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**Performing the Global: The Mediated Mobility of Virtual Cosmopolitans**

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**Volume 21 Issue 7 (December 2019) Article 6****Hye Jean Chung,****"Performing the Global: The Mediated Mobility of Virtual Cosmopolitans"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss7/6>>

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**Abstract:** This article examines how contemporary media art and popular culture, vernacular cultural practices, and digital technologies express and actualize aspirations for global mobility. This task is propelled by the need to question the limited scope of how we envision globalization. Here I explore how people use forms of visual media to "perform the global" through mediated experiences of mobility. I propose the concept of "virtual cosmopolitans" to describe those who participate in the experience of global citizenship through their use of photography, film, and digital media. Although they do not have access to conventional forms of cosmopolitan mobility, these virtual cosmopolitans find ways to envision or simulate cosmopolitan experiences by inserting themselves into the global imaginary via mediated networks of images. This article discusses how these virtual cosmopolitans participate in the discourse and experience of globalization, and considers ways to manifest and actualize cosmopolitan desires through vernacular forms of media. I focus on two documentary films that engage with the photographic medium to consider diverse forms of mediated mobility: *Born into Brothels* (Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski, 2004) and *City of Photos* (Nishtha Jain, 2005). Although both films illustrate how disadvantaged subjects in contemporary Indian society negotiate their desires of mobility, they propose different ways to assert their identity as a cosmopolitan, deploying varying levels of imagination. This discussion illustrates how marginalized subjects engage with global forces in local spaces by cultivating media literacy and demonstrating creative uses of visual media.

**Hye Jean CHUNG**

## **Performing the Global: The Mediated Mobility of Virtual Cosmopolitans**

"Cosmopolitanism is infinite ways of being."

- Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, Dipesh Chakrabarty

### **I. Introduction: Virtual Cosmopolitans**

Reiner Riedler's series of photographs, *Fake Holidays*, depict tourists who spend time in artificial travel destinations. In one photograph, a newlywed couple poses in front of fake versions of the Egyptian pyramids and the Eiffel Tower at the Window of the World, a theme park in Shenzhen that fetishizes cosmopolitanism through its collection of scaled-down tourist sites. Another photograph shows a group of tourists sunbathing under heat lamps in the Tropical Islands Resorts near Berlin. Yet another depicts tourists escaping the desert climate of Dubai to lounge in ice caves at indoor skiing halls. In a *WIRED* article on Riedler's photographs, Margaret Rhodes describes this popular and pervasive trend in the global travel industry as "manufactured travel." These works of the Austrian photographer demonstrate how people around the world apply mediated memories and imaginings to three-dimensional physical sites that simulate the sensation of escaping to faraway places. The photographs of Jinna Yang provide another example of "faking" a shared experience of global travel. The New York-based photographer traveled around Europe with a life-size cardboard cutout of her father, who passed away from cancer before fulfilling his wish to travel the world. As a tribute to her late father, Yang took photographs of herself with the cutout at various tourist locations, including the Eiffel Tower, St. Paul's Cathedral, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Coliseum in Rome, and the Skógafoss Waterfall in Iceland. The works of both photographers trouble the distinctions between what is authentic and what is simulated. Even though the subjects and the viewers of the photographs are aware of the boundaries between real/fake and reality/imagination, we can still feel satisfaction and enjoy the sense of "being there" through a deliberate disavowal of these boundaries.

In a similar vein, John Urry uses the term "imaginative travel," to describe how people "travel elsewhere through memories, texts, guidebooks and brochures, travel writing, photos, postcards, radio and film." He aptly observes that this often generates "the desire for travel and for being bodily in other places" (*Mobilities* 169). This article explores how people "travel elsewhere" by using various forms of visual media that enable us to "perform the global" through mediated experiences of mobility. I propose the concept of "virtual cosmopolitans" to describe those who participate in the experience of global citizenship through their use of photography, film, digital media, and online platforms.<sup>1</sup> I consider how subjects who do not have access to conventional forms of cosmopolitan mobility find ways to envision or simulate cosmopolitan experiences by inserting themselves into the global imaginary via mediated networks of images.

This article examines how these virtual cosmopolitans participate within the discourse and experience of globalization, and how they manifest and actualize cosmopolitan desires through vernacular forms of media. This analysis suggests that we can perform cosmopolitanism by engaging in media practices that deploy various modes of image-making and imagination to attain concrete and material forms, consequently embedding ourselves in globally interconnected networks of imagery and identity. Here I discuss two documentary films that engage with the photographic medium to consider diverse forms of mediated mobility: *Born into Brothels* (Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski, 2004) and *City of Photos* (Nishtha Jain, 2005).

### **II. Globalization and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism**

As we negotiate transitions in global networks of people, capital, resources, and technologies, we are often compelled to question the facile and abundant rhetoric that associates globalization with specifically defined, privileged modes of mobility. In "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global," Saskia Sassen raises this issue when she writes: "The global does not (yet) fully encompass the lived experience of actors or the domain of institutional orders and cultural formations; it persists as a partial condition" (215). Cognizant of the multiple experiences of globalization, she observes that, "[d]iscrepancies between the rates of acceleration affecting different economic activities can engender differing temporalities" (222), suggesting the need to incorporate those who are all too often forgotten or ignored

<sup>1</sup> For more on the concept of "virtual cosmopolitans," see Hye Jean Chung, *Media Heterotopias* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018).

in the discourse of globalization, even though their lives and imaginations are affected and mediated by global systems. In addition to temporality, we should also consider whether the different rates of acceleration determine the way we conceptualize space and maneuver (physically or virtually) through complex spatial constellations that connect multiple locations.

In "Cosmopolitanisms," authors Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, and Chakrabarty suggest that cosmopolitan practices and histories should be considered "in the plural" as "cosmopolitanisms" (8). They propose a radical revision of the history of cosmopolitanism by thinking beyond European intellectual history. In *Cosmopolitanisms*, Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta likewise emphasize the plurality of "cosmopolitanisms" that includes "many blooming, fleshed-out particulars" found in various transnational trajectories of refugees, migrants, or other dispossessed and diasporic subjects of the twenty-first century (1). Referring to the work of historian David Hollinger, they indicate the numerous adjectives that can modify cosmopolitanisms: "rooted, discrepant, vernacular, critical, subaltern," among others (4). Pnina Werbner similarly points out that "marginal cosmopolitanisms" address the notion that a variety of cosmopolitan practices co-exist, leading to the inclusive consideration of travelers with varying degrees of privilege and diverse notions of citizenship and cultural belonging (497).

Responding to this call to identify varied forms of cosmopolitanisms, this article presents virtual cosmopolitans as global minded citizens that envision and devise "ways of inhabiting multiple places at once" or "ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home," regardless of whether they physically travel across borders or remain in one place (Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, and Chakrabarty 11). The key aspect of virtual cosmopolitanism is engaging in the experience of accessing and exploring geographically and culturally diverse locations through various forms of media. Virtual cosmopolitans thereby reclaim cosmopolitanism by disengaging it from elitist connotations, exclusionist ideas, and colonial ideologies, and expanding it to encompass different modes of imaginary and mediated mobility. They participate in a vernacular cosmopolitanism, or a form of reclaimed cosmopolitanism that recognizes the need for plurality or considers "infinite ways of being," as noted in the epigraph (12).

This article addresses the theme of the "monstrous global" by considering how specific cultural practices that engage with visual media demonstrate the impact of global imaginings and transnational exchanges upon individual and collective identities. The image-making activities discussed here are not regarded as "monstrous" in a negative sense. Nor are they associated with overwhelming fear or anxiety. They are, however, connected to the notion of the "monstrous" (i.e., overwhelming; wide-reaching; perceived as inevitable and inescapable) effects of globalization in terms of scale and scope. Moreover, the imaginative tasks performed by virtual cosmopolitans are marked and driven by the desires, frictions, and tensions that are incubated in the pervasive, dense network of globalization. This article aims to shed light on ways that marginalized subjects engage with global forces in local spaces by developing media literacy and demonstrating creative uses of visual media in order to forge vernacular forms of cosmopolitan identities in everyday life.

Because this paper focuses on visual media, my invocation of the "vernacular" is also inspired by Miriam Hansen's notion of "vernacular modernism." She uses this term to consider classical Hollywood cinema as a popular form of modernism, or as "a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity" ("Mass Production" 65). Although Hansen deploys this concept to explain a mass-produced cultural form that was created by "Fordist-Taylorist methods of industrial production and mass consumption" (64-65), here I emphasize its vernacular characteristic by prioritizing the "amazing appropriative flexibility" (65) afforded within the system of creating media images and products.

Another inspiration is the work of anthropologist-art historian Christopher Pinney, who borrows this notion of "vernacular modernism" to discuss postcolonial photographic practices, in which "the surface becomes a site of the refusal of the depth that characterized colonial representational regimes" ("Notes" 202). Pinney observes how local visual traditions in contemporary popular photography in Africa and India mediate modernity in ways that are critical of European modernity and colonial regimes of visibility. He asserts that "the surface of the photographic images becomes a site for the self-fashioning of postcolonial identities" through a variety of techniques including collage and montage (219).

I build upon Pinney's applications of Hansen's "vernacular modernism" by focusing on the "self-fashioning" of cosmopolitan identities displayed in photographic practices in contemporary India as depicted in the documentary films, *Born into Brothels* and *City of Photos*. By doing so, I add these "fleshed-out particulars" to further exemplify the plurality of cosmopolitanisms, specifically through their imaginative and inventive use of media. My main concern is to examine how the films' subjects envision themselves as cosmopolitans, or perform cosmopolitanisms, even though they do not physically engage in globetrotting, border-crossing travel. It is the imagining of another place that provides the subjects with a sense of mobility. The "modernizing" medium of photography becomes their mode of

transportation to another world. It functions as an apparatus that equips them with a sense of participating in a transnational ecology of producing and consuming visual media.

Although both films illustrate how less privileged subjects in contemporary Indian society negotiate their desires of mobility, they propose different ways to assert their identity as a cosmopolitan, deploying varying levels of imagination. In *Born into Brothels*, the subjects try to overcome their cultural, social, economic, and geographical limitations by learning the skill of taking photographs. In *City of Photos*, the aspirations of the subjects are fulfilled in a more imaginative (and less literal) way, as their hopes are visualized in the material form of the photograph. The subjects of *Born into Brothels* are initiated into the "self-fashioning" of identity by becoming well versed in the visual technologies of photography. They do not, however, engage in creative acts of resistance and appropriation that defy traditions of "colonial representational regimes," at least from what is shown in the limited frame and format of documentary cinema. The subjects in *City of Photos*, in contrast, show an "amazing appropriative flexibility" (Hansen, "Mass Production" 65) and imaginings of mobility by utilizing the possibilities of photographic and digital technologies and engaging with local cultural practices of image-making.

### III. *Born into Brothels*

The documentary film *Born into Brothels* received much publicity when it received an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2005. It tells the story of London-born, Cambridge-educated, and New York-based photojournalist-filmmaker Zana Briski teaching photography to the young children of sex workers in Sonagachi, a red-light district in Kolkata. The film's success fueled debates on whether this media exposure ultimately improved the circumstances of the children. This recalls similar concerns surrounding the feature film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008), which depicted pervasive poverty and acts of violence in contemporary India. Writing for *The Times*, Alice Miles described Boyle's film as "poverty porn." *Slumdog Millionaire* was also accused of exploiting the misery of disenfranchised Indian children. These accusations were supported by the fact that the nonprofessional child actors actually lived in the poverty-stricken neighborhood in Mumbai, as depicted in the film.

The children featured in *Born into Brothels* are encouraged by the filmmakers to overcome the many limitations of their disadvantaged status by learning to express themselves through the medium of photography. In this film, aspirations of the marginalized subjects are presented in a seemingly straightforward, unproblematic manner. It is suggested that, thanks to the education and care provided by the filmmakers, these underprivileged children acquire social mobility—and for a chosen few, transnational mobility. The children's photographs are exhibited in various art venues in Europe and the United States, and are used to draw attention to their plight. (Since the release of the film, the filmmakers have created a nonprofit organization called Kids with Cameras that teaches photography to marginalized children in Haiti, Jerusalem, and Cairo, as well as Kolkata.)

Throughout colonial history, visual regimes of ethnographic documentary have framed representations of non-Western colonial subjects as specimens of the Other in ethnocentric perspectives steeped in imperialist desires. *Born into Brothels* is haunted by the ghosts of this colonial past in its replication of "ways of seeing" that are embedded within unequal relations of power between Western nations and the Global South. Critics of the film raised concerns whether such representations of the children objectified them as recipients of global charity without addressing the broader structural problems of poverty and social inequity. In his review, Joshua Roth refers to the popular criticism against the film, which includes accusations directed to the Western filmmakers for their "missionary zeal" and "neocolonial attitude" ("*Born into Brothels*" 151). He also notes that the film, crafted by a "single, privileged author" (i.e., Briski), does not interrogate the facile assumption of photography as "a means of empowerment," nor does it use the children's photographs as "a means of understanding" their interiority and creativity (151). Although the children discuss their photographs with Briski onscreen, they are mostly shown making factual or descriptive comments instead of questioning the creative process of taking photographs or asking why their work would garner interest in the circuits of global media.

Issues of empowerment and redistribution of power are addressed in the companion curriculum on the film provided by Amnesty International. This curriculum also raises the question of the "transformative power of art," although it focuses primarily on the function of art as a mode of personal expression and therapeutic device rather than as a method to achieve social empowerment and acquire cultural capital. The film's Website likewise reinforces the idea of photography as a liberating, empowering medium that provides marginalized children with the means of asserting agency. It states that: "The photographs taken by the children are not merely examples of remarkable observation and

talent; they reflect something much larger, morally encouraging, and even politically volatile: art as an immensely liberating and empowering force."<sup>2</sup>

A glaring absence in the film, however, is a self-reflexive interrogation of the historical conditions in which photography can be effective as a tool of pedagogy and empowerment, especially in this specific context. The film focuses on the newfound mobility of the marginalized children attained through photography, but does not consider possible ways in which the children's photographs, as well as Briski's own photographs and film footage, provide visual pleasure and emotional impact for the viewers within the conventions of aesthetics, documentary realism, and nonfiction storytelling.

Briski's voiceover narration describes how the red-light district is a "whole separate society within itself" and "another world" where everyone is terrified of the camera and everything is illegal. She suggests that her film is meaningful as it offers an insider's view of a secluded, "exotic" space that is normally hidden from tourists' eyes. The sense of infiltrating and exposing a forbidden place is heightened by the dark, shaky footage shot by a hidden, handheld video camera. The voyeuristic camerawork and disjointed editing implicates the viewers in the act of entering this illicit space. The filmmakers sidestep the ethical issue of whether their film continues the ethnographic tradition of exploiting their non-Western subaltern subjects by highlighting their apparent dedication to the children and their intimate relationship with them. A palpable tension exists, however, between the voiceover narration that describes the hardships of the inhabitants of the red-light district and the images that aestheticize and exoticize their surroundings.

Meanwhile, the synopsis provided on the film's Website seems more self-aware of this troubled history of Western photographers in non-Western settings, taking on a defensive tone when it describes the film as "[defying] the typical tear-stained tourist snapshot of the global underbelly" and the children's photographs as "prisms into their souls, rather than anthropological curiosities or primitive imagery, and a true testimony of the power of the indelible creative spirit."

*Born into Brothels* suggests that the children acquire a sense of accomplishment and self-worth as they learn to look at their surroundings with a creative (and somewhat critical) eye. What I take issue with here, however, is the unquestioned assumption of a universally appealing visual aesthetic that seamlessly moves through the photographs taken by Briski and the children. Although one can view the children's photographs as expressions of their individual creativity and agency, or as examples of autoethnography, their photographs also collude in the task of self-exotification. In the film, the children fluidly move between the roles of photographer and subject, turning the camera on themselves as well as their surroundings.

Pooja Rangan situates Briski's project within a genealogy of autoethnography, which she describes as "a process of self-othering through photography" (146). She discusses how the traditions of autoethnographic media production are entwined with the contemporary phenomenon of "child media advocacy," which purports to provide disadvantaged child subjects with the means of self-representation, empowerment, and social mobilization by improving their media literacy skills. Rangan notes that *Born into Brothels* relies heavily on the "ethos of emancipation" (145) and humanitarian activism without acknowledging the "coercive cultural logic" that fetishizes the figure of subaltern, non-Western children and commodifies the affective labor of autoethnography within a global media apparatus.

In *Born into Brothels*, the children's photographs, or rather their education on the economic and cultural power of the photographic medium, initiate and supposedly enable their escape from debilitating surroundings. Also, the filmmakers attempt to further actualize their aspirations of economic, social and geographical mobility by raising awareness of the children's plight, and by guiding viewers to the related Website. The filmmakers of *Born into Brothels* were criticized, however, for depicting the children's parents, local activists, and social workers as uncaring and ineffective, downplaying local efforts to help the children, and for ultimately undermining the dignity of sex workers. Most notably, Partha Banerjee, a filmmaker-journalist who helped to translate dialogue from Bengali to English, criticized the film for reinforcing "a colonialist vision of Indian society," which is depicted as "helpless without Western intervention" (Roth, "Born into Brothels" 151). Banerjee wrote a letter to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that derided the Western filmmakers for exploiting the children's "misery, helplessness, and traumas," and for failing to mention the efforts made by sex workers and local activists in Kolkata to set up financial institutions, health clinics, and sex education schools to improve the situation in Sonagachi ("Documentary"). He also disagreed with the claims that the children's situation

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<sup>2</sup> The film's Website ([www.kids-with-cameras.org](http://www.kids-with-cameras.org)) is now defunct, but its contents are archived at <https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/films/born-into-brothels/>

was ameliorated by the filmmakers' attempts to help them. His letter stated that most of the children were living in worse circumstances than before.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* plainly articulated the glaring distinction between the children and the filmmakers by describing a significant moment during the award ceremony: "As a British filmmaker claimed the Oscar for best documentary at a swanky Hollywood theater, a group of scrawny children celebrated in a dank and dingy room in Calcutta's notorious red light district" ("Young Lives"). Although the article also mentions how the film has positively influenced the children, its opening sentence highlights the disproportionate levels of mobility and agency between the children and the filmmakers. This moment of disparity, in fact, was already foreshadowed in the film, which shows Briski back in New York as her voiceover narration explains that the children's photographs will be auctioned at Sotheby's. Meanwhile, lacking visas and travel funds, the children watch the exhibition of their photographs on a computer screen back in Kolkata.

*Born into Brothels* is an integral part of the global cultural and economic exchange that takes place among producers and consumers of documentary films and ancillary products, such as photographs, exhibitions, and books. The last update on the children was posted on the film's Website in July 2010. According to the post, many reportedly managed to escape the red light district and to continue their education: one boy (Avijit) went on to study film at New York University and one girl (Kochi) went on to attend a private high school in the United States and is/was also harboring dreams of becoming a filmmaker. This "happy ending" continues the film's narrative as a testament to the transformative power of visual media to provide a means for the children to mobilize themselves as educated, self-sufficient citizens with media literacy skills.

This film, however, is also a tale of un-actualized mobility, or immobility. Despite the good intentions of the filmmakers, *Born into Brothels* mostly succeeds in fulfilling the desires of virtually transporting the spectators to another place, rather than the subjects of the film. This prompts the difficult ethical question that is often invoked in regard to documentary cinema: what are the responsibilities of the filmmakers and the audience toward the subjects whose lives are depicted and consumed in the (all too often) exploitative production of cultural products and media images? *Born into Brothels* ultimately reiterates the visual regime of ethnographic documentary, because the children are incorporated into the global economy of labor and capital by acquiring literacy in the universal (i.e., Western) language of art and visual communication. The film depicts the children receiving lessons not only in photography but also in market capitalism by having their work sold at Sotheby's auctions or online Websites. While acknowledging the fact that this allows the children—subjects who have been marginalized and subjugated by "master narratives" on local and global levels—to be included into the meaning-making process, we should be wary of seeing this process as simply empowering.

#### **IV. City of Photos**

Photographic representations have become indispensable to the experience of travel—not only as a visual record of one's journey, but also as a mode of interacting with an unfamiliar space and claiming it as one's own. Susan Sontag writes: "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (*On Photography* 4). As such, photographic images hold a material connection with mediated experience and offer a sense of empowerment that is associated with the act of taking or possessing photographs. Sontag concisely alludes to issues of ownership, agency, and control when she notes that "to collect photographs is to collect the world" (3).

Sontag asserts the close relationship between the development of photography and tourism, because photographs function as "indisputable evidence" that "I was there" by showing the human subject framed in the background to confirm their presence to oneself and to others (9). In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry similarly notes: "What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photography images, which have already been seen in brochures, TV programs, blogs and social networking sites... it ends up with travellers demonstrating that they really have been there by showing their version of the images they had seen before they set off" (179). These observations showcase the performative nature of enacting cultural rites that regard travel photographs as material evidence of travel. Therefore, the very process of taking and showing the photograph completes the goal of possessing visual and material evidence that situates the subject in the desired travel destination.

This function of the photograph to prove that "I was there" is aptly utilized by the subjects in the documentary film, *City of Photos*. In comparison to *Born into Brothels*, Nishtha Jain's film illustrates more inclusive and imaginative modes of mobility that are embodied by vernacular forms of visual media. In this film, the Indian filmmaker reflects upon the personal and collective significance of taking photos in the local context of past and present India. She presents the story of various people who have

their pictures taken in front of painted backdrops at neighborhood photo studios in Kolkata, Ahmedabad, and Mumbai. *City of Photos* also depicts people who have photographs digitally manipulated to satisfy their desires of escaping to another time and place or to construct imagined identities based on popular cultural forms, such as Hollywood or local films. Jain's film also demonstrates how aspirations of Indian citizens are fulfilled in the virtual sense, as a form of "imaginative travel." In other words, they are visually embodied in the material form of the photograph and not attained through physical travel. *City of Photos* suggests, however, that this visualization is effective and satisfying as a substitution for the "real" thing because of the aforementioned features of the photographic image as "miniatures of reality." Here the longings for mobility are expressed and actualized through the power of visual media to destabilize the demarcation between truth and fiction, and to conflate imagination/image or aspiration/actuality.

Jain's film articulates how imagination and memory are spatialized, and how the desires and aspirations of modern subjects are created, visualized, or mediated through a network of vernacular images that are circulated globally but also embedded locally. As virtual cosmopolitans, the subjects of *City of Photos* satisfy their desires for travel through the materiality of the medium, as well as the experience of having their pictures taken. In lieu of visiting the actual places, they position themselves in front of various backdrops, such as the popular tourist site Taj Mahal or a newly built bridge in a modernized part of town. In her voiceover commentary, the filmmaker ponders on what draws the customers to the latter image in particular: "When did this bridge enter the space of your fantasies? Like the dream of a better life within reach, just across the river." Other customers choose backdrops that depict natural landscapes or well-groomed gardens, which stand in stark contrast to their immediate urban reality: traffic congestion, crowded streets, and smog-filled skies.

Another sequence depicts customers standing in front of painted backdrops of globally mediated catastrophes such as the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in flames and local disasters such as a train accident in Bihar or a cyclone in the state of Orissa. Jain ruminates on the significance of these images for the sitters: "Maybe it's the ultimate fantasy. Immortality. Standing against havoc and destruction, you can feel, I have survived." The backdrops in these photographs also function as a material visualization of the often-unattainable wish to travel to other countries or the desire to insert oneself into historically significant moments and places (e.g., 9/11 attacks). These performative acts allow them to assert their identity as a cosmopolitan subject. By incorporating themselves into the global vernacular of recognizable media images, the subjects of these pictures are able to imagine themselves as virtual cosmopolitans, or as global minded citizens that envision and devise "ways of inhabiting multiple places at once" or "ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home," to recall the words of Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, and Chakrabarty.

Christopher Pinney observes an analogous phenomenon among the people in Nagda—a town in central India—who prefer to take photographs in front of formulaic painted backdrops instead of the actual space of the town. He notes that photography is used as "a means of escape" by using the body as "a surface that is completely mutable and mobile, capable of being suited in any time and space" (211). Pinney examines how the use of backdrops in photo studios in Nagda creates a photographic idiom that enables the "imaginative travel" and mobility of the referents.

Heike Behrend similarly studies how commercial photographic studios in Mombasa, Kenya participate in a "visual recycling" of mass-produced images that engage in a global visual vernacular. Behrend notes that the photographers who work in Likoni—a site of mass tourism frequented by Western travellers—create "a new space of wish fulfillment and imagination" that enables local customers "to participate in a world from which in actuality they are excluded" ("Imagined Journeys" 222). Examples of the backdrop images include landscapes and cityscapes of popular tourist locations (e.g., the Alps, Nairobi) and paintings of such modern modes of transportation and travel as airplanes, cruise ships, and motorways.

In a series of photographs titled, "The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society" (1999), Akram Zaatari highlights the connections between the modernizing forces of the photographic camera and the motor vehicle. These works of the Lebanese photographer-filmmaker can also be considered as examples of "vernacular modernism," in the sense adopted by Christopher Pinney. These photographs reveal how modern visual technologies and forms of transportation have affected the lived and mediated experiences of Arab citizens. These photographs function not only as personal or anthropological artifacts, but also as works of art that are exhibited in museums and stored in archives as material objects that embody modes of seeing, framing, and experiencing modern technologies. Zaatari's photographs manifest the collective memories of Arab citizens who engage in shared aspirations (or actualizations) of mobility by positioning themselves sitting inside or standing next to real automobiles. This series also includes studio photographs with the sitters posing on painted horses or camels, in flying airplanes, or on fancy boats. The photographed subjects are thus able to participate

in the "increasing acceleration and mobility of modern life" and "producing a cosmopolitan visualized discourse of potentially being everywhere" (Behrend 227) by positioning themselves in the physical spaces of automobiles or engaging in virtual modes of travel in the photo studio.

In these various geographical contexts, photography has been used as a means of escape that enables the mediated mobility of these subjects. Although it may seem flat and artificial to those not familiar with such culturally inscribed photographic idioms, this reclamation of space is a way of inserting oneself into the photographic frame or into historical and geographical significance, and also a way of reclaiming one's own image.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes a photograph that he cannot remember taking, but acknowledges the undeniable power of the photograph to record "what has been." He writes: "In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory, but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty... *because it was a photograph* I could not deny that I had been *there*" (85). As a signifier of the real, a photograph can overpower even our belief in our own memories by positing an undeniable, indisputable truth. Barthes's claim that "[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence" (87) may no longer be applicable because of the development of digital image synthesis and manipulation, but the psychological and affective impact of visible evidence is still formidable.

In printed form, the photograph doubly functions as a visual image and as a tangible thing that creates "phantom," or virtual, memories. It is both a visual surface and a physical object that you can view and touch repeatedly. This tactile materiality brings the photograph out of the realm of imagination and into the realm of the real. The power of the visual medium to dissolve boundaries between real and imaginary can prove so effective that the demarcation between truth and fiction is rendered more fluid. Who can say that this memory is fake when it has a real presence in the picture, and therefore in the subject's mind?

In regard to this close relationship between material objects and virtual imagery, I turn to Arjun Appadurai's suggestion that we conceive of imagination as a social practice, or "a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility," and the act of imagining as a more active and materially engaged process (*Modernity* 31). Describing "mediascapes" as one of five building blocks of "imagined worlds" (33), Appadurai explains that the complex, intricate web of multimedia obviates the need for clear demarcations between what we perceive as real and what we perceive as fiction. He writes that the "lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes" are blurred, and that those who are distanced from actual experiences of metropolitan (or cosmopolitan) life are even more likely "to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects" (35). *City of Photos* embodies Appadurai's idea of mediascapes by juxtaposing various forms of local and global media (photographs, street billboards, Hollywood and Bollywood movies, television shows, and digital images) to create new modes of imagined mobility and participation for those who are excluded from more conventional notions and practices of cosmopolitanism.

Jain animates the tantalizingly still, quiet surface of the photographs by ensconcing them in cultural and historical narratives, thereby illuminating the desires that motivate the subjects of her film. The reality of urban space and the imaginary world of "fake" photographs are merged in *City of Photos* to effectively illustrate how the two realms commingle in the minds of virtual cosmopolitans who fulfill their fantasies through the act of having their pictures taken. Recalling childhood memories of going to a studio to have her picture taken, the film's narrator describes her fear of being "stuck there in the other world," emphasizing the otherworldly (yet physical) quality of the experience. In this context, the small neighborhood photo studios function as "chambers of dreams" that enable "personal explorations of an infinite range of alteregos" (Pinney 213) and imagined travels to various locations. They become a liminal, or heterotopic space that bridges the overlapping worlds of reality, fantasy, and mediated memoryscapes. Foucault describes heterotopia as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" ("Of Other Spaces" 24). This concept is useful to discuss the spatial complexities and imagined geographies created in these "chambers of dreams" because heterotopic sites are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place segments of diverse geographic worlds and temporal histories" (Bruno, *Atlas* 147).

We can consider both the material spaces of the photo studios and the mediated spaces of the photographs as heterotopic forms that enable these virtual cosmopolitans to devise "ways of inhabiting multiple places at once" or "ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home." If photo studios are a space of illusion and imagination that provides a means of escape from the physical reality of our current location, the photographs produced there transform these illusions and imaginings into real tangible objects. In other words, these photographs realize and materialize this virtual journey in visual and

tactile media forms by envisioning the body as a "mutable and mobile" figure that is "capable of being situated in any time and space" (Pinney 211).

The heterotopic space in the photograph is thus a materialization of a transnational imaginary and a virtual place that fulfills cosmopolitan desires. Jain's film, however, also considers the illusory nature of this wish fulfillment by demystifying the processes of fabrication and the effects of simulation. Even as the photographs become a space of illusion that articulates the vision of realizing cosmopolitan aspirations, the actualization of these dreams is circumscribed by the material reality of their limited circumstances.

*City of Photos* is reflexive about the role and nature of representation, unlike *Born into Brothels*, which lacks such self-awareness. Jain's film suggests that the real spaces in the city are neither spatially intact nor temporally coherent by presenting the cityscape as an asynchronous, disjointed mixture of different temporalities and spatialities through shot compositions, camera movements, and editing. Here the cityscape is depicted as a place where past and present commingle and where objects connected to different historical moments and stages of modernity coexist. This is well illustrated in the sequence that shows Gandhi's statue standing against a cluster of advertising signposts and surrounded by a maze of busy traffic, and in the shot that depicts dilapidated buildings against the backdrop of a shiny, steel bridge. The film creates a disorienting yet smooth sense of movement across different time-spaces by juxtaposing painted, photographic, and physical spaces, or by utilizing various frames of mirrors, photographs, doorways, and windows to layer multiple spaces. In one sequence, the film crosscuts between two adjacent rooms in a photo studio to fluidly merge two separate conversations between photographer and client. This overlapping of spaces complicates the viewer's spatial experience. It also opens up other virtual realms through which one can pass with ease, because the power of these visual images (or belief in this potency) frees the subjects from the bounds of spatial and temporal frames.

In the Director's Note, Jain writes: "In this city we can travel freely through time, space and different realities, as photographs themselves do exactly that when they take us back in time or serve to express our fantasies. I draw upon this inherent quality to make inferences, and to speculate about what lies beneath and beyond the visible frame and, eventually, within ourselves."<sup>3</sup> In *City of Photos*, this knowledge of "what lies beneath and beyond" does not lessen the impact of the visible frame. In one scene, two lovers kept apart by family disapproval are united on the surface of a photograph against the backdrop of a colorful flower garden and as diffused celestial beings (described as "stars emerging in the sky" by the male customer) hovering above the Taj Mahal, thanks to the photographer's dexterity with Photoshop. This *mise-en-abyme* story is analogous to what the filmmaker achieves through her suggestive juxtaposition of aural and visual images. The deconstruction of the photographic surface does not lay barren the rich, imaginative space of her subjects' visual fantasies, but rather the opposite. It invokes the presence of "what lies beneath and beyond the visible frame" and creates a sense of moving freely through different time zones and spaces, beyond conventional notions of real or imaginary, thereby expanding the scope of possibilities afforded by the mobility of virtual cosmopolitans who envision and perform "infinite ways of being."

## V. Conclusion

This article engages in a critical examination of how contemporary media art and popular culture, vernacular cultural practices, and digital technologies express and actualize aspirations for global mobility. This task is propelled by the need to question the limited scope of how we envision globalization. As the notion of cosmopolitanism is revitalized in scholarly and popular discourse, it is possible to devise ways to incorporate those who are often forgotten or dismissed as global subjects, and to consider how their lived experiences and media practices are affected and mediated by global circulations of media images and technologies.

This comparison of the two documentary films, *Born into Brothels* and *City of Photos*, highlights the different ways that their subjects become virtual cosmopolitans through their use of photographic images. In both films, Indian citizens with limited mobility utilize photography and digital media to participate in the shared experience of global citizenship. The children of *Born into Brothels* vicariously realize their desire for travel by watching video clips of their photographs being exhibited in another country on a computer screen. The subjects of *City of Photos* enjoy an imaginative mode of mobility by positioning themselves within the photographic frame, thereby destabilizing the boundaries between reality and imagination. Despite their good intentions, the filmmakers of *Born into Brothels* do not reclaim cosmopolitanism from elitist connotations, nor do they present effective or creative ways to

<sup>3</sup> The Director's Note was previously available on the film's (now defunct) Website: [http://raintreefilms.net/note\\_city.html](http://raintreefilms.net/note_city.html)

transcend systemic inequalities that anchor disadvantaged subjects to their current social, economic, or geographical position. In *City of Photos*, however, the filmmaker demonstrates the potential of the photographic medium and the medium of documentary film to visualize and materialize aspirations of mobility. Jain's film is thus particularly useful in this discussion on virtual cosmopolitanism, because it illustrates how various forms of "imaginative travel" offer ways to envision oneself as globally minded and mobilized subjects.

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