

A N U S T U P B A S U



A Memorialization Without Destinying : A Revisitation of JU Media Lab's National Instruments Project Archive

"However, with our purposeful activity, and even more, our purposeful remembering, each day unravels the web, the ornaments of forgetting".

Walter Benjamin

Prologue

National Instruments Limited was an Indian public sector company located in Jadavpur, a locality toward the southern end of the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). It was engaged in the design, development, and manufacture of fine opto-mechanical and opto-electronic instruments for a variety of end-users, especially those tasked in geological surveys, meteorology, and defense. The institution traced its origins to 1830, when Sir George Everest (1790-1866), the then Surveyor General of India, felt the necessity of skilled mechanical help in Calcutta itself for servicing equipment. A workshop called Mathematical Instruments Office was set up in the Dalhousie area in the central part of the city, with Syed Meer Mohsin Hussain being appointed as the first Indian master maker of fine optical and precision devices after the departure of Henry Barrow¹. The legend therefore, with whatever remoteness or intimacy, grafts

itself onto a pioneering moment of modern rational-scientific inquiry in colonial India that would include, amongst myriad things, the great trigonometric survey of the subcontinent, the mathematical achievements of Radhanath Sikdar (1813-1870), and the long shadow of the greatest mountain in the world². Following that colonial moment, from the middle of the twentieth century, the story of the institution ties up with another narrative of becoming — a non-aligned Nehruvian journey of the free Indian republic toward technological, scientific, and industrial self-sufficiency. National Instruments Ltd., in its final public sector incarnation, moved to its location in Jadavpur in 1957, under the auspices of the second five-year plan. At its peak, the spacious premises, covering about ten acres of land, is said to have hummed with the activity of about two thousand workers.

National Instruments entered its twilight in the late eighties, primarily because the Indian Army — for which it manufactured a range of products like infra-red search lights, passive binoculars, theodolites, and night vision optical devices — gave away lucrative contracts to a Swedish company. In 1992 NIL was registered as sick industry with the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR). The rate of decline was precipitous throughout the early globalizing years of the nineties, with the company steadily shredding workforce through the Indian government's Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) after a rehabilitation plan was authorized by the BIFR in 1999. Production finally halted in 2003. A year before that, in July 2002, the Department of Disinvestment in the Ministry of Finance, Government of India, announced intentions to induct a joint venture partner for NIL and called for bids, declaring that the authorized and paid-up capital of the company was INR 100 million and Rs. 83.1 million respectively³. Evidently such efforts did not work out. However, perhaps because of its PSU status, NIL did not meet the fate of similar old world Industrial sites in the vicinity, which became prime real estate⁴. Finally, in 2009, Jadavpur University absorbed the 64 remaining employees of NIL and acquired the factory premises to set up a new campus there.

It was in the summer of that year that I visited the NIL compounds with Moinak Biswas, a friend, mentor, and an extraordinary scholar of Indian cinema and culture. That was a crucial moment, for it was in the middle of a short interregnum before the JU administration began renovating the space and exorcising ghosts to make an academic campus out of the factory building. Biswas, who was the Head of the JU Film Studies Department and Coordinator of the university's newly formed Media Lab, instigated a collaborative multi-

media project in which several past and present students and affiliates of the institution took part. The six month long enterprise yielded a remarkable artistic archive of the ephemeral, including four short films, one sound installation, and many projects in still photography and photo animation⁵.

My own recollection of the factory – derelict, dirty, spooky, and majestic – is not pertinent to this discussion. It is sufficient to say that I found the place and its surroundings poignant, haunting, intensely dramatic, and traced by an unforgiving violence of time. It was, in itself, an installation of deathly art – a monument of dusty and frozen chaos in which the ironic and the tragic either folded into each other or both slipped into grotesque humor. Walking through the hallways and the rooms was a wholesome synesthetic experience, with sensory surprises at every turn. The building turned especially sonorous when it rained heavily on one of the three days I was there. The sheets of water drummed in through the many broken panes of the large and numerous windows and skylights; the wind howled, resonating against the high ceilings.

It was a few months later that I saw the archive, first in part when I wrote the first version of this essay, and then only recently in its entirety. I taught a portion of it (one film and a few images) in an undergraduate freshman seminar in the University of Illinois in the spring semester of 2010. The recession was well under way in the United States at that point; the historical obsolescence of the iconic American industrial worker of the twentieth century was of course a process already long completed; by then people were beginning to sing dirges for the final bastion of Detroit. The NIL images strongly affected my students, to a degree considerably beyond my expectations. Most of them were born in the American Midwest, but very much in a ‘post-industrial’ new economic dispensation of the early nineties. As such, many objects in the photographs and films were decidedly out of their orbit of experience: older machinery with limited automation, offices virtually without computers and with stacks and stacks of files instead, cameras that were not digital, or the grandfatherly typewriter. They did not respond to the catalogue of things in the photographs; instead, they were touched by powers of gesture and communicability in the image. More than anything else, it was that learning experience that prompted me to write about the NIL archive.

Let me first provide a working description of this astonishing body of work. Following that, the essay will turn towards a meditation on what such images and sounds could mean in our age of information and instant commodification. Do they report some sort of ‘truth’ in the heart of the matter, or do they problematize dominant notions of ‘truth’ and their relationships to the idea

of the image? Do these pictures say something about the current status (aesthetic, political, technological) of the image itself in what is, supposedly, a long rumble of the postmodern in the age of digital media? Do these pictures and echographies challenge already there, readily consumable and eminently advertizable global structures of feeling (the nostalgia industry, the memory industry, exoticism, ethnography, or orientalism), or are they subsumed by them? Do they give us an 'image' of the factory, or can they bring to fresh crisis ontological understandings of the image itself? How do they set up a relationship between art and reportage? What could be the status of this archive in relation to massified structures of statist and corporatist archiving? When it comes to vanishings and presences in the factory, who is it that ultimately holds the name-giving powers? Who tells us when to feel wistful, when to mourn, or when to laugh heartily? Is the image that which represents, speaks volubly, or, as Ranciere said, is it that which holds its tongue?⁶ Let us keep these queries pending for the moment and first visit the archive.

Pictures, sounds, and stories in the archive

The archive of course is made up of a number of individual projects. Each of these is distinctive on its own and deserves to be valued and recognized as such. However, after describing them briefly, I shall critically consider the archive as a singular entity when it comes to the question of the image. One could of course begin exploring anywhere; there is no overriding principle of navigation or hierarchy of components that has been attached to the archive. Let me however begin with the films in a random order.

Sambit Bose's short *Ekti karkhanar itikatha/The Story of a Factory* documents the history of NIL, through testimonies of past workers, evocative tracking of spaces, and a survey of the panoply of old, dusty instruments. Kartik Pal, the senior clerk, talks sadly about crucial errors in management policy, falling profits, losing key R & D personnel to the private sector when the winds of change drifted in with liberalization. Gautam Sarkar, technical worker, proudly displays the achievements of the past – the stereoscopic prisms, the theodolites, the collimeters, side-bore muzzles, and the passive binoculars. Mukunda Das from the Accounts section speaks about the theatrical exploits of the National Instruments Friends Club, from the early *Bonhi bonya* to the last production — Girish Ghosh's Moliere inspired legendary play *Jaisa Ka Taisa*, which was staged in 1993. One of the remarkable aspects of Bose's film is how it connects spaces and articulated memories with unsentimental candor: the worker recreation room with a dusty table tennis board, the subsidized canteen with

upturned tables that used to provide fifty-paisa meals till 2008; the machine shop and tool room filled with ghostly structures; and the overlooking second floor windows from which the officers got a panoptic, monitoring perspective of the workers down below. The camera cuts away frequently from these testimonies – sometimes fond, sometimes sad —to track and linger around the dusty and forlorn spaces in which, perhaps as Jean Epstein would say, the phantom voices of generations have been lost.

Ankur Das's *Graveyard of Memories* is a more forensic exploration of space.



NIL: The Machine Shop. Photo courtesy JU Media Lab, Madhuban Mitra, and Manas Bhattacharya.

The factory is more cadaverous and elemental here; the camera works like a scalpel, extracting abstract patterns of matter and movement, through tracking shots and judicious extreme close-ups. It traces disintegration of colors, worn down textures, inscriptions of moisture, cobwebs, rust, putrefaction, and decay. An encroaching rude geometry of nature is seen to overwrite the straight lines and symmetries of industrial artifice. The sheen of finely finished glass is rendered incandescent and then buried by dust; different clocks are frozen in different points of time; empty chairs occupy emptiness or starkly face each other. Stray pieces of paper stick out of files or hang from notice boards, turning yellow under the sun or rustling in the wind. This graveyard of memories is intensely naturalistic; it is one in which vegetation creeps and roots into cracks of devastated concrete and spiders weave their webs in between objects, inventing a primordial clutter by tying disparate things together and exiling them from their social histories. Out-of-frame sounds (sirens,

telephones, rain, machines) of a busy diurnal world are exhausted when they are juxtaposed with the deathly stillness of the premises. The film presents inertia as a durational intensity through loop montages that break and then come together once again with slow, elegiac maturation. The naturalism here is akin to what Deleuze notices about Zola's art of exhausting determined milieus and returning them to originary worlds: "The originary world only exists and operates in the depths of a real milieu, and is only valid through its immanence in this milieu, whose violence and cruelty it reveals."⁷ Das's film, like many other images in the archive, reveals the intensity of historical devastation by tracking the fierce gestation of an originary world in the ordered space of the factory. Here there is no distinction to be made between natural and artificial construction; the violence of coexistence and abandonment becomes apparent in the scene of a light bulb being buried by dry leaves or in that of stubborn paperweights being still at work.

Das's film shares an experimental spirit of exploring dead space as enervated and time as thickening with *Underneath the Sky of Rust*, a short workshop film made by 'Group A'⁸ of the Jadavpur University Film Studies Department students. The latter work distinguishes itself especially with a few slow zooms, jump cuts, tracking shots, aborted or directionless conversations and a haunting sound track featuring strains from Pink Floyd ("Welcome to the Machine" and "Echoes"). The film ironically mixes clamor of bustling activity with shots of desolate spaces. The sound of a telephone ringing accompanies a slow zoom toward a dusty receiver kept off the hook but balanced on the instrument, as it is often done when there is a call waiting for someone who needs to be fetched. A former unnamed employee responds to questions we do not hear, sitting on a chair in the middle of a grime covered floor which was air-conditioned once upon a time and on which no shoes or foreign particles were allowed. Probing, yet aborted and 'nowhere' camera movements interspersed with incommensurable stills underline the fact that once processes of serialization, electrification, and production have ceased, there is no particular direction one can go inside the factory, since objects, having lost their destinies and lineages, are no longer useful in signposting and mapping. They simply occupy a ground, without revealing whether it is by design or accident. The factory, in both, *Graveyard* and *Sky of Rust*, is dirt in the heart of the city. The factory is dirt because it is now matter out of historical space and historical time.

Sanjeet Chowdhury's *Letters to Mother* is an imaginative account of an anonymous young worker's epistolary reports of his life in the factory, written

between 4th February and 6th October, 1980. The letters are recited as a continuous voice-over, with the camera making awry movements across derelict zones and scanning decrepit objects in black and white. Chowdhury heightens the irony by saturating the soundscape with a spectrum of noises (telephones, machines, voices, traffic, sirens, typewriters, a beating heart, and even warfare between Romans and revolting slaves) and animating the inert mise-en-scene with on-shoulder swish pans, tracking movements, fast motion, and blue holographic digital diagrams. The narrative begins with the young man writing excitedly about his new work place, its impressive heritage, and the thrill of working with foreign made machines. It then moves to simple delights of being served fish three times a day in the canteen, robust activity inside the machine shop and the paint shop, and a word of praise from Mr. Sengupta, his supervisor. The protagonist talks about his new friendship with Gautam, a colleague in the optical department and his neighbor. He is soon promoted to a desk job upstairs after spending four months in the Machine shop. He describes some of the products with obvious pride, but also admits an alienation from the worldly end uses of some, like the theodolites made for the military. He speaks of the tedium of regimented labor — as Farukh, his colleague from the machine shop once said, punch cards are like chains on the feet of workers. In between the young man falls sick, but is nursed back to health by Gautam's young sister Tuni, who is appearing for her school final examinations. He also joins the Worker's Union, and preparations begin for the staging of Badal Sircar's 1972 play *Spartacus* to commemorate the union's 25th anniversary. The play would eventually be staged on 26th March, 1981. The story however ends much before that, with our young man writing to his mother on 6th October, 1980, that he would be coming home for the Pujas and that he would be bringing good news with him. It is never revealed what the good news is; but this missive of hope from an imagined, one that promises good times yet to come, is already historically condemned to be a chronicle of death foretold. The interface between digital media and the antiquated setting of old Nehruvian industrialization does give us a story, but it is perhaps not just the aborted individual one in the letters. Rather it is about the missing decades and missing generations that deny a wholesome narrative passage between optimism of a still-born past and the dereliction of the present, between the letters from 1980 and the missing worker of today.

The volume of two thousand or more still photographs in the NIL archive by Madhuban Mitra, Manas Bhattacharya, Nikhil Arolkar, Bhagirath Haldar, and the distinguished cinematographer Abhik Mukhopadhyay is equally

remarkable, as is the sound installation *Frozen Noise* by Sukanta Majumdar. Arolkar's black and whites, shot in analog, are the result of a fascinating experiment with contrast and planes of focus, with the lit portions of the frame often burnt out and depth often sacrificed for detail and tonality. The interplay of light and shadow, focus and background expresses a profound theatricalization of still time while the grains on the analog print enter into a *writerly* compact with the dust in the setting.



Dust in the setting, grain in the analog print. Photo courtesy JU Media Lab and Nikhil Arolkar.

Mitra and Bhattacharya have organized their work into an exhibit entitled *Through a Lens Darkly* that has been, in the last two years, displayed in Singapore, Greece, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Hungary, apart from several cities in India. Here the still images are ordered into a few component sections and are accompanied by four photo animations made “by clicking a lot of pictures at a high speed and then merging them to show light and wind playing visual illusions on the broken assembly tables⁹.” “The Archaeology of Absence” is a series that offers glimpses of a range of private quiddities in the factory (a shirt hung up and left behind as if for eternity); “Persistent Circuits” traces geometrical patterns on walls, wires, and switchboards; “Temp Mort” features clocks that have stopped and “Post Datum” shelves and shelves of documents and files now at the mercy of insects and the elements. “Autopsy of the Great Indian Camera” gives us the dissected skeletal components of NI’s most iconic product, the National 35 Sprinty BC still camera that was made in the late seventies by licensing the design of and reverse-engineering the then obsolete German product Regula Sprinty BC. There were, in all, five models of the National 35, including two pocket-size

versions. One of the most resonant motifs featured regularly in the various undertakings of the National Instruments Project is the huge model of the National Reflex 2000 on the lobby of the main building, a product that was being developed when the factory closed down. It would have been India's first indigenously manufactured SLR camera.

The image in the archive



The National Reflex 2000 model placed on the lobby. Photo courtesy JU Media Lab, Madhuban Mitra, and Manas Bhattacharya

Let me begin this section by stating what, by now, could be an obvious point: since we have long since climbed down from the high horses of aesthetic modernism, and the camera, in the digital universe, has lost its ontological claim to truth in the world, I am trying to make a working distinction between picture/sound and image. In this, I follow a spirit of inquiry pursued by Rancière (who we have already recalled) in his meditations on the image as a non-realistic, non-naturalistic entity that produces dissemblance by not being exclusive to the visible, and earlier, by Benjamin in his conceptualization of the dialectical image, Adorno in his aesthetics of contradiction, and Lyotard in his work on the sublime. All pictures are not images; in the hour of the mass production of the senses and an industrial temporalization of consciousness¹⁰, too many pictures condemn things to end up in the deserts of advertising, spectacle, or information. We therefore turn to a question we have suspended for a while. It pertains to a possible ontology of the image. That is, the image not taken in a commonplace, positive sense (for it seems no longer possible to do so), but as a figure of thought. Is there an image of the factory as ruin in the manifold pictures contained in the archive? That is, when we consider the

image as a singular figural instance of that which is not beholden to the merely phenomenological, but a non-numbering One that in itself opens up a multiplicity. That is, the image does not merely present us with a visual scene or information, but gestures toward an imaginative world that we can build around what we see, allowing the powers of the past to invade the present, collapsing what is given here and now with thoughts of there and then. We would like to ask: is there an image of the factory in the archive or are the pictures there only to impart a 'surface coherence' to the phenomenon of the factory and simply add to modernity's overall 'pathos of archival desire'?¹¹

This merits consideration because pictures and sounds that come from acts of witnessing, documenting, or mourning are imperiled in many ways. Their social lives are tested by powerful gravitational forces of the nostalgia industry, virtual tourism, ethnography, or the information. It is important to quickly remind ourselves of the obvious, that powerful corporations like CNN today microsource accidental visuals from quotidian cell phones and handycams in Iran or Egypt or Tunisia, enframing them into already there grids of mythic reckoning: 'freedom' is ontologically tied to 'free market' and America is a reluctant behemoth in an evil world. Debord told us how pictures and sounds are claimed by the state in order to emerge as a Napoleonic figure that monarchically directs "the energy of memories".¹² Pictures and sounds are thus habitually interrogated in terms of whether they are amenable to regimes of truth (from anthropology to orientalism) and structures of power that capitalize and order things. They are evaluated in terms of newsworthiness when news in our informational world, as Derrida astutely observed, is that in which 'actuality' tends to be "spontaneously ethnocentric".¹³ Consider the images of political posters in the NIL factory grounds that tell us of a once vibrant tradition of left-wing trade unionism. Are they supposed to automatically consign the entire cosmology of National Instruments to a doleful yet knowing ethnographic diagnosis emerging from a commonsensical neoliberal understanding of West Bengal's long dalliance with Marxist politics, an endemic lack of 'work culture,' 'militant trade unionism,' and the consequent flight of capital from that state? A dominant template of 'news' has to instantly induct words and images into a closed web of associations that in turn can be submitted to axiomatic narratives and dominant myths of our times – the Nehruvian past that has to be left behind, or the neoliberalism that has to be necessarily embraced at the end of history or in the middle of a war of civilizations. On the other hand, the picture offers the image precisely when it acquires affective and intellectual powers to gag or disrupt such planetary

administration of informational clichés. Imaging could thus involve either an overloading or a draining of sensations; it could be a roundabout journey through clutter toward fatigue and poignancy instead of a totality of experience.

The critical task is of course not to imagine that the archive, in its social existence, can be, or even should be, 'protected' from powerful, industrial ecologies of affect, remembrance, narration, and meaning. No production is possible with such willful exile, as Warhol's can of Campbell's Soup, amongst many other things, remind us. The purpose instead is to forge a stance of textualization devoted to alterity; it is not to fondly mourn a monument or the end of a narrative, but to present a counter memory. The task therefore is not to argue whether some of the pictures provide authentic representation or whether the odd one lapses into exoticism. Rather it is to liberate them from phenomenological burdens of 'truth,' 'authenticity' and 'representation,' and also to gauge to what extent such pictures and sounds insert themselves into an overall informatic ecology of exoticism in a manner that announces the exotic itself as an "ornament of forgetting".¹⁴ The thought of the image is thus the thought of trapping things in a double bind, folding its positive *thisness* as pure object around its inevitable epistemologico-industrial status as spectacle, phenomenon, or curiosity. The image is not *of* the object, but an invitation to approach the object like a gambler rather than the anthropologist in order to think around it. There is no pure index in the image, but, as Peirce maintained, only dominant poles of indexicality, themselves in a state of pendulation in a radical continuum between matter and mind.¹⁵ The factory is in ruins. The ruins are a historical landscape of signs assuming the shape of a factory.

We will, therefore, draw imaginative powers from the archive and *textualize* something as one of the many ones possible to draw out from it, keeping in mind that the Latin *textus* means web, being the perfect passive participle of *texô*, which means "to weave." Engaging with the archive is in itself an artful enterprise, since one cannot 'report the archive once and for all, instead one can relentlessly, and eventfully each time, draw out affections, thoughts, and stories from it. Let us first turn to the scattered visuals of the 'private' that we find: a love letter, a pack of cards, a mosquito repellent sprayer, a whiskey bottle, a box of chewing tobacco (*Baba Kesari Zarda*), a tin of Colgate tooth powder, a pair of slippers on an eternal wait for footsteps, medicines, clothing on lines, images of gods and goddesses, personal idols (Indira Gandhi, Tagore, Ambedkar, Ramkrishna), a poster featuring legendary movie stars Hema Malini and Dharmendra, an old issue of the *Soviet Literature* magazine, passport photographs, a tumbler, a pet plant emerging from a bottle, bravely green and

curled around a post, or a citation from Henrik Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People* (“The strongest man in the world is he who stands alone”) boldly emblazoned on a wall. The thought of the image here, let us propose, is not of these personals that are visible or proper names of lost friends that are heard (Bankim Naskar, the absent Subrata, or Sanjoy Mondal). The image is that of an acutely compressed interval of time in which a sudden catastrophe — like the instant demise of a bridge — seemed to have taken place; a cleft had opened up between the factory and its world. It is as if after such an event, no return, in a historical sense, was possible and owners were permanently distanced from their sundry intimate possessions. The acute compression of time (when there was only time to go and not for coming back) was thus followed by eternal suspension. A shock, a violent striation in the temporal order had wrenched these things from sensuous belongings; following that, time seemed to have stopped flowing and congealed itself around these objects. We can align this double image of time — one that suddenly makes things orphans and then mummifies them — to a piece of graffiti inscribed on a drilling machine that announces the 14th day of March, 2003 as the historic VRS day. That is, we can align the two without necessarily insisting on a positive connection. The historic VRS day was when 503 employees embraced the voluntary retirement option. This was in the middle of an overall decline in the factory population, when it lost hundreds of workers within a few months.¹⁶ An employee wistfully recalls in Bose’s *Ekti karkhanar itikatha* that the factory suddenly looked dead on the morning of the 1st of April, 2003. Attempting to run the show was like trying



Photo courtesy JU Media Lab, Madhuban Mitra, and Manas Bhattacharya

to cover a cadaver with a small piece of cloth.

Let us then turn to another set of visual attributes — the abstract, accidental patterns discovered and tracked by the various cameras: warts of moisture on the walls, ripples on water puddles, designs of rust on metal, cobwebs, creepers, roots, and lines of dirt that seem to tie things together, or maps of lost continents created by cracks and paint falling off walls. They indeed inaugurate another unfolding universe of writing. What could be the visual significance of the remarkable, almost three minute long sequence of a spider spinning industriously in Das's *Graveyard of Memories*? What could be the status, qua the thought of the image, of the geographies of clutter – breaks, alignments, parallelisms, ruptures, displacements, centerings and de-centerings – elaborated by shifting perspectives of the camera as it surveys, in fits and starts, many things thrown together by chance or design? There are immense possibilities in the critical adjacency between the dirty wash cloth and the machine or in the studious, unflinching attention of blind table lamps as they remain peered over documents, for they challenge name-giving powers.

These reminded me of what Benjamin had to say about the optical



Photo Courtesy JU Media Lab and Nikhil Arolkar.

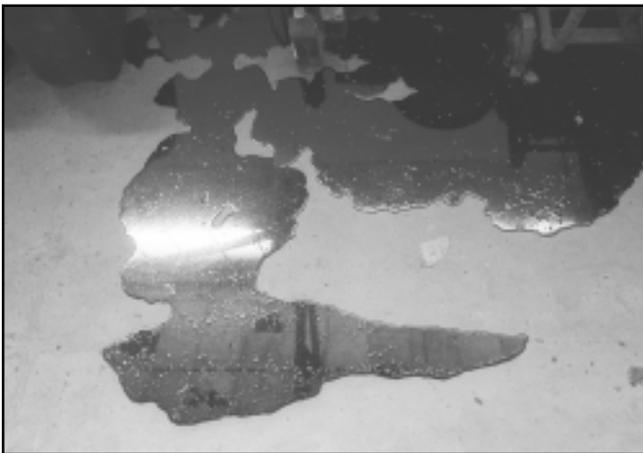
unconscious of photography. It would perhaps be useful to cite the passage in full:

Photography reveals . . . material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic

visible as a thoroughly historical variable. Thus, Bossfeldt with his astonishing plant photographs reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle¹⁷.

The question of the optical unconscious can be connected to an idea of the primordial that complicates the workings of narration, memory, historicity, and cognition in relation to the pictures in the archive. Is that a rotting wall or a demon inscribed on a surface by time itself? Is that a clown's head or rust on a doorknob? Are those dusty lenses on a table or a diagram of a devastated beehive? Is there a dinosaur next to the typing machine? The power of the primordial is that which unleashes the thought of the image by splintering the picture in many directions, toward originary worlds and away from determined milieus. It comes to the fore, not when an entity has just physically decayed, but when it has fallen off the dominant order of historical time, when it has been abandoned and robbed of significance by the many propulsive themes of the latter (progress, development, economy). It is then that the geometrical patterns appear to thread together and invest things with a primordial aura (a discursive murmur that Foucault notices lining forms in spaces visited by Blanchot¹⁸) that comes into being just before they sink into the womb of time itself. The walls will be repainted and doorknobs will be coated once again in the new dispensation, but the image of a terrible beauty has already been born.

Finally, we can come to the myriad 'public' elements great and small we



A map of lost continents. Photo courtesy JU Media Lab, Nikhil Arolkar



Lenses. Photo Courtesy JU Media Lab, Madhuban Mitra, and Manas Bhattacharya



The National 35 Sprinty BC. Photo courtesy JU Media Lab, Madhuban Mitra, and Manas Bhattacharya



Refrigerator. Photo Courtesy JU Media Lab and Nikhil Arolkar

find in the archive: stray dogs on the lobby floors, political posters, rickety furniture of various kinds, stacked files, old typewriters that can still snap inkless keys into place, calendars, stopped clocks, an empty refrigerator with the door left open, myriad dusty instruments, the old punch card machine, the ‘guillotine’ used to cut sheets which also once claimed an operator’s finger, rusty Ambassador cars with flattened tires and license plates from the sixties, or a framed snake and ladder chart titled “Game of Productivity.” One can add to these the tracking shots in the films across floor spaces, rooms, and corridors (when there is nowhere in particular to go inside the factory), the long shots of the outskirts, or the tilt-ups towards the sky. Do these constitute an image of a micro-universe, even if it is a lost or tattered one? Perhaps they do, but it is also possible that the thought of the image comes to the fore when the pictures *run into* something. That is, they run into a void where there was a world that the factory, to borrow and transpose a theme from Heidegger, once had ‘set itself back into,’ and the world, in turn, had come forth to shelter it¹⁹. *That* world is gone from the pictures, so they give us an image of absolute and abject interiority without an ‘outside.’ That is, not just the Nehruvian dispensation or the nation at large to which the Ambassadors would venture forth by exiting the gate or to which the cartons of National 35 would be sent, but also an entire bygone universe in which prisms would arrive from West Germany or Scotland. The floor is thus a graveyard and the sky is full of rust; the factory is deserted because in an ontological sense, a desert has surrounded it. Time is thick in the NIL and devoid of the present tense because

it is never clear, from moment to moment, which of the twin impulses of a temporal consciousness of the modern it belongs to – that of abstracting and rationalizing an irreversible flow or that of focusing on the contingent and the ephemeral²⁰. It is this zone of perpetual arrest and historical detention that the archive posits as the site of the image's naissance, between past and present, between life and death, between the story of the factory and a legend as impressive as the tallest mountain in the world.

Note: This is an extended version of my essay "Through a Lens Starkly: An Exploration of JU Media Lab's National Instruments Project Archive" forthcoming, at the time of writing, in Basu, Dudrah, Gopal, and Rai eds., *Intermedia in South Asia: The Fourth Screen* (London: Routledge, 2012).

References:

¹ This story is stated in Sambit Bose's *Ekti Karkhanar Itikatha/History of a Factory* (2009), one of the films discussed in this essay. See also Partha Ghose, "Scientific Studies in Calcutta: The Colonial Period" in Sukanta Chaudhuri ed. *Calcutta: The Living City, Volume I: The Past* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990): 195-202.

² I am of course alluding to Sikdar's 1852 mathematical identification of Peak XV in the Great Trigonometric Survey as the tallest mountain in the world. The peak, as we know, was named after Everest by Andrew Waugh, the then Surveyor General of India, with a characteristic colonial disregard for local names.

³ See < <http://www.divest.nic.in/nil.asp> >, accessed 15th June, 2011.

⁴ The premises of both the Sulekha Ink factory and Dabur Industries a few miles down southward along the Rajah Subodh Chandra Mullick Road have been transformed into apartment buildings now. The extensive compound of the Usha factory, west of NIL on Prince Anwar Shah Road, houses 'South City,' currently one of the biggest real estate complexes and malls in Eastern India.

⁵ A part of the archive can be accessed at the JU media lab website: <http://www.medialabju.org/index.php>.

⁶ See Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, (New York: Verso, 2009): 11.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 125.

⁸ The members were Agrajit Roy, Anurima Das, Rini Sarkar, Sourav Dey, Subhadra Mukhopadhyay, Utsab Sen, and Wriddhayan Bhattacharyya.

⁹ See the report entitled "Still moments, forgotten factory" in *The Sunday Guardian*, December

26th, 2010 <<http://www.sunday-guardian.com/home/still-moments-forgotten-factory>>

¹⁰ I am of course alluding to Miriam Hansen's "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism." *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (1999): 59-77 and Bernard Stiegler's overall meditations in *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*. Trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), especially chapter 3, 97-187.

¹¹ See Mary Ann Doane's exemplary discussion of Siegfried Kracauer's lament on photography as a 'mere surface coherence' and accumulation of clutter at the level of contingency, without providing a totality of experience in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), 12-23. In this context Doane also reminds us that for Benjamin, the 'posthumous shock' given to the moment by the camera does not pass into experience (*erfahrung*).

¹² Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, (New York: Zone books, 1996): 76

¹³ See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge MA: Polity Press, 2002): 4.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust" in *Selected Writings, Vol. II (1927-1934)* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999): 238.

¹⁵ See Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, Vol. 1 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986): 226. See also Doane's discussion in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 92.

¹⁶ Initially 523 employees filed for the option on that day; twenty of them withdrew in the last moment. After March 14th, 68 employees were left, of which 4 took VRS before Jadavpur University took over in January 2009.

¹⁷ Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *Selected Writings, Vol II*, 512.

¹⁸ See Michel Foucault, "This is not a Pipe" in James D. Faubion ed. *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume II: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1998): 187-204.

¹⁹ I am alluding to Heidegger's overall meditations in "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977): 139-212.

²⁰ Doane devotes her intellectual project in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* to a critical exploration of this endemic duality.

Notes

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