

*Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat: Futurism and Pirate
Modernity in South Asian Electronica*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

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Asian, and African Studies

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May 1, 2015

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ABSTRACT

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Ravi Sundaram's conception of recycled, or pirate, modernity was first deployed to explain the extralegal circuits of production and consumption of pirated and counterfeit goods, particularly in India. This thesis argues that the production, performance, distribution, and consumption of South Asian electronic music can be read under the specter of an aestheticization of the circuits of pirate modernity. Through sampling, glitching, and remixing artifacts, sometimes with pirated software or counterfeit hardware, South Asian electronica situates itself in youth culture as an underground form of sound. This is a music that concerns itself with futurity and futurism, doubly so by its links to the diaspora and to Afrofuturist readings, and with the physicality of the sound wave. The thesis also suggests a shift in the economic and political import of pirate modernity wrought by this aestheticization, examining how it has been appropriated for profit and mobilized for political use.

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

Completing a degree in the humanities has been a humbling experience. Making the transition was not an easy task for someone who studied mathematics and writes code for a living; without the assistance and encouragement of mentors, colleagues, and friends, it would have been insurmountable. I am indebted to all those who helped me through the journey:

To the members of the Fall 2014 MESAAS Graduate Colloquium, and to Allison Busch, for their helpful critiques.

To Jessica Rechtschaffer, the academic department administrator for MESAAS, for cheerfully and quickly responding to my inquiries. I'll never understand how she had the patience to re-explain everything to me when I missed one meeting or another.

To my undergraduate professors at NYU Courant, for inspiring me to abuse the jargon of topology in cultural studies.

To the musicians who invented such a creative, imaginative, and speculative world.

To my colleagues at Bloomberg, who tolerated my irregular schedule and asked about the Urdu and Hindi books next to the C++ and finance texts.

To my mother, father, sister, and brother, for their love and support.

To Vivek Gupta, for his commiseration.

To Sohini Pillai, for encouraging me to pursue a topic I loved.

To Aftab Ahmad, for teaching me Urdu poetry and humoring my unconventional readings.

To Gabriela Ilieva and Rakesh Ranjan, for teaching me Hindi.

To Gayatri Gopinath, my second reader, for introducing me to theory as an undergraduate.

To Sudipta Kaviraj, my advisor, for entertaining my ideas and sharing his own thoughts.

And to Ravi, to whom this is dedicated, for everything: *o mere jaan-e jaan, aankhon se duur na ho...*

Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat: Futurism and Pirate Modernity in South Asian Electronica

*The future's ancient
The dawn breaks orange
The peacock sings
And Delhi still swings
—“136,” MIDIval PunditZ*

*mix yesterday in with today and bear tomorrow your
future rising out of old recordings
—William S. Burroughs*

Bombay, 1982. Charanjit Singh, a Bollywood music producer, was experimenting with electronic music equipment procured during overseas tours with famous playback singers. He had recently brought three new bits of Roland equipment back from Singapore, including a synthesizer and a drum machine. Although electronic sound equipment had made some inroads into music production in the city, the fear of obviating film orchestras by replacing them with synthetic sound tempered its advance. Singh mostly worked on mainstream Bollywood soundtracks, but his new project wasn't in direct competition with his other work: the record he made in 1982 was unlike anything he'd produced before, and unlike anything he would make after. In the span of two days, he recorded versions of ten *ragas*, including the *ragas bhairavi* and *bairagi*, using the new equipment.¹ The small pressing of *Synthesizing: Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat* went largely unnoticed. The remarkable fact, though, is that the record sounds very much like the acid house music which would emerge from Chicago and Detroit several years later. *Ten Ragas* was very much ahead of its time, and its relative unpopularity until its “rediscovery” in the early twenty-first century allows it to serve as an

¹ The *rāga* is a form of classical Hindustani and Carnatic music. It begins with an improvised portion, the *ālāp*, which joins with a *tāl* (cycle). The performance of a *rāga* can be entirely instrumental or involve voice; the key is that the melodic elements are meant to inspire a particular affective response. There are about 200 distinct *rāgas*, which change with the passage of time. (I would suggest Nikhil Banerjee's recordings for a general introduction.) Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, *The Rāgs of North Indian Music: Their Structure and Evolution* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1971), 28-9.

excellent case study of what was perhaps the first instance of South Asian electronica, a form at the juncture of technology and history.

Neither the anecdote of Singh's album nor this thesis means to locate the origin of electronica, if something like an origin could ever be discovered, in 1982 Bombay. Instead, it means to explore the aesthetic space of the electronica which rose to prominence in the urban sites of South Asia. To borrow a term from Kodwo Eshun, my concern is for the "sonic fictions" produced by South Asian electronica. The central tenet of the thesis is that the recycled modernity of electronic music is an aesthetic variant of an appropriation of the political economy of Ravi Sundaram's recycled modernity—a native idiom of the electronic, pirate age. Simultaneously, it seeks to demonstrate that electronica embodies the futurist orientation of much of South Asian urban culture: as the urban gained currency, so too did electronica. An affective, physical virology and illegality propagates through this music. Its affective effect is to discomfort the listener, to make her feel displaced, and yet recognize that such tenuous assemblages are the hallmarks of modernity: music "that simultaneously pulls you in yet leaves you standing alone at the threshold of some darkly magical door."² The analysis seeks to go beyond a sort of piracy in which a media product becomes degraded at each reproduction; instead, it explores the creative possibilities opened by degrading, remixing, and introducing noise into sound.

A few notes on definitions are in order. By "South Asian electronica," I find it convenient to borrow the aesthetic portion of Dhiraj Murthy's definition of the genre as a mixture of several culturally privileged types of music.³ The challenge is in defining this as a specific form of hybridity

² Asmara A. Malik, "The Melancholy Streets of Ismail's City (Spotlight: Musician Zohaib Kazi)," *The Missing Slate*, Summer 2011, 54.

³ Murthy defines British "Asian electronic music" as "a mix of some of the following: electronic digital manipulation; one or more traditional Hindustani instruments such as the table, sitar, sarangi or veena (or samples of them); Asian vocalists; lyrics and samples broadly relating to South Asia; samples of Bollywood tracks, but generally a rhythm line similar to drum and bass; downtempo; jungle; and other electronic musics." Dhiraj Murthy, "Representing South Asian

without “decamp[ing] around a saccharine postmodern celebration of hybridity or the self-styled narcissism of cultural absolutism.”⁴ It does not refer to the totality of electronic music produced in South Asia; rather, it refers to the electronic music of South Asia which makes a deliberate reckoning with the music or cultural artifacts of the (imagined) past or imagined future, either by referencing them or by conspicuously omitting them. This definition is much unlike that of the homogenous, worldwide electronica that flows everywhere and is located nowhere. Neither does it describe remix culture or DJing as a whole, but rather that music which is produced from an assemblage of sources—excluding, for example, a remix of a single *filmi* song. (Importantly, Murthy roots his analysis in the South Asian diasporas of the United States and United Kingdom, with all of the attendant political consciousness tightly coupled to the music; I carry over elements of his aesthetic delineation of the genre while arguing for a distinct political and economic situation.)

The electronic here refers to the digital, defined in contrast to a mechanical analog. It is most simply defined in this paper as sound encoded in discrete bits which can be faithfully replicated, rather than as waveforms suspect to disintegration. I use “electronic music” when referring to music produced with electronic devices or when I seek to emphasize the circuits of production and consumption, and “electronica” for the new aesthetic formation. Electronica, in straddling the space between present, past, and future, combines “technostalgia” with futurism—the reader will permit me a brief abuse of terminology as I collapse what might properly be called a “futurist orientation” to “futurism.” Here, I mean to broaden the definition from that of the Futurist movement of the early twentieth century; while there are elements of noise-as-vibration in one sense, a preoccupation with the trajectory of the future is an aesthetic imprint of this music. Thus, I mean it to refer to “a

Alterity? East London’s Asian Electronic Music Scene and the Articulation of Globally Mediated Identities,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (2009): 331.

⁴ Koushik Banerjea, “Sounds of Whose Underground?: The Fine Tuning of Diaspora in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 17, no. 3 (2000): 73.

desperate attempt to fashion a language for the future capable of resisting the emotional decline of the present.”⁵ It is the form of futurism implicit in Eshun’s musical conception of Afrofuturism, which is transregional and transhistorical.

When one thinks of “South Asian electronica,” the immediate echo that comes to mind (whether in the US, UK, or Pakistan) is the genre of Asian Underground, the electronica produced within the South Asian diaspora and particularly in the UK. The genre is closely coupled with that of fusion, which describes a particular form of syncretism between musical traditions.⁶ The immense popularity of musicians in the diaspora, such as Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney, has made this so. However, the diaspora is not my referent here. Although this thesis cannot ignore the production of electronica within the South Asian diaspora, the primary focus is on electronica produced by denizens of South Asia: but neither is this meant to cast the genre as if it were uniformly coherent and essentially syncretic, nor as a metonym for a nation. It is meant here as a geographical reference concordant with a specific aesthetic form, one that may have initially developed in the diaspora but has now been brought back.⁷ When I do discuss the diaspora, it is with reference to the engagement of musicians in South Asia with tracks produced abroad.

Hardware, Greyware, and Pirate Markets

Until the late 1990s, the tools and instruments of electronic music production in South Asia were mostly acquired through informal channels. The popular music industry was closely tied to the film production industry; in North India, both were closely associated with the city of Bombay. A fear that the introduction of electronic keyboards would render film orchestras redundant persisted

⁵ Here, Banerjea is criticizing the commercialization of “Asian Underground” music in the context of multicultural Britain. *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶ Louis Banks, the Darjeeling-born jazz musician, implicitly registers his dislike for the necessarily homogenizing construction of “fusion:” “Jazz basically is chromaticism and Carnatic music is modal, so there is a difference. You can bring these two forms together and make interesting music. That’s what we are doing but the name given to it is ‘fusion.’” Zakir Hussain, “Fusion Music,” *Journal of the Indian Musicological Society* 41 (2011): 243.

⁷ The conspicuous and deliberate omission of trance music in Goa is a consequence of this restrictive definition.

through the 1980s.⁸ It appears that most Indian musicians who acquired electronic keyboards did so when touring internationally, which had come into vogue in the 1960s; even so, exorbitant duties were charged when the instruments were imported.⁹ Charanjit Singh began playing the electronic keyboard in 1965, after returning from a trip abroad playing for Kishore Kumar. Working with the Bollywood music producers Shankar-Jaikishan, he soon found himself in demand as a studio musician.¹⁰ He also sang as part of wedding bands and pursued other odd jobs. It was in 1982 that he purchased a Roland TB-303 (a bass synthesizer and sequencer), TR-808 (a programmable drum machine), and Jupiter-8 (one of the last synthesizers to lack MIDI support) while in Singapore; shortly thereafter, he produced *Synthesizing: Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat*.¹¹ Few copies were pressed, and the album mostly faded into obscurity (although segments were used for interludes between programs on All India Radio).¹²

By Singh's time, electronic music was not entirely new to South Asia. Its influences can be heard in disco-styled Bollywood songs that predate *Ten Ragas*, such as the 1981 hit "Disco Deewane."¹³ But it would appear that none had previously established a genre which actually took as its aesthetic base the conditions of possibility implicit in electronica: electronic instrumentation was used not merely to supplement an orchestra or to replace some instruments, but was instead taken as the foundation of the entire aural plane. *Ten Ragas* is, aesthetically, an exemplar of acid house.¹⁴ In the vein of this style of house music, often presumed to have originated in mid-1980s Chicago, *Ten Ragas* predates

⁸ Gregory D. Booth, *Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 245.

⁹ Vipin Reshammiya reports that "In 1959 or 1960 I managed to bring one Claviolin Reverb from London.... The government charged 200 or 300 percent import duty on such things." Ibid., 246.

¹⁰ Ibid., 247.

¹¹ Rana Ghose, "Charanjit Singh: About," REProduce, <http://reproduceartists.com/charanjitsingh/about>.

¹² Charanjit Singh and Suparna Singh, interview by Samrat Bharadwaj and Rana Ghose, 2010.

¹³ "Disco Deewane" was recorded in London, however.

¹⁴ Acid house is a genre of house music. House music typically features repetition, drum machines, use of electronic instruments, a synthesized bassline, and an emphasis on dance; acid house is house music that features specific noises and patterns that first emerged with the Roland TB-303.

the canonical, 1985-recorded “Acid Tracks” by Phuture by two years (and so its release by four).¹⁵ Because of the apparent anachronism of the work, an author at *The Guardian* in 2010 first thought that Singh’s supposedly anachronistic record was an elaborate hoax. Yet the album is listed in a 1985 discography as HMV ECSD 2912, published in 1983; indeed, Singh is the only author listed in the discography as having primarily used a synthesizer in his work.¹⁶

The technology of the *sitar*,¹⁷ then, came to be complemented by the technology of the synthesizer. By the early 1990s, another technology with the power to displace both hit the scene: the computer, which carried with it the possibility of mimicking and sampling physical instruments so perfectly that the original might be rendered obsolete. Imported computers and software were prohibitively expensive in South Asia in the 1990s, and yet they proliferated. This was due in large part to greyware—that is, consumer products (electronic, media, or commodity goods) that were counterfeited or obtained through informal channels (the grey market). The media theorist Ravi Sundaram locates greyware in pirate modernity:¹⁸ greyware, as “quotidian commodity culture,” is the product of an informal network of small, local businesses which assembles computers and images them with pirated software. Initially, this “nonlegality was never a performative or political stance, but a functional one:” imported, licensed software was simply unaffordable. Yet, as Sundaram notes, this left open the possibility of a new “greyware culture that disrupts all existing imaginaries.”¹⁹ Electronica music is native to these cultures of piracy. Even today, software piracy is extremely prevalent in music production. As Dalt Wisney (Sheryar Hyatt), an underground musician in

¹⁵ Samrat B[haradwaj], *Hub: Indian Electronica 1982-2010* (New Delhi: Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, 2011), 8.

¹⁶ Michael S. Kinnear, *A Discography of Hindustani and Karnatic Music* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 40.

¹⁷ A stringed instrument used in Hindustani music.

¹⁸ Sundaram has also referred to pirate modernity as recycled modernity. My sense is that recycled modernity, the term he earlier used for it, is less dependent on the economic emphasis he employs in his later works on pirate modernity.

¹⁹ Ravi Sundaram, interview by Geert Lovink, 2002.

Karachi, recalled in a 2013 interview, “That’s how I started making music. I got one of those Korean pirated CDs with the music software in it.”²⁰

If pirated software changed the domain of the production of music, the foundation had been laid by pirates and counterfeiters of earlier media. Manuel estimates that in the mid-1980s, pirated cassettes were responsible for “some 95 percent of the prerecorded-music market.”²¹ Piracy disrupted economic circuits related to the production and distribution of media, creating a “novel form of panic” in an industry which had previously only experienced “manageable chaos.”²² The emergence of piracy completely changed the topologies of the video and music production industries in South Asia. Cassette duplication led to “permanent instability” in allowing music to mutate through each copy or reproduction.²³ If the original reproduction was said to be faithful, cassette- and VHS-based duplication led to one in which the original was always corrupted, and copies begot copies; electronic music appears to go one step beyond this process, deliberately introducing mixtures and works derivative of prior media.

The same technology that was responsible for making the distribution of music more economical—as Manuel describes of the market in the 1980s, even “a cassette of regional folk music made on a minimal budget may turn a profit with sales of only 100 pieces”²⁴—also made it more susceptible to the illicit copy. Perhaps more significantly, pirate modernity brought with it a “permanent loss of space and markets.” The media industry came to be one “of dispersal where ‘distribution’ took on a productive form.”²⁵ Note that Sundaram is not referring to the loss of *all* markets for such goods, but rather for the loss of the large-scale markets that existed before such

²⁰ Basim Usmani, “We Accidentally Started EDM Beef in Pakistan,” *THUMP (Vive)* (2013), http://thump.vive.com/en_ca/words/forever-south-karachi-pakistan-edm.

²¹ Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 83.

²² Ravi Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India,” *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (1999): 116.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 73.

²⁵ Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 116.

widespread piracy; these pirate markets emerged in their stead as illicit substitutes. For example, Sundaram discusses spaces in Delhi that are known for pirated goods, such as Lajpat Rai (domestic electronic products rebranded as foreign counterfeits), Palika Bazaar (a literally underground market in Delhi, known for counterfeit tapes and discs), or Nehru Place (an important commercial district).²⁶ The systems of organization were no longer so rooted in place—workers were mobile, for example—and Sundaram tentatively identifies the markets as “form[s] of subaltern industrial production... private enterprise without classic capitalists.”²⁷

Pirate modernity is not easily subsumed by other theories of economy. For example, what is missing from Marxist theories of electronic media production is the focus on consumerism and consumption to which theory must now attend. Following Appadurai, consumption gives rise to pleasure, which in turn gives rise to agency.²⁸ As the relationship between consumption and production has changed, Bourdieu’s market of symbolic goods, divided into the restricted and non-restricted fields, has become obsolete; a putative field of restricted production can no longer be bracketed off from the spheres of class which manufacture its products. If the Frankfurt School feared a homogenization of media as a consequence of commodification and mass reproduction, it took Gramscians to see public culture as a space of dissent and contestation. The new technologies of distribution that are enrolled in pirate modernity, such as the internet, have changed the calculus so that it now makes sense to make niche music.

Liberated from the necessity of live performance, and transmuted into the digital (rather than the analog), piracy may have developed so quickly in markets of intellectual property because there is no difference between the reproduction of a song and the format in which it is originally distributed.

²⁶ Ibid., 93, 97, 100.

²⁷ Ibid., 104.

²⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7.

(Even though the sanctioned copy made available for sale lacks the fidelity of the analog waves of live performance, the digital version loses no fidelity when copied.) Walter Benjamin once warned that reproductions of art lacked provenances, divorced from their origins and stories: the original, unlike a reproduction, may be subjected to “chemical or physical analyses,” and ownership makes sense only in the presence of an original.²⁹ In postmodern terms, reproductions are said to be inauthentic, according to Benjamin’s reading of the term. Pirate modernity appears to be a better descriptor of this new music for a number of reasons. First, in electronic music, the original and its reproduction are not so far removed. It is true that a musical project in a software program can illustrate diverse rhythms and melodies woven together into a musical texture, and can reveal the genealogies of its digital sources, but even from the final product—a single wavelength, distributed to the masses—it is possible to extract samples and remix a work. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, pirate modernity is not concerned with the concept of ownership; it makes little sense to trace the provenance of a digital file released to the world. The file may carry metadata, but even this is susceptible to manipulation and fabrication. This liberation of piracy from “the boundaries of space, of particular networks, of form...” has led to a “subjectless subjectivity” which renders Benjamin’s reading moot.³⁰

Circuits: The Aesthetics of Pirate Modernity

The employment of economic or political theory to explain an aesthetic mode of representation is something that must be examined critically. The coterporal and collocational practices of media in urban cultures represent one method which has been pursued fruitfully by several theorists. Typically, these approaches situate the aesthetics of sound in the urban landscape, relating the aesthetics of vibration to the movement of markets. Henri Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis has

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968 [1936]), 220.

³⁰ Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 112.

been employed in the discussion of urban space recast as rhythm. If rhythm can be represented as periodicity, or as a wavelength, then it seems natural that the rhythm of the city could refer to movement (as Lefebvre intended) or to the vibrations of sound; aberration is allowed in both. Bilal Nasir Khan, of the electronica collective Forever South, recognizes these rhythms in Karachi:

People's lives move very slowly in Karachi, which is why everyone there is so mellow, but then again, it has its fair share of violence lurking around. Living here, we're constantly riding these two waves at some point or another—for every two bad trips you might go through, there's one good trip to make up for it... Karachi is inspiration in many ways. It's a city full of struggle, and when a nation struggles, it brings people together, and that aspect of the city is wonderful.³¹

Rhythmanalysis as method is Goodman's attempt to extend Lefebvre in order to meet sonic harmony and sonic deviation halfway. Rather than rely on Lefebvre's "harmonization in a hierarchy of instants," or on the Deleuzo-Guattarian "relation between beats at the expense of the event of pulse," he calls for attention to "the rhythmic vibration between break and flow, between particle and wave."³² Like the periodicity exhibited by the Fourier transform, which transmutes frequency and amplitude, or sound and space, it calls for a certain reliance on repetition and patterns within a work, without necessarily making claims about the sources of samples in a sonic text. And there is evidence that producers of music, limited by the output ranges of their equipment, make reference to these frequencies: as Talvin Singh explained, the electronic music scene in 1990s India was primarily techno or trance, "so there was no sonic requirement for frequencies beyond 50 Hz."³³

In tracing the development of European music, Jacques Attali proposes four distinct, roughly chronological modes: sacrificing, representing, repeating, and composing. Goodman and others have criticized Attali for attempting to formalize a division between noise and music;³⁴ in the context of

³¹ Ruth Saxelby, "World View: Meet the Rising Stars of Karachi's Fraught yet Fertile Creative Scene," *The Fader* (2014).

³² Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 88-9.

³³ Aditi Dharmadhikari, "A Timeline of India's Evolving Bass Culture Vol. I: The Pioneers Decode Significant Moments from the Early Days," (2014), <http://homegrown.co.in/a-timeline-of-indias-evolving-bass-culture-vol-i-the-pioneers-decode-significant-moments-from-the-early-days>.

³⁴ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 51.

electronic music, both have been subsumed into sound. For Attali, the stages of repeating and composing are ultimately anticipatory: if the development of new instruments in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe predicted the Industrial Revolution, Attali sees in composition the mutation of technology, of use-value and time-value. Ultimately, the producer and the consumer become the same person, “institut[ing] the spectacle of himself as the supreme usage.”³⁵ With the progression complete, Attali believes that “the World, by repeating itself, is dissolving into Noise and Violence.”³⁶ The transmogrification of music into bellicose walls of sound is entirely in line with the manifestos of Futurism. Other theorists suggest that producers and consumers—the distinction is a bit blurry—take on the role of “affective hackers... sonically enact[ing] the demise of Babylon” and thus figure into their aesthetic descent into chaos.³⁷

Ravi Sundaram’s conception of pirate modernity opens this space of imperfection, of the remix and the glitch, as a space of creative possibility that allows social organization and audio to drift from each other. It describes a broad range of practices that result from remixing or illicitly reproducing cultural and physical objects, whether waveforms or counterfeit commodities. Intimately linked with the rise of media in the postcolony, pirate modernity is “globalization’s illicit and unacknowledged expression” in an era in which Nehruvian developmentalism has given way to private capital accumulation.³⁸ Electronic music, then, is representative of pirate modernity in at least three senses. First, its aesthetic tendency to remix old artifacts with the new (or to digitally reproduce old sounds) is emblematic of this culture of duplication and derivation; second, the tactics of its physical performance have been closely linked to the development of urban life; and third, it is pirate modernity that introduced the software and hardware necessary for the production of this music

³⁵ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985 [1977]), 144.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁷ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 73.

³⁸ Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 12, 14.

(the aesthetics of which themselves mirror these methods of production). All of these are embedded in the urban; indeed, Sundaram's conception of pirate modernity is intelligible only with reference to the urban. It offers a critique of Marx's obsession with production, focusing instead on a Baudrillardian emphasis on producer and consumer circuits; it potentially advances a solution to Appadurai's search for a model of consumption in a world in which it "is now the social practice through which persons are drawn into the work of fantasy."³⁹

Importantly, then, pirate modernity adopts the aesthetics of a tactic while not adopting the structure of strategy and tactic; it is not a rebellion against capitalism writ large. (The troublingly low proportion of female electronica musicians indicates that it replicates many of the failures of capitalism.) It is not, as Benjamin may have feared, a fascist model of production, for it does not respect property rights. Indeed, the aesthetic products of pirate modernity are conditioned on their own conceptualization as underground works. De Certeau wrote that elites deploy strategy—a power relation made visible by a central locus, such as an institution—while non-elites deploy tactic: a decentralized action which takes advantage of the moment and temporarily subverts and tricks those in power.⁴⁰ Though de Certeau did not write particularly about media, and although the text predates Sundaram's formulation of pirate modernity, it appears relevant to the new configuration: institutions, such as record labels, are now appropriating music which can be produced only in the aesthetic realm of the tactic, of the illicit space in which what is won cannot be kept. If "a tactical media in India would deal with the sleazy, mobile forms of media practice in the everyday,"⁴¹ it would seem that pirate modernity has allowed it to be appropriated into the realm of strategy. Pirate modernity, then, cannot be simply mapped onto such a division. Pirate modernity exists in the space

³⁹ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 82.

⁴⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984 [1980]), 35-7.

⁴¹ Sundaram, "About the Brazilianization of India," 129.

between the city and technology, as the city is a node in a globalized network. At first, it appears to potentially provide a means for South Asian electronica to uncouple itself from elite culture:⁴² the move to electronic music dramatically reduces the cost of music production and distribution. At the same time, it enables artists to draw from diverse, global traditions, as the cost of obtaining samples has decreased tremendously: for example, Ashok Krish, a Chennai-based Tata consultant, produces covers of electronica and film music from abroad (“Daft Punk” becomes “Daft Pankajam,” a Carnatic take set to the tune of the *raga karnaranjani*) and pokes fun at local news media (his parody band, “Parodesy Noise,” is a play on both *pardesi* and the Tamil phrase for “foreign dog”).⁴³

Given the physical tools necessary to produce electronic music, South Asian electronica necessarily involves transnational flows, both in its production and in its distribution and performance. These flows are productive, and indeed one purpose of them is to mock: DJ Ma Faiza, for example, sees one popular remix of hers (that of the Israeli “Come to India”) as “overrated.”⁴⁴ The effect of telecommunications in an interconnected world has made new modes of production and performance possible. As early as 1996, Talvin Singh’s *Anokha* club night in London was billed as a space “linked to Bombay via an ISDN connection, making possible a Future Sound of India jam in real time between musicians in London and Bombay.”⁴⁵ A component analysis of such hybrid forms requires careful attention to prevent essentializing their constituent cultures while still preserving a measure of commensurability between these strands. Paul Gilroy, in asking what

⁴² Dhiraj Murthy, “Nationalism Remixed? The Politics of Cultural Flows between the South Asian Diaspora and ‘Homeland,’” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, no. 8 (2010): 1419.

⁴³ Chhavi Sachdev, *A Classical Indian Musician Is Transforming Hit Songs into Pop Parodies, The World* (Public Radio International, 2014).

⁴⁴ This particular song raises interesting considerations of Orientalist tracks brought back to South Asia. “Come to India” is a song produced by an Israeli DJ, Oshri Krispin, operating under the moniker “Indra.” For the quote from DJ Ma Faiza, see “Chat with DJ Ma Faiza,” *The Telegraph* (2012), http://www.telegraphindia.com/1120626/jsp/entertainment/story_15656075.jsp.

⁴⁵ Rob Young, “Sounding Off,” *The Wire*, January 1996, 9. The time zones of South Asia, of course, are quite literally ahead of London’s.

questions must be answered if a “music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it,” notes that diasporic black music, a counterculture, relies on a “unique conjunction of body and music.”⁴⁶ Though I do not suggest that it is possible or desirable to determine an “absolute essence” of music in a given national or regional group, what is needed is a method for setting nebulous boundaries around the *cultural*, rather than ethnic, antecedents of this music. This is a difficult task: marketing materials and liner notes for the innovative 1990 album *Mustt Mustt*, a collaboration between Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Michael Brook, emphasized “the importance of Western technological production” in a way that effaced the *qanwali*,⁴⁷ which it “attempted to reduce... to an aesthetic form.”⁴⁸ Ashwani Sharma’s criticism points out that electronica need not exist purely as a composition of exclusively digital elements, although it increasingly is characterized as such. Elite youth culture in India now revolves around a DJ on a laptop, playing synthetic tracks with no instrument other than the computer. Other musicians attempt to keep their tracks somewhat unrecorded, so that at least part of the song can be played live—by playing strings, for example, which become an organic kernel that the computer can process, modulate, and amplify.⁴⁹

When considered in the sonic domain, the question of the “authentic” and the inauthentic in an era where the analog becomes digital (becomes analog, becomes digital...) is perhaps irrelevant. Walter Benjamin once wrote that photographic negatives would never yield an “‘authentic’ print,” as any print would always be a reproduction.⁵⁰ Digital replication, whether licit or illicit, appears to have

⁴⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75-6.

⁴⁷ A *qanwali* is a particular form of Sufi devotional music that has branched into many variants.

⁴⁸ Ashwani Sharma, “Sounds Oriental: The (Im)possibility of Theorizing Asian Musical Cultures,” in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma (London: Zed Books, 1996), 24.

⁴⁹ Derek Beres, *Global Beat Fusion: The History of the Future of Music*, 2 ed. (Los Angeles: Outside the Box Publishing, 2014), 77.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 224.

found a similar role: one could ask for the original source files of a project, for example, but would always be left with a sequence of bits with no further recourse. It is the irrelevance of the “original” that enables the aestheticization and propagation of pirate modernity. This both opens a creative space and forces a reworking of economic profit. Part of the reason that piracy was and is so widespread in the Indian popular music scene is that musicians in the cassette era were typically paid a flat rate for their services, rather than extracting ongoing royalties.⁵¹ Another is that electronic music is in vogue among the youth of South Asian cities, and record labels have found that it is difficult to sell this new aesthetic in the same way that other popular music is sold. Indeed, at times, it would appear that South Asian electronica is entirely a subset of the youth culture of South Asia. Before labeling pirate modernity as a variety of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic assemblages, Sundaram explains:

“Recycling” is not a process of more of the same (i.e. simple replication), but works as a complex difference engine—each copy is different from its predecessor through variation and recombination. Piracy therefore occupies a field whose edges move all the time, margin to center, international to local. Governments and industry have been publicly repelled and secretly fascinated by media piracy, a sure sign of the latter’s corporeal power. This is piracy’s great public secret—and the relative ease with which it has withstood severe attacks from industry-sponsored enforcement campaigns.⁵²

This fascination with the aesthetics of piracy operates within the electronica scene itself, as mockery and mimicry of technologies of the state and of industry. For example, D.E.S.U.—the Delhi Electrical Supply Unit—organized electronica events from 2008–9, its posters illustrating circuits, computers, and tapes.⁵³ The acronym is that of the Delhi Electric Supply Undertaking, a government utility established in 1958 and superseded by the privatized Delhi Vidyut Board in 1997. Given the

⁵¹ Manuel, *Cassette Culture*, 86. In the cassette era, pirates could destroy the evidence of their crime with an interesting trick: “Sometimes the police at Lal Bazar [in Kolkata] even raid the pirates and seize the cassettes at our request, but there is some bribery, some collusion, and by the time the tapes are brought to court the babu who sits and supposedly watches over all the various seized material has been bribed for 500 Rs. to pass a magnet over the tapes so that they are blank.” Ibid., 85.

⁵² Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*, 112.

⁵³ B[haradwaj], *Hub*, 63.

importance of the pirate economy of electricity production in Delhi, it seems fitting that the acronyms highlight an aesthetic form while evoking industry. D.E.S.U. was praised for being “local” without being “ethnic,” simultaneously using “sounds and conversations from their immediate environment” while developing “complex sound installations, post-modern, kinky and yet very danceable.”⁵⁴ That electronic music has become an aesthetic is further evidenced by long-standing media distributors’ attempts to mimic it, collapsing circuits of art and production. For example, the film distributor Eros is said to sell genuine DVDs alongside pirated copies it produces itself in order to evade taxation. What is interesting is that these pirated (unauthorized by the contract with the film production company, at least) copies have “all the characteristics of what is perceived to be the prototypical pirated disc... an attempt is made to deliberately downgrade the packaging of the disc so that it subscribes to a certain notion of a pirated disc cover.”⁵⁵ Only the packaging—and not the content of the disc—is altered. Brian Larkin, discussing the Nigerian pirate video network, describes how piracy becomes aesthetic by introducing noise and erosion to the product.⁵⁶

Nucleya (Udyan Sagar)’s 2013 EP, *Koocha Monster*,⁵⁷ is an excellent example of the syncretism of performance in new electronic acts in India. In only six tracks, Nucleya lays Tamil vocals on a bass track (“Bell Gadi,” featuring Chinna Ponnu and Relok), remixes and vulgarizes the popular song “Akkad Bakkad,” and puts Delhi Sultanate’s rap over reggae and bass in “New Delhi Nuttah.” Delhi Sultanate (Taru Dalmia)’s inclusion is interesting: the lyrics to “New Delhi Nuttah,” delivered in a false Jamaican patois accent, say that he swears one will “never see me down in LAP,” an elite, exclusive dance club in Delhi, and yet that is exactly the sort of space in which his music might be

⁵⁴ Palash Krishna Mehrotra, *The Butterfly Generation: A Personal Journey into the Passions and Follies of India’s Technicolour Youth* (New Delhi: Rain Tree, 2012), 236.

⁵⁵ From an interview of Meghna Ghai by the Sarai researcher Ankur Khanna. *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts*, (Delhi: Seagull Books), 285.

⁵⁶ Brian Larkin, “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 290.

⁵⁷ “Kucha” means an alley or lane in Hindi. (Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.)

consumed. But this music reads as more commercial, an appropriation of pirate modernity while attempting to extract profit from its listeners. It may be that the mechanism of funding has changed—as a recent article noted, music producers and other middlemen are now more important than the record companies, and their funding now comes from lifestyle brands⁵⁸—but the profit motive remains.⁵⁹ Even if pirate modernity has enrolled more participants into the space of production, it has bifurcated consumption into the live event (an expensive, underground-on-the-rooftop or -in-the-farmhouse affair which is often illegal and demands a high entry fee) and personal consumption (downloading of tracks, which can be done inexpensively or for free given a computer or mobile phone).

Some artists seem to register a yearning for a putatively pure aesthetic of a South Asian electronica scene of yesteryear, an aesthetic which may never be recoverable. For example, the band Bhram-Inn, formed in 2006 and best known for their song “Urban Streets,” explicitly seeks to emulate the electronic music of the 1990s.⁶⁰ A small minority of DJs are reverting to vinyl or incorporating it into their productions, cognizant of the physicality of the medium. Of course, production is never entirely virtual—a computer must be purchased, or a recording device used—but this seems to be a genuine return to analog, physical materials.

In some ways, the shift to completely computer-generated electronica reduces the sense of dissonance present in earlier music. For example, the use of electronic music to confer a sense of alienation is strikingly present in Kamal Swaroop’s 1988 film *Om Dar-B-Dar*, which is unsettling in its juxtaposition of historical, futuristic, and pseudo-scientific texts. Radio is used as background noise,

⁵⁸ Rana Ghose, “Sell the DJ,” *GQ India*, January 2015, 51.

⁵⁹ Coke Studio is perhaps the best-known example of this new form of sponsorship. The expropriation of culture and its enrollment in such economic structures is perhaps suggestive of capitalism’s tendency to absorb everything into itself.

⁶⁰ B[haradwaj], *Hub*, 54.

which leads to “the mobilisation of sensation through an embodied experience of media history.”⁶¹ The result is a disconcerting film which is artistically valued for its incomprehensibility; electronica provides the natural soundtrack. Om, the protagonist, introduces an extended visual sequence with the nonsensical “Main aatankwadi tadpolon ke sampark mein aaya;”⁶² the synthesized music in the background echoes the noise of a frog. Although the film was not widely distributed on its release—film censors “kept looking for a story line or a political message in the songs”⁶³—it made waves in certain circles of the filmmaking community.⁶⁴

Indeed, though hybridity is not subversion, there is often an element of subversive play in South Asian electronica. Producers are quite cognizant of this effect, and as such exploit such juxtapositions for an alienating effect. On the 2012 song “Imaginary Parrots Cheebay,” by Forever South’s Dynoman, electronic drones are interspersed with dialogues taken from Hassan Tariq’s 1976 film *Surayya Bhopali*.⁶⁵ A woman, conversing with her sister about her secret wedding, panics: “Agar ghar walon ko meri khufiya shaadi ka raaz pata chal gaya, to kya hoga?”⁶⁶ The dialogues from which the song draws suggest a rebellion against social norms, mimicking the jarringness of the music. The song also contains spoken samples from a TED talk, quoting Shakespeare, by Kathryn Schulz. Such is the assemblage of cultural artifacts pulled together in these danceable tracks.

Although most of my examples have been drawn from India, electronica music can be found throughout South Asia. For example, in 2013, a Dhaka-based Bangladeshi collective released the self-titled *Dhaka Electronica Scene: Explorations*. The chronology of the development of the genre in

⁶¹ Amit S. Rai, “Race and Ontologies of Sensation,” in *Deleuze and Race*, ed. Arun Saldanha and Jason Michael Adams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 280.

⁶² “I came into contact with the terrorist tadpoles.”

⁶³ Aditi De, “Subversion on the Screen,” *The Hindu* (2004), <http://www.thehindu.com/mp/2004/11/16/stories/2004111601050300.htm>.

⁶⁴ Anurag Kashyap’s 2009 film *Dev.D* plays homage to *Om Dar-B-Dar* by mimicking a song from the earlier movie in “Emosional Atyachar” (“Emotional Oppression.”).

⁶⁵ Ahmer Naqvi, “Beat Boys,” *The Caravan*, March 2014, 105.

⁶⁶ “If the household comes to discover my secret wedding, then what?”

these countries is somewhat irrelevant; as Sundaram points out, the speed of movement of these cultural forms has reached, as Paul Virilio states, “the audio-visual... the ‘last vehicle’ in modernity,” one conditioned on “*arrival without departure*.”⁶⁷ (Larkin criticizes Virilio in part because he fails to address the breakdowns implicit in technological advances—electricity can be unreliable, and pirated artifacts can contain inadvertent glitches.⁶⁸)

Pakistan’s vibrant rock music scene of the past few decades has given rise to a distinct sort of electronica, though the scene appears more nascent than that in India. Karachi, though, is perhaps the city in which the lawlessness of electronic music most persists, where the aesthetic is pirate through and through. Forever South’s *Collections Volume 1*, a compilation of tracks released by FXS artists, includes tracks with titles such as “IslamabadVice” (Chi.Boss) and “The Slowfall” (Alien Panda Jury) that seem to delight in the underground. As we have seen, Bangladesh, too, offers the Dhaka Electronic Scene collective, which released in 2013 its second compilation *Atisha—The Sonic Uprising*. The rise of the collective of artists is a testament to the constant shifting of these systems of music production: what is needed is an examination of the sector of media production, not merely that of its systems of distribution. Indeed, Samrat Bharadwaj (Teddy Boy Kill/Audio Pervert) said that he left Mumbai for Delhi to “grow outside the industrial hegemony.”⁶⁹ Forever South, Bhavishyavani Future Soundz, Dhaka Electronic Scene, and other collectives now dominate the electronica scene and offer an alternative.

Karachi-based 6LA8 (Taimur Mazar Sheikh and Omer Asim) is a prolific band, producing an astonishingly diverse range of music. One critic described the 2011 track “Celeplode” as one he “always imagined as being used for a dance at a mehndi for a robot couple.”⁷⁰ Other tracks, such as

⁶⁷ Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 65.

⁶⁸ Larkin, “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds,” 304.

⁶⁹ Josh Feola, “Global Ear: Delhi,” *The Wire*, May 2014, 18.

⁷⁰ Ahmer Naqvi, “6LA8: A Dream Come True,” *DAWN (Sunday Magazine)* (2014), <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118559/6la8-a-dream-come-true>.

“The Future Doesn’t Care for You,” are moody, post-rock, cautiously optimistic quasi-dirges. 6LA8 has collaborated with Dynoman, including on the 2012 track “Drugs, Don’t Do Kids.” I do not wish to argue here that electronica music produced in South Asia offers a sort of *Planet of Drums*, in which every such production is coded as rebellion: even if the electronic music so produced can be accurately called a “musical war machine,” it may spawn an affective, contagious collectivity that is nonetheless in tandem with capitalism.⁷¹ Yet the frequently unstable movements of the participants in this musical scene—Karachi Detour Rampage, for example, “put on one blistering live show and then ostensibly dissipated”⁷²—and the association of the scene with drug culture still indicates that it is outside the mainstream. Electronica, then, is still somewhat peripheral.

No discussion of South Asian electronica, though, could totally ignore the contributions of artists in the diaspora; indeed, scholars have cautioned against irredentist, ahistorical readings “in which ‘South Asian sounds’ predate the diaspora” in an effort to downplay the role of the diaspora in fostering the scene in South Asia.⁷³ In the Asian Underground movement, one would likely include artists such as Nitin Sawhney, Talvin Singh, and Karsh Kale.⁷⁴ Singh’s 1997 compilation album *Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground*, named after his successful London club night, is perhaps the exemplar of this genre. As one Pakistani artist notes, the album was very influential on his own music: “it was futuristic yet it sounded local.”⁷⁵ This use of “local” by a Pakistani artist describing an album from the UK is illustrative of the difficulty of tracing transnational waves of sound and making claims about origins. Yet South Asian electronica in the diaspora is put into a

⁷¹ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 175.

⁷² Asfandyar Khan, “Emerging Pakistan: Forever South,” (2012), <http://www.thewildcity.com/EN/features.xhtml/article/2893-emerging-pakistan-forever-south>.

⁷³ Murthy, “Nationalism Remixed?,” 1417. For an excellent overview of South Asian musicians in the diaspora, including electronica musicians, refer to Rashid, “A Handful of Dust.”

⁷⁴ Bhangra is (or was) perhaps an even more important diasporic music, but its style and audiences differ tremendously from those of Asian Underground music.

⁷⁵ Malik, “The Melancholy Streets of Ismail’s City,” 55.

precarious position: how can it avoid being consumed as exoticism? Gayatri Gopinath points out that the UK-based Asian Dub Foundation's "imagined sonic community mobilizes an interventionist nostalgia where 'India' signifies a history of radical organizing rather than a site of pure, unsullied cultural identity."⁷⁶ For bands such as Asian Dub Foundation, then, the challenge is in attempting to avoid essentializing ethnicity and instead draw upon shared histories of struggle. This is a difficult balancing act to perform. In the context of 1990s Britain, Banerjea demonstrates, although cannot resolve, the difficulty of avoiding an attempt of reifying Asian Underground tracks as compartmentalized multiculturalism while still attempting to put them to political use:

People for instance who can only appreciate their ghazals or *qawwali* dipped in junglist wax are no more likely than their peers to accept the growing demands for recognition by Asian working-class folk in the housing, employment and education markets. Rather like those early batch-cooked menus in the original curry houses, it appears to be a case of dilute to taste.⁷⁷

Combined with the stale trope of "the underground: forever used as myth and machinery to transport the stale bodies of the 'mainstream' into the dark recesses of the imagination,"⁷⁸ it becomes clear that the "underground" is not really underground at all. For Banerjea, some audiences construct it as a physical place to see and to be seen which has little to do with the music. This hipster fashioning emerged from the transnational flows that shaped and shared electronica in South Asia, which began with the elite, moneyed classes of society. But Banerjea's critique is really about the audiences that the music entertains, and not an aesthetic critique of the genre itself. Rafeeq Hasan is more willing to entertain the underground, reading into it a certain countercultural narrative that appears genuine. Narrating his experience of a Talvin Singh performance at a London nightclub, Hasan deals with questions of Asian Underground music, capitalism, and the Other.

⁷⁶ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 43.

⁷⁷ Banerjea, "Sounds of Whose Underground?," 72.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

Hasan notes that the dance floor of Fabric would “appear to resemble the fragmentation of the individual at the hands of capitalism run amok, the death of collective, the impossibility of radical consciousness due to the stultifying effects of financed, strategic ‘counter-culture.’”⁷⁹ But Hasan argues that such an analysis fails to confront the “almost interminable dialectical contradiction” involved in considering the event to be “a self-determined style of self-exoticization.”⁸⁰

More frequently than ever, South Asia-based musicians are pairing with members of the diaspora to contribute to their music. Indeed, one of the most important virtual platforms for electronic music in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh and Pakistan, is the Goethe-Institut-organized *Border Movement*. Bandish Projekt, a Mumbai-based music collective initially composed of Mayur Narvekar, Udyan Sagar, and Mehrr Nath Chopra, has featured the spoken-word, British-Gujarati artist Last Mango in Paris (Shane Solanki) on several tracks. The music video for the 2013 track “Alchemy,” for example, features highly artificialized images to accompany the deliberate glitching in the track underlying the spoken-word voice. The song tries to link the past and the present: “Converse trainers under *kurta pajama* and *salwar kameez* / I’m the thunder of the storms on the horizon weeping solidified tears of *rudraksha* beads.” Music is often freely distributed on platforms such as Soundcloud or Bandcamp, for selling tracks or streams is untenable; admission to live performances is now the driving force behind these artists’ revenues, bringing the question of pirate modernity back to the regulation of space.

If electronica is perhaps the genre most closely linked to pirate modernity, other genres have not escaped its specter. Rock or alternative bands often play the same venues that electronica acts do, particularly in spaces such as Mumbai’s Blue Frog. Shaa‘ir + Func (Monica Dogra and Randolph Correia, respectively), for example, produce original music that is heavily reliant on basslines,

⁷⁹ Rafeeq Hasan, “The Dialectic of the Dance: On Talvin Singh’s ‘Anokha,’” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 32, no. 4 (2001): 205.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

glitches, and melodies common in electronica music. Shaa'ir's processed, haunting voice sings lyrics that address the same themes of alienation found in much of youth music. Shaa'ir + Func are perhaps exemplars of what music can be produced when the boundaries between genres break down; though their artifacts are from the present, the band mixes together so many genres that it seems the syncretism mirrors the breakdown of boundaries in pirate modernity. It is cognizant of its emergence from this collection of broken artifacts. For example, the song "Reach" from their 2014 album *Align* proffers an invocation: "Say a prayer for me / When all is ruin and demise / Let it all fall down... We are wasted in our youth."

Rediscovery and Futurism

The particular aesthetic mode of electronica is cognizant of its own demise, and in cheating future obsolescence it sometimes appears to efface itself even as it is new. The common theme of "rediscovery" of older works, then, is hardly surprising in a genre of music that relies on making reference to the past, carrying it forward into the future. *Ten Ragas*, along with the film and soundtrack of *Om Dar-B-Dar*, and other artifacts of electronica—what John Akomfrah's "data thief" would term "techno-fossils"—have recently been "discovered" as anachronisms; each has been re-released in the twenty-first century. Thus, the rediscovery of Charanjit Singh's record nearly three decades after its release evokes intriguing theoretical questions.

Such "rediscovery" makes such historical artifacts tenable in the present, as they can be remixed in what Sundaram terms "*recycled* electronic modernity." The subaltern space of recycled modernity—"everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation"—comes to dictate a pirate modernity that subverts the cyber elite that particularly characterized the upper class of India in the 1990s.⁸¹ Eventually, as Sundaram hints, this recycled modernity becomes

⁸¹ Sundaram, "Recycling Modernity," 61.

“disposed by the elite domains of electronic capital, a world which possesses a hunter-gatherer cunning.”⁸² The idea of subversively recovering artifacts from the past to establish a new technoculture parallels the Afrofuturist discourse of Akomfrah’s imaginative film on the development of Detroit techno music. In *The Last Angel of History*, “another hoodlum, another bad-boy, scavenger poet figure called a data-thief” discovers encrypted “techno-fossils.” “Crack that code and you’ll have the keys to your future,” the narrator continues.⁸³

Although it may initially appear to be inapplicable to South Asian electronica, it may be useful to consider precisely this program of Afrofuturism advanced by Mark Dery, Alondra Nelson, and others. Afrofuturism is a form of critical analysis which seeks to write the African diaspora’s “own future text” called for by Ishmael Reed’s 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*.⁸⁴ Though Dery coined the neologism in a 1993 article (“Black to the Future”), Alondra Nelson notes that “the currents that comprise it existed long before.”⁸⁵ Afrofuturism describes the interaction between the histories of identity in the African diaspora with the technologies, extant or imagined, of the future. As an artistic mode, examples of Afrofuturism can be found in literature, art, and music. Science fiction is often an underlying theme, with artists such as the jazz musician Sun Ra exclaiming that “space is the place”—a common theme is that extraterrestrial space would provide for the liberation of African diasporic populations.

As an aesthetic program, Afrofuturism offers useful interventions in studying the social aspects of music. Some of my analysis here rests on the discussion of sonic texts in the British-Ghanaian critic Kodwo Eshun’s seminal work on musical Afrofuturism, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*. Eshun’s rejection of continuity in Afrofuturist music opens up an expressive space: “Sonic Futurism doesn’t

⁸² Ibid., 62.

⁸³ John Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History* (1996), DVD.

⁸⁴ Alondra Nelson, “Introduction: Future Texts,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 9.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 15.

locate you in tradition; instead it dislocates you from origins.”⁸⁶ The genealogy of Eshun’s aesthetic conception of Afrofuturist music is rooted in Paul Gilroy’s work on memories of slavery in African diasporas, and as such is not congruent to that of South Asian electronica;⁸⁷ the result, however, is a similar aesthetic space. Note, though, that the goal here is not to define an “Indofuturism” as such—though artists such as Talvin Singh have been so designated (and, in a nod to Afrofuturism, Singh did play in indo-jazz groups in the 1980s).⁸⁸

Lyrical and cryptic, *More Brilliant Than the Sun* is a book best regarded as an art project that presupposes a canon which does not yet exist. There are, however, elements relevant to the present analysis. In his discussion of George Russell’s 1968 *Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature*, Eshun notes that the *Sonata* drew from many distinct genres, including *ragas*, finally synthesized in “a mixillogical machine.” Classical Hindustani and Carnatic music, among other genres, are examples of “Advanced Rhythmic Technologies—already centuries old.” For Russell, then, “to go back into a Ghanaian or Indian or Vietnamese sonic past is to go forward into a new future. To listen to an ART is hearing the evolution of technology 5 centuries down the line.”⁸⁹ The intention here is to recover the technological from a futurist orientation that once existed or continues to exist in these musical traditions.

What does Afrofuturism, or an ART, or any of this have to do with South Asian electronica? Afrofuturism’s explanation for the alienation of the African diaspora revolves around a recovery of the self in the ghost of slavery, of a collection of artifacts used to weave narratives predicting the liberation of the diaspora in the context of future extraterrestrial travel. The systematic program of alienation imposed on the African diaspora has caused artists to displace their representations of the

⁸⁶ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 00[-001].

⁸⁷ Ashley Dawson, “Desi Remix: The Plural Dance Cultures of New York’s South Asian Diaspora,” *Jouvert* 7, no. 1 (2002).

⁸⁸ Rob Young, “Hands-on Experience,” *The Wire*, February 1996, 24.; Peter Shapiro, “Approaching Meltdown,” *ibid.*, March 2005, 25.

⁸⁹ Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 01[003]-01[06].

present with imagined futures. Technology is the space for this imaginative program because it is alienated from itself, as it allows one to fashion an imaginative future from an entirely synthetic sequence of bits (or from a rearranged sequence): though there would seem to exist infinite permutations of mere zeroes and ones, there exists only a finite (though large) number of such combinations in a given quantity of data. Technology aids the construction of this narrative and the superstructures of technology are reconstituted in it, but ultimately it is a creative project for a future age. South Asian electronica, too, is cognizant of its dual meaning as a prognosticating, present-day enigma as well as a future techno-fossil. Electronica is a native music of the urban, technological age: it embodies a sparsity and sense of alienation that has come to pervade aesthetic production in modernity. Since this thesis considers the special case of electronic music that leaves traces of the past, rather than minimalist beats that could have been made in Berlin, or New York, or Tokyo, or anywhere else in Appadurai's global mediascape, this continuity can be leveraged to justify its reading as sonic fiction or as a future trajectory.

The Pakistani musician Zohaib Kazi seems to exemplify the sort of "Space is the Place" aesthetic of Afrofuturism. Kazi's 2008 album *Ismail ka Urdu Sheher* features a track entitled "Awaz/The Last Radiowave." An early video of the song displays a static backdrop of "Zohaib Kazi" suspended in space, with a planet taking the place of the "o" and an astronaut the last "i." Electronics figure into the production of the album and the samples, but there are very real instruments and vocals on the recording. The tracks are slowed down, less frenetic than similar artists'. The concept album unfolds around the imaginary city of Kinara, the capital of an extraterrestrial planet; the fictional Ismail Alset is a scientist who works there. The song opens with a quote by Stephen Hawking, imploring the listener to take seriously the limits of earth-based civilizations and "to spread out into space." The song is a deliberate reckoning with a liberatory

expansion of humanity that includes not just the economic elite, but also disenfranchised classes.

Khan explicitly links his music to a sort of rebellion against the elite:

We continue to use our planet's resources for nukes to ensure certain countries remain super-powers and corporations get richer while the poor are told, "Sorry, we don't have the resources for you," which is BS. We have plenty for everyone and if we don't, then we should search for a "spare" planet since this one might not last another century.⁹⁰

Samra Khan and Jaffer Ali Zaidi sing the lyrics in tandem: "Yeh baat tum suno / Yeh raaz tum suno / Unchi chikhon mein meri awaz tum suno..."⁹¹ The lyrics continue to speak of the small glimmer of light hidden in their cries. At the end of the song, a sample plays of a news report on the detection of a radio signal from outer space by SETI, as the anchors speculate that it could be from an alien civilization. The voice from above, of course, is Ismail's.⁹² There is a playful temporality here: if radio waves take so many years to travel to earth, then Ismail's is a voice from the past; Kazi's reading, though, figures him explicitly as a voice from the future.

As artists such as Kazi look toward the future, others look toward the past. If there were ever an artistic act that dropped fragments of history into their futuristic sounds, illustrating this program of futurism so clearly, then the MIDIval PunditZ would be it. The group, which consists of Delhi-based DJs Gaurav Raina and Tapan Raj, formed in 1997 and released its first album in 2002 to critical acclaim. The name is a pun on the future and the past: "MIDIval" embodies an obvious historical reference to the medieval, but it also begins with the acronym for Musical Instrument Digital Interface, a 1983 standard which defines the exchange of digital information between instruments, hardware, and computers. A "pandit" is traditionally defined as a learned scholar, but

⁹⁰ Malik, "The Melancholy Streets of Ismail's City," 55.

⁹¹ "Listen to these words / Listen to this secret / Listen to the voice of my cry from far above."

⁹² Malik, "The Melancholy Streets of Ismail's City," 55.

has been taken to mean an expert in any number of fields, both in Hindi and in English.⁹³ The group was instrumental in producing some of the first instances of electronica that borrowed from the music of the diaspora, playing early live events in Delhi which were termed “cyber mehfiles.”⁹⁴

I will take as an example several tracks from their 2005 album, *MIDIval Times*. The track “Kesariya” is a reworking of the Rajasthani folk song “Kesariya Balam.” Richa Sharma sings the lyrics in the *mand* style—“kesariya baalam/padharo mhare des”⁹⁵—while Murad Ali plays the *sarangi*. The voice is modulated and its tempo varied. It is recognizably a mix of an older form with a completely new set of instruments. Similarly, the song “Raanjhan” makes central a highly processed sample of Abida Parveen’s Punjabi “Menda Dil Ranjhan Rawal Mange,” stripped of all lyrics except for the sole word in its title.⁹⁶ The rearrangement of these diverse artifacts, which are drawn from many different North Indian languages, has the effect of removing them from their contexts and causing the listener to feel displaced—to be a victim of a sonic contagion.

In another song, “Khayaal,” Vishal Vaid sings a modern ghazal:

<i>Kab kbayaal aapka nahin hota</i>	When do I not think of you?
<i>Dard-e dil se juda nahin hota</i>	The pain can’t be removed from my heart.
<i>Haal-e dil kis tarah likhooon unko</i>	How do I write to him of my heart’s
<i>Haath dil se juda nahin hota</i>	condition?
	I can’t remove my hand from it.
<i>Dil ne kuch unse keh diya hoga</i>	My heart must have said something to him.
<i>Bewajah woh kbafa nahin hota</i>	He wouldn’t have gotten upset without
	reason.
<i>Woh kbafa hotein hain to hone do</i>	If he is upset, let him be.
<i>Woh kisi ka kbuda nahin hota</i>	He is no god, he rules no one.

The ghazal would appear to be unremarkable, following a typical rhythm and lyrical pattern. Like many other ghazals, it hints at the earlier works from which it derives (“haath dil se juda nahin hota”

⁹³ And what of the “z?” I’m not sure of where this originated, but it pervades the marketing copy of much of South Asian electronica: *Anokha: Soundz...*, “Future Soundz,” etc.

⁹⁴ Broadly speaking, a *mehfil* is a type of courtly performance which would have been presented to the elite. Murthy, “Nationalism Remixed?,” 1418.

⁹⁵ “saffron husband [, come] / to our (my) land”

⁹⁶ Information about the singers is from the album’s liner notes.

is a line attributed to Momin). It is not meant to be read at an unaccompanied text at a *mushairah*; the electronic beats emphasize and echo the emotions of loneliness and alienation that suffuse this ghazal and much of modern Urdu poetry. The topic of unrequited love, the discussion of the *haal-e dil* (“condition of the heart”), and its other themes are common in the context of Urdu poetry. Importantly, though, the song hints at a hopeful future.⁹⁷ Given the well-known ambiguity of gender and consequent homoerotic undertones in the ghazal form, it is useful to read the work through the lens of queer futurity. Drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch, José Esteban Muñoz has described the work of queerness as “a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”⁹⁸ The ghazal in “Khayaal” may thus be read as an requiem which traces an ultimately unrealized homoeroticism of the past. Present-day artistic works may encode a “relational and collective modality of endurance and support,” one for which the temporal present “is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination.”⁹⁹ Muñoz locates the realization of utopia at an ever-retreating horizon, a yearning for an impossible future that “approaches as a crashing wave of potentiality.”¹⁰⁰ The pleasure of listening to “Khayaal” comes from its trajectory of shared, collective struggle, an arc which connects the past and the present before mobilizing a politics of hope as it launches toward the future. It forgives the frustration of a future which never came to pass by suggesting that its possibility lies beyond some eventual horizon.

If the futurism of the MIDIval PunditZ is evident throughout their music, interviews, and liner notes, the Mumbai-based music collective Bhavishyavani Future Soundz makes prophecy a part of its name. The group DJs and organizes parties, but does not typically release its own tracks. Inspired

⁹⁷ I thank Gayatri Gopinath for suggesting that I read the song in light of Muñoz’s work.

⁹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

by a fortune-telling robot in Juhu, a neighborhood of Mumbai, the group “decided that nothing captured their glocal narrative better than a shiny, lit-up futuristic robot, mouthing Indian fortune teller-style stories.” The collective’s promotional materials feature the Devanagari character “bha” emblazoned on a comic book hero, Bahadur. A poster for an event on August 6, 1999, “Local No. 2,” proudly proclaims a night of “FAST DANCING FOR A NEW INDIA.”¹⁰¹ Design and marketing were critical to the success of the events, and indeed such circulations—as well as the artists’ own comments in interviews—are critical to reinterpreting sound through the lens of futurism. Time has quickened in this aesthetic, and electronica seems idiomatic in the acceleration of time that Virilio and Koselleck see in modernity.

Illicit Vibration, Illicit Performance: Remixing History

Elias Canetti, having established the lemma that sound is physical, understands it in terms of the “throbbing crowd;” the “sensual mathematics” of the performance is disseminated as a virus, which “maps the propogational vectors of vibrational events.”¹⁰² If electronic music is often distributed for free over the internet, whether licitly or illicitly, then the space of collective consumption has centered on the performance venue. This space of performance, consumption, and community-making is also the locus of production: the DJ can remix or change tracks at will, responding to the reaction of the crowd. In Delhi and in other South Asian cities, these assemblages of listeners dancing to electronica are often illegal—conducted without permits—and can fall through at the last minute due to police intervention. Electronic dance music, a much more commercialized form of electronica, attempts to maintain this illicit aesthetic even as the events have grown far beyond underground affairs.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth Lobo, “How Bhavishyavani Future Soundz Shaped Mumbai’s Nightlife,” *Rolling Stone India* (2014), <http://rollingstoneindia.com/bhavishyavani>.

¹⁰² Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, xix.

Steve Goodman's brilliant *Sonic Warfare* examines the relationship between sound and fear, with particular attention to the connections between sound and the military. Central to the method of this project is bringing back some of the physicality of the music: sound is understood as a series of vibrations, some infrasonic and some ultrasonic, at once composed of divergent strains and yet harmonized. Goodman proposes a vibrational ontology which recognizes that "[a]t the molecular or quantum level, everything is in motion, is vibrating"—necessitating that we draw in "the texturhythms of matter, the patterned physicality of a musical beat or pulse."¹⁰³ Vibration may offer a way to overcome the supposed split or "disjuncture between spatial and virtual neighborhoods" that Appadurai mentions.¹⁰⁴ Goodman's central thesis is that the physicality of the sound wave affects biological processes, which in turn drives assemblages, fear, assemblies of people, and an affective, sonic contagion. The remixing of old artifacts is central to making the familiar unfamiliar and inducing this affective discomfort. Paul Gilroy recognizes these "pulses from the past" as reimagined premodernity, which aesthetics makes use of because they can "refuse the categories" of modernity, or of technology.¹⁰⁵ Goodman writes of the unsettling experience of *déjà vu* involved in hearing the musical source of a sample, or the film from which a dialogue was sampled, when one's first exposure is to a remixed track: "a synesthetic surplus value is produced" when the audiovisual source is reduced to the non-visual remix.¹⁰⁶ Goodman and others have read this through contagion, where the samples are small viruses giving rise to cross-temporal "vectors of affective contagion."¹⁰⁷ Sundaram, too, motivates the metaphor of the virus in discussing "parasitic attachments to larger

¹⁰³ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁴ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 74.

¹⁰⁶ Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 150.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 151. Contagion has been used elsewhere: the audiovisual artist Mathangi Arulpragasam (M.I.A.)'s 2007 track "Bird Flu," which by its title refers to contagion, samples from R.P. Patnaik's Tamil song "Thiruvizhannu Vandha." See also Ronak K. Kapadia, "Sonic Contagions: Bird Flu, Bandung, and the Queer Cartographies of MIA," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26, no. 2-3 (2014).

structures,” although it does not seem to be so biologically relevant as tracing the vibrations of sound through the body.¹⁰⁸ The metaphor of sound as virus—as a code that has been unleashed and cannot be pulled back, one that resonates and is capable of autopoiesis—allows sound to propagate and reverberate, entirely suffusing the space of production and consumption.

If all of this sounds sinister, yet familiar, it is probably because there are elements of the electronica scene that reinforce this image. The association of electronic music with drug culture is perhaps emblematic of the relationship between sound-as-vibration and drugs, both of which induce biological effect. In the same way that the Futurists complained that “our ear is not satisfied and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions,”¹⁰⁹ so too have drugs been used to accelerate the body. Rana Dasgupta’s text on the moneyed elite of Delhi included an interview with a drug dealer: “Nothing works without drugs in Delhi.”¹¹⁰ One sample in Dynoman’s “Imaginary Parrots Cheebay” is an excerpt of a 2000 talk at Disinfo.con by the Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison. The vocal sample is an excerpt of Morrison’s speech in which he describes a tale of alien abduction subsequent to his use of dope on the rooftop of a hotel in Kathmandu. The association of electronica with this scene, whether warranted or not, has important repercussions as police forces and municipalities choose to preempt or shut down clandestine dance events. Read differently, though, it could be argued that the music is simply consumed mostly by youth populations predisposed to these behaviors.

Indeed, the disconnection between youth culture and the venues which host these events is a major point of contention. In discussing the early days of playing drum ‘n’ bass music in Mumbai,

¹⁰⁸ Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 112.

¹⁰⁹ Luigi Russolo, “The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2005 [1913]), 11.

¹¹⁰ Rana Dasgupta, *Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 375. See also Mehrotra, *The Butterfly Generation*, 162-6.

Masta Justy (Jatin Vidyarthi) of Bhavishyavani Future Soundz recalls, “We used to explain the genre to clueless owners and managers as ‘Ganpati ke time drum jaisa music.’”¹¹¹ Electronica, then, can leverage artifacts from the past to derive legitimacy or explain itself. These textures of time are not politically inert. Futurism is political, and hence South Asian electronica is political. However, an attempt to discern a particular political orientation is flummoxing and ultimately fruitless. In the context of India, the futurist orientation, in its particular aesthetic mode, might be said to be akin to the futurity and optimism inherent in a Nehruvian political program; such an identification would be as exact as saying that reference to the past is inherently conservative, which denies the past its creative possibilities. Thus, there is no prescribed political orientation to South Asian electronica, even as it reflects political life. The commercialization and concomitant industrial essentialization of South Asian electronica could be read as a development important to any locus of the political sphere; the historical, cultural artifacts mixed with beats new and old can be reinterpreted in any given future plane. If much of electronica carries with it an underground or illicit vibe, then other forms have been more successful in shaping themselves as commodities in the usual sense, and indeed have begun to be appropriated by political entities.

Appadurai notes that cultural flows emerging from the metropole can become indigenized in other spaces, which can cause them to be enrolled in nationalism.¹¹² The recent history of India’s national song, “Vande Mataram,” is a case in point.¹¹³ Though its lyrics were originally written in an 1882 novel by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, it was made into a political song in the decades to come. The lyrics of the song explicitly link India with the maternal figure of the Hindu goddess

¹¹¹ Dharmadhikari, “A Timeline of India’s Evolving Bass Culture Vol. I: The Pioneers Decode Significant Moments from the Early Days”.

¹¹² Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 32.

¹¹³ And it is the song (not the anthem, a title bestowed to Rabindranath Tagore’s *Jana Gana Mana*. Interestingly, though, the MIDIval PunditZ dropped “Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka Jaya He” twice into their track “136.” Ashok Krish has also produced a song entitled “Jana Gana Minor.”)

Durga, offending members of other religious communities who are equally members of a secular state. Even as Chattopadhyay's novel was characterized as anti-Muslim, the song carried leftist political connotations that were important during the period leading up to Independence.¹¹⁴ In recent decades, however, the song has been closely linked with the right-wing Hindutva politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The choice by the MIDIval PunditZ to remix the song on the 2005 album *Vande Mataram*, then, raised interesting political questions in which sonic currents inadvertently reinforced earlier political symbols. Consisting of eight remixes of the national song of India, the MIDIval PunditZ never quite came out and said whether they had meant their remix as left-wing kitsch or as a right-wing political homage (if either).¹¹⁵ However, the confluence of electronica and a nationalist tract meant that it raised eyebrows from the whole of the political spectrum. The album was meant to be released at a launch party in Gurgaon on August 12, 2005; even as "many of Delhi's young society types were in attendance," the event was cancelled due to the presence of protesters representing political organizations such as the BJP.¹¹⁶ Whatever the MIDIval PunditZ' take on the album was, the protesters didn't know quite what to make of it: Murthy writes that they "took offense at the shift... from Hindu nationalist anthem to majoritarian Indian nationalist anthem."¹¹⁷ That is, the medium of the remix was taken as sacrilege.

The reading of the lyrics on the track is overdetermined by the electronic beats underlying the composition, making them explicitly political—they are more than simply remixes in the vein of "Asian Kool." Virinder Kalra has examined popular songs in the British Asian diaspora, with particular attention to these explicitly political songs—for example, those that retell the story of

¹¹⁴ Murthy, "Nationalism Remixed?," 143.

¹¹⁵ As Murthy allows: "Granted, the MIDIval PunditZ's invocation is not Hindutva. However, it is also not in opposition to Hindutva." Ibid., 1425.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 1424.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 1425.

Udham Singh. Singh, termed a freedom fighter in Indian discourse, avenged the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre by assassinating the former general of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, in 1940. Because the assassination took place some 21 years after Jallianwallah Bagh, which figured prominently in the Indian Independence Movement, it had already acquired symbolic currency.¹¹⁸ Indeed, from the 1970s onward (and especially the 1990s, with Asian Dub Foundation's *Rafi's Revenge*), the enduring popularity of Udham Singh, Bhagat Singh, or Satpal Ram in song illustrates the close connections between militancy, revolution, and performance. For Gopinath, this emphasis on "militant masculinity" tends to render the music politically suspect, for this performance of history tends to sonically reenact "the subordinating tendencies of the very movements it evokes."¹¹⁹ This is not necessarily evident on the face of the music. For Kalra, what is most interesting is how contemporary lyrics fail to *narrate* the event, and instead figure Udham Singh as a mnemonic device: in the words of one *bhangra* song, how the song implores the listener "to remember the story of Jallianwallah Bagh."¹²⁰ One must therefore go beyond lyrics, placing them instead in a broader context. It is assumed "that the listener already knows the stories that are about to be related," and the function of the lyrics is to provide a space in which other "sets of stories" may be related in an anti-imperialist discourse.¹²¹ Something similar is going on with electronic music: the lyrics evoke another era, urging the listener to think about temporality and production, and yet may end up reinforcing elements of the dominant culture.

¹¹⁸ The Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, or the Amritsar massacre, occurred in Amritsar on April 13, 1919. Disobeying a curfew, Indians from different religions assembled in celebration of the Vaisakhi festival and in protest of the British. The British Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, confining the protestors and festival-celebrators to the walls of the garden, ordered his troops to open fire. Though each government's reckoning differs from the other's, several hundreds or thousands of Indians were killed in this incident. The massacre figures as a watershed event in the Indian Independence Movement.

¹¹⁹ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 48.

¹²⁰ From the 1992 song "Udham Singh" by Apna Group, translated from Punjabi by Virinder S. Kalra, "Vilayeti Rhythms: Beyond Bhangra's Emblematic Status to a Translation of Lyrical Texts," *Theory, Culture & Society* 17, no. 3 (2000): 91.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

Sundaram warned precisely against this: that in the era of pirate modernity, “the dominant electronic public has cohered with the cultural-political imagination of a belligerent Hindu-nationalist movement.”¹²² The discourses of the cyber elite cohered with a new definition of modernity that displaced the Nehruvian modern; pirate modernity is an imaginary harnessed to establish “the hegemony of the Hindu majority” over consumption.¹²³ Even if there is an alternative space in which extralegal circuits of production and consumption operate through the alleys of Palika Bazaar, the dominant aesthetic may be susceptible from other angles.

Thus, there is every reason to believe that electronica music, at least in South Asia, projects the plane of the future into the political present. In interviewing Delhi-based musicians for a 2010 article, Dhiraj Murthy found that his sample “unanimously believed that the [South] Asian electronic music they were creating was politicized.” Murthy identifies the musicians’ motivations as twofold: to revive a hypothetical “anterior Indian essence” as well as to posit electronica as something that could reverse an imbalanced, transnational flow of culture.¹²⁴ Whether this characterization is fair or desirable is open for debate, as the “discovery” of this “essence” is necessarily rooted in invention or fabrication. This combats the sense that these musical futures are empty, or that they are only futuristic in an aesthetic sense: “[t]he powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse.... The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow.”¹²⁵

Indeed, electronica perhaps fills a cultural void left by the exasperation of the left in Indian politics. This is akin to the situation of African intellectuals in the late twentieth century: evoking Homi Bhabha’s “melancholia in revolt,” Eshun argues that a “fatigue with futurity” caused these

¹²² Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 60.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹²⁴ Murthy, “Nationalism Remixed?,” 1420.

¹²⁵ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 289.

activists to cease “to participate in the process of building futures.”¹²⁶ Yet, as the case of “Vande Mataram” has illustrated, the political orientation of electronica is rarely clear. The question hinges on whether electronica is meant to read futurism back into older artifacts, or whether it means to place their construction solidly in the present; shifting the orientation, is electronica meant to be understood today, or are listeners meant to give meaning to it only in retrospect? Ultimately, it would appear that electronica manipulates the guise of enigma, rendering itself pluripotential while simultaneously unobservable, elusive, and just beyond reach.

Conclusion

By facilitating the distribution of computer technology through informal networks, piracy—both of intellectual property as well as in counterfeit and rebranded computer technology—encouraged the development of new organizations of capital. Piracy, considered in the specter of pirate modernity, instilled in these circuits of distribution a certain aesthetic. The development of remix culture, sampling, and digital music production, along with new modes of electronic distribution, took up these aesthetics and developed a new genre of music. This genre is an imaginative, quasi-marginalized field in which these aesthetics play out across space and time. It is marked by informal, ephemeral networks of producers whose underground ethic encourages a subversive image and makes use of the illicit spectacle. The assemblages of pirate modernity also make possible a conceptualization of disrupting different types of networks; the emphasis of the biological effects of vibration on the body are entirely in line with the pirate aesthetic. It may even offer one means of finding “the real ‘underground’ to the Asian Underground,”¹²⁷ of reconstructing the sonic textures embedded in the peripheries of its construction. However, pirate modernity is again being reshaped

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 57.

as producers and marketers have begun to extract value from the aesthetics of this music, and as political parties recognize the importance of this music to youth cultures.

Sundaram closes his essay on recycled modernity by noting that “the mimetic act is less punctual, the copy is not crucial to pirate culture.”¹²⁸ I want to suggest that the mimetic act is not punctual because it constructs a world of the future; futurism mediated by futurity is one aesthetic mode by which pirate modernity plays out. The difficulty with futurism is that makes the present and future seem entirely new, as if its artistic project would always be at the bleeding edge. But aesthetic modes eventually come to pass, and all that can be done in the present is to understand what futurism means and what it meant. At the start of their 2002 song “Bhangra Fever,” the MIDIVAL PunditZ linked physical spaces to musical possibilities: “If you’ve ever existed in grids or swerves, you know that London swings, New York’s a grid/Chicago swings/Bombay’s a grid, Delhi swings.” In 2005, their song “136”—the source of the quotation which opens this essay—closed by linking dialogues of the future to the past: “The future’s ancient, the dawn breaks orange, the peacock sings, and Delhi still swings.” South Asian electronica embodies the urban and transnational as its condition of possibility and as the result of that possibility; it ultimately forms a vision of the circuits of the future homeomorphic to those of the present and the past.

¹²⁸ Sundaram, “Recycling Modernity,” 65.

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Discography

This discography catalogs the works referenced in the thesis; not all are South Asian electronica.

- Artist
 - *Album*
 - “Song”
- Ashok Krish
 - “Daft Pankajam”
 - “Jana Gana Minor”
- Asian Dub Foundation
 - *Community Music*
 - *Rafi’s Revenge*
- Bandish Projekt
 - *Alchemy*
 - “Alchemy” (with Last Mango in Paris)
- Bhram-Inn
 - “Urban Streets”
- Charanjit Singh
 - *Synthesizing: Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat*
- Dev.D (film)
 - “Emosional Atyachar”
- Dhaka Electronic Scene (collective)
 - *Atisha—The Sonic Uprising*
 - “Fabric” (The B Regiment)
 - *Explorations*
- Dynoman
 - *Naubabar*
 - “Imaginary Parrots Cheebay”
- Forever South Records (collective)
 - *Collections Volume 1*
 - “IslamabadVice” (Chi.Boss)
 - “The Slowfall” (Alien Panda Jury)
- George Russell
 - *Electronic Sonata for Souls Loved by Nature*
- M.I.A.
 - *Kala*
 - “Bird Flu”
 - *Piracy Funds Terrorism*
- MIDIval PunditZ
 - *Hello Hello*
 - “Naina Laagey”
 - *MIDIval PunditZ*
 - “Bhangra Fever”
- *MIDIval Times*
 - “Kesariya”
 - “Khayaal”
 - “136”
 - “Raanjhan”
- *Vande Mataram: An Electronic Exploration (compilation)*
 - “Vande Mataram (Electro Indian Mix)”
- Nazia Hasan
 - *Disco Deewane*
 - “Disco Deewane”
- Nucleya
 - *Koocha Monster*
 - “Akkad Bakkad”
 - “Bell Gadi” (with Chinna Ponnu and Relok)
 - “New Delhi Nuttah” (with Delhi Sultanate)
- Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan & Michael Brook
 - *Mustt Mustt*
- Om Dar-B-Dar (film)
 - “Terrorist Tadpoles”
- Phuture
 - *Acid Tracks*
- Shaa’ir + Func
 - *Align*
 - “Reach”
- 6LA8
 - *Chaos/Solipsism/Self-Projection (with Aus Rine)*
 - “Drugs, Don’t Do Kids” (with Dynoman)
 - “The Future Doesn’t Care for You”
 - *The Moderate Picture*
 - “Celeplode”
- Talvin Singh
 - *Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground (compilation)*
 - “Jaan”
- Zohaib Kazi
 - *Ismail ka Urdu Sheber*
 - “Awaz/The Last Radiowave”