

Invasive Media: The Making of A *Gregarious Species*

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In 2019, millions of gregarious desert locust swarms flew across the India-Pakistan border and ravaged farmers' fields. Rising emissions had yielded melting glaciers and heavy rains which are suitable conditions for locust eggs to hatch and survive. In the same year, Indian government officials described migrants as termites at nationalist rallies across the country. Pakistani state ministers suggested people cook locust biryani. Farmers started to wonder if locusts were bioweapons from enemy countries, sent to destroy their crops. As plant scientists met at the India-Pakistan border to discuss how to manage this "transboundary pest," Indian farmers circulated videos of locusts on YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Staged hangings and beheadings of "foreigner locusts" betrayed the masculinist, nationalist idioms of farmer insecurity in the Thar Desert region. Pakistani, Sindhi and Urdu news media asked whether locusts were *halal* or *haram*. Indian, Hindi news media reported the swarms with headlines such as "Seema Paar, Tiddee Terror" ("Cross-Border, Locust Terror"). Together with news footage of contemporaneous xenophobic political rallies, these locust videos comprised a dense, blurry swarm of digital media images of "invasive others."



Fig 1. Locusts covering a tree, as seen through a cracked jeep window in the Thar Desert.

In *A Gregarious Species* (2021, 10 min), my practice-based study of digital media images of locusts, I leverage the blur as a formal filmic technique to connect nationalism, environmental crisis, and everyday precarity as interlinked phenomena. Evoking the felt sensations of a blurry locust swarm—a dense, whirling, cloud-like phenomenon—my glitchy, split-screen assembly of cellphone videos over nature/culture as a cacophonous zone of indistinction. In the two-minute opening sequence, we see a series of fuzzy videos of thousands of locusts marching and flying across desert patches, crop fields, asphalt roads, and urban terraces. I collected high-resolution footage of locusts on my Canon C100 camera while accompanying fieldworkers on their pest control missions and farmers in their crop fields. Foregoing sleek recordings, I chose to source the film with found footage. To evoke popular visions of locust swarms, I used low-resolution “poor images” (Steyerl) from individually produced mobile phone videos. For Hito Steyerl, poor images are the debris, trash, and excess of capitalist image production, lacking value within the class society of images. I bring together such blurry cellphone videos from India and Pakistan to reveal links between dispersed producers across borders. My arrangement of these poor images

seeks neither to inform nor entertain, but to organize viewers into anti-national forms of thinking through a shared experience of the locust swarm.

Two scientific terms for locusts caught my attention in developing this piece: “gregarization” and “transboundary.” Both terms offer an entry point into thinking together about insects and blurs. Indeed, the rapid movement of most flying insects appears blurry to the human eye. Scientists use the term “transboundary” to refer to the way animals, insects, and plants move across national borders. International bodies such as the United Nations use the term to promote cooperation between countries for managing cross-border “pests” such as locusts. While the administrative-scientific term partially maintains the mythos of state territories, its usage also betrays the artifices of international borders by recognizing that nonhuman mobility “naturally” exists outside of such borders. In this vein, Eleana Kim’s theorization of the term “flyway path” offers visions for interdependent, cross-border connections. While ecologists use the phrase to refer to animal migration paths that link ecosystems across countries, Kim sees these flyways as planetary models for privileging nonhuman animal agency. An attention to interspecies cross-border movements points to possibilities for symbiotic relations beyond domination and subordination. Indeed, insects have long been iconic figures for theorizing sociopolitical formations (Schwaighofer).

I evoke these contiguous geographies and shared cultural landscapes of locust flight through the juxtaposition of unmarked mobile phone videos from Sindh and Rajasthan, Karachi and Delhi. The cuts and split screens yoke these disparate, yet linked, locales together into a zone of indistinction, even as a postcolonial international border has split the region into “enemy states.” Shots of pesticide-spraying drones against a blue sky followed by the lifeless locusts are a reminder of the militaristic connections between border control and pest management in this

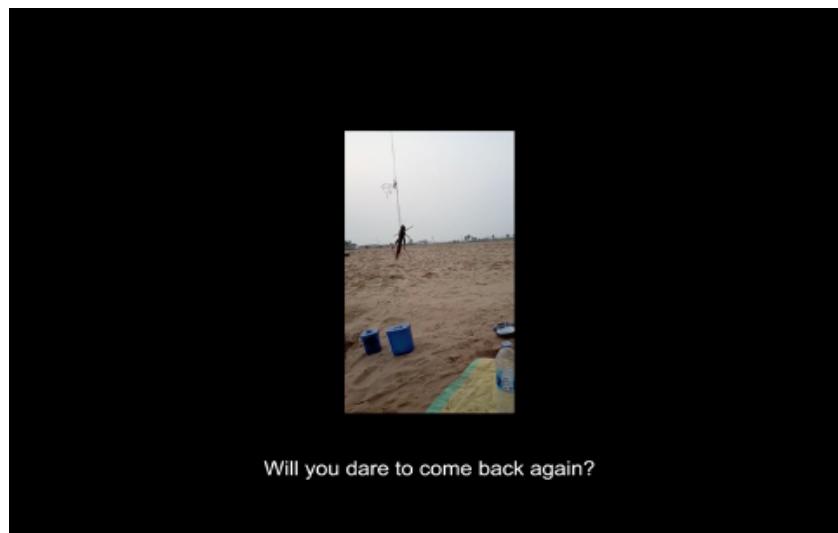


Fig 2, 3, 4. Screenshots of farmer-produced mobile phone videos of locusts in the film.

desert region. Even as the plant scientists I interviewed spoke fondly of cross-border meetings with their counterparts in other countries, the hawkish fervor of news coverage and governmental rhetoric about foreign locusts pierced the air.

As locusts travel across contiguous geographies, they also move between and bring together discourses of multiple stakeholders: farmers, scientists, and politicians. In two moments in the film, flying locusts from a farmer's mobile phone video flicker on the screen, interjecting into a Zoom webinar and a political rally. The glitch effect contends that pest management,



Fig 5. Glitch screen.

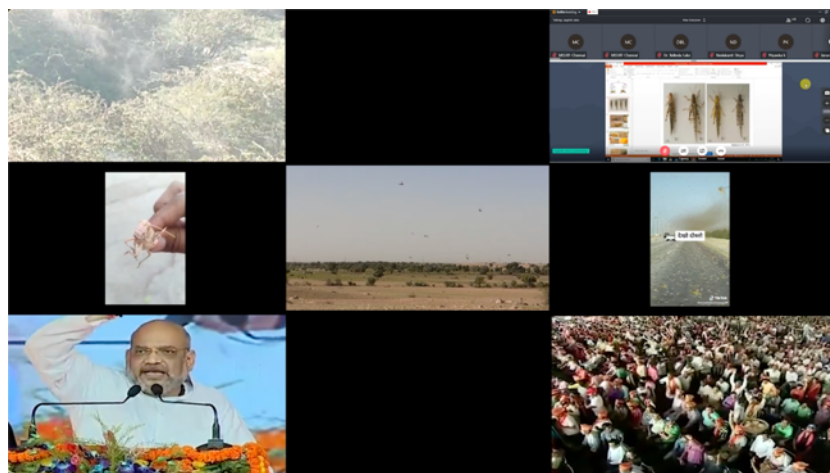


Fig 6. Split-screen collage in closing sequence.

nationalist, and everyday farmer discourses are overlapping. These arenas are interlinked through the locust, a slippery boundary object that retains its form even as it shifts across perspectives (Starr and Griesemer).

Moreover, the glitches suggest a bug in the system. The locust, of course, is a literal bug in the visual field, but the nationalist rhetoric of government officials and everyday farmers alike are wider systemic failures that perpetuate inequities. The glitch also suggests that the penetrative force of swarming bugs and climate change supersede the social artifice of borders. Even as an Indian government official calls for the expulsion of foreigners, we see flying insects defiantly enter the frame.

Frames proliferate in the closing sequence, a cacophonous split screen. The split screen is a visual argument about the proliferation of sensory inputs and the overwhelming collision of nationalist rhetoric, scientific jargon, and farmer insecurity. The cascading xenophobia on screen further conveys the anti-sociality of nationalism, as well as the limits of technocratic governance to contain the swell of swarms. Reminiscent of the glitchy cut to flying locusts after the moderator's question in the Zoom webinar, "What is the one we should worry about, [Solitary or Gregarious Females]?" the split screen conveys the indistinction between individuals in collective formations like the swarm. Like thousands of individual locusts in a swarm, scientific, nationalist, and agrarian discourses comprise an entangled force.

Engaging Jussi Parikka's notion of "insect media," the final arrangement of multiple frames draws from the "gregarious" social organization of locusts, the swarm. Evocative of the gregarization process, whereby solitary locusts "gregarize," changing color from brown to electric yellow and becoming indistinguishable from one another in an aggregate swarm, the split

screen suggests the interrelatedness of discursive fields. This interrelatedness is also gestured toward throughout the film through the inclusion of videos from TikTok, a platform that operates through inter-referentiality. Akin to the individually indistinguishable locusts in a swarm, these mobile videos' meaning and existence are defined in relation to a wider whole. As we apprehend the locust as mediating between multiple stakeholders, we arrive at a rendering of insects not only through media (Brown), but as media (Klein; Parikka). Through a zootechnical swarm-like arrangement, the overlays and cuts in the film mimic the entanglement of multiple discourses, the entanglement of insects and media.

In sum, the film argues that insect images circulate within a populist discursive sphere that leverages an interspecies language of pestilence, reifying national binaries between citizen and foreigner while blurring other boundaries. The film visualizes how locusts metaphorically and materially stand in for foreigners and minorities as pests external to the national body politic. Magnifying the insect as a flexible symbol and substance across borders, my artistic work engages broader conversations about insectivity (Brown) and invasive others (Ticktin; Subramaniam). Moreover, my exploration of the affects of political rallies with “poor images” adds to our understanding of populism's enchantments amidst subaltern dispossession (Akhtar).

Like the excesses that spill out of nationalist frames, locust flight and the plurality of lived realities exceed the binaries of borders. The blurry, “transboundary,” and “gregarious” movements of nonhuman animals pose challenges to the contain-and-capture impulses of border regimes and smartphone cameras. There is both tragedy and optimism, then, in the border sequence where we can see the continuous desert landscape through gaps in a barbed wire fence, aware of a thorny separation. The overlaid lyrics of a classic Bollywood song from this TikTok video of locusts at the border are foreboding even as they seem to offer some assurance:

bura waqt hai, magar gham nahin

juda honewale kabhi ham nahin

ki yah dosti toot sakti nahin

[It is a difficult time, but there is no sorrow.

We will never be separated. This friendship cannot be broken.]

A Gregarious Species visualizes the deafening rhetoric of invasion across our natural and national worlds. The film features locusts as flying, trans/boundary objects that connect nationalist politics and farmer insecurity. Through blurs, split screens, and glitches, I contemplate interbeing between citizens and foreigners, states and nations, insects and humans, and screens and selves.

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