

Lawrence Liang

Is it a Bird? A Plane? No, it's a Magic Chair

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e-flux journal #27 — september 2011 Lawrence Liang
Is it a Bird? A Plane? No, it's a Magic Chair

Aren't our favorite Superman stories the ones in which Superman – drained of all his powers by Lex Luthor, who has hidden kryptonite in a pill or behind a painting, take your pick – must recover his strength to outwit Luthor? Reduced to a pile of muscles, the Man of Steel is momentarily vulnerable and forced to rely on the only superpower he has left – one that we ordinary mortals share with him: his creativity and imagination. The pleasures of these stories arise precisely from the challenge of things not being ideal. Given the perpetual threat under which Superman lives, it would not be inaccurate to say that he flies between the stratospheres of the ideal and the impossible. This hovering between perpetual impossibility and an absolute potential also measures the distance between the bespectacled, clumsy Clark Kent and his alter ego. But what if the true alter-ego of Superman is not Clark Kent, but Walter Mitty, the everyman from James Thurber's 1939 short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, who dreams his way into his absolute potential much like all of us? What if Superman is the necessary fiction that allows Kent/Mitty to fly, despite the heaviness of the real world around them? After all, Walter Mitty is the one who really understands that the most subversive power we possess is our imagination – it penetrates walls, stops bullets, flies across the world, and in it we are all light as air.

Italo Calvino urges us to take things a little lightly as we step into the twenty-first century. Enumerating lightness as one of the desirable attitudes to cultivate, Calvino says that when the entire world is turning into stone through a slow petrification, we should recall Perseus's refusal of Medusa's stone-heavy stare. To slay Medusa without allowing himself to be turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and "fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror."¹ Calvino reminds us that Perseus's strength lay in his refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live. But what of those who live under the terror of the Gorgon – do they wait for their Perseus, their Superman? For his 2010 documentary on the crisis of the education system in the United States, Davis Guggenheim used the appropriate title *Waiting for Superman*, in reference to a Harlem teacher's childhood belief that a superhero would fix the problems of the ghetto, and his frightful realization when his mother tells him that superman does not exist.

The transformation of Clark Kent into Superman is always precipitated by a crisis, usually one large enough to potentially destroy the world. But what if it is not a monumental



Pirate DVD stand. Photo: Eunheui.

end-of-the-world that scares us, but the prospect of losing the small worlds that we inhabit and know: a bookstore disappearing, a public organization running out of funds, an independent gallery shutting down?



Scene from the *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* where Walter Mitty assumes the role of a surgeon.

The crisis of funding in arts and culture threatens to destroy many such worlds with a slow petrification of our sensibilities, and the understandable impulse is to despair and bemoan. It is, after all, no coincidence that a state of the economy – depression – also names or appropriates an affective state whereby a self-fulfilling prophesy is initiated: an economy drained of capital produces a draining of life. An alternative economy would have to seek a language that does not just name a different economic process, but names different psychic energies amidst the prediction of gloom that normally accompanies the retreat of capital from all forms of life, including creative life. And yet it remains important to maintain that the mere presence of healthy public institutions does not guarantee a richer cultural life, just as their absence does not necessitate a poverty of cultural life.

In his satirical poem mocking the sad passions of A. E. Housman by emulating his doom-filled verses, Ezra Pound writes:

O woe, woe,
People are born and die,
We also shall be dead pretty soon
Therefore let us act as if we were
Dead already.

But the fact of the matter is that we are neither dead, nor indeed is the state of cultural life. We now inhabit a paradoxical moment in which, even as known spheres of cultural life are retreating, we find a simultaneous eruption of energetic

practices and possibilities. A film club in Berlin screens downloaded films and hands out copies of the film to the viewers at the end of the film (when was the last time you went to an exhibition and walked away with the artwork?), cineastes in China curate samizdat collectible DVDs of world cinema combining the best of various legitimate DVDs, a website claims to have a better collection of video art than the MoMA, and young people across the world are experimenting with cheaper technologies that bridge the gap between the films they see and the ones they simultaneously make in their minds.

In most parts of the world, the crisis in art and culture is not a new one, and the absence of strong state or private support has been a perpetual condition whereby material constraints become both the precondition as well as the context in which various creative forms find forceful expression. Attesting to the vitality of the electronic everyday, Bhagwati Prasad and Amitabh Kumar's graphic novel *Tinker Solder Tap* narrates the story of most parts of the world from its vantage point in Delhi, where scarcity and abundance, creativity and decay dance together – sometimes flirtatiously, at other times threateningly. *Tinker Solder Tap* provides us with two images of Delhi's urban landscape as it morphed throughout the 1990s and 2000s into a mediascape of sensation and excitement, with extremely cheap media opening myriad possibilities for transforming everyday life through creativity and cultural production.

So the question might not be a matter of what is to be done, but rather what is to be done now that the six screen projections may not be possible? Is there hope, or are we doomed to live as though already dead? In his conversation with Mary Zournazi on the philosophy of hope, Michael Taussig suggests that it could be useful to think of hope as a kind of sense, much like our other senses. For Taussig, it is precisely because of the life-draining threat posed by our material circumstances that we need hope.² Elsewhere in the book, it is argued that hope is what one cultivates against all reasonable evidence suggesting that there should be none. Referring to the temporary autonomous zones that people create to test the outer possibilities of freedom, Taussig asserts that even when imminent failure looms, autonomous zones provide a glimmer of possibility. And is it not the case with hope that all it takes is a glimmer, and not a burning bush?

I would suggest that one could extend the idea of the hope sense into other domains rarely articulated as belonging to that of the senses or sensibility, engulfed as they are by their legal status. How, for instance, might we think of a pirate sense – like a hope-sense this is not a foregrounded sense, but a subterranean one,



Bhagwati Prasad, Amitabh Kumar, last plate from *Tinker Solder Tap*.

flying just below the radar of the visible and the audible, but ever alert to the possibilities offered in spite of the apparent impossibility of our material life? While our capacity to lead imaginative lives is dependent in part on conditions such as the availability of resources and infrastructure, it would be erroneous to subsume one under the other. Piracy has been over-analyzed in terms of its legality and access, yet under-theorized as a specific sensibility and attitude, and it may be useful to turn back a bit differently to Superman to see the heroic possibilities of a pirate sense.

Approximately eight hours away from the bright lights of India's financial and film capital of Bombay is a small non-descript town called Malegaon. The town is populated mainly by migrant Muslim laborers from North India who work in the power loom sector. Malegaon saw major riots after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and became infamous in 2006 after a series of bomb blasts. But the town has recently been in the news for something else. It has emerged as the center of a parallel film industry that churns out remakes of Bollywood hits, re-contextualizing them to address local issues and to cater to local tastes. Thus, one of the biggest Indian blockbusters, *Sholay* (1975), is remade as *Malegaon ki Sholay*, and Oscar-nominated *Lagaan* (Taxes) is remade as *Malegaon ki Lagaan*, in which, instead of depicting opposition to colonial taxes, the film takes problems of civic amenities as its subject. All the actors in the film have become stars within the local community, and one of the reasons cited for the popularity of these remakes has been that the local community can see people they recognize on the big screen. The average budget of a Malegaon production is

around Rs.50,000 (\$1000), and runs in one of the fourteen local video theaters in the town, while now also circulating via VCD and DVD. It all started when Shaikh Nasir, a local videographer who shot wedding videos, decided to borrow money to make his own film. He shot it on video and used two VCRs to edit the film in real time. The film turned out to be a surprise hit, and thus started the Malegaon film industry.

Local workers in the various small-scale industries double as actors, and they try to stay as close to the original film as possible, emulating the same camera angles, lighting, and so on. It is understandably difficult to emulate a large, mega-budget Bollywood film in a small town like Malegaon, so the Malegaon crew has learned to adapt and innovate using local resources. A bicycle stands in for dolly, and a bull cart is used for crane shots. While remaking Hindi epic *Shaan* (1980), the director realized that there was no way to hire a helicopter with a total budget of Rs.50,000 for the film, so they simply had to make do with a toy helicopter and shoot it in a way that made it look as authentic as possible.

Faiza Khan's documentary film *The Supermen of Malegaon* (2008) follows Nasir as he sets out on his most ambitious venture – a remake of *Superman* for Malegaon.³ In the documentary, Nasir speaks about what made him arrive at *Superman*:

I never went anywhere to learn to make films. I would select different English films to screen. After that, I found Hindi films boring. "Weak direction," I thought. So my film education was at the video hall, I learned master angles, master lighting, the works. I used to cut out newspaper listings



Left: Shaikh Nasir editing his film using two videos, 2003. Photo: Sukhija; Right: Faiza Khan, *Supermen of Malegaon*, 2008.

of films being shown in Bombay, and play the same films here. I used to copy the posters and put them up outside my video hall. This is what obsession leads you to. I just wanted to do something differently – a little bit of this and a bit of that – and now the story has come to this. [Nasir holds up a picture of Superman.]

The film avoids what could easily have been a semi-patronizing, semi-amused look at a small film industry with its quaint and quirky films. By focusing instead on the creative impulse and passion that drives the filmmakers of Malegaon, *The Supermen of Malegaon* draws us into thinking about who a Superman is, what it means to believe you can fly, and how lightness overcomes the burden of the real. It takes for granted, as the filmmakers themselves do, the very limited resources with which they make their films, and it invites us instead to share the unlimited reserves of enthusiasm and energy that they bring to their craft. As a film writer in Malegaon says:

When a writer has a thought in his head, whatever his vision, he never achieves more than 20 percent of it. Even if it is a *Titanic*, the output is 20 percent. To live with the other 80 percent – the vision, the characters who inhabit your head – no one can understand that pain. And no money can compensate for it.

For me, the essence of *The Supermen of Malegaon* is captured in a statement by one of the weaver-actors when he says “We don’t have the facilities but are we making films. That’s what’s special. We don’t have great voices, but we are singing. That is what is exceptional ... We have no weapons but we are fighting a war, and we are winning it.” The statement reminded me of a story by Guy Davenport in which he recalls a sports function where he saw a high school marching band. Noticing that one of the horn players was a young man with Down syndrome playing an imaginary horn – keeping step admirably, and intently playing his instrument – Davenport recounted:

Tears came to my eyes, as I saw great metaphysical depths in it, and perhaps a metaphor for life itself as we now live it. I *hope* the boy really thought he was playing in the band (I wonder if he goes to practice?) and that he was overcoming the dreadful handicap in some way that counterfeited reality for him. He may even be a student in high school, pretending he can read and do arithmetic (just like my

students). I then entertained a fantasy in which I, who can’t sing or play a note, might be allowed to play an imaginary violin in a symphony orchestra.⁴

There is perhaps a lesson to be learned from *The Supermen of Malegaon* and their finely-tuned pirate sense that does not name the legality or illegality of an act, but marks an attitude – to time, to resources, and to creativity. If the state (as benign promoter of the arts) and private corporations (as owners of culture) both promise access on paternalistic terms, then a pirate sense is one that demands a defiant access. It refuses to wait for Superman, and instead pretends that it can fly. It is to be found in Borges’s village librarian, who, upon finding that he cannot afford to buy the books he has read positive reviews of, proceeds to write those books on the basis of their title.



Faiza Khan, *Supermen of Malegaon*, 2008. Filmstill.

Alternative economies are alternative not just because they are quaint, but because they have figured out a way of being in the world that extends the limits of what they can know by drawing their own boundaries of the knowable. If we are to face up to the challenge of the crisis of the arts, it would be through a recognition that our potential lies beyond the threshold of the possible. As Brian Massumi puts it:

That vague sense of potential, we call it our “freedom,” and defend it fiercely. But no matter how certainly we know that the potential is there, it always seems just out of reach, or maybe around the next bend. Because it isn’t *actually* there – only virtually. But maybe if we can take little, practical, experimental, strategic measures to expand our emotional register, or limber up our thinking, we can access more of our potential at each step, have more of it actually available. Having more potentials available intensifies our life. We’re not enslaved by our situations. Even if we never

have our freedom, we're always experiencing a degree of freedom, or "wriggle room." Our degree of freedom at any one time corresponds to how much of our experiential "depth" we can access towards a next step – how intensely we are living and moving.⁵

Echoing Massumi, a recent text by the Cybermohalla ensemble describes a playful experiment with conditions of intellectual life and speech in localities:

The magic chair is a condition everyone carries in them. It's a matter of its activation. How to build an environment around us that can bring the highest level of activation of this magic chair? In daily life, the place of the magic chair diminishes or expands depending on what and who it encounters. What can we or do we create around ourselves, in what ways can we enter that which has been made by others around us, so that an activation and expansion of the magic chair may happen in and around us?⁶

Avant-garde arts practices of the recent past have been so tightly coupled with institutional forms that this crisis could perhaps open a possibility for us to bring back what Jeebesh Bagchi describes as a spirit of the "rearguard." As both an attitude and a strategy, Bagchi describes the rearguard as a practice that knows that in order to survive, there is a need for many "do-it-yourself" tools. It acts like a craftsman and builds them. It knows that it is by multiplying throughout diverse paths and forms that one can breathe within debris. It takes this agility, porosity, and masking as a site for discovery, exploration, and connection.

Thus, the transformation of Clark Kent into Superman may not be a matter of a quick fix, running in and out of a magically-appearing telephone booth, but, instead, a careful combination of new skills and senses with which we, like Perseus, take flight. Indeed, the time has come to talk of many things, of cabbages and kings and whether men have wings.

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Lawrence Liang is a researcher and writer based at the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore. His work lies at the intersection of law and cultural politics, and has in recent years been looking at question of media piracy. He is currently finish a book on law and justice in Hindi cinema.

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2

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