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Ways of Seeing

The visual ontology of an Indian Bazaar

Denis Vidal

Comparing the fate of different historic urban centres all over the world, it is useful to make a distinction between two very different forms of *nostalgia*: The nostalgia aroused nowadays in historic centres in the West is no longer so much linked– as it was a few decades ago – to massive threats to the architectural heritage. Rather, it is linked with their 'museification' and the strange mix of artificial vitality and social or cultural void that is sometimes the consequence of conservation policies whose aim is also to offer some sort of nostalgic consumption of the past. But there also remain other historic centres in the world where the *nostalgia* is much more linked to the deep sense of loss roused by the destruction and dilapidation of the urban heritage. Unfortunately enough, Old-Delhi is undoubtedly in this latter category. One reason for this may be linked partly to the dramatic history of Shahajanabad (Gupta 1981) . But whatever the role various historic episodes may have played, there is no doubt that the single most important destructive force has been the systematic commercialisation of the old city during the recent decades. From a conservationist point of view, then, commercialisation has been largely responsible for the destruction of the heritage of the city (Gupta 20000). But it is also acknowledged nowadays that commercial culture is the background on which all sorts of popular art, largely ignored until recently, have flourished. And there is certainly no lack of interest in such forms of creativity today as demonstrated by the proliferation of publications and exhibitions on diverse forms of 'popular art' such as calendar art street billboards, film posters, etc (Uberoi &Sood1998, Jain 2007).

As a matter of fact, this recent wave of interest is not the first time that cultural elites have shown enthusiasm for the aesthetic output of urban and commercial culture in India. The popularity of Kalighat paintings among the elites of Calcutta at the beginning of the twentieth century is an earlier example of it (Guha-Thakurta 1992, Mitter 1994); so also is the 1960's trend for various forms of popular urban art which inspired different modern artists (Kapur 2001). It is however only from the 1980's that one really witnesses a more diffused interest

for different aspects of urban visual culture which had been largely neglected until then. Take, for example, the case of studio photography in India, largely ignored until the nineties when it suddenly became an object of exhibitions, collections and scholarly works (Pinney 1997, Sharma 1997, Pinney 2004) . And such is also the case with hand painted film posters which ceased to be considered chiefly as curiosities and begun to be shown in exhibitions all over the world, acquiring altogether a new aesthetic respectability .

There is no doubt, then, that we have witnessed the opening of new areas of research in visual culture which had not been studied before. But one limitation of such opening is that it has remained mostly focused on images (with the exception of a small category of works dedicated, for example, to the study of contemporary urban streetscape or to clothing (Bhatia 1994, Tarlo 1996) . In *Beyond Appearances,* for example, a collective book edited by Sumathi Ramaswamy in 2003, and which is fairly representative of exciting new work in this domain during the last decades, all the case studies focus, in spite of their diversity , on images. This point is worth noting, I believe, not only because it obviously limits the domain of analysis , but also – more fundamentally – because indirectly it informs how visual practices are apprehended. To give just one example, it is interesting to note that when the authors use notions like the 'inter-ocular', ' inter-visuality' or even 'visual practices', what most of them seem to have in mind as Sumathi Ramaswamy rightly points out in the introduction to her collective book, is 'a dialogue with other images both within the same medium as well as across different visual genres' and from this , she concludes in another passage of her introduction that 'Ultimately it is the image's public presence that enables its pedagogic function of training the eye to see in particular way, of producing particular forms of visual knowledge and practices, and of generating a society's codes and habits of seeing and being seen, its ideology of visuality' (Ramaswamy 2003: XV).

Now, I would be the last one to deny the interest of studying images and of discussing their possible impact on ways of seeing in India in certain areas of religious and political life. But I would also like to insist that , in spite of their obvious proliferation , images are not the only significant element of the visual environment. It may be true that in certain cases, our eyes may be trained by how we are used to looking at images ; but it may also be that, in other cases, it is precisely the opposite which is true and that we may look at images in the way we have been trained by looking at other things. Whether one should consider such a possibility seriously and what it may imply for the study of visual practices in India, is what I would like to consider briefly now on the basis of my research in the bazaars of Old-Delhi (Vidal 2000, 2003, 2005)

Beyond imagery

Needless to say, an approach, which perceives commercialisation as the main threat to all forms of culture– past, or present generates a radically different perspective from an approach, which takes commercialisation as an inspiration for popular creativity. However both of these perspectives fall prey to a rather conventional view of visual culture, limiting it mainly either to the study of architecture or to the study of popular visual arts produced in the city. What is rarely taken into account in such analysis is that the visual culture of bazaars and wholesome markets is far more complex and all embracing than either of these two features of them, and that the spectacle of the bazaar should not be dismissed as simply food for orientalist or tourist fantasy. With the exception of a few main axes through Shahajanabad such as the one between the Red fort and the Jama Masjid - or Chandni Chowk - where architecture is clearly a dominant feature, what plays the most decisive role in the visual environment is the extraordinary proliferation of commercial goods which compete very successfully with people to occupy every available space in the city. So, what I shall argue here is that the presence of commercial goods in the city does in itself constitute an essential element from a visual perspective: not only because it transforms the urban fabric in various ways; but also more decisively, because, through such goods and the manipulations and the transactions associated with them, very specific manners of seeing are being generated. Although these have never been studied as such, they none the less represent some of the most interesting specificities of the visual culture of Old Delhi.

Material impact

It is a curious paradox that economics has been such an abstract discipline in spite of the extreme materiality of its object. This could be the reason why it has been mostly left to sociologists, anthropologists, historians or even philosophers to recover the paramount importance and various implications of the fact that economic activity consists effectively of manipulating concrete goods in all their materiality and not only abstractions (Subrahmanyam 1990 , Bayly 1994, Dagognet 1996, Callon 1998). And certainly one only has to visit Old-Delhi once to be utterly convinced of it. The space taken by all sorts of commercial goods is such that in many parts of Shahjahanabad one would barely notice, during the day, if all the walls of the buildings suddenly became invisible; while the whole city would take on an

entirely different appearance if it were suddenly emptied of the commercial goods it contains. More seriously speaking, one can broadly distinguish three main modalities of the circulation of commercial objects in the city which explain their omnipresence:

Firstly one has to remember that Old Delhi is not only a place where goods are bought and sold; it is also where a large quantity of them are produced or, at least, transformed by craftsmen in workshops and small factories, using raw materials which come from outside the city. These goods have to be transported around the city at various stages of their manufacture. To give only one example, there may be more than half a dozen different craftsmen working in different locations involved in the fabrication of a single piece of jewellery before it attains its ultimate customer.

But the most obvious circulation of commercial goods remains associated with the retail trade. This is not only because such transactions are usually accompanied by an immediate exchange of goods or services between buyers and sellers; but is also linked to the fact that one finds here – as in all bazaars - many shops selling identical goods rather than few shops selling highly varied products (Geertz 1978) . So, while retail or semi-wholesale markets are not necessarily the ones which play the more determinant role in the economic life of Old-Delhi, they none the less occupy a maximum of place and are certainly the most visible. Finally, like everywhere else, the markets which imply the most important circulation of goods and the most important monetary transactions, are the wholesale ones. They are also the ones, which involve, as well, the most intricate details of commercial culture. And it is for this reason that I chose to study one of these markets when I was doing research in Old-Delhi a few years ago.

A visual paradox

The apparent paradox of wholesale markets, from an urban point of view is linked to the fact that – while they have an overwhelming role in the urban economy of Old-Delhi - they seem much more marginal, from a visual point of view, than retail markets which don't have at all the same economic importance. This is due to the fact that the nature of the distinction between retail markets and wholesale ones is not only quantitative but qualitative as well. One important thing to realise - while studying commercial activities in Old-Delhi, is that one is poised to encounter very diverse degrees of 'abstraction' in the functioning of the different markets of the city.

It is not difficult, for example, to understand what is going on in retail markets because traders are traders, customers are customers; and transactions are transparent in the sense that real goods are generally exchanged on the spot against real money. But things are not the same in wholesale markets whose functioning and symbolism obey a very different logic and are not so easy to understand if you are not accustomed to them. But if you study them in some details, you soon find that such forms of functionning have, indeed, some interesting implications for the study of visual culture and for visual anthropology which have not always been given all the attention they deserve, at least in the case of a city like Delhi.

One may also notice from this points of view that the few anthropologists who have chosen to study the forms of symbolism involved in commercial activities in India have tended to select the aspects of in which can be directly related to the culture or the ideology of the social communities involved in such activities. And I do certainly agree with the fact that such a perspective may be worth following. But there is also no doubt in my mind that there are also other forms of symbolism in markets which are as interesting to study in spite of the fact that they may seem less directly related to the social or the cultural identity of the traders but are more directly associated to the very nature of merchant activity and it is precisely on such forms of symbolism that I would like to attract the attention in this chapter.

Market symbolism and visual culture

One of the rewarding aspects of studying the visual culture of the bazaars in Old-Delhi is that it may allow an anthropologist to open a dialogue with one of the most challenging work of art history of the twentieth century: I speak here, of the work of Michael Baxandall about the Quattrocento in Florence (Baxandall 1972). The rather unique epistemological merit of Baxandall is that he did not satisfy himself, like so many before or after him, with the pious generalities or with the loose chains of causality which are usually put forward by socially oriented art historians when they postulate the existence of a link between the art of a period and the ideology of the people who patronised or appreciated it. Rather he argued convincingly that merchants of the Renaissance had developed very specific ways of looking at their environment which were linked very precisely to their every day behaviour and to their professional practice. To give an example of it, which was particularly inspirational for me when I studied the rice market in Old-Delhi, Baxandall managed to document successfully the fact that Florentine merchants developed particular visual skills that enabled them to reduce irregular shapes and volumes of all sorts to geometric ones so that

they could better evaluate on the spot the quantities of goods presented to them in the exercise of their trade.

The methodological problem, however, for an art historian like Baxandall is that he could not simply satisfy himself with the demonstration that merchants who patronised the art of the Renaissance developed effectively specific manners of looking at their working environment. If he wanted that such a demonstration would be considered relevant for art history, he had to demonstrate as well that the same merchants looked at pictures and appreciated them in the same manner that they looked at the objects of their trade. And he needed also to demonstrate the existence of some sort of causal link between the visual habits of the traders and the evolution of painting in Florence during the *Quattrocento*.

Now it seems to me that it is one thing to be able to demonstrate that people often look at things in a particular manner in their professional practices: even if is not as easy as one may imagine to document this in the present, it is still more difficult to do it in the past when one disposes only of a very limited amount of documentation. But the situation is still more tricky if one expects to demonstrate that people bring to other things the sorts of criteria and visual habits they employ in their professional practices or in any specific activity. All of this does not mean that Baxandall was wrong in establishing this sort of links. Rather, it means that he was advancing a strong hypothesis, and it is certainly difficult to know if they may be generalised to other cases and in other contexts. This is why it is interesting to reconsider such possibility through a contemporary empirical study. And what I will argue here is that one may effectively approach the visual culture of Old-Delhi by reconsidering it from the sort of perspective that was initiated by Baxandall.

To give a first example of it, one finds that different characteristics are linked to the visual culture which prevails in each of the bazaars of Shahajanabad. So, at a primary level of analysis, one can notice that the commercial logic of the city implies diverse forms of visual culture which may be more or less commonly shared according to the nature and to the quantity of the goods which are exchanged. Let us take as an example the case of the retail or semi-whole sale cloth market in Old Delhi. There is no doubt in this case that the appreciation of goods and of their visual appearance is a form of competence which is generally shared on a more or less equal and symmetrical manner between the local traders and the women coming in groups – generally before a marriage - in order to buy the cloth and the sari which correspond to an important part of the bride's dowry. The jewellery market corresponds to a slightly more complicated case in the sense that it involves transactions between partners whose visual culture is asymmetrical. There are very few customers able to appreciate really

the value of the stone and jewellery they buy. As a consequence, the question of trust plays a fundamental role in such a market; and it is also the basis of the interaction as well as the reason of the long standing relationship between jewellers and most of their customers. Finally a grain market like the one that I have studied in Naya Bazar corresponds to yet a different case in the sense that it involves only professionals who are sharing very specific competences in terms of visual culture. Such is obviously the case for the traders who operate in this market. But as I will attempt to show, the enquiry become really interesting when one is attempting to assess - and also to differentiate – not only the visual culture of the traders but also the visual culture of all the other categories of actors – and they are many – which play an equally important role in this particular market. But before doing so, let me introduce very briefly the market itself.[1]

Naya Bazaar

Situated at the Western edge of the walled city, Naya Bazaar offers an impressive sight. Here, concentrated in a very small section of the old city, is not only the heart of the grain market of Delhi, but one of the most important grain markets for the whole of North India (according to market people, only 20% of the grain which is negotiated here is to be consumed in Delhi itself). It is also the main centre for grain export outside India. Naya Bazaar must be one of the most congested areas of Delhi both during the day and at night. With the exception of Sundays and a few moments of relative quietude at dawn and dusk, there is no respite in this place which functions not only as a commercial centre but also as home to hundreds of coolies who work here during the day. The traders themselves, who once used to live above their shops, have slowly drifted away to quieter places of residence outside the walled city. Along the main road and in a few adjacent streets, one finds during the day a constant flux of coolies, *dalals*, employees and traders, jostling together in the most indescribable chaos made up of an astonishing variety of vehicles.

It is difficult to estimate the number of people whose activity is directly linked to the grain market in Delhi. Such attempt is also problematic from a methodological point of view. However one may give a very approximate estimation by assessing the different activities, which play a prominent role in the organisation of the market as a whole.[i] The number of

[1] It should not be forgiven, however, that the description that I give here of the market dates of 1995-1995 and should be then considered as a historical snapshot of this particular moment.

coolies (*palledar*) could be close to ten thousand workers, with just under a third of them working in Naya Bazaar and the two other thirds working mostly in Lawrence Road and in other godowns disseminated throughout the city. Most of them are associated with particular traders but a few works on a free-lance basis. The number of peons (chowkidars) can be estimated at between two thousand and three thousand. The number of accountants between three thousand and four thousand five hundred. The number of traders between three thousand and five thousand. The number of intermediaries is something which the market people themselves find the most difficult to evaluate. While the official number seems to stand around five thousand, it would seem not all of them are effectively active in the market at the same time. Only one or two thousand of them are based at Naya Bazaar and no more than half of them are constantly active. The others live outside Delhi and so not necessarily come regularly to the market. The number of people who are associated with the various modes of transport which cater almost exclusively to the needs of the grain trade may be estimated at between five and ten thousand. The number of workers in the factories processing grain in Delhi is also difficult to estimate. It is estimated that there are about five hundred grain factories which employ an average of ten to twenty employees, meaning that their sum total would consist of some five to ten thousand workers.

There are, without doubt, many other people whose activities could be included in this list, but even if one considers only the few categories mentioned here, the people directly associated with this market could amount to anything between thirty and forty thousand. However more interesting than their exact number is the distribution of caste, class, gender, religious and regional identities amongst them. It is noticeable, for example, that nearly all the traders in the grain market are Hindu, belong to merchant castes and trace their origins to Haryana or the Punjab (more than 90% of them, according to those questioned). One does not find such homogeneity among other groups. For example only 65% of dalals are thought to belong to merchant castes and only 40% of accountants. The distribution of Brahmans in different roles in the market is the opposite. Whilst amongst the traders there are almost no Brahmans, amongst dalals we find roughly 20% and amongst accountants 30%**.**

Caste, regional origin and economic power are all significant factors of identity in the market place but their particular relevance varies in different professions. For example, although the traders share a similar background in terms of region and caste, it is their access to capital that gives them their distinctiveness in the market. Among coolies it is regional origin rather than caste identity that is emphasised. In each case what really matters is the networks that one's identity enables one to tap into both in terms of business and social

relations. However one cannot fail to notice the almost total absence of Muslims in the market with the exception of a few Muslim coolies mainly from Rajasthan.

But what really gives the place its identity and dominates the urban landscape is – like in the other bazaars of Old-Delhi – not only the people who are working there, but also the extraordinary quantity of large jute bags full of grain, which seem to fill every possible vacant space in the area. However, one should not be deceived by what one sees at Naya Bazaar. This perpetual train of vehicles, advancing desperately slowly in the attempt to load or unload their sacks of grain in shops where bags never seem to cease accumulating is a rather deceptive sight: the bags which arrive at Naya Bazaar constitute only a fragment of the trade. This is just the semi-wholesale market oriented towards the relatively small clientele of individual shopkeepers in Delhi and its neighbourhood. The main part of the trade (the wholesale and bulk trade) is much less visible; it is negotiated mostly in the hundreds of small offices which these days occupy each floor of the rather dilapidated buildings in the area. And apart from the omnipresence of telephones, account books and computers which are becoming increasingly common, the only apparent manifestation of the innumerable transactions which represent hundreds and thousands of tons of cereal per day is the sight of a few grams of grain in small plastic bags which circulate from hand to hand between traders and intermediaries throughout the entire market.

If one cannot really appreciate in Naya Bazaar itself the quantity of grain which is negotiated and which transits effectively through Delhi, it is also because Naya Bazaar, in spite of its importance, constitutes only one of the elements of the grain market in the capital. Due to historical circumstances in the commercial development of the city, it is, for example, in the smaller market of Rui Mandi near by that the wholesale market for cereal is concentrated. One will also find in adjacent areas separate grain markets of lesser importance, selling on a retail basis the produce, which they have just purchased in Naya Bazaar. Similarly, all around the market, one will find areas where different sorts of trades and services, which cater to the specific needs of grain traders, are concentrated. There will, for example, be street corners specialised in recycling jute bags or in making and renting the trolleys (*tela*) which coolies use for transporting grain. As long as the train was the main means of transporting grain, the centrality of the old city remained a relative asset for stocking grain in spite of the congestion. However, this is no longer the case. The reputation of the train has become so bad among the traders that nowadays almost all prefer to use trucks which, though slightly more expensive, are both faster and more reliable. It is only in the case of big traders negotiating entire shipments of grain, generally for export, that the train is still

preferred. As a result, it has become both advantageous and cheaper to have godowns outside the old city. Godowns are now disseminated throughout the periphery and in the immediate vicinity of Delhi. A significant number of them are concentrated in one area in a northern part of the capital known as Lawrence Road. There, besides the hundreds of godowns which give a strange deserted look to the area, are hundreds of small factories where some of the grain which transits through Delhi is also processed before being resold and sent again outside the city. While the majority of traders, commercial intermediaries and accountants are still located at Naya Bazaar, it is today at Lawrence Road that one will find the most important contingent of coolies, peons and factory workers, associated with the grain market. But let me come back now to my main point.

The various ways of glancing at a bag of grain

The question of knowing if a heavy bag of grain should be perceived primarily as a mobile or a static object may seem slightly absurd to most people. But one must recognise that for two of the main categories of actors in the market - the coolies (*palledars*) and the peons (*chowkidar*s) [2] – such a question is not only vital but is also important in determining their visual relationship to their working environment. What really matters for *palledars* – when they consider the work to be done - is to be able to assess on the spot, the mechanical devices, modes of transportation and the precise gestures necessary for moving heavy bags of grain from one spot to another in a minimum of time, knowing of course that they are likely to have to carry the load on their backs at various stages in the process. For *chowkidars*, the question is slightly different. For them what is important is to keep a close watch in order to make sure that no bags of rice disappear from their sight. But whether it is in order to keep the bags immobilised or to displace them, what *chowkidar*s and *palledars* share in common is the fact that they are less concerned by the exact content of these bags than by the pure materiality represented by their shape and weight.

Accountants (*munshis)* , on the other hand, have very specific ways of looking at bags that are entirely different from those of the *chowkidar*s and *palledars*. For them, neither the number of bags nor their exact weight have much physical meaning. Their function when they stand beside the traders is – on the contrary - to use their visual senses and mental ability to convert the bags into quasi abstractions i.e. a few numbers that they are able to manipulate in

their account books. If the process of conversion performed by accountants remains purely abstract, this does not mean it entirely lacks materiality. After all, account books are very valuable objects, looked after by traders with more care than money or the goods in which they trade. But the mental conversion represented in the account books does not affect in any sense the nature of the traded goods which are objects of the calculations. It is precisely this that distinguishes the activity of *munshis* from the activities of the workers employed in the hundreds of factories possessed by the traders in the region of Delhi. These workers are the ones responsible for physically converting the grain from one quality to another; and at every step of their work, they will have to be able to visually assess the effectiveness of the processes of transformation for which they are responsible.

But if most of the economic actors in Naya Bazaar have some responsibility, at one stage or another of its commercialisation, for the displacement or the transformation of the grain, it is the traders and commercial agents who have the real responsibility for the execution of the whole process or, at least, the more complex sequences of it. This means that they can't be satisfied either with considering bags of grains purely for their exterior appearance (like the *chowkidar*s and *palledar*s) or considering them purely in the abstract manner reserved for accountants. Rather traders should be able to appreciate the quantity, quality and the value of the huge quantities of grain in which they are trading at each and every step of the process of their commercialisation.

Ideally this would suppose that traders have developed visual techniques that would enable them to grasp at a glance the exact content of a load of grain which transits in front of them at any moment of time. But lacking such supernatural powers, they make do with the use of grain samples. And it is the making up, circulation and assessing of these samples that constitutes one of the main activities of Naya Bazaar. This is done by use of an instrument known as a *parkhi* which looks somewhat like a dagger with a small gutter down the centre. The instrument is inserted into the side of a bag of grain in such a way that when it is withdrawn it brings with it a few grains for inspection. According to the number of bags which have to be checked, the trader or his assistant will systematically take tiny samples of grains either from each bag or from a selection of them. Nowadays, the samples are generally kept in small plastic bags with just a few indications written on them indicating the provenance and the quantity of the grain. But in Naya Bazaar it is still possible to see intermediaries using the old technique of transporting samples in carefully knotted folds of cloth. The quick succession of small gestures which allow traders and commercial intermediaries to assess the quality of a grain sample have a quasi-ritual element and it is

obvious to any observer that this is one of the moments where market people employ all their commercial acumen. It is on the basis of this that they will make their own estimation of the price they are ready to pay for the grain. They will also have to judge the quality of it and calculate what the potential demand for it might be, according to its price and the evolution of the market.

The handfuls of grain that traders and commission agents manipulate on the market are never considered for themselves; nor do they have any value as such; if they are looked at with such intensity, it is rather, of course, because of the huge quantities of grain they are meant to represent. And it is also this that finally distinguishes them from the more or less similar quantities of rice - equivalent to a few handfuls - that inevitable escape from the bags manipulated in the market - and are immediately spotted and swept up with brooms by poor women and children who at any time glean the ground of the market streets of Naya Bazaar

Looking at market actors and at economic transactions

Whether it is in order to carry them, keep an eye on them, count them, check their content , or to grasp whatever may escape from them, one could multiply the different sorts of visual skills expertly developed and continually put into use in the perception of bags of grain in a wholesale market like Naya Bazaar. But one should not imagine that it is only the goods of the market that are the focus of specific manners of looking. The way people look at each other, according to the economic function of each of them, is no less meaningful. Let me give just one or two examples. While I was studying the functioning of this market, a few years ago, there were mainly two categories of *coolies* working there: the largest group came from Rajasthan and worked in teams (*toli)* under the direction of a supervisor who served as the main interlocutor between them and the traders who employed them. But the other group came mostly from UP and Bihar, and were usually employed at a cheaper rate and on an individual basis. Not surprisingly, traders generally had an easier relationship with the Rajasthani *palledars* than with the ones they employed individually on a more contractual basis; but it was also noticeable that traders tended to maintain a very anonymous relationship with them, even in cases where they had employed the same persons for many successive years. Similarly, most of their customers seemed to have very little concrete reality for the traders, even when they had been dealing with them on a regular basis for many years, and this was because all of the concrete details of transactions were discussed exclusively with commission agents and intermediaries who represented them and with

whom they had, on the opposite, a close relationship. More generally, I have always been fascinated – in such an environment completely saturated by all sorts of goods and people - by the ability developed by most people working there to notice exclusively the people and goods of interest to them and to ignore completely the rest of the world. Finally, one should also notice that it is not only with regard to the commercial goods or to the economic actors of the market but also in connection with economic transactions that specialised ways of seeing have developed. One must know, for example, that contracts are sparingly used in the transactions which take place in Naya Bazaar. This means that the various intermediaries who help to formalise deals among traders and commission agents play a particularly important role as witnesses of the transactions that take place. And in cases of disputes , their evidence will be systematically used in all sorts of litigations.

The economic battlefield of visual culture

In India, as elsewhere, there has been an increasing tendency in recent years to give a more prominent role to the packaging and advertising of goods in the process of their commercialisation. And one is beginning to see the symptoms of this trend in Shahajanabad too. But one of the most striking aspects of the old city - noticed by foreign observers from its origins to the present day - has long been the contrast between the wealth and abundance of the goods displayed everywhere in Old-Delhi and the minimal care which is given to their packaging. Moreover, the same remark applies to other aspects of the surroundings: whether it is the shops where the goods are displayed, the buildings in which these shops are situated or the streets which compose the different markets of the city. The question, however, is to know if such neglect should be simply considered as an incidental consequence of the commercial culture of the city and of the indifference of its inhabitants to their surroundings; or whether perhaps it reveals something more such as the existence of an alternative visual culture which deserves to be analysed as such.

As everyone has had to learn in recent years, there are basically two ways of coding information: either 'analogically' by transmitting some of the physical qualities of the data through a channel of communication; or 'digitally' by coding all the relevant information. For example, in the rice market, the use of samples can be considered as analogical' technique while the use of a 'gradation' system in order to communicate the quality of the grain can be identified as a 'digital' one. And there have been numerous attempts in India to introduce a system of gradation which could be used conveniently by all market people in order to assess

more simply and more quickly the quality of grain all over the country. Such a system of grading has effectively been put into use in the case of different agricultural products in India; but it has not been generalised until now in the case of Naya Bazaar. Market people are on the whole opposed to the idea. According to them there are just too many sorts of grain of too many different qualities for such a system to be functional; it would either be too imprecise or too complicated. Only the biggest traders and exporters are in favour of such a system. But they are also keen for the grain production of the entire country to be radically homogenised because of the specific requirement of their politic of commercialisation.

Basically, what characterises the commercial practices of Naya Bazaar at every level is the absence of dissociation between the material dimensions of commerce and the various sorts of information which are the core of economic activity. It is not only on the basis of the goods themselves that economic actors must extract the relevant information and appreciate it at their own risks; the same remark applies to commercial transactions whose success or failure will depend much more on the trust and credit put on each of the partners involved than on any written contracts or formal conditions. And, the central importance given to the ability to appreciate the worth of goods and of people will result in the development of specific ways of looking at them which contrast vividly with the modern tendency to rely more on existing information (packaging, advertising, publicity etc) than on one's own judgement. What I would like then to suggest is firstly the fact that the maintainance or the disappearance of such a culture of perception, has very important implications – in India like elsewhere – on the rural economy as a whole and that it is the future of millions of farmers and of whole economic regions which are very directly at stake through such a logic of perception. But it seems also to me that it is not only in the case of the bazaar, but in a whole category of other domains that one is assisting, in India like elsewhere, at various attempts for replacing a visual culture based on a relatively direct perception and knowledge of things and people involved by a culture which puts more emphasis on a logic of visual representation and indirect information. Now, in such a context, it seems to me particularly important to avoid that a 'visual turn' in Indian studies would focus too exclusively on images as such. Because it would risk then to be, in the academic field, a pure and un-critical translation of this general evolution.

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[i] These figures have been obtained by using a combination of quantitative and qualitaive measures with the help of traders and of diverse professionals associated with the market.