artist. Everything that happens, including humiliations, embarrassments, misfortunes, all has been given like clay, like material for one’s art. One must accept it... Those things are given to us to transform, so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so.

“If a blind man thinks this way, he is saved. Blindness is a gift. I have exhausted you with the gifts it has given me...”

“I want to end with a line of Goethe: ‘*Alles Nahe werde fern*’ – ‘everything near becomes distant’... Goethe was referring to the evening twilight. Everything near becomes distant. It is true. At nightfall, the things closest to us seem to move away from our eyes. So the visible world has moved away from my eyes, perhaps forever.

“Goethe could be referring not only to twilight but to life. All things go off, leaving us. Old age is probably the supreme solitude – except that the supreme solitude is death. And ‘everything near becomes distant’ also refers to the slow process of blindness... that is not a complete misfortune. It is one more instrument among the many – all of them so strange – that fate or chance provide.”

Memoirs of Information Work

Avinash Jha
Librarian, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

In a cybernetic utopia of self-regulation, one freedom is a necessity – the freedom to self-regulate. There is only one necessity – the necessity to self-regulate, stay in control, pursue the moving target... The more we are

embedded in the new technological forms of life, the more we find ourselves grasping mechanisms of self-correction.

Avinash Jha provided an account of the “information imperative” that operates in libraries, which sets up the “mission, goal and vision” of library work in the contemporary information age.

Invoking the traditional Information Desk in one part of the library, that houses dictionaries, directories, encyclopaedias, etc., Jha stated that this section represented a particular kind of “organisation” of knowledge. The rest of the library was for the “work” of knowledge production – inquiry, research, analysis, synthesis. However, we have “swiftly moved” to a situation where a library has to be understood as existing within “an ocean of information”. In the earlier framework, information represented the end or the beginning of knowledge; in the new paradigm, it represents the “life-blood”, which by its circulation keeps the “engines of knowledge society pumping in a breathless rhythm”.

Jha described his experience working as a “documentalist” for over a decade in a library in Mumbai that was part of a documentation centre. “This was another kind of inversion – a library within the frame of documentation, rather than documentation within the frame of a library, which was the normal practice. I learnt the craft of documentation before I studied library and information science. Working in a centre that saw information work itself in an activist mode, I internalised the values of what we called ‘democratic’ information systems, as opposed to academic, commercial and military systems, even while we shamelessly borrowed techniques from all of these...”

“That was two decades ago. We had a computerised catalogue but no accession register. The catalogue system software was written by a hired professional, but had been conceptualised/developed collaboratively with other non-governmental documentation centres or documentation units situated in various organisations. The intent was to create a format that could serve as a platform to exchange information... The bulk of our work consisted of soliciting and selecting material – from all kinds of print, audio and video sources, and classifying and organising all of it. The categories we used were not on the basis of disciplines, but topics or issues, so that users from diverse backgrounds could relate to these directly...”

“Our system was differently organised, in an open and transparent fashion, and kept adapting to emerging needs.”

When the internet boom asserted itself in the mid-1990s, Jha explained, “documentalists began to sense that they were becoming irrelevant, redundant”. Not because they were “technically backward”, and not because the internet was an alternative source of information, but because the digital mode signified a kind of power and authority to reorganise work, lives and institutions.

Attempting to define “information”, Jha listed the progression of categories: ‘data’, ‘information’, ‘knowledge’ and (rarely-claimed by those seeking and using information) ‘wisdom’. Data is seen as raw material for information, and information is seen as raw material for knowledge.

“The Oxford English Dictionary will tell you that information is a bit of knowledge that is separated from the knower and has the potential to circulate,” Jha remarked. “It can also be seen as some knowledge which has already found a symbolic medium (creating potential for it to circulate); and like any knowledge, is associated with some desire. It leaves one body of knowledge (and desire) and circulates/finds other bodies of knowledge (and desires). This takes place through the mediations of symbols, materials (media), information organisation systems, technologies, institutions, legislations such as intellectual property law, etc. This results in an overall continuing social organisation of information as it circulates among different communities.”

The speaker clarified that these generic conceptualisations were “rather neutral”, and that to find the “political significance” of information circulation, he turned to the “popular adage” of our contemporary information society:

INFORMATION IS POWER.

“This is true in the sense that the right information at the right time enhances our capacity in a given context,” Jha argued. “But what about power over others? Possessing information that everyone else possesses is no source of such power. It is the *exclusive* possession of certain information that gives us certain leverage or power; and it is the secrecy/withholding of information that is the source of power over others...”

“We are not talking about information as property, but as the missing piece in a puzzle or a game. It is in the very nature of information that withholding it ensures that something is obstructed, or left incomplete or unaccomplished...”

“Once the information is disseminated, its power dissolves. It becomes a capacity by being integrated into a body of knowledge...”

"Thus, we cannot say that information always wants to be revealed. There is an equal pull in the opposite direction – information wants to be concealed."

Exploring this powerful dialectic of presence and absence, Jha reiterated that information can be withheld in different ways:

> when there is no information about this information, i.e., when no one suspects that it exists

> when it is legally withheld through provisions such as the Official Secrets Act and other political/bureaucratic/military codes

> when it is rendered elusive to non-specialists through a particular mode of disciplinary organisation

> when it is rendered inaccessible for lack of appropriate technology

> when it is withheld due to lack of purchasing power, as in the case of intellectual property

With regard to information that is accessible, Jha pointed out that organising it consists of "bringing two pieces of information together in such a way that the knowledge represented by each illuminates the other". The organisation of information is therefore based on the organisation of knowledge – and in libraries, this is achieved through the material organisation of embodied forms of knowledge.

The speaker invoked the system of the documentation centre, which "broke away from the liberal or scientific conception of an all-encompassing universe of knowledge", and instead created a place "of constructing and reconstructing *social* knowledge", that included various kinds of knowledge and knowledge interests in society.

"In contrast to building national libraries and archives and attempting universal bibliographic control, the idea was that multiple smaller centres should flourish, and the organisation of information in each of these should bear the stamp of the centre's individuality..."

Jha defined this as the "democratic model" of information, whose basic principle would be "self-organisation".

Transposing these parameters of analysis to the data "that is flowing through the worldwide networks and in and out of our computers", the speaker asked if the information in "information

technology" was different from that embodied in traditional material forms.

This technological information can be understood within a "cybernetic model", according to Jha. He argued that the discourse of "information society" is constructed on the "systematic ambiguity" between these two meanings of information, which are related to one another even as they differ from each other.

The basic principle of cybernetics is "self-regulation", and the basic interest is in "building self-regulating or self-correcting machines", also known as control mechanisms, the speaker explained.

He cited the instance of James Watt, who patented the flyball governor for the steam engine in 1782. "When properly functioning, this device would keep the engine running at a particular speed. If the speed increased, this increase itself resulted in activation of a mechanism to reduce it. Similarly, if the speed decreased, it would be brought back to the set mean value." This mechanism has two crucial aspects. A part of the output energy is redirected to the controlling apparatus further back in the causal order of the system – this is known as "feedback". When feedback is such that it counteracts the action of the machine; it is corrective, not reinforcing – this is known as "negative feedback".

Another instance is that of a target-seeking torpedo, "a paradigmatic example of a self-correcting system". The torpedo that seeks a moving target has to adjust its direction whenever the target changes direction or course. "This is not simply a result of a force exercised on the torpedo by the target – the torpedo is powered by an internal device that is not attracted to the target but is steered towards it, in response to an influence emanating from the target," Jha reiterated. This influence is not a force, but of the order of a "message".

The idea of self-regulation was also central to the conception of the economy in the industrial capitalist stage – economy was conceived as a self-regulating system of markets (labour, consumer, raw materials) that does not require outside intervention.

Jha then invoked the American engineer/mathematician Claude Shannon's influential "mathematical theory of communication" and the concept that information is an entity that can be computed.

"Shannon used information as a metaphor and generated a computable formula for its

measurement in terms of a probabilistic equation,” Jha explained. “The computer takes data from the communication system and breaks it into ‘bits’ (binary digits) of information – zeroes and ones. These are converted into signals. An orderly procession of signals is transmitted, and then reconstructed into meaningful ‘information’ that can be read, decoded, understood. This information is general, some of it carrying meaning and some not...

“This generalised information functions in exactly the same way as the ‘message’ in a target-seeking torpedo, and as negative feedback in a cybernetic system. Information that is not meaningful in our terms is not necessarily noise. It may be performing the task of self-regulation, or self-correction. Here, the meaning literally is the message itself...

“This conceptual development would have limited significance, had technological developments not led to the inexorable convergence of media and the concurrent developments of the notions of information society. When it became technologically possible to convert *all* forms of communication to the single platform of the digital, it became possible to think of information as independent of the medium, *any* medium.”

According to Jha, we have a double concept of information associated with the digital revolution – information that is “pure meaning” or representation, supposedly independent of any medium, and information that is a “message” in a cybernetic system, functioning as negative feedback, without any meaning.

“So now we have a world of meanings and representations – the virtual world – which is disembodied, independent of the underlying medium. When cybernetic messages can generate a world of representations, we are given the domain of virtual reality...”

Through the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of ICT, information has now become a “master concept”, Jha continued. There is a complex interplay between the social and the technical meanings of information. The information of ICT is “blind” to the distinctions between human beings and machines. The aspect of “control”, essential to the cybernetic conception, “goes under the shadow of the shining qualities of information...”

“In a cybernetic utopia of self-regulation, one freedom is a necessity – the freedom to self-regulate. There is only one necessity – the necessity to self-regulate, stay in control, pursue

the moving target... The more we are embedded in the new technological forms of life, the more we find ourselves grasping mechanisms of self-correction.”

Jha then considered these principles in relation to libraries. The overwhelming imperative to digitise and thus accumulate as much information as possible, at the expense of developing systems that can organise this information, has muscled out the democratic model of information, where the imperative is to place information in relation to other information, to accommodate a variety of media and forms of information, and to organise them in an accessible way.

“When knowledge of representations is superceded by representations of knowledge, the librarian or the documentalist becomes a manager and a technologist. The organisation of information becomes secondary to ensuring flows of information, and we are therefore compelled to digitise and further digitise...”

Rapporteur's Note

Claude Shannon, a distant relative of Thomas Edison, is regarded as an ordinary genius of the electronic communications age, and as the father of information theory. While working at Bell Laboratories in 1948, he formulated a theory around the communication of information, and worked on the specific problem of how to transmit information in the most efficient manner possible (this path-breaking research, “A Mathematical Theory of Communications”, is still referred to as ‘the Magna Carta of the information age’).

A basic postulate of information theory is that information can be treated like a measurable physical quantity, such as density and mass. The theory has been widely applied in engineering, acoustics, psychology and linguistics. Basic elements of any general communications system include:

- > a source of information/transmitting device that shapes the information of a “message” into a form suitable for transmission by a particular means
- > the means or channel by which the message is received
- > a receiving device that decodes the message back into some approximation of its original form
- > the destination or intended recipient of the message
- > a source of “noise” (i.e., interference/distortion) that changes the message in unpredictable ways during transmission

In other words, the information desired constitutes the “signal”; the information not desired constitutes the “noise”.

“Information” as understood in information theory thus has nothing to do with any inherent meaning in a message. Rather, it is a degree of order, or non-randomness, that can be measured and treated mathematically. A mathematical characterisation of the generalised communication system yields critical quantities, including the rate at which

information is produced at the source; the capacity of the channel for handling information; and the average amount of information in a message of any given type.

Shannon also posited the concept of “entropy”, deriving from the physical notion as in the second law of thermodynamics. The information-theoretic notion of entropy is a measure of the randomness of a random variable; it is a measure of the amount of information a random variable or stochastic process contains; it is a lower bound on the amount a message can be compressed; and it is the average number of yes/no questions that need to be asked about a random entity to determine its value.

By this logic, information consists of what its recipient does *not* know. It is *not* facts, data, evidence received, as commonly understood, but a message the recipient does not know the contents of; it is a form of “uncertainty” (a term sometimes used interchangeably with “entropy” in the context of information theory).

The more bits of information a person obtains, the more uncertainty.

Shannon demonstrated via mathematical proofs that entropy can be used to measure a channel’s actual capacity; channels have a certain maximum transmission that cannot be exceeded (today this is known as “bandwidth”).

For any channel, the capacity can be defined so that if the user stayed within it, he/she would have a transmission as free from errors as desired; the probability of error/noise could be squeezed to an arbitrarily small value.

Today, all modern communication tools rely on error-correction mechanisms based on information theory.

“Because It’s There! Because I Can!” Desire and Information Economies of Abundance

Felix Stalder
*Media Scholar, Zurich; Researcher-Organiser,
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Access and transformation, input and output: in the information environment these desires are as basic as inhaling and exhaling. Indeed, it is precisely these desires that are producing existence, because in the information network, communications – input and output – are what will establish a node as a node.

Felix Stalder declared that we are in the midst of an “uneven shift” from an information environment characterised by scarcity of cultural goods to one characterised by their abundance. “The internet is giving ever-greater numbers of people access to efficient means of mass communication, and P2P protocols such as Bittorrent are making the distribution of materials highly efficient... more and more material is becoming freely available within this new information environment. As an effect, the current structure of the culture industries is being undermined, and with it, deeply-entrenched notions of intellectual property....

“This is happening despite well-orchestrated campaigns by major industries to prevent this shift,” Stalder continued, adding that these campaigns extended from the “seemingly endless expansion” of intellectual property regulations across the globe, to new technologies aimed at maintaining informational scarcity (digital rights management/DRM systems), to “mass persecutions” of average citizens who engage in standard practices on P2P networks.

The speaker remarked that this had created a “pitched battle”; on the one side were organised industries, with well-honed machines of political lobbying and armies of highly paid lawyers and technologists, while their opponents consisted of “a rag-tag group of people and small collaborators”. These included programmers who develop open source tools to efficiently distribute digital files; administrators running infrastructural nodes for P2P networks out of their small internet service providers, or using cheap hosted locations; shadowy, closed “release groups” who “specialise in circumventing any kind of copy-protection and making works available within their own circles often before the works are released in public; and, finally, millions of ordinary computer users who prefer to get their goods from the P2P networks where they are freely available, beyond DRM protection, and where users can, if they wish, easily release their own material.

Stalder remarked that dominant, entrenched interests are usually at an advantage over the less well-organised “forces of innovation” which tend to initially be somewhat chaotic. “And, looking at the legal arena, there is plenty of reason to be pessimistic.” However, the speaker pointed out, looking at the social arena, “where what people actually do is what counts”, things look different. Despite new/tougher laws and legal persecution, P2P networks are in fact prospering, “to the degree that they account for 50-80% of global internet traffic, depending on region and time of day...”

“How is it that such unorganised sets of people, who agree on very little, who have neither a coherent ideology, or a business model, or even much self-awareness as a community, are able to challenge, if not overrun, well-organised sectors of industry and, as an effect, dramatically change the informational landscape?” Stalder asked. “Having discounted ideology, the answer in brief is: *desire*, raw and unchecked.”

The speaker outlined the social psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “pyramid of needs” as a schema of human motivation, ranging from the physiological (breathing, food, sleep, sex, etc.) at

the bottom to “self-actualisation” (morality, creativity) at the top. “Following this, we could think of P2P networking as filling a need for people who do not need to worry about material survival and who can now address a lack of informational goods. But it is more fruitful in this case to view desire not as something resulting from a lack, but as Deleuze and Guattari suggested, as a primary productive force, as an unarticulated will-to-existence... The more interesting story here is about desire creating reality, for the pure sake of creating it, not for any ulterior social/commercial motives, though they may be crafted on top of this (or any) particular articulation of desire.”

Stalder quoted the British mountaineer George Leigh Mallory, who in 1922 said with regard to his desire to climb Mount Everest: “The first question which you will ask and which I must try to answer is this, ‘What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?’ There is not the slightest prospect of any gain whatsoever. So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of the mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won’t see why we go. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. This is what life means and what life is for...”

Two years later, probably already sick of having to repeatedly answer the same question, Mallory allegedly offered by way of explanation just a terse, “Because it’s there.” A few months afterwards he froze to death on the north side of the peak. His body was discovered after three-quarters of a century.

“If people are able to do something, then, sooner or later, somebody will do it – if only just to see what happens. Something that can be done, but has not been done before, exerts a strong pull – so strong that it’s essentially impossible to regulate it directly,” Stalder asserted. “Regulations make certain actions illegal, or not profitable, but for this small subset of people who do not care about profitability and legality, this will *not* be a deterrent to their will. The challenge created by obstacles, and curiosity about our own personal abilities, are deep desires driving our actions. And what is regarded as a worthy obstacle, and how personal abilities are configured, are of course at the same time highly individual and culturally specific...”

“Technology triggers its own desires,” Stalder declared. “Translated into a communication and information environment, the utterance ‘because it’s there’ means access. Knowledge that a perfect copy could be available triggers a desire to get it. Possessing it triggers the desire to do something with it, transforming it in any way imaginable, be it re-editing *Star Wars*, remixing 20th-century music or converting books into executable code format which is then transformed into images. Why? *Because I can. Because it’s there...*”

“Access and transformation, input and output: in the information environment, these desires are as basic as inhaling and exhaling. Indeed, it is precisely these desires that are producing existence, because in the information network, communications – input and output – are what will establish a node as a node... More than anything else, the torrents of raw desire, unleashed by the pull of obstacles and the blind push into the unknown, are reshaping the landscape of the information environment, creating new peaks of scarcity and deep lakes of abundance,” Stalder remarked.

“Only after the flood recedes, and the new formations become visible, do the more orderly forces, those of commerce and the law, begin to stake their claims and make their own modifications of the landscape. But by then, the canyons are already carved out, and the terrain ready to be cartographed.”

According to Stalder, these desires are at their “most raw” in peer-to-peer file sharing, “a major contributory to the deep lakes of informational abundance”. The term ‘file sharing’ is “a great semiotic trick, just as the term ‘piracy’ is”; both terms are totally inadequate tools to understand what is actually happening, but serve strategic purposes in framing the debate. “We all know that the pirate who copies music and films without permission does *not* commit an act symbolically equivalent to forcibly entering ships, robbing, killing and destroying. The industry knows this too, but the term ‘piracy’ serves their purpose of conveying to lawmakers and law enforcement agencies a sense of grave, even bodily, danger...”

“Similarly, the term ‘file sharing’ has great propagandistic value, because it suggests community and harmony. But in fact, sharing does *not* amount to caring.”

Stalder commented that if one wanders through the forums attached to great file-sharing nodes, the ones which really provide the deepest access, “one finds oneself in a desert of exclamation

marks”; “most people are utterly disrespectful, totally impatient, about anything that stands between them and instant gratification”. Occasionally one comes across someone who reminds others to be grateful for all the work that goes into making all this material available, but this moralism seems misplaced. “There is no community to respect, people are anonymous and their contact is sporadic, so why bother? It is the same with people who run the nodes – there is very little sense of why they do it, beyond the challenge of doing it...”

The speaker added that there is also little sense of communal sharing even within the “secluded” world of the release groups, who labour incessantly to bring out movies, music, games and software before these are publicly available. “The real driver seems to be the sheer fact of the existence of still-secret material – *because it’s there* – and high-pressure competition within small peer groups – *because I can*, faster than you. In order to satisfy these urges, complex operations have been set up...” These include accessing the material across fortified lines of security; cracking any copy protection code that might be on it; compressing it down to a size where it can be distributed across clandestine networks of password-protected and strongly encrypted servers.

“Often, dozens of people, distributed unevenly around the globe, work together, mobilising significant resources in the process,” Stalder explained. “Not just the highly specialised skills that each of these steps requires, and the many layers of security needed to avoid prosecution, but also high-quality equipment, from recording devices to created ‘screeners’; from movies to high-capacity servers designed to handle very high traffic loads.” These activities are illegal everywhere in the world; and the content industry is quick to label them ‘organised crime’. “But this is not your average criminal operation; rather, these are organised crimes of passion. Rarely is money involved; and most of the resources are donated. There are strict rules about what behaviour is acceptable and what is not; and accepting money is regarded as inappropriate...”

“The desire to get access is driven by a sense of racing against time. Who will get there first? The earlier the better – for once a copy is out, the race is over. And the race can be so intense, that release groups try to reach deeper and deeper into the production process itself, to gain an advantage...”

Stalder reiterated that while there is community presence within the nodes, the process is not

about sharing. “It’s more like a potlatch, where one group shames the other by releasing a film first, putting pressure on the others to do the same, or to lose status. The ‘gift’ is a mode of competition, and the whole game is about winners and losers. The intention is not to make the material accessible to all, and the fact that sooner or later everything ends up on the public file-sharing network annoys the elite groups no end. And they resort to strange, but internally consistent measures, such as strong encryption – which only challenges the next group to remove the encryption, and so on... and soon the film ends up unencrypted and publicly accessible...”

“The contradiction between following one’s own desires to get access to the material on one’s own terms – *because it’s there*, and *because I can* – but denying this freedom to others, creates very severe tensions.”

Stalder clarified that the different layers in the landscape of informational abundance function according to very different rules and morals. “The elite crackers have nothing but disdain for the people on public file-sharing networks. The free software movement does not condone piracy, and puts great emphasis on the difference between crackers (bad) and hackers (good). Despite the many different rationalisations of their actions, they follow the same structure of desire. They want access to the material – *because it’s there* – and they want to be able to do with the material whatever they want – *because they can*. Thus, raw desire for obtaining the material and treating it according to one’s dominant logic – even if this means encrypting a film that one has just released – produce the torrents that are carving out the environment of informational abundance. It is these desires that produce the new landscape.”

The speaker concluded with the assertion that all culture is socially produced; and culture is essentially about the circulation of information and the transformation of that information by whoever is its custodian at a particular moment. “Information always leaks because it is a form of communication, it is fluid and mobile. However, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, desires never run unchecked for long – they need to be channelled, in order to become socially stable. P2P networks and informational abundance have not been channelled yet, though some indications of this are becoming apparent. They are compelling the established content industries to reform their businesses, adapt to the new environment. Creative Commons has set up new normative guidelines about what is acceptable in this new environment...”

"But these are early days yet, and it remains to be seen what forms of commerce and governance will be able to exploit and tame these desires. For now, they are raw, bleeding and exciting – though not safe... and not pretty..."

Kirstie Ball initiated the discussion following the presentations, with a comment for Stalder regarding Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Multitudes*, which she had "struggled through valiantly" some years earlier. She pointed out that they talk about desire being experienced as a "lack", first and foremost, in the three moments of "production, conjunction and disjunction". Stalder thanked her for indicating the reference, assuring her that he would "struggle through it as well".

Ball then remarked that she agreed with Lütgert's insistence on the need to go deeply into the technical. In the context of the amazon.com website, she noted, "When you click on the button that tells you exactly what else you would like to read or buy – obviously this is a product of data mining. To me, data mining is one of the slightly dodgier information practices of the age, which would define risk, opportunity and life chances for people according to their social/consumer category."

If digital art practice is to effectively intervene in the technical realm, it would have to be in the domain of data mining, and "the troubled social categories that are produced by it". Had Lütgert encountered any such intervention in the domain of code/software art?

Lütgert replied that the practice of data mining and the collation of data bases and of private data bases becoming public, "their sale and resale", was in his opinion "horrible". But in terms of collecting information, he and his friends spend a lot of time mining databases for artistic/practical reasons – "for instance, making backups of Google maps, downloading images so that one has the material and can work with it. People should be encouraged to mine for data, keep copies of things that they deem important and want access to."

Shuddhabrata Sengupta stated that he "totally" sympathised with the "because it's there" logic explicated by Stalder – that was the reason he did a lot of things himself. He said he shared Jha's skepticism about information dissemination practices, adding that we also have to take into account the instructions that come with and are

attached to information, along with the information itself. "There is a whole technology *around* information and what we do/can do with information, which is probably where the thrust of your criticism lies. I would hesitate to say that all information practices are innocent, by virtue of their being replicable. Similarly, just because information practices are used as a means of control, I would hesitate to condemn them. It has more to do with the politics of what people do with information, rather than the characteristics of information itself."

Jha concurred, adding that there were two huge discourses around information: the democratic, and the cybernetic. "I am not saying that just because information is digital, it falls within cybernetic discourse; my point is that the cybernetic framework derives from the digital revolution and digital processes."

Segupta then linked this to Jha's statement that the withholding of knowledge also counted as an information practice. "Cybernetic processes do withhold knowledge; and the information about information then becomes a construction of secrecy. But pre-digital technologies have often done that too. We see this in the way archives are constructed, the taxonomies of filing cabinets, the chaining of books to shelves (a practice of state libraries for a long time)... We need to look at what's being done, rather than the technologies that are being used to do it." Jha agreed that the withholding of information had nothing to do with the digital; "it can happen in any kind of system..."

Tapio Mäkelä pointed out that what we do or need to do with software applications is an agenda dependent on different locations and contexts. He asked Lütgert what value he saw in people "becoming code writers at large", i.e., the value of disseminated code-literacy. What about general users and their "innocent" understanding of/relation to software?

Lütgert clarified that he was not so interested in or attracted to the world of computers when it came to "agenda"; it was extremely important to see, "because you can", *why* you do something and from what context. "If you consider agenda, I feel these information practices have to address our problems, such as the spread of paranoia, sensor-census-censor stupidity, and becoming marked for the rest of our lives... When I look for allies – in this case, not people but disciplines – I see there is potential for corruption. Areas can be extensively corrupted – the humanities in the European universities, for instance, are in the process of being turned inside out within a very

short time frame. You can't use these institutions and disciplines as tools the way you could twenty years ago...

"But computer science to me seems at the moment much harder to corrupt, as you cannot change the basic rules. To explore the function of networks is much more difficult than having a faculty of sociologists telling you that everything is just fine."

According to Stalder, if one considered things from the macro level, motivations "don't really matter". It was interesting that there was a whole range of people doing things for different reasons – "competing motivations, agendas that are mutually exclusive – and they still add up to a very particular effect that has a social relevance, changes the information landscape in which we live..."

"At the micro level, where we all live, motivations are very different – location, affiliation, who to avoid, what to nurture."

Suggesting that since Stalder's presentation was entirely about motivation, therefore it *did* matter, Ravi Sundaram pointed out that Stalder had talked about desire as an abstract movement, "of men towards machines, and desire produced by machines"; and then explored the will of the code- and cracker communities. "You are right to set up a certain problematic of these viral agents. But I wonder, precisely in the context of your responses in this discussion, not your presentation – how does motivation matter, in the history of modernity? This has been asked by thinkers from Weber onwards, especially with regard to viral effects. Beyond a point it doesn't matter. If we go beyond motivation to the broader theatre of the network, it becomes very interesting because the code-breakers may be a tiny, nasty bunch of characters..."

Stalder agreed that it was contradictory to speak about desire and then assert that one did not care about individual motivation. Similarly, there was a contradictory aspect to code-breakers: "should they be criticised for what they do, or are they the vanguard of freedom fighting?" Motivation and desire mattered not because the human range was so vast and complex, "but because particular social configurations are built on these desires – be they for mystical experience, or in this case, for the inhaling and exhaling of information as a practice of daily life". The fact that certain desires have become dominant and are the foundation for various competing ways of explaining and justifying ideologies – whether the free software movement, or "whatever hazy validations of file-

sharing exist" – desire connects these different trajectories that can be exclusive to one another "into something that gives you access to a deeper social structure".

Wendy Chun commented that "as someone who has been accused of being a technological determinist", and "as someone who has set up the hardware in a computer lab for juvenile offenders just released from prison", she was deeply invested in the domain of technological literacy. "But my question is, 'So what'? How much does making visible actually *do*? I am thinking here of the limitations of code – what code itself relies on – but also in terms of the *power* of programming, which I agree is actually there... It is not outside the discussion of control, but is part of the lure of it."

Lüttger replied that he was not insisted in the theory of different languages of code but in their effects, that influence our perceptions. "For instance, looking at the Arabic blogs that Mansour presented: what does it mean to not be literate in a code? To experience difference and exclusion – not on the semantic level, but as embedded in programming practice? Is inclusion about 'being', or about technique?"

Chun reminded Jha that most of the control techniques developed in World War II for weapons were so cumbersome that they were never actually used in the field. What did this imply in terms of the concept of self-regulation? Jha clarified that he was suggesting that self-regulation is a "normative ideal", and technologies are developed to go along with it. "Consider the economy, society, organisational structures, libraries... they are all modelled on this..."

Chun then remarked to Stalder she was deeply averse to the word "community"; but "the interesting thing about communities without a sense of community, as you described the virtual networks, is that you have them just because they are *there* – and they also *rely* on some sort of structure that is not personal."

According to Stalder, we have to come up with a better word than "community" to denote "coordinated action that is not motivated by a concern for the welfare of all the elements/people that comprise it. It is not random, but neither is it something that thinks of itself as some sort of commonwealth..." A new term would save the term "community" for an association "that is more meaningful".

Florian Schneider argued that it was important to stress the absence of a common agenda, "which

may be why motivations matter or do not matter". He said he was puzzled by the notion of "I can" emphasised by both Lütgert and Stadler. "First, it is important to distinguish this 'I can' from the notion of the potential that we *all* have. But there is another notion of potentiality where 'I can' also immediately means 'I can't', or includes the possibility of 'I can't'... Would it make more sense to replace the 'I can' with 'I could'? Because I don't need to know *how* to programme. It is enough that if I learn it, I *could* have access to software that is pirated or cracked or open source."

Mansour Jacoubi argued that Lütgert was "confusing" a number of things – "desire, originality, aesthetics, technique, efficiency, fascination with esoterism – these are things that Borges was also interested in. In your programming work, are you not interested in the aesthetics of code...?"

"And if I recall the story correctly, Borges' library, contains a book that contains the knowledge of all books – would it be possible to put *that* text into code...?!"

"The book containing all books! I must definitely work on programming that!" Lütgert responded wryly. "Obviously the 'complete' library has something totalitarian about it...!"

"For me, coding is not a theoretical question, nor do I address it in a vacuum, or as a for/against issue. The logic of *why* I code would have to be very historical, very specific, and concerned with the state of the universal computer in 2006, identified as a relatively open machine compared to other cybernetic installations in our daily lives."

Panel 4: Dialogue

Holes, Erasures, Silences: Archives and Absences

Shahid Amin
Professor, Department of History, Delhi University

In conversation with Mahmood Farooqui
Sarai-CSDS

Introduction: Shuddhabrata Sengupta
Sarai-CSDS

When one writes a "recalcitrant event" or "recalcitrant lives", one finds that there is no national reader for the story, despite the fact that it takes place in India. The characters of

this mode of historiography are not incorporated into the nationalist narrative; they remain part of the mob that flung stains onto the clean sheets of Gandhian nationalism...

Shuddhabrata Sengupta introduced the dialogue between Shahid Amin and Mahmood Farooqui as a conversation about things that "escape" the archive. "Over the past three days at this colloquium there's been a running battle between information and its 'other', its shadow. The question to be discussed here concerns aporias and ruptures in the archive – what do practitioners of a vocation deeply committed to detail *do* when confronted with a loss of detail, knowing that the devil is in the detail, and in its absence...?"

Mahmood Farooqui: Beginning with the essential entry points of location and the personal archive: both Professor Amin and I are *purabiyas* (from eastern Uttar Pradesh), and are both Naipaul's *musalmaans*, in that sense – and yet not. We have both studied at a particular university, on the same scholarship; we both valorise our affinity with the Bhojpuri language, our awareness of and familiarity with it... But we come from slightly *sharif* (privileged/landed) families, where the familiar usage of Bhojpuri is not enough to undercut the elitism that is inherent in our location...

We have both written about the need to rescue spoken Hindi from the elite constructions that purists have loaded upon it...

Shahid Amin: In the context of practices of history writing and the politics of language, most of the major constructions of Indian history are undoubtedly 'Gangetic' constructions. When you talk about India, it implies *north* India... The Dutch have a fabulous term in the journal of Asian Studies that is published from Amsterdam: the category of 'insular' Asia, which refers to Central Asia. Here at home we have 'peninsular' India – the central and southern areas – and 'insular' India, the north...!

Most constructions of what India is about, the struggle and conflict between Islam and Hinduism, the mixing of cultures, the battle over nationalism – all of that takes place on the Gangetic plain. It is interesting that the term for a syncretic, composite culture in normal academic as well as popular discourse is the clubbing together of the two main Gangetic rivers: 'Ganga-Yamuna civilisation' is what we participate in...

There is a certain amount of anxiety about getting hold of episodes, incidents, the *longue durée* of

conflict, often religious and linguistic, that north India has been playing host to... and therefore the emergence of Hindi, which had various other names, all associated with the river Sindhu/Hind...

The emergence of Hindi as a modern language was almost by necessity predicated on a really no-holds-barred struggle against Urdu, an heir to the Perso-Arab tradition which had the blessing of the colonial government because it was the language associated with Persian/court culture.

So, in the late 19th century, to write in Hindi was not just to write a language – it was to write a history.

North India produced its very own haiku: *Hindi – Hindu – Hindustan*; a welding of language, religious community, sense of belonging. We really operate with that linguistic backdrop, where the issue of what happens to dialects that modern Hindi must master, suppress or distance in order to be the new vernacular of a modern sort is really pushed aside.

Interestingly, modern Hindi calls itself Khari Boli, literally, 'the upright language', as opposed to other languages. Bhojpuri is associated with the area beyond Lucknow; Avadhi is the language of the Lucknow region/Avadh, and Braj is the language of areas closer to Delhi, and of Brindavan. Braj gave us fantastic devotional poetry rooted in the cult of Krishna, Avadhi produced the *Ramayana/Ramcharitmanas*, a major devotional and kingly epic. Bhojpuri didn't produce a major religious text, epic or otherwise – and yet it is the language of not just a very large tract of the Gangetic heartland, it is also the language of the stereotypical subaltern.

Take the Hindi films of the 1950s and '60s: the servant characters would invariably speak in Bhojpuri. It is also the language of the migrants who have gone from their villages of origin to all parts of India and the world – the cotton textile mills of Bombay, the jute mills of Calcutta, the plantations in the Caribbean and Fiji and elsewhere...

The issue of 'authenticity' has been foreshortened within nationalist Hindi writing to the formula of 'write in Hindi'. Just as nationalism lays claim to speak for the entire populace despite radical differentiation, Hindi lays claim to speak for the 'earthy' reality in a very transparent way, which is just not possible.

The fact is, neither Mahmood nor I are the people we write about. And like us, contemporary

historians just cannot be the people they write about. No amount of navel-gazing in terms of post-structuralism, etc., is going to get us out of that loop.

Therefore with regard to our writings, I think it important to indicate – and not just linguistically or stylistically but historically, in terms of narrative – the distance that our writing straddles and falls short of. Otherwise we will consume the very characters we seek to represent, in the very act of representing them.

That has been the success of nationalism... And *that* is the way language assumes the fictive presence of a differentiated populace, just because it is in opposition to an elitist language.

My friend Alok Rai, a professor of English Literature, has remarked that Hindi was earlier "erotically obsessed" with Urdu, and it is now "neurotically obsessed" with English. We have the paradox of a language that is now the 'dominant' language (the way it operates democratically) based on the sense of having been wronged all the while...

Therefore, history-writing with material that is in Hindi is only telling half the story. The real story is two-pronged: first, how the dialect is suppressed and discarded; and second, how the dominant languages are 'peasantised' by ordinary people – something they always must do – whether it is Farsi/the language of the court, or English, etc. At the level of language, a very complex relationship plays out in north India, queering Hindi all the time while opening up an analysis of the dialects to the way in which Hindi indigenises languages of dominance.

MF: You've been working for some years on the history of an 11th-century warrior-saint, through whose accounts you are trying to develop a theory of the 'popular Gangetic'. This is also a project of trying to write an alternative history of the arrival of Turkish rulers in India.

Others have also called for an "alternative history" – which for you is categorically *not* an alternative to history, or a valorisation of memory as opposed to history. At the same time, such a history is non-statist; it does not abandon the archive, but tries to create a South-to-South dialogue without necessarily surrendering to the compulsion to talk through theory... When we use theory we talk not from or via our particular locations, but through the commonality of the colonial experience.

This alternative history project is also your attempt to move beyond 'a-real' history – i.e., connoting

area/territory as well as a “real” history; you play with this semantically. Alternative history tries to write a different history using a new mode of narration, a new kind of literariness...

SA: In India, all of us have been very centrally affected by what has come to be called “majoritarian” politics. It is a statistical fact that the majority of the population is Hindu. In the early 1980s, after stating this fact you added a “but...” Now you insert a comma, then add “and...”

For the past seven or eight years, Indian intellectual life has been thrown off balance by the insistent claims for *the* authentic, indigenist history; it made for a very peculiar situation where claims to a “past” were valorised, but on the other hand a very positivistic sense of history was also being played out. You typically heard statements such as: “That might be *your* history but it is *my* past,” and “This is *our* past”...

Therefore, paradoxically, at the moment when professional historians with any kind of international recognition were de-recognised nationally, the fact that you were being read outside India meant that you had given up on writing Indian history for Indians. Either you were now using Westernised ways of approaching India, or you were insidiously undermining the civilisational foundation of India. As historians, we found that precisely when history was being invoked for the majoritarian project in a very essentialist, mythical way, the work of the professional historian was being negated; it continued to be negated from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s.

In his collection of essays on history, Eric Hobsbawm builds the figure of the historian as whistle-blower; he famously commented, “Either Elvis Presley is alive or dead,” implying that historians should take a definite stand with regard to interpretation of events – whereby the debate then simply bypasses the historian and his/her particularity that determines the relationship to the historical material. A lot of people in India were skeptical about historians’ ability to represent beliefs, legends, that were clearly categorised yet were unstable. You were not equipped to deal with memory, with representations of the past, with the “fabrication” of history in the double sense of the term...

This was another indication of the unsuitability of historians to say anything constructive about the past – because history had not, as it were, so far built an optic of the popular.

At this point some of us who had not previously researched religious communities entered the

debate, and there was a certain freshness of approach. For instance, I did not consider myself an expert on *homo Islamicus Indicus* – there were other “experts” who told you about Muslims of India, specialists on Muslims. Given the fact that the construction of Muslims of the past is so much a product of the late 19th century, it made sense that those who were not professional Muslim-watchers should now have a say...

A lot of the interest in memory, in processes of remembrance and so on, has in India arisen very directly out of the way the conjunction regarding India having a majority of Hindus changed from “but...” to “and...”

That part of my work takes me into projects of rewriting the history of the Turkish conquest. The consensus seems to be that we should divide India’s medieval history very neatly between sabre-rattling *ghazis* whose origins were in Afghanistan, and rosary-fondling Sufis – a clear demarcation between two facets and two faces of Islam. And professional historians don’t research war, warriors, *ghazis* – we are supposed to study syncreticism, the coming together...

MF: ...Of what’s been called the ‘Turkiana’ and the ‘Sufiana’...

SA: Yes. So there was no way that the historians of medieval India or some of us who work on constructions of medieval Indian history could engage with how this conquest was relived, rethought, remembered, fabricated, etc. Memories of conquest are central to any kind of re-cognition of conquest by professional historians. However, there was no approach, no attempt to tackle how conquests are remembered, how Muslims are remembered... One of my initial responses to this was to write an essay titled “Representing the Musalmaan, Now and Then, Then and Now”.

My current research is on the fabrication of a very important popular *ghazi* – who obviously did not exist when he died! This character is not mentioned in any chronicles, yet his career is intimately tied to the career of the greatest despoiler of north India, the notorious 11th-century sultan, Mahmud of Ghazni. We have a very interesting situation where in textbooks we go by the chronicled Farsi accounts of the 17 raids made by Mahmud from Ghazni into temple towns and other centres of political authority, but in hagiographical texts and in popular literature, the career of the sultan is completely displaced by that of his nephew. This character is a dashing warrior who dies a virgin – a rare achievement for Turkish soldiers at that time in north India! – and

is venerated across the Gangetic belt, not because he was not part of a “just war”, but because he also lived a life that made sense, along with his martial activities.

Chronicled accounts of the sultan leave us in no doubt that he had *no* nephew called Sayyad Salar Masoud Ghazi.

Ever since the great Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta visited India and visited the shrine, from 1344 onwards all the stories about Mahmud of Ghazni are really stories about his non-existent but very important nephew. But no historians of medieval India took this up: how could they write about someone who didn't exist? That's another instance of mainstream history-writing for a long time not really going beyond a very narrow Anglo-Saxon positivist view of the past...

Lucien Lefebvre wrote a book about “unbelief” in 16th-century France, in which he argued that the tools for thinking about unbelief didn't exist in France at that time. But in India, it was the hardheaded history of economic and political centralisation, especially of medieval India, that became *de rigueur*, in particular after the cataclysmic events of the Partition of India. We can now look back and understand why our tallest medieval historian, after India was thus divided on the basis of religion, did not tell us too much about popular religiosity – and instead worked on the desire for a centralised state, the “unity” of India being the core motif running through the *longue durée* of Indian history...

But as conflict, the remembrance of conflict and the recognition of difference in the modern nation state have come on the table, if we can recognise that there is no necessarily single way of being a tenable patriot – there are people who would be “naturally” Indian, but “others”, i.e., Dalits, Muslims, women, whoever, who can be *that* as well as be Indians – if we can recognise difference in the nation state, then surely it is time to talk about the conflicts of the past *also* being part of the history of the nation state as well as of the history of different communities.

MF: How does this in a broader sense inflect the process of writing the histories of the non-West?

SA: That's a larger area of interest for me. For better or worse, I've kept company with a group of people who go under the name of Subaltern Studies. We have come in for a lot of criticism – first from the Western establishment when we were young, for being “anti-national”; and subsequently for being almost everything: “postmodern”, “post-structuralist”, etc.; and for not

going to the archive at all; and for writing only about Bengal...!

MF: We'll come to that a bit later...

SA: Indeed, because Bengal is where the Gangetic plain ends...! But the real problem was the inscription of what I have come to call “recalcitrant events” or “recalcitrant lives” in any major narrative. Especially in an all-encompassing one like the nationalist narrative, there are processes by which events are either excluded, or assimilated under another name into the grand saga. The aim of nationalist historiography is to include everything that happens, but on its own, i.e., nationalist, terms. So, characteristically, a violent event that happens under the slogan of “Long live Gandhi!” cannot be part of the mainstream story of nationalism...

Yet, 50 years after Independence, you cannot exclude people who were part of the freedom movement and were imprisoned by the British, and so on. Those people *will* be incorporated within the nationalist parameters.

When I wrote my book *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, about violent peasants who were as ‘Gandhian’ as any one else in the freedom movement for a year before burning a police station for a variety of give-and-take moves and countermoves, I called that a “recalcitrant event” – because to incorporate a violent event in the history of nationalism is then to start thinking about writing the history of nationalism in different ways. Prior to this, in a certain sense Gandhi is the author of the history of nationalism – he authors the major nationalist movement. His responses to a violent event are always a part of nationalist accounts.

The Chauri Chaura uprising made him suspend the all-India movement. So the history of this event is in its consequences, and the consequences were so cataclysmic that the event then cannot have any history *in itself*...

It is a recalcitrant event: the subject is *somebody else*. When you try and write a recalcitrant event, when there is no national reader for your story – despite the fact that it happens in India – the characters are not seen as part of the nationalist narrative. Rather, they are part of the mob that flung stains onto the clean sheets of Gandhian nationalism...

Therefore, I might as well be writing for readers who are *not* from India... I am telling a story that is unfamiliar to the ‘national’ audience, therefore the writing of the story, or the permission to

narrate that story, necessitates that it be written in a way that does not require any prior, privileged knowledge of nationalist history. Only when you take such a conceited and audacious step – writing about an event which is implicated in nationalism but writing in such a way that your writing does not take into account any prior nationalist understanding – can you wrench that event and its narration from the embeddedness of nationalism, and tell it.

Such a history has to be a de-ghettoised history. It is not meant really for those who know their nations. The story resists being read in national terms; the 'national'/'nationalist' reader will want to stop reading it, because it talks about all sorts of unfamiliar things.

To write about recalcitrant events is in a certain sense to take a first crucial step towards de-ghettoising Indian history...

Then the narrative doesn't become "Indian" history – it becomes *history that happens in India*.

Historians who do not let the characters of such narratives use local terms, in the writing of recalcitrant events, are denying the people the agency that enabled them to create and manipulate those local terms for their version of the event. The work of the historian would in any case have analytic and linguistic traces of things, places, events, perceptions, that are unfamiliar to a 'national'/'familiar' audience. The exercise of historiography then becomes one of defamiliarising the familiar, thereby redefining the way the "national" reader understood Gandhi; and also unfolding the unfamiliar for a non-Indian audience: it becomes a double move.

The crucial term and crucial institutional mechanism that Gandhi evolves at the lower, 'mass' level is that of the "volunteer", which is really a very modern bourgeois political idea in a stratified and hierarchical society, where you are "volunteering" to be something *other* than what you ascriptively are... you are pledging to be socialist, to be non-violent, etc., via an informal contract. Gandhi writes at great length about the volunteer.

When in the course of my research I talked to the relatives of the peasants, and when I examined court records, I came across the term "*otier*", a peasantisation of the English word "volunteer". Interestingly, the English word was not translated into Hindi, which would be *swyamsevak*, literally, "self-servant". This is a linguistic trace of a new kind of indigenist politics, and in terms of behaviour suggests that the term and its practice

may not be all that Gandhi wanted it to be. The text of my research is littered with intermediate local terms generated within a world that might not be understood by even the most ardent Hindi nationalist of north India...

This is a world that nationalism will always try to flatten out, in order to lay linguistic and organisational claims to it.

Therefore the writing of this world becomes a challenge in two ways:

First, it is very different for such histories to travel, as they do not have area specification or identifiable tags enabling easy landing at foreign destinations. Conventionally, narratives from this region have to be "South Asian" or "South-east Asian" history, and so on – and identifiable theory travels much lighter and much faster. This creates a very peculiar disjuncture, precisely where fiction from the non-West, of a very dense and rich sort – be it by Rushdie or Marquez or whoever – travels so easily across geographical boundaries.

Second, our concern about talking from one area of the South to the other purely through theory makes for a very strange situation where all our histories will never be able to travel as histories. Our historians will keep labouring at it, but as long as they follow the convention of writing history that can only travel theoretically, we will have denuded all the effort, given up the opportunity to find ways in which new narration would be adequate for new ways of asking historical questions. That is where I am putting some of my emphasis and energies: into the de-ghettoising of Indian history, written in direct challenge to the way mainstream history has been written within the nation...

For "recalcitrant" history to be read within the nation, it has to be written in such a way so as to be easily read by those who give the historian the permission to narrate the "national" in unfamiliar, alternative ways.

MF: One focus in your work is, as you have just explained, new *modes* of narration.

Simultaneously there is another focus, an insistence on a particular *kind* of writing – Jane Caplan made reference to it yesterday, and it is an embedded question – the "linguistic turn" in historiography, which lays a great deal of emphasis on practices of reading. Is this also applicable to writing? You have acknowledged your debt to Salman Rushdie, Mukul Kesavan, Amitav Ghosh: a particular kind of writing and new ways of configuring social history that you see in their writing...

SA: It is interesting that in India from the late 1970s onward – after Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, perhaps the only good book he’s written, and a very important piece of work – during the nationalist period, whatever writing took place was Atlas-like, so to speak. The writers carried the weight of all of India on their shoulders, whether it was Raja Rao in the philosophical mode, or Mulk Raj Anand’s social commentary. The logic was that if you came from a colonised nation, you could not talk about fragments of it, you had to talk about the *entire* nation. Consequently the prose became *Gazetteer*-like, encyclopaedic, it felt the strain. When you look, post-Rushdie, at Kesavan, Ghosh and others, there is no pretence of representing the whole of India. And there is a kind of confidence in the tellability of the tale and the way they have decided to tell it...

MF: But these writers are still narrating the nation...

SA: They might be. But their work demonstrates a sure-footedness, a playfulness, a way of upholding the distinction between Indian languages and English; the assertion that despite what Raja Rao had done in his *Kanthapura*, everything may/need *not* be readily available to every reader at the same time on the same page. Perhaps you will follow everything on that page, but if you don’t – well, don’t worry.

The historian’s insistence on the footnote at the bottom of the page, other than offering information, is also really a demand for a giving of assent, for confirmation by the readers... But if you write about unfamiliar things while following a familiar literary convention, and want the reader’s assent, you either have to offer a long glossary, or keep inserting the meaning within brackets, disrupting the text to explain what the word is.

If you are writing about the lives of people who express themselves in dialects or hybrids of English/Hindi, because these are what have been generated in their encounter with modernity, or with dominance, you can either let go of them by translating them straight away. But you also have the choice of retaining the linguistic particularities because they show a particular tension relevant to your story.

For instance, an old peasant who had been at a railway station where Gandhi disembarked said to me, “*Hamse taniye kariye rala, Gandhi Baba* (Gandhi Baba was slightly better built than I was).” The skill with which one uses the “recalcitrant” language that one encounters, either directly or through the archives, can make the

event appear meaningful for those who are familiar with that world; or one can leave traces of those who are distant from us in terms of time and social experience, while trying to effect their “rescue”.

It’s almost the equivalent of E.P. Thompson’s famous attempt to rescue the “underdog” from “the condescension of posterity”... When we read his classic of social history, we are somehow so engaged with the master story that we are not able to pick up the working-class nuances in the narration.

It is truly ironic that the writing on Indian labour, which has till now been rooted in Marxist political and economic theorising, relies on Thompson, who is otherwise accused of being a culturalist...!

However, because of the time I’m writing in, and because I am influenced by it, I *want* to retain the traces of the person who talks to me. I *want* that word in the archive, i.e., the word of the peasant speaking in the court of law, to be part of my “recalcitrant” narrative. I want it because there is something inherent within it that enables me to tell the story in the first instance. And I am not doing any favour to intelligibility by erasing that, or masking it via translating it within brackets or pointing the reader to a glossary.

MF: For you, as a person committed to alternative historiography, the historian must not abandon the archive; rather, must travel outward from the archive into fieldwork. Obviously the colonial archive is very different from the standard metropolitan archive. You maintain that the colonial archive is made when the event is “captured”, so to speak, in its moment by the judge, the district collector, or the magistrate, or the *Gazetteer*. The event is not written for the historian, but for these functionaries.

I would dispute this to some extent. For instance the *Gazetteer*, thought of as the staple of our history and in a sense our originary history, and also as an important moment of the archive: taking 1857 in particular, while the war was going on, each document was copied in triplicate. One copy was sent to Calcutta to be stored, one copy was sent to Lahore and one was kept in Delhi. The archive was also thus being built with a view to future historians, with a view to why they would write the events, and how...

At the same time, the archive is a fragment – it involves an act of translation, and also involves censorship... You have written about soldiers in World War I, whose letters were being censored: the translated, censored portions are kept in the

archive. You also maintain that what was thought inconsequential for the purposes of surveillance actually escapes the archive. But at the same time, the archive is not an innocent or arbitrary collection of documents – it is formed with intentionality and purpose.

SA: In fact, within official historiography the war of 1857 is part of the history of England, it is *not* a history of India. It is an epitome of the way the English character shines in its moment of adversity. I'm almost quoting from the long prefaces of the demi-official historian of 1857, John William Kaye, whose bust, till it was moved to the British Library from the fourth floor of the old India Office Library, seemed to sceptically observe each scholar going in and out of that august domain...

The official writings on 1857 are really about English resolve and English character – so you can end up writing about the greatest challenge to British rule in India as the history of Englishmen under fire. The way 1857 is experienced and archived by the colonial regime is not 'normal' administration. When I refer to the colonial archive in more general terms, I imply that archives in all places are the archives of the state, and the density or lightness of that depends on how the state administers populations – and how much of knowledge generation it leaves to the components of society that would do the work of the state *without* a centralised state actually knowing that. You could have big landholders ruling on the basis of patronage, i.e., on the basis of knowledge that emanates from an affective relationship with the subject population, as opposed to a sovereign relation. The 1857 war and the documents around it are a special case in terms of the colonial archive.

Historians tend to say disparagingly that such-and-such account is a "Gazetteer-like" version of an event. The chronicles of the *Gazetteer* are ways in which people in the service of the state produced a narrative of the doings of the state – which somehow, even in terms of the criteria of history writing at that time, falls below the standard.

Abul Fazl, the great scholar and functionary in Akbar's court, produced a huge history, the *Akbarnama*, of which one section, the *Ain-e-Akbari*, is a *Gazetteer*, listing all the *ains*, the acts/codes, and also has a very detailed description of 12 major provinces. This kind of official knowledge generation is also characteristic of the colonial regime; by the 1870s, we see a clear move from a descriptive to a classificatory

system, whereby colonial rule has been re-established after the 1857 rebellion; the state has penetrated much deeper; it also wants to produce resources much more locally, and therefore needs an official *Digest* of everything about the natives to be on the desk of every new office transferred to a district about which he knows nothing... The *Gazetteer* and the various *Digests* are a mode of para-historic discourse integral to a new colonial bureaucracy.

In this colloquium, Jane Caplan posited "reading like a state" as a metaphorical parallel to James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*; and in the context of surveillance and policing, the problematic of "touching like a state" was also brought up... The real problem for the historian is trying to *not* write like the state.

Most documents are produced by functionaries of the state in the normal course of their duties. Sometimes, depending on how specialised that duty is, and how formally structured the rules of production of official 'truth' within that, it gives rise to very specialised descriptions and vocabularies. For instance, that of revenue collection and assessment: it would go back to Ricardian theory, but you would also get penal narratives, the result of the judge really creating his own archive.

For the historian, the event exists *because* it is on record...

As a historian, I cannot go into the field and wait for an event to unfold, as an anthropologist might do. The event is always a gift, *given* to me – by the archive.

Rapporteur's Note

The enigmatic virgin warrior-saint, conqueror/healer, *shaheed mard* (manly martyr) Sayyad Salar Masaud Ghazi, or Ghazi Miyan, is rendered legible only as a "recalcitrant" hyphen between historians and hagiographers, even while he has a cultic following and an overwhelming popular presence. He was 19 years old when he was martyred at Bahraich in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, in 1033. Ghazi Miyan is paradoxically absent from all standard chronicles and histories of his uncle Mahmud, the sultan of Ghazni, notorious for repeatedly invading north Indian temple towns to pillage, slaughter and raze.

In the 16th century, Tulsidas, author of the *Ramcharitmanas*, commented with some irony on the blind faith that populations, of all religions, placed in the salvific powers of the shrine of Ghazi Miyan in Bahraich, where a large fair has been held annually since the year of the saint's death:

*Lahi aankh kab aandhre, baanjh puut kab biyaae
Kab korhi kaayaa lahi, jag bahraich jaaye...*

(Who has seen the blind regain sight; which barren woman has been delivered of a son)

Which leper has regained his limbs – yet the entire world keeps heading for Bahraich...)

Abdur Rahman Chishti's Persian text *Mirat-i-Masaudi* (c. 1611) informs us that Salar Masaud was conceived in Ajmer; he had a Jesus-like countenance, "excelled in all the arts" at a very young age; "...he was constantly performing ablutions, though if he prayed without bathing, so pure was he in body and mind, it would not have been wrong. He had clean carpets spread where he was wont to sit, he wore pure garments and delighted in fragrant essences and eating betel nut..."

Using his divine perceptions to outwit wily enemy Hindu *rajas*, 12-year-old Masaud was leading soldiers into battle: "the unbelievers... were routed, and the Faithful scattered their heads in every street". Court astrologers warned their royal patrons that the "*mussalman*" vanquisher "is protected by Khuda (God) himself".

In their efforts to subdue the chaste Masaud, Hindu kings, who considered Turks to be of debased character, resorted to questionable strategies themselves. One popular ballad recounts how the "shameless *kafirs* (unbelievers)" paraded their women before Ghazi Miyan and his companions in order to create distraction. The saint possessed a perfected defence, however: "*Jab aurat par pari nazar, sar kaat aapan jeb mein dhaya* (As soon as his gaze fell on the women, he cut his head off and put it in his pocket)". Thus safely decapitated, he defeated the opposing forces and only subsequently replaced his head.

Masaud had a premonition of his martyrdom. Prior to his last battle he distributed all his money and property to those around him, telling them to spend it quickly; he said, "Jesus found no use even for his woollen cap and needle, what good shall I get from all this wealth?" He then dismissed his followers and retreated "to occupy himself with religious exercises; from that time he abjured food and water, eating a large quantity of betel nut and rubbing himself with perfumes..."

On 15 June 1033, several Hindu chiefs, "seeing that the army of Islam was reduced to nothing, unitedly attacked the bodyguard of the Prince [of Martyrs]... As the time of evening prayers came on... a chance arrow pierced the main artery in the arm of the Prince of the Faithful. His sun-like countenance became pale as the new moon. Repeating the text in praise of martyrdom, he dismounted. Sikandar Diwana and the other servants of the loved-one of God carried him to the shade of the *mahua* tree, and laid him down upon a couch. Sikandar Diwana, taking his honoured head upon his lap, sat looking towards Mecca, weeping bitterly. The Prince of Martyrs opened his eyes but once, then drew a sigh, and committed his soul to God..."

"A sound of woe and lamentation broke from the people; they wept aloud, and brandishing their swords, rushed upon the enemy of the unbelievers, and gave up their lives... By the time of the evening prayers not one was left. All the servants of Masaud lay scattered like stars."

(This note draws upon Shahid Amin's "Sagas of Victories, Memories of Defeat", a detailed historical analysis of the Ghazi Miyan legend, in *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation*, eds. Okwui Enwezor et al, Documenta11_Platform2, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002.)