In Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, James C. Scott argues that the state, as a site of formal organisation, can be thought through a visual metaphor. It strives constantly for everything to be neat, ordered, measured. Planning and regimes of making-visible are at the centre of its activity. In the opening paragraph of the first chapter, Scott explains this visual dimension to state practice:

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. Combined with similar observations, an overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation.¹

More recently, Scott has supplemented this description of statist vision with his own kind of visual regime, what he refers to as “squinting like an anarchist”.² Perhaps he chooses the term 'squint' because it questions the aspirations to totality that we see in state-controlled vision. Squinting is a form of seeing that takes for granted unclearness, partialness of vision, dimness of light. Squinting as a metaphor for looking opens up different modes of visuality that destabilise the urge for comprehensive representation. It is based on access to fragments, it underlines the ability to see even...
when conditions for sight are not optimum. When we squint, we reinforce our ability to make sense of a distorted field of vision; we squint because although we cannot make out the whole picture, we can make sense of a part. Invoking the squint as a mode of seeing is, for me, part of a larger project to turn away from the desire to represent totalities, in order to analyse events on their own terms.

My attempt to do this begins with an account of the use of parachutes in Ladakh. Ladakh is an area located in Jammu and Kashmir, where India shares borders with both China and Pakistan. Military presence asserts itself through signs, barbed wires, army vehicles, supply trucks, check-posts and gun-toting jawans. Forward posts are virtually uninhabitable in the winter, with whole areas being cut off from vehicular and pony traffic. In such a situation, the army negotiates the rugged and inhospitable terrain through what is inescapably a statist visual mode, perceiving and negotiating space from above, a literal manifestation of Scott’s metaphor. It airdrops supplies – reportedly everything from food to fuel to cars – by using parachutes of different grades and sizes. The parachute, as a form, lends itself to seeing from above. It promotes a control over space and time, in that it facilitates military ‘occupation’, and military preoccupations.

The local jawans and porters become the starting point of a long and intricate supply chain in Ladakh, a chain that fundamentally alters the parachute form utilised by the state or the army, and repurposes it to fit the needs of the local Ladakhi. Ripped parachutes are collected and sold to civilian Ladakhis, brought either on pony or smuggled out of army compounds by truck drivers who transport them to various parts of the state. Locals repair and repurpose parachutes into tents, which are most often put into use in the aid of informal economic activity. Commonly, they are used to set up tea stalls in remote areas en route to popular tourist sites, or as shades to roadside restaurants. Like the army, parachutes also help the Ladakhis in the mediation of time and the occupation of space, insofar as they give them the ability to negotiate their land, occupy it and fuel their livelihoods. If parachutes facilitate ‘seeing like a state’, and attempt to render geographies visible from a height, then tents ‘lateralise’ vision. Instead of descending from a height with the assumption of full visual mastery, reminiscent of cinematic images, the tent is always already embedded in forms of life that do not ascend. If the parachute’s field of vision recalls Paul Virilio’s discussion of the links between war and cinema, ‘seeing like a tent’ is akin to the immersed, limited and embedded nature of amateur videos filmed from amidst crowds in public spaces.

The link between seeing, parachutes and cinema on the one hand, and squinting, tents and amateur video on the other, shares an affinity with the debates around cultures of the ‘poor image’, which emerges in direct opposition to the industrial, polished cinematic image. The poor image not only thrives quite literally on squints (as anyone who has seen a handycam version of the latest movie release well knows), but it also opens out into a practical realm of waste by referring to images that in terms of quality would never enter the formal domain of circulation.

Squinting allows us to see the productive, bustling potentialities of waste. To a formal, statist, aerial vision, the lines between waste and value are so clear that any spillage is impossible to imagine. Like the poor image, the tent is not just a metaphor for waste, but is a waste-object. It is only after the parachute has run its course as a productive commodity that it is re-appropriated within a waste economy. This repurposed waste object allows us to adopt a view that destabilises a host of social sciences assumptions around waste and value. These ambitious and somewhat speculative links between sight, economy and culture are crucial in entering the space that the tents of Ladakh allow us to think about. What I ‘occupy’ myself with in this piece, therefore, is not an anthropological account of tents and informal economies, but a set of speculations about the metaphorical and ‘real’ implications and virtues of partial sight.
The rest of this paper hopes to show how by squinting we can reveal geographies of the contemporary that aerial planning visions are often – to use a problematic word – ‘blind’ to. To explicate a squinted vision of the present, I will use the example of the parachutes/tents given above and try to show how the dichotomy between waste and value is largely a construct bequeathed to us by aerial, ‘capitalist’ forms of seeing. Once we discard the supremacy of vision and descend from our parachutes, we find that the tents in Ladakh are part of a complicated mediation between the occupying force of sovereign power and the ‘occupancy’ of common people who repurpose broken parachutes (waste) and infuse them with new value. Arguments of the kind I am suggesting also push for a continuum in place of the representation of distinct ‘sectors’ of the economy, and refuse to make the planner distinctions between formal/informal, authentic/pirate, etc.

**Repurposing Waste**

The phenomenon of ‘capitalist’ waste, not so uncommon in India or third world countries in general, is complicated by considering the informal repurposing of waste objects. Very simply, we can suggest that for an aerial, planner imaginary, the lines between ‘good objects’ (commodities) and ‘bad objects’ (waste) are drawn with clarity. The contemporary discourse on recycling attempts precisely to formally recapture waste objects and render them back into a commodity for the capitalist marketplace. However, in informal economies, hidden from the vision of policymakers, the distinctions between waste and value are consistently challenged. In this context, it should be said that there is a semantic distinction to be made between the words ‘object’ and ‘thing’. In a discussion of what he calls “Thing Theory”, Bill Brown remarks that we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.6

Foregrounding objects (things) that do not fulfil their ‘intended’ uses allows me to tap into a discourse that explores a difference between objects and things, a discourse based not only on their degrees of usefulness to us, but also on our affective relationships to them. Repurposed waste commodities specifically disrupt discourses of the production, distribution, exhibition and consumption of commodities – what in Brown’s language would be their intended “subject-object relation”. All the ‘things’ that Brown mentions are, in some sense, waste – a broken drill, a defective car, a dirty window. Although Brown’s examples all have an element of temporariness to them (that is, the ‘things’ may return to being ‘objects’ once more if fixed, repaired or cleaned), I wish to locate my analysis in spaces where ‘objects’ that are relegated to ‘things’ stay that way: in the so-called “wastelands of capital”.7

Waste is fundamentally a performative concept. Nothing is inherently waste – objects become so when we designate them as such. Capitalism functions through a cogent value/waste dichotomy; indeed, it might be argued that the notion of ‘value’ in capitalism can only be upheld in a context where there is a notion of ‘waste’. What happens to our convictions about capitalism if we reject thinking in the terms of this dichotomy?

For Vinay Gidwani, “waste is the specter that haunts value”.8 We can see this, for instance, in David Harvey’s work, where he argues that:
if value is interpreted as human labour in its social aspect under capitalism, then ‘not-value’ can be interpreted as human labour that has lost its social meaning owing to processes that are also unique to capitalism.9

Gidwani notes that Harvey is not positing waste as the negation of the concept of value. Instead, he coins the neologism ‘not-value’, and tellingly, understands this negative-form to lie inside capitalism. Gidwani critiques Harvey’s formulation for “remain[ing] in a binary and dependent relation to capital... It does not allow us to think of not-value as a prospective space of difference or alterity not contingent on the logic of capital”.10 While I agree with Gidwani’s critique of Harvey, I am appreciative of Harvey’s use of the term ‘not-value’. Whether or not it was his intention, by distinctly conceptualising “not-value” as lying within the ‘logic’ of capitalism, Harvey opens up a space through which we can distinguish between the “not-value” that is essential for the ‘logic of value’ to work within capitalism, and ‘waste’ as a category that, in Gidwani’s words, lies outside of that logic and is not contingent on it.

I would propose that certain labours of both of the repair and the repurposing of waste, as well as the production of waste, can be considered ‘outside’ this logic of capitalism that Harvey so ingeniously (if unintentionally) makes theoretical space for.

While thinking through the category of waste, I shall try to build a case for instances in which we can view waste as a space that disrupts the logic of capital. The not-value that is still within the system can be thought of as that which undergoes ‘re-commoditisation’, that is to say, capitalist value gets re-imbued into waste. My earlier gesture to capitalist enterprises of recycling, or the carbon credit economy, provides examples of this phenomenon at work. The interactions between individuals and waste-objects can however also be mapped in ways and spaces that are not governed by the operations of capitalist enterprise. There is a distinction to be made between a recycling enterprise that is structured along capitalist lines and the refashioning of objects from waste on a smaller scale, as is often the practice in the ‘informal’ economy. The profit motive, common to both cases, is not enough to reduce their difference.

The Ladakhi tent enacts precisely these kinds of mediations between the formal and the informal, value and waste, capitalism and its outside, and military and civilian occupation. The tent is a repaired ‘thing’ in Brown’s sense – a parachute fixed and made ready for use again. The labour of repair, of turning an object of military use into a thing of civilian, everyday sustenance, is crucial to understanding how the intended trajectories of commodities can be reoriented. If the informal emerges, in this reading, as a waste economy in the specific sense described above, then those performing the labour of repair can be thought of as ‘waste people’ in contemporary cultures of production and consumption.

From Waste Objects to Waste People
The individual in the accumulation economy is the quintessential individual of (almost) all economic theory – abstract, ostensibly undefined by any social markers besides a proclivity to maximise profit and minimise pain and thereby act in a ‘rational’ manner. Individuals in the informal economy, on the other hand, are the ‘rejects’ of capital, made up of those who have been forcefully removed from their lands through processes of primitive accumulation, but not absorbed by capital in industrial jobs or other professions.

This category of ‘rejects’ is not to be confused with the concept of the reserve army of labour. The late Indian economist Kalyan Sanyal showed how, in postcolonial contexts, the “need economy” is populated by individuals who cannot be understood as the reserve army of labour, but something else: these individuals occupy a “wasteland”, a space outside of capitalist relations. Unlike the reserve army that is a casualty of the accumulation process, those in the wasteland are a category of people who have been
dispossessed from their land in the specific postcolonial context of primitive accumulation (which takes place in the present moment, not some historical transition period). These individuals are not within capital, they do not serve a function for capital as reserve army; they are, in effect, ‘outside’ capitalism, and have no prospect of being absorbed within it as such.11

To call this category of people ‘unemployed’ would be to mask the fact that they occupy a space in which they are unable to produce as capitalist value their most basic (remaining) possession – their labour power. By no longer fitting into capitalist circuits of production and consumption, and having no hope of being absorbed back into these circuits, they are just as much produced as ‘waste’ as are waste-objects that have fallen out of capitalist circulation. Zygmunt Bauman has argued for a category of “human waste” or people that are produced as waste. These individuals help us to think of a different relationship between people and things that are not characterised by either production or consumption, precisely because the people in question are neither producers nor consumers:

In a society of producers, they are the people whose labour cannot be usefully deployed since all the goods that the existing and prospective demand is able to absorb may be produced, and produced more swiftly, profitably and ‘economically’, without keeping them in jobs. In a society of consumers, they are ‘flawed consumers’ – people lacking the money that would allow them to stretch the capacity of the consumer market, while they create another kind of demand to which the profit-oriented consumer industry cannot respond and which it cannot profitably ‘colonize’. Consumers are the prime assets of consumer society; flawed consumers are its most irksome and costly liabilities.12

One could read Bauman’s definition of waste people in conjunction with, say, images of Occupy Wall Street protesters. In this sense, perhaps the specifically postcolonial context of Sanyal’s work can also be extended to the destabilisations that have taken place in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Indeed, simply on a visual register, the ‘tent cities’ that came up in the wake of the Occupy movements were criticised for creating an image of ‘third-world shanty towns’ amidst the cleanliness, order, neatness that normally characterise urbanism in developed nations.13

Although problematic in some senses, the comparison of the visual and material politics of Occupy to ‘third-world shanty towns’ does provide some insight into the overlaps between the informal tent economy of Ladakh and the communal tents of Occupy. In both cases, the tent becomes a thing that interrupts aerial visuality and lateralises vision. Part of the discomfort with Occupy and its use of tents has to do, therefore, with its mobilisation of an idiom of waste and dirt to counter the grid-like organisation of cities in the planner imaginary. Such a challenge to the dream of clean, ordered cities is mounted precisely by effecting what Solomon Benjamin calls “occupancy urbanism”, thereby bringing the tent directly into confrontation with questions of property.14

Tents have similarly been mobilised in another part of the world – by Israelis – to pose questions to their state. Ariella Azoulay has argued that “for the Israeli regime, the tent is considered the natural home of Palestinians, their predicament, the essence of their very existence”.15 Given this, the form that the Arab Spring protests took in Israel in the summer of 2011 was more radical than a simple mobilisation of waste and dirt to disrupt the city. The use of tents by Israelis, Azoulay has argued, was important because it played on the significance of tents in the local political imaginary. The protestors’ use of tents, that symbol of Palestinian homelessness, brought attention to the destructive nature of Israel’s policies – from blasting holes through the walls of Palestinian homes, to the devastation of the landscape – a destruction of both private
and public space, in the environmental as well as the political sense, on both sides of the wall.

**Reoccupying Waste**

The relationship between property and waste is an old one. Locke, for instance, equates the commons with ‘waste’, as lands being inefficiently used. He was possibly the first philosopher to mobilise the concept ‘waste’ in the context of property:

> We see in commons, which remain so by compact, that it is the taking any part of what is common, and removing it out of the state nature leaves it in, which begins the property, without which the common is of no use [it is ‘waste’]. And the taking of this or that part does not depend on the express consent of all the commoners. Thus the grass my horse has bit, the turfs my servant has cut, and the ore I have digged in any place, where I have a right to them in common with others, become my property without assignation or consent of anybody. The labour was mine, removing them out of that common state they were in, hath fixed my property in them.16

The paragraph quoted above is a well-known defence of bourgeois property rights, since the “grass my horse has bit, the turf my servant has cut” are all to be regarded as the private property of the ‘owner’, and not the servant. However, the fact that private property allowed for rational accumulation of wealth accruing from the land, over a period of time, prompts Locke to defend it, and thus is born the reasoning for the institutional edifice of capitalist value. Value here is thus equated with private property (that which is not commons). This conception of value (pitted against waste) goes on to shape both liberalism and capitalism and centrally informs our notions of consumption today.

Recently, however, philosopher Michel Serres has argued that the “originary” claim to property emerges *through* dirt: like animals, we first desecrate a piece of land to call it our own, and subsequently clean it up.17 Where Locke implicitly undertakes a ‘performance’ of waste – producing the commons as waste in order to then posit a notion of value in private property against it – Serres’ argument self-consciously plays on this understanding, in rendering literal the *performance* of waste as a form of asserting a right to property. Serres destabilises/inverts the classical understanding of the production of value to eradicate waste, to posit the production of waste to perform value. Serres’ reading of the production of waste as the originary claim to land lends itself to the reading of Occupy as producing waste as a way of staking its claims to foreclosed houses (which, ironically, are not precisely lying waste in the Lockean sense because they are, in their foreclosed state, contributing to capitalist value). Therefore, by mobilising the visual register of the informal (‘third-world shanty towns’), the occupiers were demanding for a different *regime* of value and waste that goes beyond the ‘not-value’ within the system: this is also a register on which, as we have seen, the repurposed Ladakh tents operate.

It is perhaps at this juncture that my invocation of squints, tents and waste comes together. The Lockean discourse on property is emblematic of Scott’s “seeing like a state”, a mode of vision that seeks to secure the boundaries of territories by making clear, individuated distinctions between who owns what. Squinting breaks with this regime and makes visible a subterranean zone of everyday existence where waste people working with waste objects re-infuse value to the ‘commons’. Scott calls this “infrapolitics”, which refers to “such acts as foot-dragging, poaching, pilfering, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion, absenteeism, squatting, and flight”.18 The quiet transformation of wasted army apparatus into a regular source of livelihood in a frontier region is a direct instantiation of this kind of infrapolitics.
The tents of Ladakh thicken existence on the ground and provide a different object-narrative for items associated with domination and the occupation of land. Similarly, Occupy’s use of tents and dirt (of waste as a claim to property in Serres’ sense) attempts to reclaim as common (as waste in Locke’s discourse) what it sees as having been lain to waste within capitalism. Protest movements in Israel, too, seek to draw attention to the laying waste of land and property in the wake of a physically destructive Israeli state policy. If the contemporary moment lends itself to squinting through the open folds of a tent, our politics can be thought through the images it invokes on the ground, and the destabilisation of waste it leaves in its wake.

Notes
3 I owe my knowledge of this supply chain activity to conversations with our driver and guide in Ladakh, who declined to be known by any other name that his last: Dorji.
9 David Harvey, quoted in Gidwani, ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Sanyal, op. cit.
16 John Locke, quoted in Gidwani, op. cit.
18 Scott, TwoCheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play, op. cit.