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Cosmopolitanism's Other Utopia: The Humanities, Cultural Studies and The Time Bias of Subaltern Communication

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How might "the humanities participate in a new cosmopolitan citizenship in an age of neoliberal crisis and decline"? How might the humanities "reinvigorate" some kind of cosmopolitics through the media, with it, or against it, or simply within range of its force field? While my appointed task here is to address the question of media and the humanities specifically, the weight of the first question also demands attention, especially as it burdens the second. I will address these questions posed by the Institute's colloquium by bringing together a discussion of Harold Innis' communication theory with a consideration of a specific media practice, that of non-literate subaltern Dalit women agriculturalists of Andhra Pradesh, India. There was a time, not so long ago that the narrative syntax of most discussions of the humanities and the media would position the humanities as antidote to the poison of the mass media, or as hero to villain in a story of possible redemption. But it is precisely the lock of that syntax that cultural studies has been able to break, enabling us to explore and articulate, I would argue, far more interesting things about both the humanities and the media. So let me put my cards on the table. My overall thesis here is an argument for the radical rupture that cultural studies, especially postcolonial cultural studies, has sought to inaugurate in what we call the Arts, without which any talk of the humanities reinvigorating cosmopolitics would simply be empty, at best. In more recent years, as our universities have become more exclusive, less democratic, more corporatized, less public, cultural studies' scholarly intervention, it seems to me, despite its ubiquity, has also been on the wane with our various contemporary returns to ethics, to theology, and even to various forms of positivist immediacy and methodological individualism, with all their moralizing consequences. The discourse of cosmopolitanism that has also returned recently is symptomatic of this situation such that we will not be able to leave the circulation of this term unexamined here in the end. In the midst of so many returns, a return to Innis' work is worthwhile because his communication theory is for us a threshold text. Even though Innis' own writings can and have been mobilized to authorize the construction of high cultural racial fortresses against the invasions of American mass media among other vulgarities and impurities (as was the original mandates of the CBC and the Canada Council), the subaltern media practice of the Dalit women farmers of Andhra Pradesh provokes a different reading of Innis which this essay will assemble. Innis' communication theory is a threshold text in its interdisciplinary range across the humanities and social sciences. In this aspect, it stands at the threshold of cultural studies own interdisciplinary intervention in Canadian universities (in which communication programs played such a prominent role) from the late 1970s on. While the links are not so direct, there can be no doubt that Innis' communication theory lent its authoritative weight to the establishment of communication programs during the system's expansionary phase. Moreover, the work coming out of Canadian communication programs served as a ground, as McLuhan might have put it, on which people picked up and refunctioned Birmingham, Australian and American cultural studies over the 1980s. But Innis' work is a threshold text for us in another way as well. The cultural turn in the social sciences has been much discussed over the years, but the concomitant and equally radical social scientific turn in the humanities has been less remarked upon. The critical, defamiliarizing operation of re-coding all the art and arcana of the various specialized disciplines and practices through a master concept of communication—"a crisis of representation!"—is one step toward their immanent transformation. Crucially, this recoding enabled those subjectivities hitherto excluded from the monopoly of high literate knowledge and the culture of command to articulate how the rites and rituals of the humanities are a media of a totalizing project of social engineering and government. Unmasked as media of communication, the discourses of the humanities are desubjectified of their aura of depoliticized transcendence onto an immanent plane of semiotic codes shared with mass and popular media. In this way, the humanities are brought out from the interior of private fantasy and made public and politically accessible as one set of mediations immanent among others in the process of social reproduction.

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In brief, this repoliticization of the humanities is what lies at the very heart of the break with tradition cultural studies sought to achieve. Innis' does not take us the whole way down this path, but he does clear part of the trail. As we shall see, he does so in a way that now throws critical light on contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, the media practice I will discuss below well exemplifies how feminist and postcolonial interventions have furthered this break and intensified this repoliticization. The video-media practice of these Dalit women of the Community Media Trust makes us confront again the phallocentrism and eurocentrism of the received tradition.

The Community Media Trust (CMT) is comprised of ten women who have made more than one hundred videos over the last fifteen years.[i] These videos are regularly screened in their own communities and farming villages throughout Andhra Pradesh, especially during an annual travelling biodiversity *jathara* (festival). Also, the videos circulate nationally and internationally through development and environmentalist social-movement solidarity networks, and are screened at major Indian congresses, which gather together environmental, scientific, and agricultural policy-makers, NGOs and subaltern farmers from around the world. These connections to what is usually called a transnational civil society, and to small farmers not only in India, but Asia, Africa, and Latin America (where their videos also occasionally circulate) as well, allow the CMTs to claim and assert a subaltern cosmopolitics. The videos are politically engaged: Gender, environmental, and agricultural issues, particularly involving seed sovereignty, biodiversity, and subaltern women's autonomy are prominent themes of the work. Videos range in genre from grassroots investigative journalism, to point-of-view documentaries, to participatory research videos, made in collaboration with the Deccan Development Society and a network of *sangham* (agricultural and credit cooperatives) to which the women belong. They have also invented a singular video practice that mediates the management of their cooperative. My discussion of their work will focus on these videos in particular. Since the situation of these women's lives remains alien to the everyday concerns of the humanities in Canada, I will begin with a contextual background account of their work. This will furthermore afford us an opportunity to examine one manifestation of neoliberalism in another part of the world.

Subalternity and Neoliberalism

The Dalit farmers of Andhra Pradesh are among the most marginalized of agricultural communities in a region where farming is generally a precarious condition of desperation and deprivation. A Green Revolution, "modernization" of agriculture was pursued in post-colonial India as part of the cold war strategy to contain subaltern revolt throughout Asia. (Wolf, 1969) As a result, farmers became dependent upon a network of agricultural research institutes, private companies, and public authorities. (Patel and Müller, 2004) This dependency had two sides, which remain at the forefront of *sangham* women's struggle for autonomy today. These women are dependent upon research institutes, agribusiness corporations, and state agencies for their access to key farm inputs, since seeds engineered by private companies have replaced those formerly collected and saved by farmers themselves. Seeds now have to be purchased along with petrochemical based fertilizers and pesticides, leaving farmers vulnerable to rising oil prices as state subsidies are reduced according to the dictates of the World Bank, IMF, and other institutions of private international governance. High-tech seeds and petrochemical based components of agriculture, however, also require monopolized instructions on their use, which make obsolete the agro-ecological knowledge farmers have traditionally taught across generations. (In this regard, small farmers have been subjected to a process of deskilling comparable to the fate of industrial workers around the world. In both cases, modernization has entailed a radical devaluation, if not outright destruction of experience, memory, and tradition as new regimes of truth and new institutions of expertise—in what Lacan usefully calls the "university discourse"—become the archive and repository of accumulated human experience.) During the 1980s, multinational agribusiness corporations gained further access to markets created by this managerial system (Patel & Muller, 2004). Liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 brought two further threats to small farmers.

The first of these stemmed from the World Bank's campaign to dismantle the Indian government's famine prevention measure, the Public Distribution System for Foodgrains. In 1992, the government relented to these demands and sharply restricted access to the program. The World Bank's policies have increased the endemic hunger and incidents of malnutrition, especially of women and children. (Patel and Muller, 2004) In response, the *sangham* women organized their own Alternative Public Distribution System. The CMT has made promotional videos about this program explaining how it can be accessed.

Secondly, American biotechnology companies assiduously campaigned to force regulatory changes that in effect made traditional practices of saving and exchanging seeds illegal, securing a monopoly space for agribusiness producers. (Kumbamu, 2006) Resulting mandatory seed registration threatened to worsen the problem of biopiracy.

Once local farmers —persuaded by Monsanto's marketing campaign promising a quick path out of debt— began to grow Bt Cotton with mixed to disastrous results, the CMT made two point-of-view documentaries that followed the disappointing experience of several farmers with Bt Cotton over three years. Since Monsanto marketed their patented seeds through promotional videos and intensive advertising in all media, the CMT's documentaries were a direct counter-strike in a media struggle over the fate of small farmers.

Moreover, Monsanto introduced Bt Cotton in India at a time when the news of farmer suicides could no longer be ignored. Caught in debt and facing crop failure just when social security programs were being withdrawn, thousands of farmers were being driven to suicide across India (two every hour by one account) (Kumbamu, 2006).

As these social and ecological crises grew over the 1980s, the Dalit women of Medak began to organize themselves into a network of agricultural and credit cooperatives. One of their key achievements was the construction of their own agrobiodiversity register, which both serves as the foundation for their petroleum-free, organic, and biodiverse agriculture, and prevents agribusiness multinationals from monopolizing genetic information.

Autonomy and Commonpolitics

In order to consolidate and further their pursuit of autonomies, the *sangham* women resolved to create their own

autonomous media. The new satellite and private channel media-scape that emerged in India in 1991 generally ignored rural issues and concerns of the poor. In total ten women completed a year-long training program organized by the DDS in 1998-99. The DDS maintains a production studio the women use. The CMT was formally inaugurated on International Rural Women's Day (October 15) in 2001 when a board of 11 trustees, including eight *sangham* women assumed management of the media cooperative.

Four features of the CMT's ties to the political body of the *sangham* are important for understanding the singularity of the women's media practice. First, the *sangham* are part of a network connecting urban spaces to rural ones, and re-articulating an elaborate and historically formed division of labour within their own community and across alter-globalization social movements and academic research institutes. In this way, they belong to a "network of networks," which for many observers is the characteristic organizational form of the global alterglobalization movement. Second, this political body both presupposes and demands the invention of a wide array of "powers of co-operation"—cultural traditions, competences and identifications—without which it could not exist. Third, in constituting itself as a decentralized political body, not only are a whole range of new communication needs created, but also an entire lacework of molecular public spheres are called into being—from urban lecture halls, class rooms, theatres, laptops, laboratories, and boardrooms to village panchayats and, especially, the rural itinerary of the travelling biodiversity *jathara*. Fourth, this re-articulation of social spaces communicates across the barriers posed by literacy.

Video Praxis

Not surprisingly, the women cite their responsibility to teach others and help them organize as their main reason for choosing video. They explained to me that when outsiders come to learn the practice of biodiverse agriculture, videos are helpful in several ways. Seeing helps one understand what one hears. But agriculture also has its own temporality. While visitors can usually stay for only a few days, they may need to see crops and fields at different times and seasons to understand how things are done. Video allows the women to work around these limitations of timing. Another key issue of timing involves making communicable the agricultural knowledge the community possesses so that their children can be taught how to work with biodiversity before this knowledge is totally lost. Equally important for them, is their ability to record *sangham* councils in order to encourage community participation and make transparent decision-making processes in a timely way. Videos of public meetings also serve to teach other farmers how to cooperate as *sangham* members. Moreover, women elders are especially anxious to reach a wider audience with their agricultural and nutritional expertise than they can by attending meetings.

There is one further crucially important aspect to their choice of video. This has to do with video's specific capacity to translate across orality and literacy. The CMT women observe that not only do their videos allow them to communicate with literate professionals, but also disarm the usual dismissive and sexist paternalism practiced by literate employers and officials.

Moreover, the women of the *sangham* also produce hours of community radio programs. While this radio has its local audience, nobody bothers to translate these and they do not circulate beyond Medak. The question I want to pose here, then, is in one respect a rather trivial one: What specifically is it about their video practice that makes it a preferred or more effective medium for communicating across the barriers of locality and non-literacy? As we will see, this question leads us to confront the singular innovation of their media aesthetic. Moreover, it is a question that provokes us to re-encounter Harold Innis' communication theory from a fresh and urgently contemporary perspective.

Mediation

If it is the case, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) suggested, that every kind of new media models itself on other established traditional media while breaking with its ground rules in some way, and that our media competence is nothing other than the dilemmas and problems of old habits confronting new possibilities, then video seems to be an especially composite medium in which the pragmatic rules of a range of other media remain available as relics in some kind of communicational junkyard. Indeed, one will recall here McLuhan's famous celebration of the death of "linear" Gutenberg Man with the retrieval of acoustic space by broadcast television. On this account, television remains a "hot" medium insofar as it remains trapped in the habits of literacy, whereas "cool" television liberates long repressed powers by extending us into the centerlessness of acoustic space.

Perhaps those of us from the world of literacy do tend merely to "read" television as our overworked critical metaphor has it, or as the withering of the televisual first into information soundbyte and stereotype, and, then inevitably, into the news-channel band of running teletype both suggest.

I want to take a closer look at the aesthetic and cognitive aspects of the CMT's media practice. In doing so, I want to argue that it is the temporality of their video practice that allows them to communicate beyond boundaries of literacy and engage in gendered class struggle. To do this though, I first need to detour through Innis' theory of communication bias. While Innis' work is now more widely read, I still want to clarify a frequent misunderstanding of the idea of communication bias. This is the simple communicational reductionism often attributed to Innis: Stone lasts a long time so writing on stone is biased toward time, whereas you can carry papyrus everywhere, so writing on paper has a space bias. He does actually say something like this, but I think he is building up to say something else.

The key thing here is to situate Innis' late communication works within the anxieties of the conjuncture in which they were written, and to place the bias of communication thesis in the constellation of his other two major ideas. For his great conceptual triad—the idea of "communicative bias," as well as the historical analytic concepts of the "monopoly of knowledge," and the imperial "margin"—are formulated not only to further our understanding of why empires of the past fell. Rather, Innis formulates them in order to understand why the British Empire was faced with revolt, why the world had been at war for much of the century, and, especially, but why the American state must make war. If his earlier books on the economic history of Canada led him, in formulating his "staples thesis," to appreciate the importance of the political fact of Empire for Canadian social and economic history, than the later work on communication (presented in

three related volumes: *Empire and Communication*, 1950; *The Bias of Communication*, 1951; and *Changing Concepts of Time*, 1952) is very much an intellectual response to the supercession of the British Empire in the world economy by the US war machine. "The change from British imperialism to American imperialism," Innis (1952) writes, "has been accompanied by friction and a vast realignment of the Canadian system" (p. 120) and his work on communication sought to understand this realignment. In this regard, the least satisfactory way to read him, in my view, is to find in his work a communicational determinism. Rather Innis' investigation of the importance of modes of communication to the rise and fall of empires and his formulation of this conceptual triad is a substantial exploration of one of many mediations of social and political change, one that he thought was increasing in importance. Innis formulates the issue in this way: "[. . .] it is difficult to over-estimate the significance of technological change in communication or the position of monopolies built up by those who systematically take advantage of it. The disequilibrium created by the character of technological change in communication strikes at the heart of the economic system" (p. 108).

Thus the idea of the bias in either time or space of a particular mode of communication directs us to one of the "tipping points" of imperial power, for communication over space and time is a material problem every empire must somehow solve. Yet the appropriation of the materials of communication into the social and political world involves its own biases. Consequently, the essays in *Bias of Communication* present a constellation of fragmentary and divergent causal chains: Papyrus is light and easily transported, but not very durable compared with writing on clay or building with stone. Thus the signifier's bias presents another material problem, which demands a social and political response, particularly some re-organization of the division of labour. Writing in stone—pictographs, hieroglyphs, and the pyramids themselves—enables a dynastic absolute monarchy in Egypt to project imperial power over space and time, just as the Mesopotamian empire is able to do through the construction of capital cities. But writing in stone requires a very specialized skill and thus a class of scribes who come to possess a monopoly of knowledge when they extend this technique to writing on papyrus. This in turn strengthens and entrenches the priesthood as a decentralized bureaucracy. Their control over calendrical calculations of flood tides and festivals allows them to decide the time for paying tribute and in this way raises the importance of the temple as a political institution as distinct from the imperial palace and the military. Meanwhile, the palace restrains infighting among temples. Yet the spatial bias of papyrus allows the priesthood to become essential to administration and ultimately tips the balance in their favour, so that monarchical power over space is weakened with respect to the priesthood's monopoly over time. Weakened control over space, in turn, leaves the Egyptians unable to repel the invasions of the Hyksos thus bringing down the fifth dynasty.

In the title essay "The Bias of Communication," Innis brings such a historiographical imagination to bear upon the Sumerian and Akkadian empires of Mesopotamia, the Palestinian Jews, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Chinese, and the Romans. He endeavors to construe how the phonetic alphabet, the ideogram, papyrus, parchment, paper, block printing, and mechanical printing poses either a bias of space or of time in relation to various other social forces and historical processes in play at different times and places. But it is Innis' diagnosis of the space bias of industrialized paper-making and printing, of radio, cinema, and television, and his assessment of their cultural and political consequences that is of more immediate interest to us here. "A Plea for Time" retraces the concepts of the bias of communication and monopoly of knowledge in order not only to denounce our "obsession with present-mindedness," but, in the wake of two world wars, also to examine the fault lines of "Western civilization," in order to understand why "the political realization of democracy invariably encourages the hypnotist" (Innis, 1951, p. 90). Articulating the core of Benedict Anderson's famous study of the links between nationalism and print capitalism three decades ahead of its time, Innis argues that "large-scale production of newsprint made from wood" coupled with the "application of the industrial process to printing" are necessary conditions without which the political reorganization of the world in terms of a system of nation-states over the nineteenth century would not have been possible: "The printing industry had been characterized by decentralization and regionalism such as had marked the division of the Western world in nationalism and the division and instability incidental to regions within nations." Whereas radio "appealed to vast areas, overcame the division between classes in its escape from literacy, and favoured centralization and bureaucracy. A single individual could appeal at one time to vast numbers of people speaking the same language [. . .] Stability within language units became more evident and instability between language units more dangerous" (1951, p. 82). Cinema then, for Innis, brings together the powers of political mobilization implied by industrial communication based on the eye and ear: "In Germany moving pictures of battles were taken and shown in theatres almost immediately afterwards. The German people were given an impression of realism which compelled them to believe in the superiority of German arms [. . .] In some sense the problem of the German people is the problem of Western Civilization. As modern developments in communication have made for greater realism they have made for greater possibilities of delusion." (1951, pp. 81-82) Industrialized printing is a crucial condition of the industrialization of war and this crossed a decisive threshold at the turn of the century with war-mongering becoming a key marketing strategy for "yellow journalism" during the Boer and Spanish-American wars. But the imperialism of the industrial state is similarly destined by technique. Biopolitical mobilization in production, consumption, and war, Innis observes, increasingly comes to depend on each other. For Innis, these inner connections lie at the root of the subversion of American democracy into a capitalist culture programmed to continually wage war through populist manipulation and manufactured consent by a knowledge monopoly. Britain and the rest of Europe follow the American lead into the twentieth century in the withering of liberal democracy into a state of war: "Communication based on the eye in terms of printing and photography had developed a monopoly which threatened to destroy Western civilization first in war and then in peace. This monopoly emphasized individualism and in turn instability and created illusion in catchwords such as democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech" (1951, pp. 81-82). In *Changing Concepts of Time*, which explores these theses in greater depth, Innis sums up his argument through this concatenation of citations: "The dependence on war has become more vital to our economic system than the dependence of war on industry." "Should an enemy not exist he will have to be created." "A war cannot be carried on without atrocity stories for the home market" (Innis, 1952, p. 43). The dialectic of realism and delusion—we now call "spectacle"—however, is tracked to a structural feature of information, which, following Innis, we might describe as the commodity form of the new:

Our study of the press has suggested that insistence on time as a uniform and quantitative continuum has obscured qualitative differences and its disparate and discontinuous character. Advertisers build up monopolies of time to an

important extent through the use of news. They are able to take full advantage of technological advances in communication and to place information before large numbers at the earliest possible moment. Marked changes in the speed of communication have far-reaching effects on monopolies over time because of their impact on the most sensitive elements of the economic system. (1952, p. 108)

This account of the space bias of the mass media is connected to three further lines of argument in the communication works. First of all, US imperialism is singled out for Innis' most emphatic condemnations, while British imperialism is relatively given greater leniency. Whatever one wants to do with these judgements, Innis' observation that a "general as Prime Minister of England is unthinkable [. . .] whereas in the United States a general as President has been regarded as almost the rule" is striking (1952: p. 45). Yet the reason behind Innis' preferences turns on a crucial issue for his historical imagination. American innovations in technique, in commercial and publicity strategies over the nineteenth century made it the vanguard of the spatialization of time. But this is only part of Innis' story. At the centre of Innis' judgment of these two empires is a comparison between the cultural and political significance of the American written constitution in relation to Britain's unwritten constitution, and a weighing of the implications of the common law and Roman law traditions. It is here that we pick up the thread of a second set of key historiographical concepts Innis reworks in an original synthesis. His comparative nostalgia for the British Empire, if that is what it is, follows from his sense of the greater institutional importance of an oral tradition—with respect to common law and an unwritten constitution—there than in the United States.

Common Law traditions assume that the state is part of the law and the subject has greater difficulty in separating himself from the state. Change is consequently more gradual and less subject to revolution. Constitutions are largely protected from drastic revision. But Roman law tradition favoured by written constitutions in the United States and in members of the Commonwealth leans toward imperialism, and threatens the beneficial effects of common law in Western Civilization. (1952: p. 76)

Indeed, it is the temporal possibilities of an oral tradition, its ritualized everyday echoing durations and its rhizomatic institutions of memory, which then forms Innis' intuition of a radically absolute otherness to the space bias of industrialized communication based on the eye. The theory of communicative bias insightfully accounts for the crucial importance of lyrical and musical traditions to cultures of resistance. It explains as well the significance of resistance culture to subaltern places such as those of everyday domestic reproduction, peasant and artisanal markets, the ward, the hallway, the streetcorner, and schoolyard, These are places for the elaboration of oral counter-memories, and as such, they bring into being heterotemporalities caught up in complex repetitions, which is how they can serve as heterotopias. Innis' (1951) plea for time here is made in the name of what he elsewhere calls "the strategy of culture": "Culture is concerned with the capacity of the individual to appraise problems in terms of space and time and with enabling him to take the proper steps at the right time" (p. 85). For Innis, the crucial therapeutic importance of oral traditions rests with their potential to "offset" the space bias of industrialized communication based on the eye.

But Innis conceives of the otherness of a time bias in oral traditions' time bias along his other major axis of analysis as well. Just as the Jews of Palestine and the Phoenicians, on the margins of Egyptian empire, translated pictography on papyrus into the phonetic alphabet, which then met the oral tradition of the ancient Greeks with momentous consequences, so it was on the margins of the Roman Empire that Roman jurisprudence was reworked by English oral tradition into common law. For Innis, as for Samir Amin, history is made in the margins of empires. On the question of Canadian culture in the face of American economic expansion, Innis (1952) is unequivocal: "We are," he writes, "indeed fighting for our lives [. . .] by attempting constructive efforts to explore the cultural possibilities of various media of communication and to develop them along lines free from commercialism, Canadians might make a contribution to the cultural life of the United States" (pp. 19-20). Beyond such exhortations, his response to questions posed by our contemporary marginality is a more ambivalent one than the assured cultural nationalism others have found within easy reach. If Canada, in mid-twentieth century, was condemned to occupy in "North America the place of Czechoslovakia as a show window in relation to Russia," then Innis can only hope that Canada, from within the space bias of American technique, would be able to find some way to become a more "stable society," in order to survive the self-destructive gravitational acceleration of American militarism. For our purposes here, let me offer two observations. First we note Innis' astonishing grasp of Canadian failure: In the deep winter of the Cold War, Innis points out that "we have never had the courage of Yugoslavia in relation to Russia and have never produced a Tito" (1952: p. 44), rather our history has taken a different path; "it has been largely in response to the pressure from American imperialism that Canada has developed her own type of imperialism" (1952: p. 69), reproducing core-periphery dependency on a national scale as an instrument of US geopolitical strategy. Any kind of return to Innis today has to face this historical analysis squarely, especially with regard to the impact resource extraction industries continue to have on Aboriginal communities (such as the impact of tar sands development in Fort Chipewyan).

Innis' investigations then are very much concerned with connecting the dots between the economic necessities of industrial production, industrialized communication, political institutions, and war. Innis' insights moreover resonate remarkably with Giovanni Arrighi's interpretation of European power struggles during the fifteenth and sixteenth century to monopolize Asian markets. Arrighi (2007) points out that these power struggles were a "major determinant of the peculiar combination of capitalism, militarism, and territorialism that propelled the globalization of the European system" (p. 320).

Arrighi's account allows us to draw out an important implication of Innis' thesis of the space bias of Euro-American industrial capitalism. Even before the conquest of America, nascent European capitalism involved flows of finance, commodities and labour power across a variety of state forms. But after the American conquest, some paramount power—the Iberian monarchs, then the Dutch, the British, and finally the US—ruled over this multi-state "world-systemic" space monopolizing strategic capacities and organizing the conditions of possibility of capital accumulation for vassal and rival locations of accumulation alike. Arrighi's (1994) account of the "hegemonic transitions" between these centers of global capitalism, then, is of particular interest to us here.

Accumulation based on commodity production and exchange will ultimately, the more it succeeds, reach a limit where either markets are saturated and/or competition is too intense for anyone to realize a profit. At these moments, what David Harvey (2004) calls "accumulation by dispossession" has each time intensified—the pillage of aboriginal America, the European Absolutist enclosures and persecutions of the Eighty Years' war, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the looting of India and East Asia, the imperialist scramble for Africa and most recently neoliberal globalization. Each time, however, the underlying over-accumulation crisis remained unresolved until some imperial governmental project was able to pilot the turmoil of creative destruction toward what Harvey calls a new "spatial-temporal fix." (pp. 43-44) As Arrighi (2007) explains, each hegemonic transition involved an expansion in the territorial shape of power: what we see is a

progression from a city-state and a cosmopolitan business diaspora (the Genoese); to a proto-national state (the United Provinces) and its joint-stock chartered companies; to a multinational state (the United Kingdom) and its globe-encircling tributary empire; to a continent-sized national state (the United States) and its world-encompassing system of transnational corporations, military bases, and institutions of world governance. (p. 235)

Each of these new and enlarged spaces of accumulation involved a fundamental reorganization of ongoing class struggles over the shape of the division of labour, and so, over the qualities and boundaries of its shape. For the division of labour, whatever its historical configuration, is eminently a political, cultural, economic, and juridical construction, all at once. It is both a historically created body of involuntary association in which the space of the political is given to us and a body that, among much else, also thinks. This immanence of human political ecology is what was reshaped each time by the hegemonic transitions Arrighi analyzes.

Innis' work allows us to understand more deeply how any division of labour has its specific communicative requirements and how each of these world-systemic shapes had posed new and original communicational problems. Everything from the emergence of prose and standard national vernacular, to perspective and printing, to the birth of mechanical reproduction, to sound bites and stereotypes, to computerization and current new media today are integral chronotopical mediations of accumulation.

Political Aesthetics of the Sangham Shot

Not only does Innis' critique hold for communication systems designed by the multinational corporations and their states in our own era, but his assessment of its anti-democratic character and its unsustainable nullification of time accords very cogently with the *sangham* women's experience of monopolistic agribusiness and post-liberalization media in India. The CMT's own videographical manifesto, as they present it in their video *The Sangham Shot*, leads us toward the singularity of their political aesthetic. Here, they explain that their videos are organized around the formal principle of an eye-level shot which they call the "*sangham* shot," since in the *sangham*, they say, "we are all equals." This shot is distinguished from two others: the "patel shot" (or landlord shot) where the camera is positioned to look down on the women working the soil from up high; and the "slave shot," a reverse shot taken from below looking up.

In their videos, a mid range face-to-face frame of someone making a statement or declaration about a particular problem or issue replaces typical "talking head" explanations. Their videos do not make use of any conventional "gutenberg" props to identify and authorize literate expertise. Nor do they frame an ideal type (of the non-literate farmer) or a general condition (for eg. of water scarcity). Instead, their videos always show a specific person from a specific village speaking about this field, those crops, or these problems. This is not to say that their videos reject explanations and generalizations altogether. But most often these are syntactically subordinated to an acoustic-image composition of a direct, face-to-face, immanent address meant to catch and hold the viewer's look.

For example, this syntax plays a particularly crucial role in the video *Making of an Agricultural Biodiversity Register*, as it documents extensive community involvement in creating an agro-biodiversity register. The video's specific syntax foregrounds individual involvement and community cooperation, as well as women's leadership role in this creative process. In advocating the use of such biodiversity registers as a seed sovereignty and autonomy strategy, the video explains how the village of Khasimpur created its biodiversity register, presenting this as an example for other subaltern farming communities to follow. For the *sangham's* solidarity network of outsiders, this explanation takes the form of English subtitles outlining the steps. But this is the barest of explanations, as it becomes clear from another kind of writing the farmers inscribe on the grounds of the village assembly out of flour, vegetable dyes, seeds, plants, and terracotta figures that extensive knowledge of dryland agriculture comprises this account. This, however, enables the video to underscore another crucial point it seeks to make. Not only are the assembled farmers experts in biodiverse agriculture, but this expertise belongs to the community. As the editing cuts back and forth between the colourful register on the ground and the public deliberation between farmers around it, the face-to-face intimacy of the *sangham* shot serves to show how this expertise is cooperatively sustained. The video concludes with the transcription of the register from the ground to a book and the village assembly's certification of the veracity of the book's contents.

It therefore becomes very difficult for the viewer to extricate oneself from the appeal of face-to-face immanence, to turn one's back, so to speak, and file away what you have just seen and heard as ready-to-use information. Rather, the *sangham* shot demands concentration and response. We will come back to this aspect of the CMT aesthetic below, but for now let me note the obverse feature of the *sangham* shot, which partly accounts for the kind of demand these videos make and the pleasure they provide.

Face-to-face immanence can be inverted by the *sangham* shot to illuminate a singular kind of movement—the movements of an embodied relation. The video *On Women & Genetic Diversity* provides a paradigmatic demonstration of how the CMT inverts the *sangham* shot into an image of such movement. The video is composed primarily of various movements of biodiverse agricultural production performed by women especially. These movements include shots of women saving and storing seeds, varieties of seeds, the use of a seed drill, crops at various stages of growth, rain, and women collecting seeds. These shots build up to profile two community elders in particular, Gangwar Anjamma and Gangwar Manemma, women who are deeply respected by the CMT (a third farmer also shows us the value of

multistoried planting). The series of movements this video tracks, these two women's direct statements to the camera, are thus "completed" into some unified or continuous movement, comprising the video's beginning, middle and end. Gangwar Anjamma tells us that she never purchases seeds, but she saves them using neem leaves and ash, nor does she ever use petrochemically derived fertilizers. Gangwar Manemma, standing among her crops, tells us that she grows 12 varieties of crops, so even if some of them fail she is always able to feed her family.

These videos document and analyze a variety of these movements within petroleum-free agricultural production. *Our Watersheds, Our Priorities*, documents the tasks of de-stoning land and building rockfill dams and bunds in a watershed self-management project. These embodied movements of people in their environment are connected to the face-to-face immanence of a watershed community meeting at which men learn about vermicomposting from women farmers. This video concludes with the farmers pledging to grow food crops instead of cash crops and with a videotaped certification of this consensus. Two videos on the *sangham* women's appropriation of technology, *A Machine for Millet*, and *Biofertilizers: A Technology Brought Home*, also provide in-depth analyses of movements of production. The first video explores the problems posed by the time-consuming and arduous nature of grinding millet into flour and the *sangham* women's consequent collaboration with engineers on designing a millet mill, which they run as a cooperative serving the wider region. The video on biofertilizers details various indigenous soil fertility practices involving green manure, tank silt, cultivating legumes, farmyard manure, and vermicomposting. Sangham women use these fertilizers themselves and sell the surplus compost through a cooperative.

The analyses of agricultural technique these videos present lie in the CMT's composition of movements, achieved during both filming and editing processes. (To assert just this, all of their videos include shots of themselves videotaping). Their agricultural practitioner's expertise becomes indispensible to both this camera-work and the editing. The intelligibility of the videos' analyses rests with the composed visibility of the movements of production. I want to suggest that what is compelling about these movement compositions is that they are capable of bringing orality's time bias of communication into the foreground of our perceptual gestalt. The women's camera "sees the world" just as the primary producers of this kind of agriculture see and understand the relationships between each activity (ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, cooking, nurturing); we also see how each becomes the other. Such analyses of movement in these videos are nothing less than Taylorist time-and-motion studies carried out on the basis of some other principle than the efficiency of domination in the production process.

There are two further aspects of these movements of production that are important to note here. The first is the impression these videos create that the agricultural practices we are seeing (bullock ploughing, hand winnowing, hand weeding, etc.) are neither archaic agricultural practices nor soon to be obsolete movements of production. Rather these movements compose some kind of Utopian past-future liberated not only from petrochemical dependence, nor those economic and political dependencies petroleum-based agriculture here presupposes, but all the dependencies which have been accumulating in the world ever since the Industrial Revolution fatefully introduced a host of spatial contradictions and conflicts between town and country. Since this past-future is also that of an oral culture, the movements that make possible petroleum-free agriculture must also be sung whenever they are shown. Secondly, the aesthetic-cognitive experience of this kind of communication (beyond whatever information may be conveyed, whatever representations may be made with respect to its space bias) is itself made up of a repetition of several movements. Our aesthetic experience as participants in this communication involves firstly, the movements the women's bodies are capable of as practitioners of biodiverse, petrochemical-free agriculture; secondly, the movements they are then able to compose with video images; and thirdly, the "tidal movements" of affect and thought produced in the bodies of their audiences. It is in this articulation that the time bias of communication asserts its powers. This is what the aesthetic-politics of the *sangham* shot is capable of achieving. This is why it is distinguished from shots the CMT call slave and patel shots, since we are presented with an image of pure social equality unqualified by any distinction whatsoever. The *sangham* shot is able to bring this time bias of communication to the foreground of the video image movement.

Common Cosmopolitanism

If this subaltern media exemplifies a kind of cosmopolitan media and a kind of cosmopolitan pedagogy, then what here do we imitate? What do we refunction and re-make in our quest for a cosmopolitan humanities? What lessons can we draw from this subaltern media practice and the new perspectives it offers to Innis' media theory and his sensitivity to cosmopolitan histories at work in and through imperial margins?

These questions prompt another question confronting our colloquium. When we ask how the humanities today might be able to reinvigorate cosmopolitan citizenship, what do we mean by "cosmopolitanism": a value, a legal principle, an identity, an ideology? Why not, in our national context, some kind of multicultural humanities, or even better, an indigenized humanities as Len Findlay (2009) argues?

Attempts to read "cosmopolitanism" as an autonomous cultural or moral value, or an ethical foundation of transnational human rights often tend to stop the sliding of signifiers at some suitably urbane figure: For example, both Bryan Turner (2002) and William Smith (2007) have recently suggested that cosmopolitanism is at rock bottom an ironic disposition, or, at least, that it should be. The slippage from description to prescription here is structural and inevitable. But such interpretations merely ignore the heart of the problem: Aesthetic effects like irony work differently depending on kinds of media, genre conventions, properties of materials, and politics of historical situations.

Both Innis' media theory and the CMT's media practice, should make clear, at any rate, that ontologizing the conceptual distinction between the political and the economic (or more precisely, social reproduction) is the ideological gesture *par excellence*. Through such obscurantist reification, the state of war that the republic of property (Hardt and Negri, 2009) perpetually wages comes to be presented as peace and good government. For example, many recent discussions of cosmopolitanism depart from the Stoics and seek refuge with Kant in order to find some normative definition recommended for our own times: be open to others, don't be afraid of strangers, be good to your neighbours, let them wear their veil on Friday so long as they don't during the week, etc. But this won't bring us any closer to finding the

philosopher's stone that might turn perpetual war into perpetual peace. Such prescriptions, moreover, blithely evade the basic critical lessons of half a century of postcolonial critique. They are also, I must say, oriented by a panic that is palpable: What shall we do with the ethnic enclaves we have created inside our alliance of nation-states? How shall we reasonably accommodate them? How will we manage a crisis of culture this time? Do we dare admit the sheer scale of the legitimation crisis now faced by actually existing democracy after the neoliberal era? This or that cosmopolitan normative theory is then proposed as an answer to these questions by reducing Kant's theory of cosmopolitan law to the right of hospitality, while ignoring his attendant critique of Locke's doctrine of *terra nullius* (Fine 2003). But these questions are made possible, in the first place, by a transcendent ethnopolitical museum-like space structured by an imaginary opposition between the West and the Rest, which articulate a vast wealth of other racializing binaries. As postcolonial cultural studies before and after Edward Said (1978) has frequently pointed out, one of the central tasks of the humanities, as we have had them, has been to shore up this imaginary opposition by trying to rationalize it into some symbolic consistency. These questions and their answers emerge out of a foreclosure of historical inquiry into the passages between empires through which our world has become so utterly rife with social inequalities of unprecedented depth and variety. If our existence is plural, multiple, differentiated in some deep seemingly well-nigh ontological sense, it is because such multiplicities have histories of differentiation that are histories of class formation and racialization only intelligible through a comprehensive study of comparative world history. Such cosmopolitan historical studies would be enlightening in the following ways, at the very least: We would have a more acute sense of how an optimistic developmentalism underlies the view that the emergence of contemporary human rights discourse after the Second World War constitutes a moral advance (Benhabib, 2006), if only positive law could now be reformed to embody its spirit (and despite the carnage created by assemblages of private global governance, structural adjustment policies, accumulation by dispossession, torture, and assassination all under NATO surveillance); we would also better understand how this developmental optimism is only the flip side of the cynicism that argues that the established Western powers are the lesser evil and nothing other than this is possible. In this regard, the cosmopolitan media politics of the Dalit women farmers of Medak remind us that the rights people enjoy today are not the indulgences of the high and the mighty, but concessions the powerful were forced to make in specific historical situations. In the hands of the established powers such laws (which are the laws of a transnational ruling class and their executives, not universal laws) are always another tactical weapon. The world system of nation-states, as system and as individual sovereignty, is the site of the reciprocal mediation of universality and particularity in the republic of property. As such, no greater universality, no cosmopolitan right can be realized within the framework of the republic of property that will not also reterritorialize into some new form of ethnopolitical class domination, as the poor who have borne the international community's high minded sanctions well understand. As scholars we should not pretend that we can dig up some rights to hand around, nor should we help our keepers maintain their pretenses. The possibility of perpetual peace in some human future can only be discovered in an immanent relationship between the present and the human past, but there is no reason why the history of Euro-American imperialism and its juridical instruments should serve as the eye of the needle through which the ethical heritage of human history must pass. Nor is there any reason why these instruments should then serve as a transcendent limit under which all ethico-political innovation must be constrained, as so many currents of normative political theory in the humanities today rather obediently presume.[ii] Stoic cosmopolitanism itself was made possible by what could be called the Bronze Age persepolitanism of Persepolis (McEvilley 2002: pp. 9-18, 540-47). Moreover, the Stoics became accessible to Kant and all of us as a result of an extensive and enduring Islamic cosmopolitanism in which Buddhist cosmopolitanism may have also played a role (Hodgson 1993: p. 119). So what is crucial to such a cosmopolitan historical imagination is its fidelity to the anonymity of history rather than to traditions of identity. The various cosmopolitanisms of human history (of Persepolis, of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, the South China Sea and the North Atlantic, of the caravanserai and of the great New World trade routes. etc.) inscribed their possibilities in anonymous metabolic processes of social change; anonymous processes through which subaltern insurrections and revolts are given to sense.

In this regard, the media practice of the *sangham* women also demonstrates that efforts to fuse together the ethical and political by theoretical fiat is poor compensation for the reification of the economic and the political into autonomous domains, and just as ideological. The possibility of perpetual peace today demands not only hospitality to a stranger who is not a fellow citizen, but to a stranger whose singularity is nevertheless examinable and therefore available to an ethical relation. As the politics of these Dalit women assert, the possibility of peace today especially demands an egalitarian solidarity of citizenship with those who we do not know and will never meet, and whose singularity is veiled by anonymity. I have furthermore tried to show how, beyond the silence imposed by Empire's plush and glittering cosmopolitanism, this subaltern media is a kind of video thinking that is both cognitive and affective, imaginary and symbolic. Innis' communication theory moreover helps us understand how such media produces a radical critique of petroleum based, labour-expelling and labour-deskilling production by presenting a time-image and analysis of production that is not of the present's past or the present's future, but let us say the future's past. In this regard, we might be able to say that this process of video mediation deconstructs the binary opposition between the empirical and the normative, for it gives us an image of production that is neither empirical nor normative, but in some way both. Perhaps this is what makes this process of mediation Utopian (Jameson, 1979 & 2005).

NOTES

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[ii] At any rate, such obedience is not going to resolve the deep, long standing crisis of legitimacy the humanities have been facing; neither from the skeptical fissure inside marked by the flag of cultural studies, nor from the Great Western

powers themselves which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, can't remember what they thought they needed the humanities for and are increasingly incapable of even maintaining them.

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