Figure 1  Women trek two miles for water, 2002. Photograph by M. Madhuraj, imgs.sfgate.co. Image courtesy of the Mathrubhumi Daily.
Looking through Coca-Cola: Global Icons and the Popular

Bishnupriya Ghosh

Scene 1

April 2002: Plachimada, a quiet village in the Palakkad district (Kerala, South India), awoke to a fracas in the wee hours of the morning. A few irate villagers had blocked the tanker bringing water to the Coca-Cola plant. Their complaint: the coming of Coca-Cola to Plachimada had run wells dry, sending women householders on a three-to-four-kilometer-per-day trek to draw water (see fig. 1).

Soon an everyday object made its first appearance on the scene: a cheap bright colorful plastic pot made for carrying water safely over distances. Village women lined up on the road, pots tucked on hip, redistributing the water captured from Coke. There was talk of arrests, talk of escalating such spontaneous measures. But few thought these sporadic events would blossom into a full-scale agitation within weeks (see fig. 2).

For what began as a spontaneous protest that morning, soon gained momentum when a vigil outside the gates of the Coca-Cola factory in April 2002 became a daily matter. Mobilized as the Anti-Coca-Cola Struggle Committee, led by a

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feisty fifty-six-year-old grandmother, Mayilamma, an adivasi (indigenous) community leader, the protest evolved into a large antiglobalization movement by January 2004 (see fig. 3). That such a movement would congeal around Coca-Cola was hardly a surprise to anyone in India, for this was a commodity that had come to metonymically signify not only all commercially marketed colas but also all consumer goods in India.

Scene 2

The empty plastic pots made a spectacular reappearance in 2005, when Coca-Cola filed a suit against the internationally renowned photographer Sharad Haksar (who runs his own advertising company) for what was perceived as a speech act against Coca-Cola. Haksar had memorialized the popular David-and-Goliath pot-and-bottle wars in a giant, twenty-by-thirty-foot billboard, evocatively titled “Thirsty,” in Chennai, 2004 (see fig. 4).

1. The term adivasi means “original inhabitants,” etymologically quite different from the official categories that register these indigenous groups as the Scheduled Tribes. One of the best elaborations on the term can be found in David Hardiman, The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. Haksar, who won the 2005 Silver Lion at Cannes, is well known for his stylized ads on fashion, jewelry, cuisine, and other consumer goods (see www.sharadhaksar.com).
Claiming infringement of its trademark, Coca-Cola demanded an unconditional apology in lieu of damages worth 20 lakhs (US$46,000). Haksar refused, noting that he had put a disclaimer on his work. “What is depicted in my picture is a very common sight in Chennai, where the photograph was taken. I did not want to make any point against a particular company. It could have been Pepsi or Fanta and still my photograph would hold,” he argued. “I wanted to show the irony of the situation. When there is such acute water shortage, aerated drinks are freely available.” The photograph became a “problem” only after Plachi-


mada, turning one of Haksar’s clients against the celebrity photographer. The lawsuit signaled both the success and the reach of the anti-Coca-Cola struggle. Plachimada had come to haunt Chennai, the largest metropolis in South India, the ubiquitous pots assembled in front of Coca-Cola hoardings in that village now iconic of water scarcity.

There were many Plachimadas to come in India: Kala Dera (Rajasthan), Mhediganj (Uttar Pradesh), and Gangaikondan (Tamil Nadu), to name only a few villages waging their own battles against the corporate giant. There are many Plachimadas all over the world—if one were to plug “Coke” and “protest” into YouTube, one would think that vilifying Coca-Cola was just as ubiquitous as the resplendent Spencerian Coca-Cola graphic splashed across the globe.⁴ Plachimada, hardly an isolated instance, is paradigmatic of a genre of contemporary new social movements all over the world, micro-scalar agitations against resource extraction gradually evolving/dispersing into sprawling global alliances—a global popular pressing ecological/environmental justice as a common horizon.

Such mobilizations (that work with, rather than against, the logic of democracy) urge us toward a capacious formulation of the popular. More often than not they shore up a historical agent not necessarily determined by its class character, even as the traditional Left (party cadre, trade unions, and student groups) acts in solidarity (rather than as vanguard). Certainly these contours animate my inquiries into Plachimada, but my primary focus is what makes possible the discursive articulation of “a people.” The popular, as I see it, requires “culture”—the performative deploying of symbols—for its very constitution. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, perusals of the popular rarely offer an accompanying theory of the media. If the popular relies on potent symbols as unifying signifiers, what media is best suited to this purpose?

I advance an answer on two fronts, historical and semiotic. First, I argue that we inhabit media cultures where the mass media play a significant role in the formation of the popular. Since we live in environments saturated with mass media flows, and we negotiate mass-media content every day, we need to think of mass media as raw semiotic material for popular culture. Far from producing social alienation, mass media is rife with potentialities for forging the popular. Mass-media icons, in particular, quotidian presences in every part of the world, provide

⁴. The Spencerian script (a style prevalent in the United States from 1850 to 1925), penned by the inventor John Pemberton’s bookkeeper, Frank Robinson, originated with the invention of Coca-Cola.
a ready palette of signifiers for contemporary struggles against global institutions. Beyond these conditions of possibility is a second proposition: that, above all other signs, the icon activates a distinctive semiotic economy that lends itself to forging social bonds—to unifying a popular through signification.

Hence Coca-Cola: what better way to get at the popular but to examine those signifying practices that consume the “face” of deregulated capital? What better way than to look closely at icons as the runes in which we habitually glimpse the force of the people?5

The Popular

We began with a singularly banal object. The charge of banality echoes critical dismissals of mass media from the mid-twentieth century onward, where we witness, to use William Mazzarella’s handy term, a globalizing of consumerism.6 We know that media flows are critical to restructuring regimes of global capital; beyond Fordism, in the dispersed production pattern that David Harvey names “flexible accumulation,” the media effectively create “needs” (via spectacle, fashion, the timed obsolescence of goods) to compensate for the overproduction of goods.7 As communications infrastructures evolve, with the vertiginous proliferation of media platforms as well as delivery technologies, iconic images move swiftly within mass-media networks “selling” the mantra of consumer choice as agency all over the world. Consequently, in the image cultures that underwrite this phase of financial expansionism, we see the emergence of a neoliberal ethos—arguably still the hegemonic aspiration even past the crashes of 2008.8


8. Giovanni Arrighi has argued for the constant and dynamic restructuring of financial capital as it gradually incorporates large swathes of the world, drawing insightful comparisons between four long systemic financial cycles (starting with the medieval Genoese financial expansion). These cycles, in Arrighi’s view (following Fernand Braudel), explain the “cycle” underlying the long twentieth century and gestures to what lies ahead. See Giovanni Arrighi, The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and Origins of Our Times (London: Verso, 1994). Arrighi’s work outlines the financial expansionism accompanying what I refer to here as the “neoliberal ethos,” necessary for financial power to remain in the postindustrial global North even as manufacturing moves to the global South (as Harvey has argued in his oeuvre on flexible accumulation). See also Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity.
This ethos may well be coming to a bitter end; it is too early to tell. But in the heyday of post–Berlin Wall neoliberalism (and the triumph of Reaganomics), global icons habitually performed the cultural work of legitimating historically and culturally particular aspirations as widely shared “global” ones. Corporate logos such as Coca-Cola sold lifestyles possible in the postindustrial global North as universal standards desired by all, while public figures such as Mother Teresa encoded Christian charity as the universal form of the gift; these powerful signifiers thereby manufactured consent for financial and/or Christian missionary expansionism in a new world order. Such iconic images signify as “global” as they privilege a new universalism where neoliberalism seemed to have won the last war of ideas.

This is precisely why commodities of this sort have met with censure. As critics of contemporary globalization (such as Fredric Jameson and Harvey) have long argued, with late capital comes the ubiquitous rise of mass consumerism both in the flow of consumer goods across national borders and in the marketing of the “ideology of consumerism” anchoring the logic of capital in a striated world system. Mass media flows fundamental to selling “foreign” products in newly opened markets pose a threat to social relations, critics of globalizing consumerism argue; these deterritorialized commodities remove people from concrete lifeworlds, binding them more tightly, more securely, more fully, into global systems of exchange.

More recently, scholars from many fronts, but most concertedly cultural anthropologists of globalization, have insisted on a more nuanced read of the impact of much-denigrated mass cultural forms that, they argue, are increasingly recalibrated at sites of consumption to forge (rather than destroy) social bonds we might describe as the popular. Searching for a new term for a spatialized domain of the

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9. The debate on the cultural effects of globalization is too vast to consolidate here, but Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991) poses some of the main arguments, while Harvey’s historical elaboration of flexible accumulation provides a cohesive framework for thinking of globalizing capital at our contemporary moment. See Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*. Flexible accumulation invokes a core-periphery model, where the “periphery” encompasses those locations from where surplus value is extracted (both resources and labor) for accumulation at global financial centers (consolidated through the Dutch-led banking system and maintained by colonialism) mainly in the global North. Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world system” (where the world is interconnected in one economic system; see *The Capitalist World-Economy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979]) has been the basis for this model, while Arrighi has sought to complicate it, elaborating shifting core-periphery relations as capital constantly restructures and reorganizes its provenance. See Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*. 
popular, Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge pitched “public culture” as a flexible rubric, allowing the inclusion of popular practices produced by those with little or no access to the modern associational forms of civil society; public culture was that vibrant zone of contestation where mass-produced commodities could be reassembled to articulate a local modernity.\textsuperscript{10} In Plachimada, in the daily performance of protest outside the Coca-Cola factory, we see signs of the popular—those expressive rituals of protest—as public culture. I shall return to them shortly, but here it is important to ask, what kind of social bonds are forged in harnessing the Coca-Cola icon? What populist reason is at work? Ernesto Laclau’s provocations in \textit{On Populist Reason} provide my point of departure for the popular consumption of mass-mediatized icons.\textsuperscript{11} There are many reasons for my turn to this genealogy of the popular. And they are worth clarifying here, to ground my claims as a historical materialism cognizant of its solidarity with what it analyzes.

Like the theorists of public culture, champions of the popular have long made the case against the degradation of populism implicit in the degradation of masses, crowds, and populations. Several traditions hail the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whose conception of hegemony envisioned a social totality constituted by different social elements not marked from the start by class belonging. Hegemony was that constantly evolving process of political reaggregation around a core—always a class core, for Gramsci. Gramsci’s readiness to include classes on their way to becoming proletarian (in his famous “The Southern Question”) provided a point of departure for subaltern studies scholars to speak to eruptions of collective agency among the Indian peasantry, insurgent acts elided in hegemonic nationalist accounts of anticolonial movements.\textsuperscript{12} Their works, largely inspired by the historian Ranajit Guha, would elaborate methods of reading resistance central to any analysis of collective agency. But the popular—despite Guha’s frequent evocations of “the people”—would remain undertheorized, in the historians’ necessary attention to the written record of (what we might consider) popular mobilization.\textsuperscript{13} Where the subaltern could remain a pure
analytic category, the popular was ever a domain of contamination where subalterns sought hegemony—cutting deals, making compromises, entering dubious contracts with their enemies. Culture, in this oeuvre, persisted in the anthropological sense of a domain of practices organic to specific communities; the expressive rituals of reassembling mass-produced commodities elaborated in the Birmingham school’s Gramscian interventions (particularly in Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige) were rarely, if at all, present in the work of most subaltern studies scholars. The written record continued to hold primacy as the archive where scholars find traces of subaltern speech. While scholars could readily turn to oral culture (lore, legend, song), with limited transmission, for messages with class content, visual popular culture remained on the margins, the contagion of mass media (in the hands of political and financial elites) rendering media such as icons suspect as expressions of collective agency.

In recent years, some scholars have attended to the potentialities of visual culture with greater acuity. Stalwarts such as Partha Chatterjee have turned to established visual culture such as cinema, chromolithography, or artisanal image making, to resuscitate contemporary cultural studies that are increasingly (philosophically) distant from the cultural practices they seek to translate and, subsequently, archive. Yet such a focus on traditional popular culture—exemplified

14. Among the subaltern studies scholars, Dipesh Chakrabarty has been the one to foreground the need for ethnographies of cultural practices to complement historical method—and especially since we live in a globalizing world where there are different stories of modernity to tell. Cultural studies therefore contribute to the urgent task of “provincializing” (in Chakrabarty’s words) the Euro-American version of a singular modernity: see Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).


16. Partha Chatterjee, “Critique of Popular Culture,” Public Culture 20 (2008): 321–44. In this recent piece, Chatterjee, moving back to the Gramscian insistence on organic intellectualism, argues that cultural critics should engage more directly with the very different norms and procedures of the cultural practices they analyze, since scholarly works increasingly influence traditional popular cultures (given the media markets of our times). A cultural criticism cognizant of its own production of value, and self-conscious of the disciplinary shibboleths of value production, can arise only from such praxis, reviving the Gramscian promise. Textual analysis in particular seems to attract criticism of philosophical distance from the subject of analytic work. While I agree with Chatterjee’s fears, I am not convinced that the ethnographic encounter offers the most viable solution, especially when it cursorily supplements theoretical hypotheses based on rhetorical analysis. Rather, a political solidarity critical of (compromised) subaltern speech can produce effective cultural criticism. In a recent essay on the solidarity between the documentarians (who have filmed the Narmada Bachao Andolan [NBA] for a number of years) and the actors in local struggles, I have made the
by image making for the Durga puja (ritual worship) festival in Calcutta, Chatterjee’s crowning example—represented in established practices often constitutive of artisanal small-scale industries, replete with singular cultural histories, cannot account for a repertoire of popular cultural practices that rely on dispersed mass media flows from “elsewhere” as their “clay,” as their raw, semiotic material for their expressive performances of the popular. For the purposes here, I characterize this genre of cultural practice as “nontraditional popular culture”—structured improvisations that reposition mass-media commodities (such as logos) in symbolic ensembles too contingent to take root as subculture. I shall argue that it is precisely the sense of dispersion into an “elsewhere” that motivates the expressive rituals—obvious, stylized ensembles of signs—of the kind we see in the Plachimada struggle; media flows from elsewhere enable a cognitive geography of a shared “globality” (the spatial projection of social totality) as the place where we now live. If such (nontraditional) popular cultural practices are the norm in our mass-media-saturated environments, scholars are compelled to look beyond rooted communities, situated in well-defined locations (a city, village, nation, or region), for evidence of subaltern speech in popular culture.

Subaltern cultural productions (the theatrical plastic pots) now appear in domains not cut off from all communication; rather, cheap communications technologies proliferate everywhere, with subaltern speech as wild static until translated into civil discourse. We see such a translation when the Haksar billboard invites us to make our way back to Plachimada, the publicity bringing new nuance to the performances; with Haksar we realize that the visual idiom of that local struggle has moved swiftly through multiple media channels to the metropolitan center, Chennai, where it is picked up as effective political practice. Once social habit, Plachimada turns a line of pots into a symbolic ensemble signaling water scarcity, as we see in the many news photographs of “water scarcity”

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*case for such a critical solidarity we can fully access through close textual analysis of aesthetics. See Bishnupriya Ghosh, “‘We Shall Drown, but We Shall Not Move’: The Ecologics of Testimony in NBA Documentaries,” in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, ed. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (New York: Routledge, 2009), 59–82.

17. If we take the local actors, often working in loose coalitions, as paradigmatic of the collective, it is one quite different from the sharply demarcated, closely coordinated, socially antagonistic *bricoleur* communities in Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979). The “nontraditional” effervescent popular culture I gesture toward here often gains its value quite directly from its collusions with mass-media news; it depends on the news to spotlight symbolic performances. In such compromise with mass culture, these are incorporated agents who seek institution in politics as soon as they are “heard.”
mushrooming right after the Plachimada protests.\textsuperscript{18} Such media mobility further eschews the localizing imperative: we may well begin with Plachimada, but soon the chain of demands constitutive of the popular assembles heterogeneous sites that we gather under the sign of the “global.” In other words, mass media flows disperse the location of popular culture, even as their rapid and constant mutability makes assigning a stable “tradition” to a cultural practice, the touchstone for consolidating cultural histories, virtually impossible. Such (nontraditional) popular culture mandates a critical method, where the scholar reads visual signs across different media platforms (newspapers, television, cinema, audio files); each case commands a calibrated theory of media accounting for the industrial and social mediation of speech acts. If we forsake the lure of the organic community, we can posit the potentialities of the popular in a different way: as gradual alterations in lifestyles, tastes, and everyday habit in heterogeneous locales that move toward social transformation—but not in unison. The vanguard motivates, but the directions of change remain highly differentiated.

If in our times of participatory culture, consumers are increasingly accustomed to the remediation of media content across multiple media platforms, they are likely to reassemble signs on a regular basis. I do not mean to valorize participatory culture, for the myth of infinite resources certainly matters less to those with little access to media production or delivery technologies. Clearly lack of access is an indisputable reality for many who might comprise the populace at the heart of the popular I consider here, and this would hold for all such micro-scalar mobilizations against resource extraction. The \textit{adivasis} in Plachimada, their water sold without consent in a corporate deal with the state government, begin their struggles as subalterns whose insurgent acts—hijacking a water truck early in the morning—were initially shrugged off as an isolated eruption. It is only when the isolated demand garners strength through its alliances with heterogeneous other social elements that we confront a collective will—or, rather, we intuit collective agency embodied in “the people” as historical agent. But to do so, to grasp the popular as a dispersion across social elements, turns us to a second intellectual trajectory inspired by Gramsci: to Laclau’s formulation of the popular, an ago-

nistic war of position—everywhere democracy remains an unrealized project, everywhere democratic institutions are largely seen to fail “the people.”

For both Laclau (who refers back to Argentinean Peronism as a critical reference point) and Chantal Mouffe (who cut her political teeth in 1960s Colombia), Gramsci’s focus on the political moment of articulation as the contingent war of position, rather than on a preoccupation with the structural determinism of class struggle per se, proved to be fertile ground for thinking social antagonisms in democratic societies. Taking the notion of articulation developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* further, in *On Populist Reason* Laclau argues that “the people” are discursively constituted in signifying practices through harnessing powerful symbols as phantasmic placeholders. If heterogeneous social elements are bound together through signification, the signifier that unifies them commands considerable affective investment. Hence potent symbols—culturally familiar, recursive, symbolically dense signs as icons—are obviously ripe for such cultural work, since they can be deployed to represent both hegemonic and popular aspirations.

If the popular articulates against hegemony, how might we distinguish between the two? A powerful social element seeking to represent the entire social totality binds all differences to the common horizon of a fissureless society, where all “others” are brought into the fold. Conceptually grasping such a totality, Laclau remarks, is an impossible task, since no social can ever accommodate every demand. And yet one difference takes on the herculean task, quilting heterogeneous demands, *embodying totality* in universal form. Such signification is hegemony, that moving equilibrium where consent is daily sought, often won, but sometimes lost.

We see the surge of the popular when that consensus is fought, and an internal frontier appears between the institutional system and the “people” (the *sarkar* and the *janata*, as it is commonly phrased in India). What might begin as an isolated “democratic demand” by a social element not necessarily defined by class accumulates force by forging bonds to other demands; the dispersed plurality, held in a chain of equivalence through signification, is the popular. The “people” emerge as the historical agent of change, with one social element (the *plebs* for the populace in Gramsci or the *adivasi* women in the Plachimada struggle) acting as the point of anchorage. Their particularity unifies a dispersed collection of agents. As it matures, such a popular articulates a common horizon for “all” differences in the

social it represents, and it attempts to change the existing institutional system. It seeks hegemony.

This conception of the popular, working through the promise of democracy, has made inroads into large arenas of social life, enabling us to think of laterally linked transnational social movements as a dispersed global popular, to think of historical agents not necessarily defined by class, and, for media scholars, to think of the potentials of mass media in forging social bonds. But the conception also points to history: what hegemony spurs such a popular, one whose chains of signification have transnational reach?

In the past three decades, neoliberalism is one horizon of a fissureless society projected by a privileged few to represent an ultimately incommensurable totality. This regime, institutionalized in various forms, is fought hard on multiple fronts, with the eco-wars over resource extraction in the spotlight. Its face—the golden McDonald’s arches or Coca-Cola’s white Spencerian graphic—is the global form of the icon seeking to embody universal aspiration masking all differences. Making the case for neoliberalism, one social element posits a demand for a deregulated market and its political support (“free and fair elections”) as a shared dream of the “free world.”

The semiotic economy of the iconic sign lends itself to such a project, since the icon is a highly sedimented recursive sign that has annexed symbolic connotations as “natural” and “eternal” core properties. The transmedial Coca-Cola logo, delivered across multiple platforms, therefore lives up to every accusation critics of mass culture have leveled against the reifying properties of icons as mass commodities. The iconic logo transfigures particular cultural aspirations into a universal dream, masking social contradictions in the social totality it cannot represent. Since Coca-Cola refused permission to reprint any of its advertisements for this essay, I describe one famous advertisement that graphically engineers “the world,” illustrative of such interpellation: the image, split in half, features the cool light white-and-blue of mountains (signaled by pine trees) on the left-hand side and the bright hot gold of deserts (signaled by palms) on the right, with the glistening Coca-Cola bottle running at a diagonal midway through the picture. If Coca-Cola travels everywhere, the ad suggests, it also answers a basic human need: thirst. The well-known caption “Thirst knows no season” sprawls across the world picture, turning a specific taste into universal need. In naming his billboard “Thirsty,” Haksar would turn that universal claim back into historical commodity—a drink for the privileged few that generates capital for the privileged few.

It is precisely because of their encoding as a signifier of something global, representative of a global force, that icons like Coca-Cola become contentious
objects for local actors who can approach shadowy agents who affect their lives through these icons. Coca-Cola provides a face for those shareholders whose equity in the company is bought by someone else’s water scarcity. Hence such logos—most famously Coca-Cola or McDonald’s—incite anger, grief, even debate, generating headlong clashes with corporations (Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel name such clashes instigated by the presence of icons “iconocrises”). At these moments we see the surge of the popular, holding diverse demands together in a signifying chain, but now with a clearly marked external adversary embodied in the logo. We see such contestations everywhere in the many translocations of Coca-Cola, the Plachimada performances among them. For a closer look, I return for moment to that (paradigmatic) locale.

**Back in Plachimada**

A small hamlet mostly producing rice, Plachimada soon saw contaminated groundwater (destroying crops) and dry wells when a Coca-Cola plant opened a large factory there in March 2000, with a conditional license from the *grama panchayat* (an elected village council at the lowest level of governance). When the company illegally extracted millions of liters of clean water, the water level fell, from 150 to 500 feet below the earth’s surface, affecting water storage and supply. A recent documentary, *One Thousand Days and a Dream*, records the struggle against the corporate giant involving village governing bodies, the state courts, environmental and antiglobalization activists, political parties, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), after a small group of resolute nonviolent protesters brought their demand for water to the factory gates in 2002. The pro-


21. Plachimada is a part of the Palakkad district of 2.6 million people, with 64 percent of its geographical area cultivated for food crops. Within Plachimada, most of the population are landless *adivasis* who work as agricultural wage laborers; therefore the main indictment against Coca-Cola’s depletion of the water table was that the wells ran dry or were filled with milky brackish water unsuitable for drinking, cooking, or other domestic use. For more details see Jananeethi, *Jananeethi Report: On the Amplitude of Environmental and Human Rights Ramification* (Thrissur, India: Jananeethi, 2003), 3.

22. The *Jananeethi Report* notes that Coca-Cola proceeded to dig sixty bore wells and two open ponds, even though it did not have the appropriate land-use permit for nonagricultural activity; soon the plant was extracting as much as a half million liters of water per day.

tests began with several incidents we might consider sporadic, until we read them retrospectively as part of a greater social demand for resources.

April 2002: A small group of women sit in quiet dharna (vigil) displaying their empty pots outside the factory gates. They observe well-established nonviolent idioms of protest from the Gandhi era, now part and parcel of democratic protests all over India. Several Coca-Cola signs in the village are slashed in the coming days. Urchins are blamed. Slowly local labor, adivasi, and women’s groups organize the first marches in Plachimada. In solidarity with the local actors at the factory gates, C. K. Janu, the well-known leader of the Adivasi Samkrashana Sangham (Adivasi Protection Front), organizes a symbolic blockade on April 22, 2002.24 Manushi, a women’s welfare cooperative, lends a hand; the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), the All People’s Resistance Forum, and leftist youth federations in the state join the protests; CorpWatch India (now the India Resource Center) gets wind of Coca-Cola’s actions in Plachimada and publicizes the struggle.

That such a nascent popular might find civil expression is not surprising in Kerala, a state with a long history of successful struggles for public policy interventions on caste, adivasi rights, land reform, and mass education. Along with West Bengal in eastern India, Kerala has been governed by the Communist Party since 1957 (with a few interim governments led by the Congress Party) and has achieved high literacy rates (the 90 percent literacy rates among rural women in Kerala is higher than the 88 percent urban male literacy rates in the rest of India), high life expectancy, and a strong economy (the state has the highest gross income per net cropped area).25 Political initiatives, often arising from local popular demands, have historically found civil-legal expression in state policy (e.g., Ezhava demands for policy on caste discrimination).26 The quiet vigil in Plachimada was therefore quite quickly channeled into the recognizable political idioms of dharnas and yatras (marches), with the entrance of statewide organizations and all-India watchdog groups.

24. Janu is widely respected in the state for her indefatigable struggle to restore adivasi lands. It was her presence at the Plachimada mobilization that catapulted the local dharna to statewide fame.
26. The Ezhava are the single largest caste-based community in Kerala, and they have always supported the Communist Party; the party, in return, has often launched initiatives that meet demands of the community. Of course, political critics of the Communist Party note that party governance tends to still be controlled by caste Hindus. But this is tangential to my point that the legislative and political infrastructure of the state allows for the steady channeling of popular demands into policy.
But the success of the Plachimada story rests not only with the political capacities (training, institutions, procedures) leftist rule has engendered in the state but also with the particular political juncture of the popular uprising. Many witnesses to the encounter between local actors and Coca-Cola wondered why Coca-Cola had chosen Plachimada, a relatively dry region, for its factory; some speculated that Coca-Cola was known to choose regions where there was little regulation on groundwater extraction (like Kaladera, near Jaipur), while others noted that Coca-Cola had its eye on the irrigation dams nearby (for which it could not obtain permission from state-level authorities). Whatever the case, even though Coca-Cola opened in Plachimada (with a permit for a bottling plant in January 2000) while Kerala was governed by the Left Democratic Front (1996–2001) led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), the Left had become the opposition by 2002 when the United Democratic Front (UDF; a coalition led by the Indian National Congress, in power 2001–6) won the election in 2001.**27** In 2002–3 Plachimada became a touchstone for the Left Democratic Front’s opposition to the United Democratic Alliance (UDA), marked by its strong disagreements over the degree of foreign direct investment Kerala should allow. It is not that the CPM had not been pragmatic about a new role for the private sector (in fact, it had recently signed a memorandum of understanding with Dubai Internet City to set up a SmartCity in Kochi), but it was still cautious about foreign investment and articulate on its departure from other state-level CPM governments’ policies (notably the controversial initiatives of the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya–led CPM in West Bengal). With Coca-Cola as a resplendent corporate enemy, Plachimada became a platform for mobilizing opposition against the UDF, even as the decentralizing agendas of local governance gave the Perumatty panchayat in Plachimada reason to revoke Coca-Cola’s permit.**28** Hence Plachimada would explode quickly onto the state and national scene: a local demand for water would now hold other social demands in equivalence through a unifying signifier.

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27. In a left-leaning state such as Kerala, the UDF alliance (led by the Congress Party against the Left Democratic Front) includes splinter organizations of the Communist Party such as the Communist Marxist Party (CMP); the alliance is seen to be at the center of the ideological spectrum in the state. But Kerala has a rather distinctive place in the larger national political sphere, where the Congress Party is often seen as leftist in inclination—often working with leftist parties in coalitions, its socialist policies are in sharp contrast to the right-wing agendas of the Sangh Parivar coalitions (led by the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]).

28. The assertion of local power on the part of the Perumatty panchayat can be seen as part of a larger movement for localization, expressed in the People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning (inaugurated 1996).
The dharna continues. The plastic pots appear every day in mute protest in front of the factory; traders from neighboring towns ply Palakkad with plastic pots (see fig. 5). Against the gleaming red-and-white Coca-Cola graphic, the bright plastic begins to signify thirst, ill health, even death. The pots become iconic, scrambling the symbolic message of the cola, “Thirst knows no season.” The fight is over water as a common resource—a necessity for the household, the women argue (see fig. 6). There is an ecologic at work in the demand: the logic of oikos (the household), of dwelling in an interconnected system (oikonomía, or economy) of human and nonhuman relations.29 But the ubiquitous plastic suggests that the demand has not as yet been recast in the civil-legal terms of an “environmental struggle.” Soon things change as the matter goes to court.

29. Oecologie was one of the neologisms coined by Ernst Haeckel, a disciple of Darwin, in 1866. A term derived from the Greek oïkos, referring originally to family household and its operations, for Haeckel oecologie referred to “living organisms of the earth [that] constitute a single economic unit resembling a household or family dwelling” (see Donald Worster, Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 44.)
The first performances led the Perumatty panchayat to cancel Coca-Cola’s license, despite Coca-Cola’s efforts to bribe the head of the council.\textsuperscript{30} Coca-Cola appealed at the Kerala High Court, winning its case in 2003 and catapulting the village mobilization into the nation’s eye. Late in 2003, the panchayat, flexing its avowed localism, resolved to hold a three-day water conference in Plachimada, just as the World Social Forum was set to convene in Mumbai. Activists with diverse preoccupations (anti-hydro-piracy, health, and antiglobalization groups), as well as global environmental groups, converged on Plachimada in 2004, bringing international media in their wake. There they drafted the Plachimada Declaration against all “criminal attempts to marketise, privatisate and corporatise water.”\textsuperscript{31} Now the performative desecrations of the icon began to hold a diverse platform of demands together against an indifferent state and a rapacious corporation. What was once a local agitation became a coalition of one hundred organizations. Performances against water extraction in Plachimada, widely disseminated in newspapers, magazines, and blogs, soon metonymically quilted together heterogeneous social demands: for corporate accountability; for better health; for educating children about bodies, resources, and economic justice; for the prevention of resource extraction; and for ecological restoration.

\textsuperscript{30} A legal battle ensued between Coca-Cola and the Kerala state government on the use of groundwater and the toxicity of the solid wastes produced by cola manufacture.

\textsuperscript{31} The declaration reads: “Water is the basis of life; it is the gift of nature; it belongs to all living beings on earth. It is not a private property but a common resource for the sustenance of all. It is our fundamental obligation to prevent water scarcity and pollution and to preserve it for generations. Water is not a commodity. We should resist all criminal attempts to marketise, privatise and corporatise water. Only through these means can we ensure the fundamental and inalienable right to water for the people all over the world” (Declaration, World Water Conference, Plachimada, Kerala, India, January 23, 2004).
Plachimada increasingly became the cause célèbre for other wars on the Indian Subcontinent. The environmental scientist and activist Vandana Shiva, head of the National Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, framed protests in Plachimada as of the same cloth as the greater “water wars,” even as, in 2003, the Center for Science and Environment (CSE), another New Delhi–based NGO, touted the struggle as the newest installment in a war against colas, vindicating its findings (that nearly all colas produced in India contained unacceptably large doses of pesticides). By the time Mayilamma received Outlook magazine’s Speak Out Award (October 5, 2005), Plachimada had attained global celebrity. With the entry of Medha Patkar, the public face of the Save the Narmada Struggle, Plachimada became another front in the war against state and corporate aggrandizement of the commons (both land acquisition and the destruction of ecological resources). Documentary filmmakers rushed to reinforce the perception: for example, K. P. Sasi, who (with Ratna Mathur) had made a well-known film on the Narmada Bachao Andolan, now shot the Plachimada struggle in a visually stunning seventy-minute piece on India’s water wars (Source of Life for Sale, 2004). With such press, buttressed by the support of all the left-wing parties in Kerala, the Plachimada demands were heard in the Supreme Court in 2005. This time the justices ruled against Coca-Cola. The plant, dysfunctional and closed since 2004, was dismantled.

The protests widen into a movement. Posters in English and Hindi overtake the local Malayalam signage. Ordinary signs (the crudely drawn hand pump run dry) become abstract art, delivered through posters produced on a small scale (see fig. 7). All over India, the protest against water extraction is taken up in the idiom of anti-imperial struggle: children carry “Quit India” signs, invoking the 1942 mass anticolonial mobilization against the British colonial state (see fig. 8). Plachimada becomes the quintessential Indian village once more under imperial rule.

32. Vandana Shiva, Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, Profit (London: South End, 2002). Shiva alleges that after Coca-Cola was restrained from dumping sludge or distributing it as fertilizer, the company began to inject waste into dry boreholes and to contaminate deepwater aquifers.

Made in solidarity, the documentaries translate a demand for water into a war over environmental justice. In these transcriptions, the homely plastic pots mutate into politically correct earthen avatars. The sepia-toned poster for One Thousand Days and a Dream (by the makers of The Bitter Drink) features a low-angle shot of dry, cracked earthen pots extending beyond the frame and testifying to scarcity. Media distributing documentaries, books, and pamphlets on Plachimada focus on the women at the vigil as the central, “original” actors in the national anti-cola movement. On occasion a single face, evocative of local defiance, circulates across media: for example, the close-up of a woman looking directly at the camera, “speaking” with her gaze, with anonymous others stretching into the depth of field (see fig. 9). The popular finds its vanguard, as the photograph finds reiteration (on the DVD cover for One Thousand Days and

a Dream, on an Internet site distributing Malayalam-language cinema, on the cover of a book, Coca-Cola: Quit Plachimada, Quit India.  

The saga of the pots continues. Increasingly, traditional earthen vessels replace the humbly utilitarian plastic pots in organized protests, as a civil idiom of responsible consumerism (that accompanies many environmental movements) takes precedence (see fig. 10).

35. See, e.g., the cover image for One Thousand Days and a Dream at www.cinemaofmalayalam.net/documentary and the cover of the unsigned booklet Coca-Cola: Quit Plachimada, Quit India, distributed at www.vakindia.org/water-publications.htm.
The matter of pots makes national news when students of the Government Law College, in Ernakulam, Kerala, smash 101 earthen pots at a rally outside the Kerala High Court to protest a second court order permitting the Coca-Cola unit at Plachimada to resume functioning in 2005 (see fig. 11). The pots symbolize a loss of folk culture. The blogosphere explodes, the pots reterritorialized as authentic to Plachimada, binding global ecological fantasies of places on earth untouched by mass consumerism. From 2003 to 2006 students all over the nation protest colas on grounds of ill health (see figs. 12 and 13). They stamp on plastic bottles; they drink coconut water as an alternative.

By April 14, 2003, Pepsi and Coca-Cola disappear from grocery stores all over Kerala. Coca-Cola finds itself in deep trouble in India, with sales dropping 14 percent by April–June 2005; the company undergoes major reorganization in an effort to contain the growing opposition. The state government of Kerala announces it will challenge Coca-Cola’s right to extract water from common groundwater resources. The company also finds itself the target of local campaigns in at least three other communities, with thousands of people mobilizing to challenge the company for creating severe water shortages and groundwater pollution.36

Much of the agitation, especially through 2004 while the case went to the Supreme Court, relied on mobilizing the iconic logo against the corporation it embodied, jettisoning the local struggle onto a global stage. Such a trajectory makes Plachimada an exemplary case for considering the role of mass media in popular culture. I turn to this in the balance of the essay, focusing closely on the historical and semiotic dimensions of contemporary media cultures salient to the formation of the popular.

Figure 12  Schoolchildren protest colas, 2006. Photograph by Narinder Nanu / AFP, www.gettyimages.com
Coca-Cola is no ordinary logo. It is an icon encountered in circulation where it has garnered considerable accretive symbolic density. As *icon* Coca-Cola lends itself to popular mobilization more than any other sign. No wonder we have been witnessing scholarly returns to “*iconoclases*” to take the pulse of globalization, in fields as diverse as aesthetics, star/celebrity studies, studies of popular religion, material culture, and art history.37 We live in times when icons seem to be proliferating, when iconoclasm, iconophilia, even iconomania, are on the rise. To a large degree, our media-saturated environments bristling with new regimes of

images have much to do with this proliferation: in Latour’s words, we are witnessing a “fabulous population of new images, fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators, greater flows of media, more powerful ideas, stronger idols.”

Since the icon is defined as a recursive graphic sign in semiotic theory, in the vertiginous transport of media content across platforms (photograph to billboard to blog to television, magazine, and newspaper, as with the Haksar image) a sign can quickly acquire iconic meaning, speedily garnering the cultural familiarity of an icon. That is, in highly media-saturated environments, images often become iconic, their rapid dissemination facilitating the accretion of symbolic values.

If icons are imbued with accretive symbolic density, there is heightened semantic condensation in gigantic icons such as Coca-Cola—especially given its hoary history in India. The drink that was “expelled” from Indian markets in 1977 was ceremoniously welcomed back in 1993 as the nation embarked on a consumption-led path to national prosperity (with the 1991 trade liberalization). Before 1977, under the Indira Gandhi regime, Coca-Cola held 100 percent of its equity share in India, a de facto privilege rescinded by the BJP-led Janata Party government, which invoked the 1973 Foreign Regulations Act (instructing non-Indian corporates).


39. Charles Peirce, the American pragmatist philosopher and logician whose realist metaphysics (influencing intellectuals such as William James and John Dewey) led to his dismissal by a critical theory informed by Saussurean linguistics, is widely regarded as the theorist who has offered extensive commentary on the icon. He theorizes the semiotic economy of the icon as generating a reality fix. It proposes a domain of objects similar to (just like) the sign itself; it motivates an imaginative pursuit of an endlessly receding horizon of the real. A representation just like an ontological object (always inferred) is an icon (e.g., a portrait formally resembling a person’s visage); a representation corresponding to an object is an index (a bullet-ridden body indicates the existence of a murderer in experiential space); and a representation where we impute a relation to an object by logic is a symbol (we impute that the word-impression “man” or “homme” refers to a two-legged creature, if one “knows” the general laws of the universe). Since the icon, unlike the symbol, shares the sensory quality of its object, Peirce, like Ferdinand de Saussure, sees it as a “natural” or “degenerate” sign. Later Peirce will suggest that each of these sign-types includes characteristics of the other, hence the indexical and symbolic characteristics of the icon. See Peirce’s early “On a New List of Categories” (1867), in The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, vol. 1, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1–27, and two later essays: “On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation” (1885), in The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, vol. 2, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 200–209, and “Lectures on Pragmatism” (1903), in Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers, vol. 5, Pragmatism and Pragmaticism, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), 14–212. For a reevaluation of Peirce’s legacy, see Anne Freadman, The Machinery of Talk: Charles Peirce and the Sign Hypothesis (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).
rations to limit their equity share to 40 percent). Coca-Cola saw such insistence as an act of aggression, arguing that giving up equity would mandate sharing the “secret formula.” Hence it departed from Indian markets in 1977, and Indian colas such as Thums Up and Limca emerged—colas still popular after Coca-Cola’s return, as Mazzarella notes in his study of cola consumer history.\textsuperscript{40} In 1997, granted approval to set up subsidiary holding companies (Hindustan Coca-Cola Holdings Private Ltd. [HCCHPL] and Bharat Coca-Cola Holdings Private Ltd.), Coca-Cola returned to India, having first bought up the thriving local competition in colas for a paltry sum (160 crores in rupees, or US$35 million).\textsuperscript{41} In the next two years, the company invested a billion dollars in its forty-nine plants in India.\textsuperscript{42}

Given this long history, the logo has considerable symbolic density in India. During the austerity of Nehruvian protectionism, it had signaled consumer bliss—the plastic pleasures of forbidden foreign goods. Yet its “return,” signaling the recent consumer revolution, has not gone uncontested. One might say that its status as iconic consumer good has positioned Coca-Cola signs as prime targets in struggles against the privatization of natural resources erupting all over India, especially in the wars over water, since one-third of India’s villages currently face daily shortages. Coca-Cola’s history has turned the logo, the “face” of foreign direct investment with death-dealing effects in rural India, into a volatile object: it is now the target for performative contestations of the old neoliberal ethos—Coke is for everybody, Coke improves standards of living for all. And so an evocative photograph beamed on a billboard to tourists, professionals, and businesspeople lodged at the nearby ritzy Taj Coromandel hotel on Nungambakkam High

\textsuperscript{40} See “India Fun,” Mazzarella’s analysis of the Coca-Cola campaign, in \textit{Shoveling Smoke}, 215–49.

\textsuperscript{41} Mazzarella recounts Ramesh Chauhan’s startling sale of the popular Thums Up brand to Coca-Cola for 160 crores in 1994, despite the possibility that the cola would have remained Coca-Cola’s robust competitor in Indian markets (Mazzarella, \textit{Shoveling Smoke}, 321–22n4). After its entry into India, the story gets murky, more complicated than just setting up holding companies. In a few years, four subsidiaries set up for Coca-Cola to offload its equity share (the holding companies and the downstream ventures) were allowed to merge. The HCCBL is the merged corporation that applied to the Perumatty panchayat for a permit for bottling operations in Plachimada in October 1999. More disturbing, the initial understanding that Coca-Cola \textit{would} offload 49 percent of its equity capital to its Indian shareholders within three to five years has yet to be fulfilled.

\textsuperscript{42} For a history of Coca-Cola in India, and especially the cola wars, see Amit Srivastava’s articles posted on the India Resource Center Web site, www.indiaresource.org/campaigns/coke (accessed December 30, 2009).
Road in Chennai would explode into controversy.\(^{43}\) It comes as no surprise that when I tried to clear permissions (on Haksar’s recommendation) for the use of the Haksar “Thirsty” billboard (fig. 4) with Coca-Cola, the company refused; hence I resorted to a photographer’s capture of the Haksar billboard available from Agence France-Presse (AFP) news archives.

The accretive symbolic density of Coca-Cola is well documented. One major public archive is *Coca-Cola: The History of an American Icon*, a film that consolidates one hundred years of footage to demonstrate how a brown liquid not only became the world’s favorite soft drink but also gathered American values to its core image.\(^{44}\) To drink Coca-Cola, as opposed to Pepsi or any other cola product, was once a reaching toward becoming American through consumption; yet now, in search of global markets, Coca-Cola has launched advertising campaigns that sell those very same qualities as universally appealing to everyone. If Coke was ever sexy, sparkling, and cool (as the vintage 1940s “Yes girl” ads clearly demonstrate), by 2000 international advertising campaigns (e.g., the “Coca-Cola. Enjoy” transmedia ads) had translated those qualities into a universal experience.\(^{45}\) To drink Coca-Cola, as one television advertisement set in a small village in Morocco (with no electricity, let alone carbonated drinks) suggested, approximates the “first kiss,” eternally the singular shock of the new.\(^{46}\)

But this highly familiar sign, harnessing multiple attachments within its rich connotative matrix, turns volatile at historical junctures where the institutions, regimes, or networks it embodies are contested; it invites performative desecra-

\(^{43}\) The Taj hotels are an elite chain managed by the Oberoi group (Mumbai’s Taj was recently the site of tragedy, November 26, 2008), attracting the wealthy, as rooms range from $400 to $1,000 a night; locally, such elite hotels draw metropolitan diners (who can afford the high-end cuisine), shoppers (most sport boutique-lined shopping arcades), and other curious gazers out for a stroll, a date, or an outing.

\(^{44}\) *Coca-Cola: The History of an American Icon*, written and produced by Jeff Martin (Orland Park, Ill.: MPI Home Videos, 2001).

\(^{45}\) Once again, I was not given permission to use the vintage “Yes girl” ad for this essay. See Phil Mooney’s blog entry on the history of this image, “Coca-Cola’s Award-Winning ‘Yes Girl’ Billboard,” Coca-Cola Conversations, July 17, 2008, www.coca-colaconversations.com/my_weblog/2008/07/coca-colas-award.html. Using the slogan “Coca-Cola. Enjoy,” the campaign was designed to appeal to people all over the world by persuading them that Coke adds a touch of magic to the special moments in their lives. The theme was global, but the campaign used local resources in different countries to create individual commercials relevant to local tastes and cultures; even as the campaign began, there were 140 versions of the tune set to words in forty languages.

\(^{46}\) One spot by Leo Burnett USA, “First Experience,” follows a boy anticipating what a Coca-Cola will taste like by comparing it to a kiss. The spot was set in a small village outside Ouarzazat, Morocco; the entire cast was from the village, which had no electricity, no television, and no Coca-Cola.
tion, habitually burned, cut, pasted, and remixed in ongoing negotiations of globalizing forces (see fig. 14).

When its most stable significations—Coke refreshes—are contested, the connotative matrix crumbles, and a riotous polysemy ensues: if Coca-Cola was once for the whole world, now it brings ruin to remote Plachimada; if it knew no season, in Plachimada it spells drought; if it was once sexy, in Plachimada it destroys all life instincts. Every time the pots are yoked to the sign, Coca-Cola symbolizes these life-destroying forces. Every time the stability of its connotative matrix is disturbed, releasing attachments to condensed valences, the icon generates high affect (anger, loss, grief).

If the accretive density of the icon accounts for its affective charge, its indexical power can, on occasion, facilitate recognition of its materiality. When we approach signs as iconic, we enter a distinctive economy (an organization of subject-object relations) that semioticians argue incorporates both symbolic and indexical functions. So far we have paused on the icon’s symbolic powers, but what of its indexicality? Even when icons function within a fetish economy—when they embody a totality they cannot represent—they do so with indexical flourish. Since the index ambiguously points to its ground of representation (the bullet hole intimates that a murder has taken place), we can think of the icon as an “aperture,” an opening (in an optical system) into a there—the ever-receding ground of history. At its most fetishistic, such a “ground”—the reach toward the material
relations constitutive of the historical (and no longer eternal) image—is symbolically anchored by a horizon of common good where all differences disappear. The hegemonic form of the icon works to conceal its ground of representation, shoring up a universal horizon. At such a moment, the consumer luxuriates in the promise of the universal, indulging in the famed passivity of mass consumption. But when this hegemonic form is contested, its conceit laying bare the interests of the few, we open into the sign’s recessed ground; we see it as a historical image, a hegemonic projection limited by its materiality, hardly universal or eternal. Hence the symbolic values it once embodied are rendered historical; they belong to an elsewhere to which we are connected as we “enter” the sign. In the fissure of the popular, the Coca-Cola icon spatially located behind the pots (in the Haksar photograph) refers the viewer back to something beyond the graphic inscription: to shadowy but resolutely historical forces with death-dealing material effects on the village.

The notion of the icon as “aperture” already underscores the visual design of the icon, a sign too often theorized only with reference to linguistics. When we are attentive to its graphic nature, we further become aware of its sensuous capacities. As graphic inscriptions, icons are more often than not lustrous material objects; highly designed or decorative, they assault the senses. This is precisely what raises allegations of commodity fetishism among critics who worry about the effects of mass media on social relations. But when we think of sensuous engagements with volatile icons, freed of their most stable message and available for resignification, we confront a different potentiality, one extensively theorized by scholars of the icon’s multisensory lure. In interdisciplinary conversations (icon study in art history, material culture, and popular religion) well beyond the scope of this essay, scholars such as David Morgan, Marie-José Mondzain, and Christopher Pinney have maintained that icon veneration or desecration (both sharing the same psychic structure) dissolves the subject into a collectivity through a yoking of the senses to the icon’s material form. Others, notably theorists of affect/sensation, underscore the absorption of subject into object as flow. Brian

Massumi (2002), for one, insists on the incorporeal materialism of the subject, its constant dynamic interactions with matter disorganizing the sovereign territories of Cartesian subject and object. In any excitation of the nervous system (brain impulses registering as sensation), only some are folded into the subject’s (rational) perceptions; the residue continues to move the subject toward matter. With physically expressive decorative objects, sensuous media such as icons, we might expect an intensification of sensations to the extent that the subject can no longer epistemologically demarcate itself from the object it confronts; it becomes the object (icon), flowing through it into the world.48 When an icon like Coca-Cola enters an epistemological crisis—Coke is for everybody versus Coke is for a privileged few—and stable perceptions fail, we have a volatilized object that increases this drive to ontological becoming. While it would be impossible to expand on this economy fully in the space of this essay, my point is simple: to be properly attentive to the magical force of icons requires a renewed materialism, one as cognizant of its epistemology (its semiotics) as it is of its phenomenology (its metaphysics) As sensation-provoking media, icons activate a riot of the senses—the sensory modes of vision, touch, or sound transforming into each other across the body—moving the subject toward what lies beyond (variously configured as chaos, divinity, nature, according to theoretical predilection). For our purposes here, we might think of the corporeal dynamism of the body as its open-ended sociality—a potentiality that, under certain historical situations, links affected subjects with historical localized others. Hence in expressive popular culture, subjects can be assembled with those engaged in the same enterprise, through icon veneration. Through the senses, in the performance we have been following so far, one apprehends the costs accruing not just to one’s own body but also to the bodies of others—those who placed their pots in front of the sign. In a struggle where the corporeal existence of the body is at risk, such sensuous linkage affords a phenomenological grasp of collective scarcity.

These properties of the iconic sign elaborate Laclau’s proposition that the signifiers of the popular demand ample “investment,” since one sign takes on the burden of signifying an incommensurable totality. I have tried to explicate how affective and sensuous engagements vitiate hegemonic or popular “reason.” But there is a little more to the force of icons than what can be proposed in purely semiotic analysis; there are those historical conditions of possibility that turn icons volatile. While the havoc wrought by the privatization of commons is direct

incitement, the quotidian presence of mass media is an important “condition” for the expressive culture of protest; mass-mediatised icons, as one genre of signs within a larger visual culture, are the vital lingua franca for aggregating the popular in multilingual contexts like South Asia (see figs. 15 and 16).

Indeed, it would be rare to find that remote corner in our times where mass-media flows do not proliferate. While access to production technologies might not be present, there are relatively few places where people are entirely media illiterate. Far from it: mass-media signs are read precisely as signs originating elsewhere. Therefore they become essential to forging relations to that “elsewhere” whose needs create scarcity at the peripheries of a global capitalist system. It follows that the icon “made” in circulation enables grasping “globality”—an image of the place where we now live. To elaborate: if, as recursive signs, mass-media icons signal flow, consumers regard them as media coming from elsewhere; they can therefore activate a cognitive geography of globalization. One can easily see how Coca-Cola came to signal distant spectral forces that could alter the rituals of daily life in Plachimada; one can easily intuit why Coca-Cola signs were slashed in Plachimada early in the mobilization, a performative desecration aiming to communicate with hegemonic industrial forces—popular culture in its effervescent expressive mode.

Mass-media icons are resplendent raw semiotic material for popular culture today. We know symbolically dense icons are habitually remade in practices of consumption. On occasion such remaking “re-auratizes” the sign, Kajri Jain maintains in her pursuit of mass-produced sacred icons in commercial arenas of exchange that activate expressive adoration or desecration.49 Such focus on resignification has always lingered in studies of popular culture: we might remember, for instance,

49. Kajri Jain, Gods in the Bazaar (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007). In aligning adoration and desecration within the same psychic structure, I follow Michael Taussig’s provocations in De/Facement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), in which Taussig argues that defacing images intimates enchantment: one defaces the thing (with magical powers) one fears or hates.
how ordinary commodities such as safety pins readily functioned as “raw semiotic material” for disaffected youth in Hebdige’s reflections on the popular. While Hebdige, like other Birmingham school theorists, read the ritual speech acts of cutting, pasting, and reassembling as indexes of social antagonism expressed in youth cultures before their incorporation into mass culture, in our time of media convergences things look a bit different. Much mass-media content these days can readily function as “raw semiotic material,” in its transit across multiple platforms and frequent recalibration by user interactions in a “participatory culture”; consumers today are used to both mutations of transmedia forms and to accessing them through diverse delivery technologies (a song from a Bollywood film delivered in podcasts, compact discs, and ringtones). If remixing has accelerated to the point of becoming unremarkable in the information age, when do we take note of “tampering” with media content as evidence of the popular?

Sans ethnography, media theorists are alerted to performative resignification when it erupts in mass media as sensational event. In resignification (as in the Haksar photograph), the connotative matrix of a symbolically dense icon provides the semiotic raw material for the forging of new social bonds and the consequent erecting of an internal frontier between “us” and “them.” The treasured Bāmiān Buddhas were just such material for the Taliban intent on forging a jihadist social imaginary: in their studious iconoclasm, the hitherto media-shy Taliban invited Al-Jazeera to televise the ritualized blasts on March 26, 2002. Such media spectacles, staged by those with access to production and delivery technologies, are a far cry from performative desecrations of Coca-Cola in sleepy Plachimada. With control of political institutions, a hegemonic popular

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often has wide circulation across multiple mass-media platforms given its need to manufacture consent. By contrast, an emergent popular-seeking institution in politics (of the kind we see in Plachimada) erupts sporadically in mass media; we only notice it if the performative desecrations register in mass media as antagonistic acts in mass media.

So it was only when Coca-Cola sued Haksar that all eyes turned to Plachimada. Coca-Cola was, after all, a client of Haksar’s advertising firm, and Haksar—for those who know his ads on food, fashion, and cars—was hardly the activist photographer. Besides, it was not as if Haksar had singled out Coca-Cola for witty repartee on the contradictions of mass consumerism. His photograph of a boy pissing on the iconic Nike flourish (embellished with the words “Just do it”), or the one of bony hands cradling a tin cup sporting a MasterCard sticker, had passed unnoticed. But then neither Nike nor MasterCard had the kind of antagonism directed against them in India that Coca-Cola did.

Company officials had actually seen the offending Coca-Cola photograph three months before the sudden cry against infringement. Therefore the allegations should be understood as Coca-Cola’s response to its weakened credibility at Plachimada—and Haksar makes note of this in his surprised response to the threat. Given Haksar’s credentials as a prize-winning photographer, the incident quickly became national news. As journalists probed further, other unsavory details about Coca-Cola’s response to Plachimada emerged, fueling media interest. National newspapers rushed to report that Coca-Cola had gone to some lengths to muzzle the press before the Haksar suit: it had slapped a 50-lakh-rupee (approximately US$110,000) defamation suit against a regional newspaper, Mathrubhumi Daily, which had covered the anti-Coca-Cola campaign for quite a while. For the media theorist, it is at the moment when Coca-Cola cries foul that one spots the slow annexation of the mass-media logo in the expressive popular culture of Plachimada: unable to litigate against temporary daily performances, Coca-Cola chose a well-known adversary to take back its logo.

51. For more on Haksar’s oeuvre, see www.sharadhaksar.com.
53. The newspaper remained unfazed, with its managing director (also a member of Parliament), Virendra Kumar, asserting that since the newspaper does not accept Coke or Pepsi or Palm Oil ads, it is free to campaign on issues of its choice. The newspaper has also been generous in allowing me to use its images without fees for this essay.
The billboard affair, one among a litany of trademark infringements in India, is a fairly standard example of how the popular erupts in mass media—in staged media events, lawsuits, “mob” violence, disruptive gathering, and so on. So it provides a starting point for tracking the popular—no easy task, since mass-production technologies are often controlled by political and financial elites housed in the very institutions attacked by popular mobilizations. How might we “read” the runes of the popular from mass-media news, blogs, petitions, documentaries, legal briefs, or nongovernmental reports made public? While it would be impossible to outline a rigorous method for tackling those unmannerly, disappearing, and scattered media archives that challenge scholars of the contemporary (a task I take on more substantially in a forthcoming book on global icons), in my closing remarks I offer a few propositions on retroactively reading the popular from its traces in mass media.

**Runes of the Popular**

If I have made a case for keeping a close eye on “hot” mass-media icons when they invite iconocrisis, it is with the assumption that they can be runes for the popular. For our case in point, with the lawsuit, we cast our eyes on the iconic logo at the heart of the storm. When one traces its circulation—the frequencies, intensities, and duration of its deformations—one can lay bare the social antagonisms at play; one moves back to where there was once a single demand. Through establishing contiguities among media traces—among pots, bottles, tube wells, billboards, photographers, vigils, actors, rallies, and so on—one is able to witness the emergence of the popular through acts of signification.

My first proposition inheres in the “rune,” commonly regarded as a symbol of divination. Runes are those traces of the popular not easily deciphered without recourse to rigorous semiotic analysis and historical digging. Just as a scholar visiting the legal archives in the Palakkad district court would treat the written record as cipher, decoded to glimpse the popular, a scholar of visual culture would approach the stylized and theatrical Haksar photograph as clue to (rather than evidence of) the popular. Too often, news photographs bear the charge of the real even in the digital era; only some news photographs by highly credentialed photographers provoke discussion. This was clearly the case here, with the lawsuit aimed at the celebrity rendering the Haksar depiction explosive: the photograph and news photographs of the billboard (fig. 4) made their way into regional and national newspapers, blogs, Web sites, and television news. Some Web sites pur-
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positively recirculated the Haksar photograph (using licenses for noncommercial personal use) to combat Coca-Cola’s repressive gesture. But quite apart from its circulation across media platforms, I would argue that it was the semantic complexity of the photograph, its enigmatic semiotic arrangement, that prompted lively debate.

After all, images of performative desecrations of Coca-Cola were rampant in the media where this photograph appeared, but those traces (e.g., figs. 13–14) rose and died, while the Haksar photograph continued to circulate. One might say that all of the photographs reporting Plachimada made “arguments,” including those appearing as mere illustrations of written or oral commentaries. Figure 13, the visual capture of a large Coca-Cola graphic slashed in red, held against the cheek of an intense-looking young man, pitches fierce emotional investment against the cola through a close-up in melodramatic mode, and figure 14, a snapshot of a student tearing down a massive Coke-can cutout, is shot skewed to increase the velocity of the sign as it falls on the small defiant figure attacking it. Reading these signs requires a certain media literacy, but their message remains fairly direct: an exposition of the young, the “powerless,” the anonymous but paradigmatic historical actor rising against the corporate giant. They lack the iconic depth of the Haksar photograph that activates a movement back into the ground of its representation. Hence the latter exemplifies a rune, a media trace sending us in hot pursuit of where these aggregated signs first appeared.

Unlike in most photographic traces of the Plachimada agitations, there are no “actors” featured in the Haksar photograph; rather, the plastic pots enact mute protest against the logo. We have to recognize both paradigmatic signs (the Coca-Cola logo and the pots), now irrevocably in syntagmatic relation to each other, to intuit what the photograph signifies: Coca-Cola becomes the harbinger of death because we know that those pots are empty, because they have become iconic of scarcity. Such a “reading” depends on our ability to disaggregate the symbolic accretions the signs have gained in their previous circulations, in order to reinsert them in a new syntax—in this case, to understand anew what the pots mean as they transform the connotations of Coca-Cola. With its condensed connotations (its coolness, its healthiness, its sexiness, its youthfulness) now dislodged, by the time of the Supreme Court verdict, Coca-Cola had begun to signal thirst, ill health, even death. To encounter the logo in this avatar is therefore to experience loss. Hence, quite aside from its semantic richness, the Haksar photograph came to bear a high affective charge not found in the other photographs.
Runes such as these compel investigation, propelling us back to where it all began—or at least where we can divine the first demand, singular and isolated. By the time we get to the plastic pots in the Haksar photograph, they are already concretely yoked to Plachimada (anchored by written and oral commentaries) and metonymic of water scarcity in South India (where plastic pots for fetching water are widely used). When we disaggregate the semiotic arrangement of the Haksar image, we begin to discover how the popular—a chain of diverse demands held together through signification—came to be. Reading the popular in mass media, through the fate of icons grown fat in circulation, therefore requires considerable reflection on the temporality of signs. After all, the Haksar photograph also features a teal-blue pump—from which no water runs, we assume, and indeed, early in the movement, posters featured the dry pump as another symbol of scarcity (fig. 7). But the pump “disappears” in the media, never quite stabilizing as the iconic sign for Plachimada, while the pots make repeated appearances well beyond the Haksar photograph (figs. 6, 10, 11). The frequency of the trace, along with its duration, becomes critical to tracking the popular; when a sign stubbornly crops up every time one “looks” for Plachimada in mass-media archives, we can surmise that it was probably iconic in popular culture. We realize that the pots were always seminal props for political theater.

When we move back, we see the pots endure. Early in the protests, the women at the dharna assembled their plastic pots in mute performance of water scarcity; the repetition of such semiotic activity turned ordinary gesture into the kind of expressive ritual we attribute to popular culture. At the level of expressive culture, the recursive water pot placed in front of Coca-Cola hoardings began to scramble the mass-media icon—semiotic acts carefully archived in news photographs and documentary footage (One Thousand Days and a Dream, The Bitter Drink, and The Source of Life for Sale). In these accounts, the pot recurs, always dry, always empty, but it takes different forms, from everyday plastic to earthen, sometimes rudimentary and sometimes decorated or inscribed. Only the external adversary embodied by the Coca-Cola logo remains stable. We can surmise a plurality of

demands at work in the variation of the pots: for environmentalists, only the traditional biodegradable version will do; for the householders, the plastic suffices; for artists and students, the decoration or inscription of the pots is routine aesthetic. By the time we get to the saturated hues of the Haksar photograph, the brightly colored pots stark against the yawning Coca-Cola icon have become paradigmatic, and we have learned to hear what they communicate in these daily performances.

And so we hypothesize an expressive popular culture as we follow the movement of signifiers across scattered media archives. The look back gathers the temporality of the popular as it disperses to include diverse demands. The look back gathers icons to assemble sporadic, seemingly isolated, acts into a social logic. The look back takes us to the first traces of collective will, to the wee hours of a day when local newspapers would report that some women, plastic pots on hip, had stolen water from a hijacked truck.