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# *THE SUBALTERN SPACE - SLUM*

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**RESUMO** – A cultura ocidental dominante usa a racionalidade como desculpa para disfarçar a sua vontade de melhorar a ordem social das sociedades que considera inferiores à sua. Examinamos a representação visual que *National Geographic* faz do espaço subalterno da maior favela de Mumbai e as identidades construídas nesse espaço. Discutimos também o conceito de espaço, pois queremos mostrar como a identidade e o conhecimento estão ligados ao conceito de lugar desde que as experiências humanas são espaciais, ligadas a lugares específicos. As pessoas se conectam ao espaço de formas, tais como emocional, física, genealógica, econômica ou nacional. Qualquer que seja a relação que as pessoas têm com o espaço, esse engajamento forma sua identidade cultural. Explicamos, afinal, como espaços modernos e subalternos coexistem lado a lado nas cidades contemporâneas.
**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** – visualidade, crítica, cultura, representação, espaço, subalternidade



**ABSTRACT** – The dominant Western culture uses rationality as an excuse to disguise its will to improve the social order of the societies it deems inferior to its own. We examine the visual representation *National Geographic* makes of the subaltern space of Mumbai's biggest slum and the identities constructed in that space. We also discuss the concept of space and show how identity and knowledge are connected to place since human experiences are spatial, tied to specific places. People connect to space in such ways as emotionally, physically, genealogically, economically or nationally. Whatever the relation people have to space, this engagement shapes and forms their cultural identity. We finally explain how modern and subaltern spaces coexist side by side in contemporary cities.
**KEY WORDS** – visuality, critical, culture, representation, space, subaltern

*National Geographic Magazine (NGM)* during its 120 years of existence has become for its millions of readers a window to the world of "exotic" people and places through the representations it makes of the "Other". The criteria the magazine uses to select which cultures and their manifestations are depicted in it are part of the political as opposed to the scientific decisions the magazine has to make. Or better, the magazine's scientific decisions are always

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permeated by political aspects. Interrogating the cultural politics that are constitutive of the representational grammar used by the magazine seems essential in order to understand the aspects of culture worthy of being disclosed.

In May 2007, *National Geographic (NG)* constructed India's poverty through images and words in the article "India's shadow city: Dharavi". By representing one of the biggest slums of the developing world in its pages, *NG* adopts a trope which follows the cultural and philosophical currents of our times: not only representing the periphery, but also the borders of the periphery. In the title the use of the word "shadow" denounces people's indifference towards this eyesore in the center of Mumbai. Dharavi can be ignored since it is a shadow and not something real. The word shadow refers to a parallel, virtual reality, a state between materiality and illusion. Dharavi is Mumbai's darker self.

In the case of Dharavi, we can assume that the cultural politics that underlie the visual narrative is that of social documentation. According to Sontag (1977), photography as an instrument of social documentation emerged as a result of the middle-class attitude called humanism. However, this demeanor was not just something pure and superior. It was, in her opinion, "both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent" (p. 56). This humanitarian attitude appeared first in the United States when slums appeared to middle-class intellectuals as "enthralling decors" (56), she recalls. It was thought that the purpose of the social documentation aspect of photography was to uncover "a hidden truth" (p. 56) and at the same time show middle-class intellectuals that the existence of parallel realities unknown to them but living by them could be of some aesthetic interest.



This conflicting character of photographic representations as social documentation is taken further by Sontag (1977). She claims that this kind of photography "tended to praise or to aim at neutrality" (p. 63). The photographer, an outsider to the harsh reality he was representing, was declared a fair reproducer of the different and maybe exotic reality. This experience of getting to know what is out there but out of reach does not only express the fulfillment of a scientific interest, from the part of the creator and the beholder, but also an enhancement of "an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted" (p. 24). The strange, the exotic became interesting, attractive and even beautiful and came to coexist with the humanitarian objective.

Although this kind of photography stirs the feeling of compassion and the desire to help these people, it also makes western people want to straighten up the situation in which

"subaltern" people find themselves. This is the attitude that Sontag (1977) calls "the colonization through photography" (p. 64) because even when documentary photography is done with the best intentions it always reveals "a relation to geographic and social reality that is both more hopeful and more predatory" (p. 63). Predatory probably because the West is obsessed with trying to make everybody fit its mould, look and be like it.

*National Geographic* culturally produces the subaltern Indianness and this kind of representation takes the form of the found object (Mitchell, 2005, p. 114), of what has been hidden or rejected and is now discovered or rediscovered by the so-called centers of knowledge and power and offered for consumption. Although representing and interpreting the subaltern are forms of exercising power over these groups of people, power should be conceived not as absolute but as relational because wherever there is dominance there is also resistance. This resistance appears in the magazine in the narratives the slum-dwellers construct and the endurance they exhibit in the photographic narrative.

Although Dharavi is in the metropolitan city of Mumbai, it occupies a subaltern position in the stratification of the city life. It is a parallel universe whose people coexist side by side with Mumbai's middle class population but their realities are completely different. This spatial polarization makes local real estate agents and, probably, the state eager to clear the slum from the center of the metropolis and build high-rise apartments in the space it occupies. The procedure involves dividing Dharavi into five sectors, "each developed with the involvement of investors, mostly nonresident Indians. Initially, 57,000 Dharavi families will be resettled into high-rise housing close to their current residences. Each family is entitled to 225 square feet of housing, with its own indoor plumbing. In return for erecting the "free" buildings, private firms will be given handsome incentives to build for-profit housing to be sold at (high) market rates." The relocation of the slum dwellers will apparently result in improving their living standards, provide improved and healthier surroundings and better accommodation for these people. However, many of them will lose their professional space since it is in the slum they practice their craft and will probably end up becoming even more impoverished.



The slum is portrayed as "unique among slums", in the heart of Mumbai. Its location right in the middle of the map gives it a privileged status. Once upon a time, the slum was located on the northern fringe but the city of Mumbai grew and surrounded Dharavi. "It was a quirk of geography and history" that large masses of poor people inhabit the center of the city. The center got closer and closer to the periphery and ended up valorizing the slum and turning it into a

valuable asset. Lefebvre (1991) supports that "social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another" (p. 86). This may also be explained by Pratt's (1992) concept of "contact zone" (p. 4). In this case we can see Dharavi as the "contact zone" where the wave of capitalism that characterizes the Indian society nowadays collides and interferes with the local networks characteristic of the poorer strata of this society. It is undeniable that the great movement of neoliberalism tends to smash the lesser movement of local networks.

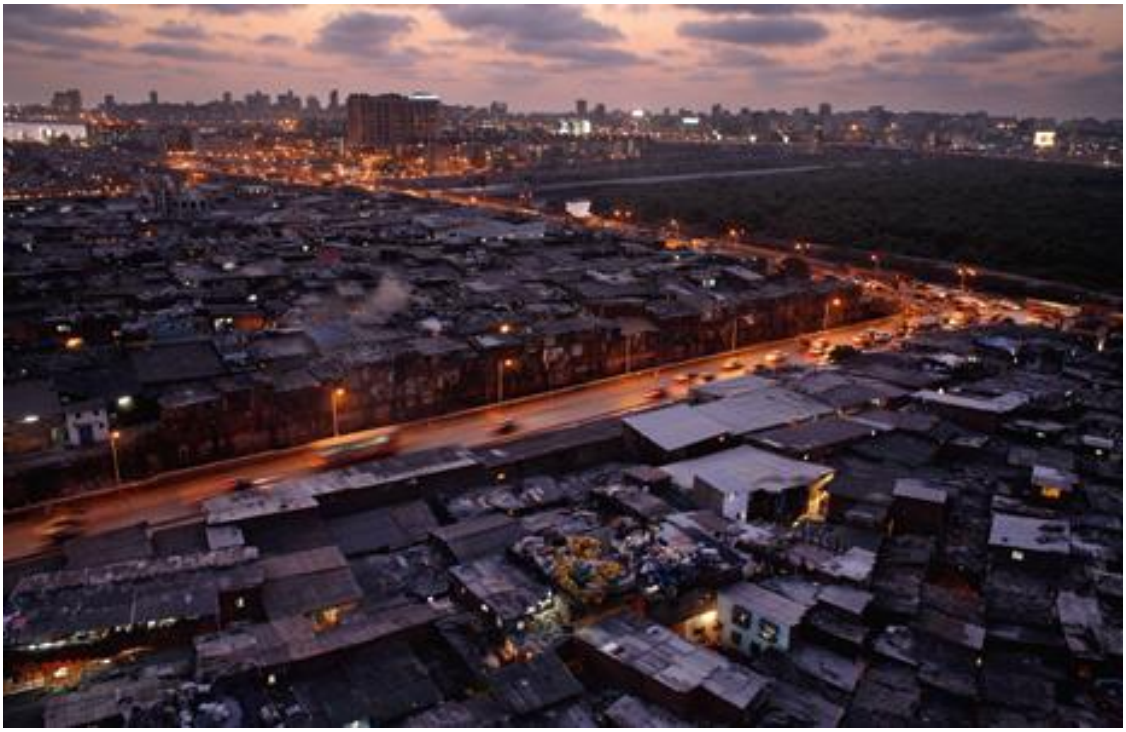



Figure 1: Cleaned up, cleared out: If city planners prevail, high-rise residential blocks and industrial parks will replace the dense web of metal-roofed homes and shops in Dharavi. Bisected by 60 Feet Road, the slum borders a mangrove swamp and the upscale Bandra neighborhood to the north. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

The picture of the aerial view of the Dharavi at twilight portrays the contrast and coexistence of the slum with the upscale Bandra neighborhood to the north. This kind of "grabber" image is common in the magazine because it gives the reader an overview of the story to be developed, is visually exciting and contains information relevant to the article. The aesthetically disorganized and slightly lit image of the slum is set in comparison to the organization and lights of the rich neighborhood in the background and the natural space of the large mangrove swamp that borders the slum. The horizontal space of the slum symbolizes submission and the vertical space of the Bandra neighborhood power. The caption reveals that

"if city planners prevail, high-rise residential blocks and industrial parks will replace the dense web of metal-roofed homes and shops in Dharavi".

*National Geographic* qualifies Dharavi as a kind of "subcontinental Harlem". This characterization is used by the magazine as a signifier loaded with meanings for the Americans. Readers construct Dharavi as an Indian version of Harlem. Like Dharavi, Harlem is a poor neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan, one of the richest spaces in the world. Like Dharavi, the American ghetto's very privileged position in the center of New York has turned it into a profitable site in the eyes of the capitalistic world. So much so that in the 1990's began the gentrification of Harlem that introduced the restoration and upgrading of the deteriorated urban property of the ghetto by middle-class or affluent people and resulted in the displacement of lower-income people.



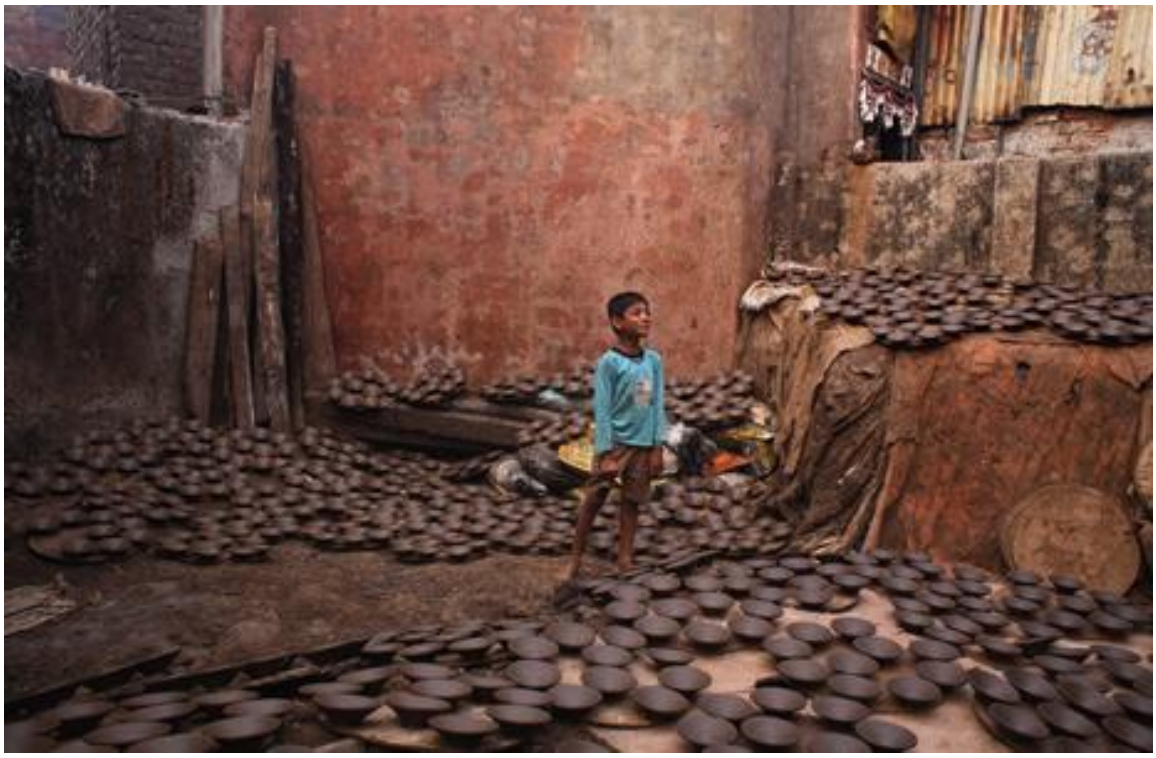

Figure 2: Bowled over: A potter's son surveys a yard paved with drying clay bowls, the traditional work of the Kumbhar caste, who set up their communal clay pits and kilns in the 1930s. The Kumbhars fear that any slum renewal will shrink their space or force them to relocate. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

Mumbai as a big city attracts the poor of the rural areas that look for better living conditions and job opportunities. Many times they find themselves becoming the poor of the urban areas, they live in slums and create in these communities an informal sector that runs parallel to the formal sector of the economy (SANTOS, 2002, p. 323). This is also how things

work in Dharavi. To get water you have to walk a good distance and when you get to the spigot you have to pay the local "goons" to fill your buckets. As slums are constructed as non-places by governments, they are deprived of public services such as water supply, electricity and sewage. Because of the illegal status of informal housing, slum dwellers often find themselves at the mercy of the local "mafia" that takes upon itself to provide basic services such as water or electricity.

Santos (2002) explains that in every big city there is a globalized economy that is produced from above and a sector produced from below (p. 323). In the parts of the city that are modern and bright, the technical object creates a mechanical routine, a system of non-surprising gestures that are based on rationality. These areas are juxtaposed to the use that the poor make of the city, in the "opaque" areas where they live. Santos (*ibid.*) considers these as spaces of creativity and approximation (p. 326). However, this aspect of creativity still privileges the few (the local mafias).

The knowledges involved in producing space are very different in the middle and upper class spaces of the city as opposed to the poorer areas. Rationality is the main ingredient of the knowledges that produce upper and middle class spaces. On the other hand, creativity and survival instinct produces spaces in the slums.



In the photo sequence *National Geographic* produces, it offers a series of photos that show people at work in order to make explicit the slum's parallel universe and its local networks. The picture on the cover portrays a potter's son in the yard of his father's shop. This kind of store is characteristic of the Kumbhar caste in Dharavi and typical of the local kind of business in the slum. The dominant color is brown and the texture of the yard exhibits the different materials accumulated that are characteristic of slums: wood planks, plastic bags and tin slates. The walls look old, chipped and dirty.

The boy, in the middle of the picture, although barefoot, is smiling and looks proud of his father's shop. The picture is taken from a high angle that shows the power we as viewers exercise on the represented participant, the little boy (KRESS and VAN LEEUWEN, 1996, p. 137). The boy also does not return the gaze of the viewer, does not challenge us or want something from us (*ibid.* p. 122). The shot is long distance and oblique and thus creates a feeling of detachment between the viewer and the representation (*ibid.* p. 130).

There are six pictures of people at work. However, all the jobs are associated to lower-class, low income laborers: potters, used-cooking-oil-can repairmen, sweatshop, laundry pool and

tanning industry laborers. There are work districts in the slums where "off-the-books, largely unregulated industries annually churn out some 500 million dollars' worth of goods", as the caption reveals. Although, western perception expects slums to be only poor and messy places, the pictures prove that there is a highly developed system of society established there. In the slum, workplaces and dwellings are intertwined. The space of a slum is an ensemble of the activities, professional, social and religious, that take place there.

The jobs are pictured as arduous and merciless. Laborers wash clothes where there is sewer runoff and kids are portrayed as taking a nap between shifts in an around-the-clock garment factory or sweatshop.



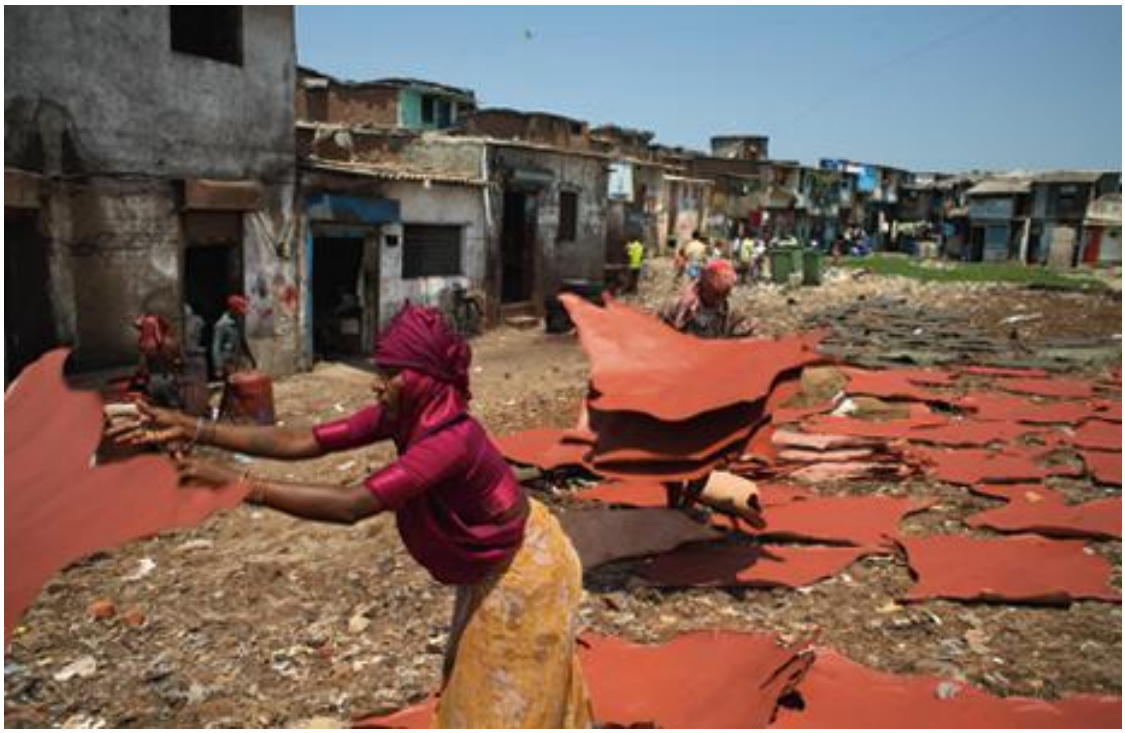

Figure 3: Elking out a living: The chance to earn a few dollars a day-and save for family and future-draws laborers from across India to Dharavi, whose off-the-books, largely unregulated industries annually churn out some 500 million dollars' worth of goods. In the Kalyanwadi tanning district, workers handle dry cowhides that will end up as purses and jackets stitched with fake designer labels. Often the work is dirty and punishing. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

These photographs illustrate Marx's "commodity fetishism" which affirms that in the capitalistic societies products are fetishized because their process of production is blurred (KAPOOR, 2004, p. 629). This happens because the relationship between the labor forces and the consumers is one of alienation since the manufacturers are based in developed countries and they "subcontract the most labor intensive stages of production" (SPIVAK, 1994, p. 83). In fact,

consumers nowadays try to know as little as possible about the processes involved in the production of the commodities they consume. In the picture of the Kalyanwadi tanning district, the caption communicates that "workers handle dry cowhides that will end up as purses and jackets stitched with fake designer labels. Often the work is dirty and punishing".

Most of these pictures are taken using a high and long distance angle that represents the submission and lower status of these people. Moreover, the properties of the pictures make the viewer get only partially involved with these people's hardships and observe them with an aesthetic and anthropological interest. The workers never stare back at the viewer as they are always absorbed in the professional activity. Squalor and unsanitary working conditions embrace these grassroots laborers.

In the visual narrative both men and women are constructed as hard working. Although *National Geographic* usually favors images of "men at work" here we can see a breach to this conception. Most of the images where there are people working, men, women and even children participate. So the society that emerges from this representation is one where women and children are also an active work force.



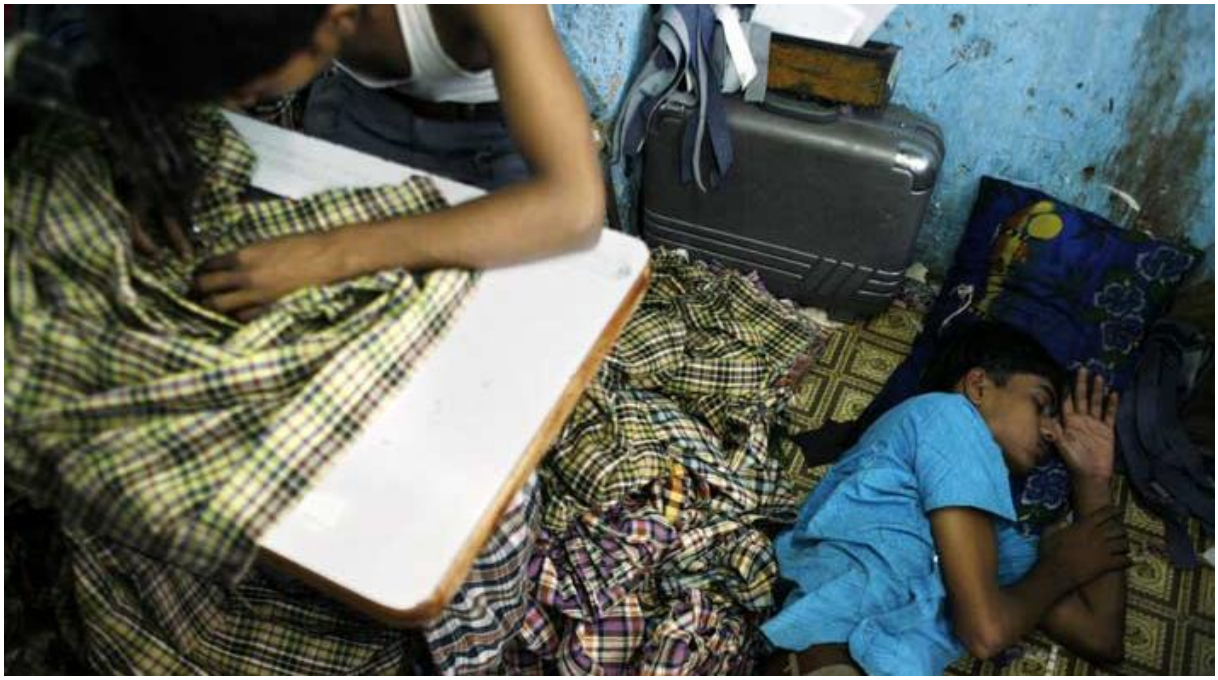

Figure 4: On a break: Out of sight behind flimsy walls hum hundreds of sweatshops. At an around-the-clock garment factory, a worker from Tamil Nadu sleeps before his next shift. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

The picture in the sweatshop is taken from a high angle. The laborers are boys whose faces are more hidden than exposed. These garment factories work around the clock and the

workers sleep on the floor between shifts. Space is always limited and passes a sense of confinement. Yet, the blue color of the wall and the sleeping boy's blue shirt animate the picture and give it a hopeful tone. Although we can not see the boys' faces very well, the exposed arms seem to belong to youngsters who should be at school, instead.

Life in the streets of Dharavi is represented as poor but picturesque. There are always people walking the narrow and dirty streets of the slum that are aesthetically interesting to the curious Western eye. In the first picture, a barefoot little girl in pink dress and a bag hanging from her arm is seen "strolling along a leaky water pipe through Dharavi's industrial district". There are other people, mainly kids, in the picture performing what seem to be every day activities. The messy appearance of the place with the colorful clothes that are hanging everywhere, the plastic bags on the roof tops and the painted wood of the houses make readers catch a glimpse of a piece of the slum reality. The materials the construction of these houses requires is of interest for the understanding of this space. This space is a product of Indian history, the consequence of migrations from poorer states that the government, embracing modernity, is about to erase.



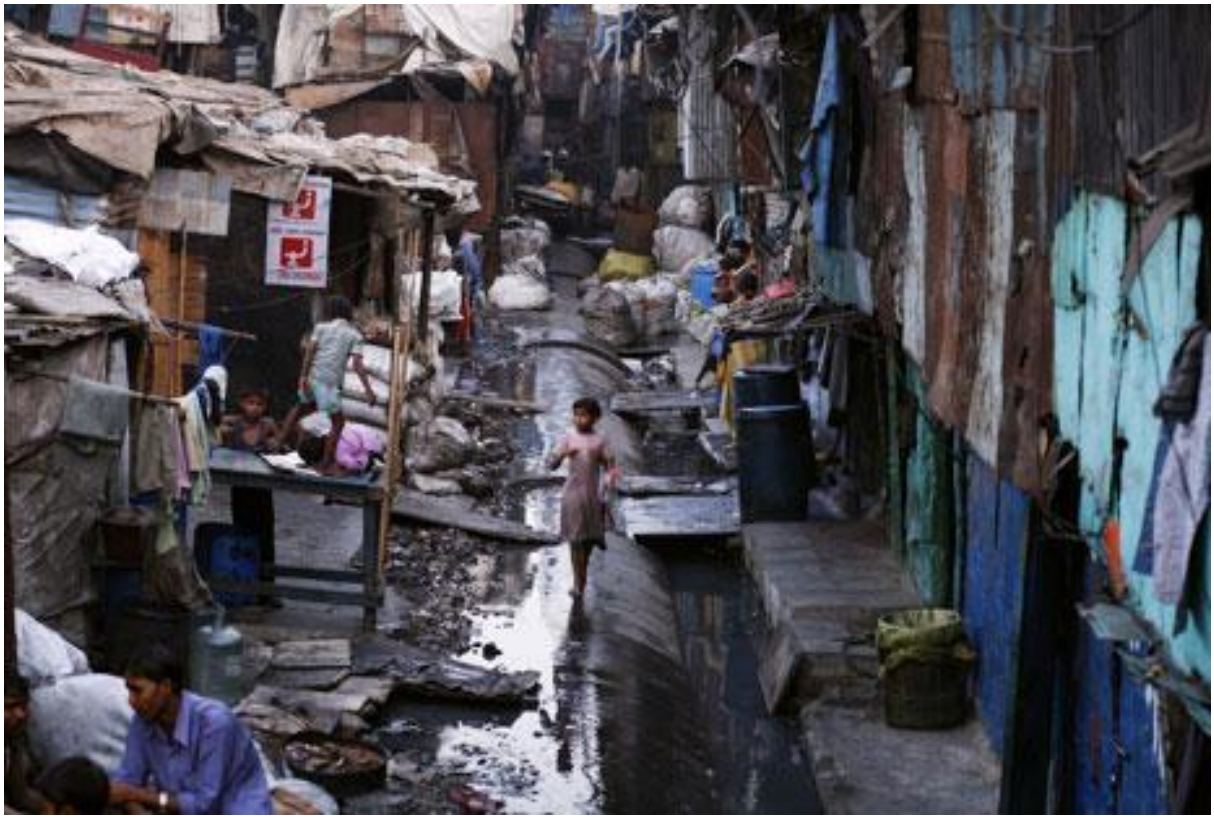

Figure 5: A neighborhood walk: A young girl strolls along a leaky water pipe through Dharavi's industrial district. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

The slum is a place where its inhabitants are surrounded by a recycled and deteriorated world. However, the proliferation of such places in the urban space makes them become an integral component of our urban networks. Slums might be seen as non-places by governmental institutions or as a place that can be turned into profitable real estate by entrepreneurs but for the residents of the slum it is "home". Some of the families have been living in the slum for more than three generations. By being born there, by laboring in that space, by creating a home in the slum and even being buried there, dwellers have created ties to this piece of land. Their identity is linked to this space since the fulfillment of their material, spiritual and mental needs happens there.

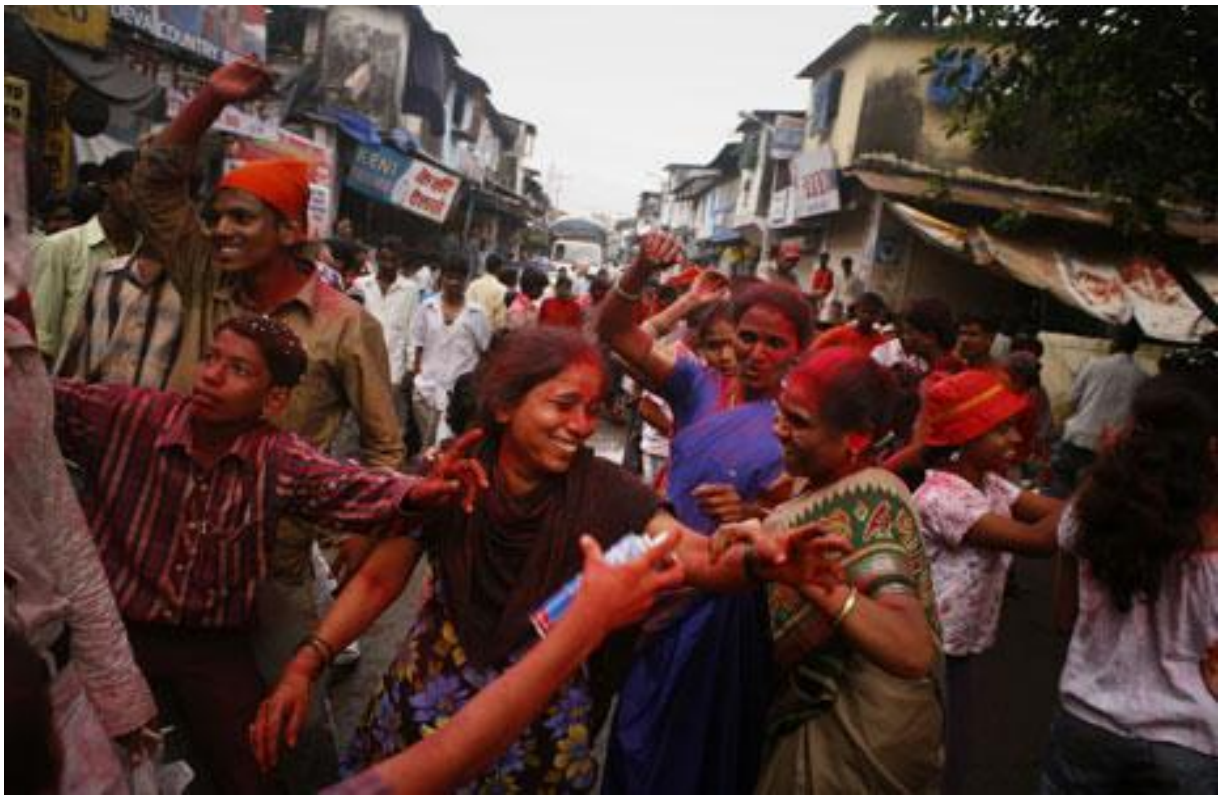



Figure 6: Good times, good luck: A Dharavi street pulses with merriment for the Hindu festival honoring a favorite god of the working class, elephant-headed Ganesh, who offers good luck. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

The fulfillment of spiritual needs can be seen in two different kinds of pictures. In the first one we observe crowds in the streets because of Ganesh Chaturthi, "a Hindu festival honoring a favorite god of the working class, elephant-headed Ganesh, who offers good luck", as the caption reveals. People look colorful and cheerful and in the background we can see

movement of cars and buses. Life is buzzing everywhere in Dharavi in spite of the poverty. The magazine shows the importance of religion to the poor since it is in religion that they find consolation for their problems in everyday life. Religious devotion is also used as glue which helps hold communities together. It is a bond people create that gives a feeling of approximation. The population in Dharavi is portrayed as Hindu. There are no Muslim or Singh's religious practices represented in the visual narrative.

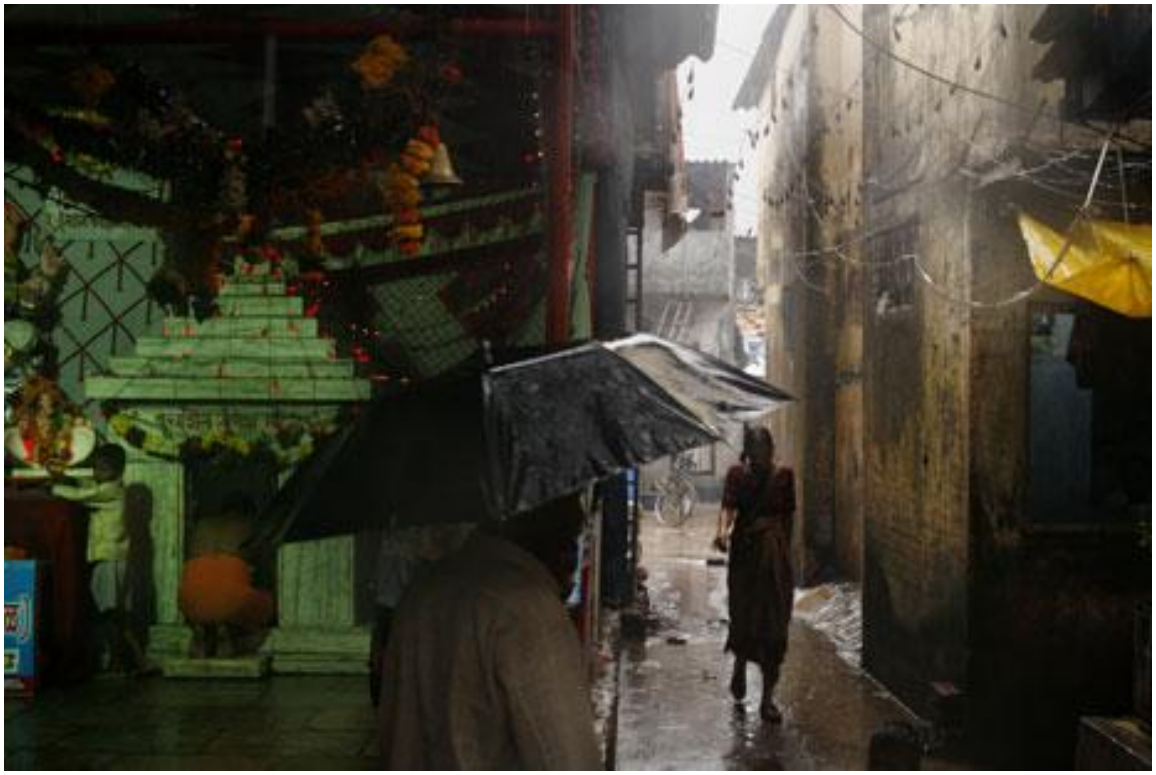



Figure 7: Refreshing aggravation: Rain brings mixed blessings to the streets of Dharavi. A downpour cools the air, fills buckets for washing, and thins foot traffic, bringing brief meditative quiet to a corner Hindu temple. But rain also leaks through tattered roofs, turns floors to mud, and floods the lanes with excrement, cause for more urgent prayers to the gods. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

Another image of life in the streets of the slum is the one of a rainy day. There is a play in the picture between the shadows and light. There is a religiosity and spirituality in the picture, because of the atmosphere the green Hindu temple creates with its small, red lamps. We can see a person kneeling down in the entrance to the temple. The mysterious aura the photograph carries is linked to its religious element. Holy spaces are present in the slum because its dwellers are capable of feeling the presence of god in spite of their hardships. Religion is one of the institutions that have an important significance in the consciousness of the subaltern. We agree

with Hardiman (1997) and his explanation of the reason why religion is so important for subaltern consciousness: "All religions consist to a large extent of assimilated folk beliefs. It is this that gives them their mass appeal and great pertinacity over time" (105).

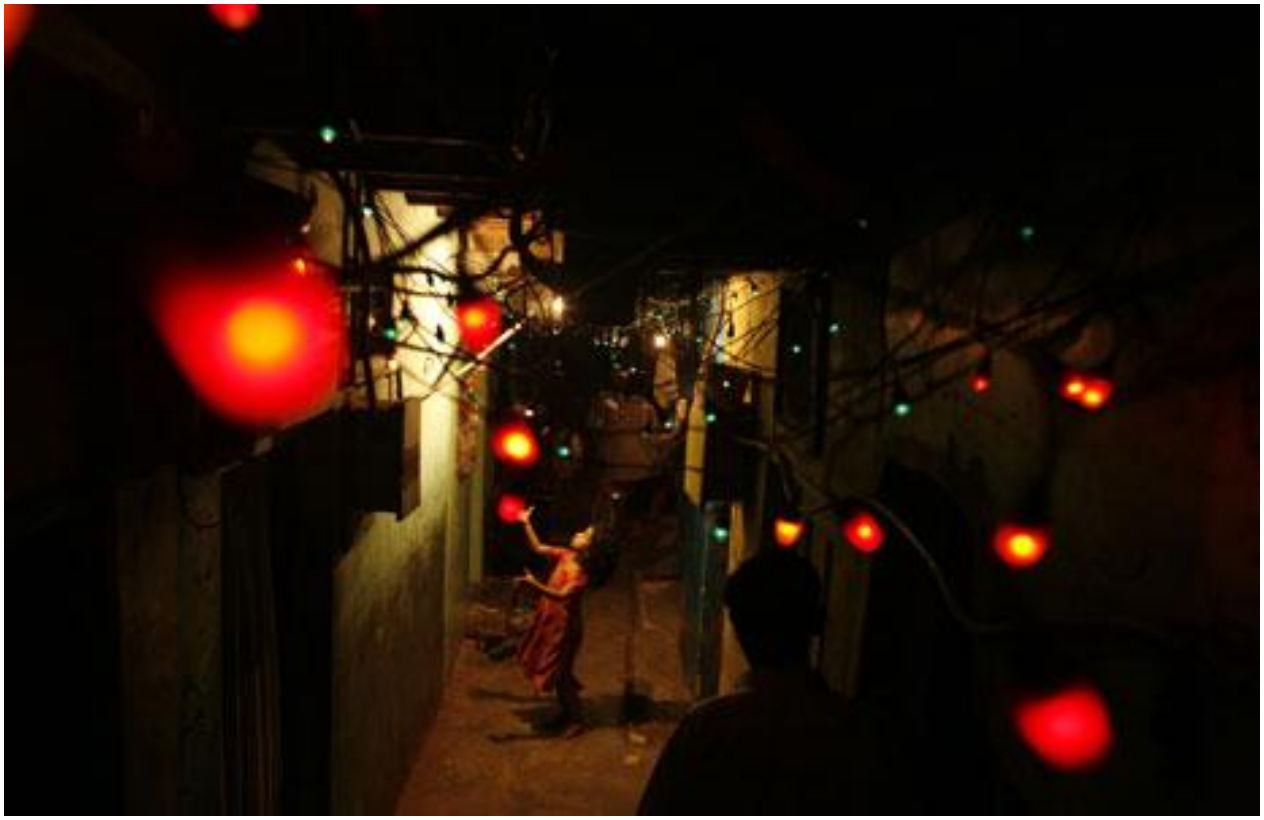



Figure 8: Moment of enlightenment: A barefoot child finds enchantment in a string of lights hung for a wedding, a grace note of survival in Mumbai's die-hard slum. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

All the participants in the photo seem in a moment of meditation. Poverty does not seem to weaken the faith and spiritualism of the dwellers of the slum. The caption comes to ironize and anchor the effects this picture has on the readers: "But rain also leaks through tattered roofs, turns floors to mud, and floods the lanes with excrement, cause for more urgent prayers to the gods". The use of the plural "gods" affects the reader's interpretations whose belief in the truth of his monotheistic faith and the power of his god is unshakeable.

The last picture of the article which also shows life in the streets of Dharavi has a melancholic or nostalgic streak. The little girl is enchanted by the little lamps that were hung

there because of a wedding. The fact that the little red lights have been put there because of a wedding shows the persistence of hope in the slum in spite of all the difficulties.

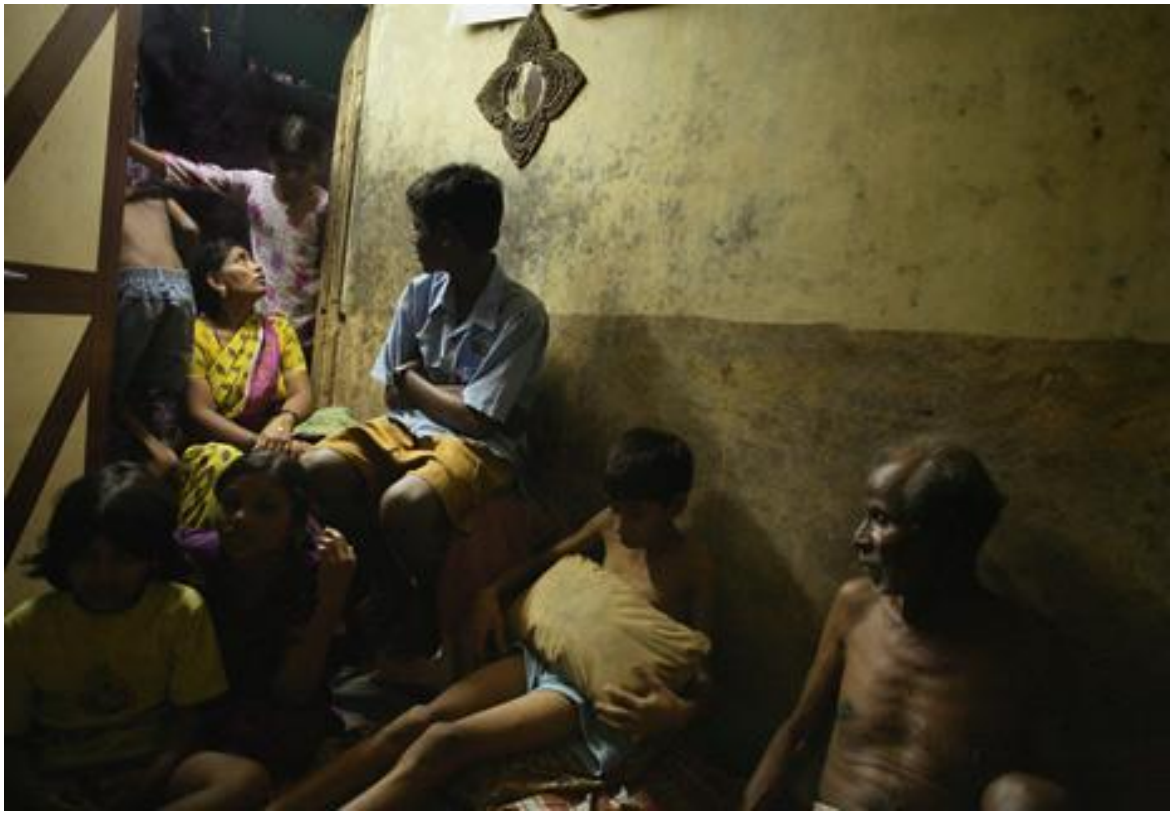



Figure 9: Family life: Fifteen members-and three generations-of the Shilpiri family dwell in two small rented rooms. With the patriarch crippled, at right, and husbands missing or dead, the household survives on what the women earn by cleaning houses and selling sugarcane. (BENDIKSEN, 2007)

Living conditions in the private space of the slum are also symbolic of the deterioration and scarceness of means. Dharavi's dwellings are pictured as poor, but colorful for the appreciation of the magazine's readership. In the picture we see eight of the fifteen members of a family who live in two small rented rooms. The patriarch of the family is reported crippled (the man on the right) and the household is supported by the women since husbands and fathers are missing or dead. Again, the participation of women in the working force of India is established. The picture is very dark, as most of the pictures of this visual narrative. The subaltern that resides in the slum is more hidden than made obvious in the pictures. The elites show desire to penetrate the secrets of the life of the subaltern but in a moderate manner. In this picture we can only see clearly the face of the woman whose yellow sari throws light on her face. The little girl's white and pink shirt also animates the picture but her characteristics are obscured.

In this picture there are no material goods exposed. Only people and the intimate physical relationship they have built because of lack of space. Some of these dark bodies are exposed and most of them sit on the floor. The spatial experience these people have is very different from that of people that live in middle or high class spaces. The intimacy and safety Tuan (2007) refers to when people experience place (p. 107) acquires different connotations in this context.

In the article, it is made clear the multiculturalism and heterogeneity that constitutes Indian subaltern society: "The Kumbhars came from Gujarat to establish a potter's colony. Tamils arrived from the south and opened tanneries. Thousands traveled from Uttar Pradesh to work in the booming textile industry. The result is the most diverse of slums, arguably the most diverse neighborhood in Mumbai, India's most diverse city". Similar to Harlem, and probably other slums around the globe, the ethnic combination of Dharavi is the result of migration waves in the beginning of the 20th century. The magazine deconstructs the homogeneity the western mind applies to the Other. The picture we get from the article is that of many different ethnicities coexisting peacefully in the same space.

The special status of the Kumbhar potters is stated in the article: "Their special status derives not-only from their decades-long residence but also from the integrity of their work. While Dharavi is famous for making use of things everyone throws away, the Kumbhars create the new". The slum has its own caste system. One of the reasons why the Kumbhars have a special status is because of their profession which is different from the most prominent activity of the residents of the slum: recycling.



However, the magazine suggests that the international system of modernization has infiltrated into the non-space and there are capitalistic forces operating in the slum: "But, one day, as in the case of Dharavi, the slum might find itself in the 'wrong' place. Once that happens, the bulldozer is always a potential final solution".

Slum clearance is one of the reasons *National Geographic* is publishing this story. The article juxtaposes the point of view of the inhabitants of the slum, which shows a personal perspective with the professional point of view of Mukesh Mehat, a real estate agent who has honed his plan for "a sustainable, mainstreamed, slum-free Dharavi". The narratives of the people who voice their opinions in the article structure the article as a play, a movement from the personal to the professional. Although the real estate agent has absorbed American capitalism and sees America as an inspiration, he is also concerned with the opinions of the dwellers of Dharavi.

The identity of the real estate agent is constructed as being on the contact zone (Pratt, 1992, p. 4) of global western trends and local Indian viewpoint. He arrived at Dharavi, opened an office and was ready to tear it down. However, after he started "talking to people, seeing who they were, how hard they worked, and how you could be there for months and never once be asked for a handout" he had an epiphany. He saw that these people were not different from his own father that had also migrated to Mumbai from Gujarat. They have the same dreams for the future. And this is what made him dedicate the rest of his life to fixing the slums. Although, the real estate agent is clearly influenced by the rules of profit, he has a very personal, sentimental and compassionate approach to his capitalistic project. He does not see the slum dwellers as an undifferentiated mass of people but he identifies them as heroes who struggle for their lives. Therefore, a variable of western capitalist is created that carries characteristics of Indianness.

Indian identity is constructed as having agency and resisting India's capitalistic processes. Both the real estate agent and the inhabitants of Dharavi are represented as questioning their value and culture systems and in this manner they are transformed into agency. This agency emerges from the understanding that cultures and identities are highly heterogeneous and complex and that the local survives by both embracing and rejecting the global. Furthermore, the narrative that emerges is at the same time influenced by global and local philosophical and cultural currents. The local acquires a dialectic with global economical, political and social issues.



The people of the slum are depicted as masters of themselves. They have a power that does not come from outside, but from the self. They seem to master themselves and, in consequence their universe. They resist western modernity and create Indian modernity. During these processes Indian culture becomes more globalized and at the same time it is Indianizing the world, by making the world more familiar with Indian values.

The residents of the slum give conflicting receptions to the real estate's plan. Having a private toilet does not seem enticing. It is impressive the fact that throughout the article, Dharavi's dwellers are constructed as having strong opinions about everything. They seem to be politicized and updated with what is happening. Shaikh Mobin, a plastics recycler in his mid-30s describes his business as "the post-consumer economy, turning waste into wealth". He thinks that change is necessary because "polluting industries like recycling have no business being in the center of a modern metropolis". However, he also declares that the main reason for the existence of slums is the government's failure to create housing for the middle-income people.

Corruption is also one of the reasons slums are there to stay. It is called bureaucracy in the article, though. What Mehta calls ""vote bank"-a political party, through a deep-rooted system of graft, lays claim to the vote of a particular neighborhood. As long as the slum keeps voting the right way, it's to the party's advantage to keep the community intact."

The abstract truth that is constructed through the language of our analysis is imposed on the reality of the senses, bodies, wishes and desires of the people that inhabit the space described visually by the magazine and linguistically by the magazine's text and our analysis. Dharavi acquires a symbolic value since it represents a reality that most urban spaces have to deal with. Is India's manner of dealing with this issue an example of political decision? The Indian government's decision of how to deal with spaces of informal housing can be used as a model or standard for similar cases in the global world.

The reading we make of this space derives from the standpoint of knowledge the researcher occupies. Dharavi proves that modern and bright spaces exist side by side with opaque and poor areas in Mumbai. There is a movement between the two poles that is visually and verbally represented in the article. Finally, the vertical aspect the state and real estate agents would like Dharavi to acquire conceals and reproduces 'meanings' of arrogance, the will to power, "a reference to the phallus and a spatial analogue of masculine brutality" (Lefebvre, 1991: 144).



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