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CONTENT

EDITOR'S NOTE

The contemporary world is one saturated by digital culture and the new media, and this saturation seems most evident today. From working from home to online classes, what some might consider a paradigm shift in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic is only made possible by the fact that we have been living digitally immersed lives all this while. In this context, it is important to note that "digital culture" is not an alien culture, separate and distinct from "offline culture", but rather it encompasses the world that has slowly been built around us, at least for the past 15-20 years.

How does this proliferation and saturation of digital culture impact literary and cultural studies in terms of its objects and methods? Does the anonymity promised by the digital sphere provide outlets for expression from those sections of society that have hitherto been marginalised on the basis of gender, caste, race, and community, or does it merely create breeding grounds for cyber-bullying and attacks from dominant communities? How do we revise our understanding of activism and community formation in an age when individuals from different ideological backgrounds swarm together for a common purpose, only to disband again when the purpose is met — as in the case of K-pop fans in America sabotaging Donald Trump's electoral rallies or campaigning for the Black Lives Matter movement, and then going back to face accusations of racial discrimination against Black K-pop fans? How do we mobilise concepts like "free labour" (Tiziana Terranova) to tease out the shifting contours where agential self-expression and corporate exploitation bleed into each other? Such questions are highly significant for the humanities and social sciences today, and the essays collected in this volume seek to address these and other relevant investigations.

The volume begins with Dr. Jenson Joseph's article, which analyses how the redeployment of cinematic images online demonstrates the longing for a symbolic order, and uses the Malayalam film *Drishyam* (dir. Jeethu Joseph, 2013) to think afresh about the image, cinema and data, and their relation to collective consciousness and the symbolic.

Nandini Paliath's article studies the effects of neoliberal management practices on the changing nature of work in the late capitalist workplace, particularly in the contexts of the demands of the digital age, making use of the autonomist Marxist concept of "immaterial labour". Dr. Rupa Deshmukhya and Dr. Elwin Susan John explore the emancipatory and democratising potentials of digitality by focusing on webcomics and similar online graphic narratives by women authors. Haritha R analyses how the digital medium has transformed the experience of cinephilia, and analyses how both filmmaking and film-viewing practices have shifted to focus on the process as much as the content, or even more so. Drawing on Tiziana Terranova's concept of "free labour", she coins the phrase "an ever ending process" to refer to an everlasting process of meaning-making visible in the contemporary age, in which the end product of a completed film is extended by the labour of viewers who constantly update the meaning of the film. Salini K's article studies how participatory fan subcultures enable interrogations of dominant gendered imaginations by taking the case of trans Harry Potter fanfiction. Jithin Varghese considers the video essay as an emergent resource for digital teaching/learning in the post-pandemic era. Riya Ajit explores the phenomenon of "digital food" — an amalgamation of food blogs/vlogs, YouTube channels, Instagram feeds, and other online displays of food — focusing on Northeast Indian cuisine, raising questions about how the digital medium transforms the materiality and rootedness associated with food. Rounding out the collection is a brief essay by Dr. Alexander Dunst, proposing a new mode of digital humanities that he calls "situated reading" as an alternative to the challenges facing the existing modes of close and distant reading.

We hope that these essays, spanning different disciplines such as literary and cultural studies, film and media studies, sociology, and the like offer a sampling of the new avenues that a scholar can explore while studying the contemporary world, centred on the concept of the "digital".

Aparna Nandakumar

Ideology as the Economy of the Image: A *Drishyam* (2013) Hypothesis

Jenson Joseph

Common wisdom counts television, New Media and the internet as the nemeses of conventional cinema. And there are enough reasons to think so: the TV at home can indeed deter people from going to the cinema; the circulation of cheap and pirated films is one of the key factors driving the internet usage globally. Yet, the present peaking of New Media cultures, catalysed by the ubiquitous use of the internet, smartphones and social media, has brought about a revival of a sort of cinephilia among Malayalis – though the phenomenon I describe here could very well be found elsewhere as well.[1] Malayali users of the internet and social media have turned massively to the public archive of Malayalam cinema for a range of communicative and sense-making practices: their memes and stickers are predominantly made out of extracted images from Malayalam films; they use film clips to satirize contemporary politics by establishing a correlation between the clip and an unfolding political scandal or a controversy; they borrow catchphrases from films to bring clarity on to a scenario or to effect a closure to an ongoing debate. In fact, sampling and riffing from cinema constitute a major part of online cultural production among Malayalis today.

As a case in point, consider the cult status that the internet has bestowed on the marginal hitman character called Pavanayi, from the

1987 comedy *Nadodikkattu* (Sathyan Anthikkad). Malayali internet users rediscovered this character – who is full of talk but fails miserably in his job – to use imageries and references about him in cultures of memes, trolling and satire. Played by Captain Raju with his towering physique, the hitman Pavanayi appears briefly in the film, made to look like the cold-blooded professional killers from Hollywood gangster movies. He is hired by the smuggler Ananthan Nambiar (Thilakan) to finish off the film's protagonists-duo, played by Mohanlal and Srinivasan, who are mistaken to be undercover CIDs. In a now-legendary scene, Pavanayi meets his targets atop a water tower, and goes to the extent of opening his suitcase to display with great panache his collection of weapons, ranging from bow-and-arrow to silencer guns, in the end to offer his intended victims the choice of weapon for their own murder – all this adding to the build-up around this character. But Pavanayi's show comes to a comic abrupt end when he accidentally slips and falls to death from the tower top. Internet cultures invoke references to the scene to commentate on situations when big promises/expectations are followed by little action/ fulfilment.[2]

Take for example, the politically charged meme below, juxtaposing two images – one that of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the other that of the Malayalam film actor Thilakan playing the smuggler who hired the hitman in *Nadodikkattu*, both seen in a strikingly similar pose. In the image that the meme borrows from the film, Thilakan's character is reacting with despair to the news of Pavanayi's anti-climactic death while reminiscing the flashy claims that the latter had made by parading his paraphernalia. The juxtaposition invokes the situation's irony in order to impress upon Modi's populist policy measures which, as critics have pointed out, often have done more damage than

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1. For example, see Al-Ghassi (2018) for a discussion of Syrian internet cultures redeploying clips from the Arabic-dubbed Japanese anime broadcast on Arab government TV in the 1980s.

2. The unique cult status that this marginal character from *Nadodikkattu* achieved among online Malayalis prompted Captain Raju, who played the role, to make a spin-off film in 2019 with the title *Mr. Pavanayi 99.99* which, however, bombed.

the intended good. Such deployment of this imagery works in memes precisely because the internet users are (expected to be) familiar with its context, connotations and the relevant affect, as they are ingrained in the collective memory through cinema. In other words, the internet users seem to turn to cinema to invoke already fossilized ideas, imageries and folk wisdoms to bear upon the contemporary times when the moral order seems to have crumbled.
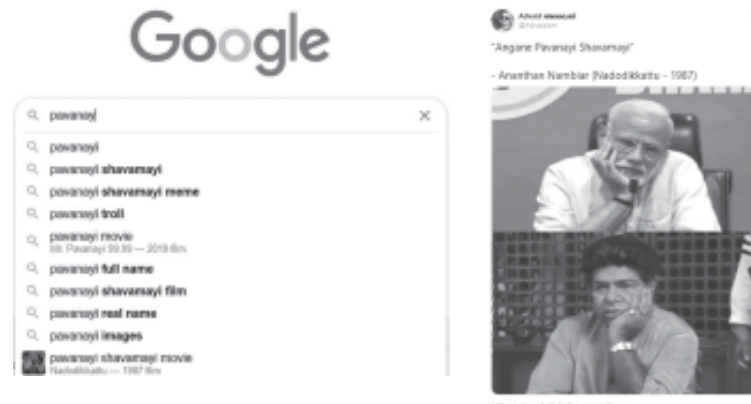
Caption: On the left, Google homepage prompting popular searches for the entry "Pavanayi". On the right, a post from the Twitter handle "@Advaidism", dated May 18, 2019; relevant link: https://twitter.com/advaidism/status/1129576696158441473, accessed last on 20 October 2020 at 6.30 am.

Such images freely borrowed from cinema are made available precisely for appropriation by anyone, towards whatever purposes one wants to use them for – plainly mundane or political, politically progressive or regressive, propagandist or informative. What makes internet cultures turn to cinema so often, and what purpose does the redeployment of these film clips and imageries serve in general? We could begin with the tentative argument that referencing film imagery in this way invokes a community feeling by riding on the general familiarity of the invoked

images, a familiarity made possible by cinema's status as one of the foremost public-cultural institutions in the region until now. This memory of the collective that the film imageries are able to invoke in online cultures seems to be crucial for both the internet users as well as for the digital media. For the internet users, it compensates for certain de-humanizing (or alienating) tendencies of the computer for which the world is a resource of computable data – emptied out of the values previously attributed to it. It thus helps the internet user to *orient* oneself socially and culturally because these images function as the antidote to the dry computational codes and commands that make up the language of the personalised New Media. In the case of the digital media, the dependence on borrowed images from cinema is one way in which it leverages the "spectacle society" that we still continue to be, because we haven't entirely come out of our dependence on images, imageries and spectacles in our social-cultural-political practices despite our growing fascination with the computer and its language of codes which seem to be capable of mediating the world better for us. Seen in this way, we can understand the internet's present dependence on film images as indicating the transitional stage in which the digital media, which looks to colonize our world and lives through codes, computational language and software, is still in negotiation with the old impulses of an image-centric society.

Yet, there is no reason to begin by presuming that collective affect is alien to the internet and computer cultures, or that 'being online' is essentially an alienating experience. We know that New Media can often materialize mobs, swarms and collectives of various types, even when it fetishizes the ideas of individual customization and personalization to make advancements into all spheres of contemporary life. Thus, we know that collective energies are not extrinsic to digital media cultures such that they would need to be imported from outside. Collective affect of different sorts saturate the internet. In fact, it is with the popularity of the internet that various coinages signifying mob behaviour – like 'herd

mentality', 'going viral' (which implies promiscuity rather than isolation), cyber bullying, sharing, and trolling – started becoming so commonplace in our everyday conversations. But we also know that the collectives that the internet and digital media cultures materialize are qualitatively different from the familiar formations of communities around a central unifying object – like the nation, the linguistic community, the tribe, or the fan club. To take into account this distinction, let us work with the following hypothesis: The collectives in varied forms that manifest in New Media cultures are the ones that the internet constantly assembles, dissolves and reassembles around mostly transient objects, by re-channelizing and re-accommodating communitarian energies within its economy, while the earlier familiar models of communities have begun disintegrating following the decline in the ideological efficacy of centralized structures and institutions.[3]

The proposition above can be rephrased as the historical shift away from societies organized structurally, towards a new order of self-

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3. The *popularity* of the internet, which takes the distributed network as its functional model (as opposed to the more familiar centralized or a de-centralized organization), itself must be taken as the proof of the decline of the old structures and their appeal. Making this claim, however, raises the question: how do we argue that the internet signifies the waning of the centralized/decentralized structures, considering that, for example, Hindutva groups or jingoistic nationalist groups thrive online too? Doesn't the persistence of such ideologies across these (pre-digital as well as digital) historical periods suggest that the older familiar structures and modes of community formation still hold forth? I propose that such continuities at the level of content must not distract our attention from the fundamental shift at the structural level. The communities that the internet materializes have the nature of swarms which form spontaneously around contingent and unpredictable themes and objects, operating according to protocols that they evolve internally in real time (as opposed to the communities bound together by a given hard-set tenet/constitution), and so on. The model of the distributed network produces, sustains, dissolves and reassembles such communities. It is true that the internet as distributed network can be redeployed in the service of familiar ideologies like religious fanaticism, nationalism or misogyny. This presents us with the challenge of understanding what the above-mentioned shift – away from the reign of centralized and decentralized social structures to the hegemony of distributed networks today – means for ideologies like religious fundamentalism, nationalist euphoria, male chauvinism, and so on.

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regulation and control. The latter takes its own "post-structural state" or "structureless-ness" as the ground from which protocols of organization, production, value extraction and management are constantly derived, which are then codified and updated, only to be broken and reformulated again. If we agree that this shift can be made the framework to understand transformations in contemporary life and culture, then the question of the symbolic order comes up as crucial. The symbolic order *structures*: it structures our desire and a given social form. Under conditions of modernity, the place of the state and art were central to the production and sustenance of the symbolic order as well as to resistances against the dominant symbolic order. Over the last few decades, we have seen indications of both the state and enterprises of art facing critiques, assaults and disavowal from quarters which are ideologically-politically incompatible – ranging from various post structural academic traditions to the right-wing political consolidations. Considering this, we could argue that perhaps what animates contemporary media cultures are the twin processes of:

(a) the exhilarations about the structure and the symbolic order falling apart as the result of our (sometimes legitimate/political, sometimes clearly anarchic/reactionary) collective desires, and as the logical outcome of the political-intellectual labour that has sought the disintegration of the systems and structures, so that we can set ourselves and our desires free, on the one hand, and

(b) on the other hand, the persistent yearning to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the old symbolic order with a given framework – a moral/symbolic order – so that the world would still cohere.

If we think of New Media cultures' dependence on cinema by keeping this context in mind, we can see that cinema here signifies a collective institution that was central to the sustenance of the symbolic order hitherto. Approaching the theme from this angle, we can understand

the redeployment of cinematic images online as allusions to the institution of cinema which has come to provide moral frameworks to relate to the world and cohere it, irrespective of whether the moral worldviews that cinema used to propagate were retrogressive or progressive. Interestingly, thus, the online cultures seem to endow cinema with a value which perhaps cinema has always struggled to claim for itself: cinema figures online as the cultural institution that has come to host the collective consciousness.[4] The recurring references to cinema in online cultures thus signifies the longing for a symbolic order, emanating from a present in which the world, after being freed from ideologies, given commandments, manifestos and constitutions, has been rendered into an *object world* composed of molecules and data which the computer can now recombine and calculate so as to be attribute them with value afresh. It is true that the digital world has its own priests who attempt to compensate for the lack of the old symbolic order with new ideologies that reify data and code, or even hippies and anarchists of the digital world who sustain subcultures of free software, cults of hacktivism and so on. Yet, the nostalgia for the image – and by extension, cinema – seems to persist in digital cultures.

Thus, if these online invocations of cinema and images from cinema indeed function as the longing for a symbolic order, how does such a yearning help us think afresh about the image, cinema and data, and their relation to consciousness and the symbolic? The 2013 Malayalam super-hit suspense thriller *Drishyam* (Jeethu Joseph), which thematises this yearning for a symbolic order by compellingly linking this longing as having something to do with the image and cinema, is a

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4. See also my discussion of the 2019 Malayalam film *Jallikkattu* directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery – one of the leading figures of contemporary new wave cinema in the region: 'Just A Buffalo or Not: What to See In *Jallikkattu* If You Can't See a Good Film', *Film Companion*, 20 November, 2019; available at https://www.filmcompanion.in/features/malayalam-features/just-a-buffalo-or-not-a-nuanced-take-on-lijo-jose-pellisserys-jallikkattu/

very insightful cultural text to explore this theme. The film's plot has many striking similarities with the globally popular 2005 novel by the Japanese writer Keigo Higashino, titled *The Devotion of Suspect X*, though director Jeethu Joseph has denied that the film is based on the novel, responding to widespread discussions online about the similarities and the assumption that the novel must have inspired the film. *Drishyam* tells the story of Georgekutty, a family man, who succeeds in protecting his minor daughter and his wife from getting arrested after he comes to know that they ended up murdering the only son of a high ranking police official who was blackmailing them for sexual favours by threatening to leak a nude video of the daughter which he made on his mobile phone during a school trip. Georgekutty manages this by cleverly manipulating people in getting them to inadvertently testify the false alibi that he has provided to the police claiming that he and his family were away on the day when the murder took place. The cunning way in which Georgekutty succeeds in doing this becomes the high point in the film. Moreover, the clue to understanding the reification of the image and cinema in the film also lies in this aspect.

We can identify the following two elements as central to both the novel and the film:

1. The protagonists in both the novel and the film succeed in manipulating people's memory by using the nature of the consciousness to work like the (cinematic) image. Though this link between the image and consciousness is not immediately discernible in the novel, this dimension is foregrounded, thematised and made explicit in *Drishyam*;

2. Both the novel and the film stage a conflict between a chauvinistically instrumental-rationalist state machinery vs. the desire for a moral framework or a symbolic order, eventually privileging the latter over the former by offering gratification for this desire.

These arguments must be demonstrated with regard to both the novel and the film. The novel, which was the third in Higashino's "Detective Galileo" series, however became the author's most accomplished work. Its English translation that came out in 2012 got awards outside Japan; film adaptations were made in English, Japanese, Mandarin, Korean and other languages. One of the factors that makes this novel unique, is the equally heroic proportions that the murderer attains in the plot on par with Detective Galileo — the protagonist across the series. In fact, the reader's identification stays primarily with the mathematician Ishigami who commits the murder, more than with the physicist Yukawa, nicknamed as Detective Galileo, who solves the mystery and helps the police catch the murderer. This is despite the fact that the novel keeps the reader guessing about the psyche of Ishigami even when he is presented as the anchoring figure. *Drishyam* uses a similar possibility, but to a different effect: the place of Ishigami, the mathematics teacher in the novel who commits the murder, is taken by Georgekutty, the protagonist played by the star actor Mohanlal, who is a common man who has to devise ingenious ways to protect his wife and daughter from getting arrested for a murder that they committed inadvertently. In the film, thus, the investigative figure becomes more of an antagonist.

But merely pointing this out does not fully explain how does Ishigami, the mathematics prodigy and the actual murderer of a homeless man who eventually gets caught in the end, transform into *Drishyam*'s protagonist Georgekutty, the common man who *must succeed in covering up a murder on behalf of his family if real justice is to prevail*. To derive an explanation, let us look at what is common between Ishigami and Georgekutty, and how these underlying commonalities make both these narratives compelling tales about the contemporary. In the novel, Ishigami is a mathematics teacher at a school, despite being qualified to deserve better in terms of recognition. There is also an implicit suggestion in the novel about why Ishigami remains an under-appreciated and wasted

mathematical prodigy: the worth that Ishigami sees in mathematics and its practices, are at odds with how mathematical principles have been appropriated to device control logics on behalf of the state and capitalism, as the computerisation of all forms of life today takes the deployment of instrumental rationality to newer planes, producing serious consequences. In other words, Ishigami's marginalisation corresponds directly to the corrupt, dehumanising appropriation as well as the instrumental application of mathematical logic and rationality by the modern state and today's digital economy. Thus, it is only through an appreciation of Ishigami's principles that Detective Galileo is able to crack the case.

For this reason, Ishigami is also not presented to us as the familiar archetype of the anti-hero with a psychotic inflection, like Robert De Niro's character in Martin Scorcesse's *Taxi Driver* (1976) or Shah Rukh Khan's character in the 1993 Hindi film *Darr* (Yash Chopra) who ends up committing crimes against society which marginalises him and denies him his object of desire. In contrast, the murder that Ishigami commits is motivated by a double love. The prime motif is quite evident: he feels the irresistible urge to protect the woman whom he secretly loves, and he is ready to go to the extent of killing a homeless man as part of his elaborate plan. But in addition, it is in fact an affect of identification and empathy that draws Ishigami to his victim, the homeless man, as well. Ishigami sees his own reflection in the homeless man whose existence in the city has been rendered superfluous, and whose disappearance would not be missed or noticed. This identification with his victim makes Ishigami's act of putting an end to the homeless man's misery a gesture of kindness, something that Ishigami wants to do to himself. After all, getting caught in the end was part of Ishigami's meticulous scheme too, so that he will end up in jail where he is freed from bondage to his humiliating profession and position in society.

Thus, Ishigami's view of the world, shaped first of all by his assessment about his own marginalised status in society, and secondly

about the ways in which mathematics as a system of organising principles has been totally appropriated by the state and capitalism, inheres in it, a critique of the contemporary as such. This critique of the peaking of instrumental rationality finds a place in *Drishyam* too*,* as I shall demonstrate later in the paper. The place of mathematics in the novel as a system of thought, or a system of principles, is substituted in *Drishyam* with its invocation of cinema as a cultural institution. In other words, what is analogous to the place of mathematics in the novel is the invocation of cinema in the film. I will anticipate one of my arguments here, and say, that mathematics in the novel and cinema in *Drishyam* can be understood as references to the symbolic order — i.e., to a set of principles or values according to which things could be structured.

In *Drishyam*, Georgekutty is played by Mohanlal, one of the twin superstars of Malayalam film industry, whose popular appeal is channelized towards the symbolic elevation of the (cinematic) image, which in turn represents, as I already suggested, a desire for the symbolic order – a desire that must be understood within its historicity. *Drishyam* was famously advertised with the curious tagline, "Visuals Can Be Deceiving". Curious because it is not a film that ponders over the nature of the image and its ability to deceive us. For example, it is not anything like Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow Up* which is a contemplation on photography and truth. A possible explanation could be that the tagline serves as a warning to the viewer: "come ready to be taken for a ride". Yet, the film doesn't do that too: It is not a film that keeps showing us one thing, only to reveal a completely different truth in the end. It is true that it keeps us in suspense, but there is no image or visual that keeps shrouding the truth, which is unveiled in the end. In fact, there is a counter-intuitive reification of the image. This reification of the image, I would argue, is narrativized in the film in the form of the protagonist's cinephilia. Because our protagonist Georgekutty whom the star Mohanlal plays, is obsessed with cinema; his head is full of images from cinema.

Let us look at this dimension a bit more closely. Georgekutty is an uneducated common-man from the village, yet he is extremely intelligent – a faculty he has acquired from his compulsive habit of watching films; he is thus a cinephile whose big dream is to buy and revive an ailing cinema theatre in his village. Georgekutty's passion for cinema makes him a cable television service provider, which is another way for the film to link Mohanlal's stardom to cinema itself, as this effectively makes his character a trader-distributor of cinema through television.[5] His own cinephilia has taught Georgekutty that consciousness works like the moving image, or like cinema as such;[6] taking cues from how his own mind is so captured or absorbed by the cinematic image, he decides to manipulate people's minds by providing them with vivid images of events that actually didn't take place.[7] The film's promotions used the tagline "Visuals Can Be Deceiving" in order to play up this dimension. At first look, the tagline might sound as if it is a warning against the deceptive quality of the image and cinema, but such a suspicious (deconstructionist) attitude towards the image is not in sync with the general reification of

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5. The dependence of private television services and channels on cinema from the late 1990s onwards can be identified as the precursor to the contemporary media cultures redeploying cinema. For example, one of the solutions that Asianet, the first private television channel in Malayalam, found for generating program content when it launched its transmission during the mid-1990s was to acquire the rights of old and new Malayalam films and assigning Diana Silvester, who soon became a legendary TV producer, with the task of producing program segments by combining scenes from across films. One of the flagship programs of Asianet, produced by Diana Silvester, was called 'Cinemala', meaning 'garland made out of film scenes'.

6. Bernard Stiegler (2011) has argued that consciousness is arranged and works like cinema.

7. The same can be said about the novel as well, though it does not develop it into an argument about images and consciousness: its protagonist also manipulates people's memories by offering them with vivid imageries of events that never took place in order to protect his love interest and her daughter by helping them construct false alibis.

cinema and the image in the film – which is after all titled *Drishyam*, meaning "the image". But it begins to make sense if we expand it and say, "visuals can be deceiving, because they work all too well with our minds (and we like/miss being deceived by them)". Seen in this way, the tagline in fact becomes a eulogy for the image and cinema, and by extension, for ideology and the symbolic order which work with the faculties of "deception and manipulation" so as to put in place a given frame that will mediate the world for us, or will allow us to cohere the world. In other words, the film also allows us to contemplate on the nature of ideology *as* the economy of the image. The image can orient us by giving us a perspective by putting things in relation to each other, precisely by placing them within a *given* frame. And this cognitive operation seems to be at the centre of how ideology works too, by prompting us to imagine relations between variables in life, and to take those relations as given or as natural. Thus, there seems to be a contiguity between the economy of the image and how ideology or the symbolic order works.

Drishyam treads the difficult path of securing the moral victory of the protagonist who in fact succeeds in covering up a murder, that too by manipulating a whole lot of well-meaning people in the village and town in the process. It compels the audience to take a moral stance in judging Georgekutty: can he be pardoned for all that he has done, by first covering up the murder, and then manipulating people into corroborating the false alibi? Is the objective truth to be privileged, in which case, Georgekutty and his family must face legal consequences for what they did, irrespective of the circumstances? Or, will the moral framework ultimately triumph, in disallowing a family from suffering, for accidentally murdering someone who was evil anyway? In the final revelation, as we realize that Georgekutty had disposed of the dead body by burying it beneath the police station under construction, there is a suggestion that real justice prevails now, as the police has been made to function as the guardian of

justice and common welfare, which is suggested as its actual moral duty rather than serving the clinical frigid rationality. If *Drishyam* has an anti-realist core, it is in its privileging of the moral order over empirical truth, or image over data. Interestingly, Georgekutty eventually continues to *represent* the common man, even though he had cleverly deceived everyone in his attempts to try to protect his family, because being deceived in representation is precisely what desiring a moral frame or the symbolic order entails.

Where can we take this analysis of the film as a contemplation on the symbolic order as analogous to the economy of the image? First of all, we could ask, what about the contemporary life prompts the film to work with a desire for the symbolic order, if we can derive that interpretation from the elevation of the (deceptive) image in the film? This question must be answered in relation to the current debates about how truth or plane reality seem to have ceased to matter, resulting in a crisis of liberal democracy across the world. As a counter-strategy to this crisis, the response from level-headed rationalists like us is to privilege the real, turn to data, fact check, and so on…; the film seems to reject that as an efficient strategy. The political dimensions of this desire for the moral framework or the symbolic must be understood against the context of the reification of data in contemporary political-cultural life on the one hand, and the losing of faith in structures, moral frameworks and the symbolic in general, including in the Constitution and in institutions. Both these tendencies — the reification of data as well as the losing of faith in moral, symbolic orders that produce structures — are evident in political traditions and discourses across ideological spectrums, and are not limited to the right wing political ideologies, even though it is the right wing ideologies that are able to make the most out of this context — at this moment, at least.

This dimension also makes *Drishyam* an anomalous film carrying at its heart a desire for the symbolic order, at a time when the contemporary new wave cinema in Malayalam derives most of its creative energies from the critical deconstructionist discursive traditions that privilege freedom from structures by exposing the fallacy of the symbolic order. The fact that *Drishyam* was a widely accepted film in the region, even amidst the wide cultural-commercial acceptance of "New Generation Cinema" in Malayalam, indicates that both these desires – *for* the symbolic order as well as *for defying* the symbolic order by demystifying it – persists simultaneously within us, in contestation with each other. The contemporary New Media culture takes this tension between these two desires as the ground to promote its own ideology and infrastructure which can cater to both these desires. For example, the fetishisation of the computer code and the coder in contemporary popular culture results from two related, yet contradictory, desires. On the one hand, it comes from our new-found trust in the computer to objectively codify, rationalise and process the world better (than cinema or any other old media), in a mysterious mathematical language considered to be devoid of any traces of human subjectivity/biases. On the other hand, computers and new media forms capture our imagination simultaneously by constantly proliferating visuals and imageries which we continue to crave, and whose deceptive powers can't seem to get enough of.

But how do I proceed from identifying the reification of the image in *Drishyam* to arguing that it signifies a desire for the symbolic? Also, I have not yet demonstrated the affinity between the cinematic image and consciousness, or shown what quality of the cinematic image enables it to absorb our minds so easily, as the film also seems to suggest? The film's pitting of the common man against the rationalist technocratic state machinery is our clue. Riding again on Mohanlal's star charisma,

the film treads the difficult path of securing the moral victory of the protagonist who covers up a murder even by manipulating a whole lot of well-meaning people of the land in the process. To achieve this, the film has to first depict the contemporary as a morally decrepit, post-modern historical condition, against which the protagonist's actions become justifiable through the invocation of a compelling moral frame. In the film, the fundamentally corrupt nature of the contemporary condition is signified by two elements. The trope of the taboo act is one indication: the murdered boy's lust towards the minor daughter first and then towards her mother makes him deserve death beyond redemption, as he symbolizes the present world's moral anarchy – a suggestion made stronger by showing the boy typically as a spoilt new generation youth and as someone given over to the lures of new media technologies like the smartphone.

The second trope which the film uses to make references to the contemporary/post-modern condition is through its critique of the state machinery – represented by the police department – and the purposes it serves today. The story begins in the milieu of the police station in the village being renovated as part of the community policing project of Kerala Police called "Janamaithri Policing" ("People Friendly Policing").[8] Georgekutty is deeply suspicious of such projects, as he thinks this won't change the corrupt nature of the police force in any fundamental way. This suspicion accommodates the critical pessimism that the ideology of decentralization could be turned against people and the community in the hands of the state machinery, which often applies its spirit in order to extend its reach even into areas and geographies which were previously considered out of its bounds. And his suspicions soon

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8   Jeethu Joseph has said in interviews that he got the idea for the film while making promotional films for Janamaithri Police's initiatives in Kerala.

come true: the film shows us that the police force will eventually operate according to an instrumental rationality which cannot ensure justice.[9] To signify this as what is absurd about today's historical condition when the spirit of decentralization is turned against its own grain to further expand the reach of instrumental rationality, the film uses the Dalit body (of the actor Kalabhavan Shajohn) and the figure of the woman (played by Asha Sarath) as representative figures of the police force, presenting us also with an interesting internal dynamic between the positions they represent within the force. The Inspector General, whom Asha Sarath portrays, combines the traditional masculine repressive brutality of the police with a new feminine shrewdness; she can think like the common man Georgekutty, making the contest between the two into a mind-game of "equals" despite the asymmetry in their positions in terms of power. Her cunning also helps her to identify and exploit the rivalry between Constable Sahadevan, played by Shajohn, and Georgekutty, as she delegates the former to unleash conventional methods of torture on the family, including women and children, while she stays away from directly getting implicated in administering such brutality and repression. The absurdity of this

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9. Here, we should remember that the desire to see this (instrumental) rationality prevailing was once a progressive modernist impulse, as Madhava Prasad has shown in his analysis of the 1958 Hindi crime film *Kala Pani* (Raj Khosla), which privileges the historic "shift from the [feudal] morality of sinning by association to the legality of guilt by commission". In the film, the hero investigates a 15-year old murder of a courtesan which took place in a brothel, for which his father was wrongly convicted. For the hero, the dilemma is that the father's immorality is beyond question, *which he should set aside to seek the truth*: even if he did not kill the courtesan, he frequented the brothel. Prasad illustrates, thus, that there is a historicity to the fact that the 'truth' that the hero of *Kala Pani* seeks is a legal truth, based on the legal discourse's emphasis on precision of language, which signifies a desire for escape from the moral categories of shame and sinfulness. He identifies this as the anti-aristocratic thrust in *Kala Pani*, which he contrasts with the ideology of the dominant feudal family romances of the 1950s and 60s which always secured the feudal moral order over legality (See the section 'Feudal Family Romance' in *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 1998, OUP: New Delhi; pp. 64-72).

scenario – when the feminine has become an added modality of repressive power – is foregrounded in these scenes through the mediating figure of the IG's husband (played by Siddique) who is stunned at seeing the extents to which his wife is able to use her position to exploit the possibilities of pushing the boundaries of protocol, a shock which the film expects the audience to feel as well. The redeployment of Asha Sarath's own stardom, which derived from the lead female characters she played in television serials popular among women viewers in the region, adds to this effect (See also screengrabs from the relevant part in the film below). It is against this mapping of the historicity of the present that the film compels the audience to take a moral stance in judging Georgekutty.

To conclude, the privileging of the moral frame in *Drishyam*, which I have argued as signifying the desire for the symbolic order, needs to be understood within the historicization that the film itself seems to have undertaken, outside of which the film as well as its popular acceptance will come across as an a-historical conservative reaction against a rapidly advancing technological modernity. The popular enthusiasm about contemporary modernity, especially towards New Media forms and the various possibilities of promiscuity and liberation they offer, far outweighs the anxieties about them – even when many such anxieties about the prying of New Media into our lives are quite legitimate concerns. Of late, the region's cinema audience has been polarized into those who like and patronize the contemporary new wave that looks to break away from conventional cinema, its representational registers and its icons, on the one hand; and a more traditional audience segment whom the dominant

industry and its star system still count on, on the other. Capitalizing on Mohanlal's stardom as a bridge, *Drishyam* was indeed a singular film, whose acceptance managed to cut across this divide. My attempt was to offer an explanation for the film's universal acceptance by suggesting that its privileging of the moral order must be seen as a response to the specific historical condition we inhabit today – no matter what name we choose to call it – rather than essentially as regressive simply *because* of the moral ingredient in it.

To approach *Drishyam* as a cultural text that helps us map the present by using the text's own properties, however, need not entail absolving the film of various conservative values that one can hold it responsible for upholding explicitly. For example, the moral order that the film privileges eventually institutes the patriarch at its centre, whose figuration has not undergone much reform vis-à-vis the familiar traditional patriarchal figure, other than that he is portrayed as sexually liberal in comparison – in an attempt to present him as relevant in today's context when traditional patriarchal moralities are under public scrutiny (see also Mokkil 2019). Similarly, the portrayal of Georgekutty as the common man is disappointingly a reinvention of the old conventions of construing the upper castes' life experiences as synonymous with the life and the struggles of "the average citizen". The protagonist's Christian-ness and his orphan status do not take this characterization significantly away from the conventional registers of signifying the common man in Malayalam cinema whose default identity has been that of the Hindu upper caste man. Above all, the villainy of constable Sahadevan, an evidently lower caste character, is presented with no historicity: he is simply evil, foreclosing all possibilities of this character gaining an interiority. As a result, much of the narrative becomes a restaging of the post-1990s thematic of the Hindu secular citizen's disillusionment with the secular state machinery – a drama in which the subaltern figures either as the obstacle in the path to modernity who needs to be eliminated or reformed,

or as merely the victim on whose behalf modernity is disavowed altogether and the aristocratic order re-legitimized. In other words, despite the impulse in *Drishyam* to privilege the symbolic order – an impulse that I see as against the general cultural grain today – the film fails to propose a moral order that is significantly different from the familiar moral registers, suggesting perhaps that this is precisely the challenge before us: having desired the disintegration of the prevailing structure for good reasons, how do we reimagine ourselves as a moral collective, or a society that works with certain principles about what we ought to be?

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Cool, Creative, Authentic: Management Practices and the Workplace in the Digital Economy
Nandini Paliyath

The imagination of workplace as a site of subjugation and normative control, where employees lack choice, power and agency, in short, as inherently alienating spaces, is undergoing a rapid transformation (Fleming, 2). At the root of this change, is the relatively new management practice which places the employee at the centre of its discourse. The employee has more freedom to express themselves in and through work. Management recognizes the perspective and creativity that employees bring in, as instrumental to the production process. The management style is de centralized and "celebrates" diversity, innovation and authenticity, which almost looks antithetical to the larger pursuits of organized capitalism during the Fordist era (Cruz, 13). The nature of skilled jobs in the tech industry has also changed to become more irregular and casual, with the idea of "permanent jobs" losing currency (Gill and Pratt, 14). This change is more visible in fields like information technology, media and other creative industries etc. and does not restrict itself to transforming the labour process but also extends to the way the corporation presents itself in the public through branding or Corporate Social Responsibility. This essay tries to understand this new management discourse which is more employee-centric and anti-authoritarian as opposed to the earlier Fordist practices that were criticized for being centralized, hierarchical, inflexible and alienating. Though the literature is not strictly from a Marxist viewpoint, it is heavily inclined towards the work of autonomic Marxist scholars and commentaries on neo liberal management practices.

Sociological research into labour and management practices in neo liberal corporations have tended to focus on the alienation it brings about in the employees through the constant pressure to perform, the instability and precarity, low wages and salaries. However, the newer corporations are trying to adopt a seemingly more relaxed, non-authoritarian and informal approach towards managing the business and its employees. It is almost as if the corporation recognizes that a relationship based on profit seeking terms is not going to benefit either party in the long run. The consumers', and more importantly, the employees' 'gaze' are accorded critical importance and management styles have evolved to cater to the newer generation of employees who are critical of the profit maximizing strategies and the exploitative labour related practices associated with capitalism (Cruz, 13).

At Google, for instance, which epitomizes this kind of management practice, the change has started from the recruitment process. They have done away with stress interviews and brain teasers which used to be the standard earlier. Being able to be innovative and creative in real time situations is what they look for in employees. "Optimizing people in terms of happiness and performance" is something that defines the management style of Google. This is typically manifested in taking your work laptop home, working from home or practices like providing nap pods and gyms and massage therapists for employees in the office (Forbes). This is in addition to perks like creches for employees' children, paid maternity and paternity leaves and free meals and laundry services. (Although most of these perks are typically only continuing employee welfare practices from the Fordist era and new corporations cannot be credited for "introducing" them).

While these practices might look like a welcome move in the direction of employee welfare and greater freedom, inclusivity and diversity, this have also led to the collapsing of boundaries between work and non-work, leading to normalizing of the organisation colonizing the employee's private sphere and leisure time. The company providing for goods and services which were earlier associated with the domestic, for instance, sleep pods, leads to generation of affective relations between the employer and the employee, but also normalizes the usurpation of leisure by work (Spicer, 50). It has also resulted in a workforce which is perpetually "on call". One does not log off work, spatially or temporally, and perhaps more importantly, the work space begins to increasingly look like non-work. The notion of "work life balance" has been taken over by what autonomic Marxists describe as the "the social factory" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 25).

Boltanski and Chiapello refer to these practices as the "new spirit of capitalism" (162). To attempt a historical analysis of how these changes unfolded, they look at the management literature from 1970s pointing out to the introduction of terms like "empowerment" and "self-management" in the new management vocabulary. With the advent of the internet companies that did not produce tangible goods, but services, that depended on the skill of the individual employee and not the standardized assembly line-based production system, managements realized that the workplace culture of the Fordist era was untenable because of the highly competitive and irregular nature of work. Jobs like software development, graphic designing, advertising and other "new" industries (described as "immaterial labour" by autonomist Marxists), required a new culture of work**.** Instead of compliance, businesses started valuing creativity and active engagement from the employees. Flexibility, self- enterprise and autonomy were the desirable personality traits of the new employee (Cruz, 83). For organisations based on knowledge economy, employees were their asset, liability and raw material. Attracting

talent and encouraging them to be creative became the most important concern, but, also important was preparing them for the precarity that was characteristic of the "new" world. To realize this dynamism among the work force, the new management used carefully devised methods and practices which differed greatly from earlier practices.

Instead of eliminating the "personal component" of employees which include emotions and quirks which till the time were considered too irrational to be in the rationally and "professionally" organized office space, managements started working to include more of subjectivities. The companies tried to mask the hitherto existing boundaries between capital and labour to build a new organizational culture which formed the employee's new "solidarity" forged with the organization (Fleming, 27). Standardization and homogenization were eschewed in favour of individualism and self-expression. Creativity and authenticity became the new catchwords.

Chiapello has argued that the changes in management practice had their "design inspiration" in the "artist critique of capitalism" which can be traced back to the 19th century, but strengthened during the 1960s and '70s, reaching its high point during the May 1968 student protests. As opposed to the social critique of capitalism whose major concern was about rising inequalities between capital and labour class and absence of worker collectives like labour unions, artist critique was focused more on the lack of flexibility and autonomy in the neo liberal work places which destroy workers' creativity and results in disenchantment and alienation (586).

During the late 19th and twentieth centuries, some artists found profound material success through patronage by the new capitalist class while majority of them were forced to give up art for day-to-day survival or "simplify" their craft to cater to the sensibility of the bourgeoisie. Thus,

the artist critique of capitalism had its roots in the sense of the forced departure from "authenticity" that artists thought, came with free market mode of social ordering (Chiapello, 588). It was based on the supposed opposition of the apparent values of the artist and the bourgeoisie.

Management discourse responded to artist critique positively and proactively because it was "complementary to capitalism, especially in its most recent forms" (130) by focusing on the disenchanted employee rather than attempting to change the structure of the capitalist system which would harm their market interests (Chiapello). The new management found the perfect posterchild for the new work space in the stereotype of "artist"- "creative, self-employed, intrinsically motivated to work and indifferent to material gains from work" (Cruz, 5). Virno argues that all wage labour in the current phase of capitalism has something in common with performing artists (68). In sectors where the end product of labour is intangible and/or affectual, it helps to have a work force that finds fulfillment within itself, irrespective of the material gains or the end product itself. This helps in shaping a precarious work culture that is fashionably described as "hustling, gig or permalancing". (Cruz, 84) The artists are a typical kind of labour- their major complaint with capitalist ordering is the lack of authenticity and creative freedom and a sense of alienation. They are not so much exploited, but rejected. Chiapello calls the artist "a grandiose kind of pariah" (587).

Since the new corporations' apparent focus was on creativity and authenticity, they often hired people that does not fit in with the dominant cultural or societal ideal, much like how artists are perceived to be. Liu illustrates how IT companies hire anti conformist workers, who "reject labels and exudes transgressive attitudes about capitalism and corporate world" (93). This may include people who dropped out of college, persons belonging to racial, gender and sexual minorities etc. who could be projected to showcase the corporation's emphasis on diversity.

Boltanski and Chiapello writes, "Capitalism needs its enemies, people who have a strong dislike for it and who want to wage war against it. These are the people who provide it with the moral foundations that it lacks, and who enable it to incorporate justice-enhancing mechanisms whose relevancy it would not otherwise have to acknowledge" (163). If freedom and authenticity were what the Fordist model of management lacked in the work place, the new phase of capitalism compensated for it by actively recruiting individuals who resist the normative ideals, and were "cool" with their imagined transgressions.

Another important strategy employed by the new management to align with the new discourse was to move offices from business districts to more ethnically diverse suburbs or less affluent, but newly gentrified, bohemian neighbourhoods within the city. The design aesthetics of the offices changed to reflect the new "open" and "cool" approach (Fleming, 94). Where employee creativity is an important resource, it is not only the cognitive capacity but also the affective capacity of employees that the firms rely upon. For instance, Google has diner booths instead of conference tables as their data driven research shows that such seating aids creative ideas. Apart from perks like health check- ups, free meals, creches, flexible work hours and the like, they also added "fun" things to the work place like slides, ping pong tables, televisions etc. that are typically associated with leisure than work (Forbes, 2018). Fleming observes that it is not only non- work that is being coopted by the corporation but also anti work, "the "other" that lies beyond the sphere of production" (81). The dismantling of boundaries between private and professional (work and non-work) helps to make work seem like it was "not about capital accumulation at all" (Fleming, 83). Chiapello notes that practices related to non- work, as noted above, works to detach employees from antagonism towards capital because resistance to work is not about work itself, but rather about the relationship between labour and capital (588).

The change in the way new corporations handle criticism also illustrates how their practices differ from the Fordist era. Embracing resistance is an important way by which new corporations handle dissent now (Fleming,79). By actively seeking feedback from employees and listening to the criticisms the employees might have about them, the management fosters a feeling of acceptance among employees which positively impact their productivity, observes Fleming. A certain ethos of criticism and cynicism also entered the management lexicon and culture, along with the disenchanted, non-conformist employee. The managements backed this up by eschewing hierarchy wherever possible. This change chimed well with a new generation of employees who thought the "corporation 'sucks' but would nevertheless like to cash in" (Fleming, 81).

But it is to be noted that only certain forms of criticism and resistance were permitted. Most of the available avenues for resistance are expressive in nature, like having an anti- globalization poster on the wall or "wearing a Che Guevara t shirt to a company football game" (Fleming, 81). Some corporations encourage their employees to volunteer at animal shelters or organize waste collection drives as part of their Social Responsibility initiatives. The resistance is "designer" and is mostly confined to safe expressions of consumer choices like buying organic vegetables or following Green Peace on social media. As an employee in capitalist social organization, one is presented only with two options- one is to not work, the second is what the new corporate employee does, express the dissent through one's lifestyle, by being what is described as "cool". Liu says, "cool is the protest of our contemporary society without politics…it is the gesture that has no voice of its own" (294).

Chiapello points out that cynicism, detachment and anti-establishment attitude served the new corporation right also because it

individuates the worker instead of helping form collective subjectivities like the trade unions during the Fordist era (591). The stress on personal authenticity helped to downplay the collectivism in workplaces that distinguished the Fordist model of management. Chiapello argues that the stress on creativity and self- expression work to turn labour into a personal psychological and intellectual experience while downplaying the political aspect of labour process. She also suspects that the stress on expressing individuality is a move towards muting the employee experience of commonality- the uniform experience of the labour process (593).

It was not only the management ideology that coopted capitalist critique of the younger generation of employees, but capitalist business leaders themselves endorse anti- capitalist causes like ecological concerns or social responsibility. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and more recently Elon Musk of Tesla are the most visible among this breed of "liberal" capitalists who maintain a steady moralistic rhetoric of anti-accumulation. In case of Bill Gates, he projects a carefully curated image as some sort of a 'reluctant millionaire' whose day job is as a philanthropist. Projecting themselves as the hardworking "outsider", hence rebels and heroes, help mask and sanitize their image in the public eye and take the attention away from their truly humungous scale of accumulation. Thus, capitalism has coopted the culture or resentment and cynicism the younger workers seem to harbor against a profit maximizing, winner-takes-all system. Through new management practices, Boltanski and Chiapello argues that "capital is espousing a form of self- critique to sustain itself" (82). The corporations have appropriated the anti-capitalist tools and modes of protest and resistance and subsumed them under its umbrella to use it to its advantage. As Mark Fisher observes, anti-capitalism is disseminated in capitalism (3). The focus on autonomy, creativity and authenticity, the embracing of criticism, the doing away of hierarchy and the promotion of diversity are

all steps in ensuring the survival of a system that benefits no one but the capitalist class.

These new management style should not however, trick us into thinking that neo liberal management organisations gives free reign to the employee and are devoid of any mechanisms of control. Theorists observe that change in the optics of organisation does not necessarily mean that the corporation has relinquished control over labour force (Cruz, 105). What we witness is rather, a shift from the disciplinary society as described by Foucault to achievement society where coercion and control by a central power and well-defined lines of control are replaced with self-control and surveillance by individual subjects. The workers in this system are trained to be what Foucault calls the "entrepreneurs of self" (70). The worker in this system gains not just a livelihood through work but their self-description and self-worth also is attached to their work, which means that it indirectly depends on the employer. What is also often overlooked by the liberal advocates of the new management techniques is the fact that promoting self-expression at work does not automatically entail "freedom", or protect the worker from alienation. The emphasis on authenticity, Fleming argues, is also often used to mask the antagonism between capital and labour. The writings try to impress upon us the fact that the overarching emphasis on creativity, autonomy and individuality at work places might actually end up alienating us further because they shape the culture of work and workplace to look and feel like personal and not collective experiences.

The essay is based largely on the scholarship that looks at the kind of industries where the new management practices have purchase, namely industries that work with internet- based technologies, and focus mostly on the middle rung of labour force within the digital economy- the largely middle class, technically skilled people. It is partly because those are the industries where the changes in management practices are more visible and also because these industries form the fore of the contemporary

knowledge-based economies**.** However, there is a large chunk of labour force that falls outside the purview of these management practices because they are considered "un skilled" and hence, expendables by the neo liberal model, who might not actually be "cool" with the precarity and whom new management has neither trained for nor compensated enough for. It took a crisis of such an epic scale as Covid to realize that they are but essential, important and indispensable. They are not at the receiving end of any of the perks that has been mentioned in this essay like sleep pods or laundry service, or even living wages that will keep them out of debt. They are certainly not recruited for their creativity or authenticity but rather their ability to stick to stylized routines. The workers at checkout counters and retail sales clerks provide a glaring example. Precarity, for them, did not arrive with post Fordism or the gig economy; precarity has been a precondition of their existence. What changed with neoliberalism is that public utilities like housing, health care and higher education moved to monetized services, making their precarity even more precarious and the possibility of climbing out of poverty or even maintaining a decent way of life free of debt, an increasingly unattainable goal. While this essay has focused more on the configuration of the template of the new management practices, the fact remains that precarity and consequent dispossession at the one end of the spectrum and superlative accumulation at the opposite end remain the defining feature of the new capitalist model.

The literature is also not representative of a large section of elite industries within the digital format of doing business, for instance, finance or corporate law firms. They have not jumped the "cool" band wagon. They do not seek diversity in recruitment, they usually only hire from a pool of graduates that were trained at elite top tier schools, they have no interest in the cool, non-conforming lifestyle that the technology companies seem to be approving of. This only goes on to show that corporations value authenticity and creativity only when they assure a

growing revenue and not because they are intrinsically interested in employee well-being.

Most of the literature reviewed in the essay is from the global north. It is safe to say that neo liberalism did not grow in the same pace or take the same shape in all parts of the world. In south Asia, it has had a different trajectory of development. India was pretty much in the Fordist era, with our reliance on heavy industries until well after structural reforms kicked in during the 90s. Even after three decades since structural adjustments, India as a country does not fit neatly into the conception of neo liberal economy in the first world sense of it, with the peripheries heavily reliant on agriculture and allied trades (and the presence of a huge informal economy), while the core aligns with the larger template of neo liberal market order. However, pre liberalization, industries in countries like India had a trade union system, however imperfect or problematic, for addressing worker's grievances and ensuring safe and fair practices, at least to some minimal extent. However, the labour unions had been demonized and systemically killed off long before the new industries entered the scene, and the change in the way state- capital relations are configured in late capitalism ensured that they stayed that way. This needs also to be seen in the context of the formation of trade unions in IT companies in India, recently, formed to protest "forced resignations" of employees.

The studies have mentioned how employee heterogeneity has been a feature of the new management practices. However, the literature being largely theoretical or of a commentary nature, has failed to capture any voices from the ground, the labour force, although the exclusive focus seems to be on how the management of labour force changed in new corporations. There is no sense of tension or imbalance related to class, gender or sexual orientation to be seen in the narratives from the point of view of employees. It is not very difficult to imagine the profile of

an average employee in specialized professions and it is hard to imagine fair representation from caste, class, race, gender and sexual minorities even in the most diversity insistent workplace.

We are undoubtedly in an era where capitalism seems like the only available alternative. How exactly capitalism has organized itself to seem like the only available option is what these studies impress upon us. As Hardt and Negri writes "Capitalism expands by proactively reacting to the resistance it meets". So, we are urged to do away with the evils and excesses that are associated with free market ideology. This is imagined to be easily achieved through bringing in "diversity" in the work place, provisioning for flexible work hours, encouraging authentic expression of self and allowing for expression of rebellion and criticism within reason. All of it is complemented by "protesting" capitalism which ensures a safe outlet for rebellion while never threatening to disrupt the current system through any lasting political change. As Boltanski and Chiapello observes, **"**Capitalism has turned out to be infinitely robust because it has discovered a road to salvation in the criticisms it has faced" (163).

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Graphic Narratives, Digitality and Cartographies of Gender

Rupa S. Deshmukhya and Elwin Susan John

Introduction

The Indian literary terrain has since time immemorial, depicted the rich cultural tradition through oral storytelling thus, exemplifying that storytelling is an indispensable part of this cultural makeup. It is always the socio-cultural climate that has invariably influenced the form and content of any literary work. The overhaul witnessed by Indian fiction in the twenty-first century can be attributed to the proliferation of communication technology and also the necessity to accommodate diverse cultures. Indian fiction now lays adequate stress on the articulation of anxieties and concerns through a media that appeals to the populace; that is the digital medium. What is also unique to the Indian cultural milieu is the analysis of mythology, folklore and its own very nuanced cultural tropes against the backdrop of digitality. There has been a gradual evolution in the pattern in which narratives have mediated the cultural, social and political matrix of India and have negotiated the diverse concerns that are at the heart of gender and identity politics. In the wake of globalization, the culture of aesthetic discourse has also been redefined as technology is proven to be a significant resource in generating responses and paving way for new forms of expressions. In the introductory article of their book *Graphic Novels and Visual Cultures in South Asia*, E. Dawson Varughese and Rajinder Dudrah observe:

Globalisation, increased domestic and international travel, regional partnerships and changes to society in terms of education, job opportunities and shifting perceptions of women's roles have all contributed to the field of visuality in new and often unanticipated ways. (Varughese 2)

The graphic mode of representation was initially looked upon with suspicion. Nonetheless, it has transmuted the concerns of those on the periphery. Hillary Chute's comment in *Comics as Literature?* exemplifies the seriousness of the form:

Graphic narrative has echoed and expanded on the formal inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift towards the democracy of popular forms. In the graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention. (Chute 462)

A narrative, in any form, cannot be isolated from the socio-cultural impact it creates and this necessitates a rethinking of space and its impact on gender. Digital narratives lend themselves to an exploration of concerns related to gender, sex, various forms of marginalization and abuse of rights. These narratives exemplify different forms of subversions to address the issues of hegemonic tendencies, thereby refuting the patriarchal power structures. While providing a platform to interrogate these concerns, they also bring to light the performative nature of gender and the multiple geographical and demographic contexts.

By locating this study in a broader context, this article will argue that in spite of the geo spatial differences, cultural anomalies and heterogenous communities, the fluidic nature and performative quality of

gender have always negotiated with the evolution of feminism in South Asia. Through the intersections of digital technologies and its offshoots, questions related to sex, gender, consent, abuse, rights, equality and so on are discussed in open forums or more rightly put, there is a significant revamping of discourses within feminism. As mainstream media has been in the grips of projecting lop-sided notions of gender, most of the narratives perpetuate regressive notions of gender. A shift in the perspective is imminent with graphic narratives and web comics, as these creative forms are not only unearthing the silenced voices but also creating spaces for transnational solidarity. A plethora of issues pertaining to the South Asian context are brought to light after engaging in digital spaces. A discourse generated around the issue of gender invariably contests the representation of gender. Thus, it is pertinent to consider these counter narratives which have the potential to create new agencies of change. The patriarchal status quo and conventions of heteronormativity have stifled voices and digitality has provided a creative platform to revive those silenced voices. It would be appropriate to argue that this is the digital turn of feminism in South Asia. South Asian feminism negotiates with the concerns that are stemming from the cultural contexts and the heteronormative epistemological models.

The Graphic Turn of Storytelling

The production, consumption and reception of graphic narratives would be at the center of this discussion. Marjorie C. Allison says, "The graphic text, in its very form, requires that readers be engaged in the creation of meaning and reality" (Allison 75). Kavita Daiya adds, "The graphic narrative's status as a trans-medium and its ability to reconceive the strategies of other forms like journalism, memoir, visual art, and fiction have urged critics to reconceptualize the form's discursive possibilities" (Daiya 9).

Mythological references are at the heart of Indian storytelling. The refashioning of paintings and cartoons in graphic narratives offers an opportunity to relook at mythology and historical events through an alternative lens. Ashok Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya*, Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* and *The Harappa Files*, Amruta Patil's *Kari*, Srividya Natarajan's *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* are a few examples of graphic narratives that have challenged the perceptions, prejudices, notions of femininity and masculinity which further fragmentary existence. These graphic narratives are also informed by several historical and political discourses.

In her book *The Classic Popular*, Nandini Chandra has well illuminated the historically changing evolution of the *Amar Chita Katha* comics series, which ran from 1967 to 2007. She unveils the dialectical relationship between the aesthetics of the series and the cultural politics of Hindu nationalism in India (Chandra 2008; McLain 2009; Babb and Wadley 1998). Chandra's scholarship points out that the comics tradition in India engages the topics and debates typically seen as the territory of literature. The question of Indianness in *Amar Chitra Katha* with its definite reinforcement of the mainstream cultural practices is a significant concern to analyse especially, the manner in which these hegemonic cultural practices are reflected through the representation of female characters.

Pramod K Nayar's *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation History and Critique* highlights a new representational mode in Indian writings in English that heralds a major shift in the reception. And which he opines "looks at adult graphic narratives offering political commentary, cultural analysis of sexuality, child abuse, urban life and satire" (Nayar 6-7).

Orijit Sen has been credited with the creation of the first graphic novel. *The River of Stories* captures the traumatic experiences of the

marginalized against the backdrop of Narmada Bachao Andolan. This narrative captures the political upheavals in the country by charting out the historic struggle of a Jamli community and it is here that we navigate through the experiences of the marginalized in a medium which harps on the collective memory. Similarly, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* throws light on the exploitation during the period of emergency. Both these narratives graphically capture the oppression endured by people due to their historical and political conditions in India. The reference to these novels is pertinent as they are suggestive of the breadth of graphic novels to accommodate themes of trauma, resistance and protest through the image-text combination.

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridors* (2004) captures the changing dynamics of an urban society while projecting the undercurrents of masculinity of the cosmopolitan male in India. The characters in the narrative grapple with different conditions yet, their responses to their lived experiences are laced with commonality. Lopamudra Basu (2018) observes on Sarnath Banerjee's *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, "postcolonial masculinity is represented to be in a state of anxiety, struggling with accommodation in the emerging space of a postcolonial metropolis, an anxiety camouflaged by a superficial performance of aggression, heterosexuality and patriarchal privilege" (Basu 34).

Ira Sarma's contribution in terms of glocal audiences for graphic narratives supports the claim that graphic narratives incorporate the intertextual elements which invariably navigate local, national and global cultural spaces. In her essay titled "Indian Graphic Novels: Visual Intertextualities, Mixed Media and the 'Glocal' Reader", she observes the need for the Indian graphic novel to have a 'glocal' reader who can navigate both local and global cultural spaces. There is an analysis of select works of Appupen, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Amruta Patil and Sarnath

Banerjee. She has exemplified the manner in which these authors have appropriated the visual cultural utterances of Indian and non-Indian visual cultures. These are intertwined in their narratives as local and global cannot be separated from each other. She also opines that the readers of Indian and non-western graphic novels must navigate a much bigger world.

The essays in the book *Graphic Novels and Visual Cultures in South Asia* by E. Dawson Varughese and Rajinder Dudrah trace the unique trajectory of the graphic novels ranging from comics to representation of the cities and their impinging influence on women. They examine the prevalent visual cultures in South Asia and the manner in which they are reshaped to suit the new world order:

> this new trajectory of text-image production has partly come out of a tradition of Indian comics combined with heightened consumerism in South Asia, particularly in India following the liberalisation of the economy, felt most intensely post-2000. This moment where competing factors have been at play has allowed the graphic novel to develop and grow to find a unique voice and an ever-expanding domestic readership, including an increasingly international one too. (Varughese 1)

Graphic Narratives and Feminism

Having established the subversive power of the graphic form, this section of this article will discuss the ways in which graphic narratives negotiate with and represent the discourse of feminism. The contention is to relook at discursive spaces and the idea of heterotopia as they challenge the existing world order. The space or medium of negotiation is also pertinent here as the contestations of gender occur through images and words. Foucault in *Other Spaces* avowed:

> And perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down. These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example, between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred. (Foucault 2)

The present article observes the modalities of the feminist discourse and the notions of representation in the canon, when expressed through the graphic medium. The term 'representation' also assumes a much wider context when seen through the prism of globalization. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders* says:

> We- feminist scholars and teachers- must respond to the phenomenon of globalization as an urgent site for the recolonization of people, especially in the Two-Thirds World. Globalization colonizes women's as well as men's lives around the world … Activists and scholars must also identify and revision forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives. It is their particular exploitation at this time, their potential epistemic privilege, as well as their particular form of solidarity that can be the basis for reimagining a liberatory politics for the start of this century. (Mohanty 236)

The indigenous intervention by Anant Pai through the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) series in the 1960s marked a graphic turn in Indian literature. *Amar Chitra Katha* is situated in the comic genre but it engages with the

discussion on India's socio-cultural milieu. The representation of female characters in ACK series has been central to some of the debates related to gender politics. Femininity and masculinity within the framework of the patriarchal matrix have reinforced the conditioned notions of gender, etching out definite roles for men and women. The archetypes created through figures like Sita, Anusuya and Savitri as sacrificial beings were a projection of lived realities and a reinforcement of expected gender roles. Nandini Chandra opines,

> Of the large number of titles devoted to women, the majority was drawn from a mythological or legendary universe, and those which were part of history were not slotted in the history series. Thus, by virtue of being de-historicized, they were particularly amenable to being iconized. What was the nature of this iconicity? Were heroines meant only for the inspiration of a female readership? What kinds of ideals and aspirations did they set up for young girls reading or looking at the comics? (Chandra np)

These questions raised by Nandini Chandra also draw attention to the patterns of binaries and accepted modes of behaviour to be nurtured by women. Most of the women characters are created as versions of the ideal female. Parameswaran and Cardoza points out "captions accompanying the illustrations of these godly and royal female characters painted in pink reinforce the 'feel-good' qualities of the visual images. Amar Chitra Katha comic books consistently use the words 'slim', 'fair', 'comely', 'beautiful', 'virtuous' and 'lovely' to describe light-skinned women" (Parameswaran 19). *Amar Chitra Katha*'s standardized practice of using shades of pink and brown to represent specific categories of characters and figures across its vast archive ensures that Indian children are exposed consistently to the disturbing subtext of 'colorism' that pervades the pictorial domain of these comics.

An anthology by Zubaan titled *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* presents a series of stories dealing with brutal discrimination and violence against the backdrop of a gang rape case in Delhi in 2012. The fourteen graphic stories engage us with the determination of women to present their points of view and voice their concerns to effect a change in society.

Suhaan Mehta avows that Indian graphic novel has created an alternative space. It has the capacity to accommodate "voices that habitually fall outside the realm of Indian socio-politico-cultural discourses" (Mehta 173). Amruta Patil's graphic narratives can be located within this framework. Patil was influenced by the mythological readings and the pervasive influence of ACK. She has to her credit *Adi Parva, Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*. Gender as a social construct has been put to analysis in her graphic text *Kari* which was published in 2008. Patil challenges the constructs emanating out of a heteronormative discourse and also elucidates the features of gender performativity.

Kari resides in Mumbai and works as a creative designer in an advertising agency. The place where Kari serves is a means of subjugation as it stifles her with the demands of a heterosexual society. Several cultural constructs are evident through the advertisements. Foucault's analysis of power merits attention in this context. Kari's suicide is also symbolic of the lack of space in a world where queer gender and sexuality are sidelined in the want for identification with normativity. In the essay, "'Can You See Her the Way I Do?': (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari*", Surangama Datta argues,

> Kari's minimalist clothing style redirects the reader's gaze, taking it away from her physical appearance and placing it instead on her mind-scape, an interesting visual tactic. Indeed, if anything captures attention within her appearance, it is her

intense eyes. One character in the graphic novel in fact describes her as *the young lady with burning eyes*, and indeed, it is not surprising that eyes are foregrounded. After all, they represent seeing, expressing and visualising. (Datta 4)

Through Kari's attire, there also seems to be an avowal of queer identity even while the society coerces individuals to conform to the heteronormative ways of living. It is here that the fluidic and performative nature of gender and sexuality as represented in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* successfully comes to the fore. Butler affirms, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition of a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of the body, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler xv). This quote makes it clear that Kari's subjectivity is not jettisoned in her second birth. She continues to wear shabby clothes and short hair wherein her short hair is also an indication of severing her association with the strict code of femininity.

The fixity attributed to gender is turned on its head when Kari is romantically attracted to Lazarus and at the same time she also leans towards Angel. There are several complexities which put Kari through the dilemmas wrought due to the expectations of the binary standards of society. The image of sewer in the narrative too, underscores the kind of discrimination faced by people due to their sexual orientation. However, there is a ray of hope in the novel as Kari reconciles with the alternative form of gender expression. Patil, through this novel, has thus created a space to conceive alternative identities without getting dragged into the binaries of male and female roles. The possibilities brought in by the protagonist into the gamut of this narrative are indicative of a definite inclusive turn as well as intersection of varied gender identities in graphic narratives.

The Digital Turn of Feminism in India

This section of the article is on the next pertinent turn in the history of feminism and its medium of expression in India. The transformations that are aligned with the digital medium of communication are rapid and pervasive in nature. It facilitates the creation of a sub-culture as social networking platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc and blogging pages allow women to express themselves more freely. This can be also argued as the 21st century wave of feminism. The internet and its offshoots have enabled women to question, subvert and negotiate with concerns that are hitherto silenced or pushed to the fringes as a taboo subject. Some of the major concerns that are openly raised by women in the digital platform include questions on patriarchy and women's health, among several others.

Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan's *Royal Existentials* represent issues of the present and other historical moments through Indian miniature painting. The creative and critical tool used in this webcomic is unique as traditional miniature works are refreshed to deal with the anxieties and curiosities of the present as well. "Extrication" or webcomic number 168 evokes Raja Ravi Varma's famous painting of Shakuntala pulling out a thorn from her foot. In "Extrication", the female protagonist wonders, "just need to stop to pull this thorn, that is the patriarchy out of my foot, and keep on walking" (Parthasarathy np). Here, one would find that a classic and a vignette of history reappears in the present and it subverts the quintessential representation of a royal woman. Without any fear, the modern reincarnation of Shakuntala questions patriarchy in the most subtle ways. In "Exhaustion" which is Comic number 172, the authors continue to critique the acceptance of patriarchy. [Refer Figure 1]

Kaveri Gopalakrishnan and Aarthi Parthasarathy's *Urbanlore Comics* is an emphatic series on the spaces occupied by women, particularly a negotiation with urbanity and patriarchy. As their web portal says, "Urbanlore was born out of a series of conversations about Bangalore - the city, its history, the people, landmarks, culture, nostalgia, urban legends, experiences, interactions; and we hope to reflect these discussions in the graphic stories, and extend these conversations to other cities" (Gopalakrishnan np). For example, its series called "What was it like when you could smoke inside Koshys?" is about the changes that were implemented at a resto-cafe named Koshys in Bangalore. The cafe which was founded in 1940 is a popular meeting place for people from all walks of life. With the smoking ban at the cafe, the webcomic narrates the nostalgic hazy, smoke-filled days from the past at the Koshys and the discussions that the regulars used to have at the cafe. This highlights the free spirited, independent, metrosexual, liberated woman who is ready to have a life for her own, clearly without the support of men. [Refer Figure 2]
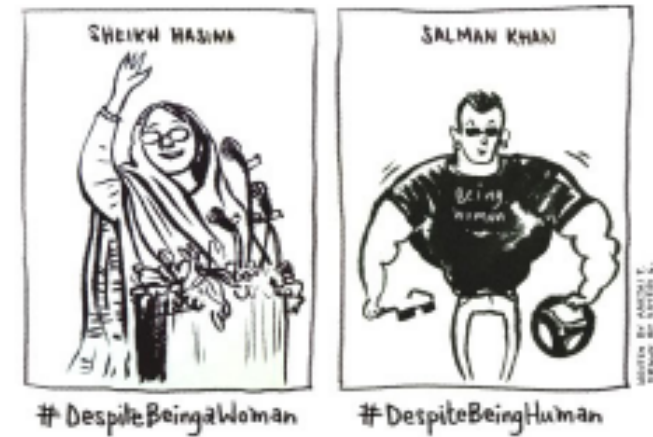
Women's health is another concern that has found untethered space for discussion in the digital medium. Rachita Taneja's *Sanitary Panels* particularly gives a voice to issues around women's health that have been silenced as taboo. Starting with menstrual health and body image to raising her views against totalitarian regimes, Taneja's *Sanitary Panels* has positioned itself as an observant critic of present-day India. [Refer Figure 3]
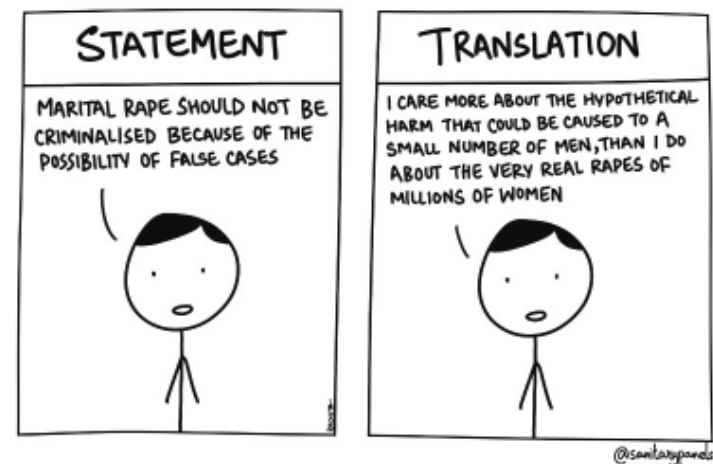
Happyfluffcomics by Akshara Ashok is eloquent about questioning established socio-cultural norms. On matters like abortion, one of her panels suggest, "why are abortions perceived as scary? Societal conditioning, stigma, the patriarchy, I could go on. But in reality, abortions are not at all scary and with the right support, they are safe and effective when done correctly. There is help out there if you're dealing with an unintended pregnancy. There is no shame or guilt about getting an abortion. Always remember it is your body and it is your choice" (Ashok np). Such expressions are a courageous route map to women who are struggling with matters of this kind and it acts as a digital binder, proclaiming solidarity across borders. [Refer Figure 4]

Apart from women's health and patriarchy, several other issues are discussed in the digital front. The webcomic *Doodleodrama,* created by Mounica Tata discusses matters like body image, sleep patterns, cooking, dreams, social networking sites, social anxieties, clothing, cleanliness, advertisements, love, use of apps, music, gaming, gardening, coronavirus, monthly savings, K-drama etc. Everything that crosses the mind of a millennial is right there on this webcomic. Some of the most

popular panels are on society's obsession with fair skin and understated trauma and marital rape in India. *Good bad comics* by Aditi Mali is not verbose and it conveys social anxieties through the visual medium.

In all these webcomics mentioned in this section, there is an increased visibility to the problems faced by women in particular. Debanjana Nayek suggests, "feminist comic artists of the digital space reclaim this centre of power by enhancing the visibility of the subdued and uncomfortable truths about a feminine existence. The social media sites which are often turned into a platform for cyber bulling and stalking by sexual predators, have been utilised as a scope to be 'visible'" (Nayek np). This subversive potential of the digital space is what has been channelised by women comic artists.

Conclusion

In "(Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts", Marjorie C Allison says:

> part of the reason graphic texts play a key role in helping readers to envision the world is that, as McCloud points out, viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning, cartoons have historically held an advantage in breaking into world popular culture. By seeing and reading themselves into the story, readers can actively reimagine how the world is constructed and how they are similar to and different from the world the writers present. What has been marginalized is brought to the centre and given a privileged place in these stories. (Allison 74).

The digital turn of feminism in India is therefore an ongoing process and a constantly evolving one. It is addressing issues not only as matters that affect women, but also as social issues that affect the collective thinking of a society. It is empowering women particularly, by bringing their concerns outside the domestic space to the public.

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FIGURE REFERENCES

Figure 1: https://www.royalexistentials.com/post/168312585087/royal-existentials-is-a-weekly-webcomic-series

Figure 2: https://urbanlorecomics-blog.tumblr.com/UrbanLoreShorts

Figure 3 https://twitter.com/sanitarypanels/status/1481662298255425538/photo/1

Figure 4: https://www.instagram.com/p/CIgKPeqnhej/

Re-searching the Details: Changing Audience and Aesthetics of Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

Haritha R.

With the prevalence of digital technology, everyone is exposed to the technicalities that work behind the camera and this change is reflected in the discussions around cinema on the internet. A recent trend observed in Kerala is that when the digital print of a film becomes available on the internet - for instance, when a film is released on the online streaming platforms or when the pirated copies of the films become available for download on certain websites and applications - people tend to rewatch the film multiple times to nitpick cinematic detailing or mistakes in the scenes which they failed to notice in a single watch. Using easily available technological tools, they extract frames from the film, mark the details/ mistakes, and combine them to make videos or memes. These videos are uploaded on YouTube and other social media pages and get circulated widely. These self-edited videos sometimes explain the significance of the found details in the film's narrative and analyse the filmmaker's craft in presenting the film with realistic appeal. The contemporary audience watches films neither to get deceived by the illusion of reality nor to see how the film represents reality. The focus instead, is on how well a film has handled the technological and narrative detailing to make itself look real to the audience.

Focusing on recent trends in the discussions around cinema on the internet, I discuss in the first part of the paper, the changing modes of film reception in the context of dissemination of digital technology and prevalence of watching films in digital format. This part observes that the

pleasure of consuming cinema has been extended from seeing what is happening on the screen to finding the process that work behind its making. In the second part, I attempt to see how contemporary Malayalam cinema, by foregrounding the process of filmmaking in its aesthetic and marketing aspects, responds to the emerging modes of reception.

"Cinema in Detail": The Pleasure of Discovering the Hidden

Unlike in theatres, watching films in digital devices offers the audience an individualized and private experience and provides them options to pause, rewind and repeat the scenes as many times as they want. They also get to download films, possess copies and edit them for repurpose. According to Laura Mulvey, the spread of digital technology has made the close reading of a film text possible for everyone (Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* 144). Options to delay and halt the scenes enabled by the digital devices have made it easier to fragment the film text for a detailed analysis of the technical and narrative elements in it. Textual analysis of cinema, hence, "ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema" (ibid.). She further notes that delaying, halting or repeating the scenes in a film can make the spectator conscious of the time of the camera - which normally tends to stay hidden when the film is watched 24 frames per second. She revisits her earlier conception of the three looks associated with cinema which she discusses in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." First, "[the look] of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, [second, the look] of the audience as it watches the final product, and [third, the look] of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (17). She argued that the first two looks need to be subsumed into the third "for the diegetic world to maintain its credibility and for the psychosexual dynamics demanded by the gender politics of Hollywood cinema to hold" (Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving*

Image 190). Enabled by the advancements in technology, the spectator today "can search for the look of the camera while also asserting control over the look within the fiction" (ibid.). She says that when a film is delayed, "the presence of the past (the look and time of the camera) finds consciousness in the present (the look and time of the spectator), across the tense of the fiction (the look and time of the protagonist)" (191). "The loss of ego and self-consciousness that has been, for so long, one of the pleasures of the movies gives way to an alert scrutiny and scanning of the screen, lying in wait, as it were, to capture a favourite or hitherto unseen detail" (165). The cinema of delay "unlocks the pleasure of decipherment, not only for an elite but also for anyone who has access to the new technologies of consumption" (191).

Although, as Mulvey observes, the new digital technologies of consumption of cinema make plausible the spectator to be conscious of the time of the camera, we cannot deny the fact that the audience in a theatre does not always completely surrender to the narrative drive of cinema and can equally be conscious of the time of the camera while watching a film. However, as Mulvey identifies there seems to be a new found pleasure in the alert scrutiny and scanning of the screen for details. This change is reflected in the discussions around Malayalam cinema on the internet. There are websites and social media pages in Malayalam where information on cinema is shared and discussed. For instance, m3db.com (Malayalam Movie and Music Data Base) is one of the largest online database on Malayalam cinema and music which is run on an open collaboration maintained by voluntary contributors. It has a page titled "Cinema in Detail" (CID) where the readers are invited to post details or mistakes they discover in a Malayalam film. The brief description of this page says:

> M3db is starting a CID work. Yes, CID (Cinema In Detail) is a place to document all the notable scenes and unnoticed mistakes in films. Thanks to Mukesh who suggested this witty and meaningful title[1]. (Kiranz)

Similarly, a discussion on the film *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017) published in Fullpicture.in – an online magazine on Malayalam cinema – is titled "More evidence on Dileesh Pothan's brilliance – The F.I.R on 'Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum'". Terms such as CID, evidence and F.I.R seem to suggest that the process of finding the details hidden in a film is seen as an act of investigation or a process of discovery. As if in a treasure hunt (Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* 193), there seems to be a playful pleasure in repeatedly watching the scenes from films and discovering the inconspicuous details which are skillfully hidden by the filmmaker[2]. Many look for the details in the background (use of the props, presence of background actors, the quality of background music etc.), examine the cinematic and narrative elements (the significance of the location, connections and continuity in the narrative etc.), and the technical aspects (the quality of the VFX, editing, colour grading etc.) in a film. Apart from the technical details, the politics (or lack of it) of films is also often discussed and analysed in these platforms. The m3db also has a Facebook page in which information on various aspects of Malayalam films are shared and discussed collectively. As mentioned above, these details are not only collected, discussed and shared but also used in subjective expressions in the form of memes, video tutorials, and video essays etc.[3]

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1. Translation mine

2. Laura Mulvey understands the spectator s tendency to repeat, pause and delay cinema as acts which have "all the childish and playful pleasure of the treasure hunt." (2006, 193)

3. An interesting instance is the video tutorials demonstrating the technology of editing used in a scene from the trailer of the upcoming film *Minnal Murali*. These videos are are shot in indigenous locations using mobile phones and are edited with various mobile applications such as the Kine master.

The Internet and Collective Knowledge

These discussions around films on the internet can be understood as visible instances of the change that makes the textual analysis of cinema a work of cinephilia, which Mulvey identifies in connection with the changing modes of spectatorship in the digital era. The pleasure of discovery and decipherment drives the emerging audience segment to voluntarily indulge in these diligent acts of re-searching the technical and narrative detailing, extracting frames and producing self-edited videos and memes which contributes to an ever-expanding online archive of information on various aspects of Malayalam cinema. Tiziana Terranova, in her article on digital economy and free labour, identifies such voluntary acts of producing knowledge as a characteristic of the emerging digital economy. She understands such acts - which are not normally considered as "work" as they are acted out of a desire for affective and cultural production – as a form of collective cultural labour which is done for free. In the emerging and expanding field of digital economy that creates monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect, free labour questions the legitimacy of a fixed distinction between production and consumption or work and cultural expression (Terranova 35). There is "an investment of desire into production of the kind cultural theorists have mainly theorised in relation to consumption" (42).

In this regard, the acts of cinephiliaon the internet potentially function as a collective cultural labour that contributes to the production of a shared knowledge about cinema. This repertoire of knowledge seems to be functioning as the resources that contribute to the discussions on films in social media (in the form of reviews, memes, Facebook post etc.). There is an emerging tendency to approach a film by invoking certain common features from the filmmaker's/actor's/technicians' earlier films – such as the recurring patterns in making, casting, selection of

genres, associations between actors and technicians etc. Although such acts of love of cinema have been in practice for long, the prevalence of digital technology has given form to such a collective of viewers. Considering the emerging modes of reception of cinema, Jenson Joseph comments:

> If the old avant-guard filmmaker had to make films with just a vague optimistic idea of the existence of an addressee, which the distributers and exhibitors would easily dismiss as non-existent anyway, now the internet seems to be capable of manifesting this obscure category as a real force – in the forms ranging from affective displays on electronic media screens to the fan videos people create and circulate online. (Joseph, "Just a Buffalo, or Not?: A Nuanced Take On Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Jallikattu*")

Rather than conceiving these acts as an indication of the emergence of a new spectatorship, Joseph understands them as changes that lead to the reification of the hitherto obscure category of an addressee. He says that the challenge for the contemporary filmmakers would be "to settle into this repertoire of images, imageries, and insights that the resources of the commons would keep invoking... by reifying *one* collective wisdom" (ibid.).

The possibilities of watching films in digital format and also the easily available repertoire of information about the technicalities that work behind cinema seems to have driven the audience's attention more towards the processes that work behind cinema rather than its consumption as a product. The pleasure of consuming cinema seems to have extended from seeing what is happening on the screen to finding the process that works behind its making.

Reel and Real: Changing Aesthetics

Until recently, the challenge for the filmmakers was to make the audience feel/believe that what they see on screen is a reflection of the reality. The discussions were mostly centred on the possibility of the narrative to have happened in real life. The super human portrayal of the hero, the special effects used to enhance spectacles etc. were critically examined and were usually not considered as elements of good cinema. The technicalities of cinema were effaced to a feasible extent in order to reduce the distinction between the reel and the real for the audience. The prevalence of digital technology and the popularity of the new media have made changes in the structural distance between cinema and the audience. People from various cultural backgrounds and social locations have started making short videos on Tiktok and other new media platforms, making use of their own social locations, personal spaces, and regional dialects for their subjective expressions. Different regional, class and caste locations, which are often obliterated in the mainstream media narratives gain visibility through these videos[4]. These on-the-spot videos captured first-hand provide a different experience of the real, which the cinema is often unable to offer for its audience. When "real-er" videos with minimal editing and other technological interventions are available in the new media, one tend to focus on the technical details while watching cinema, to see how well (or not) the filmmakers make their images look real to the audience. The point of discussion seems to have shifted from how a film represents reality to how effective is the film's attempt in using the technical and narrative detailing to provide maximum reality appeal to it. Hence, today, the illusionary status of cinema is no longer

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4. A.S. Ajith Kumar looks into the characteristics of Tiktok as a medium in detail and analyses its popularity among the people from communities belonging to the lower strata of the society. For more details see: Ajith Kumar, A. S. "PolisaanamTiktok: PuthanMadhyamam, PuthanUthkandakal (PolisaanamTiktok: New Medium, New Concerns)." *Utharakalam*, 20 June 2020, http://utharakalam.com/new-media-tiktok.

marketable. Contemporary Malayalam cinema seems to be responding to this change by foregrounding the process of filmmaking, in its aesthetic and marketing aspects, rather than effacing it[5].

Unlike before, the filmmakers can make films with more certainty that the audience would not fail to notice even the inconspicuous detailing done in various aspects of filmmaking including cinematography, art direction, editing, casting, title design and so on. Although it is challenging for the makers to be extra diligent towards the detailing in frames, it can also be an opportunity for them to foreground the effort they have invested in the making of the film. For instance, there seems to be a change in what is demanded from the production designers today. If their job earlier was to either construct the backdrop for the action or to create huge sets for spectacles, the contemporary trend suggests that their task today is to convey more about the characters and their geographical and social locations through the detailing done in the production design. Through the carefully placed everyday objects, the filmmaker gets to communicate with the audience, who indulges in scrutinising the screen, certain clues which can provide additional information and connections regarding the narrative. In films such as *Premam* (2015), *Charlie* (2015), *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), *Kappela* (2020) etc., the props, objects and other elements used in the creation and organisation of the physical world of the characters are not always placed as the backdrop to the action but are often foregrounded in the narrative using camera angles and lighting techniques (fig 1 and fig 2).

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5. These changes are neither pertaining only to Malayalam cinema nor are shifts in the medium of cinema alone. However, considering the limits and scope of this paper, I attempt to understand these changes by focusing on Malayalam cinema.

[Fig 1] Screen grabs from *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016) (Source: M3db.com and YouTube)

[Fig 2] Screen grabs from *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) (Source: YouTube)

Such shots might distract today's audience from the narrative for a while and catch their attention towards the detailing done in the frames. This could act as an opportunity for the filmmakers as they get to convey to the audience the work that has been done in making the narrative backdrop look realistic. The extra attentiveness to detail hence can arguably be understood as an emerging aesthetic mode adopted by the filmmakers in response to the contemporary audience segment who assess the quality of a film not only based on what is shown on the screen but also based on the processes that goes behind its making. Corresponding to the emerging modes of reception, a change is reflected in the marketing of films as well. For instance, today, the making process is made transparent by uploading "behind the scene videos" and bloopers soon after or even before the release of a film. Unlike before, there is also a growing popularity of personal interviews with filmmakers and technicians as opposed to the interviews of the actors/stars.

An Ever ending Process? Cinema and Contemporary Media

Rather than understanding these changes as exclusive to Malayalam cinema, it would be appropriate to situate them within the emerging tendencies of the contemporary media practices. With the prevalence of the internet and the new media, the ways in which media engages with its audience seems to have changed. Referring to cultural anthropologist Mattijs van de Port, Joseph discusses a prevailing tendency of the contemporary media to flauntingly reveal the mediation process to create a sensation of immediacy and transparency which is in contrast with the mode that hides the involvement of the human hand to produce "the illusion that what it shows us is the real thing itself" (Joseph, "Disrupting Boundaries of Politics in Kerala" 32). Joseph indicates an effective displacement of "the hitherto investment in the (apparatus–effacing) realism, with a new breed of (object-oriented) realism that promises direct access to things through an aesthetics of de-mediation" (ibid.). In this method, the process behind the making of a product/art

work is immanent and transparent in its presentation. One of the examples van de Port cites to describe this aesthetics is the media pilgrimages or organized tours to TV studios, film sets or outdoor locations where famous film scenes had been shot. These pilgrimages "allow people to face the 'real' of the movie or TV show in all of its technological, staged and produced quality, and expose the process of mediation as make-believe" (van de Port 85). Rather than to hide, deny or naturalise the medium, the medium is here revealed for what it is, in all of its human-made, technically put together manner (84). It gives "the idea that fronts are all about make-believe, and that one has to move to the back-stage to encounter the real thing" (85).

In this mode of aesthetics, the end product becomes a manifestation of the process that goes into its making. Terranova makes a similar observation in connection with the changes in the concept of commodity in the emerging digital economy. She identifies that the commodity, today, has become increasingly ephemeral and compressed in duration to an extent that it appears to be "more of a process rather than a finished product" (Terranova 48). In other words, it is the continuous, creative and innovative labour that makes a product updatable and capable of fighting off obsolescence. In that sense, the quality of a commodity, today, depends upon its ability to be ever-expanding in nature. Aren't the changes in contemporary Malayalam cinema also a reflection of this shift? The emerging modes of filmmaking practices also seek for an ever ending interaction between the film and its audience to make their product alive in the industry. The method of foregrounding the detailing done in the film and the contemporary strategies of promotion and marketing of films can be understood as an attempt from the part of the filmmakers to keep their film in the loop of the discussions on social media. The rigorous and diligent acts of re-searching the details and other emerging modes of reception concomitantly contributes to it further. Here, the sustainability of a film relies on its capacity to make flexible the structural distinction between the filmmaker and the audience.

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Subverting Canons: Fan Culture and the Transfic Phenomenon

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In a world dominated by technologically powered social patterns and communicative models, rapid changes in the forms and features of participation cannot remain constant. When the world is converging neatly into a small, smart device, we are also constantly expanding, beyond our geographical, linguistic, and even cultural limitations. A band comprising of just seven South Korean performers today has a hold over more than fifty million people globally. Warner Bros Pictures, after almost four years of relentless efforts by the fans, had to finally release the original director, Zack Snyder's cut of the movie Justice League on the 18th of March 2021, a movement unprecedented in the history of cinema. All these became possible in today's world only because of the power digital platforms have placed in the hands of fan communities. It allowed people who have never been to Korea, who cannot even understand the language, a chance to be involved in a community bigger than their immediate society. It paved the way for a movement that began just as a hashtag on Twitter called #ReleasetheSnydercut to develop into a huge movement that pressured one of the biggest movie and industrial franchises to step back. Fan communities are not the same as they were previously; they are now strong and self-realized organizations with a voice, motives, and power. And hence they have a defining role in changing and challenging the existing narratives of many among the marginalized, like the transgender community.

Fan culture or fandom refers to a group of people, acting like a community, which is built around a certain aspect of the popular culture, like media, as in the case of movies or TV shows, literature, sports teams or even individual celebrities. Previously, fandom was only explored as a type of consumer culture; today academic circles are not only just accepting, but also analysing the productive nature of fan communities. Fandom today can be defined as a participatory subculture, where individual fans act as both producers and consumers. It is a community of dedicated participants, contributing or encouraging contributions, providing a platform of shared feelings, mutual understanding and informal mentorship with a strong belief in the genuineness and the significance of their action. Their output can be anything starting from an extended dialogue about the object of their fandom to actual creative and artistic expressions such as fan art, cosplays, music, short films or their most important literary output, fanfiction.

A fanfic is a fictional text produced by the fans of an original work, where they use characters, settings, and aspects of the plot of an already established creation. The original creation, often labelled as the canon, can be a literary text, a media production or even a popular celebrity. There are various reasons why fans engage in content creation and perhaps the most relevant reason among these is their obsessive dedication towards the canon which leads to wanting more stories surrounding the preferred canon. Henry Jenkins in his seminal work, *Textual Poachers; Studies in Culture and Communication* explains that "fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored" (165). But a large population of fan authors is also using this literary platform to raise their voices against the biases of a canonical work and is seeking to fill the gaps in the original story. This paper explores that very quality of fanfiction with the help of a specific fanfiction genre.

Reading is never a passive act and Wolfgang Iser has made it clear that an artistic text becomes a dynamic, coherent and complex entity only once it is read, realized and reflected (Iser np). While most readings end there, the realm of fanfiction writers begins there. Fans take these stories and develop new narratives that reflect their own mental, social or moral identity, sometimes deviating from the original or sometimes adhering to it. A text is not a stable entity; its meaning can change with each person. The manifestation of these nuances in a creative form results in fanfiction. Roland Barthes, in his essay *The Death of the Author* claimed that the birth of a reader occurs with the death of the author. But in today's fan culture, with the birth of a reader, the death of one author and the birth of another occur simultaneously. It leads to an endless circle of meaning production and creation of narratives and triggers a ripple of creativity through incessant retellings and reinterpretations.

Fanfiction is a democratic genre, a voice of the marginalized and a platform for creative free play. It is hence like a shadow to the canon, as it cannot exist without it, but is also the other side of it. Fanfics are subversive in nature and challenge the canon in every possible way. Such fanfic is called transformational fanfiction as opposed to affirmational fanfiction, the latter referring to fics that serve the purpose of reinstating the author's intention alone. There are hundreds of digital platforms dedicated to the creation and distribution of fanfiction alone. Archives of Our Own, Fanlore, Wattpad, Fanfiction.net, Asianfanfic are just a few examples.

Till date the most number of transformational fanfics have been produced by or about the queer community. In fact, according to Alexandra Garner, "fandom is a queer space, not just because of the people that make up those communities, but also and perhaps especially because of the transgressive nature and the disruptive power of fanfiction works"

(107). The way they twist the canon to fill the gaps and voice the existence of the marginalized identities is nothing less than a revolt. There are many genres within fanfiction that explore these themes like slash, genderswap, transfic, gender neutral etc. Out of these the most frequently studied genre is slash. A slash fanfic focuses on the romantic and sexual dynamics between same-sex characters (mostly gay men). According to Sharon Hayes and Matthew J. Ball, the slash fandom challenges the heteronormative metanarrative by informing widespread social discourses about sexuality and gender and dismantles gender stereotypes by reconstructing the conventional feminized version of traditional masculinity often portrayed in similar mainstream stories by replacing it with characters who undergoes alternating aspects of hyper masculinity and feminine emotional poignancy (4). In her study of homoerotic fanfiction, Camille Bacon Smith discusses how many such stories engage in an elaborate description of the first sexual encounter as the romantic love then is "fraught with risk of trust broken, of exposure or even loss of the self, of society's disapproval…" (230). While there are many mainstream books that explore these queer experiences, they all prescribe a limit to the imagination regarding these identities because, they are all in the end, books meant for commercial success in a heteronormative world. This is where the relevance of fanfiction emerges. Fanfiction, with its non-commercial aspect, is a unique platform where gender identities and sexual fantasies are fluid. They create a democratic cyber space for these explorations without ever putting them under commercial or moralistic pressures.

While Trans fanfic is similar to Slash in some aspects, it is important to explore and analyse them separately. According to fandom definitions, a transfic is a "term used to denote fanfiction about transgender characters, usually characters who are not stated as transgender/transsexual/gender diverse in canon"("Transfic"). Transfics came into existence as a reply to the rampant dissatisfaction against another

popular genre called genderswap, which was meant to break the conventional binaries of gender. Fanlore defines genderswap as "fanfiction in which one or more characters switch binary sexes, such as depicting a male character as a ciswoman" ("Genderswap"). Although these fanfictions were able to portray the gender dysphoria experienced by a transgender character, much of these stories ended with the restoration of the original gender and thus failed to fulfill the goal.

Defining transgender fiction that belongs to the mainstream (as opposed to fanfiction) itself is a problematic enterprise. During an interview for the Lambda Literary festival, Tom Legar of Topside Press who specializes in publishing trans literature defined transgender literature as a "body of a cultural work that resonates with or illuminates or otherwise serves transgender communities". Later, Meredith Talusan, a trans writer from Philippines offered a much more welcoming definition by viewing trans literature "through the lens of the set of associations we've come to have with the word transgender… it need not be written by or for trans people". This directly contradicts Mey Rude, a trans Latina editor and writer who considers only works by trans creators as trans literature ("What Counts"). In her essay "The Rise of Gender Novel", the Canadian trans writer Casey Plett criticizes the works of Kathleen Winter, Shani Mootoo and numerous other such cisgender writers who have penned critically acclaimed novels with transgender protagonists by labelling them as "sympathetic novels about transition by people who haven't transitioned" ("The Rise"). Casey Plett further attempts to list out the shortcomings of such Gender Novels. According to her these novels often focus on demeaning tropes where the gender is equivalent to genitalia and surgery, where the trans women are portrayed as fake and mannish and the plot is often grounded on unrealistic transition narratives. Almost all protagonists of such stories are similar, "they grow up in unsupportive families… most of them are physically or sexually brutalized… each protagonist is a chosen one, a lone wolf plodding on

against adversity" ("The Rise"). The characters are often one-dimensional and the only story they have to tell is their specific struggle. On the contrary books by trans writers are often multidimensional, where the trans protagonist is not reduced to the struggles related to the gender alone. Trans critic Catherine Cross in her article about the memoir *Redefining Realness* describes it as "a portrait of the trans woman as human… not inspiration porn, not a feel- good story of triumph over lone bigots, not lurid medical examinations, but a decidedly human story" ("The Rise").

While many of these views contradict each other, a basic framework of the criteria required for any literary work to be qualified as a trans narrative can still be inferred. Subjecting the fanfiction genre of transfic to these criteria would hence be an unbiased way to assess their value and scope. Because of the anonymous nature of digital content creators, the details of a fanfiction author are rather difficult to obtain. Hence the understanding that only a trans person can create trans narratives, when applied to creative platforms of fans will lead to nowhere. On the other hand, knowing the history of transfic can rectify this problem to some extent. The genre of transfic is the product of extended conversations with trans communities and hence embraces their values and issues in much better ways. It began with providing a platform to talk about what it means to be queer in a conventional world. Once the discussion started getting a stronghold, a fan of the screen name Kyuketsukirui used the comment section of *LiveJournal,* a Russian owned blogging site to gather such stories that spoke about transgender experiences. This can officially be called the beginning of the transfic genre. Thousands of transfic have been published since then and it would now be impossible to inquire about the author's identity. If we, instead of analyzing individual stories, are viewing the genre as a whole then the authenticity of its origin can be understood and accepted.

The selected fanfics, "The Girl Who Lived Again" and "Paper Birds" published by dirge without music and Never mind grantaire respectively in Archives Of Our Own are both based on the Harry Potter universe. Created by British author J.K Rowling, the Harry Potter franchise began in 1997 as a set of seven novels about a wizard boy called Harry. The novel is set in imaginary locations based in London. The original story has no queer representation even if it attempts to bring together characters that belong to various ethnicities. The movie adaptations of these novels also show complete justice to the original story and consequently have no queer representations. In spite of that, the Harry Potter fan community is till date the largest fandom ever to be built around a literary work, and the mere number can help us assume the diversity among the fans. A diverse fan base for a canon that has no obvious queer representation is perhaps the reason why a large number of transformative queer fan works are produced based on this particular franchise.

In "The Girl Who Lived Again", Harry, the main character, is a trans girl. The first person to whom Harry confides the truth of her identity is Hermione, another among the main trio of the canon, and her immediate reaction was to find books about gender diversity in the wizarding world so that her friend could find a description she found comfortable enough to agree upon. Ron, the third of the trio, turns extremely defensive and protective about Harry and is determined to make others treat her with respect. The story changes nothing of the original plot; it just adds more details to include the trans experiences of Harry Potter. This fanfic is a short retelling of the canon. In the first book of the canonical series, Harry saves the day by protecting a magical stone called Philosopher's stone from falling into the hands of the dark wizard Lord Voldemort. There is a mirror in the story called the Mirror of Erised that when looked at shows the person's deepest desire. In the canon, Harry looks at the mirror to find his parents and the philosopher's stone. In the fanfic too, Harry sees both the parents and the stone, but this time Harry also sees

her true identity. In the mirror her hair is longer and she looks a bit more feminine ("The Girl Who"). This subtle way of hinting at a personal exploration and discovery without altering the plot or erasing the heroic potential of Harry's story increases the value of this fanfic as a trans narrative.

This doesn't mean that the story is without any reference to the specific struggles of a trans person. Not everyone is accepting of the new Harry, as such a plot would be doing injustice to the reality of trans lives. The bullies of the original story like Severus Snape, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson are all still bullies. But instead of raising the violence quotient to draw sympathy towards the trans protagonist, the author has employed ignorance, the lack of want in any awareness and hesitation to accept the altered identity of Harry as the main characteristics of the bullies. There are characters who are silently intolerant, but civil when it comes to interactions, and characters who are openly supportive of Harry. Hermione even brings in materials from outside the magical world and distributes pamphlets to create gender awareness among wizards.

The nurse at the infirmary tends to Harry's broken bones often as in the original story, but in this fic she also offers Harry the contacting details of the trans community of wizards. The attacks, tournaments and magical mishaps in the canon happen in the fanfic too, but here these are not the only reasons for Harry to feel trapped. There are moments when she feels unnatural inside her body and wants to be invisible. But at those times a teacher or a friend would always be next to her, convincing her that she was not unnatural, she was only made to feel so. There are moments when Harry is taught about make-up and the feminine way of dressing, without it being reduced into a stereotypical transformation. The story ends much like the original story, but towards the end it is hinted that Harry would undergo magically aided transition.

In "Paper Birds", a character in the Harry Potter series called Remus Lupin is portrayed as a trans man who is in love with his bisexual best friend. The story is set in an imagined past where the four friends are still teenagers and at school exploring their identities and trying to find a place within the system. It is a very short spin-off story that imagines a past for the original story. And it is entirely based on the romantic and sexual pursuits of Remus Lupin ("Paper Birds"). Although the story does not elaborate much on the physical aspect of being transgender, it attempts to explain the emotional side of it. As Kristina Busse makes it clear in her book Framing Fan Fiction, here the "transnarrative is a trope to comment on the show, with this emphasis, the multiple realties of trans people's lives, from potential psychological turmoils to mechanics of sex reassignment surgery, can be relegated or dismissed in favor of character exploration or romantic plots" (73). As she explains, the sense of self does not always have to be derived from the body, thus giving focus to trans desires rooted in emotions. In the story, Remus is hopelessly in love with Sirius, his best friend, but is also convinced that it is not reciprocated. He could not be forward about his desires as in the case of a cisgender person because he is confused about how Sirius would react. The whole story is based on the tension built around this confusion.

None of these characters are one-dimensional. Harry is still a wizard and capable of fighting the dark magic just like the canonical Harry. The plot built around their identity unfolds simultaneously with the original plot affirming the fact that a person's life is not just about their gender. Here a political notion is upheld, and their primary aim is to voice the concerns of transgender communities without reducing the story to a mere protest. In these stories, one is transgender not because of experiments or accidents; it is a deliberate choice that stresses how this genre came from the large number of dissatisfied queer members among the Harry Potter fans.

In all these stories gender dysphoria is discussed openly and all the psychological turmoil related to being trapped in the wrong body is taken into account. This is done by an unobstructed focus on the trans body and mind as opposed to the ones defined by the binary concept of gender. In the first story, the life of Harry before the transition is explained, and hence the feeling of being trapped, the desire to be invisible and the need to escape are often highlighted. In the second story, Remus has already transitioned and here his experience of getting used to the changes is detailed. In her talk with Vogue, Nomi Ruiz, the Puerto Rican trans woman artist, discussed about the need of trans women to open up about their sexual expressions, as there existed a "myth that you could never have another orgasm, that there's no sensitivity, and that you could never enjoy sex again" ("Why One Trans Woman"). The gentle expressions of bodily changes Remus undergoes in the presence of Sirius, although not evidently conveyed, still points towards a delicate understanding of this very sensitivity. Most fan authors prefer to explore this experience in a positive light as opposed to commercial fiction where the tragedy of being different from the prescribed normal is commonly stressed. These stories also use the correct and preferred pronouns and follow all other such conventions to break the gender binary construct. Without spoiling the fundamental nature of the plot, the fan authors are able to incorporate the trans experience in the thematic context creatively, thus opening up a possibility for trans characters to enjoy a life beyond the identity of their gender, just like a heteronormative canonical character.

These stories are extremely important to problematize the binary particularly because these stories are mostly written about very popular characters with a lot of fan base. Attempting to place them into a fluid spectrum from their defined heteronormative position can create a strong impact on its readers, and the exposure thus provided is a new and different sphere, and hence more powerful and able to encourage faster transformation in people's minds. The fan authors also encourage an

open and participatory space to further the discussions that started from their stories. Most of the transfics open to comment sections where other trans fans are allowed to offer criticism without the fear of judgements. While most of the transfic authors are also transgender individuals, there are a few cisgender authors also trying to create stories of this genre. They access the benefits of the digital fan community to conduct conversations so that their stories represent the community they are representing in the right way. Thus, with the help of these digital platforms, a collective creatorship is developing, one that is powerful enough to disagree when the canon itself gets oppressive. This paves the way for a certain kind of activism against the canonical works.

Fan activism happens when the fans acting as a community can participate in matters that resist the mainstream ideologies so much that it ends up being developed into a fan-led political movement. Henry Jenkins in an article called "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance" defines this activism as

> …forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture. (np)

In fact, the Harry Potter Alliance is a fan alliance created entirely by Harry Potter fans in 2005 for social service, particularly taking up issues like gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, net neutrality, and more. There is no better example than Harry Potter fandom to explore the power of fans and their activism through fanfiction, particularly because this very action is a revolution against the original author J.K Rowling.

While some authors and publishing agencies express hostility towards the actively creative fan community, there are other authors who wholeheartedly support fanfiction writers. J.K Rowling is one such author and had once said that she was "very flattered by the fact that there is such an interest in her Harry Potter series and that people take time to write their own stories" ("A Legal Battle"). This fandom is also an example of how contradicting the interests of the author and a fan author could be, as the last few years have shown much hatred towards J.K. Rowling because of her transphobic comments on Twitter. The most recent issue came up when Rowling tweeted an article that read "Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate". Along with this she also posted a caption that was indicating how much she was against people considering transwomen as women ("JK Rowling Transphobia"). This, and some other related tweets by her, irked transgender activists to such an extent that 2020 also saw a crucial re-evaluation of the diversity and inclusion quotient of her works. She is now being called a TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) among other things and has received intense criticism ever since. Even if she has never been intolerant against transgenders she is also not acknowledging them fairly. These events were followed by a long dialogue between fans and the author through twitter where Rowling explained her views repeatedly only to meet with a fan backlash that labelled her views as "misinformation, fear mongering, misgendering, othering, ignorance, far right language/dog whistles and pure hate" (Fowler). Some fans supported her right to express her opinion, while some were at the point of rethinking their preferences. While some fans thought that they would never be able to dedicate their energy anymore to a story by a woman who refuses to acknowledge a community as a whole, a large population of fans were of the opinion that the fiction J.K Rowling created was an autonomous entity and accepting the work was not in any way synonymous to accepting the author's point of view. Fan sites like

MuggleNet and the Leaky Cauldron issued statements where they openly proclaimed that they stand with Harry Potter fans of trans communities, and that while they "do not condone the mistreatment JKR has received for airing her opinions about transgender people" they would definitely reject her beliefs ("Harry Potter Fan Sites"). Any literature is a dialogue, and it can be engaged with, without being endorsed by the creator's opinion. In this particular case, the fandom was built around the art and not the artist. This point was further emphasized by Daniel Radcliffe, the actor who played Harry in the film series of the same later. He posted a long statement on The Trevor Project that, "Transgender women are women. Any statement to the contrary erases the identity and dignity of transgender people and goes against all advices given by professional healthcare associations who have far more expertise on this subject matter than Jo or I". Later, another actor, Eddie Redmayne who is the main lead of the Fantastic Beasts film series, that comes under Rowling's Wizarding World Franchise, also made himself clear about where he stands and how much he disagrees with Rowling's comment. All these are attempts to differentiate the franchise created by Rowling from the effects of Rowling's personal opinions.

Even when the author has been spreading transphobic comments online, we can say that the fan community is trying to create an inclusive platform for all regardless of their gender or sexual identity. This irony is perhaps the biggest and most significant democratic feature of fanfiction. It shows the genuine struggle towards fluidity, inclusivity and the freedom to creative free play. Transfics are in essence genuine trans narratives that attempt to illuminate trans issues without trying to raise the violence quotient that draws sympathy and tries to portray the multiple realities of trans life. They also start a dialogue that is extended through fan activism leading to the art's independent existence from the artist. This is a proof to the fact that a fandom can exist without blind support towards the author and that with proper legal awareness of the process, fanfiction is

a platform that allows young readers to engage, enquire and disagree with dominant ideology presented in the canon, thus teaching a reader to rebel against the canon while also being actively dedicated to it. This is the perfect example of digital culture empowering a community by assuring a sense of belongingness and fraternity.

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Video Essays: The "Trending" Form of Learning and Dissemination of Information

Jithin Varghese

Introduction

Even before the pandemic, video essays were a popular category on YouTube, apparently covering almost any topic under the sun. Understanding its potential, many media houses and ideological groups have started to use this medium to reach audiences. Beyond politics and the media, many find it a useful medium to gain knowledge, just like reading an article. Oftentimes, they find it more preferable when compared to a book or a Wikipedia article. The ability of the presenter to present any complicated manner in a medium with a flexible format is that factor that makes it popular. But what has been a hobby for both presenter and audience has changed since the pandemic. The pandemic has forced every institution to shift their classes into cyberspace, making students and teachers rely more on cyberspace to gather resources for their educational purposes. Reading an article for a long time over a screen is both frustrating and stressful. Modern humans looking for an easy source for such complicated information prefer video essays, which convey similar information within 30-40 minutes. If presented in a manner that interests viewers and their attention is never lost, it will attract a larger audience. This is also the reason why e-learning platforms model their lessons on video essays. It is also one of the reasons why they attract more students during the pandemic. This paper will look at what makes it interesting, why we are attracted to it and how it transforms teaching and knowledge

distribution. When it comes to researching this topic, the problem one faces is the scarcity of research materials. Even though there are innumerable articles related to digital learning, there are not many articles focusing on the concept, 'video essay' per se. The reason for such a scarcity, according to Estrella Sendra, is because "…video essays still struggle to find a scholarly space. They do not seem to enjoy the same legitimacy as a written text (Sendra 72)." As a result, the sources for this article come from a few critical research articles, blog posts and amateur essays from websites written by content writers.

Origins: Essay Film

The video essay has its roots in this unique genre called Film Essay or Essay Films. This genre has always resided in a twilight zone between documentary and fiction. Its roots lie deep in the early days of cinema itself, where its makers and conceivers were trying to find meaning and legitimacy for the new art. But it was not a major genre until the arrival of the Soviet films into the western world, especially ones made by Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov and Pudovkin. The Soviet directors made the genre a unique invention and also an intervention in the field of cinema. The stories of this genre made the world and revealed it. Thus, they expressed the dialectic between control and chaos. They made the narrative the soul of these films, giving them a unique touch (Tracy). Their montage and other radical experiments further influenced the Western filmmakers, giving an impetus to create similar works, even to make works more radical than any of its predecessors.

The essay film immediately became associated with the radical circle of the film industry. With the arrival of the talkies, narration became its backbone. Soon this genre captured the minds of more and more film artists, who used it to express radical ideas or make films based on historical events, especially on Nazi atrocities and the post-World War

world. It featured a personal touch of the creators in the Brechtian style, along with elements from the pre-Stalin Soviet film industry. But this genre that initally focused on urban spaces and industries slowly started to shift. It started to move away from the illusion of presenting the reality of life and the ambition to show life as it is lived towards becoming a postmodernist art (Tracy).

After years of evolution in the high-brow film society, contemporary essay films are defined as works that neither follow a fictional standard of immersing the audience into its world, nor indulge in the conventions of documentary, which stands on complete reality to the level of journalism and hyper-realism. It takes up real-life issues that documentaries would take and is presented as a Brechtian style narrative featuring a dialogue-like narration of the presenter, creating a direct and conversational relationship between the film and the audience. This personal relationship between the film and the audience is the reason why it got its name, the Essay Film ("Vice: The Essay Film").

The popular conception of the essay is that it is a non-fictional literary piece guided by citation. The word "essay" in fact, according to French philosopher Montaigne, means "to try" i.e., to test out ideas and to attempt. That is the spirit of this genre. Both essays and essay films put forward an argument, which they intercede and validate using citations.[1] Both strike a personal relationship with the audience by preventing them from completely immersing themselves in the work. This is the structure that online video essayists retain while making their piece of work.

Content creators and recent filmmakers have used this genre in such a manner that it has made this highbrow, obscure genre the fastest-growing field in YouTube. The feature that attracts creators and the

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1. Essay films use this as a Brechtian device to intercede with other texts and break fictional conventions.

audience is its presentation of formal complex matters in an informal and personal way ("Vice: The Essay Film"). The reason for its popularity can be found not merely in its entertaining factors but also in the fact that most of it is presented on user-generated content platforms like YouTube.

Education and Cyberspace

Since the late 90s, there have been efforts to include education in cyberspace. After the introduction of smart devices and increasing connectivity, the entire e-learning or online learning platforms sector has seen an immense transformation. It got a heavy boost after the pandemic which forced educational institutions to shift from traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms to that of cyberspace. In this case, if one is to quote Estrella Sendra,

> Such circumstances have made as evident as ever the great potential in integrating digital technologies into the teaching and learning practices, and aware, at the same time, of the inequalities and diverse possibilities of access depending on geographic locations, among other social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Tutors have (had to) become students, enhancing creativity, searching for teaching approaches able to foster an interactive and inclusive learning environment, acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of all class members. (Sendra 68)

Even before the pandemic, many looked at the scope of e-learning platforms and online resources ("ALI Global Login"). Its flexibility and compatibility made it a possible alternative for the traditional classroom structure. Many employed adults use these platforms to expand their skill base or learn a course they couldn't take because of their difficulties. These platforms give the learner unlimited exclusive access to the course

materials and can be accessed from anywhere with good internet connectivity.

This is the reason why the pre-pandemic art schools tried synchronicity of online resources within the structures of the traditional education system. Martha Hollander, in her essay "The Imaginary Museum: Teaching Art History With Mobile Digital Technology", describes how the students were able to attend better and grasp matters better, through this "blended learning" format. Many present-day educators have questioned the traditional lecture format which is only effective when delivered by a good speaker, which is not always the case. Moreover, listeners could become passive in this format. The synchronous use of electronic devices inside the classrooms could be the solution, as it can make students more active participants in the class (Hollander). But this inclusion of electronic devices, especially smartphones, is often looked at with suspicion and scorn by another group.

Students, while accessing online resources during classes, can also be distracted at the same time by social media and other internet activities. Teachers and professors fear that a device can pull students away from their focus. Some can handle the entertainment and academic side of the phone the rest cannot. To quote the educator and writer Paul Barnwell,

> Using phones for learning requires students to synthesize information and stay focused on a lesson or a discussion. For students with low literacy skills and the frequent urge to multitask on social media or entertainment, incorporating purposeful smartphone use into classroom activity can be especially challenging. The potential advantage of the tool often goes to waste.

> It doesn't seem to create a huge change in the grades, for students who use it to study will use the online resources to

improve their grades, while others use it as an excuse to use its entertainment medium during the study time. Another issue that arises in this online education scenario is, how should it be shared, privately or communally? The inability to bridge the gap between these two groups can lead to more harm than good (Barnwell).

This is where the significance of video essays comes in. Unlike the articles, essays, and other resources where one has to strain a lot to understand the matter (which deters many in the first place from accessing them), these video essays have a sense of informality in the formality, where there is ample space to breathe. Instead of trying to sound smart, they try to interest the viewer. As a result, this format engages the viewer, rather than making the viewer use all of his/her mental resources to understand the given facts. The more interesting the presenter is, the more personally the viewer will invest in it. There is also a wide range of choices for the viewer to select a topic of his/her interest, or one's favourite presenter from many who have uploaded video essays on the same topic.

> They present compelling questions or topics and then dig into them using media as evidence and explication. This makes them a great match for lessons on persuasive and argumentative writing. (Higgin)

Many educators who try the synchronous method of using both online resources like video essays with the traditional lecture style often find themselves more capable of connecting with their students. The reason why this mode is preferred is because of its flexibility of production and its scope of reaching a wider audience. But those materials cannot be sold to any institute as educational material which is a disadvantage to the whole system itself (Bretz).

The potential of YouTube as an educational platform is best described by the words of Chareen Snelson, who states that

Although YouTube was created as a video-sharing service for everyday users, the potential for educational use has not gone unnoticed. Over time, scores of colleges and universities have established a presence on YouTube by creating their video-sharing web pages called YouTube channels…

Those who seek educational video have numerous places to look for content, including websites created specifically for the purpose of disseminating educational video…

One of the obvious benefits of using YouTube in online education is that it provides online access to vast quantities of free public video on a broad spectrum of topics. It is a simple matter to link to or embed YouTube videos in online course content or discussion forums. Content management is also a benefit. Online educators can establish YouTube channels to collect, organize, host, and distribute videos. (Snelson 159-160)

On the other hand, online education platforms use this method to impart their lessons in a video essay model. All this is said in the case of the viewer. But watching one video will not help, neither can its entertainment factor alone keep the audience waiting for a new episode. This is where YouTube videos have an advantage over their counterparts in e-learning or online learning platforms. The advantages are algorithms and conditioning.

Algorithms and Conditioning

> From a monistic point of view… common sense ontological categories such as human and nonhuman (or human and machine, or human and technology) are not totally separate, but rather, exist on a continuum. From the perspective of

monistic philosophy, human and technology are part of the same substance—they are just variations of it. This breaks down the artificially imposed boundary between in-person and online learning formats, and disrupts hierarchies that privilege human over nonhuman elements, whether they are physical (e.g., computers) or immaterial (e.g., the Internet). Rather than opposed, these elements are in a mutually interdependent relationship with each other. In other words, both humans and technology have agency, and both affect, or even produce, the other. Just as we as faculty members act on and transform technology, the technology acts on and transforms us. For example, faculty interact and shape our technology by creating courses with lesson modules on our learning platforms to communicate key ideas; in turn, technology mediates our pedagogical practices—it shapes what we can do—and becomes a part of our expanded professor subjectivities as we become-machine. (Strom and Porfilio 10-11)

Not so long ago, the term algorithm was not familiar outside the academic circle. But after the data boom, a lot of laypeople started to hear this invisible DNA that controlled the digital world. An algorithm "is a procedure or formula for solving a problem, based on conducting a sequence of specified actions ("What is algorithm?")." Thus it is this line of code that determines what you see, hear and read, based on what you see, hear and read. It is a loop of data, fed by the user, built and maintained by the company and then serving the interests of the customer so that they can keep on returning to the website, be it YouTube, Google or any social media or e-shopping platforms.

When it comes to the YouTube algorithm, the recommendation on what one sees is based on one's personal viewing history in YouTube, then on the performance of the video, and then on its overall audience or

the market. It then recommends the viewer with videos that are often watched together, topically related to it and the videos the user has watched in the past. For example, if one always watches videos related to history, the algorithm will recommend the viewer with the best performing or trending videos on history. But it is not a foolproof system as, when the taste of the audience changes, the algorithm may not become up to date with that change and would require a couple of days to keep up (Cooper).

This is the reason why people keep on returning to this site. This is also another factor that makes video essays one of the most popular categories. Viewers find it easy to get information on their favourite topics and, with related topics being recommended, their knowledge becomes fuller and more relevant. The content creators will also make their videos short and use the format mentioned in the previous section, so that the viewer will watch the whole video, resulting in its better performance. This in turn will be recommended to others of similar tastes. Creators are also rewarded with money through advertisements, encouraging them to keep making even better videos. But this cycle is not related to just the mechanism of this website; it also works on the psyche of the viewer in a method called conditioning (Cooper).

Ivan Pavlov's discovery of conditioning is considered to be one of the most important discoveries in the modern world. Conditioning is defined as a "behavioural process where a response becomes more frequent in a given environment as a result of reinforcement, with reinforcement typically being a stimulus or a reward for the desired purpose (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica)." There are two types of conditioning; classical and operant. "Classical conditioning involves associating an involuntary response and a stimulus, while operant conditioning is about associating a voluntary behaviour and a consequence." In simple terms, classical conditioning focuses on involuntary automatic behaviours,

operant conditioning focuses on applying reinforcement or punishment on behaviour, either in supporting it or removing it (Cherry).

Algorithms act as both types of conditioning. If we look through the classical conditioning perspective, the potent stimulus or the target stimulus is the basic human need to be connected and validated, with neutral or triggering stimulus being the notifications and news feed from social media (or YouTube in our case). When notifications announce their arrival or when we see a new interesting feed, anticipation is created, and when one checks it, the result is the gift for the anticipation, which releases a neurohormone called dopamine, which is secreted to trigger, one to seek a reward and be rewarded. This pleasant sensation locks the user in a habit loop, thus creating a classic scenario in classical conditioning. The tech companies want their consumers to be in this constant loop so that they can spend most of their time over screen time, and avail themselves of their services (Gribble).

If we look through the operant conditioning perspective, when users check their phone, they see something new. The search for novelty is something that human beings have evolved to be. When they open an app or visit a site, a new feed or notification comes up. When this new material is satisfactory, it gives them a sense of reward, which in turn leads to the release of dopamine. Thus, in this case, the potent stimulant is the basic need for novelty, while the neutral stimulus is the news feed or notification. According to B. F. Skinner (who discovered operant conditioning) "the behaviour is rewarded on a variable and unpredictable schedule; the reward is felt as more pleasurable and the conditioned behaviour is more resistant to extinction in comparison with a behaviour that is rewarded all the time," i.e., the behaviour is conditioned, which is reinforced intermittently. The mobile and software companies use this behavioural conditioning to promote the use of their products, and instead of exposing the user with novelty every time they use it, the companies

reward their customers only some time heightening the pleasant feeling, thus pushing them into addiction ("The Addict in Us All").

The reason why our brain is so susceptible to the patterns of conditioning is that, it is how our brain works. According to neuroscientist Dr Lisa Feldman Barrett, emotions are not hard-wired or universal, they are concepts constructed by the brain based on past experiences to make sense of the receiving data. Concepts are compressed versions of past experiences. These concepts act as categories. It is through these that the brain makes sense of the world. It is trying to take everything one sees into some existing categories, which is easier than creating new ones. Even before receiving the full data the brain predicts or stimulates the next action or reaction, which we interpret as the reaction to a situation or emotional expression, and this result is recorded to be used to create concepts (Barrett 40).

The human brain's activity resembles the working of an algorithm. This is the reason why the user is conditioned to spend more time on these cyberspaces, leading to addiction. It is these factors that make the usage of social media scandalous, resulting in negativity and propaganda to find a firm root among the masses. All of these are adequate for educational purposes as well (Harari 83).

Video Essay: The Perfect Formula for Future Education?

> Video essays invite us to write using the very materials that constitute our object of study: moving images and sounds. It encourages video-makers to engage with it haptically, effectively, that is, both intellectually and emotionally. It creates audio-visual knowledge through the audio-visual medium, that is, narratives about narratives, at the same time integrating the lived experience of the video-makers. To these multi-layered narratives both as an object and process, there are further

inclusions of narratives when these video essays are included in the classroom. (Sendra 74)

Throughout this paper, we have discussed what makes video essays unique, and how we are naturally inclined towards it. It is these advantages that make learning and dissemination of information more efficient, especially when it is conveyed through video essay formats. This is the reason why an increasing number of e-learning platforms use video essay formats to teach, but as mentioned above, YouTube's algorithm and consumers' association of it as an entertainment medium gives it an added advantage. E-learning platforms lack this basic infrastructure of creating eagerness and anxiety among their users. Most of the consumers are young millennials and Gen Z's who are short on patience and are easily distracted. These consumers click on YouTube and are rewarded with the next, much-anticipated episode waiting for them. While in the case of other e-learning platforms, they lack the anticipation-anxiety-inducing-rewarding infrastructure of YouTube, which gives its consumers an experience similar to attending a school or tuition class, which they dread.

But YouTube has its disadvantages. First of all, not all video essayists have good intentions and not every video on YouTube belongs to the educational or entertainment category. The far-right populist parties have risen to power in many countries, through heavy propaganda on the internet, especially through social media and YouTube. With them, many social media accounts have also risen, propagating white supremacist, casteist, homophobic, xenophobic and neo-Nazi ideologies. They use it to spread hate speeches and wild conspiracy theories, for example, flat earth theory and QAnon. While ISIS allegedly used these platforms to recruit, Hindutva ideologies also spread far and wide through it (Jahromi).

These platforms might have tuned their algorithms to de-emphasize hate speech and conspiracy theories. It is successful in hunting down overtly hate speeches, but borderline contents cannot be detected by the algorithms. It cannot differentiate between actual hate speech and ones that describe it or contest it. These borderline contents are used as alternatives for the ones that are taken down, and as a result, are still able to spread their messages. Even intervention by human hands has not made much change (Jahromi).

YouTube is also facing a challenge from OTT platforms which, unlike YouTube (which runs on user-generated content), create their own content and also stream content generated by other companies. So, under the increasing pressures, YouTube brings in many countering features, with results ranging from demonetizing[2] to exclusion of the video from the trending or home page, to outright removal of the video itself. This seems good on paper but this inadvertently creates another victim. It also attacks the educational video essays that talks about scandalous ideas such as terrorism and violence. Commentary videos (on movies and other pop culture materials) are attacked on the grounds of piracy. Already, makers of smaller videos are facing problems as the reformed algorithm prefers videos that are longer. The mainstream media outlets can hold on to this new algorithm, but individual creators cannot stand strong in this new environment. Even among individual creators, those that are 'flashier' seem to be preferred, excluding others (Alexander). This adversely affects the creators of video essays, who go through many struggles to make one video. These videos are made using paid editing software, which means less revenue. Such measures could discourage them from making such videos as making them becomes more and more unaffordable. A hostile condition with their videos not getting the

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2. A YouTube system in which advertisement is removed from a video, depriving its creators of revenue (Alexander).

reach among the intended audience can discourage them from making such videos, threatening the whole video essay genre itself.

Conclusion

> A key challenge within the rise of data has been the unequal distribution of data literacy. When those in positions of power use a new discourse (i.e., data) to engage in their cultural practices, those that are influenced and don't speak this discourse are actively excluded from collaborative construction. This creates data inequality, between those that "speak data" and those that do not…. (D'Ignazio, and Bhargava)

The problems that video essayists and their audience face are not trivial. It is capable of even ruining the good aspects of cyberspace. It is important to make sure that nothing happens to the production of quality video essays, especially in this time where more and more learners turn towards cyberspace to fulfil their educational aspirations. It can also be used to level the "data inequality" as this is one of many suitable ways to teach non-technical people about the intricacies of data and technology (D'Ignazio, and Bhargava).

The proponents of digital learning often emphasize creative methods of teaching, which of course includes video essays too, as the new medium of teaching. This is the reason why many educational videos either resemble or are video essays. But mainstream video essays are equal to that of an article from a news magazine, while e-learning platforms do not have the infrastructure to keep the user in anxiety-anticipation.

The task for future educationists is to create video essays that are both explanatory and exploratory enough so as to attract the attention of the students and also impart knowledge in such a manner that one can learn it, engage with it and understand it without much difficulty and

mental strain (D'Ignazio, and Bhargava). They should use the infrastructure of YouTube to draw students and make them anticipate the next segment. That way, they can reach a wider audience. They should use algorithm-circumventing methods to make sure their videos are not submerged and should also have access to online crowdfunding platforms to sustain content creators even if their videos are demonetized. Even cooperation with YouTube is a viable option. Through this and other effective means, education and knowledge can be imparted and disseminated effectively.

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The Politics of Northeast Indian Cuisine: Ethnic Foods, Digital Food and Fusion Cuisine

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Food often acts as an important cultural artefact that signifies an intimacy with the roots, cultural experiences and identity of an individual and his or her own heritage and culture. It is a powerful metaphor that gives a sense of rootedness and belonging to the alien immigrant on foreign soil. Food politics is a contested and a problematic issue, especially when one considers the politics of Northeast Indian cuisine with mainland India. The Northeast Indian cuisines have often been treated as a singular and homogenized entity, and therefore one can hardly fathom the diversity and richness of the unique flavours that mark the heritage and culinary legacy of northeast India. India's North East region consists of eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura – and comprises roughly 8% of the country's geographical area. The Northeast Indian region is positioned strategically to the major states in the east and countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar and is rich for its resources, access to its domestic markets of eastern India, and therefore, it has been considered as one of India's prosperous regions. The Northeast Indian Region is also known for its rich cultural heritage, comprising more than 200 tribes, known for their rich and authentic cultures. Some of the tribes include the Garo tribe, Bodo tribe, Adi tribe, Nishi tribe and so on. Heralded for its headhunter tribes as can be seen in Nagaland, the sun and moon worshippers of the Apatani tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, the Northeast Indian region is touted for its vibrant, exuberant and authentic cultures, experienced through its tribal festivals. In terms of its culinary heritage and its gastronomic legacy,

the culinary traditions of the Northeast Indian region are divergent from mainland India, as can be seen in their methods of cooking, the elements of taste and flavor and so on. The vibrant culinary traditions and its mélange of flavors and tastes reflect the exuberant and vibrant way of living. While Assamese cuisine is known for rice and fish, momos and thupkas remain the staple diet of Sikkim. The methods of cooking too remain divergent and diverse as can be seen in the case of the cooking methods of non-vegetarian dishes like smoked pork and its combinations with bamboo shot. Seasonings like Narasingha lend richness of taste and flavour and act as the central ingredient of Masor tenga curry or sour fish curry.

A huge gastronomic black hole hangs over northeast Indian cuisine, along with false and popular stereotypical notions and misconceptions. Lack of awareness and perpetuation of stereotyped assumptions has led to bizarre narratives revolving around the culinary legacy of the Northeast Indian cuisines. It is high time that this narrative undergoes change and the act of politicizing Northeast Indian cuisine with respect to mainland India must be undertaken and looked into deeply. The cuisine of Northeastern states has often been conceived of as something homogeneous or a unified entity. However, one can hardly fathom the diversity or the smorgasbord of unique flavours and tantalizing recipes that adorn the rich heritage of the Seven Sisters(the Seven Sisters constitutes the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura). Momos are conceived of as a popular dish of the Northeast Indian region, when it is hardly the traditional staple diet that homogeneously represents the entire Northeast Indian culinary traditions. Momos remain primarily a Tibetan dish. Tibet's proximity to Bhutan and India and the settlement of Tibetan tribes along West Bengal and other Northeast Indian states remains one of the reasons for this percolation or infiltration of momos into Northeast Indian culinary legacy. Oftentimes, the Northeastern cuisine has been conceived of as dominated by momos and thupka alone, overshadowing and perhaps

even undermining the rich diversity of the cuisine. Jaffrey, in her autobiographical preface to her cookbook, affirms her speculation and disbelief in maintaining a homogeneous culinary narrative on Indian cuisine, one which is altogether labeled as Indian (*Madhur Jaffrey's Quick and Easy Indian Cooking).* Popular stereotypes and taboos often cloud assumptions concerning the cuisines and culture of Northeast India. Anthropologist Dolly Kikon who hails from Nagaland has extensively discussed issues relating to her state, especially relating to the ban of dog meat and the complexity of the issue. She believes that it became an area of contestation when the abrupt ban was celebrated by Delhi and mainland India exposing the political underpinnings of what and what not to eat. The historical trajectory of environmental rights is deeply rooted in the political life of race, ethnicity and food cultures. There remain unanswered questions and dilemmas concerning the ethical and moral underpinnings of dog meat eating, the concern for stray animals and the selling of certain meats in public. Dogs imply different significations to the Nagas such as food, pet companion, medicine, spirits and supernatural elements, etc. Hence Kikon warns against homogenizing the interest of the Naga community to dog meat eating alone. Dog meat eating has therefore become mired in grounds of moral ambiguity when acceptable dietary practices revolve around the framework of class, caste and the logic of barbarism.

However, digital culture and social media can be considered as a blessing in disguise when we consider how multifarious blogs and vlogs have flooded the internet, dismantling popular notions and bringing into limelight the rich culture and heritage of Northeast India. There are several, multitudinous cuisines and flavours abounding in the "mythical" Northeast. India that one hardly has any knowledge about. The Indian cuisine has always been heralded by the rich tandooris, Mughlai kebabs,

paneer and the so called north Indian and south Indian dishes that one hardly has any awareness about the traditional and authentic cuisine of the Northeast.

Arjun Appadurai in his *How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,* discusses the emergence of the so-called national cuisine, and how attempts have been made to incorporate regional and ethnic roots. For instance, the new Indian cookbooks have gained popularity due to the advent of print media and cultural rise of the middle classes. This is particularly evident in the case of ethnic and regional cookbooks which perpetuates images of the ethnic Other, creating a sense of "ethnoethnicity", integral to regional and ethnic culinary traditions. the representation of such gastroethnic images of Bengalis, Tamils and so on has resulted in subsequent refinements of the culinary conception of the Other. such representations have significantly helped in creating new structures and categories of thought, giving a cosmopolitan lens to the Indian culinary framework. this can be seen in the rising anthology of "South Indian" (e.Reejhsinghani 1973b; Skelton and Rao 1975) cookbooks which attempt to shatter the distinctions between Tamil, Telugu and Malayali cuisines and consider them together as South Indian cuisine. The conceptions of national cuisine therefore have become problematic especially when they are backed by nationalist ideologies with regional cuisines vying for recognition and an identity of their own.

However, things have changed dramatically since then, thanks to digital and social media. Significant efforts are made between the rest of India and the Northeast in building dialogues and negotiations, which has resulted in the dramatic and significant evolution of north east Indian cuisine, spreading its roots not only within the rest of India, but making its mark globally as well. Gordon Ramsay has featured Northeast Indian cuisine in his show Gordon 's Great Escape, bringing into limelight the diversity of Indian cuisine. He acknowledged the diversity of Indian cuisine

with regard to the difference in the spices used in the Northeast and the rest of India. With the dramatic evolution of the cuisine within the confines of digital media, people are willing to experiment with the diverse and unique flavours and food connoisseurs and gourmet gurus are increasingly acknowledging the exotic, flavourful and healthy culinary traditions hailing from the Northeast. Cooked on less spices and oils, the cuisine is often compared with the bland flavor of Vietnamese food. Simple spices and often light but palatable dishes are the central traits of Northeast Indian cuisine. For instance, Sana Thongba, a Manipuri dish constitutes paneer andand is prepared with less spices. Thoiding Asuba, another Manipuri dish, is a simple dish since it consists of only one ingredient, sesame seeds and is therefore rich in protein. However, one can hardly homogenize Northeast Indian culinary legacy to simplicity alone. Diversity and multiplicity thrive in terms of the culinary legacy of northeast India.

Food signifies an intimacy with the roots and acts as an emotional anchor, binding the cultural experiences and identity of an individual and his or her own heritage and culture. It often acts as a powerful symbol, giving a sense of rootedness to the alien immigrant on the foreign land. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart in *Rereading Cultural Anthropology* believes that nostalgia is "a cultural practice, not a given context; its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present" (252). Dislocated from their roots, inhabitants of northeast India often struggle with nostalgia and longing for their delicacies and flavours which can be seen as associating one's sense of national identity to culinary practices and flavours. Here one can be attributed with a sense of culinary citizenship which involves the practice of associating one's national identity with regard to their relationship with food. Therefore, food figures prominently as a means of negotiating with the agony and pain caused by displacement and rootlessness.

Migration has become a contested issue in the Northeast, especially with the influx of migrants from eastern and Central regions moving to north eastern and western regions of India. Work, marriage, higher education, are some of the reasons for the out-migration from the Northeast. In the initial period of 90's, the Northeastern migrants have become the second group of internal migrants following the South Indians of the 60's and 70's. Following the opening up of large routes of migration from within and outside the Northeast, it became inevitable that migrants began moving out to urban metropolises for better jobs and employment opportunities.

In the light of the neoliberalist outlook of metropolitan Delhi, urban spaces have emerged to create more opportunities for the Northeastern immigrants. Northeast migrants are increasingly visible in two main consumer sectors namely, new consumer spaces and call centres. Humayunpur in Delhi is often seen as the place that caters to the flavours and delicacies of north east India. One of the most populated urban centres situated in the heart of Delhi, the city is now home to migrants from the seven sisters. Despite being a home for a large number of migrants, things have never been easy for the immigrants who have been looked down upon and forced to shift their lives back to their homeland due to the incessant condemnation and hatred that they have been facing. However, despite such hardships, the immigrants have displaced from their roots and established their living, attempting to create a sense of familiarity amidst the alienation and lack of belonging. However, the Humayanpur quarters, as a whole, acts as a haven for the Northeastern population compared to other major spots, attempting to create a space of familiarity and comfort without them actually fitting in, thereby giving a semblance of home. This is evident in the restaurants that cater to Northeast Indian flavours and grocery stores supplying fermented bamboo shoot (bamboo shoot fermentation is a traditional process that is integral to the culinary traditions of Northeast India), yongchak (an important

ingredient to Northeast Indian culinary legacy, found in many dishes such as Eromba, Yongchak Singju, etc), axone (a very popular food in Nagaland and other tribal communities of Northeast India, made by fermenting soybeans. It is also referred to as akhuni), etc.

India is witnessing rapid growth in terms of economic and demographic transition. Globalization has brought increasing visibility to regional and ethnic cuisines, integrating a cosmopolitan perspective and bringing up innovative possibilities in the realm of Indian culinary legacy as a whole. For instance, Grand Market Pavilion, the great multi cuisine restaurant, in its event of launching ITC Royal Bengal in Kolkata, has opened its doors to explore the flavours of the seven sisters. Chefs from the Northeast specifically were called upon to cook signature dishes, thereby celebrating the ethnicity and diversity of the seven sisters. Authenticity being the key point to be considered, delicacies were especially whipped up to ignite authentic and local flavors. Ashis Nandy in his *Ethnic Cuisine: The Significant Other* believes that there were always ethnic cuisines but there was no such strict hierarchy or categorization as such. The cuisines of the others were integral to one's life, either acting as markers of class or meant for explorers, connoisseurs and anthropologists. He firmly reiterates that ethnic food has become a matter of serious business and that it made significant inroads into global metropolitan life, creating a sense of cosmopolitan experience. Rachel Laudan, visiting scholar at the University of Texas and author of *Cuisine and Empire,* believes that what is conceived of as peasant foods are basically various levels of ethnic foods. Ethnicity has become a contested issue, mired in the politics of food, noting the resilience of ethnic cuisines towards any processes of acculturation. Such theoretical statements about the politics of ethnic cuisines speak volumes about authenticity as a vital marker when it comes to ingredients, food preparation methods and even the chefs and the servers associated with the entire process. Rustic and authentic flavours act as the core values of ethnic cuisines,

despite the global exposure and the wide spectrum of the event. In other words, there have been sincere efforts, with the rise of globalization and digital media, to bring the flavours that have been previously eclipsed, into the limelight. Food historian Ashish Chopra was of the opinion that the rich flavours of the north east have been largely overshadowed due to the popularity of Indo-Chinese food. However, such global exposure would aid in broadening the horizons of north east Indian cuisine and bridging the gap between the mainland and north east India. As quoted in an article entitled, "What's cooking in Kolkata? The tale of five interesting new restaurants in the city", Auroni Mookerjee, chef and GM, The Salt House, Kolkata, believes that the delicacies from all the regions of Northeast India must be adequately represented or else such a culinary exercise would be in vain. He says, "There are some standard dishes that are showcased in the name of Northeast cuisine. Usually, these do not feature the distinctive meats, like beef and fatty pork," says Mookerjee. "Offal is also popular, like pork trotters and intestines in Sikkim. Blood is used heavily, in sausages and to thicken gravies. Fermented foods have an acquired taste, but they are also central" ("What's Cooking in Kolkata?"). Outsourcing fresh and locally based ingredients from the north east has not been a simple process and hence other means such as by ways of couriers or local suppliers had to be relied upon. However, sourcing fresh ingredients has never been an arduous task both for small eateries and large restaurant chains as well. In a *Hindu* article entitled, "The North East Flavour trail", Ramayom Keishing of North East Kitchen in Chennai, in a personal interview, says that gaining authentic and fresh ingredients can seem tricky and therefore he relies on local supplies and ingredients (Dutta).

The whole of the Northeast Indian cuisine has often been homogenized and treated as a unified entity which becomes further problematic when one considers the positioning of Northeast Indian cuisine within the so called mainstream Indian culture and heritage. It has been considered a matter of ease when it comes to drawing asymmetrical boundaries around the culinary idea of "Indianness". Indian culinary heritage has often been a site of contestation when it comes to segmenting the culinary traditions of various multifarious states into a single, neat homogeneous category. It is a matter of impossibility when it comes to assigning structural markers that define the taste and flavour of a particular region when India's culinary legacy is burgeoning with a multitude of rich and diverse flavours and culinary traditions. Since Northeast Indian cuisine has often been relegated to the margins and hardly occupies any centre stage, the notion of representing its true ethnicity and heritage becomes even more problematic and difficult to wrestle with, especially with regard to the relationship of the Northeast politically with mainland India. There pervades a sense of social exclusion and identity politics when it comes to redefining and establishing the identity of Northeast India. India's Northeast remains completely marginalized and cordoned off from the political realities of the national imagination. Home to about 238 tribal communities and thereby constituting about 28 percent of the population, economic instability, domestic conflicts and the latest development of the Citizenship Amendment Act has furthered alienation and isolation from mainland India. Adhering to neither the leftist or the right political ideologies of the mainstream Indian politics, the NER (Northeast Indian region) fails to garner support and an identity of their own. This is similarly visible when it comes to the culinary traditions as well as can be seen in the Indian cuisine, which is heralded globally for its tandoori, paneer and dal tadka when one hardly looks into the rich delicacies of the seven sisters such as the Manipuri fermented fish, bamboo chicken and so on. Different parts of India have opened their doors, embracing the rich flavours of the northeast as can be seen in the case of Mizo Kitchen, which serves smoked meat dishes, Axomi, which serves aloo pitika and the Smokey tribe Restaurant which serves a wide variety of Naga chutneys, both of them situated in Bengaluru. Increased awareness regarding the

diversity of the seven sisters has become one of the glorious victories ever, due to the rising globalization and the digitization of media. This is clearly evident in terms of the burgeoning growth of restaurants that adhere to serving the delicacies of each of the Northeastern states, and thereby acknowledging and preserving the rich cultural heritage, rather than treating them as a singular, homogeneous entity. This is best exemplified through restaurants like Oh! Assam and Nagaland's Kitchen, situated in New Delhi. Various parts of India are embracing the richness of the north east Indian cuisine as can be seen in the increasing number of restaurants which cater to exposing the rich diverse flavors of north east Indian cuisine. For instance, The Categorical Eat-Pham based in Safdarjung caters to serving stir-fried fish gizzards and the fermented Manipuri fish, ngari.

Fusion cuisine is a recent advent in the field of culinary studies, marking a significant step in terms of broadening the horizons of Asian cuisine. Although flavours and recipes have been traversing across the globe, the advent of fusion cuisine plays an instrumental role in bringing visibility to the divergent regions, cultures and culinary traditions, thereby remapping and repositioning South Asian culinary citizenship in the twenty-first century. The term culinary citizenship ascribes to a form of affective citizenship, which involves giving subjects the ability to determine their subject positions in terms of their relationship to food. Such a provision ensures agency and identity formation, an improvisational, innovative and de facto citizen making, not through the conventional political legal jurisdictions but through ethnic, intimate culinary practices of ethnic food. Food evolves as a metaphor for thinking and feeling beyond national and cultural identification. Such culinary practices can be seen as powerful alternatives to narrow minded and firm associations and imaginations between nation and cuisine.

Moreover, fusion cuisines play an instrumental role in foregrounding the distinctiveness and chess of the culinary legacy of the

combining delicacies, underscoring the regions 'roots and origins as can be seen for instance in a Spanish paella served with a butter chicken masala and a Naga chili chutney. This puts an end to the popularly conceived notion of "the viability of the nation as a culinary discursive possibility" (Fairchild 3). Such a proposition puts an end to any distinctions of cuisines based on national identity. Hybridized cuisines are an excellent culinary practice, especially when one considers the relegated status of north east Indian cuisine. In such a case, fusion cuisine plays a powerful role in terms of bringing into light the rich culinary legacy of Northeast India, without compromising its flavours and essences.

With the rapid globalization and digitization, Mcdonaldisation and Coca-Colonization have become the watchwords, thereby significantly altering the contours of geopolitical nations and thereby limiting the borders of ethnic and regional culinary practices and emerging as some of the biggest threats to the growth of ethnic and regional cuisines. Globalization, according to Roland Robertson, is "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (R. Robertson, *Globalization*, 1992: 8). Therefore the world is moving towards a sense of "unicity", eroding territorial borders and creating a sense of global consciousness. However, rather than homogenizing force, globalization, he argues, results in particularization of universalism and vice versa. He conceives of the "local" as a site of conflict and resistance towards globalizing trends and therefore "glocalization" entails that what happens locally and globally are mutually dependent and constitutive. Suggests that what happens locally and globally are mutually constitutive; therefore, the local is not only shaped by the global but also has the potential to change the global. the is evident in the case of Humayanpur, based in New Delhi is one of the best examples, which shows how the migrant labor from Northeast India has significantly altered the politics of the Seven Sisters, a space which was earlier conceived of as homogeneous and a unified entity, sharply relegated from mainland

India. Delhi can be considered as the melting pot of a multitude of cultures and diverse ethnic communities. With the advent of the northeast Indian labor force, the face of Delhi has changed forever, creating an increase in terms of job opportunities. Furthermore, with the booming of globalization, the immigrant labor force has directly participated, although invisibly, contributing significantly to the economy of the nation. In an age of digitization and globalization, we are living in a post national world and hence it becomes necessary to problematize the concept of "national" and discard the narrowly defined notions of national distinctions. globalization has eroded any sense of territorial distinctions and thereby redefined the notion of national imagination and identity politics. Indian cuisine, as Floyd Cardoz, executive chef at Tabla, puts it, has often been defined in terms of its excess and pungent flavours and odours. This does not extend to tastes alone, but is conceived of in terms of smell as well. This can be similarly applied to Northeast Indian cuisine as well, which is often looked down upon and clouded by popular stereotypes and taboos. One of the major stereotyped notions is with regard to the association of the mainstream momos to the north eastern region, hardly looking into the rich and ethnic diverse flavours inherent in each of the northeastern states. Other popular assumptions include the use of dog meat in Nagaland, when one hardly has any awareness regarding the rich and dynamic flavours in the Wokoso Rhuchii/Rhuchak, pork cooked with fermented organic bamboo shoot stem and aromatic herbs. The 2016 legal notice to ban dog meat in Nagaland sparked huge controversies revolving around ethics, morality and ethnicity of the indigenous communities. Dog meat has become integral and intimate to the culinary tradition of the Naga community and therefore there hardly remained any national debate on the consumption of dog meat until the legal notice and its debates on animal rights. Furthermore the dog meat eating becomes further embroiled in dilemmas involving which animal deserves protection, the love and the bonding between humans and

animals and so on. Unlike cows which are considered sacred and holy, the dog meat consumption is mired in the politics of morality and ethics and the language of animal rights, triggering debates on whether it is right to eat "man's best friend".

Ethnicity has become more spatialized and determined by the sensory framework. Rather than appreciating the simplicity and the rich diversity of the cuisine, the palatability of the Indian food generally, and, the north east Indian cuisine, in particular, are overshadowed by stereotyped and preconceived misconceptions, mostly involving the presence of pungent odors, spiciness, etc. This is most clearly evident in the case of akhuni or axone which is known for its distinctive flavour and pungent smell(it is a fermented soybean known to flavour meat and other vegetarian dishes). The Northeastern migrants living in Delhi struggle with contested issues of casual racism, issues of social space leading to the perpetuation of various stereotypes regarding Northeastern cuisine. Not only are prejudices harboured about Northeast India (that they are violent, savage and primitive), but rather they are translated into the culinary practices as well. Although Humayanpur is known as a cosmopolitan place, the fact that migrants choose to eat culinary delicacies that mark their distinctive identity shows how they disrupt the neat category of what is considered modernity. It is by means of everyday consumption practices which produce communal stereotypes and thereby underscore the porous nature of boundaries and territories. Kikon in her work, *Farm to Finger: The Culture and Politics of Food in Contemporary India*, therefore underscores that it is in the intimate spaces of kitchen and in the exchanges and negotiations between masala eaters and the akhuni eaters that significations underlying culinary citizenship, democratic social spaces and secularism are challenged and redefined. Kikon in "Eating Akhuni in Delhi" further argues that there is a fine line between environmental rights and preserving the cultural heritage of ethnic communities. Dog meat has however become integral to Naga cuisine

but has never entered contested grounds or become part of a national campaign.

Palatability is an index factor, determining the politics concerning the northeast Indian cuisine and hence it is necessary to negotiate with and actively participate in the political and ethnic implications underlying the degree and mode of palatability. A certain degree of tolerance is associated with palatability and hence only simple, light and palatable diets occupy centerstage, resulting in relegation of rich, unknown and the authentic flavours of minoritized north east cuisine to the margins. Although nutritious and palatable dishes remain the hallmark trait of Northeast Indian cuisine, homogenizing the multi ethnically diverse cuisine to a singular trait alone is problematic and requires significant redefinition. it is necessary to acknowledge and underscore the rich complexity, exuberance and vibrancy of the rich flavours of such ethnic cuisines. Not only are they diverse in terms of the flavours and delicacies, but also in terms of the food preparation techniques and the use of indigenous ingredients. For instance, the Nagas relish pork and beef, which is smoked and then fermented to be preserved for longevity. The use of freshly available herbs, the method of cooking and the integral ingredient of Naga cuisine i.e., spicy raja mirchi makes Naga cuisine unique and distinctive. For instance, Nambie Jessica Marak, in her popular YouTube channel Eat Your Kappa, breaks a popular stereotypical notion that for food to be delicious, it must be cooked with excessive oils and spices. Northeast Indian delicacies are mostly boiled and served nutritious, involving fermented foods and boiled vegetables. Inventiveness and resourcefulness are other key features underlying north east Indian cuisine. Geography being a key factor, the hilly regions of Meghalaya often use fresh farm or forest produce in their cuisine. Hence creativity, spontaneity and resourcefulness are valued rather than ascribing to any narrowly defined notions and conventions.

Fusion cuisine is one innovative approach since it creates a space that celebrates uniqueness and diversity for new tastes and flavors. Norman Van Aken, who claims credit for having invented the term "fusion cuisine," defines it as "a harmonious combination of foods of various origins" (Dornenburg 22). It offers multiple possibilities in terms of the politics of palatability and is a sign of the increasing sense of visibility acquired by ethnic flavours and cuisines. Multiculturalism is one of the significant consequences of globalization and fusion cuisine can be conceived of as the manifestation of multiculturalism, involving hybridity, intermingling of cultures and assimilation of flavours and tastes. An instance of this can be seen when Atul Kocchar opened a restaurant in the heart of London, thereby bringing northeast Indian cuisine to the global scene. One of the popular chefs based in London, he opened a restaurant that caters to celebrating the delicacies and flavours of the Seven Sisters, entitled Kanishka's World of Imagination. The restaurant features delicacies that are the hybridized versions, marrying seasonal British produce with authentic species and flavours of north east India. Such attempts can be seen as a means of exploring the unexplored terrain of Indian culinary legacy, thereby broadening the horizons of Indian cuisine. The restaurant caters to integrating regional flavours with quality British produce and attempts to experiment with the cooking methods and practices of northeast Indian cuisine. Signature dishes include Kachela Maas, a Sikkim inspired venison tartare with mustard oil mayonnaise, and Chocolate Rasmalai, a popular dish in eastern India. Such a fusion of the regional with the western brings in a politics of assimilation and integration and thereby attempts to adapt Indianness to the western palate.

Fusion cuisines are not just about merely combining various flavours but rather an attempt to bring in a sense of palatability by bringing disparate elements in seemingly new and innovative ways. Ming Tsai, host of the Food Network shows East Meets West and Ming's Quest,

says that such fusions create remarkable culinary experiences, bringing about a sense of "chaos" in the plate and the mouth as well. For instance, Kocchar brings about a similar fusion experience through naan crouton and onions, with mains such as Samundri Khazana Alleppey, which is a dish of pan seared seafood, Alleppey sauce and smoked cabbage poriyal.

Cookbooks play an instrumental role in mapping the Northeast Indian cuisine in the global arena, thereby shifting the focus from the mainstream Indian cuisines. Cookbooks such as Hoinhnu Hauzel's *Essential North-East Cookbook* and Aiyushman Dutta's *Food Trail: Discovering Food Culture of Northeast India* play an important role in terms of remapping the terrain of Northeast Indian cuisine and significantly altering the politics of the cuisine with the mainland India. Such a proposition posits north east Indian cuisine as a complex and nuanced, rather than as a unified and monolithic entity. Such attempts can be seen as a means of analyzing and emphasizing the social and symbolic role of food, thereby dismantling food from its regional and national markers.

Digital and social media have further broadened the horizons of Northeast Indian cuisine, thereby increasing its visibility within the grand politics of Indian cuisine. YouTube channels, blogs and vlogs have significantly altered the mainstream narrative on Northeast Indian cuisine, by bringing them into the limelight and thereby altering its politics and positioning within mainland India. For instance, Eat Your Kappa, run by Nambie Jessica Marak, a Media Studies graduate from Shillong, involves a collection of vlogs with 10,653 subscribers, which chronicles the significant aspects of Northeast Indian cuisine, busting stereotypes and addressing its diversity rather than its commonality with the Indian cuisine. Kappa is a Garo method of cooking, which involves Iye, extracted from bamboo. Being a quintessential dish that marks the diversity of the Northeast Indian ethnic communities, she believes that the word is often

synonymous to Northeast Indian cuisine. Her channel attempts to break popular stereotypical notions regarding the assumptions underlying the Northeast Indian cuisine as a homogenous entity and hence believes that ethnicity and diversity need to be celebrated. Her recipes are unique wherein she attempts to narrate tales that are unique to each delicacy, thereby appealing to a sense of ethnicity and diversity of the Northeast Indian tribal communities, such as Khasi, Mizo and Bodo. However, her channel is diverse in terms of dealing with a variety of subjects involving farming practices, intermingling the social and cultural contexts underlying the delicacies, various festivals and cultural practices, etc. She also addresses the differences and similarities underlying the eating and food habits among tribal and non-tribal communities. She believes that the cuisine of the Garo people is very much similar to that of tribes from Tripura and even Bodos of Assam. The cooking technique of boiling is very much preferred rather than deep frying or baking. a few spices are used, vegetables are mostly from the backyard, mostly garlic and chilies are used as seasonings.

Instagram feeds, blogs, YouTube channels and vlogs bring into limelight the multiplicity of the flavours and cuisines that predominate the Northeast Indian culinary legacy. The Oo-Morok Trails is a popular Instagram account that caters to celebrating the indigenous cuisines hailing from the Seven Sisters and believes in preserving the rich culinary legacy of the north east. Food bloggers on popular social media websites such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram which are some of the fastest growing means of content sharing. José van Dijck, in *The culture of connectivity*, says that "Within less than a decade, a new infrastructure for online sociality and creativity has emerged, penetrating every fibre of culture today" (2013, p. 4).

The politics of food within the grander digital realm has always been a contested issue. Digital food photography plays a significant role

in terms of determining food preferences and lifestyle, thereby creating spaces of intimacy, sociality and connectedness. Food bloggers often engage in digital photography, featuring the circulation of amateur food photography. There has been a significant explosion of food photography, which involves the use of highly aestheticized food imagery. This is particularly significant in terms of altering the politics of northeast Indian cuisine within the grander narrative of global cuisine. YouTube channels like Nagaland Foodie play a pivotal role in underlining the immense possibilities of fusion recipes. Various Mukbang videos on Northeast Indian cuisines such as eating catfish with bamboo shoots and spicy chilis, or eating local fish with spicy chilis may focus on fetishized viewing of the consumption of food. However, in contrast to popular opinion, Mukbang videos are usually more authentic since they include more content and speaking as compared to ASMR and other types of food content, which focus on aesthetic elements. Ruprekha Mushahary's blog *Feelings*, explores the various delicacies of the state of Assam with a separate section on Bodo delicacies. Creating aestheticized and brilliant digital imagery of culinary delicacies is another way of creating a sense of participatory culture in the digital space. It was Alexander Cockburn who came up with the term "food porn" in 1977, referring to the emphasis on the visual aestheticization of food. This is increasingly evident in cookbooks, television shows and social media posts which deploy techniques such as lighting, food styling and celebrity stars, thereby reaching out to the average consumer. Critic Richard Magee also talks about the performative dimension of food, linking it to sex, by invoking sensual aspects relating to food. Food porn mostly involves giving a simulation of the real food, widely divergent from the appearance and appeal of the home cooked food. Hence, such cohesive and integral means of digital media culture can significantly alter the positioning of Northeast Indian cuisine within the global landscape of food and culture. Furthermore, more and more vlogs and YouTube channels are

mushrooming, mostly initiated by ordinary food lovers rather than food connoisseurs, giving out advice related to the cuisine, culture and heritage of north east India. For instance, channels like The *Foodie* explores homemade Manipuri cuisine while vlogs such as those of the youtuber, Tanya Khanijow, often feature travel to various northeast Indian states and trying their diverse culinary treats and delicacies. Vlogs on northeast India travel series such as those of Sinful Foodie and Backpacker Ben, often involve exploring the local rich street delicacies of Shillong and Mizoram. Chef Ranveer in his The Epic Channel, explores the flavours of Manipuri cuisine and tries his hand in the cooking style and techniques underlying the same. Ili Shohe in her dissertation entitled "A Study of Popular Naga Cuisine and its Representation on Instagram" discusses at length the popular stereotypical notions that are perpetuated in social media thereby bringing into forefront the various challenges faced with regard to the representation of the Northeast Indian culinary traditions.

The creation and growth of such digital spaces play a pivotal role in terms of digital food activism and in the creation of alternative food movements. Such digital tools and forms of social media aid in the engagement of the politics of food and in bringing about a sense of visibility to the hitherto marginalized and unexplored terrains of culinary legacies. Bloggers, social media websites and various other digital tools are indispensable in bringing into light the richness and diversity of northeast Indian cuisine, exposing a range of food issues and breaking popular stereotypes and misconceptions. For instance, the Oo Morok Trails, a popular blog on Northeast Indian cuisine, posts pictures and blog posts, keen on underscoring the ethnic and authentic Northeast Indian cuisine. She says that it becomes imperative to incorporate unique recipes and make an attempt to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Northeast India, thereby bringing a cosmopolitan perspective to the Northeast Indian culinary legacy. Her video tutorials on YouTube deal with the multifarious indigenous methods of cooking, thereby focusing on the various

multitudinous aspects of food preparation and culinary traditions. Esther Losa, in her channel, Nagaland Foodie, delineates the various traditional delicacies of not just her own but various Naga communities. Although hailing from the Lotha tribe from Nagaland, she attempts to underscore the diversity and rich vibrancy of the various Naga tribes, by celebrating their culinary traditions as well. Popular misconceptions about homogeneity of the culinary delicacies are dismantled by handling multiplicities of rich and unknown delicacies through such digital mediums. Food aficionados from all over the world have turned their eyes towards the Northeast Indian culinary legacy by balancing both taste and health and thereby attempting to preserve and promote the ethnicity of their food and food habits. Ruprekha Mushahary, one of the famous food connoisseurs, through her food blog Feelings, integrates Assamese cuisines while A Foodie's Diary, helmed by foodies Bikram Rajkhowa and Geeta Dutta, is an innovative channel showcasing the ethnicity and authenticity of the Northeastern recipes by integrating native and exotic flavours. For instance, the channel brings into the limelight lost or forgotten ethnic cuisines such as Aathkoria, an unknown Assamese recipe, and also brings into forefront the traditional practice of growing vegetables in the Assamese garden. Hence such digital mediums bring into limelight lost and forgotten traditional practices of ethnic communities and thereby creates narratives, new and unique about the already known narratives of Northeast India.

The term digital food cannot be conceived of as a unified entity but involves a range of dietary traditions and culinary practices that are increasingly contested in the digital realm. The culture of food blogging, tourist and culinary vlogs, YouTube channels of foodies and other renowned food connoisseurs have significantly altered the global politics of the Northeast Indian cuisine. In the 2001 issue of Bon Appétit titled "America Goes Global", the editor-in-chief Barbara Fairchild said, "We're eating off the same plate and enjoying ourselves immensely. It has been

said that the problems of the world might be solved more easily by talking around a dinner table than a conference table. We agree" (42) (Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions*). Although it may seem simpler, the politics of food is often deeply entrenched and highly contested. It is not only about making good or palatable food but rather more about the synthesis of a culinary culture that challenges narrowly defined national boundaries. Fusion must not only be ephemeral but rather it must be a democratic process, capable of changing the contours of cuisine and culture. Food must always be about the coming together and celebration of various cultures and races and hence it is necessary to understand the dynamic politics underlying the act of synthesis or fusion of flavours and creation of new and unique delicacies.

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Beyond Close and Distant: Computation, Literary Sociology, and the Place of Interpretation[1]

Alexander Dunst

In one of his later essays, Stuart Hall criticized what he called the "overwhelming textualization of cultural studies", warning that its political vocation depended on studying culture's intersection with, among others: '"institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, ideologically defined parties and professions"' (Hall 272).[2] Hall also acknowledged that this institutional perspective had remained problematic, indeed that it had proven impossible to come to an adequate account of "culture's relations and its effects."

In what follows, I contend that digital methods have the potential to furnish this elusive account of culture's relations. Perhaps more controversially, I argue that the digital humanities represent an opportunity to return to the political vocation of cultural studies. Building on the work of Katherine Bode, the first part describes distant and close reading as two variants of largely decontextualized scholarship. The second part highlights an alternative approach, what I will here call situated reading: Rather than focusing on the text as the ultimate source of meaning, this method uses sociological information and relational databases to *model* literary systems – or, in Hall's words, "culture's relations and its effects."

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1. This short paper is adapted from the introduction to a forthcoming book, *The Rise of the Graphic Novel: Computational Criticism and the Evolution of Literary Value*, to be published with Cambridge University Press in 2022.

2. Hall cites Edward Said in the second quote.

I. Beyond Close and Distant

In the version that remains best known to literary critics, the digital humanities pursue an approach called distant reading. This unfortunate phrase enacts a number of problematic dichotomies: between quantitative and qualitative, empirical and critical, computational and hermeneutic scholarship.[3] Intended as a descriptive term, quantity often morphs into a prescriptive goal, a race for ever bigger datasets that shows obvious parallels with the efforts of large software companies. Scholars who study rarer artifacts will never accrue enough data for distant reading, whether it's because they focus on minor languages, niche formats, or historical acts of opposition.[4] Despite their reputation, then, many digital humanities projects therefore aren't concerned with distant reading. Instead, they employ digital affordances to preserve, analyze, and disseminate smaller sets of cultural objects or practices.

The two related dichotomies of empirical and critical, computational and hermeneutic, similarly give way upon closer scrutiny. For scholars like Hall, no contradiction existed between empirical observation and critique. One built the foundation for the other. Like every experimental approach, computation also demands interpretation. In particular, experimental results necessitate a form of sustained reading that attends to the ambiguities and contradictions of statistical patterns but embeds them within a theoretical framework. Computation does not replace the hermeneutic circle but becomes part of its functioning, positioned between the formulation of hypotheses and the interpretation of results (Sculley and Pasanek).

Historically speaking, distant reading flows from the confluence of two scholarly practices – the New Criticism and humanities computing. As Katherine Bode points out, there is a deep affinity between distant and close reading: the notion that texts are singular, stable entities and the central source of literary meaning. As a consequence, texts are often read in isolation from their physical manifestation and socio-economic context (Bode 92). The second approach that has shaped distant reading is known as humanities computing. With roots stretching back to the 1940s, humanities computing developed tools and methods for the analysis of written documents. This new area of study also emphasized the text, now become a digital entity. Implicitly or explicitly, humanities computing took its distance from a concern with social contexts and the analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality.[5] Most computational methods enable the sophisticated analysis of large collections of linguistic data. But they pay much less attention to their social entanglement. The distinction between qualitative and quantitative in the debate over distant versus close reading therefore obscures that both fail to construct literature as a socio-historical system.

II. Situated Reading

Over the last few years, I worked on a book that studies graphic narratives published in North America since the 1970s as a literary field. This project drew on contemporary accounts of cultural capital to *model* the social elevation of this publication format. Thus, the aim consists in capturing the characteristics and contexts of a cultural object and structuring this information in ways that enable computational analysis.

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3. For its original coinage see Moretti "Conjectures on World Literature." A recent reiteration of these oppositions can be found in Moretti, "The Roads to Rome".

4. Some of the observations in these passages were first published in Dunst, "Digital American Studies: An Introduction and Rationale".

5 Martha Nell Smith comments: "When I first started attending humanities computing conferences in the mid-1990s, I was struck by how many of the presentations remarked, either explicitly or implicitly, that concerns that had taken over so much academic work in literature—of gender, race, class, sexuality—were irrelevant to humanities computing". See Smith 4.

Central to this model are the links between 270 retro-digitized graphic narratives and a relational database that contains metadata for each of these volumes: page length and author information, color and size, reprints and film adaptations, translations, academic citations and review ratings.[6] The databases that contain and relate these tables of information provide a generally unsung tool of computational study. But they allow scholars to establish lateral networks that provide connections beyond a focus on individual authors and titles. Each entry and every link becomes an access point to the entire system (For a helpful discussion see Léger-St-Jean and McGettigan).

In comparison with Moretti's distant reading, which seesaws between micro- and macroanalysis, this multi-leveled network means that individual texts lose in importance. Instead, the focus of interpretation becomes the literary field and its component parts. In studying the rise of the graphic novel, these were subgenres and stylistic strategies, colors and shapes, textual and visual complexity. What I call situated reading employs computation to analyze cultural objects in their socio-historical contexts, specifically, the relation between aesthetic production and social reproduction. Situated reading emphasizes the construction of fine-grained models of cultural phenomena, semi-independent in their logic, yet embedded within larger media ecologies and political economies.

Beyond close and distant, there is an urgent need in the study of literature and culture today for "complementary scales of reading" (English 12-13) that focus on the middle strata of culture, from minor genres to specific cultural institutions (See English and Underwood, English). Pragmatically, such a mid-level method allows for a form of modeling that can represent, if never fully account for, the complexity of actually

6   For sample visualization, a search option, and download of the entire database see: https://groups.uni-paderborn.de/graphic-literature/gncorpus/corpus.php

existing phenomena. These mid-level phenomena mediate between the abstract poles of society at large, and the instance of the literary text (See Frow). They do so not by extrapolation, or the notion that the individual text *expresses* larger concerns. Rather than aiming to analyze the entirety of literary history, it is in analyzing these midlevel phenomena that we may encounter the complex, even contradictory, evidence that allows us to revise established interpretations and grand theories.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Diotima's: A Journal of New Readings
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The Research Department of English, Providence Women's College, Kozhikode, invites papers for the 2022 issue of its annual journal, *Diotima's: A Journal of New Readings*, on **Children's Literature**. We welcome well researched and theoretically grounded research papers from academicians and research scholars from the Departments of English, Media Studies, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Social Sciences and other interdisciplinary areas pertaining to the broad area of **Children's Literature.**

Literature as a medium for cognitive appraisal, an instrument for conveying meaning, imparting knowledge and skills, represents non-imaginative as well as imaginative works. Besides facilitating the interpretive function, they encompass composite ways and means to highlight aesthetic values in individuals, institutions, socio-cultural embodiments, languages, genres, historical periods and so forth. Furthermore, historically, literary works spanning across domains have influenced individuals of various age groups. Relying on the literary taste of such diverse readership for their appeal and acceptance, they are found to help strengthen character, build intuitions, and instil motivation and resilience in the young, adult and old alike. Literary genres that range from literary fiction to mystery, thriller, horror, historical, romance, western, bildungsroman, speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy, dystopian, magical realism and so on occupy a central position in the contemporary literary scene besides also lending themselves to broad taxonomies such as fiction and non-fiction.

While categories do exist, one area that has still remained abysmally explored is children's literature, whether picture books, poetry/verse, folklore and fairy tales, fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography and/or non-fiction. As Donna Norton observes in her work *Through the Eyes of a Child*, children's literature holds a particularly important place among other genres, as "it empowers and helps children understand their cultural heritage and of those around them besides contributing to their emotional intelligence and creativity." Besides, it helps children evolve their personality and develop their skills, and transmits literary essence from generation to generation. This unpretentious and pragmatic insider observation aside, the literary world outside reflects only a modest appreciation of children's literature, understanding it only partly, for, contemporary discourses on children's literature tend to be heavily loaded by unwarranted adult perspectives on its thematic content, stylistics, idiom, readership, interpretative modes and the like.

Yet, children's literature, in particular, acts as a vehicle for social change, resisting conventional and conservative ideas and customary nomenclatures. No doubt, it is emerging as an area looking forward to reasonable exploration and worthy critique, not to be discarded as an unadorned and elementary corpus of amateurish literary ramblings. Varying templates of axioms and assumptions vis-à-vis this discourse include the following thematic queries:

- Examine how children and childhood are represented with reference to gender, social, economic, racial and political constituents

- Analyse to what extent writers represent children as protagonists or prominent characters in their composition

- Examine whether contemporary writers emulate aetonormativity in their creative works or there are alternative ways and patterns that override one-dimensional outlook of the adult-writer constructing the child reader

- Elucidate whether writers have shifted their attention from fantasy/supernatural to more realism

- Survey if there exist comprehensive yardsticks for language, style and tone with respect to male and female characterisation

- Assess how digital, technological and other postmodern developments reflect in contemporary children's books

- Besides these, the thrust area of this research takes into consideration re-creations of classics, adaptations of stories, illustrations, cartoons on social media platforms, regional children's literature, e-books, etc.

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