

DREAM MACHINES

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I am at the present writing my dissertation which is focused on images of IT (Information Technologies) especially in connection to some Swedish contexts. But to get a perspective on the Swedish material I also try to investigate related dynamics in some Indian contexts. It is from the Indian material that this presentation is built.

IT and electronics are often said to homogenize, globalize and connect the world. But behind these statements, of course, a more complicated reality is hidden. Localities and heterogeneity are of great importance, especially in connection to IT. Electronic networks give people the possibilities to be connected to faraway contexts. In some ways this boosts isolation from occurrences in people's physical proximity. However, this doesn't mean that the question about localities becomes redundant, but the question of who's connected to what becomes crucial. This presentation draws from two examples. The first is about how some men and women in Bangalore, India use the computers in a certain café, and how IT-related dreams and fantasies are conjured up. These dreams are related to the other example I want to present. It draws on observations of how certain images of the world appear in relation to some kinds of electronically oriented "world music". These images depend on the contrast between hi-tech and lo-tech, and on stereotyping associations to wired, connected localities and localities dominated by tradition and roots.

There is a relation between the direction of the dreams and fantasies of some youngsters in Bangalore and the way the world is imaged in the rhetorics and aesthetics of IT and also of "world music". The directions of the young people's dreams are towards localities that are considered to be more "in touch" with the world and with "the future" than others. In contrast to these localities, images of the stagnated backwaters of disconnection are to be found. The question I address is, how is this mapping conjured up?

Just some words about method. The material I've used is based on observations and interviews with some young men and women in Bangalore. The dreams I talk about in the presentation, of course, wasn't to be found among all of the youngsters I talked to. But many mentioned similar IT-related dreams. When it comes to the "world music" part I've listened to different artists especially those that has something to do with India and with electronics. I've also looked at lots of websites and some magazines.

Let's now start in a milieu in the South Indian city Bangalore...

Connected on Brigade road, Bangalore

Picture the following:

In Brigade Road in Bangalore you can find The Cybercafé. Bangalore's first such café, equipped with computers to be used for reaching the Internet, sending e-mail etc. It is now one among many similar cafés in Bangalore but it still has a very good reputation. This is a place where the interior is dominated by austere furniture of metal and marble, mirrors and a cool atmosphere, rather like an Italian café. In one of the rooms there are rows of computers along the walls. Mostly young people sit here, sending e-mail by "Hotmail" or "Yahoo" and checking out different websites. The sound level is fairly low, with rattling coffee cups, fingers striking keys, the hiss of hard-disk fans, low-key conversation, and background music. (Which is often calm melodious American or European pop and rock.)

By becoming a member of the "Cyber brigade" club you can surf the web at a discount in the café and receive other benefits. In a brochure marketing the Cyber brigade you can read the following:

As a flagbearer to a race welcoming the 21st century, you are an epitome of the cyber generation. Sophisticated taste and lifestyle. Zestful in work. And unabashed at play. Well-informed and in touch with the world. Now you have a club that reflects your outlook towards life. Coffee Day Cyber Brigade, the club for the Cyber Generation.

"To be in touch with the world" in the "Cyber brigade" way doesn't mean to be in touch with the streetscape outside the café, which is in stark contrast to The Cybercafé atmosphere. At the smoked-glass doors to the café a guard makes sure that no one comes in except those who look as if they belong. Brigade Road is in many ways a part of Bangalore that is considered to be cosmopolitan. But Bangalore is a city that is not very geographically segregated, at least compared to cities like eg. Jakarta. It means that on Brigade Road young hipsters on two wheelers share the street with all kind of vehicles, with beggars, small kids selling knick-knacks and the omnipresent stray dogs. The world that many of the café users want to be "in touch with" is somewhere else. Many of the young men and women that sat in The Cybercafé when I was there in the beginning of 1998 were communicating with friends in the USA, some were also searching for a job. Jobs that could be placed in the category: "overseas appointments". In the morning papers there are notices for several well-paid software jobs in the USA. The headlines can be like: "Wanted: 20 software consultants for U.S.", "Software professionals required for USA immediately" or "Opportunities in USA for IT professionals". Some young people in Bangalore dream about being programmers and NRI's (non-residential Indians) "over there". Maybe to be employees in a "Fast Company" somewhere in California or New York. In this way The Cybercafé is a context where images and dreams about different localities are central. The images

of these localities are often amalgamated with dreams of career, cooler lifestyles and economical independence.

In the focus of these dreams and imaginations is the computer. The computer is the key to a better life. It is for many people in Bangalore (as well as for people in other localities) an artifact that symbolises success and economical possibilities. There is a considerably high amount of programming and computer-training programs provided by different companies and institutes in India. The two biggest chains in this line of business are probably NIIT and Aptech, the latter with it's simple slogan: "We change lives".

IT-dreams with global scope are momentous here. Therefore it is worth concentrating on people's imaginations and conceptions. Arjun Appadurai takes Benedict Anderson's term "imagined communities" a little further and talks about...

...imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them. (Appadurai, 1996:33)

What's on the menu at the Cybercafé, Bangalore is not just people's fantasies as something private, individual or introverted. Instead it is the fantasy as a social practice. (Appadurai, 1996:31). There are important connections between people's fantasies and their actions. Tom O'Dell writes about these dynamics in his book "Culture unbound":

Fantasy, along these lines, involves much more than mere make-believe; it becomes both a point of departure for social praxis, as well as an important door

opening into a world beyond the local arena of daily life and its activities.
(O'Dell, 1997:57).

For the young people who sit in the Cybercafé or go to the different programs offered by NIIT and Aptech, it's in many ways closer to Silicon Valley, California than to the slums in the fringes of Bangalore. What becomes visible is a global cultural order characterized by complex overlapping and also separating flows. It's all about integration of people in different networks but also about separation and about exclusion. This is something that the French philosopher Paul Virilio (In *Samtider* 1/1997) touches upon when he talks about how people equipped with electronics communicate over long distances at the same time as they avoid neighbours that are considered to be unpleasant, boring or simply not "in touch with the world".

The judgement who and what is not "in touch with the world" or who's "on" or "off" then has a lot to do with rhetorics, and also with aesthetics and fashion. So let me therefore turn to my second example, which has to do with how aesthetic products can be related to images of connectivity, technology and to different localities.

The Future Sounds of India

There's an artist called Talvin Singh that makes electronic music. He was born in England and is of Indian extraction. He is educated in playing tablas but has a special liking for electronic tunes. He has performed with artists like Björk, David Bowie, Sun Ra and Massive Attack and has in that way created a worldwide reputation. Based in East London he has contributed to form what is called "The Sounds of The Asian Underground". He is also the person behind projects like

"Future Soundz of India" and "The Calcutta Cyber Café" (which is a music project).

During 1998 Talvin Singh released a disc with the name "O.K." (Island/Omni, 1998). On the web-site "Desisound" his electronic based music is described as something that falls between different categories... Between future and past and between the electronic and the human. It's music from "the floating world", ephemeral music. In the website review you can read the following:

A question often asked: What will music sound like in the 21st century? Ask Talvin Singh. He lives there already.

'O.K' his debut album, (...) is from the floating world, music that captures the feeling of movement between identities, cultures, destinations, languages. A place between the body and digital processes. A zone of oscillation between traditions and heresy. In the gaps between genres, where music is currently at its most interesting, or in the vast differences of scale between rural village and urban supersprawl. Everywhere is exotic; nowhere is exotic.

Talvin Singh's music has resemblances with electronic dance music and with genres as drum'n bass and jungle, which a bit simplified could be characterized as built up from heavy electric basslines and energetic, syncopated and occasionally polyrhythmic drumbeats. To this electronic computergenerated texture Talvin Singhs tablas are added.

Parts of the sound on a disc like Talvin Singh's "O.K." could be characterized as "world music" In pieces called "Light" and "Traveller" harmonic, hovering synthpads are mixed with ethereal sounds of pianos and strings. Images of a stereotypical ancient India are then conjured up with the help of flutes, sitars and tablas that are contrasted to the modern sounds of electronic beats and harmonies. This contrasting is common in different kinds of "world music". Electronic instruments are mixed with musical elements associated with stereotypical images of different localities that creates associations to something "traditional" and in that

way already past. Veit Erlmann observes with the help of Fredric Jameson's thoughts on "spatial historiographies" that "...much of "world music" has the pseudohistorical sound of pastness." (Erlmann, 1996:483).

When it comes to Talvin Singh's music it is often described as including these historical elements. The following is to be read in one of the reviews of the disc:

Singh's subtle craftsmanship in fitting the old with the modern make this album seductive and one of the best efforts yet as blending Asian sounds with techno

One of the quoted reviews on a sticker attached to the CD case expresses something similar:

A boundary-melting compound of past and future... not just ok but stunning.

In reading these reviews one can observe a clear contrasting effect in the associations to Indian milieus as - "rural villages" - and fast electronics - "urban supersprawl". Talvin Singh's electronical hybrid music can be seen as an illustration of what Manuel Castells (1996) has described as de- and re-contextualisation of different elements and the oscillation between associations to past and future in the global electronic networks of the nineties.

It is possible to observe that much of what is associated with India in record reviews and aesthetical expressions represents the past. Another interesting aspect of this is the fact that what is called India's electronical underground scene is located in London. South Asians in London create something called "The Future Sounds of India". Everything is produced with the help of expensive computers, synthesizers and samplers. It's possible in a bit simplified manner to say that the images conjured up in relation to some kinds of music imply that many localities in geographical India represent the disconnected past, at the same time as India's hi-tech dominated future is located somewhere in the wired West.

Conclusion

So, what do we get if we merge the two examples I've just presented? The activities in The Cybercafé in Bangalore and the hi tech oriented "Future Sounds of India" produced in London. The examples show different aspects of how IT and the "cyber rhetorics" about technology, connectivity, the future and speed accentuate stereotypical images of where the future is to be found and which localities are in touch with the world. The first example has to do with people's actions and dreams in a concrete context. The other example is about an aesthetic product and the rhetorics about it. Both examples show how images of certain localities as "more connected" than others are conjured up.

When we focus on themes like connectivity, global asymmetry and hierarchical order are accentuated. We get a scale where some localities are associated with being more "off" or lower than others. This hierarchy is an imaginary order that has concrete repercussions, especially when people's dreams and fantasies turn to action. If there is a direction in people's dreams, it's also possible that people will move in that direction. There's to some degree a correspondence between the imagined worlds of the young persons in The Cybercafé, Bangalore and a braindrain from India to the West. Worth mentioning is that many of the IT- and India-related products known on a global market are produced by NRI's (Non Residential Indians) in the USA or in Europe. One famous example is the web-based e-mail provider Hotmail, invented by Sabeer Bhatia now owned by Microsoft.

The whole of this discussion depend on the material, political and economical conditions in different localities. Questions about a locality's infrastructure, the level of education etc. are to a large extent influential. But apart from these essential conditions there are rhetorical and aesthetical expressions focusing on themes like connectivity which lay stress upon material and economical differences.

The youthful dreams of connectivity and being "in touch with the world" imagine the street milieu in Brigade road in Bangalore as "slower" and less connected than the cool hi-tech dominated milieu in The Cybercafé. The space in which The Cybercafé is located is also more peripheral and "slower" than many of the nodes in the world to which it is electronically connected. Both London and California are according to this scheme "faster" and "cooler" than Bangalore. According to the rhetoric in the Cyber Brigade leaflet about being "in touch with the world", "the world" is primarily considered to be contexts in Europe and in USA, and definitely not in the street outside The Cybercafé. Geographical closeness in relation to these distinctions is in some ways illusory. The question is more about being connected to the right network. Manuel Castells (1996:470) makes the observation that the distance between different nodes in the global electronic network generally becomes zero while at the same time the distance from points that are not connected to the network becomes almost infinite.

If in connection to IT there arise dreams and fantasies for different people, it is important to investigate what kind of images that are conjured up in these dreams. If the dreams are about connectivity and to be "in touch with the world", it is worth asking what different people really want to be connected to. If the dreams are directed towards a faster and more connected future it is worth asking where this future is located.

For many of the youngsters in The Cybercafé in Bangalore, the future is certainly not located in what is pictured as the traditional, disconnected backwaters of rural India. Maybe not even in the relatively cosmopolitan parts of Bangalore. The electronic future images and sounds of India are for them located somewhere else. According to the rhetorics of the marketing for the Cybercafé in Bangalore, it's when you are in touch with these images and sounds that you are in touch with the world. Even if this world happens to be a dream world.

Literature

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