



## Spectacle and Suffering: The Mumbai slum as a worlded space<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between spectacle and worlding. Using Dharavi as the site (cite) of analysis, the paper considers how slum tours, art and television documentaries produce particular narratives and imaginaries of the slum. We move beyond the discussions of voyeurism and the aestheticisation of poverty and suggest that the knowledge of the slum is entangled with the motives, preconceptions and experiences of multiple actors, giving the slum a relation with the “world” that holds opportunities to disrupt hegemonic views of urbanism, while centering its own position as a locus of knowledge on urban poverty. The paper suggests that analysing the spectacle of the slum through the lens of worlding offers ways to think critically of how urban space is reordered and urban knowledge is produced and circulated.

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### Introduction

It must have been a strange moment when Mehboobi Sheikh was asked by a group of people who had just walked into her home if they could examine her washroom and toilet. The request was not motivated by an urgent physical need. Rather, it was part of a putative slum tour conducted by Sheela Patel of SPARC, a well-known NGO, to show poverty first-hand to Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela, a managing director of the World Bank. Mehboobi Sheikh's home is in Dharavi, which is fast establishing itself as an iconic slum in Mumbai, the Global South's metonymic city (Harris, 2012; Roy, 2011a). Indeed, the slum, and especially this slum, “has become the most common itinerary through which the Third World city (i.e. the megacity) is recognized” (Roy, 2011a: 225; also Brook, 2014; Žižek, 2004).<sup>1</sup> As Mehboobi Sheikh discovered, Dharavi forms a literal space in the busy itinerary of visitors wishing to gaze upon ‘real’ people living in urban poverty. Less obvious is Dharavi as an itinerary in a different sense – as a basis for constructing, confirming, contesting, and exhibiting knowledge on slum life that is then circulated beyond the immediate locality. Dharavi operates to combine these itineraries – a space that fulfils people's search for an authentic experience of poverty and

development, which is conveniently presented to them, perhaps as with the vignette above through the intrusive inspection of a resident's toilet.<sup>2</sup> These experiences of the slum in situ become mobilised forms of knowledge that can travel beyond Mumbai, to and through the offices of the World Bank, NGOs, universities and media. Complex realities are lifted from their context and mapped on to larger frameworks of meaning; thereby producing the slum as a theoretical construct apparently grounded in real life (Rao, 2006). In the process Dharavi acquires the quality of an ‘everywhere’ for all slum spaces.<sup>3</sup>

This paper is prompted by the observed similarities between the ‘slum tour’ described in the opening vignette, a tour conducted by and for development professionals, and the many slum tours conducted for tourists to Mumbai on a daily basis. As others have observed, the distinction between these groups and their motives can be slight. Hutnyk (1996), for example, has explored how back-packers and development volunteers share understandings and experiences of poverty, arguing that both seek out suffering and are complicit in the reproduction of the idea (the ‘rumour’) and the materiality of the poverty that they find. To adopt Hutnyk's term, the tour operates as a ‘technology’ that brings

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the difficulties of slum as a term (see Gilbert, 2007), and we use it here critically.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of ‘staged authenticity’, introduced by MacCannell (1999), argues that an awareness of the superficiality of most tourist experiences motivates some to engage in the frustrating quest to find authenticity. Promised “back door” access to the authentic, tourists are duped by what is prepared and represented to them as the ‘real’.

<sup>3</sup> The point is not unique to Dharavi, although it has emerged as probably the most translatable site for the ‘global slum’. Other contenders include Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, Kibera in Nairobi, Ajegunle and Makoko in Lagos, Orangi in Karachi and Alexandra in Johannesburg.

together different actors and provides a means to acquire knowledge through experience of a single site. For participants, the seeing, walking through, smelling and touching 'poverty', the disorientation of the maze-like alleys, the move through darkened buildings, the cacophony of noise and different languages, the sting of smoke, provide the tours with a corporeal power, a sense of poverty that demands to be engaged with in order to be understood. As with many tourist experiences, the newspaper report of Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela's tour informs us that she initially recoiled at the "smell and the dirt" of Dharavi before telling us that these conditions made her determined to press on and see more.

Tour itineraries also share a narrative that demonstrates how the conditions of the slum can be improved. Careful not to undermine the claims that Dharavi is a space of enterprise and industry, of ethnic neighbourliness, of cooperative service delivery and management, vernacular architectures and crime-free public space, tours nevertheless include and often end with examples for how community projects, properly supported, could alleviate conditions of poverty. The tour arranged for Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela ended with a visit to "various projects" that were described by Sheela Patel and Jockin Arputham of the National Slumdwellers Federation. As others have noted, SPARC and National Slumdwellers Federation have refined the art of speaking for the poor, advertising the merits of community organisation and pressing for donor support through devices such as exhibition projects and 'toilet festivals' (Doshi, 2013; McFarlane, 2004). The intention is that Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela moves from the position of indiscreet voyeur to a potential advocate for a particular approach to poverty alleviation. But, the same process is at work in more conventional slum tours. Standing before a toilet block at the end of a tour we undertook in Dharavi as part of a pilot research project, our route took in a toilet block next to an area of open ground covered with rubbish, animal and human waste. The guide proceeded through a routine that described how the toilets had improved the area and demonstrated the potential of community organisation before spontaneously declaring that these were the same toilets shown to important visitors by Jockin Arputham and SPARC.

Both tours, therefore, draw on a notion of development that presents projects as a solution to poverty. The representation of poverty in ways that make it 'attractive' to tourists, volunteers and donors relies on brief non-technical narratives and a contrast with the participants' own life and normative judgement on humane living conditions. The dialectic of social inequality and empathy is evident in the account of the visit to Dharavi by Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela. On the one hand, Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela represents the extreme of inequality. She worked for the World Bank, holds degrees from Harvard and MIT, had been two-time Minister of Finance and a future Foreign Minister in Nigeria, as well as member of a royal house. On the other, the pedagogy of the slum encounter relies on her position as a woman, mother and passing acquaintance of poverty in Nigeria. The newspaper quotes Ngozi Okonjo-Iwela expressing concern for women workers in Dharavi, if they were "being treated fairly", and if the children work or go to school, an exchange that is prefaced with information that she is a mother of four. Discussion of the "entrepreneurial spirit" of Dharavi is articulated through an intuitive comparison with conditions witnessed growing up in Nigeria, the dynamics of urban livelihoods are therefore recognisable and understood as largely interchangeable.

This paper explores how 'slum imaginaries' are constructed and what forms of knowledge are produced as a result. The lives of Mehboobi Sheikh and her neighbours are enmeshed in relationships with NGOs and civil movements, and less directly with donors, tour operators, artists, writers, film-makers, architects, celebrities, and of course academics, each attempting to

construct a coherent narrative to articulate a particular knowledge of the slum. This paper explores, therefore, some of the ways that Dharavi becomes a mobile site (or cite) of aesthetic perspective, inspiration, sentiment and understanding on urban poverty. Drawing from recent debates on spectacle, cosmopolitanism, and worlding practices, the paper proposes that the reproduction of the slum as image, artefact, and experience relies on the representation of urban poverty as a spectacle that gains attention and value by shifting the interface between people's perceptions of the familiar and the strange (see Roy and Ong, 2011). Specifically, the paper analyses slum tours we undertook in Dharavi, the emergent genre of 'slum art' and television documentary to demonstrate the slum as a space of spectacle and a 'worlded' source of knowledge.

### The slum as spectacle

The notion of spectacle has gained considerable currency in writing on the city (Pinder, 2000; Gotham, 2005). Taking up Debord's provocation that "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (2002: 12), a common concern has been the idea that the production of space is dominated increasingly by images and events that reduce the novelty and potential spontaneity of urban life to set-piece, homogenised, corporatised spaces that carefully package the "experience of urban diversity, to be consumed without danger, and with limited risk of contact with social difference" (Stevens and Dovey, 2004: 359; Sorkin, 1992; Gotham, 2005). To what extent can the 'toured' slum be added to the exhibition, shopping mall, theme park, gentrified downtown, or mega-event as a site of spectacle? In terms that Debord might recognise, are social relationships presented by the slum mediated by the organisation of everyday life as a series of images? These images, Sorkin has suggested from his discussion of Disney, involves a careful calculus of difference thriving on the algorithms of both the desirable and the attainable. He notes that these "images never really innovate, they intensify and reduce, winnowing complexity in the name of both quick access and easy digestibility. What's being promoted is not the exceptional but the paranormal" (1992: 226). The deceit is that an arrangement that "eliminates geographical distance" through a promise to organise and represent life as a series of familiar experiences produces that difference anew in "the form of spectacular separation" (Debord, 2002: 167). The commodification of everyday life requires the construction of distinctions between spaces and social groups, producing images of difference, while obscuring the control exerted over these manipulations. In a world of spectacle, visualisations of stigma can become commodified and operate as a means to distinguish difference and make that difference real (Ghertner, 2011; Jones, 2013).

For many writers, the spectacle operates as both a sign of and means to domination of the social by capitalism, provoking some to theorise the de-politicisation of social life through the disassembling of power relations through the image (see Gotham, 2005).<sup>4</sup> In this scenario people become passive spectators, voyeurs observing capitalism's duplicity and their own exploitation (Pinder, 2000). Yet, the arrangement may not be so neat. First, as Stevens and Dovey note, the "choreography of life ushered in by the spectacle can produce a city with the qualities of a 'sieve'; despite the attempt to contain and order urban experience, meanings and actions consistently 'leak' through the cracks" (2004: 358). This leakage provides opportunities for alternative understandings and relations, and therefore possibilities for politics (Pinder, 2000: 368). Second, there

<sup>4</sup> Hutnyk regards "tourism and charity in the 'Third World' [as] the soft edge of an otherwise brutal system of exploitation." (1996: xi).

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