Ghostly Images, Phantom Discourses, and the Virtuality of the Global

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Abstract: The central premise of this article is that the conceptual terrain of the global is fundamentally unstable, that its content is far from determined. This opens the door to many different interpretations and uses of the term, where the referent is not so much to a pre-given reality, or even a tangible geographical space. Rather, the global constitutes its own content in the various fields in which it gets deployed, selectively affirming particular images and representations, while denying, repressing, or otherwise excluding others. I draw on the early history of film to argue that the global is a virtual distribution of value and intelligibility, where its images and signs no longer “represent” an independent reality, but actually shape and transform the inter-subjective experiences of its virtual subjects. I use a recent documentary film on call centers in India to demonstrate how distinct regimes of cinematic images enable different kinds of interventions into these virtual distributions, revealing the global as a richly imagined terrain of discourses and representations, which are always already subject to re-distribution.

KEYWORDS: the global, the virtual, film, political economy, India, neoliberalism, critical theory
1. Global Simulacra

If taken literally, the global signifies nothing other than itself; it is a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1983; Deleuze, 1990), a conceptualization that is far too broad to be understood empirically, let alone quantified. Its referent is not to a tangible space or reality that exists independently of its concept. Rather, the global constitutes its own content. This impossibly wide term, including everything, signifying nothing, is as flexible as it is pervasive. These days, the term seems to be deployed everywhere: from global warming, to global pandemics, from the global war of/against terror, to the global financial crisis. In each case, far from signifying a coherent reality, the global becomes actualized in discourses that affirm certain images and representations, while excluding others. Perhaps the only thing that is truly “global” is the post-modern media itself, a de-territorializing distributive apparatus comprising multiple interpretive/performative sites that circulate images and discourses, producing the very thing they are supposed to re-present. If the global is a simulacrum, then the simulacrum is itself global.

In this article, I attempt to approach the term cautiously. But the global inevitably becomes a placeholder for a kind of thinking that wants to move beyond inherited political categories and cartographies. In this sense, the global designates a kind of newness, a potentiality, one that is impossible to separate from its virtuality: its distribution of images, discourses and signs. I therefore approach it as a simulacrum, but not in the way that this term is usually understood. As Massumi (1987) and Durham (1998) have pointed out, there are two ways in which the simulacrum has been approached. The first and more familiar is Baudrillard’s rather cryptic sense of the hyperreal: “a real without origin or reality…a map that
precedes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). With “hyperreality, signs no longer represent or refer to an external model,” but instead refer only to other signs and representations (Massumi, 1989: 90). The other sense of the simulacrum is less nostalgic for a lost referent—the real—and owes much to its Deleuzian (qua Nietzschean) re-inflections. Here the simulacrum embodies the performative and transformational “powers of the false,” and constitutes a radical morphology of the metaphysical ideas of truth, origin, and presence (Deleuze, 1990). Through “falsifying” images, narratives, and descriptions, the simulacrum “does not so much derealize its objects as ‘counteractualize’ them, drawing from the image which it at once repeats and falsifies a potential for metamorphosis already immanent within it” (Durham, 1998: 8).

While Baudrillard’s sense of the term is useful for an engaged critique of the hyperreal, it is the latter sense of simulacrum that I want to explicitly link to a concept of the global. The term will not be evaluated in terms of its resemblance to a pre-existing model (the planet earth, humanity, the West, etc.), but in terms of its ability to mobilize critical thinking that illuminates disjunctures and disagreements within inherited discursive and spatiotemporal (dis)orders, introducing to common sense perception something uncommon, something that disturbs and haunts the intelligibility of dominant images and imaginations of the global.

Following the recent work of Michael J. Shapiro (1999, 2008, 2009), my argument is structured cinematically, relying on conceptual montage and thinking through juxtaposition more than by explicit argumentation. In the end, “the aim is to engage in political thought without closing the question of the ‘political’” (Shapiro, 1999: 1). I begin by looking at the early history of film as a haunted scene of representation, where the moving image did not merely act as a copy of an original model, but quickly became a performative transformation of the model itself: mobilizing images and signs that have become the conditions of possibility for global simulacra. I then draw a comparison between the specters of representation that
haunted the early cinema and a “phantom discourse” of neoliberal globalization that is actualized in contemporary India through a new aesthetics of globality (Mani 2008). I draw this comparison in order to show how a cinematic mode of thinking with respect to the simulacrum offers a way of interpreting globality beyond the Marxian problematic of false representation (ideology), which, as I will show, remains a seductive, yet limiting, way of critiquing dominant ways of perceiving the global. Finally, I revisit the history of cinema to position documentary film as a potentially radical form of simulacra, and present a recent work from India that uses an unorthodox mode of documentation to connect the simulacrum of the documentary image to the simulacrum of globality, illuminating, in the process, a global politics of intelligibility.

2. Ghostly Images and Early Film

Before the advent of film, there was animated photography. A series of projected images was designed “to present the totality of an action unfolding in an homogeneous space” (Clarke and Doel, 2007: 592). As techniques and technologies for capturing movement through the cinematographic apparatus were being developed at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, animated photography gave itself “the task of rendering true motion within the confines of the image” (Clarke and Doel, 2007: 596), where “the aim was to be as objective and accurate as possible in these depictions” (Rose, 2001: 20). The earliest films inherited this preoccupation with rendering true motion, striving for cinematic transparency with respect to the real.

For early audiences of film, “moving” images were treated not as mere metaphors for real movement, not simply life-like, “they actually seemed to be alive,” so “that contemporary trade journals, exhibitors, and the public often referred to animated photography as ‘living pictures’” (Doel, 2008: 89). But even at the very dawn of the era of film, skeptics were already questioning the relationship that the Cinematographé and its projected images had with the
physical movements and spaces they were supposed to capture and re-present. These observers noted that the relationship seemed haunted by a perceptible gap in the re-presentation, a certain absence or disjuncture. Maxim Gorky, the Russian dramatist, stated that the cinematographic image “is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its sound-less spectre,” after he experienced the Cinematographé at the Nizhni Novgorod Fair in 1896 (Clarke and Doel, 2007: 592). Two years later, Wordsworth Donisthorpe—who invented his own early motion-picture device, the kinesgraph—warned against confusing the moving-image with the reality it was supposed to depict, even while recognizing that such images would hold a seductive power over future audiences in times to come, as the motion-picture apparatus improved, and such images and movements became more and more realistic.

Shall we ever be able to glide back up the stream of Time, and peep into the old home, and gaze on the old faces? Perhaps when the phonograph and the kinesegraph are perfected, and some future worker has solved the problem of colour-photography, our descendents will be able to deceive themselves with something very like it: but it will be a barren husk, a soulless phantasm and nothing more. (Clarke and Doel, 2007: 592)

The fear of these early critics was that in the cinematic transformation of physical and spatial movement into moving images, something would be irrevocably lost in the translation. A living actuality of movement in space would be replaced by a ghostly apparition in two-dimensions. But perhaps what really haunted them was that, beyond this purported loss, something might actually be gained as well. Indeed, there seems to be an unspoken realization that if the filmic image came to be confused with reality itself, then the “soulless phantasms” would no longer be limiting their haunting apparitions to the projection screen alone. For it was a testament to the peculiar discursive power of these moving representations that a ghostly life would be conjured back into the very thing that was supposed to be represented: reality itself. With the advent of the moving image, an event captured in the past would no longer be merely past, but would conjoin with the present as a spectral, virtual double. Perhaps what haunted the earliest observers of film, then, was the possibility that the
cinema could constitute a new way of thinking about time and the present, where representation no longer referred to a stable past, but was the “organ for perfecting the new reality” (Deleuze, 1989a: 7-8).

3. The “Phantom” Discourse of Neoliberal Globalization

Writing more than a century after the likes of Gorky and Donisthorpe, the venerable Indian historian Lata Mani invoked a similar vocabulary of “phantasms” and “illusions” in critiquing the discourse of neoliberal globalization in India. In “The Phantom of Globality and the Delirium of Excess,” published in the influential leftist journal Economic and Political Weekly out of Bombay, Mani targets the new discourse of globality that has increasingly come to dominate the post-liberalization landscape of India. This “phantom discourse,” Mani argues, is required by neoliberal globalization to “mediate its disruptive effects,” making available new “Western” life-styles and practices of consumerism for the most privileged social classes, and making possible a form of escape that spares them “from the burden of having to engage the actual material realities” which confront them everyday in a poor and underdeveloped country like India (Mani, 2008: 41-42). The “phantom discourse of globality” not only disarticulates the real relations between neoliberal globalization and the material realities it enters, transforms, or destroys. It also offers a mode of affiliation for its chief beneficiaries who are required to feel global in conditions that are a far cry from what the term supposedly denotes. (Mani, 2008: 41)

For Mani, “Globalization as cultural ideology actively fosters this misrecognition” (Mani, 2008: 42, emphasis added).

Interestingly, Mani conceptualizes the manipulative power of such a phantom discourse as virtual. For instance, with respect to the sense of belonging and recognition that elite and middle class Indians feel with their imagined counterparts in the West, Mani points out that “since one is aspiring to live in one place as though it were an elsewhere, the virtual can attain the status of reality, thus generating and sustaining illusions about both locales” (Mani,
2008: 42, emphasis added). Here, the virtual is understood as an illusion, an escape from the here and now, to a decidedly “Western” elsewhere. Mani points to the proliferation of this phantom discourse of globality in the media, in urban space, in governance, and concludes that “the trafficking in the virtual that we witness in this period is unprecedented” (Mani, 2008: 45).

“Trafficking in the virtual,” we might say, implies a complex and dispersed regime of seemingly unconnected discourses and images, as well as solid architectural spaces and the built environment, that closely maps onto what Baudrillard (1983) called the simulacrum, where: “in postmodernity it was no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become detached from any certain relation to a real world with the result that we now live in a scopic regime dominated by simulations, or simulacra” (Rose, 2001: 8).

Mani’s argument similarly approaches “postmodernity” as an “unanchored discourse” that mediates the disruptive effects of globalization through images and forms that are detached from reality. Yet, whereas Baudrillard insists that the age of the simulacrum “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1893: 5), Mani’s concept of the virtual is clearly to be distinguished from that of the real. This is why, for Mani, the secessionist subjects of neoliberal India (i.e. the new middle class and urban elite) actively “misrecognize” themselves in their life-style obsessions and brand name-driven realities, and feel a “false sense of confidence” in the “New India,” when “actual material realities” and “facts on the ground” starkly contradict these delusions of globality (Mani, 2008, 43).

This privileging of “actual material realities” as a pre-discursive corrective to the illusions and misrecognitions of the virtual has the effect of relegating the latter to a secondary
cultural and/or ideological role in the Marxian dialectical sequence of social causality (McLellan, 2000). The phantom discourse of virtuality/globality thus becomes recognizable under a broader, abstract categorization: it is a cultural ideology, one whose subjects misrecognize it for reality. Such a derivative position for the cultural as ideological implies that critical politics needs to intervene primarily at the base-level of material reality, and decidedly not in the superstructural sphere of images, signs and discourses that are mere expressions of the material. But if the phantom discourse of globality names a postmodern simulacrum, then this hard distinction between the ideological-discursive and material-real needs to be reexamined. This is not to repudiate Mani’s argument, which is invaluable as a cogent critique of neoliberal globalization in contemporary India. But it is to ask, if “Globalization is fundamentally an economic phenomenon” (Mani, 2008: 41), how is “the economic” also a function of discourse (Mitchell, 1998), and how do “economic phenomena” become intelligible at the level of everyday life, that is, at the level of culture, discourse and ideology? How is the global economy assembled not only through material processes such as production, labor, and surplus accumulation, but also through images and representations that inscribe these practices with a certain intelligibility, while rendering other practices as unintelligible? How do images and discourses proliferate beyond their material referent in order to intervene in the production and experience of solid reality itself? Such questions need to be thought about seriously if we are to practice a “counter-discourse” to neoliberal globalization, as Mani suggests we do at the end of her essay (Mani, 2008: 47).

4. Trafficking in the Virtual

I want to resuscitate Mani’s idea of “trafficking in the virtual,” but instead of reading it as an ideological distortion, I link the virtual to a “new thinking of the ideological” (Derrida, 1994: 58), beginning with the assumption that discursive and material processes intertwine virtually and are mutually constitutive in shaping inter-subjective experiences of neoliberal
globalization. I take to this concept of the virtual and link it to the inter-subjective production of 
the global for two reasons.

First, the virtual, as I approach it, does not signify the opposite of the real, nor does it 
simplistically reduce to the artificial or the simulated. Instead, “the virtual is the mode of reality 
implicated in the emergence of new potentials” (Massumi, 1998: 16). Shapiro frames the 
concept of the virtual with respect to a thinking of the event: “events have a virtual structure 
that is never captured in any particular determination” (Shapiro, 1999: 21). In this way, the 
virtual can be thought of as an excess of pure potentiality, crystallizing beyond hegemonic 
materializations in the present, so that “the potential of a situation exceeds its actuality” 

Secondly, a critical concept of the virtual makes possible a return to the early history of 
the cinema, where, as Deleuze finds, “there is a formation of an image with two sides, actual 
and virtual” (Deleuze, 1989b: 68). The cinema’s radical discovery of the virtual image can help 
to complicate our reading of neoliberal globalization as merely a cultural ideology, and as I will 
subsequently show, a rather unorthodox documentary film coming from contemporary India 
helps us move critical thinking about globality beyond the limits of Mani’s rather orthodox 
framework, but otherwise prescient argument.

5. Animated Photography, Film, and Documentary

It was not very long before animated photography’s founding preoccupation with 
“objectivity” and “accuracy” in re-presenting an actual event became anachronistic with respect 
to new technologies and procedures that were being developed for capturing movement and 
light through the camera. What enabled the evolution beyond animated photography’s concern 
for rendering “true motion” in homogeneous space was “the advent of editing techniques” such 
as “stop-motion, slow-motion, speed magnification, reverse action, parallel action, point-of-view
shots, reaction shots, continuity editing, and a host of others” (Doel, 2008: 95). Deleuze links the newly mobilized camera and use of new editing techniques to “the emancipation of the viewpoint, and, most significantly, to a privileging of time over space” (quoted in Shaprio, 1999: 23). This enabled the film camera “to stop slavishly re-presenting an actual or staged instant, and to start functioning as an apparatus that could both manipulate and manufacture space and time. In doing so, animated photography ceased being a referential medium, bound to the Real, to become a simulacral medium, free to fabricate a reality-effect” (Doel, 2008: 96).

If new cinematic techniques and technologies freed the camera from merely trying to re-present actual or staged events, their immediate and widespread embrace in mass-produced Hollywood fiction in the first half of the twentieth century generated critical reactions early on from those who were suspicious of the popular cinema’s complicity with dominant forms of power, such as patriarchy, white-supremacy and capitalism (Dixon and Grimes, 2004). Dixon argues that “as a counter-point to mass produced fiction film, documentary film offered an alternative perspective on the world, one that could even serve to challenge hegemonic attitudes and prejudices” (Dixon, 2008: 69).

Documentary’s renewed attachment to the “truth” of “alternative perspectives” also served to attach it to a particular politics of representation, one that all too easily slips from one concept of representation (representation as a proxy—as in an elected representative “representing” her constituency) to another (representation as a portrait—as in film as a form, or language) in the interest of representing the marginalized perspectives of excluded, or subaltern groups. Channan, for instance, argues that “the documentary idiom”—despite the manipulations of the camera and now digital editing—“encourages us to believe that the fact that one is seeing something amounts to evidence that it must have existed in the first place”
This status as “evidence” positions documentary as a particular kind of “public address,” communicating “facts” to “citizens,” rather than “fictions” to “private individual subjects,” like in mass-produced Hollywood drama (Channan, 2007: 16).

At a broader, historical level, however, documentary films should be understood as fitting within a modern epistemological matrix of knowledge/power that begins in the eighteenth century, where “the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process” (Foucault, 1995: 224). This is not to say that all documentary films are simply pawns of power, but rather that prevailing modes of filmic documentation intensify this circular epistemology by placing the camera either in the position of “objective observer,” or as a “neutral investigator,” where the documentary film “is meant to instruct through evidence; it poses truth as a moral imperative” (Rabinowitz, 1994: 18).

One style of documentary that emerged in the politically charged 1960’s, cinema verité, or direct cinema (as it was called in the United States), used “an unobtrusive camera” to directly capture the “truth of reality” through “vignettes of intimate life” (Rabinowitz, 1994: 130). The documentary camera of direct cinema attempted “to position itself like the fly on the wall and invisibly observe the activities taking place before it” (Rabinowitz, 1994: 20). In contrast, other styles of contemporary documentary more readily embrace the investigative role of the camera and use the documented interactions between subjects and the camera (or a journalistic host/narrator) to provide evidence or testimony in reporting “the truth” of a given event or situation. But in both styles of documentary—unobtrusive and interactive—the documentary form itself becomes embedded within “practices of investigation” that seek to “establish the truth by a number of regulated techniques” (Foucault, 1995: 226). In critiquing these documentary techniques, Deleuze finds that such films paradoxically “preserved and
sublimated an ideal of truth which was dependent on cinematographic fiction itself” (Deleuze, 1989b: 149).

But as we will soon see, the co-presence of fact and fiction, the actual and the virtual, is hardly a contradiction in film; it is a condition of possibility for the cinema to mobilize a kind of thinking that embodies a radical critique of the false problematic of “mis-representation.” In what follows, I use a documentary film from contemporary Bombay to demonstrate how the documentary idiom itself can be used to re-think the relationship between reality and its representation, and conjure cinematic worlds that index the simulacrum of globality.

6. Cinematic Images in John & Jane

Ashim Ahluwalia’s 2006 documentary, John and Jane (J&J), on call centers in neoliberal India, is not your typical documentary film. The stylistic composition of its images seems to belong more to dramatic and fictional genres than to the documentary idiom that Channan outlines above. But far from presenting a coherent narrative, the film consists of fragments and sequences that are connected in a non-linear way. Moreover, with the absence of an omniscient narrator to provide a social or historical context for these juxtaposed images, the film generates an intense aura of ambivalence with respect to the subject matter it addresses. Instead of providing a clear statement on the “truth” of the reality it depicts, J&J forces us to question the very status of reality in the virtualized space of the Indian call center.

The film opens with a haunting prelude to this de-territorialized world, introducing in a quite disorienting way, the very subject matter the film will claim to document. We are presented with dizzying images of bright, blurry lights seen from the perspective of a moving vehicle that navigates the streets of New York City, shaky lens trained on the passing urban nightscape—Times Square, a Loes Theater, McDonalds, high-end fashion stores. After a
moment, we hear from off-screen the sounds of a distant classroom, a “cultural training course” for call center workers in India. We hear the following exchange between an instructor and her students:

My name is John Doe.

This line is repeated by the class, accompanied by subtitles. These students are being trained to speak English with an “American” tongue, so that their potential customers on the other end of the line will think they are interacting with Americans. Yet even though all the words that we hear in J&J are spoken in English, they are always accompanied with subtitles, in English. It is as if Ahluwalia wants to underline the fact that the native’s linguistic mimesis always bears the mark of its dissemblance, that the repetition is also always a difference.

As the lights of New York City coalesce into a hazy blur the camera cuts sharply to a brightly lit bedroom. As opposed to the shaky camera and disorienting lights of the opening drive, here the shot is stabilized and fully composed. In fact, it seems as if the lighting and the setting are too perfect, as if the bedroom is staged for the camera. Ahluwalia already breaks with the documentary idiom by using one of the oldest tricks in the history of documentary, the “fiction of cinematography” (Deleuze, 1989b: 149), not only the staging of “actual” events for the camera, but also the editing techniques and juxtapositions that allow the camera to pursue an extra-representational vocation. We see a young man sleeping, eyes shut tight despite the bright lights of the daytime and the camera right up in his face. From off-screen we hear the sounds of his mother:

Glen! Get up! Its time to get up! Are you going to sleep all day? What is this nonsense? Get up!

Then we get a broader, establishing shot of Glen’s room, with Glen sprawled on his bed, and his mother enters the scene. She repeats her shrill wake-up call, and her piercing alarm-clock-
of-a-voice is as disquieting to us as it must be for Glen, who must try to sleep during the daytime because he works every night in the call center.

Glen Castinho, the first subject of Ahluwalia’s film, begrudgingly negotiates the “spatio-temporal alienation” of call center work. As Aneesh (2006) has recently noted in the context of Indian call centers, the alienation that call center workers experience is but the flipside of “spatio-temporal integration.” Call centers in India are part of an “emerging paradigm of transnational labor that allows workers in India to connect to corporations and consumers in the United States with high-speed satellite and cable links, performing through globally accessible data servers a range of work activities” (Aneesh, 2006: 1). But workers in India frequently have to work at night, in order to “synchronize” with the American workday, so that “night work in software companies is putting workers out of phase with their own society” (Aneesh, 2006: 93).

This spatio-temporal alienation/integration is precisely what Ahluwalia wants to document in J&J, in all its heterogeneity and complexity. When he is not shown languishing in the call center, we see Glen rolling joints of marijuana mixed with tobacco, smoking frequently in his time off from work. He curses profusely in his narrative, telling us that he chose to work at the call center “only for the money,” that he hates his job and his boss, and that he wants to “fuck [his] boss’ wife,” just to let him know “what it feels like to get fucked.” As Glen tells us his frustrated story, Ahluwalia deftly syncs his pre-recorded narrative with shots of him at work, interacting with a customer on the phone, so that it looks as if Glen is telling the customer his most intimate and depraved fantasies of white-collar revenge.

J&J is made up entirely of mobile portraits that show six different call center agents in their everyday lives: at work, at home, and in other spaces. Only rarely do they speak directly
Ahluwalia’s six cinematic portraits are presented in three pairs, though shots of all six at work are interspersed amongst one another in montages throughout the film. Glen is paired up with Sydney, whose narrative also testifies to the extreme alienation of call center work. While Glen’s escape is cannabis, Sydney’s is dance, where his mother tells us that Sydney often performs at weddings and other functions. In the first part of the film, during Glen and Sydney’s narratives, the two are frequently shown at work, interacting (mostly unsuccessfully) on the phone, trying to make sales calls but dealing with constant rejection and verbal abuse from the customers on the other end of the line. The pressure to meet ambitious sales goals is high, and leads to a high attrition rate for workers at call centers (Aneesh, 2006: 93). Sydney’s narrative attests to the disciplinary techniques put in place to ensure “productive” labor—the virtual panopticon:

They record you; if your call is bad you lose your incentive [commission] for the whole week.

But the panoptic power of the call center is not merely limited to the work space, it seems to follow Sydney and Glen wherever they go. In one scene shot in Glen’s kitchen, Glen complains to his mother about the lack of days off they get from the call center. Far from expressing sympathy for her son’s plight, Glen’s mother dishes out a lecture on corporate logic, informing him that “this is the system,” that call centers exist for the customer’s convenience, and that the customer is always in need. If he doesn’t like the job “then leave, and go tell your Indians to give you a job!” From Sydney, we get a more subtle sense of the omnipresence of the call center in the worker’s life:
The only thing I think about is work. The only thing I do is work. The only people I meet is working people. The same people and the same work to do.

Glen and Sydney’s portraits darkly depict the spatio-temporal alienation that accompanies global integration in the call centers. But Ahluwalia quickly changes this trajectory by showing us how one person’s alienation can be another’s rebirth. Two workers (Nikki and Osmond) use the call center as a space to re-invent themselves, discovering a new kind of corporate “family” in the process. And the final pair (Nicholas and Naomi) becomes so absorbed into this world that they effectively escape from the here and now, to a virtual elsewhere. As Ahluwalia explains in a recent interview:

The film was structured as a transformation process from someone who really hates his job to someone who really loves it; there’s an underlying journey that’s happening from an Indian boy and girl to a final sort of ‘John’ and ‘Jane,’ virtual American characters…In a strange way I think of all six of them as the journey of one person.

But this virtual transformation is wrought with dizzying ambivalence. During the film’s disorienting opening stanza, after being introduced to Glen and his macabre discourse of economic imprisonment, the film cuts suddenly to a corporate training video, ostensibly one that would be shown to new employees upon entering the corporate world of call centers. Against an image of a rotating, digitally produced globe, we hear a soft, robotic-voice with a curiously discernable Indian accent. The strange voice articulates what will become a haunting conceptual motif for the film:

Who would have thought that workers in India would be selling insurance, sim cards, mobiles, to customers in America? The call centers have made the virtuality into a reality.

The virtual becomes a powerfully mobilized concept in Ahluwalia’s film. At one level, the narrative journey is from actual Indian to virtual American. But following the motif above, there is also a parallel transformation of virtuality into reality. Thus, to render a reality that is always already virtual becomes the cinematic task of Ahluwalia’s film. As he states in an interview:

For me, the idea of virtual ‘call agents’ with fake American identities who talked on the
phone all night seemed straight out of science fiction...I imagined that this job must
have some odd psychological side effects, because it is quite a bizarre job if you think
about it.

But in order to treat this parallel framing of the virtual, Ahluwalia deliberate departs from an
orthodox documentary idiom. Thinking schematically about the relationship between the
documentary image and the material it captures, most documentary films produce images that
fit Deleuze’s classification of the “organic regime,” in which the relationship between an afilmic
reality (the world as it exists independently of the camera) and a profilmic reality (the world that
is presented on the screen because it is captured by the lens and exposed to the film) is
approached as strictly representational. In the organic regime of the image, “the setting
described is presented as independent of the description which the camera gives it, and stands
for a supposedly pre-existing reality” (Deleuze, 1989b: 126). In contrast to the organic regime,
Deleuze poses the “crystalline regime,” where the profilmic image does not simply describe
subjects and objects that belong to an afilmic reality, rather the “crystalline description stands
for its objects, replaces it, both creates and erases it…and constantly gives way to other
descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones” (126).

Building on Deleuze’s framework, Jacques Ranciere articulates the coalescence of the
organic and crystalline regimes in the “cinematic image,” which means “two different things.
There is the simple relationship that produces likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful
copy, but simply what suffices to stand for it. And there is the interplay of operations that
produce what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance” (Ranciere, 2007: 6).

Ranciere’s concept of the cinematic image is suitable to a critical reading of
Ahluwalia’s film, which utilizes the documentary idiom, but only in order to radically destabilize
the ontological relationship between afilmic and profilmic realities. Ahluwalia does not seem
cconcerned with faithfully recording and representing the world of call centers as it exists
independently of his camera. Instead, what Ahluwalia documents is a reality that is always already virtual, populated with subjects who are actually Indian yet virtually American. In rendering this ambivalence, the organic shot becomes doubled by its crystalline reflection, producing what Deleuze calls “time-images” (Deleuze 1989b).

[Insert: Call Center Time-Image]

We see wide-angle shots of the call center floor, its maze of cubicles and agents busily talking on phones, with fluorescent lights providing a synthetic tint to the space. The perspective is akin to that of a security camera, and in the foreground are signs of spatio-temporal integration/alienation: a digital clock in the corner reads 3:43 am; placards over cubicles read “New Jersey” or “New York.” Then we get a montage of different call center workers trying out their “Americanized” English on customers located on the other side of the globe. Following Durham, we might say that Ahluwalia’s film shares in the singular prerogative of postmodern art: “that of articulating the experience of a deterritorialized humanity” (Durham, 1998: 186). As one reviewer of J&J notes:

Ahluwalia, shooting in antiseptic 35mm, films [the workers] lives like a purgatorial sci-fi horror show with no discernible delineation between waking and dreaming states. Time and again the director cuts back to his subjects sleeping during harshly bright daylight hours, amid Bombay’s perpetual hustle and bustle: they’re androids dreaming of distinctly Western electronic sheep (Uhlich, 2005).

As noted in the review, Ahluwalia forgoes handheld cameras and digital video (more germane to new wave documentaries) for highly controlled and composed 35mm film. This gives the images a dramatic, almost fictional feel, even though the actual content of the film is decidedly “non-fiction.” This visual style allows Ahluwalia to inhabit a zone of connectivity between waking and dreaming states—without telling us when the dream ends and reality begins—as seen in the opening shots of Glen’s sleeping face as well as those of the other agents. Moreover, the documentary has no objective narrator, no detached voice to provide a
context for the images and sounds we see and hear, so that the narrative imaginations of the six subjects alone constitute the inter-subjective world of J&J. Here, vivid imaginations become impossible to separate from the “agency” of the workers themselves, whether it is the frustrated Glen “fucking” his boss’ wife out of revenge, or the angelic Nikki Cooper, who is introduced after Glen and Sydney, and incredibly describes the love that she feels for the customers she interacts with on the other end of the line. If cinematic images are primarily “relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect” (Ranciere, 2007: 7), then J&J becomes political in a Rancierean sense when Ahluwalia gracefully contrasts Glen’s frustration at work with the optimistic narrative of Nikki. With the camera trained on a despondent Glen on the phone with a customer, Nikki confides to us in an intimate, blissful tone:

In the call center I was introduced to a new person: myself…a new part of me…In the call center I excel. I am one of the best in my team. The relationship I have with everyone is so beautiful.

We are forced to juxtapose the liberation of Nikki, who, as a woman in the call center can attain degrees of freedom and financial independence not imaginable elsewhere in India, with the emasculation of Glen, who tells us that the discipline of the call center makes him feel like a neutered dog:

I’m getting to be tamed, you know? Sit boy, sit!

Rather than making a general comment on whether call centers are “good” or “bad,” whether workers are “happy” or “unhappy,” Alhuwalia poses a more interesting thought: in the call center (and in neoliberal India more generally) one woman’s “liberation” quickly becomes another man’s “castration.”

7. Globality as an Escape to Elsewhere

Recalling Lata Mani’s critique of the phantom discourse of globality in
neoliberal India, the virtuality of globality had to do with creating an illusion of elsewhere in the here and now of the present. Rather than evaluating this existential escape in terms of its fidelity or infidelity to a fixed referent (“America” or “the West”), the cinematic critique that is practiced in J&J allows us to explore how such referents become de-territorialized in fundamental ways. In one particularly powerful sequence, Ahluwalia plays the naïve narrative of Nicholas, a call center worker who is enamored with the idea of “America”:

I have never been to America but I imagine this country to be a beautiful country, with snow, cold…the signals…big, huge highways where cars zoom up and down, up and down. No dust, no bad air, those beautiful buildings.

The power of imagination to familiarize a never-seen-before landscape is crystallized in this scene, where instead of showing us images or representations of America, instead of providing a solid geographical referent to contrast with the Nicholas’ illusions of America, Ahluwalia shows us metropolitan Mumbai: stunning images of modern high-rise apartment buildings and condominiums, towering office and business structures, postmodern architectural design, all seen from the perspective of a moving vehicle on an expressway. The point, we might say, is to show how an imagined elsewhere does not need a solid referent, but crystallizes ambivalently in the here and now of the urban present.

Existential escapes from the present need not be strictly spatial, they can also be temporally negotiated. At one point Ahluwalia trains his camera on Osmond as he is sleeping during the daytime. We hear the sounds of a motivational tape that he listens to everyday, a repetition of the line “I am now wealthy” over again. Osmond tells us that his dream is to buy his own house by October 26, 2006 (roughly two years from the time of filming), a date that he has circled on a calendar with a picture of a model home attached by a thumbtack. Speaking directly into the camera, Osmond articulates his determination to acquire:

There is no power on earth which is going to stop me; because I’m going to be working very hard towards it, and I want to get out of this.
Osmond’s desire is not only for material acquisition, but also the existential escape from his lower-middle class background that such acquisition would signify. He tells us unabashedly:

Certain parts of India, they’re not quite civilized.

And it becomes clear that this part of India, and perhaps a part of himself, haunts Oaref Irani as he transforms into Osmond.

Rather than pushing us to judge these characters and their preoccupations, rather than evaluating them according to a fixed moral criteria, Ahluwalia’s film urges us to think the conditions of possibility for such escapist desires to become intelligible realities. The simulacrum of globality that comes in an American package captivates these subjects, and drives them to change their lifestyles (Nicholas tells us that before working at the call center, he used to speak in Hindi, but now he speaks only in English, it was an “American feeling” that he started having), their personalities and values (Osmond boasts that the call center has “made me a principled man…I make goals and I think positively”), and even to transform their own bodies.

Indeed, it is this last, physical and bodily transformation that is most haunted and haunting in J&J. Paired up with Nicholas, who informs us that if it was up to him, he would never leave he call center, he would eat and sleep there just to avoid the “hustle-bustle” of Mumbai, is the even more enigmatic Naomi. She is introduced after an eerie montage of shots taken from security cameras set up all over the call center. The images are blurry and in black and white, with lines of distortion running across. But it is not the resemblance of these images to actual events that is demanded from this montage. Rather it is the dissemblance of the security camera’s images, the blurry panopticism of 24-hour surveillance, that is used to render “the perception of an idea more complex” (Ranciere, 2007: 6).
Born Narmata Pravin Parekh, Ahluwalia’s final subject tells us that when she started training for the call center,

Namrata totally became Naomi.

But it was not only her name that changed. Ahluwalia introduces Naomi with a long, intense shot of her face, closing in at times, drawing back at others. We see that she has incredibly pale skin, a pinkish-whitish complexion, bleach-blond hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. The camera’s visual meditation on Naomi continues as her narrative is gradually introduced. She addresses her own singularity head-on when she informs us that her co-workers do not know what to make of her, constantly asking her:

Where are you from?

Indeed, as we see Naomi’s face, its mysterious and ghostly artifice, and listen to her strangely twinged mid-western American accent, we begin to ponder the question ourselves, even as we might fear the answer.

But before we can get a response from Naomi, Ahluwalia returns us to the call center training class, where images and imaginations of the “virtual American” get reincarnated in the very souls of Indian call center workers, making someone like Naomi possible, even if she remains unintelligible:

Teacher: “Who is John and Jane Doe?”
Class: “The average American.”
Teacher: “And what are their values?”
Class: “Individualism, achievement and success, pursuit of happiness, patriotism…”
Teacher: “Very good!”

We return to a shot of Naomi at work, and as we see her speak with an American customer, one who is no more real than imagined for her, we realize that it does not matter where Naomi is actually from. More profoundly, we begin to recognize that the social transformations productive
of neoliberal India cannot be dismissed as merely a “cultural ideology” that is an illusion or misrecognition of a more fundamental economic reality. By bleaching her skin and hair, and transforming not only her personality and her name, but her body itself, Naomi’s apparition reminds us that every specter and phantom that haunts representation does so precisely by “taking on a body” (Derrida, 1994: 141). For it is this discursive materialization that obliterates the separation between body and spirit, matter and memory, the real and the imaginary.

The artifice of Naomi’s body is substantiated by a series of self-interpellations. We see her shopping in a crowded market, where her narration proceeds:

Don’t mistake me for anything else. But I’m totally naturally blond.

She repeats:

I’m totally naturally blond.

And reconfirms:

I just want to make it officially clear: I’m totally naturally blond.

With each repetition, Naomi attempts to secure her own intelligibility through a discourse of the natural. She continues:

I like to be just me…I like to be the ‘me’ of me. I am totally Americanized…very much into today’s world.

As we puzzle over the ambiguity that surrounds Naomi’s strange discourse, J&J’s concluding shots are trained on Naomi dancing by herself in a dark club. She talks in her narrative about “looking for an ideal man,” someone “light skinned,” with “light eyes.”

Blonds are naturally attracted to blonds. That’s very natural of course.
The camera pans out to reveal the entire dance club, with lights flashing and bodies moving to an electronic beat. We fade to black and roll the credits. The End.

It is unsettling, but also fitting, that J&J ends with Naomi’s ambiguous discourse of the natural. What Ahluwalia’s film does is disrupt the “natural,” or organic, regime of cinematic resemblance that guides the thinking of most documentary films. The dissemblance practiced through Ahluwalia’s camera, the artifice that we notice, is impossible to separate from Naomi’s phantasmatic body that exists at the very margins of social intelligibility. If these workers are becoming “virtually American,” then built into this virtuality is an irreducible dissemblance and difference that is productive of something else, a different trajectory made possibly through global circuits of images, discourses and imaginations. At the end of the film, we no longer know what is “real” or “imagined” in neoliberal India, what we can “make sense” out of, and what is “the wordless, senseless materiality of the visible” (Ranciere 2007: 9) that takes on the form of globality. But this is because Ahluwalia does not seem concerned with producing a common sense articulations of the global. Rather than attempting to secure such consensus, Ahluwalia practices a cinema of dissemblance and *dissensus*, that is, he supplies an *uncommon sense* of globality, one that remains open in terms of the conclusions one might draw regarding the cultural and economic processes that intertwine *virtually* in a globalizing world, producing Naomis and Osmonds right next to Glens and Sydneys. Moreover, Ahluwalia’s haunting, open-ended conclusion to J&J is an invitation to think critically about the politics of experience in neoliberal India, how mediated and fragmented experiences become intelligible through new distributions of value and intelligibility. That such distributions must be negotiated and re-negotiated in order for a sense of globality to become “common,” to materialize as an actuality, already presupposes that value and intelligibility are always already subject to re-distribution, opening the door to different imaginings of the global.

8. The Art(ifice) of Documentary Film
In making J&J, Ahluwalia’s stated desire was to produce a style of documentation that did not attempt to represent the totality of the world of call centers, nor did he want to make a definitive political statement regarding this aspect of globalization, whether it benefits India or not. First of all, he wanted to explore the distribution of value and intelligibility between fiction and non-fiction forms of film.

Certain things are seen as documentary and certain things are seen as fiction based more on the medium that you are using and the style of the shooting than the actual content. For example, you shoot something hand-held and it becomes documentary; you shoot it static and it becomes fiction. So I was interested in just what happens if you shoot something on 35mm film and static and it’s the same material that you would otherwise shoot on DV [digital video] and hand-held. It was a challenge to see if we could do something on 35 mm that could be intimate and the same time still fall in this strange liminal space between fiction and non-fiction... These guys are also faking who they are; they are fictionalizing themselves, they have fake names, fake identities within this fiction/non-fiction space.

So Ahluwalia set out to make a documentary film that, as Shapiro puts it in a different context, “does not seek ‘the truth’ but seeks instead to provide vehicles for experiencing the world differently” (Shapiro, 1999: 22). Fundamental to this critical stance is the Nietzschean realization that “the ‘true world’ does not exist, and, if it did, would be inaccessible, impossible to describe, and, if it could be described, would be useless, superfluous” (Deleuze, 1989b: 137).

Is such a critical stance inapposite to the dominant perception of the role of documentary films in contemporary society, that is, as serving a public function by educating citizens with facts about the “true world”? If such a perception speaks to a particular politics of documentary, then it is clear that this politics itself works within a very delimited imagination of the political. In one review of J&J for the entertainment magazine Variety, for example, film critic Robert Koehler articulated a limited concept of the political by opposing the striking visual style of Ahluwalia’s film to its decidedly “apolitical” content. Koehler notes the distance that Ahluwalia takes from “many of the elements commonly associated with [contemporary]
nonfiction film...and [how he] opts for highly controlled and composed lensing in 35mm.

Some viewers may be lulled by the [picture's] sheer elegance into thinking it's a drama...The film's classy surface, though, conceals a lack of depth, as it fails to provide a greater understanding of the hot-button issue of outsourcing. Indeed, 'John and Jane' is perhaps most notable for how non-ideological it is in its basic mission to observe six such Indian workers on the job and at home...[The picture] overall lacks the revelatory moments of top-notch cinema verite, just as it takes no position on whether or not globalization promises to expand world economic opportunities.

In this articulation, the role of documentary film is to “provide a greater understanding” of decidedly “hot-button issues.” But we can see in Koehler’s language that this “issue” is already colored by a particularly American bias (it is far from clear that Indian call center workers perceive themselves as “outsourced” labor [Aneesh 2006]), so that the very terms of the debate are already set, to the exclusion of other possible meanings and articulations. Instead of treating the issue of “outsourcing” as a debate between expanding “world economic opportunities” or not, Ahluwalia’s film goes to work deconstructing the various terms themselves, deterritorializing ideas of what is “American” and what is “Indian,” what might be considered a purely “economic phenomenon,” and what is decidedly a matter of “cultural identity.” Ahluwalia’s film is less interested in taking positions within already established debates than in showing us the distributions of value and intelligibility that produce different experiences and imaginations of globality in contemporary India. This makes the film irreducibly political (Ranciere 1998, 2004).

In direct contrast to most documentary films, which deploy organic images to produce evidence that testifies to the “truth” of an afilmic reality, Ahluwalia uses what Deleuze calls the “powers of the false” to call into question this reality, to render instead a profilmic image that is a veritable simulacrum, where “the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but...places in question the very notations of copy and model” (Deleuze, 1990: 256). Whereas most documentary films ultimately refer us to a preexisting model or afilmic reality, one whose basic
parameters are already set by a discourse of common sense and intelligibility (Deleuze and Guattari: 1994), Ahluwalia’s film functions precisely by unsettling these parameters, producing an uncommon sense of the present that cinematically connects the simulacrum of globalization to the simulacrum of documentary film itself. The simulacrum is conceived here “as the edge of critical modernity,” and immanent to its virtual structure is an internal critique of modernity itself: “Modernity is defined by the power of the simulacrum. It behooves philosophy not to be modern at any cost…but to extract from modernity something that Nietzsche designated as the untimely, which pertains to modernity, but which must also be turned against it—in favor, I hope, of a time to come” (Deleuze, 1990: 265).

My point is not that Ahluwalia’s intention was to fulfill these Deleuzean requirements. Rather, in documenting call center workers as virtual subjects who are variously captivated and captured by discourses and imaginations of globality, in which their own lives are lived in relation to an imagined elsewhere (i.e. “America”) that may or may not have an original model, *J&J* provides a connection and a corrective to the false problematic of discursive and/or cinematic misrepresentation. This is what allows Ahluwalia’s film to move seamlessly between the “soulless phantasms” and “discursive illusions” that haunted Mani as well as Gorky and Donisthorpe at the outset of this article, treating them not as illusions to be conjured away but rather as simulacral effects that are the material of a new (virtual) reality in neoliberal India. *J&J* steadfastly refuses to make an optimistic or pessimistic statement regarding call centers and globalization in India. The force of this film is not its articulation of a consensus opinion on the present, but rather its meditation on how the heterogeneity of inter-subjective experiences in neoliberal India foreshadows the transformational potential of the global (virtual) economy in the future to come.