

CHALCHITRA DARPAR

2022 - 2023



THE UNDERGRADUATE FILM JOURNAL
CELLULOID

CHALCHITRA DARPAN

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CINEMA IN CRISIS

2022 - 2023



MIRANDA HOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI



CELLULOID
THE FILM SOCIETY
OF MIRANDA HOUSE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dear Readers,

It is an absolute pleasure to present to you the third iteration of **Chalchitra Darpan**, the undergraduate academic journal by Celluloid: The Film Society of Miranda House. *Chalchitra Darpan* was conceived with the vision to foster academic thought and promote holistic research practices in scholars who might be in the nascent stages of their respective fields and careers. As an independent publication run solely on voluntary participation of the journal's team as well as Celluloid, this publication owes its existence to the gracious and persistent efforts of a myriad of people. Foremost, we would like to thank sincerely our mentors, Professor Gorvika Rao and Professor Shweta Sachdeva Jha for their keen insights, constant guidance and encouragement. We would also like to express with indebted hearts, our special thanks to Ashray Sinha, for continuing to work with us in the capacity of a web developer, and for creating an incredible online space which lends the journal its own unique identity. We would be remiss to not acknowledge the founding members because of whom *Chalchitra Darpan* continues to thrive, Oli Chatterjee and Giitanjali. Words fail to do justice to the sheer respect and heartfelt appreciation which we possess for the previous Editor-in-Chief, Faaria Hilaly, who not only gave us her precious time and guidance with heartwarming abundance, but also entrusted us with the responsibility of carrying forward *Chalchitra Darpan*'s legacy. Our sincere thanks to the Celluloid Union 2022-23 for their much valued support, and encouragement. I am indebted to President Shyambhavi, who bore much of the weight of logistical details and communication, as well as Vice-President Jannat Johal.

Chalchitra Darpan is a labour of love, and we would like to thank each of our team members for the unwavering commitment with which they've poured their persistent efforts into the journal this past year. Our editors, designers and illustrator have worked ceaselessly and meticulously for the creation of the third edition of the journal. Their feedback, understanding, consistent hard work and creative vigour has brought out the best in us, as leaders and collaborators. On a final note, we would like to thank our contributors, who chose to write for *Chalchitra Darpan* and continue to generate excellent research, keeping the flame of film academia alive and yet again serving as a reminder why the existence of *Chalchitra Darpan* is vital for the production of new, stimulating narratives in the arena of undergraduate scholarship. To our supporters and readers, thank you for your continued interest in our work, and we hope you enjoy reading this edition as much as we did.

**Akshika Goel
Anushka Joshi
Editors-in-Chief**

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A NOTE ON DESIGN

Designing the third edition of Chalchitra Darpan came with a peculiar challenge. We knew it was time to set in concrete what elements of design we wanted to retain from last editions so as to create a set of visual pointers that would remain constant throughout, but we also did not want to hinder creative freedom. This edition is a result of the deliberations that followed, enough for it to be clearly identified with its predecessors while also fighting a sense of monotony.

The color palette consists primarily of bleak tones of blues and browns resonating with the theme of crisis. In contrast, the stark yellow forces the reader's attention. This is a crisis you cannot look away from. The typography used in the cover designs for the articles is bold, block letters meant to provide accessibility that sometimes gets lost in convoluted fonts. Each paper is complemented by an illustration that gives a peek into the essence of the paper while retaining a mystery. The designs are meant to attract but also to force the reader to come to terms with the bleakness of it all.

The journal's complexion as a subjective fret has been tried to be emulsified with the use of a color palette: white, brown, black, yellow, and grey. With an intention to visually communicate as adjectives of concern rather than a dramatic message.

Just like the color yellow stands for imagination and caution, with the cover articles and illustrations we seek to extend a dotted line of purpose to the readers and rest a dependency upon the authors for their wisdom, as shown with the specs of grey color, and lastly, to quote cinema on how it dignifies even the hues of the nightfall of society whilst contrastingly continuing to inspire, like the colors dark brown and white.

**Asra, Anjali and Shirley
Design**

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EDITORIAL

The journal's theme, "Cinema in Crisis," was determined out of our own experience of a global health and humanitarian crisis, aka the pandemic. The fear, pain and uncertainty which COVID-19 wrought on the world threw our notions of normalcy and routine off balance completely. While the global impact of the pandemic cannot be denied, a disruption of the normal is not something unknown or alien to many people and communities all around the world- this is relevant now more than ever, as the world stands witness to the violence in Palestine. Neo-colonialism, occupation, apartheid and warfare have been the continued reality of many communities. How, if at all, do these communities consume, create and proliferate cinema? If such a cinema does exist, which stands in opposition to systemic violence and oppression, then what does this cinema of resistance take form as? Can cinema itself perform as a tool for expressing dissenting voices?

With these questions in mind, we would like to briefly introduce the journal articles included in this edition of Chalchitra Darpan:

Cinematic Representations of Bengal Famine of 1943 – Emmanuel Godwin

How do the artistic sensibilities of filmmakers intersect with an event of collective trauma and pain? In analysing the cinematic portrayals of the 1943 Bengal famine, Emmanuel Godwin in "Cinematic Representations of Bengal Famine of 1943" explores this question. Through selected films, like Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (1980) and Satyajit Ray's *Distant Thunder* (1973), this paper scrutinises how Bengali filmmakers have used elements of melodrama, realism, and allegory in conveying famine victims' suffering and the political and ideological dimensions of class, gender, and nationalism within these representations.

Deconstructing Cinema as a Site of Resistance in an ultra-capitalist Nation – Udhriti Sarkar

Cinema is and continues to be a site where political and personal ideologies find and interplay, they are both contested and asserted. "Deconstructing Cinema as a Site of Resistance in an ultra-capitalist Nation" by Udhriti Sarkar explores cinema both as a site of resistance to and assertion of Hindu nationalism in India. The paper examines how cinema becomes a platform for knowledge production. It argues that cinema as resistance is confined to a privileged elite due to the capitalist structures which surround it and proposes an abolitionist deconstructionist outlook for true resistance.

The Oscillating Spectrum of Queer Identity Representation in Hindi Cinema – Ritam Talukdar and Khushi Kumari Shukla

In exploring the symbiotic relationship between Hindi cinema and society, "The Oscillating Spectrum of Queer Identity Representation in Hindi Cinema" focuses on the representation of queerness, looking closely at the visual culture which creates, resists, and surrounds the 'crisis' of sexuality and identity. The paper examines how representations of queer narratives have evolved in Hindi cinema, evaluating the shift from fantastical portrayals to more relatable depictions.

Towards a Transgressive Cinema - Raghu Pratap

Contemplating more on modernity and the transgressive potential of cinema, Raghu Pratap's "Towards a Transgressive Cinema" dwells on the philosophical nature of cinema to highlight the crisis that cinema itself would fall if not rescued. The paper contends that cinema faces a crisis today, with an excess of image production and a marked lack of inventiveness in such production. With the fascinating idea of 'woke images' as a counter to the conception of transgressive cinema, the paper explores how cinema must escape modern signifiers to unlock its true possibilities.

The Role of Satire in Cinema in Times of Crisis- Udiskha and Diyasha Chowdhury

New crises give birth to new cinematic genres, and then those genres become eruptions, disruptions that challenge socio-political norms. Udiskha and Diyasha Chowdhury's "Role of Satire in Cinema in Times of Crisis" delves into the origins and evolution of one such cinematic genre, of satire, and looks at movies such as *The Great Dictator* (1940), *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), *Don't Look Up* (2021), and *Barbie* (2023), among others, to examine how these satirical elements framing political messages and social critiques.

"I Am in a Dark Place": Hell and Hopelessness in Zhao Liang's Behemoth (2015) - Siria Falleroni

Siria Falleroni's paper is an exploration into the evolution of cinema amid contemporary crises where she analyses Zhao Liang's documentary *Behemoth*, a Chinese cinematic piece which captures crisis psychologically, physically, and ecologically. Siria's paper reveals how the cinematic processes in *Behemoth* blend slow cinema and experimentation to transform images into nuanced messages, primarily relating to the burdens of self within consumerist society as seen through the plight of mine workers, industry-ravaged landscapes, and the empty promises of capitalism in China's "ghost cities."

An Analytical Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on Cinema in Pre, During and Post-Pandemic Periods with Special Reference to Mysuru City - Shilpa S

The COVID-19 pandemic is an event which triggered a global crisis- enveloping economic, social, and political aspects. And cinema could not stay untainted. Shilpa S' "An Analytical Study of the Impact of COVID-19 on Cinema in Pre, During and Post-Pandemic Periods with Special Reference to Mysuru City" is a study that examines the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the cinema industry, particularly in Mysuru, India. The lockdowns halted film production, closed cinemas, and displaced industry workers. The shift from traditional cinema to online streaming platforms like Netflix and Disney+ Hotstar is explored, signalling a transformation in viewer preferences. The paper addresses the closure of single-screen theatres and suggests strategies for cinema revival post-pandemic, considering the changing landscape.

Lawrence of Arabia: Interrogating Imperialism, Crisis and Dislocation - Jannat Johal

In looking at David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) Jannat Johal's paper explores crisis and dislocation as cinematic devices. It also delves into societal anxieties about heroism and masculinity in times of crisis and employs theories of Edward Said on Orientalism and

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Homi Bhabha on post-colonialism to complicate her analysis.

The scholarship exhibited through the journal articles in this edition does a fantastic job of positing our initial inquiry into the nature of the relationship between cinema and crisis in many different lights, and from as many angles. Protest is a churning that never stops, a process which is made and remade, thus continuing to inform the best parts of our sensibilities as a species. The creation of a more just and equitable society is a worthy goal, but *how we come to achieve said goal* is equally important. Cinema of resistance, then, is perhaps the documentation of the lives lived abnormally, or, “outside” of what is purportedly normal; A showcasing of how seemingly paradoxical realities can and do continue to coexist.

Signing off,

Akshika Goel, Editor-in-Chief

Anushka Joshi, Editor-in-Chief

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CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF BENGAL FAMINE OF 1943

EMMANUEL
GODWIN

CINEMA IN CRISIS 2022-2023



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INTRODUCTION

During World War II, a devastating famine occurred in India, known as the Bengal Famine of 1943. Approximately 2.1 to 3 million people died from food shortages and diseases. Though there are several explanations for factors that caused the famine, historians argue that the Bengal famine was a man-made disaster, and two factors that exacerbated the crisis were—the Japanese occupation of Burma, which led to the disruption to supply of rice to Bengal, and the harsh policies of the British colonial government. The impact of the famine on society was widespread hunger, disease, and death affecting millions of people. Through the lens of social, economic, and political consequences, the famine weakened the already fragile relationship between the British colonial government and the Indian nationalist movement and led to a surge in peasant unrest and political mobilization. This was the time when cinema played a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing the response to the famine. Many filmmakers during this famine turned their attention to the crisis, and even artists began participating in raising awareness. The films produced during this crisis raised awareness about the famine and mobilized public opinion to support relief efforts.

How was Bengal's film industry positioned during the crisis? Bengal's film industry was the most influential cultural institution in the region. Filmmakers used films to document the suffering and struggles of famine victims and mobilize public support for relief efforts. However, there were not many films during the famine. Many films that played a crucial role in shaping public opinion were only after the famine. Existing research on Bengali cinema and the famine has largely focused on the political and social implications of these films. Scholars have analyzed the ways in which filmmakers engaged with issues of nationalism, class, and gender, and moreover analyzed the role of cinema in shaping public opinion and mobilizing support for relief efforts.

Some of the films from the 40s like *Parineeta* (1942), explore issues of class and religion and use heavy melodrama to convey social issues. Furthermore, movies like *Abatar* (1941), and mythological drama films, are also used for myth and melodrama. National film award-winning *Dui Purush* (1945 film) is another example of melodrama. *Dui Purush* (1945) is an Indian Bengali film that tells the story of Nuttu, a poor educated social worker who fights against Zamindar for people's rights. After Nuttu falls in love with Kalyani, a barrister's daughter, he is sent to prison. When Nutu gets out of jail he finds out Kalyani is married off to someone, and Nutu marries another woman, and he starts a school. *Bari Theke Paliye*, a film by Ritwik Ghatak, depicts the harsh conditions of the refugees and people displaced due to the the 1943 famine (Vahali, 179).

Melodrama after melodrama, is a good technique of storytelling and also a powerful genre that can impact society. Melodrama here is characterized by exaggerated emotions, heightened conflicts, and moral polarities. This has been a popular narrative style in various film industries around the world. In the context of Bengali cinema, this technique has been effectively employed to shed light on the social, economic, and political issues surrounding famines.

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One of the primary strengths of melodrama is its ability to evoke intense emotions in the audience. By presenting exaggerated situations and characters, melodramas can elicit empathy and create a deep emotional connection with the viewers. In the case of films addressing famines, this emotional intensity serves as a powerful tool to raise awareness and mobilize public sentiment. By showcasing the struggles, sacrifices, and hardships faced by the affected individuals and communities, melodramatic portrayals can effectively draw attention to the devastating impact of famines.

Most of the films during the 1940s had a very important aspect, that is the engagement of political and social issues. The majority of the films during this had at least some or other representation of social issues. Also, many scholars have noted the presence of nationalistic themes. Films like *Chinnamul* (1950) and *Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), used the famine as a backdrop to explore other issues of land reform and peasant struggle. For example, *Chinnamul* (1950), a film following the partition, used people from different refugee camps to give a realistic effect. The film had no professional actors, no songs, and no outtakes. The film *Chinnamul* (1950) holds an intriguing position in the context of the partition and its portrayal of real-life famine victims as active subjects rather than passive objects. The casting of individuals from refugee camps instead of professional actors brings up important questions about agency, ethics, and the depiction of trauma in cinema.

One could argue that by involving real-life famine victims in the film, *Chinnamul* grants them a form of agency and empowers their voices. These individuals, who have experienced the traumatic consequences of partition and famine firsthand, are given an opportunity to participate actively in the storytelling process. Their presence on-screen not only adds authenticity to the narrative but also provides a platform for their stories to be heard, potentially enabling them to reclaim their agency in the face of adversity. However, it is essential to consider the ethical implications of casting real-life victims of trauma in such cinema. Filmmakers must approach this process with sensitivity and respect, ensuring the well-being and consent of the individuals involved. It is crucial to establish clear boundaries, provide support systems, and address any potential retraumatization that may arise during the filmmaking process. Ethical considerations involve obtaining informed consent, protecting the privacy and dignity of the participants, and ensuring that their involvement does not exploit or sensationalize their suffering. The distinction between "art" and a "spectacle of suffering" is indeed a complex one when dealing with films like *Chinnamul*. On one hand, the film's approach of using real-life victims lends a certain authenticity to the narrative, bringing the audience closer to the harsh realities of partition and famine. This authenticity can contribute to the film's artistic merit by presenting a raw and unfiltered depiction of the human experience.

On the other hand, there is a risk of sensationalizing suffering and turning the film into a spectacle. Filmmakers must be cautious not to exploit the pain and trauma of the participants for the sake of entertainment or shock value. It is crucial to maintain a balance between conveying the harsh realities of the situation and respecting the dignity and humanity of the individuals involved.

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Ultimately, the evaluation of whether *Chinnamul* is seen as art or a spectacle of suffering depends on the intentions, approach, and execution of the filmmakers. If handled ethically and with a genuine commitment to amplifying the voices of the victims, the film can be considered a significant artistic endeavor that sheds light on the human cost of partition and famine. However, if the film becomes voyeuristic or fails to treat its subjects with respect, it risks turning the suffering of real people into a form of entertainment, which is ethically problematic.

Also, filmmakers utilized unique strategies to convey the impact of the crisis on individuals and the society as a whole. The selected films from three notable directors of the Bengal film industry, *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder) (1973) by Satyajit Ray, and *Akaler Sandhane* (1980) by Mrinal Sen. As Majumdar (2012, p. 762) writes, "A film like *Ashani Sanket* (1973), based on the famine of 1943, epitomized for many film society viewers, Ray's tendency to aestheticize, through his impeccable cinematic sensibility, the horrors of a man-made famine". These films provide a diverse range of representations of the Bengal famine of 1943. Moreover, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) by Ritwik Ghatak is not based on the Bengal Famine of 1943, but is to be analyzed because of its representation of famine.

Overall, all these films illustrate the diverse range of representations of the Bengal famine and the various strategies used by filmmakers to engage with the crisis. Each film provides a unique perspective on the causes and consequences of the famine and highlights the ways in which cinema can serve as a tool for social and political critique.

Use of Various Cinematic Techniques and their Effectiveness

Bengali filmmakers employed various cinematic techniques to represent the famine and its impact on society. One common technique was melodrama, which can be seen in *Akaler Sandhane* ('In Search of Famine', 1980), Mrinal Sen critically analyzes the past, present, and future using the melodrama lens. The film showcases the harsh realities of the famine, such as the lack of food, widespread death, and the social and political upheaval that accompanied the crisis. The characters in the film are shown struggling to cope with the situation, with many resorting to desperate measures to survive.

Akaler Sandhane has two narrative time-frames, firstly the famine of 1943 and a film shot about it in 1980, a film within a film. *Akaler Sandhane* relies on melodrama to engage the audience in the sufferings of the famine victims. The effectiveness of these cinematic techniques varied in their impact on audiences. Melodrama, for instance, was successful in evoking an emotional response from audiences but was criticized for oversimplifying the complexities of the famine. Realism, on the other hand, was praised for its accuracy but was criticized for being too bleak and lacking in hope. Allegory was considered effective in highlighting the underlying causes of the famine but was criticized for being too abstract and difficult for audiences to understand.

Mrinal Sen uses a documentary-style approach to portray the 1943 Bengal famine. The film begins with a group of filmmakers who set out to make a documentary film about the

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famine. However, they are met with various challenges. Mrinal Sen blends the Bengal of the 1980's with the Bengal of 1943. As the filmmakers begin their documentary shooting, they find themselves struggling to capture the reality of the situation. We can see Sabitri (played by Smita Patil) is the wife of a farmer whose family of four has been starving for weeks. Sabitri, in order to make ends meet, spends an evening with a contractor from Calcutta and brings home rice and kerosene oil. Even though Sabitri's not seen with the contractor in the film, we do see her husband's reaction. The husband figures out how she got the handful of rice and kerosene oil. However, Sabitri continues to boil the rice for her sick child. The husband smashes all the utensils and is about to hurt the child, when Sabitri screams helplessly to stop her husband. At the same time, Durga, who has gathered with the locals to watch the shooting, lets out an alarmed cry. This cry urges the viewer to observe the parallels between Durga's lived experiences and the film that is being shot. Even though Durga lives four decades after the famine, life is somewhat the same for Sabitri. Her husband lost an arm in an accident in the factory, and she is the breadwinner of the family. She works as a maid in several houses. Mrinal Sen may be hinting that the reality is still the same as the Bengal famine of 1943.

Later in the film, Sen also sheds light on the famine by using powerful imagery, such as shots of people searching for food in garbage dumps and shots of people with emaciated bodies. These images are jarring and unforgettable, and they help to bring the famine to life for the viewers. As the filmmakers begin their documentary shooting, they find themselves struggling to capture the reality of the situation.

There is a scene in this film, where the filmmakers play a 'spot-the-famine' contest. The director shows them a series of famine photographs and asks them to date the exhibits. In these photographs, there were pictures of the 1943 famine, pictures of the 1959 food riot in Calcutta, and some pictures of 1971 when Bangladeshi refugees flooded West Bengal during their War of Independence. Since the 1943 famine is well-known, a few people from the crew mistaken the photographs from 1943 but they were not. There is also a picture that is mistaken for the Buddha but is actually a photograph of a statue belonging to the Gandhara period.

The inclusion of the 'spot-the-famine' contest and the misidentification of photographs and a statue in the film *Chinnamul* carries several layers of relevance and implications. Firstly, the 'spot-the-famine' contest highlights the cyclical nature of famines and food crises throughout history. By presenting photographs from different periods of famine and unrest, the film draws attention to the recurring nature of such crises and emphasizes their continued relevance and impact on society. It serves as a reminder that famines are not isolated incidents but rather part of a larger pattern of socio-political and economic factors that contribute to food insecurity and human suffering. The misidentification of the photographs and the statue adds a layer of irony and commentary on the fallibility of memory, perception, and historical understanding. By showcasing the confusion and mistaken assumptions made by some members of the crew regarding the photographs, the film highlights the potential for misinterpretation and the complexities of accurately

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contextualizing historical events. It raises questions about the reliability of individual memory and the challenges of documenting and comprehending complex historical narratives. The misidentification of the statue as Buddha, when it is actually from the Gandhara period, can be seen as a metaphorical commentary on the tendency to oversimplify and generalize cultural or religious symbols. It suggests that there can be a lack of nuanced understanding and a tendency to reduce complex historical and cultural identities to simplified or stereotypical representations. By subverting the expected identification of the statue, the film challenges viewers to question their own assumptions and preconceived notions about cultural and religious heritage.

Overall, the inclusion of the 'spot-the-famine' contest and the misidentification of photographs and the statue in *Chinnamul* serves to engage the audience in a critical reflection on the cyclical nature of famines, the challenges of historical interpretation, and the potential for oversimplification and misrepresentation. It encourages viewers to question their own understanding of history, memory, and cultural identity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities and nuances inherent in socio-political issues.

Sen's portrayal of the famine in *Akaler Sandhane* captures the physical, emotional, and psychological devastation caused by this tragic period in Indian history using melodrama. The film within film ends with Sabitri leaving the village alone. In the scene where she is part of a long line of people going to the city in search of food, she pauses, and turns back, as the director in the background is telling her to turn back and break down, there is a switch between the reality and the fiction, as the audience we might see that it's all the same. As the director tells her to break down, she breaks down in tears. Now coming out of this film within the film, Mrinal Sen ends the film with a still of Durga, slowly receding in the background, there is a voiceover: "Durga is alone. Her infant died. Her husband cannot be found."

In the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star), The director Ghatak discussed various themes including the devastating impact of the 1943 Bengal famine. Ghatak, known for his poignant portrayals of social and political issues, presents a powerful depiction of the famine and its effects on a refugee family in the film. Though the film doesn't revolve around the 1943 Bengal famine, the film takes place in the aftermath of the Bengal famine and portrays the struggles faced by the refugees who were displaced during that time. Ghatak captures the physical and emotional turmoil of the famine through the lens of the protagonist, Nita, and her family.

Ghatak emphasizes the harsh realities of the famine through stark visuals and evocative storytelling. The film showcases scenes of widespread hunger, poverty, and desperation. Ghatak employs symbolic imagery to highlight the devastation, such as shots of withered crops, empty rice bowls, and skeletal figures. These visuals effectively convey the gravity of the famine and its impact on the characters' lives.

Furthermore, Ghatak delves into the psychological toll of the famine on the characters,

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particularly Nita. The constant struggle for survival and the loss of loved ones take a toll on her mental and emotional well-being. Ghatak portrays the psychological trauma of the famine through Nita's character, showing her despair, resilience, and ultimately her tragic fate. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* serves as a commentary on the larger socio-political issues of the time, such as the Partition of Bengal and the displacement of people. The famine serves as a backdrop that exacerbates the already challenging circumstances faced by the characters, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these events.

Filmmakers used melodrama as a storytelling technique in films about famine. Melodrama was a popular genre in Bengali cinema at the time, and the genre fitted well to convey the emotional impact of the famine on ordinary people. Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is one of the examples, the movie used the melodrama genre to create an emotional impact on the struggle of refugees. Anustup Basu notes that the film "uses melodramatic techniques to evoke the pathos of the refugee experience." In Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, melodrama was employed as a storytelling technique to evoke the emotional impact of the refugee experience. The film utilized various elements to create this emotional resonance.

Music played a significant role in creating the melodramatic effect. The film's soundtrack, composed by Ghatak's frequent collaborator Jyotirindra Moitra, incorporated poignant melodies and evocative lyrics that heightened the emotional intensity of the scenes. The music worked in tandem with the narrative, enhancing the pathos and eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience. The setting and cinematography also contributed to the melodramatic impact. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* depicted the struggles and hardships faced by refugees in post-partition Bengal. The film showcased the dilapidated refugee camps, the harsh living conditions, and the overall bleakness of their existence. The visual representation of such settings created a sense of emotional turmoil and sympathy, reinforcing the melodramatic tone of the film. Acting played a crucial role in conveying the emotional depth of the characters and their experiences. The performances in melodrama often lean towards heightened expressions of emotion. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the actors portrayed their characters with intense emotions, capturing the pain, anguish, and resilience of the refugee experience. Their performances resonated with the viewers, intensifying the emotional impact of the narrative. Lighting and visual aesthetics were also utilized to enhance the melodramatic effect. The film employed contrast lighting, shadows, and symbolic visual motifs to accentuate the emotional content. These visual techniques heightened the dramatic atmosphere and emphasized the emotional struggles of the characters.

As other authors have also noted (Bhattacharya, 62), in Satyajit Ray's film, *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder), the events of the Bengal Famine are sketched in a small village in then undivided Bengal. The character Gangacharan, being a Brahmin, holds significant importance as it highlights his privileged position within the village. Notably, Gangacharan is portrayed as the only Brahmin in the entire village, further emphasizing his elevated social status and the contrast between his background and the suffering experienced by the other villagers during the Bengal Famine of 1943.

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From the opening scene of the movie, Ananga, wife of Gangacharan is enjoying herself in the water, and looks above to see airplanes flying in the sky. Indicating war looming around. From here, the film begins to slowly depict the widespread hunger, death, and illness that are ravaging the region. Initially, Gangacharan, being from a relatively privileged background as a schoolteacher, struggles to fully comprehend the magnitude of the famine and its impact on the villagers. However, as the plot unfolds, he gradually becomes more aware of the misery and suffering surrounding him. This awareness prompts him to actively participate in the relief efforts, reflecting his evolving understanding and empathy for the plight of the people.

One of the most poignant scenes in the film occurs when Gangacharan visits a relief camp specifically established to assist the famine-stricken victims. The portrayal of this camp as overcrowded, disorganized, and filled with the sick and dying, lying on the ground, evokes a powerful sense of human suffering. Ray's deliberate use of close-up shots of the victims' faces captures their anguish, further intensifying the emotional impact of the scene. The haunting musical score accompanying this scene adds an additional layer of poignancy, underscoring the gravity of the situation and the emotional turmoil experienced by the characters.

By portraying Gangacharan as the only Brahmin in the village, Satyajit Ray effectively highlights the stark contrast between his privileged position and the harsh realities faced by the other villagers during the Bengal Famine. This contrast serves to emphasize the social divisions and the profound impact of the famine on individuals from diverse social backgrounds, ultimately contributing to the film's exploration of human suffering and the collective response to such crises.

During an interview with Udayan Gupta (Gupta and Ray, 29), Satyajit Ray discussed the political message behind his film *Distant Thunder*. Gupta asked about the absence of the typical images associated with famine, such as scorched earth and starving faces, in the film. Ray explained that the famine depicted in the film was one in which people could die of hunger even when there had been a good harvest, and that was the point he wanted to make. Ray also discussed his use of color in the film, which was inspired by the lush green landscape described in the source material. However, Ray revealed that the decision to use color was also influenced by the unavailability of satisfactory black-and-white film and stock in India. Overall, the interview explored the intersection of art and politics in Ray's work, specifically the theme of humanism in *Distant Thunder*. Towards the end of *Distant Thunder*, the character Moti, one of the workers who used to work in the brahmin household appears in front of Gangacharan house, when the wife comes running to see her, we can see the harsh condition of the worker. The famine has left no one in the colony. Everyone is dead in her household. "Don't touch me Brahmin sister. You would have to take bath?" She says, and we can see Moti asking for food. The wife offers her food, however, Moti dies. The brahmin priest later looks at Moti in sorrow and he walks away helplessly, but in the back there is a kid watching all of this. As the priest walks away, the kid appears in front of the dead woman, takes the food and walks away.

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In conclusion, the use of these cinematic techniques by Bengali filmmakers provided different perspectives on the famine and its impact on society, and their effectiveness was subject to various critiques and interpretations.

Political and Ideological Dimensions of the Representations

The political and ideological dimensions of the representations of the Bengal famine in Bengali cinema reveal the filmmakers' engagement with issues of nationalism, class, gender and caste. Some films reflected the dominant nationalist discourse of the time, emphasizing the resilience and fortitude of the Bengali people in the face of British colonialism and famine. Others highlighted the class disparities and injustices that contributed to the famine and called for socialist reforms to address these issues.

Similarly, the representations of gender in these films were also shaped by the dominant cultural norms and values of the time. While some films reinforced traditional gender roles and upheld the ideal of the self-sacrificing, virtuous woman, others challenged these norms and portrayed women as active agents of change and resistance. For instance, character Chutki and Angana. In the film, *Distant Thunder*, we can see Chutki coming across a man with his face half burnt, he then later offers her rice if only she can come with him to the broken house. She refuses him many times, until things get worse. Chutki confronts him, he explains he burnt his face during the festival of goddess Kali. She than later, offers her body for some rice. In another scene from the movie, there is a conversation between Chutki and Angana. Chutki explains if there are no vegetables to eat, she has to eat insects. Angana mocks her by saying only swans eat insect. Chutki tries to leave but Angana then calls her back and asks her how does one cook insects?. Women during famines were not just hit by famine but also with the norms and traditions. Towards the end, Chutki visits her sister, breaks down in tears and leaves her to go to the city to get food.

Overall, the political and ideological dimensions of these representations reflect the complex social and political context of Bengal during the famine, as well as the evolving debates and discourses around nationalism, class, and gender in the postcolonial period.

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CHALCHITRA DARPAR

UDHRITI
SARKAR

DECONSTRUCTING
CINEMA
AS A SITE OF
RESISTANCE
IN AN ULTRA
CAPITALISTIC
NATION

CINEMA IN CRISIS 2022-2023

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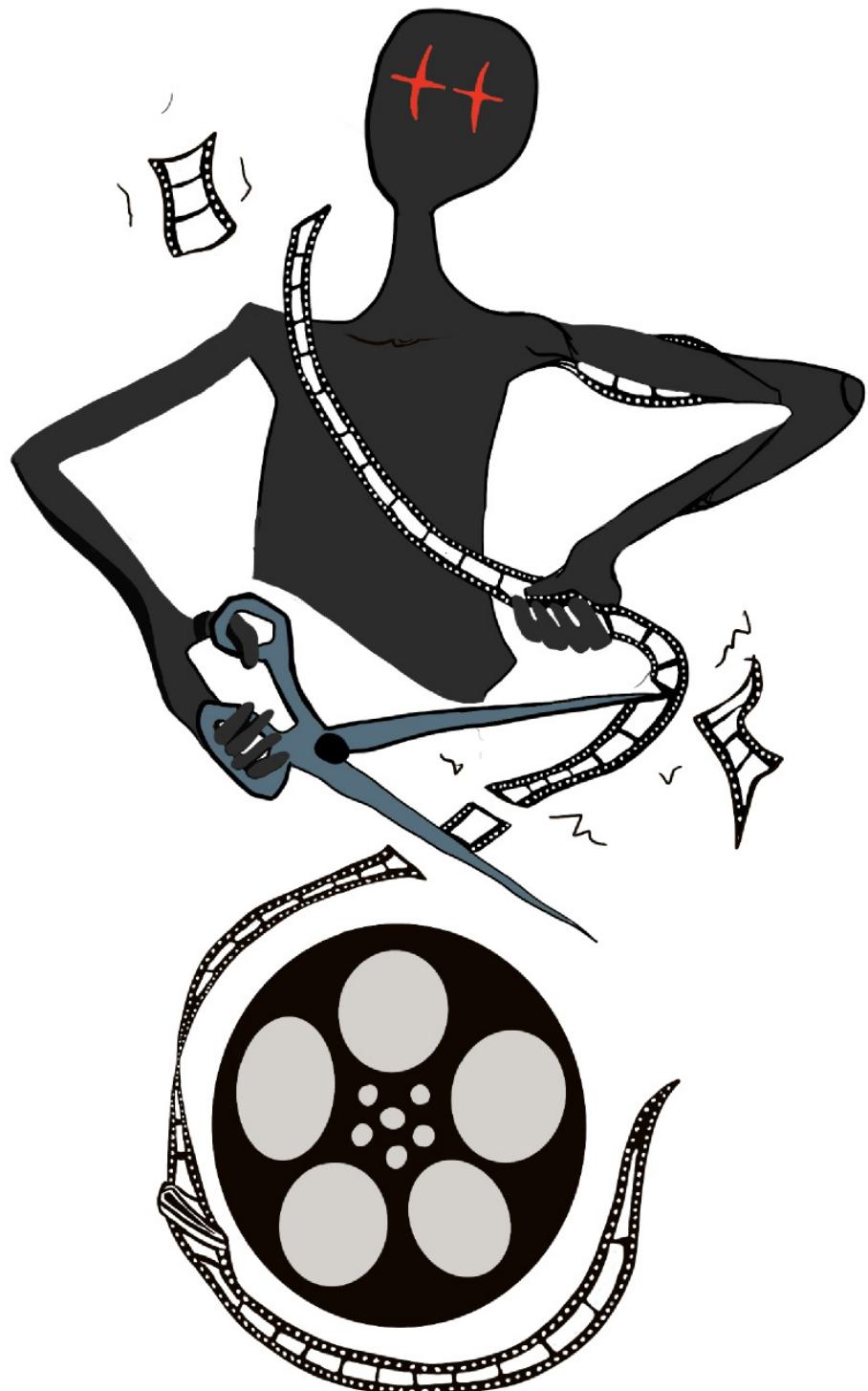
When the history of cinema is investigated, one encounters a stale debate of whether cinema is only a form of entertainment or whether it can be used as a tool for dissent. Jafar Panahi's *Taxi*, Albertina Carri's *The Daughters of Fire*, Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*, India's very own Mrinal Sen's *Interview* or Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* are all examples that prove that cinema since its conception has been a site of resistance. It has been the voice of dissent against several discriminatory societal institutions and powerful and oppressive regimes. Simultaneously cinema has also been, as it was intended to be when it was invented, a source of entertainment. The cinematic site of artistic expression is then a paradoxical site that is inherently located within a capitalist structure which also harbours a potential to be a site for resistance against that same structure. Therefore, it is important to question who controls such a powerful mode of knowledge production. Where does the voice of cinema lie? Who decides who can watch what and how? This essay interrogates such questions while investigating cinema as a part of a capitalist structure that hinders its own potential for resistance. The essay examines cinema of resistance as something that is created within an elitist ultra-capitalist structure of viewing that ultimately makes it inaccessible and unavailable to most of the world.

Created within the capitalist structure, originally cinema "was used by elite institutions, such as states, corporations, and investment banks, to establish and facilitate a form of liberal economy" (Grieveson 1). The moving images, the entire experience of viewing those images in a dark room where the viewer and image exist in a dichotomous isolation where the awareness of the presence of other viewers constantly haunts and also provides a sense of belonging, made cinema more "didactic and persuasive" (Grieveson 1) than any other artform which helped intriguing and influencing people easier. The films mentioned at the beginning of the essay despite being in different languages and limited availability, all challenge the sanctioned and stable order of living. Michael Foucault considered power as the designer of the capitalist system that in turn became central to the human condition. In an ultra-capitalist world where "human relations, science, institutions are all caught up in a struggle for power," (Nayar 35) everything, even narratives of dissent and resistance, can be sold and consumed. If the language barrier of the aforementioned films is set aside and the argument that cinema holds power to move people through the signification that emerges from the simple existence of images on a large screen is followed, is the cinema of dissent and resistance only for those who can afford to look and experience these images? Where can cinema of resistance be found? Foucault also argued that institutions of power often segregate parts of the populous as "sick, criminal, mad so that they could be placed under surveillance and 'observed by particular kinds of authorities'" (Nayar 35). This process of binarising the population into the norm and the deviant is discursive and births "a terrain of thought, a system of knowledge, a particular kind of language that allowed some things to be said and disallowed some others" (Nayar 35). What we need to enquire, then, is what does the discourse of cinema allows us to see? Which institutions control the language of cinema and therefore the binarization of the population? And finally, if cinema is consumed only by the privileged, what happens to the knowledge produced? Does it manifest as a voice of dissent or does it get lost as soon as the viewer is taken out of the cinematic experience and is placed into an ultra-capitalist world?

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The camera is often a tool of dissent, "the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood," (Sontag 4) where the moving images produce a knowledge that empowers the audience with the awareness that one is merely "an infinite history of traces without an inventory; an endless collection of oneself that is impossible to gather" (Singh 18). But it is also crucial to remember that the modern camera was "sold as a predatory weapon" that became addictive "fantasy machines" (Sontag 14) making cinema primarily a capitalist reproduction of fantastical spaces that shield the mass audience of mainstream cinema by concealing them within "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (Mulvey 60). Although cinema has been used as a tool "to highlight social realities, social evils, and also present ideas that might not have been comfortable to the masses," (Tripathi 65) the power to control those images still lie in the hands of a certain group of people i.e, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in India. With the chairperson and the members of the CBFC being appointed by the Union Government, films that are officially released in India often cater to the language designed and dictated by the CBFC. Indian cinema, even before independence, has been rooted in a Brahmanical cis-hetero-patriarchal structure that has preserved and sustained "the dominant caste hegemony" (Yengde 503). If Foucault's argument is to be followed, then the discourse of cinema also comes with a preconceived "object, a language and an authority figure who uses this language to describe/classify the object" (Nayar 36). The determination of this preconceived object of Indian cinema and thereby the nation ultimately lies in the hands of the CBFC. Currently, popular Indian cinema, especially Bollywood films, being a "cultural product" readily replicates the dominant Hindu-right radical ideologies and passes them off as a "form of expression and mass entertainment" (Yengde 503). The general audience then ultimately consumes cinema which is approved by an organisation that has historically been rooted in a Brahmanical structure that is "intertwined with the matrices of oppression," (Upadhyay 464) especially caste-based violence and Islamophobia.

This essay interrogates the language of Hindi-language films, especially Bollywood cinema, to portray how state powers infiltrate cinematic language and hinder resistance by simply controlling it. This, by no means, insinuates that popular Indian cinema is equivalent or only limited to Bollywood films. However, the limited scope of this essay only allows to look into Bollywood films considering that Bollywood has evolved to be a central part of how cultural politics is shaped in India. The biggest example of how Bollywood films are used within the right-radicalised Hindutva project is only evident when one looks back at the enormous and eerily terrifying success of Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files*. A film that glorified violence, unabashedly promoted Islamophobia, and justified the illegal occupation of Kashmir by the Indian military, was not only a cultural success but a capitalist one too. The after-effects of the film, the call for violence against Muslim men and women from within the cinema halls shows how the power of cinema can be misused. The CBFC has time and again used the excuse of religious sentiments being hurt to censor films or even scenes that were critical of right-wing Hindu ideologies. For example, films like Mira Nair's *Fire* or Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*. For the CBFC, freedom of speech has always been packaged with the subtextual messaging of never criticising the regime and its misuse of power and culture. The



organisation has demanded cuts in films like *Udta Punjab* or has completely banned the release of films like *Paanch*, *Black Friday*, and many others as in a rather hilariously ridiculous manner, in the case of the documentary on Amartya Sen, had ordered to beep out words like “cow,” “Hindu India,” “Hindutva,” “Gujarat” etc. (Safi). CBFC’s actions regarding censorship of cinema, especially whenever the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has held power in the central government, shows the evolution of right-radical Hindu nationalist ways of knowledge production that ultimately benefits the Hindutva project by promoting not Indian cinema but Bharatiya cinema. This binarization of India/Bharat is central to the ways knowledge is allowed to be produced through cinematic language and images in India. The *Kashmir Files*’ financial success and the cultural effect that it has had on the general Hindi-speaking population is justified because it uses extremely unnecessarily violent images to arouse particular sentiments of Islamophobia within the audience that is desperate to prove their “Hinduness” and their “Indianness” by participating in a dominant nationalist project that has been spoon-fed to them through other jingoistic cinema that came before it. The film determines the object – the enemy – of the structure of Hindutva capitalism, vilifies them, and presents them in front of an audience who exist within the same Brahmanical cis-hetero-patriarchal structure. But *The Kashmir Files* was not produced out of thin air for the audience to consume. It, backed by the BJP government, marked the epitome of the nationalist project supporting which in today’s post-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) India was perversely connected to citizenship. The way nationalism is sold to the audience in India through cinema hinders cinema’s potential to be a site of resistance. The CBFC and Indian culture promote cinema as a mode of entertainment that should not be questioned or used to question. The success of films like *RRR*, *Pathan*, and *Uri*, all three of which belong to different genres but have a shared sense of an overtly on-the-face nationalism that can be packaged and sold. The audience then is not sold a film or a story but a discourse, accepting and encouraging which will guarantee (at least momentarily) one’s citizenship rights. Interrogating films like *RRR* as a Brahmanical cis-hetero-patriarchal and rather stale retelling of the Indian freedom struggle would automatically make one the binarised “Other” – the object of the institutions of Hindutva capitalism. On the other hand, accepting the jingoism presented in forms of films like *Uri*, *Pathan*, *War*, etc., which gives the audience a pre-conceived “Other”, all while masking this discursive form of otherization as nothing but entertainment, makes them the valid subject of the nation. When financially successful Bollywood films of the last ten years are investigated, it is seen that all the films, although having distinct plot lines fundamentally, are built around narratives that ultimately support the Hindutva project.

Furthermore, Bollywood cinema, a product of capitalism and globalisation has constricted narratives of marginalised people as merely plot lines that can be strategically used, appropriated and fetishised where caste is only spoken about in “Brahmanish tropes”, Hindu-Muslim relationships are a source of exemplification and romanticization in order to “construct” the image of India as a post-caste, “liberal, post-colonial polity” (Yengde 505). The portrayal of caste in Bollywood has always been synonymous with the portrayal of poverty. Narratives of caste are otherwise eliminated from the cinematic landscape or, as it often occurs, the non-dominant caste ‘others’ are used as scapegoats to further the plot

while maintaining the facade of inclusivity. The biggest example of appropriation of Dalit narratives in recent Bollywood films is Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*. Armed with a powerful message, the film uses caste as a trope to attract the liberal audience. Although it might feel like it resists the Brahminical structure that the Hindutva project endorses, it simply reinforces them in a neo-liberal fashion. Sinha's hero, Ayan Ranjan, is the Brahmin saviour of the marginalised others. The film portrays Dalits being at the mercy of dominant caste heroes where they are expected to wait for their Brahmin saviour to resist against casteist violence inflicted on them. Ayan Ranjan's supposed empathy towards the marginalised communities and their oppression is a way in which the struggle for caste liberation is minimised and fictionalised. Moreover, Sinha's Dalit characters within the films are rendered "voiceless" unless they have to explain their struggle to the ignorant urban Brahmin (Dominique). Sinha furthers this gross Brahmanization of the anti-caste struggles by not only centring his film around a Brahmin with a saviour complex but also saturating his film cast with dominant caste actors. Similarly, queer narratives in Bollywood films like *Subh Mangal Zyada Shavdhan* or *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* portray the Hindu nationalist idea of queerness where caste and class are obliterated from narratives, where queer narratives are nothing more than a trope to endorse rainbow capitalism. Nishant Upadhyay calls this process of assimilation of dominant caste Hindu queer and trans folks within the Hindutva project "homo-hindu-nationalism" that concurrently portrays a liberal image while upholding "Brahminical supremacy and Islamophobia" (Upadhyay 469). Therefore, cinema released for popular consumption can never truly be the cinema of resistance because instead of deconstructing the structure these films endorse a pseudo-criticism that reinforces the same ideas of the structure. These films released by and within the structure of Hindutva capitalism indulge in a top-down approach where the marginalised are asked to wait for the messiah to arrive and save them thereby ultimately curtailing their voices. Resistance in Bollywood cinema is severed at the root because consuming popular CBFC-certified films ultimately accepts the knowledge produced by Hindu nationalist machineries of power. Bollywood cinema is, then, always a mode of entertainment and never a site of resistance because to resist is to break the vertical hegemonic structure into a play of multiple horizontal meanings. Instead, popular Hindi cinema endorses the meaning inscribed to them by the centre of power, in this case, the fascist BJP government.

The only places where uncensored films can be viewed are film festivals and private viewings, where the filmmakers speak freely to the audience without there being the hauntological presence of censorship. But resistance through art is made obscure to people who cannot afford the demands of globalisation within cinema such as being able to understand English subtitles or have free access to the spaces where resistance is fetishised and intellectualised. Therefore, narratives of dissent ultimately fade into oblivion within the urban elite circles and do nothing to further the filmmaker's voice of protest against the atrocities of the structure. If an art form of dissent is only accessible to people who have access to cinema halls or film festivals where resistance is measured in academic teaspoons, cinema of resistance becomes a luxury that many can't afford. It becomes an appropriation of stories stolen from the most marginalised and released as weapons of dissent to an urban elitist middle-class audience which only has the ability and power to

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consume, all while existing within an ultra-capitalist structure and never questioning it. It remains constricted to the elite, niche audience which has language, class and caste privileges to access cinema's potentiality as a site of defiance. The films discussed at the beginning of the essay are all available on the internet. But that simultaneously raises the issue that not everyone in India has access to the internet. In a country where internet access is severed with the slightest instances of protest and unrest, who are these stories for? Are the ones oppressed and marginalised only meant to be featured in cinema — in fictionalised or documentary-style storytelling — for film critics to postulate and idealise resistance and its merit with an academic discourse that remains rooted in the hegemonic structure of Hindutva capitalism?

The discursive binarization of cinema into a site of entertainment and a site of protest and resistance within the ultra-capitalist structure ultimately diverts conversations around the state's tendencies to surveil, censor and curtail freedom of speech. Therefore, true resistance is never possible, not while the existence of cinema within the structure of capitalism is overlooked. Within the ultra-capitalist Hindutva project resistance in the form of cinema is paradoxically presented to us as a stable jenga structure, where the audience is eternally enticed with the image of a fallen structure all while they are used to stabilise the structure by not questioning the existence of the structure itself, and by participating in a reverie of an imaginative and fetishised future. Unlike other art forms, theatre that doesn't undergo pre-release censorship or isn't heavily dependent on machinery, cinema as a site of resistance is only possible when it is made with accessibility in mind and to do that would be a form of defiance because it would deconstruct the structure of capitalism that inherently otherizes and discriminates. To envision cinema of resistance in this idealist way is to also imagine, with a rather abolitionist, deconstructivist ideology, the complete demolition of capitalist systems. Conversations around how the audience is allowed to watch cinema and the audience's own agency while watching the film or even who gets to be the audience is enough to challenge the capitalist structure that has a chokehold around films because cinema is not just about the narrative told but also the narratives heard, absorbed and their impact on the audience after they leave the darkness of the theatre.

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THE OSCILLATING SPECTRUM OF QUEER IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN HINDI CINEMA

RITAM TALUKDAR,
AND KHUSHI KUMARI SHUKLA

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INTRODUCTION

The contents of this article align with several prominent lawyers, petitioners, allies and members of the LGBTQIA+ community arguing for their right to marry in the Supreme Court of India. It is a monumental time for society as it becomes more accepting of ideas outside the heteronormative narrative and makes way towards becoming inclusive, in terms of extending legal rights to communities who have been historically marginalised and rendered invisible, simply because they identify as the 'other'. This moment in contemporary legal dialogue is similar to that of the decriminalisation of Article 377 in 2018 when same-sex relations were no longer penalised or considered punishable by the Indian state. However, legal milestones don't often guarantee a broader social acceptance. While there is, perhaps, greater consciousness and sensitivity towards gender and sexuality in the urban milieu, much of the nation remains oblivious and explicitly ingrained in their own biases resulting in homophobia. In light of this, the paper discusses, not law or society, but another integral part of social life, i.e., cinema. Cinema can be a means of sensitisation as well as act as an outlet of identification for those struggling to express their queerness in a heteronormative environment.

The Hindi movie industry, Bollywood, churns out hundreds of movies every year. It is arguably one of the most popular movie industries in the world. However, the LGBTQ+ representation in Bollywood movies has more often failed to make a mark, and at times even managed to make the perception of homosexuality even worse. A host of movies such as *Mast Kalandar*, *Partner*, *Mastizaade*, and *Dishoom* depict gay men as sleazy, hypersexual beings who have an eye on every man in the vicinity, who can even cross into the zone of sexual harassment and assault.

The characterisation of LGBTQ characters in mainstream Bollywood movies is rarely in a truly positive manner. Rather, it has a bad habit of making a 'gay' side joke, caricaturing characters whose only relevance to the plot is as comedic relief, either through their failed perusal of the main character, their unwanted sexual advances towards people, or simply through cross-dressing cis-gender, heterosexual characters in loud, effeminate costumes with bulging fake breasts/prosthetics and bad makeup, to make it 'funny'. Lesbians, on the other hand, are depicted as tomboyish or 'wannabe men' characters, or as ultra-feminine, as an allusion to who is the man in the relationship.

Some movies make no difference between lesbians and FTM (Female-to-Male) transgenders. Other sexualities such as bisexuality, pansexuality or asexuality don't find much representation, if at all. Those rare movies that feature sensitive representation are also not without their own drawbacks. Herein, the paper discusses these issues to closely understand the crisis of representation of gender and sexual minorities in Bollywood.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a narrative analysis approach to investigate the dynamic portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in the context of Bollywood films. A corpus comprising 6-7 prominent movies released between 2000 and 2023 has been carefully curated which predominantly

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feature LGBTQ+ themes, allowing us to gain insight into the evolving nature of their depiction.

The analysis considers key indicators of social reception, specifically examining the revenue collection and audience ratings derived from popular platforms such as IMDb and RottenTomatoes. By leveraging these quantitative measures, the essay aims to discern the broader societal response to these movies and shed light on the intricate interplay between cinematic representation and public reception.

Through the lens of this comprehensive examination, the paper seeks to elucidate the prevailing crisis surrounding LGBTQ+ representation within the Bollywood film industry. The analysis extends beyond mere character portrayals, encompassing nuanced assessments of both the construction of LGBTQ+ identities within the narratives and the consequential responses of the audience. By scrutinising these facets, it strives to unravel the complex dynamics influencing the portrayal and reception of LGBTQ+ themes in Bollywood cinema.

Observation: Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui"

Introduction and Context:

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui stands out as one of the first Bollywood movies to feature a transgender person as the main love interest, ultimately leading to a happy ending. However, the film reveals a disconnect between the textbook idea of trans-genderism and trans-sexuality and the reality experienced by transgender individuals in India.

Idealised and Conventional Representation:

Maanvi, the trans woman protagonist, embodies the image of a perfect feminine woman according to societal norms. She possesses conventional beauty and fair skin, comes from an affluent family, and can afford to work, not out of necessity, but as an expression of personal freedom. Her transition is portrayed as flawless to the point where her partner cannot notice any visible signs of her past. Maanvi is always seen in fashionable outfits and high-end cosmetics. However, this portrayal ignores the struggles and challenges faced by many transgender individuals in India.

Limited Impact of Trans Identity:

In the film, Maanvi's trans identity is reduced to her past, which seems to have minimal impact beyond her love life and her relationship with her family, particularly her mother. The movie adheres to conventional Bollywood tropes, including the heroine forgiving all insults committed by the hero when faced with a challenge in the hero's life. Manu, the male protagonist, initially rejects Maanvi cruelly and violently but later falls deeply in love with her. This sudden change is attributed to his ignorance, and he endeavours to educate himself about transsexuality by speaking to a transgender person about their experiences.

Conforming to Heteronormative Storytelling:

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui makes an effort to fit the "unconventional" couple into the framework of traditional heteronormative storytelling. The film reinforces the idea of

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Maanvi's strength and implies that Manu must match up to her. Multiple characters emphasise this notion, perpetuating the belief that dating someone who does not conform to conventional standards of beauty is a sacrifice or an effort on the part of their partner.

Conclusion:

While *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* breaks ground by featuring a transgender person as the main love interest and presenting a happy ending, the film falls short in its portrayal of transgender individuals. The idealised and conventional representation of Maanvi fails to reflect the diverse realities and challenges faced by transgender individuals in India. The film's adherence to traditional Bollywood tropes and its attempt to fit the couple into heteronormative storytelling limit the exploration of more nuanced and authentic narratives. To foster genuine inclusivity and understanding, Bollywood must move beyond superficial representations and offer more nuanced and diverse perspectives on the experiences of transgender individuals.

Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Laxmii" (2020):

Introduction and Promotion vs. Execution:

Laxmii initially garnered attention through its pre-release social media campaign, aiming to extend respect and dignity to transgender individuals. However, the film itself tragically fails to live up to these intentions. As a remake of the Tamil movie "Kanchana," it tells the story of a sceptic named Aasif who is possessed by the ghost of a transgender woman named Laxmii. Unfortunately, the portrayal of Laxmii and the reactions of Aasif's family to his "feminine" activities veer into caricatures and reinforce stereotypes about transgender people.

Caricaturish and Stereotypical Depictions:

The film's attempts at humour rely on exaggerated reactions from Aasif's family when he engages in activities associated with femininity. This perpetuates the narrative that it is abnormal or unacceptable for masculine men to engage in self-care or feminine behaviours. Aasif's casual sexism, including negative remarks about wearing bangles, further reinforces the idea of emasculation in a negative light. Additionally, the actors portraying Laxmii exhibit either exaggerated feminine gestures or masculine body language, presenting a portrayal that feels more like a man playing at being a woman rather than an authentic representation.

Supernatural Elements and Misrepresentation:

The incorporation of supernatural and holy elements in the storyline involving a transgender character further distances transgender people from being portrayed as normal individuals. Laxmii's dialogue about being trans due to "hormonal locha" and societal hatred towards trans people due to misconceptions like begging perpetuates condescension and inaccuracies. The film fails to acknowledge the realities of transgender individuals' lives, including the intersecting factors of religion, caste, class, and legal status. Laxmii's idealised character, despite the challenges she faces, does not fully reflect the structural roadblocks and complexities experienced by transgender individuals.

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Cis-gender Dominance and Tropes:

The film's main cast comprises cisgender actors, with transgender extras given minimal screen time. Additionally, *Laxmii* falls into the trope of the cisgender "man" saving the day through his actions, reinforcing the age-old narrative of trans characters as demonised figures. Laxmii is portrayed as an anti-hero at best and a revengeful ghost at worst. Even the celebration depicted by the trans extras after the villain's death reinforces a violent image of transgender individuals. The song "Bum Bhole" further contributes to this unsettling portrayal.

Conclusion:

Laxmii disappoints in its execution of LGBT representation, particularly in its portrayal of a transgender character. The film perpetuates stereotypes, caricatures, and misconceptions about transgender individuals. It fails to move beyond tropes of demonisation and violence, neglects the realities and complexities of transgender lives, and grants minimal representation to transgender individuals. Cisgender dominance in the cast further adds to the problematic nature of the film's representation. To promote authentic and respectful portrayals of transgender individuals, Bollywood must challenge stereotypes, prioritise inclusivity, and provide meaningful representation that reflects the diversity and experiences of the LGBTQ community.

Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Girlfriend" (2004):

Introduction and Portrayal of Lesbianism:

Girlfriend is an early representation of lesbianism in Bollywood, and unfortunately, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes and portrays lesbians in a demonising and distorted manner. The film characterises lesbians as abnormal, violent, man-hating, anti-social, sexual predators, and criminals. It suggests that lesbianism is a result of mental issues or trauma, reinforcing negative perceptions and misconceptions about the LGBTQ community.

Characterisation of Tanya:

Tanya, the central character in the film, is depicted as an independent and successful woman working as a sales associate for a diamond merchant. However, her character portrayal is deeply problematic and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about lesbians. Tanya is shown as an extremely controlling and manipulative individual who exhibits stalkerish behaviour towards her friend, Sapna. She actively monitors and controls Sapna's actions and is possessive about their relationship.

Manipulation, Assault, and Gaslighting:

Tanya's character engages in morally reprehensible actions throughout the film. She engages in dubious sexual encounters with a heavily intoxicated Sapna, highlighting a lack of consent. She attempts to manipulate her boyfriend by getting him drunk to engage in sexual activity. Tanya's behaviour escalates further as she physically assaults her boyfriend, nearly killing him. She continuously gaslights Sapna to maintain their relationship, using various excuses to control her.

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Distorted Equating of Lesbianism and Transsexuality:

One of the major issues with Tanya's character is how the film equates lesbianism to transsexuality. Tanya claims to be a lesbian but explains it as being a man stuck in a woman's body. This equating of different aspects of gender and sexuality further distorts and misrepresents the experiences and identities of both lesbians and transgender individuals.

Impact of Misrepresentation:

Girlfriend not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes about lesbians but also distorts the understanding of lesbianism and its relationship to transgender identities. The film's portrayal contributes to the stigmatisation and misunderstanding of LGBTQ individuals, reinforcing prejudice and discrimination.

Conclusion:

Girlfriend presents a highly problematic and harmful representation of lesbianism. The film demonises and distorts the image of lesbians, portraying them as abnormal, violent, and manipulative. Tanya's character perpetuates harmful stereotypes and engages in morally reprehensible behaviour, including assault and manipulation. Moreover, the film's distorted equating of lesbianism and transsexuality adds further confusion and misrepresentation. Such misrepresentation hinders progress towards accurate and positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals in Bollywood cinema. It underscores the importance of challenging stereotypes and promoting authentic and respectful representations to foster inclusivity and understanding. Tanya's character is in several ways the stand in for the man in Bollywood's heteronormative bias. In light of that how a man's stalking is romanticised whereas in a similar setting, it becomes a demonization of the homosexuality could be explored more.

Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Kapoor and Sons" (2016):

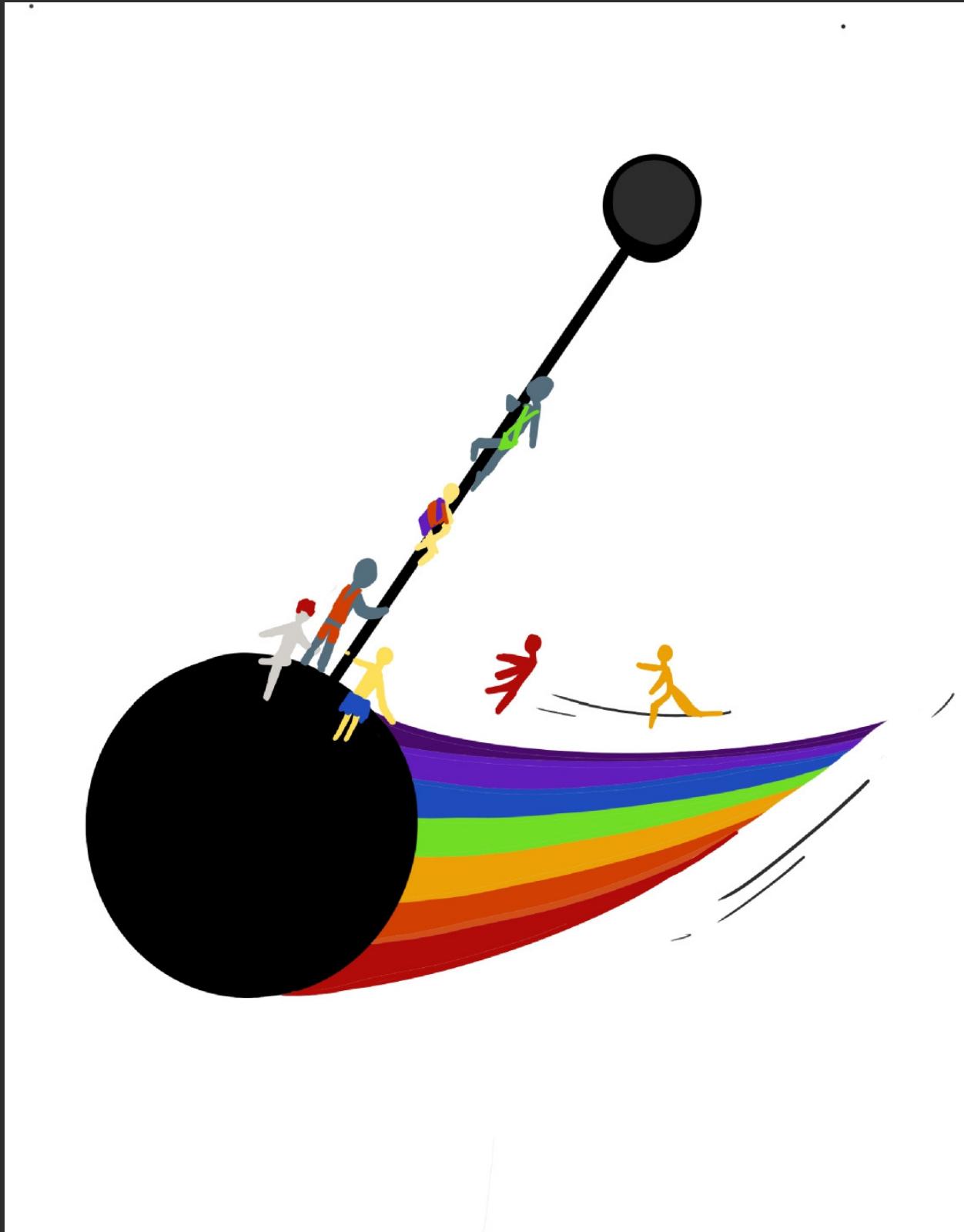
Introduction and Rahul Kapoor's Character:

In *Kapoor and Sons*, Rahul Kapoor is portrayed as the seemingly "perfect son" of his family. As the responsible older brother and a successful author, he strives to maintain an ideal image. However, as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that Rahul is repressing parts of himself and his life, particularly his sexuality, fearing rejection from his parents. This internal conflict is revealed as he keeps his relationship in London hidden and tries to make his mother come to terms with his identity.

Moving Beyond Stereotypes:

The film successfully goes beyond stereotypes and prejudices often associated with LGBTQ representation. Rahul's character represents the everyday person, with his gayness being just one aspect of his personality and characterisation. He does not exhibit overt queer coding or conform to stereotypical gay characteristics typically seen in Bollywood films. Instead, Rahul's portrayal highlights that an LGBTQ individual is "just like" any other person, debunking the notion that sexual orientation defines an individual's entire personality.

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Subtle Hints and Nuanced Representation:

Although not overtly queer-coded, Rahul does give subtle hints about his sexuality before it is revealed. His well-dressed appearance, correction of the colour of his shoe, and the scene where he invites his mother to visit him in London allude to his identity. These nuanced representations offer a more realistic depiction of LGBTQ individuals, highlighting that their identities can be subtle and varied rather than conforming to stereotypes.

Challenges in Physical Appearance:

While the actor beautifully and sensitively portrays Rahul's character, the physical appearance of the character brings forth certain issues. Rahul represents a mainstream idea of attractiveness, with conventional good looks, a muscular physique, success, and a privileged background. This portrayal, while not a failure on the character's part, highlights a broader issue in the representation of LGBTQ characters in mainstream Bollywood. Often, they are depicted as coming from privileged backgrounds, conforming to societal beauty standards, and lacking representation of intersectionality with class, caste, disabilities, and other aspects of identity.

Conclusion:

Kapoor and Sons presents a commendable portrayal of LGBTQ representation through Rahul Kapoor's character. It challenges stereotypes and prejudices, showcasing that an LGBTQ individual's identity is multifaceted and should not define their entire persona. The film's subtle hints and nuanced representation contribute to a more authentic depiction of LGBTQ experiences. However, the issue of representing LGBTQ characters primarily from privileged backgrounds and neglecting intersectionality remains a concern within mainstream Bollywood. It underscores the need for more diverse and inclusive portrayals that reflect the intersectionality of sexuality with other aspects of identity.

Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Margarita with a Straw" (2014):

Introduction and Establishing Laila's Character:

Laila, portrayed by Kalki Koechlin, is the central character in *Margarita with a Straw*. She is a young woman with cerebral palsy, a condition that affects her mobility and speech. The film provides a deeply intimate portrayal of Laila's journey of self-discovery and exploration of her identity, particularly as a queer individual.

Challenging Stereotypes and Overcoming Limitations:

Laila's character breaks away from conventional portrayals of disability, as the film focuses on her aspirations, desires, and agency beyond her physical limitations. It challenges societal stereotypes by presenting Laila as a complex, multi-dimensional character rather than reducing her solely to her disability.

Exploration of Sexuality and Queer Identity:

Laila's narrative in the film explores her journey of self-discovery and coming to terms with her sexuality. She navigates her attraction to both men and women, leading to her realisation that she is a queer individual. This exploration of her sexuality is depicted with

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sensitivity and authenticity, highlighting the importance of representation and understanding in depicting LGBTQ experiences.

Personal Growth and Independence:

Throughout the film, Laila undergoes significant personal growth, striving for independence and embracing her individuality. She moves away from the confines of her sheltered life and embarks on a journey of self-discovery, pursuing her education abroad. Laila's narrative emphasises her desire for autonomy and the challenges she faces in pursuing her dreams while also navigating her personal relationships and the complexities of her identity.

Intersectionality and Relationships:

Laila's character intersects with multiple identities and experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of her individuality. The film explores her relationships, both romantic and familial, and how they impact her journey. Laila's interactions with her mother, friends, and romantic interests reveal the complexities of love, acceptance, and understanding within the context of her queer identity and disability.

Embracing Individuality and Empowerment:

As the narrative unfolds, Laila embraces her individuality and asserts her right to be recognised and respected for who she is. The film showcases her resilience, determination, and pursuit of her own happiness. Laila's character demonstrates the importance of self-acceptance and self-empowerment, challenging societal norms and expectations.

Conclusion:

Laila's character in *Margarita with a Straw* provides a poignant and authentic portrayal of a young woman with cerebral palsy navigating her journey of self-discovery and exploration of her queer identity. The film challenges stereotypes and offers a nuanced depiction of disability and queerness, highlighting the intersectionality of Laila's experiences. Through her personal growth, relationships, and pursuit of independence, Laila's character emphasises the significance of representation and empowerment for individuals with disabilities and queer individuals alike.

Analysis of LGBT Representation in "Dostana" (2008):

Analysis of Sam:

Sam, portrayed by Abhishek Bachchan, is one of the central characters in *Dostana*. As a gay man, Sam's narrative arc provides insights into the challenges and complexities faced by LGBTQ individuals within the film's context.

Introduction and Establishing Sam's Character:

Sam is introduced as an affable and outgoing individual who becomes friends with Kunal (played by John Abraham). He possesses a vibrant personality, often seen exuding confidence and embracing his individuality. However, it is important to note that the initial portrayal of Sam leans heavily on stereotypes, emphasising flamboyant behaviour, fashion choices, and exaggerated mannerisms associated with common tropes found in Bollywood

comedies.

The Pretence and Emotional Journey:

As part of the film's plot, Sam and Kunal pretend to be a gay couple to secure an apartment. This pretence forms the foundation of their relationship throughout the narrative. While their initial motivation is driven by practicality, Sam's journey evolves as he develops genuine feelings for Kunal.

Sam's emotional journey unfolds gradually as he navigates his growing affection for Kunal while remaining constrained by the limitations of their pretence. His character demonstrates resilience in dealing with societal judgement and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. This internal conflict becomes more pronounced as the film progresses, leading Sam to question his desires and confront his own identity.

The Struggle for Acceptance:

One of the key aspects of Sam's narrative is his struggle for acceptance. He experiences a range of emotions, from fear and anxiety to hope and vulnerability, as he contemplates coming out and revealing his true self to his loved ones. Sam's desire for acceptance is poignantly portrayed, emphasising the emotional toll of hiding one's true identity due to societal pressures.

Throughout the film, Sam's journey is underscored by moments of internal reflection and self-discovery. He grapples with the fear of rejection and the potential consequences of revealing his sexuality. The narrative highlights the psychological and emotional impact of living in a society that may not fully accept same-sex relationships, shedding light on the challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals in India.

Friendship and Support:

In addition to his personal journey, Sam's character also showcases his role as a supportive friend to Kunal. He provides emotional guidance, acting as a confidant and ally. Sam's empathy and understanding create a safe space for Kunal to explore his own feelings and come to terms with his identity.

Sam's friendship with Kunal deepens as they rely on each other for emotional support. Their bond evolves beyond the pretence, revealing a genuine connection and mutual understanding. This aspect of Sam's narrative emphasizes the power of friendship and solidarity within the LGBTQ community, highlighting the importance of supportive relationships in navigating personal challenges.

Conclusion:

Sam's narrative in *Dostana* offers a glimpse into the experiences and emotional journey of an LGBTQ individual within the context of the film. While his character demonstrates resilience, personal growth, and the desire for acceptance, it is essential to critically analyze the limitations of his portrayal. The reliance on stereotypes and the film's focus on comedy

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hinder a more nuanced exploration of Sam's identity and experiences as a gay man. Nevertheless, Sam's character contributes to the broader discourse on LGBTQ representation in Bollywood cinema, highlighting the need for more authentic and inclusive narratives that fully capture the complexities of LGBTQ individuals' lives.

Analysis of Kunal:

Kunal, portrayed by John Abraham, is a key character in *Dostana* and his narrative arc offers insights into the portrayal of LGBTQ individuals in Bollywood cinema.

Introduction and Initial Characterization:

Kunal is introduced as a straight man who, alongside Sam (played by Abhishek Bachchan), pretends to be gay to secure an apartment. Initially, his character is depicted as reserved and hesitant about the pretence. Unlike Sam, Kunal does not exhibit the flamboyant behaviour often associated with stereotypical portrayals of gay men in Bollywood.

Exploration of Identity:

As the film progresses, Kunal's character undergoes a transformation, leading to a deeper exploration of his own identity and understanding of sexuality. His interactions with Sam and their pretend relationship prompt introspection, raising questions about his own desires and the potential for non-traditional relationships.

Throughout the narrative, Kunal grapples with his own understanding of his sexuality and societal expectations. His journey represents a struggle to reconcile his feelings with societal norms, which often perpetuate heteronormative standards. This internal conflict highlights the challenges faced by individuals in exploring and accepting their true identities within a society that may not readily accept non-heterosexual orientations.

Emotional Development and Acceptance:

As the film progresses, Kunal's emotional development becomes apparent. He navigates his growing feelings for Sam and grapples with the implications of these emotions. Kunal's internal struggle showcases the emotional toll of suppressing one's desires due to societal pressures and expectations.

The narrative emphasizes Kunal's journey towards self-acceptance. He experiences a range of emotions, from confusion and fear to eventual realisation and embracing of his own desires. Kunal's character arc underscores the importance of self-discovery and authenticity, ultimately leading him towards a greater understanding and acceptance of his own sexual orientation.

Friendship and Support:

Kunal's narrative also showcases the importance of friendship and support in navigating personal challenges. His bond with Sam deepens as they rely on each other for emotional guidance and understanding. Kunal finds solace in Sam's friendship, allowing him to openly express his feelings and doubts.

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Through his friendship with Sam, Kunal finds a safe space to explore his own identity and experiences. Sam's unwavering support provides Kunal with the confidence to embrace his true self. This aspect of Kunal's narrative highlights the significance of supportive relationships in the journey towards self-acceptance and the exploration of one's sexual orientation.

Conclusion:

Kunal's narrative in *Dostana* contributes to the exploration of LGBTQ representation in Bollywood cinema. His character showcases the internal struggle faced by individuals in coming to terms with their sexual orientation in a society that may not readily accept non-heterosexual identities. Kunal's emotional journey, self-discovery, and eventual acceptance provide insights into the complexities of LGBTQ experiences and the importance of authentic representation. While the film's portrayal of Kunal may have limitations and relies on comedic elements, his character adds to the discourse on LGBTQ representation and the need for more inclusive narratives that authentically capture the diverse experiences of queer individuals.

DISCUSSION

The representation of LGBTQ individuals in Bollywood cinema has long been a topic of discussion and scrutiny. While there have been notable attempts to portray LGBTQ characters and narratives, there are recurring themes and narratives that contribute to the crisis of representation in the industry. This discussion will explore the common themes and narratives that arise in the analysis of several Bollywood films, highlighting how they perpetuate the crisis of LGBT representation.

- *Stereotypes and Stigmatization:* One prevalent issue in Bollywood's portrayal of LGBTQ characters is the reliance on stereotypes and stigmatisation. Characters are often depicted in exaggerated or caricaturish ways, reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating harmful beliefs about LGBTQ individuals. Examples include demonising lesbians as abnormal and violent in *Girlfriend* and presenting transgender characters as revengeful ghosts in *Laxmii*. These stereotypes not only misrepresent the diversity of LGBTQ experiences but also contribute to the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of the community.
- *Superficial and One-Dimensional Characters:* Another common narrative element in Bollywood films is the superficial and one-dimensional characterisation of LGBTQ individuals. They are often reduced to their sexual orientation or gender identity, and their entire personality and storylines revolve solely around their LGBT identity. This limited portrayal fails to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of individuals within the LGBTQ community and reinforces the notion that being LGBTQ defines a person's entire existence. The characters of Sam and Kunal in *Dostana* serve as examples of such one-dimensional representations, where their sexual orientation is used as a plot device rather than fully exploring their complexities as individuals.

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- *Limited Intersectionality:* The lack of intersectionality in the representation of LGBTQ characters is a significant issue in Bollywood cinema. Many films neglect to address the intersecting identities of LGBTQ individuals, such as their caste, class, religion, or disability. This omission ignores the unique experiences and challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities. The character of Rahul in *Kapoor and Sons* illustrates this issue, as his privileged background and conventional attractiveness overshadow the intersectionality of class, caste, and other marginalised identities that often affect LGBTQ individuals.
- *Heteronormative Storytelling:* Bollywood films frequently conform to heteronormative storytelling, where LGBTQ characters are forced into traditional heterosexual narratives. This approach suggests that queer relationships must adhere to societal norms and reinforces the idea that being queer is abnormal or deviant. In movies like *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, the attempt to fit LGBTQ characters into a conventional romantic framework limits the exploration of authentic queer experiences and perpetuates the idea that acceptance can only be achieved by conforming to heteronormative expectations.

The common themes and narratives observed in the analysis of Bollywood films contribute to the crisis of LGBTQ representation in the industry. The reliance on stereotypes, one-dimensional characters, the absence of intersectionality, and the perpetuation of heteronormative storytelling all hinder the progress towards authentic and diverse representation. To address this crisis, it is essential for Bollywood to break free from harmful stereotypes, explore the complexities of LGBTQ experiences, and embrace intersectional narratives. By doing so, the industry can play a pivotal role in promoting understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity for the LGBTQ community in India and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The crisis of LGBTQ representation in Bollywood cinema is evident through the recurring themes and narratives identified in the analysis of various films. The reliance on stereotypes, stigmatisation, one-dimensional characters, limited intersectionality, and the perpetuation of heteronormative storytelling all contribute to the marginalisation and misrepresentation of LGBTQ individuals. These issues hinder the industry's progress towards authentic and inclusive portrayals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

To address this crisis, Bollywood must take proactive steps towards more responsible and accurate representation. Here are some suggestions for the industry:

- *Diversify Narratives:* Bollywood should invest in narratives that authentically reflect the experiences of LGBTQ individuals across different genres and themes. By exploring a wide range of stories, the industry can move beyond stereotypes and offer a more nuanced understanding of queer lives.
- *Humanize LGBTQ Characters:* Instead of reducing LGBTQ characters to their sexual orientation or gender identity, Bollywood should strive to create multi-dimensional

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characters with depth and complexity. Portraying LGBTQ individuals as fully realised human beings with their dreams, aspirations, and struggles will help challenge preconceived notions and foster empathy among audiences.

- *Promote Intersectionality:* Recognize the intersectionality of LGBTQ identities by incorporating diverse backgrounds, such as caste, class, religion, and disability, into the narratives. This approach will provide a more accurate representation of the challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals and promote a greater sense of inclusivity.
- *Collaborate with LGBTQ Voices:* Involve LGBTQ individuals, activists, and organisations in the creative process to ensure authentic and respectful storytelling. Collaborating with the community will help portray their experiences with nuance and accuracy while avoiding harmful stereotypes.
- *Challenge Heteronormative Narratives:* Bollywood should actively challenge the dominance of heteronormative storytelling by exploring alternative relationship dynamics and non-traditional narratives. Embracing diverse forms of love and relationships will help break down barriers and foster acceptance within society.
- *Educate and Sensitize:* Engage in initiatives to educate both industry professionals and audiences about LGBTQ issues, promoting awareness and sensitivity. This can include workshops, discussions, and partnerships with LGBTQ organisations to foster dialogue and understanding.

By implementing these suggestions, Bollywood can play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and promoting acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. As an influential industry, it has the power to challenge stereotypes, break barriers, and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse society.

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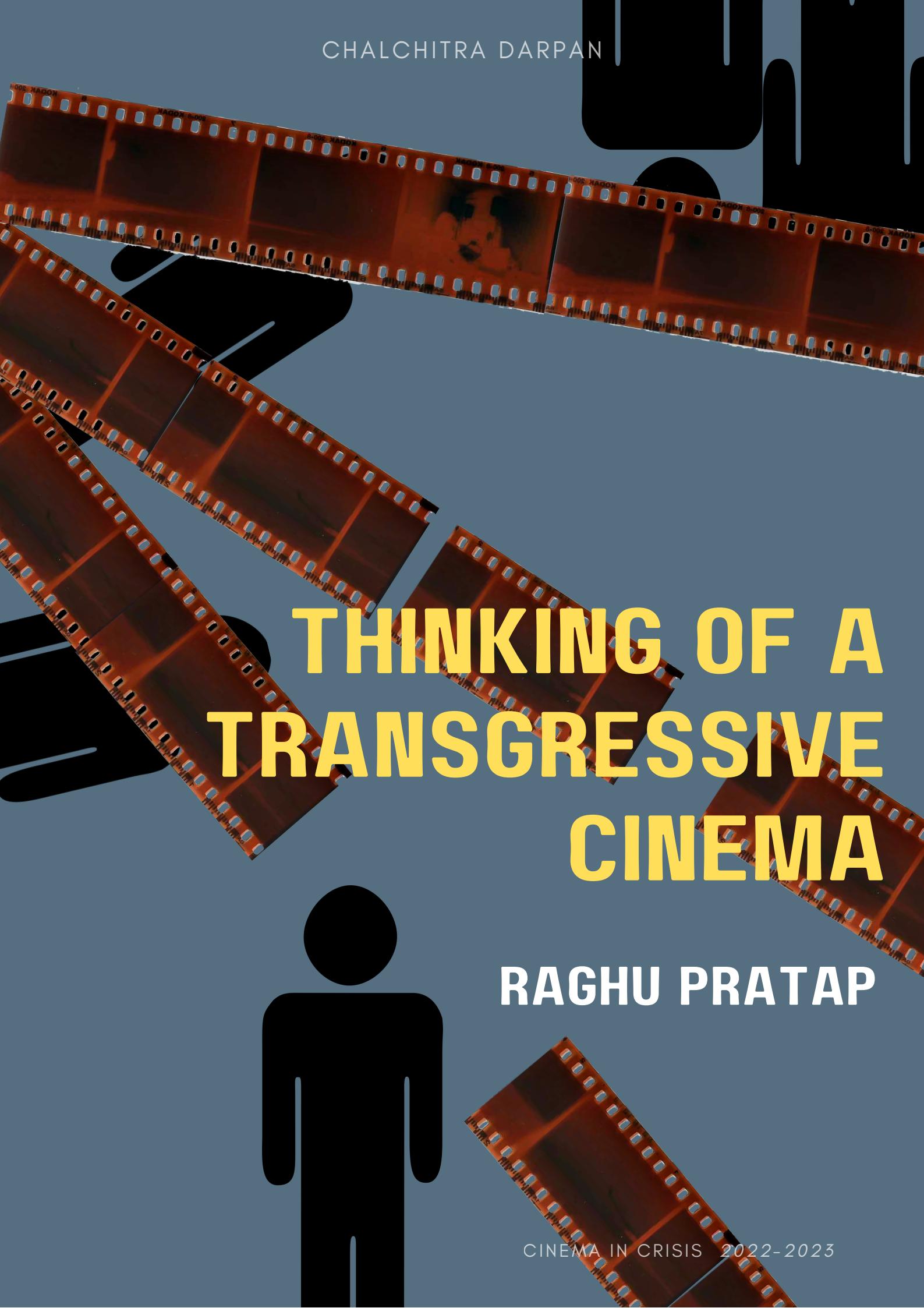
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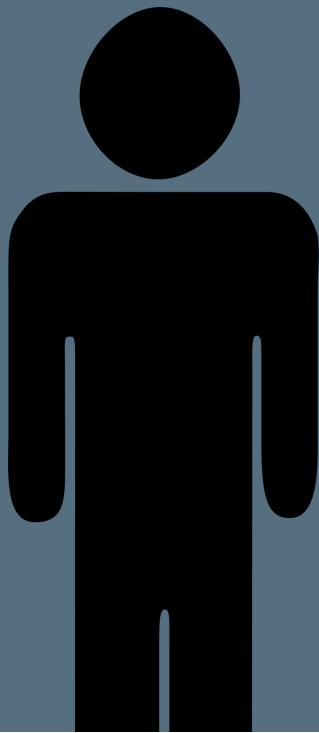
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THINKING OF A TRANSGRESSIVE CINEMA

RAGHU PRATAP



CINEMA IN CRISIS 2022-2023

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The Wait

In Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Decamerone* (1970), a line strikes out from the rest of the film: "Why create a work of art when it is so much sweeter just to dream about it?". "Waiting reveals beauty," says the Korean-German philosopher Byung-chul Han in *Fatigue Society*, *Byung-chul Han in Seoul/Berlin* (2015). But for what does one wait? And for how long does one wait? Waiting, as it is understood to be, is time spent in anticipation of *arrival*. However, this does not mean that "action" begins from a moment of *arrival*. Is the *filming*, therefore, restricted to the arrival, like when the Lumiere Brothers witnessed the train arriving at La Ciotat? It surely isn't. The camera keeps on rolling, perhaps at Isabelle Huppert in an empty train station or at Chen Shiang-chyi as she waits for the metro in *What Time Is It There?* (2001).

When the Lumiere Brothers first filmed the train in 1895, it did not arrive immediately, instead what we see first are empty train tracks *waiting* to be occupied; there is nothing, yet there is everything. Is the wait nothing? No, it is still something. The wait is an "action". In Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), 22-year-old Nana Kleinfrankenheim, played by Anna Karina, says: "Why must one talk? Often one shouldn't talk but live in silence. The more one talks, the less the words mean." The wait is an act in itself that is not contingent upon an arrival, or a product. The arrival is a result of the wait; the wait itself must be free of arrival. A lover loves not to possess; it loves because it loves, because it is overcome by thought and feeling. At the same time, the wait is anything but static – it is a movement, it is perhaps the most dynamic stage. The wait always leads you somewhere, until the moment you express.

A transgressive cinema, in this context, is not a cinema that is characterised by its transgressive content or material, but a cinema that continually looks to reject itself, to create itself, that finds no easy answers to hand out. It is a cinema that makes use of the wait. The wait, here, becomes an essential constituent of this transgressive cinema.

Waiting is thinking. Waiting is thought. Saying is a belated act. When we wait, we are considering the world. We are considering a sequence. When we are in wait, we are able to question the condition of reality – not just what ails reality but how one must look at this reality, and why one must do so. We see the world through cinema, and thus we are obligated to dwell on the world, and on cinema itself. This is precisely where politics operates; it is at this anticipatory stage before one takes upon themselves to lock reality within the frame of a camera, and through a sequence of images, guide the spectator to a place.

Dialectical Cinema

Accentuated by the ready availability of cheap digital technology, films have proliferated, for a variety of ends- aesthetic projects, political messages, inquiries into memory, et al. In most of these cases, the camera is missing: as an actor, as an active participant. There needn't be any break of the fourth wall to confirm the camera's presence. The camera must be a conscious participant- a tool that constantly resists the filmmaker's power to use it. Even when the camera is missing, it in no way means that the gaze is missing. On the

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contrary, the gaze itself confirms the absence of the camera. (If the camera is forgotten, we may one day suffer from how the camera has framed us, and framed history, and in the process, taken us farther away from any truth if it exists). Therefore, does making a film really frame the world and lead us somewhere else? Does it add to what is already there, does it stretch your mind further, allow you to discover, like how man discovered fire once? In this sense, many films are not an arrival but a regression. The existence of work does not by its own existence take us further. Films that have not arisen from waiting have not added to, but rather subtracted from what is already there. As more and more films are being made, we are seeing less and less – and what we see is violent opacity. This excess has choked the world.

Ivan Klima (Klima 105) writes in his novel *Love and Garbage*:

"What does it matter? Tomorrow, if we feel like it, we'll make something different. At least we aren't burdening the world with another creation. This is something we both are aware of: that the world is groaning, choking with a multitude of creations, that it is buried by objects and strangled by ideas which all pretend to be necessary, useful or beautiful and therefore lay claim to perpetual endurance." (Klima 105)

A transgressive cinema is thus one that understands cinema to be in its anticipatory moment, a moment that imagines cinema, looks to invent cinema itself— the current cinema which by the force of language, is referred to as cinema. A sense of discovery, a battle so to say, to not just simply push cinema, but to transgress what is understood to be cinema, to give it a rebirth, to reveal the possibilities it conceals. Often when we are thinking of cinema, we are inevitably thinking in reiterations, conditioned by an involuntary and historical collective consensus: what kind of stories to make, where to place the camera, how to film a person, and perhaps most importantly, how we utilise the sequence, for the frightening power of cinema is its sequence, from an actual film to primetime television news and to more recently, Instagram. To create is to not necessarily say something more, that is to add. To transgress is to, often kill cinema, to not cease looking like a lover does not cease to love, to challenge and resist the cinema, i.e., to use a dialectical approach. The growing multitude of films today have taken it farther away from cinema.

Andre Bazin (Bazin 21) writes in *The Myth of Total Cinema*, that the cinema had for long, existed in the minds of people in the nineteenth century – and that every development added to the cinema paradoxically took it nearer and nearer to its origins, that the cinema has not yet been invented. A transgressive cinema, must therefore, bring itself to a state of pre-existence. In the Indian context today, the most glaring examples of non-dialectical films that are characterised by "fulfilment-of-an-objective", non-anticipatory nature, absence of waiting, lack of inquiry into the gaze and of the camera itself are some of the films made by Anubhav Sinha, which have been marketed as "political films" dealing with explicit political themes as diverse as caste politics and militancy in North East India. *Anek* (2022) is a case in point: A film that deals with issues of racial discrimination, neglect, marginalisation as well as a turbulent history of insurgency and militancy in the North East- a region culturally, politically, and geographically disjunct from "mainland" India. The film exhibits grave problems: aside from severe misrepresentation and gross oversimplification,

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the film unwittingly furthers prevalent stereotypes attributed to people from the region; their relationship with the Indian state; a straitjacketed view of militancy. While the region consists of eight states that sharply variate from each other, the film offers a grotesque solution in the form of culturally and geographically homogenizing the entire region – where car number plates bear the letters “NE” instead of the names of states – establishing geographical ambiguity. As the film takes an approach wherein it appoints itself as something of a crusader in bringing to the fore issues that plague a ‘margin,’ it appoints a ‘good’ intelligence officer as the protagonist, and proceeds to show a full-fledged military operation take place with generous amounts of violence. For a region tempered by a history of unchecked violence in the hands of the Army under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the film’s decision to include this only further delineates the need for a transgressive cinema today. While touted to be a ‘political film’, *Anek* proves to be anything truly like it; it is a film where the camera is absent and the gaze itself confirms this absence of dialectical inquiry and reflexivity. In such a situation, we see less and less; we see more and more of what is already there; there is no newness except a superimposed oldness that is repackaged as newness. We are not led anywhere, except once again nailed to where we are.

In a conversation with Bill Krohn in 1977, Serge Daney explains:

“...the way that the power which the camera represents (its capacity to intervene, interfere, extort and provoke, to modify the situation which it grafts itself onto) is or is not thought about by the people who make the films. Paradoxically, films denouncing bourgeois power, injustice and oppression are themselves totalitarian, non-dialectical, laid on like veneer... ...there comes a time when you realize that what’s important is not agreeing or disagreeing with the explicit ideology of the film, but seeing how far someone is able to hold onto his ideas while at the same time respecting the audio-visual material he has produced. It’s a dialectical movement: at first the filmmaker – guided by ideas, tastes, convictions – produces a certain material, but then it’s the material which teaches him things by resisting him.”

A transgressive cinema might thus be thought of as a cinema that cannot be made without an inquiry into cinema itself. And when one comes to this frontier, one mustn’t surrender themselves to what exists before them, whether it is the cinema or the state. It is here where one must struggle, aggress, and specifically, transgress. The cinema we resist against, is therefore a cinema that asks us to wait. Meanwhile we do not stop, but struggle. As cinema is being taken farther away from itself by a growing multitude of films, a transgression in this context implies, taking cinema to itself, to take it closer to its origins, to inch closer to inventing it.

‘Woke Images’: An Adversary to Transgression

A major adversary to the possibility of a transgressive cinema, is the phenomenon of woke images. While the term ‘woke’ may be broadly used in various contexts, in the given specific context, it attributes to an interesting phenomenon. Woke images, such as the prescriptive impulse of images we see circulated around online, create implicit pressures to conform to the nature of those images and ‘amplify’ these images, especially when these images concern a social or a political issue and require engagement, or dissemination. Such images often operate in the psychological realm, and are characterised by an unsaid consensus,

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that we are expected to further and continue without question. We might come across a disturbing incident on social media, that has resulted in much outrage, where a dominant viewpoint expressing angst, has, in the opinion of one person who is equally outraged, shown a fundamental flaw in their argument. This fundamental flaw may be hidden by layers of righteous anger, and action-oriented emotion among calls for universal justice, truth, et al. In such a situation, if the person finds the fundamental flaw to be harmful, or disagrees with it vehemently, and they find an image containing the said viewpoint, they may choose to abstain i.e., not share or perpetuate an image they find to be harmful. This abstinence isn't apolitical, instead this is precisely where politics lie, this is precisely where the wait lies. What is fascinating about woke images is that unlike a large historical burden in the sense of tradition, they exist in the form of immediate answers and choices, in the form of 'trends'. Films in the vein of *Anek* suffer from pre-designed arrival. They are films that have already arrived at sans dialectics. They occupy what has already been told or been raised. For example, there is much debate and discourse from a 'national' lens towards the North East, continually framed as a region of much neglect and marginality. In such a situation, a film like *Anek* chooses to take up what is an already 'condemned' or 'known' issue amidst a narrative that has been well set out—an established marginality. A film like *Anek* begins and ends there.

While the result in the case of *Anek* is more jarring, there are subtler examples. Instagram, as a visual image-based medium, poses a great threat to anticipation, waiting and the idea of a transgressive cinema – involving the realms of ideology, politics and society.

'Woke images,' as termed in this context, are images which already possess an ostensible answer. In the context of the last few years, the term woke has gained much popular use, it can be referred to a sense of 'knowing' or 'having known' or more aptly, being 'enlightened,' whether it is of a certain issue or of awareness. Over time, invisible templates have been formed by the woke imperative, rights-based viewpoints that are already attached to certain events and occurrences, such as freedom of speech, gender-based violence, etc. Often these assertions emerge from an activist orientation, or to put it more simply, to characterise someone who stands up against what is wrong. The issue here precisely is this: the activistic viewpoints that are adopted increasingly confirm rigidities; they increasingly mark moral orientation around an issue into defined binaries. Rather, it is not a question of moral relativism, but differences within the realm of a similar moral compass, such as the right to free speech. Slowly, it erases difference, which is the essence of dialectical thinking. It means that one already knows what is to be opined, what is the mode of resistance they must undertake, and what is the language with which they must think about justice.

Thus, Instagram produces 'woke' obligations from its members, such as instantaneous acts of posting about an act of violence, without producing a corollary obligation to engage with the issue. The language confirms this: they are 'woke images' and not 'waking images'. You are not thinking, on the other hand you already know what to do. This is not to discount and outrightly reject an individual act of solidarity or dissemination of information, but to question the very system and culture and behavioural impulse it perpetuates. It is as if the

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train has already arrived at La Ciotat, and it is only then that the Lumiere Brothers decided to film. If you already know, there is nothing to unearth. It is here where an individual transgression becomes necessary.

The excess of images on Instagram today- both woke images and otherwise exact a certain violence on the receiver of those images. The images are not violent by themselves but as they accumulate, they create a collective nothing: the collective nothing exacts violence upon the individual; that seeing so many things at once; confronted with stimuli of all kinds, one is failing to grasp meaning. This is in clear opposition to the collection of images seen in films, where the collective is bound by a thread, even when non-narrative, experimental films are being made.

There are more and more films being made today, and one cannot help but think- what are they saying? Saying, in terms of pushing us to think of cinema, the world, life itself, politics, human existence, et al. Saying does not mean a film needs to directly depict a marginalised group to talk about them; it may say about them in film that may seem entirely unrelated to the 'issue'. A shot may be powerfully used for this purpose. Whatever the subject of a film, we must see the world inside it, even when it is fantasy. Seeing the world means being sensitive to everything around us. In *Om Shanti Om* (2007), romance, horror, Bollywood and cinema itself take the forefront, but there are scenes when Mukesh Mehra (Arjun Rampal) inappropriately touches a younger actress much to her discomfort, and this moment is bound well into the film. This scene is a remarkable moment in the film – for it suddenly ruptures the 'glamour' of cinema, and repositions and attunes itself to the world itself, and what happens inside this world. This is a moment of 'politics' for the film, and it effectively says many things about power, gender, and the film industry.

More films are being produced but rarely are they saying anything. Ten films in the North East may say less than one film made on the subject. Or in other words, what we have today is information without narrative (Byung). Images are never alone and one image leads to another, but today what we have are sets of solitude connected by speech (Godard).

In such a situation, the excess conceals what is to be unearthed; it becomes noise (Eco 35). The excess is nothing but a kind of censorship (Eco 35) and inadvertently aids fascism. It has thus moved from an earlier prohibitive state to a state of deception: where there is deflection of an actual issue, which is superimposed by distractions in the form of something that is irrelevant but true (Eco 36). For example, a national corruption scandal may be deflected by a news item going into the grisly details of a film star's infidelity. Hordes of news and issues hurtle towards us, proliferate by the second, and before we know it, we have been caught in a web, a maze, that can only be escaped by a process of discrimination, of choice, of filtering and of sieving. Today, people are spending hours on Netflix picking the right film or series to watch, only to end up watching nothing. This is no way freedom, but auto-exploitation where the feeling of freedom attends to it; the exploiter is simultaneously the exploited (Byung 8)

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Already arrived-at images thus are prone to reproducibility because they are characterised by the presence of a supposed ‘answer’. Once a supposed truth proliferates, it begins to become, appear and function as an actual truth. This is the very function of woke images. In such a situation, it extinguishes any room for a critique of this now-solidified truth, and makes it harder to dislodge it and any attempt to do so may well be seen as outrageous, or transgressive. The idea of this particular ‘transgression’ has thus become necessary in terms of all language, action and thought.

Given the images we see unfold today: the shared characteristics between images that inhabit films as well as the images that constitute Instagram – a certain crisis seems to afflict cinema, and images by and large. The reasons originate from the political system, consumer culture, capitalism, social media, psychology, etc. Perhaps in a moment like this, *transgression* precipitated by the *wait*, can birth a thought that rejects, evolves, grows what is there – only in order to discover what else is there. Transgression forbids cinema from dying; it forbids history from dying.

To invoke Bazin once more, cinema hasn’t yet been invented, or solidified, or arrived at like a woke image – it is still waking up, it is being invented as we go along. Which is why we anticipate, wait. And we never do *nothing*.

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THE ROLE OF SATIRE IN CINEMA IN TIMES OF CRISIS

UDISHA AND
DIYASHA
CHOWDHURY



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"Satire is the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter in order to embarrass, humble, or discredit its targets."¹

Satire has long been one of the most popular literary devices in film. Satire works are frequently seen as controversial or taboo in nature, with topics such as race, class, system, violence, sex, war, and politics being criticised or commented on, typically under the guise of other genres such as comedies, dramas, parodies, fantasies, and/or science fiction. Satire has long been a key component of cinema, from early silent slapstick to the present day, using humour, irony, or exaggeration to expose and ridicule people or ideas.

Whether through caricature, spoof, parody, or something similar, satirising political figures, historical events, societal attitudes, and so much more has resonated on the big screen throughout the ages. This list of great satires – from real-world to fiction inspires discussion and debate around many issues, including their targets, their success and their impact on contemporary pop culture. Satire is used in film as a form of powerful social commentary. Kirk Combe writes, "In short, satire operates within a cultural context to enact a polemic mission. To accomplish its persuasive task of blame and praise, satire invades other genres, manipulates its narrative persona, specialises in exaggeration, and establishes an intense transactive relationship with its audience."² Satirical films strategically employ humour and exaggerated portrayals as pivotal devices to engage in a societal analysis and critique. Within their purview, these films engage in examining socio-political issues along with the critical appraisal of established cultural norms, human behaviour, belief systems and contemporary events. Satires routinely assume a critical stance towards government policies, institutional paradigms, including the realms of media and religion, socio-cultural stereotypes, and figures of authority and oppression. Such films bring the hypocrisies of the society into the limelight and seek to unveil the inherent flaws therein and the complexities of the human condition. This unique form of commentary offers a potent and engaging approach and urges self reflection.

The popularity of satires in films can also be illustrated with a number of examples. David Fincher's *Fight Club* is a satire on contemporary society and capitalism, Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* is a satire on Hitler's Nazism. Others like *The Truman Show*, *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Edward Scissorhands* are also satires on life and the society as we know it. So far, we've only discussed productions by the West. There are also powerful satires in Asian films especially Indian ones like *Jane Bhi Do Yaaro*, *Oh my God!*, *PK*, *Bhooter Bhabishyot* and its sequel *Bhabishyoter Bhoot* and many others.

Through satirisation, directors soften the blow of serious and sensitive messages that a film may intend to deliver to its audience while making sure that the viewers realise what is being critiqued in the film. Jons Klaessens writes, "Satire targets specific politicians,

1 <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-satire>

2 Combe Kirk. Speculative Satire in Contemporary Literature and Film: Rant Against the Regime. Routledge Publications, 2021.

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governments, and societies, but great satire outlasts the time it was made in and resonates later on, often because the problems addressed have not been resolved."³ The tendency for comic works to resist injustice, the misuse of power, and the influence of evil is apparent in present perspectives of some of the worst periods in history.

Satire first appeared in Literature and its beginning can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Greek poets Archilocus and Aristophanes are known for building the foundations of western comedy. In a lot of their plays and poems, they can be seen critiquing society and individuals using humour. Although the term 'satire' didn't exist then, their work can be labelled as the same. In films, mostly three types of literary satires are used: Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean. Horatian satire, characterised by its gentle and light-hearted approach is the most common one. It aims to reform or correct societal flaws through humour and irony, wit and wordplay. Juvenalian satire takes a more harsh and direct approach, focusing on exposing and condemning societal injustices, vices, and corruption. It can be scathing and often uses exaggeration to make its point. And then, there's Menippean satire, known for its complex and absurd narratives that blend different ideas and perspectives to offer a broader, multifaceted critique of society.

In the history of films, it is difficult to trace back to the first ever example of a film satire. However, a 1906 French silent Short Film by Alice Guy-Blancé, called *The Consequences of Feminism* (*Les Résultats du féminisme*), can be taken to be among the earlier films to have used satire. Alice Guy-Blancé, thought to be the world's first filmmaker, showed gender-role reversal in her short film, where men were performing roles traditionally ascribed to women, such as household and other domestic chores and women 'behaved like men' as they were seen in the public sphere and assaulted their male counterparts. In a clear, biting critique of societal gender roles that facilitates gender inequality and mistreatment of women, the short film heavily relied on comedy and farce to depict its message.

For our essay, we have chosen *The Great Dictator* (the Charlie Chaplin franchise), a Horatian satire and *Don't Look Up*, a Juvenalian satire to analyse through them the usage of satire in cinema as resistance to the evil and corruption in this world. These three political satires are from different time periods and of completely different artistic techniques which will help us critique the element of satire in them against different kinds of societal as well as artistic backdrops.

In Charlie Chaplin's famous political satire *The Great Dictator* (1940), Chaplin masterfully satirised German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, right at the dawn of the Second World War. Adenoid Hynkel, Hitler's spoof, was short tempered and inhuman, mocked the tyrant that Hitler was. In a risky endeavour, Chaplin took the path of humour to harshly criticise the Führer at a time when the Nazi leader was at the peak of his power. It is no surprise that the film was banned in Germany. K. Austin Collins writes for *Vanity Fair*, "The Great Dictator is a

³ <https://www.sothetheorygoes.com/satire-genre-theory/>

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classic for a reason. It's startling in its depictions of violence, which stand out less for their outright brutality than for how memorably they depict the Nazis' betrayal of everyday humanity. And it's renowned as well for its resourceful and original humour, which combines Chaplin at his most incisive and balletic with raucous displays of verbal wit."⁴

Filming on *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin's superb parody of Adolf Hitler, began in September 1939, just as World War II was getting underway. The Axis had already been established and the Nazis had taken over much of France by the time it was published in 1940. The film's December debut in London took place in the midst of German air raids, so the threat was everything but abstract, according to critic Michael Wood. The next December of 1941 would bring about its own deadly aerial threats, this time on American soil, which would help Americans understand the gravity of this conflict by bringing it home. It was strange to be making a comedy about Adolf Hitler at the time, let alone one in which Chaplin, who at the time was one of the most well-known actors in the world and was best known for playing the lovable, lumbering Little Tramp, played Hitler. The US and Germany were not yet at war in 1940, therefore it was concerned that a film like this would ruffle some feathers. However, Chaplin had already unintentionally become associated with the era's portrayals of evil.

Hitler's figure, the Little Tramp, with his short moustache and peculiarly compact face, had already established itself as a symbol for caricaturists making fun of him in the media. Additionally, he was already on the Nazis' radar because they called him "a disgusting Jewish acrobat" in their 1934 book *The Jews Are Looking At You*. Chaplin was not a Jew. However, he was frequently said to be. He was surrounded by German supporters when he visited Berlin in 1931, demonstrating that his popularity could outshine even the advancing ideological frontiers of a budding Nazi Germany—hence their animosity. Chaplin presents us with a new take on his iconic character Little Tramp, a Jewish barber who saved a high-ranking officer's life in World War I and who, after a plane accident and years of recovery in the hospital, wakes up to the seeds of his own revolution.

Hitler is seen by *The Great Dictator* as a performer, an orator who uses language as the unifying, energising force that it is. But it also recognises him as a mental entity. This naturally implies that it's full of jokes that appear childish, wherein Hitler's anxieties, his desire for power, his ideological contradictions and his fervent reliance on devotion are criticised. It isn't a psychiatric portrait, but it also isn't just a punchline and distortion-filled funhouse portrayal of the impending battle. In the infamous climax of *The Great Dictator*, these two guys appear to merge into one another. It is a stirring speech purportedly made by the Jewish barber, who is asked to address the crowd after the Nazis mistake him for Hynkel (for reasons best left for the film to explain). When he finally speaks, Chaplin himself comes out, transcending the bounds of persona, humour, and even the fictitious concept of a "movie" in the traditional sense.

4 <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/satirizing-hitler-charlie-chaplin-great-dictator>

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In the face of terrible evil, the speech argues for humanity. "We think too much and feel too little," argues Chaplin. "Humanity is more important than machinery. Kindness and compassion are more important than intelligence. This theme—"more than machinery we need humanity"—can be seen throughout Chaplin's work, and it is particularly relevant in this instance. Breaking free of the sarcastic constraints of the movie, Chaplin reemerges as himself, utterly human, and delivers a message from the heart and the film stands as a satirical and fierce take on the evil of Nazism.

Similarly, Taika Waititi's Oscar nominated 2019 film *Jojo Rabbit*, is another satirical take on Nazi Germany that shows the effect of indoctrination of ideology in young kids. Likewise, several filmmakers have taken serious political scenarios and have satirised them in order to level criticisms against the system. For a satire to be successful and effective, the dialogues must be sharp-witted and the characters and plot must be carefully constructed. It is up to the film-makers to use the satire in a fictional world that has elements relevantly drawn from the real world for these films to become a mode of resistance against the corruption of the real world.

The humorous yet unexpectedly sombre satire *Don't Look Up* on Netflix exploits the existential climate problem to highlight the flaws and ignorance of contemporary society, particularly as seen through the eyes of the American people. The wonderfully clever and anxiety-inducing prose from writer-director Adam McKay shines throughout the movie, in large part because of the excellent performances from a star-studded cast headlined by Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence. The plot centres on Kate Dibiasky, a Ph.D. candidate at Michigan State University, and her astronomy professor Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonard DiCaprio), shortly after they learn that a massive comet is heading straight for Earth and that its impact will result in mass extinction. The two astronomers meet with an overly materialistic and unaware President Orlean (Meryl Streep) and her materialistic son and Chief of Staff Jason (Jonah Hill) in an effort to alert the public to this approaching catastrophe. The idiotic mother-son team ignores the astronomers' cries for assistance and advises them to "sit tight and assess." Although hilariously portrayed, the President and her son's character satirises the reality of world leaders and how all they care about is their personal profits and agendas. President Orlean in the film is steeped in corruption while her son supports her but tragically is left behind by her to die on an apocalyptic earth while she escapes on a spaceship.

Dr. Mindy does his best to explain the problem during their first meeting with the president, but his explanation is slowed down by an apprehensive delivery of challenging technical jargon. The intense fear that DiCaprio's character is experiencing at that precise moment is captured through his trembling voice and nervous tics as well as several close-up shots. This immediately incites a general unease that intensifies as the action develops. President Orlean and her son Jason interrupt Mindy's earnest monologue and make disparaging comments about how bored and perplexed they are. Dibiasky and Dr. Oglethorpe, the chief of planetary defence, do their best to convey the severity of the situation and to make sense of Mindy's explanation, but they are also met with further derisive remarks. Jason makes fun

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of Dibiasky's *Boy with the Dragon Tattoo*-inspired appearance and Mindy's "weird" breathing. In the greatest ways possible, Hill's performance as a tone-deaf mommy's boy is hysterically cringe-worthy, and some of his scenes are among the funniest in the entire movie.

The naive astronomers and the self-interested politicians engage in a fun but tense back and forth as a result of McKay's choice to do so. This sequence's camerawork and framing have a subtle but powerful influence on the mounting stress. When the Orleans are the subject of the camera, the wide shot they usually choose is fluid and reflects their lighthearted reaction to what they downplay as a "potentially significant event." When the astronomers are in the picture, the opposite is true. Frequently, a very closeup is used to dwell on the troubled looks on their faces, highlighting how critical the situation is. The film's visual approach mirrors the absurdity and denial that often surrounds urgent problems, such as climate change, as it uses vibrant and exaggerated imagery. The juxtaposition of larger-than-life disasters with the nonchalant reactions of characters serves as a satirical mirror to real-life indifference to impending crises. The film's use of visual irony, like scenes of natural disasters unfolding against a backdrop of everyday life, amplifies its critique of society's tendency to downplay or ignore dire warnings.

The majority of Britell's score, which received one of the movie's four Oscar nominations, can be heard throughout the several montage scenes that are designed to ratchet up the pacing and advance the plot. With each new apparition, the composition's chaotic nature intensifies as the inevitable crash approaches. The comet's impact is about to happen in the last scene, so Mindy, Oglethorpe, and Dibiasky put their differences aside and gather for a Last Supper-style feast. An surprising sense of unearthly calm permeates the picture as the table trembles, windows shatter, and walls explode. Finally happy with their attempts to alert society, the astronomers can take comfort in knowing that they gave it their all. Britell chooses to use a melancholy theme mixed with twinkly chords that gradually fade as complete disaster befalls the protagonists rather than having the soundtrack reach a rousing finale. *Don't Look Up* remains throughout as a commentary on the vanity of human beings and the inaction of the government.

A satirical film is a lot like a comedic exposé. The main purpose of satire is not to evoke laughter, but to provide a cultural critique and leave the audience with a powerful social message. When set in fictional worlds, such as in *Don't Look Up* which is a dystopia, satire makes sure that the audience is able to relate it to the real world. The film's comet crisis may not have been real but it represents the climate crisis and the severe inaction of world leaders who know nothing but their own profits. The target of the satire is to trigger a sense of recognition or realisation in the minds of the audience to spread awareness about the social situation. McKay used the fictional setting of an extinction-level event, to send out a strong message regarding climate change and how the world has repeatedly disregarded the threat that it holds to the future. If not a comet, global warming is a real threat to life on Earth, and the film has successfully delivered its desired message to its audience using satire. Hannah Little writes, "*Don't Look Up* is a huge Hollywood feature film that uses

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humour to draw an allegory for humanity's current response to climate change. Through positioning the audience with the scientist protagonists, the film makes fun of the characters not taking the science seriously in response to an extinction level event of a comet heading for Earth. From politicians being more concerned with their electoral success than the destruction of our planet, to the media trying to keep the news of the comet inconsequential and "light", to the population at large denying the existence of the comet or believing that it will bring jobs and prosperity rather than the inevitable destruction, the film satirises many real-world populations.⁵

As we approach the end of the essay, we would like to discuss in short, the much anticipated 2023 film *Barbie* by Greta Gerwig. Based on Mattel's Barbie doll franchise, Gerwig used her film to talk about important gender issues surrounding body image, gender roles, objectification and so on. 'Stereotypical Barbie' played by Margot Robbie, lives in Barbieland with other Barbies who are doctors, Nobel Laureates, journalists and even the President. Barbieland is run by women of all shapes, colours and sizes and the men, most of whom are known as Ken do not really have much say and have accepted the rule of the land. It is only when Robbie's Barbie and Ryan Gosling's Ken visit the real world they are met with a whole new world. Barbie is made uncomfortable by the male gaze and Ken is exhilarated to learn about patriarchy and is determined to make Barbieland- a land run by men. Through this satire, Gerwig also criticises the role that blonde, white Barbie dolls play in stereotyping and propagating the idea of the 'perfect body' as well as racial superiority. "*Barbie* satirises both the matriarchal fantasy of Barbie Land and the goofy patriarchy of the Real World", writes Kevin Kodama, in an article.⁶

The film, although extremely pink and seemingly cheerful, talks about some very grim issues. The film is hilariously clever and much like in Charlie Chaplin, employs visual comedy to delve into themes of gender roles and feminism. It offers a self-criticism of the Barbie franchise that has been said to have a negative impact on the self esteem of young, impressionable girls. Gerwig addresses all these and more by blending real life issues and a toy franchise, something that is successfully achieved only through the use of satire. The film's success also speaks greatly of the relevance of satire and its effectiveness as a medium to provide a social critique and important messages using humour.

From the discussions on the two movies that we've chosen for this essay, It is quite evident that Satire is frequently used to take a stand in films against societal evils for its ability to be relatable yet lucid and comical— somewhat like using humour to lighten a difficult conversation. Where direct criticism and dramatic dialogues fail, humour takes over to deliver important messages that must be heard loud and clear. Hence, satire becomes very important to filmmakers to use as a weapon of protest, and it will continue to remain an integral part of dissent in art.

5 Little, H. (2022). The use of satire to communicate science in 'Don't look up' JCOM 21(05), C06.

6 <https://movieweb.com/is-barbie-satire/>

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- *PK*. Dir. Rajkumar Hirani. Vinod Chopra Films, 2014. Film.
- *Bhooter Bhabishyot*. Dir. Anik Dutta. Satya Films, 2012. Film.
- *Bhabhishyoter Bhoot*. Dir. Anik Dutta. 2019. Film.
- *The Consequences of Feminism*. Dir. Alice Guy-Blache. Gaumont, 1904. Film.
- *The Great Dictator*. Dir. Charlie Chaplin. United Artists, 1940. Film.
- *Don't Look Up*. Dir. Adam McKay. Netflix, 2021. Film.
- *Barbie*. Dir. Greta Gerwig. Warner Bros., 2023. Film.

“I AM IN A DARK PLACE”: HELL AND HOPELESSNESS IN ZHAO LIANG’S BEHEMOTH (2015)



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INTRODUCTION

The birth of cinema can be traced back to an irrepressible desire of human beings to document, but how has it transformed or, more correctly, how has it modulated itself in the time of contemporary crisis that humanity is now experiencing? By proposing the example of a slow-moving and poetic independent documentary, I attempt to investigate how Chinese cinematic storytelling elaborates the trope of crisis, understood from a psychological as well as a physical and ecological perspective. Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* (*Beixi moshou* 悲兮魔兽) is not only the perfect blend of slow cinema and experimental work, but it is capable of using the documentary form as a medium to shape and portray the burden of the self through the infernal circle of consumerist society. The elements that will structure this analysis revolve around the painful plight of mine workers, the industry-ravaged landscape, and the empty promise of capitalism embodied by China's "ghost cities". This research aims to underline how this process can transform images and words into more complex messages, giving rise to a substratum of different meanings to be untangled within film creation.



A still from the movie "Behemoth."

1. Chinese Independent Documentary Movement

Before further proceeding with the analysis of *Behemoth*, it is useful to briefly consider the preponderant characteristics of the Chinese independent documentary movement. "My camera doesn't lie" is a line from Lou Ye's famous film *Suzhou River* and it can be effectively used in describing the Chinese independent film movement of the Nineties (Sniadecki 60). Presumably, the cameras that do lie are those of the celebrated predecessors of the Fifth Generation – such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang – engaged in the reworking of myths and legends of ancestral China, yet lacking a "sense of reality" (*xianshi gan* 现实感).

Undoubtedly, a crisis is a chaotic magma that artistic creation has always made use of. In the case of China, critical scenarios are provided by three nodal points: the end of the Maoist era, the beginning of the reform and opening-up phase promoted by Deng Xiaoping, and the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989), a historic moment in which the Chinese youth's ideals of democracy and freedom were severed by the government tanks. Following the disastrous events of Tiananmen, countless artists, writers, and intellectuals left the People's

Republic to pursue their creative ideals abroad. Conversely, those who decided to stay faced a climate of increasing uncertainty, both economic as well as social, and cultural. The artistic and film production of the 90s inevitably reflects the sense of doubt and discouragement experienced by Chinese artists in the face of the nation's sudden changes. The independent documentary movement is, in some ways, the suffered result of the post-Maoist zeitgeist and the starting point of the implications immediately following the establishment of the new system. By repositioning the "truth" of marginalized and subaltern life experiences taking place on the spot, Chinese documentary filmmakers have been challenging paradigms of representation, generating alternative strategies and reformulating new schemas for relating to the circumstantial (Wang 23). The renunciation of cultural myths and certain self-oriented folkloristic tendencies paved the way for the advent of a highly personal (*geren dianying* 个人电影), authentic (*xianshi* 现实), and contingent (*xianchang* 现场) cinema.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the matrix of novelty brought forth by the new independent documentary movement, it is essential to propose the concept of "visual mode" put forth by scholar Paola Voci. Voci has carefully analyzed the novelty matrix in this unprecedented relationship between creator and subject, distinguishing mainly between the "verbal mode" and the "visual mode". The verbal mode involves "redundant dialogues, monologues and voiceovers often combined with emphatic music, horror vacui, fixed camera, in which the plot and human protagonists are paramount" (Voci 67) and is prevalent in Chinese mass media. The main purpose is to persuade and convince the audience and assume that an underlying traditional ideology exists. In contrast, the visual mode includes "the use of silence, of spaces devoid of human figures, of visible and unconcealed camera movements, of regard caméra and almost absent editing work" (87). The use of such language shows the subject matter without attempting to verbalize it, transforming "both images and words into more complex messages" (68), thus, giving rise to a substratum of meanings to be untangled within the film work.

As far as independent Chinese documentaries are concerned, the encounter with the Other in the sphere of the contingent and the accidental is exactly what allows one to draw a line of distinction with mainstream state productions (Chiu and Zhang 82). Much has already been discussed academically about the characteristics and history of the documentary movement, what I would rather emphasize here is the link between "the image and the ethics that produced it" (82) or, to put in other words, the dynamics between the filmmaker and the movie's subjects. Judith Pernin describes the relationship between the author of the work and its protagonists as a set of mutual intentionality and complicity, as well as an interaction that leads to the creation of another space within the frame. The director and the subject exchange ideas and glances – the result of an affinity that transcends the screen – communicating to the viewer an "ambivalent intimacy" (Pernin 29). Such a relationship is rooted in an "instinctive, emotional, even spiritual, politicized, and concrete" connection between the protagonists in front of and behind the camera, whose common goal is the truth of the experience of economically, socially, and politically marginalized people. At the same time, another aspect to be considered within the movement is the

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"cruel nature" of documentary filmmaking, as defined by independent filmmaker Zhu Chuanming. The relationship between the filmmaker and the marginal subjects inevitably opens up a series of ethical issues. While the authors want to give voice to realities ignored by the mainstream apparatus, at the same time, the act of capturing the misery of the protagonists' condition on camera contravenes unwritten codes of documentary ethics, as well as creating an irremediable rupture between the privileged position of the authors and the subordinate position of the subjects being filmed.

As Edward and Svensson have previously pointed out, the modes of engagement pursued by Chinese independent filmmakers fall into three main aims. The first is to make visible people and identities that state representations conceal, elude, or gloss over, such as internal migrants, workers, members of ethnic minorities, queer communities, and disaster victims. Second, to witness events and situations that are equally hidden in state representation, like the plight of migrant workers, the forced demolition of homes in rural areas, and the impact of severe environmental degradation on local communities. Finally, to explore historical memories and experiences otherwise unrecognized or presented within a narrow range of interpretive parameters in state-sanctioned media (164). *Behemoth* itself falls into the categories just listed: Zhao Liang's documentary addresses the invisible issue of China's subalterns by witnessing their suffering and raising public awareness.

Zhao Liang is undoubtedly one of the most important figures in the domain of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking. In 1993, he left his hometown Shenyang to undertake university studies at the prestigious Beijing Film Academy. Living in Beijing since then, he works as an independent documentary filmmaker and multimedia artist in the field of photography and video art. His most famous works include *Petition* (2009), presented at the 62nd Cannes film festival, *Crime and Punishment* (2006), and *Together* (2010), selected by Berlin International Film Festival and Hong Kong International Film Festival. Banned in China, presented at the 72nd Venice Film Festival and winner of numerous international awards, *Behemoth* (2015) is perhaps his most successful and experimental work by far.

I will now proceed into a more in-depth analysis of the modalities through which the "crisis" trope emerges in *Behemoth* by dividing the research into three main sections: hell, purgatory, and heaven. This election is not accidental but echoes and follows Zhao Liang's own choice. The director has openly declared that he was inspired by Dante Alighieri's masterpiece for the production of *Behemoth*:

"In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante travels in his dreams through "Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso". In *Behemoth*, I borrow this idea and depict an enormous industry chain: coal mining – iron mining – iron manufacture – architectural reinforcing bar manufacture – the construction of a "ghost town" in Ordos. The colors red, grey, and blue represent respectively Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. Through the contemplative gaze of this film, I investigate the living conditions of industrial workers as well as the short-sighted urban development. It is my critique and meditation on modern civilization." (Zhao, Zhao Liang Studio)

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2. *Inferno: The Plight of Subaltern Workers*

Behemoth opens with an unsettling sequence. Following a series of explosions, a guttural voice belonging to the Mongolian chanting tradition takes over and terrifies the viewer with its archaic power. In particular, it is the Tuvan chant "Xöömej", an identity symbol of the Mongolian peoples, which consists of a composite harmony created through the hollows of the human throat. Immediately afterward, the director inserts a biblical quotation on a black background: "God created the beast Behemoth on the 5th day. He was the biggest monster on earth. A thousand mountains fed him". Often associated with the other famous biblical monster Leviathan, the Behemoth depicted in Job 40: 15-24 (10-19) is understood as a mythological creature possessing supernatural characteristics. The descriptions received from the Bible seem to suggest that it is a "super ox" of mythical proportions possessing supernatural characteristics. From numerous references to Behemoth in postbiblical Jewish and Christian literature, the earliest understanding of Behemoth was a sort of unruly mythic creature that only God could subdue (Van Der Toorn and Van Der Host 165-166). The monster that gives the documentary its title is not only a biblical character, but also relates to the infernal imagery of the first part of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante's Inferno is a concentric abyss that unfolds within the bowels of the earth, directly beneath the city of Jerusalem. Each circle of hell is designated for a specific punishment dictated by the law of "contrapasso", whereby the penalty is analogous or diametrically opposed to the committed transgression. The atmosphere evoked in the work is thus profoundly disturbing and devoid of hope, as the damned are condemned to suffer for eternity. In a similar vein, the sequence devised by the director succeeds brilliantly in creating an environment that immerses the viewer in an atmosphere of crisis and deep despondency.

The journey from the underworld to paradise is presented through an extradiegetic voice – the only one present in the hour-and-a-half-long documentary – which speaks through poetic lines adapted from Dante's verses:

"Midway on our life's journey, I seem to have had a dream. In the dream I was suddenly awoken by the sound of heavy explosions; I opened my eyes to a boundless smoky haze. The smoldering ground beneath my feet makes me feel like I am in some dark, desolate place. Only looking all around me do I discover I have arrived at the pit's edge of the inferno."

Whilst *The Divine Comedy*'s opening lines are "In the middle of the journey of our life \ I found myself astray in a dark wood \ where the straight road had been lost", here the protagonist's dream leads him to a desolate place covered in smoke, that we soon discover to be dust from the mines surrounding the Mongolian grasslands. The placid voice eventually introduces two key figures that punctuate the entire movie's visual pace, a naked body in a fetal position and the narrator's guide, a man with pneumoconiosis:

"There, I met a guide, burdened with a heavy portrait of the dead. Walking weary from his dusty journey, the mountain he comes from offers no path to paradise. He doesn't know how to write poetry, yet the eloquence his heart exhales is no less powerful than the Divine Comedy."

Regarding the presence of the nude human figure, we could put forward two hypotheses. Firstly, as the body recurs in numerous shots from beginning to end, it could represent the

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protagonist and the narrator, indeed the one who undertakes the arduous journey. Secondly, the body in the fetal position could be a depiction of archaic humanity – completely naked and therefore vulnerable – facing the sorrowful loss of mother earth. On the contrary, there is no room for doubt that the narrator's guide – similar to the poet Virgil who accompanies Dante on his journey – is a miner. The man neither speaks nor can write poetry, yet he is the only person capable of leading the traveler into the abyss of hell. From the very beginning of *Behemoth*, the hopelessness that seeps out of the work is very perceptible: the voice immediately makes us aware that the mountain where the guide comes from "offers no path to paradise". A visible element that distinguishes the silent guide is a mirror that he laboriously drags over his shoulder. The mirror is placed on his back and therefore reflects the grey landscape of the mountain, as if it were a constant reminder of the destruction wrought by mankind against nature. The act of gazing at one's reflection in the mirror – or what is believed to be the true image of oneself – has always been a recurring motif in Western literature, philosophy, and art, to begin with Ovid's Narcissus – who becomes obsessed by the allure of his own image reflected in the water – to finish with the concept of the mirror stage proposed by philosopher Lacan, wherein a child recognizes himself in the mirror for the very first time, thus beginning to develop the core of the "Self". In regard to the use of the recurring mirror motif in *Behemoth*, I believe its purpose lies less in a psychoanalytic interpretation and more in a direct and explicit denunciation aimed at the audience. Typically, when we look into a mirror, we see our own reflection. However, in this instance, the worker dragging the mirror doesn't see his own reflection but instead directs it squarely at the gaze of the viewers. Within the mirror, we witness the reflection of the devastated landscape, as if the object itself serves as a conduit for the spectator's awareness, leaving no room for retreat.

As already mentioned, the film is set in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, a Chinese province located in the far north of the country. The huge gray mine is thus in absolute contrast to the Mongolian nature not yet contaminated by industrialization, composed of green fields where flocks of sheep placidly graze the grass, right on the border of hell. Zhao Liang's accurate camera movements outline the ghostly features of the mine with increasing clarity. In *The Divine Comedy*, hell is divided into nine concentric and overlapping circles of crowns: the more serious the sin committed, the lower the position of the offender will be. In an extremely similar way, *Behemoth* first focuses on the trucks that descend in a single file into the mining site. The shot is visually reminiscent of the tortuous circles of Dante's imagined hell, as the narrative voice confirms: "Ridge after ridge descending with my guide, I see the monster's playthings carrying out invisible orders". After a merely exterior presentation of the mine, the descent into the earth's core begins through a long shot of the mineshift elevator. The camera follows a vertical trajectory from top to bottom, playing with the point of view of the miners themselves. The images before the viewer not only are distressing in their darkness and claustrophobia but are also deliberately enhanced by the slow pace of Zhao's camera, which carefully focuses on every detail of the workers' activity. Coal mining is not the only infernal location depicted in the documentary and a subsequent shot, completely red, introduces the iron mining workers. If the mine represented the depths and darkness of the infernal abyss, the iron manufacturing corresponds to the very flames of hell: distressing

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sounds of hammers, flames, and smoke set the rhythm for the men in the forges. Through numerous close-ups and regard caméra shots, the camera focuses on their silent faces, devastated by the scorching heat of the fire.



Figure 1. Coal and iron mining workers' close-ups in *Behemoth* (Zhao Liang, 2015).

In this regard, it is crucial to pay attention to the methods employed in the representation of the protagonists' crisis. Despite the documentary nature of *Behemoth*, however, the workers are exclusively allowed visual space without words (Sorace 41). Such a choice on the part of the director inevitably opens up several reflections. First of all, it is evidence that *Behemoth* stands for a work of hybrid experimentation between documentary and film essays that fits perfectly within the value framework of Chinese independent documentary filmmaking. While we have already discussed the main stylistic elements of the documentary form, it is helpful to briefly outline the peculiarities of the film essay. Laura Rascaroli, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of theorizing this category, identifies two key characteristics of the essay form: its reflectivity and subjectivity. In essence, the film essay has the ability to reflect upon itself and is highly personal, almost autobiographical in nature (25). Furthermore, Rascaroli emphasizes the importance of active spectator participation in the reflections put forth by the creators of the work:

"The "I" of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a "you"—and this is a key aspect of the deep structures of the form. "You" is called upon to participate and share the enunciator reflections. It is important to understand that this "you" is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator. The essay film constructs such spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, "closed" argument, the essay's rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual response, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about. This structure accounts for the "openness" of the essay film." (Rascaroli 35).

Moreover, the workers' piece to camera sequences or the numerous close-ups of their worn-out physiognomy fall within the characteristics of the "visual mode" identified by Voci: "the use of silence, of visible and unconcealed camera movements, of regard caméra [..]" (87). From Sorace's point of view, the choice to exclude interviews or biographical details of the workers means that "the silent bodies and gazes of the miners speak of their expendability. The decision not to give the miners a voice amplifies the singularity of each physical presence in the face of its precarity and serial interchangeability" (41). For Zoran, on the

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other hand, "Zhao takes on the task of telling the worker's story, humanizing it, speaking for the subaltern and turning the mirror toward humanity itself" (12). However, it is precisely the act of "speaking for the subaltern" that constitutes one of the most neuralgic points of the documentary ethic. While the filmmakers' goal is to emphasize the marginalized condition of workers, at the same time the authors must be aware that they do not belong to the subaltern status of their protagonists. For example, Chinese independent director Zhu Chuanming states that only operating the camera results in the establishment of inequality between director and subject:

"When you set the camera and point it at a person, an unequal relationship between looks and shots is invariably established. It cannot be avoided. If you try to avoid it, it only means that you cannot be true to yourself. They cannot point the camera at me, because our relationship, under the veneer of what I have called a seemingly equal conversation between friends, is an unequal directorial relationship, in which I am the one looking at their lives, not myself. I am hidden and they are exposed." (Qiong and Robinson 382).

Despite Zhao Liang's inevitable assumption of the workers' intimate experiences, I believe that this is a prime example of what Judith Pernin refers to as "ambivalent intimacy" (29). By entrusting themselves to the director and his artistic vision, the workers willingly position themselves in a state of vulnerability, allowing their circumstances to be conveyed to the viewer's gaze. As a consequence of that, the film serves as a representation of the larger societal issues at hand, offering insight into the struggles faced by the working class. Despite the utter absence of direct speech from the protagonists themselves, their visual presence and physical demeanor effectively conveys the sense of hopelessness and despair associated with their condition.

It is significant to draw another parallel with *the Divine Comedy*. In the eighth circle of hell, Dante and Virgil encounter Ulysses, who is guilty of defying human knowledge's limits. Ulysses, while alluding to the collective human condition, articulates a renowned evocative expression within Dante's masterpiece: "Consider your origins: you were not made to live as brutes but to follow virtue and knowledge" (Alighieri 110). This quotation conveys the implication of a higher purpose within the scope of human existence that surpasses the mere survival endeavor or the single-minded pursuit of hedonistic gratification. The use of the term "brutes", meaning "savages" or "animals", highlights the contrast between the potential of rationality and the primitive instinctual nature of mankind. Whilst Ulysses' words should be interpreted as a reminder to strive for something beyond immediate pleasure or survival, *Behemoth* seems to completely overturn his intention. Not only do the protagonists find themselves bereft of the capacity to engage in artistic expression and the pursuit of "knowledge", but they are also confined to a state of basic subsistence. During an interview, the director affirms the inclination of individuals to prioritize their survival instinct over rationality:

"This is the essential egoism of human nature that I mentioned earlier, and overcoming this egoism is what I meant by "awakening." Unfortunately, a human being will never become a true resister as long as he/she can get a little bit of food and warmth. Those in power know this very well and act accordingly, so things remain the way they are, and nothing changes. Therefore, I would say that it is our egoistic desires that are to blame for the situation we find ourselves in. But the current social system is also responsible—the stupid, sneaky strategy of the ruling class."(Guarneri and Jin)

In the hellish machine set up by the man himself for other men, the narrator's voice seems to confirm that no room for hope will be granted to the condemned: "Life's greatest sorrow is to live with desire yet without hope, there is no greater sadness than to recall in misery our times of joy". The quotation "there is no greater sadness than to recall in misery our times of joy" (Alighieri 21) originates from Canto Five of the first part of *the Divine Comedy's* infernal realm. This passage serves to underscore the human condition of desiring a better life, yet being unable to obtain it due to the cyclical oppressive nature of exploitation systems. Furthermore, the idea of recalling delight amidst anguish conveys a sense of loss intertwined with the disappearance of a state of a primitive instinctual nature — a condition of authenticity before the advent of an increasingly codified society.

3. Purgatory: The Environmental Crisis

After considering the first of the three parts of *Behemoth* from the perspective of the workers' experience, I chose to address the section on purgatory by proposing the trope of the relationship between man and landscape. Specifically, I aim to address the theme of crisis and (almost) irremediable rupture between mankind and nature through a brief comparison of some stills from *Behemoth* and their resemblance to Chinese landscape painting practice.

First of all, *Divine Comedy's* purgatory realm should be understood as the place where atonement, reflection, and repentance for sins committed take place, preparing the soul for final redemption. There are numerous visual-symbolic devices employed by Zhao in the purgatory section. The exit from the hellish sphere of mine darkness seems to be accomplished when the workers, having returned to the dilapidated shacks in which they live, wash their bodies of the dust residue encrusted during the night. The fundamental act of washing with water constitutes the only ritual of purification from dirt, as well as signifying the re-appropriation of one's body. The images immediately following the ablution sequence are significant: a child is playing naked in the dust of the Mongolian grasslands and the recurring nude figure, is now standing between the gray space of the mine and a field of green grass. Corey Byrnes has used the term "Chinese landscape of desolation" to point out all those artistic operations in response to the recent year's global environmental crisis. The adjective "desolation" is employed to describe both an abandoned place devoid of human beings, but especially to "emphasize the state of a place that has been rendered unfit for habitation. The landscape of desolation gives artistic form to a world that is becoming increasingly unfit for the habitation of many species" (126). Byrnes also believes that Chinese environmental degradation has inspired cinema and photography to reconsider their relationship with earlier forms of ancient cultures, such as Chinese landscape paintings (*shanshui* 山水). In particular, Chinese documentaries have consistently portrayed desolate landscapes through the use of "a consciously objective or transparent style to expose to viewers the hidden realities of environmental degradation" (127).

Chinese landscape paintings, literally "mountains and water", means the act of painting two of nature's most important elements: mountains and rivers. The mountain corresponds to the "Yang" element - vertical, masculine, stable, warm, and dry in the sun - while water is the

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"Yin element" - horizontal, feminine, fluid, moist, and cool (Trouveroy 6). The constant interaction between these two forces comes from Daoist precepts, "all of nature - humans included - is one organic whole, developing and changing in accord with its inner principle. The distinctions we make between different things belie nature's underlying unity. Painting visually represents this universal dynamism" (Turner 11). Within this framework, humans ideally represent the trait d'union between Heaven and Earth (Trouveroy 7), indeed shall live in mutual symbiosis (Zhang 111).

This brief introduction to the foundations of traditional Chinese thought and art will help give a sense of the substratum of meaning inherent within film creation. In addition to the workers, the documentary bestows an undisputed leading role in the landscape. The director's camera extensively explores the Mongolian panorama, capturing its vastness, its majestic mountains, and its verdant grasslands, all of which become essential visual elements within the semantic framework of *Behemoth*.

In the symbolism of traditional Chinese art, rocks possess qualities of persistence and solidity, while also embodying the original universe, in contrast to the characteristics of mutability found in trees, which represent human change such as birth, growth, and death (Zhang 127). Chinese painters used to represent mountains' bare eroded peaks to better reveal their life-line, while the deeply cut crevasses not only show "the essential bones, but they also show that the mountain exists in a state of flux and change, that the hard Yang mountain of stone is advanced upon by the Yin forces of water" (McMahon 70), whilst mist and clouds should be interpreted as the breath of these dynamics. In the left figure, I compared the famous vertical scroll painting by Guo Xi, Early Spring (1072), to one of the sequences from *Behemoth*. The two images share similarities in the presence of a mountain and its partial coverage, yet a significant difference distinguishes them. In the painting, the mountain is shrouded in a mist-like vapor rising from a stream nestled on the right side of the rock, while in the documentary still, the dust being raised is the result of a thunderous explosion consciously caused by the mine workers. Through the use of framing and its poetic visual composition, *Behemoth*'s landscape slowly becomes a silent witness to the Anthropocene's crisis and the irreparable rift between man and nature, underscoring the gap between the ideal of harmony and the actual impact of human actions on



Figure 2. Still from *Behemoth* and Guo Xi's *Early Spring*.

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the environment. More than once, the melancholic narrative voice expresses a lamentation for the transformation of a once vibrant and joyful environment into a desolate wasteland: "This is a place that has been destroyed, once upon a time it gushed with mountain springs and was lush with vegetation, now not a blade of grass survives. A land of deathly silence" or "Once we sang in the sunshine and blithe, sweet air but now I grieve upon the shattered earth".

Several other visual elements play with spirituality and the alternation of positive and negative in the complex relationship between man and nature. One man holds a green plant in his hand while observing the explosions in the mountains and the ruptured panorama surrounding him. A snake slithers among the rocks - recalling sin and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden - contrasting with the framing of a Mongol on horseback carrying a lamb in his arm, usually understood as a symbol of innocence.

The most representative passage which captures the sense of crisis in man's relationship with nature occurs when the guide leads the narrator to a devastated terrain where the head of a Buddha statue emerges. The voice justifies the presence of a similar sculpture: "My guide ushers me to this strange place. It is said the coalmine owner had a dream. In his dream, the mountain god blamed him for blowing up the mountain, and he constructed this Buddha statue to soothe his inward panic". It is interesting to observe how the oneiric device makes the sense of guilt towards the environment caused by human actions explicit. Furthermore, the construction of a Buddha statue is consistent with the concept of purgatory, as the redemptive act functions to reinstate a discernible measure of positive karma after the perpetuation of negative deeds. According to Pecic's argument, the intricate interplay between ecological devastation and the annihilation of its inhabitants allows Zhao to depict humans "as both victims and perpetrators of the destruction of their natural environment" (Pecic, p. 7).

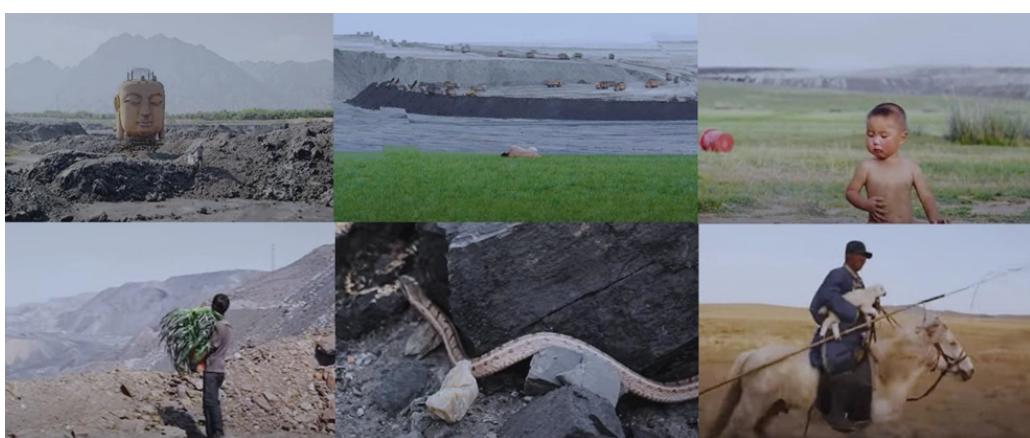


Figure 3. Examples of "image writing" (影响写作) in *Behemoth* (Zhao Liang, 2015).

Before delving into *Behemoth*'s final section, it is crucial to acknowledge how the images of the crisis observed thus far exemplify the creative process that Kiki Tianqi Yu defines as "Image writing" (影响写作). Similar to the concept of "caméra-stylo" developed by the French Nouvelle Vague's precursor Astruc, Chinese image writing constitutes a subjective and implicit socio-political commentary. Image writing is employed by filmmakers "when

verbal language is inadequate to this task and writing with images can be more expressive" (175). The scholar argues that Zhao Liang expresses his provocative vision of the world not via words, "but through impressionistic and ideographic cinematic imagery that seeks to express the unspeakable" (179), as demonstrated by the intricate construction of the mining inferno and the spiritually-infused sequences observed in the purgatory.

4. Paradise: *Ghost Cities*

After a series of sequences depicting the near-death workers in hospital rooms, scenes of sick migrants from Sichuan gathered in protest, and a panoramic view of hundreds of graves, the infernal journey finally comes to an end. A truck filled with steel travels along a desolate road, leading the viewer's gaze into a city of enormous buildings. As the typical Mongolian chant, "Xöömej" once again punctuates the distressing rhythm of the shots, the chromatic tones of Zhao Liang's paradise take on softer colors, such as blue and yellow. For the first time, the naked figure in a fetal position rises, turning its back to the camera while observing the row of brand-new buildings:

"Could it be that I'm still dreaming? Could it be that I'm already in paradise? This brand-new place is the destination of all my chaotic dreams. Like a mirage, after one has endured an ocean tempest. In paradise everything is clean. In paradise, work is relaxing, even a little boring. In paradise, no inhabitants are to be seen. This is what they call a ghost city."

Since the mid-1990s, Chinese movies are characterized by an increasingly growing concern for the future of memory, the loss of identity, and the need to preserve the images of the city. In the era of globalization, filmmakers are forced to renegotiate local, cultural, and national practices through "cinematic re-mapping" (Zhang 78). In the rapid transformation of the Chinese urban landscape, two opposing forces are at play: "construction and demolition". In Chinese independent documentary filmmaking, the decaying city has shaped a kind of "unsettling aesthetics of ruins", through which cinema and documentary are called upon as visual witnesses to the urban decay and its consequential repercussions. In the case of Behemoth, we are confronted with the phenomenon of the construction of so-called "ghost cities" (*gui chengshi* 鬼城市), which are vast and modern semi-abandoned cities resulting from the economic bubble (2005-2011) in the Chinese residential and commercial real estate sector.

In particular, the city portrayed in the documentary is located in the municipality of Ordos, situated in the Gobi Desert in Inner Mongolia. In 2004, the Ordos government invested in the construction of a new administrative capital, Kangbashi. Nevertheless, the new capital has failed to attract residents, becoming an almost abandoned city (Sorace 41). Only in very recent years, following the relocation of prestigious schools to Kangbashi, the city, and its real estate have been repopulated by families of Students (Kawate). According to the same source, in China, the construction of condominiums is carried out to increase steel and cement production, which is considered to be a departure from the normal concept of economic "supply and demand".

It is precisely on this anomaly of the system that Zhao Liang's reflection finds its focal point, allowing for a dual interpretation of *Behemoth*: from the chronological process of "coal

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mining – iron mining – iron manufacturing – architectural reinforcing bar manufacturing – the construction of a 'ghost town' in Ordos" to the sequentially opposite perspective, which is the construction of Ordos as the reason that justifies the entire process chain. The empty dream of the city is thus founded on the sacrifice of the bodies and labor of thousands of workers, as confirmed by the narrator: "Through the dusty haze, the raging flames, the graves, and through the shattered homeland, all the sacrifices transmuted into steel, which is carried off to build the paradise of our desires". Similarly, the social critique carried out by Zhao Liang is ambivalent: the workers are indeed the victims of an oppressive system driven by greed, but at the same time, they are complicit in their oppression. During an interview, the director stated that the class consciousness of Chinese workers and peasants has not yet fully matured, saying that "The awakening takes time, so it might be a while before they can get into Heaven. Otherwise, they can only be buried in the hell they are helping to construct."

If paradise is empty and based solely on sacrifice, does it mean that everyone else is in hell? The final sequences constitute the ultimate climax of the contemporary crisis experienced by humanity, making cinema the perfect medium to portray it. The guide traverses the deserted streets of Ordos, dragging the mirror on their back. In its reflection, an individual carrying a plant appears. Shortly after, the person is gone, and in the mirror's reflection, only the towering buildings are to be seen. Finally, the narrator responds to an underlying question in the film that has not yet been explicitly addressed: "This is no dream; this is who we are. We are the monster, the monster minions". If *Behemoth* had played with the fragile antithetical relationship between dream and reality, positive and negative until this point, the concluding sentence unequivocally asserts that man himself is the fundamental cause of his crisis.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this research aimed to explore the theme of crisis through the lens of an independent Chinese documentary, which can be categorized as "slow cinema" or a "movie essay". After providing an introduction to the fundamental characteristics of the independent documentary movement, which enhance our understanding of the themes presented in *Behemoth*, the study delved into the conditions of the workers and their relationship with the environment. In the case of the workers, particular emphasis was placed on the visual portrayal of their painful subjugation, accentuated by the absence of dialogue and their silent gaze directed toward the camera, akin to a wordless plea. Concerning the ecocritical aspect of *Behemoth*, I opted to contrast the environmental destruction with man's symbiotic relationship with nature often depicted in Chinese landscape painting. The third and final major theme, the phenomenon of ghost cities, serves as a poignant embodiment of the crisis explored in the documentary, where man is both a victim and an architect of his downfall. In light of the findings, we can assert to some degree that both cinematic expression and the independent documentary format serve as optimal artistic mediums for conveying the prevailing sense of disillusionment embodied in contemporary society.

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**AN
ANALYTICAL
STUDY OF
THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON CINEMA
IN PRE,
DURING AND
POST
PANDEMIC
PERIODS**

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CINEMA IN CRISIS 2022-2023

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"Cinema is the transfer of social, economic and cultural issues by dropping moving images on a screen or curtain. Cinema is an invention that has its roots in ancient arts. It is the recording of motion pictures. Although cinema does not have a deep-rooted history like literature, painting or other fine arts, it developed its expression possibilities shortly after its emergence." says IGI Global- PUBLISHER of TIMELY KNOWLEDGE. Collins defines Cinema as, "A cinema is a place where people go to watch films for entertainment."

'Lockdown' and 'Quarantine'- the words that ruled our vocabulary in 2020, not only locked up the entire world, but also paralyzed a majority of the sectors which included the cinema industry and its businesses across the globe for months together. Production & technical crew members were laid-off and cinema houses were completely shut down due to the pandemic. The films which were on the verge of release were put on a halt and for a long time theatres remained empty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a bitter blow to the already fragile entertainment industry. While theater owners, employees, actors and back screen staff were desperate to be reunited with their audiences, reopening cinema halls was not high on the Government's agenda. Closed since March (2020) according to the Ministry of Home Affairs guidelines, cinemas were allowed to re-open in the last phase of the Unlock 1. This period of suspension had a direct impact on the survival of theaters- both single screen and multiplexes.

The following study mainly focuses on the analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on cinema in the pre, during & post pandemic periods, which led to a drastic change in the concept of cinema and a shift in the viewership from traditional to OTT. The convergence of media coupled with the popularizing of both International and National Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms and Online streaming services like Disney + Hot Star, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Eros now, Hoichoi, MX Player, Jio Cinema, Zee5 Voot, Sun Next, etc played a vital role. The traditional concept of viewing cinema on the big screen soon seems to be going extinct. The SOP issued by the Government of Karnataka during the Pandemic and the affordable subscription charges of the OTT and Online streaming services with entertainment in the form of 'binge-worthy' series, celebrity memoir, true crime documentaries, cross-lingual and cross-cultural cinema, etc. which provides ample personal space/time and wide variety of choices to its individual viewers has led to this evident shift irrespective of age and gender.

There were tons of restrictions because of the Pandemic in 2020 and 2021 resulting in people slowly shifting to OTT platforms for entertainment along with the concept of Work-From-Home. Not many people gave up the comfort of OTT and went to theaters, when they finally reopened their doors, audiences could finally enjoy movies on big screens again. A relatively new industry for the Indian market, OTT (Over-The-Top) entertainment, but the rate at which it has grown and expanded is tremendous. Netflix, which was one of the first major streaming services to have set foot in India, has gained more than 4.5 million paid subscribers in the past 2 years because of COVID. While Netflix has a large number of subscribers, it's still lagging behind Disney+Hotstar which apparently holds more than 400-

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500 million active users, and Amazon Prime which has around 5 million paid subscribers in India. These are huge numbers and it only comments on the fact that OTT is the future for entertainment.

COVID has affected many big industries around the world but if there's one industry that has benefitted from the pandemic, it is the OTT industry. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to acknowledge that the pandemic had geared up the OTT business and fuelled it to increase its users. Reports suggest that during the past two-three years, OTT subscription has gone up by almost 80%. That's a huge growth percentage by any standard. This was mostly made possible because of the lockdown that was implemented by governments across the globe. People, stuck inside their houses with nothing to do, headed to streaming platforms to kill boredom and to enjoy their free time, which became a primary source of entertainment.

On the flipside, the pandemic grew the hunger and urge of movie fanatics to watch films in cinema halls. And as theaters opened, fans rushed to see their favorite stars. About 8 million movie lovers chose to step out for live entertainment. No matter if it was a weekday or weekend nothing could stop audiences to stay away from cinema halls. About 40% of cinema-goers booked tickets for evening shows on weekdays this year. In fact, 600,000 people went to live events alone.

Closure of a few theaters came as a rude shock to other theater owners, cinema-goers and distributors. In fact, cinemas in Mysuru have laid off their part-time employees and have even asked full-time employees to go on leave without pay, since March. While those who are still working, took steep pay cuts to keep their jobs.

The Single screen theaters in Mysuru like Rajkamal in Shivarampet, Gayathri on Chamaraja Double Road, Sterling and Skyline at Visvesvaraya Industrial Suburb Sangam on Chandragupta Road, had announced temporary suspension of screening during the pandemic. "The pandemic was like the final nail in the coffin for most single-screen theater owners", opined a few owners of single theaters in Mysuru. Iconic theaters that have catered to the cinema craze of Mysureans for many decades and other single-screen theaters are bearing the brunt of the pandemic and the lockdown as there is no revenue for over three months. Day-to-day maintenance too has become an arduous task for them.

Karnataka Film Exhibitors Federation Vice-President M.R. Rajaram said in an interview to the Media persons that "cinema theater is the only business that has to obtain operation permission and fitness certificate from Fire, PWD, Health, Electricity Departments and a final No Objection Certificate from the Deputy Commissioner."

"Taxes are rather heavy in Mysuru when compared to Bengaluru. Every year, theater owners pay Rs. 30,000 as trade license fee to the Mysuru City Corporation (MCC) and Rs. 3 lakh to Rs. 10 lakh goes as property tax depending on the size of the building and extent. Also there are other taxes and fees like the license fee of departments. Each theater in Mysuru pays anywhere between Rs. 1 crore and Rs. 1.5 crore as taxes to the Government. Also, we need

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to look after theater maintenance and staff salary. How are we supposed to function?" asked Rajaram.

Earlier in the city limits there were 21 theaters and now only 13 are functional with the rest selling off properties or diversifying their business models. Today, there are 13 single-screen theaters in Mysuru city and three multiplexes housed in shopping malls. In the district, there are 36 theaters.

As per the newspaper's report, C.R. Hanumanth, Proprietor of DRC Cinemas said that the movie theater experience — complete with surround sound, visual effects, snacks and refreshments — has thrived over years but now things have changed. The cinema industry is in doldrums and theaters and multiplexes are worst affected as they were not permitted to open.

"In a situation where we are not allowed to operate, cleaning and maintenance work including the complicated screen maintenance has to go on and staff salary has to be paid. How are we supposed to survive? The Government must have allowed us to operate with guidelines or rules. Even if we are allowed to screen cinemas, there was a fear that people might not come to watch movies. Going by the footfall at malls, cinemas' footfall is going to be even lower. But somewhere we have to start as a confidence-building measure," he added.

According to a report published in a newspaper, Mr. N.M. Padaki, who owns Shanthala Theatre, said that the cinema hall was started in 1974 after taking land on lease from an Orphanage Trust. "When the initial 30-year lease expired, we appealed to the Trust to renew the lease. Now the Trust has not permitted us to again renew the lease. So we have no other option," he revealed.

Talking to the media persons, Kannada film actor Dr. Shivarajkumar said that cinema theaters were forced to shut down as new cinemas were not being released due to the 50:50 occupancy rule in theaters. Dr. Shivarajkumar said that though most of the cinemas were nearing completion, producers and distributors were not taking the risk of releasing cinemas due to the 50:50 rule.

Pointing out that though the Government has relaxed the rule for many sectors, the continuance of the 50:50 rule in respect of cinema theaters is severely affecting the film industry, he said that the Government must do away this rule for theaters as well keeping in mind thousands of families who are dependent on cinema theaters.

Contending that many theaters across the State have shut down fearing losses on account of non-release of new films, Shivarajkumar asserted that the closure of cinema halls has rendered thousands of families jobless and without income.

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This paper attempted to elaborate the impact of online streaming services over the market of mainstream cinema houses and multiplexes with a special reference towards pre, during & post pandemic conditions with special reference to Mysuru city.

In this article, we tried to explore the phenomenon of the OTT (Over-The-Top) industry in India, which has witnessed an incredible growth in recent years. OTT refers to the streaming of video content over the internet, bypassing traditional cinema theaters. With the advent of high-speed internet and affordable data plans, the OTT industry in India has witnessed unprecedented growth in terms of both viewership and content creation.

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JANNAT
JOHAL

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA:

INTERROGATING IMPERIALISM, CRISIS AND DISLOCATION



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Released in 1962, *Lawrence of Arabia* is a timeless epic directed by David Lean. The film follows the remarkable journey of T.E. Lawrence, a British officer, and his involvement in the Arab Revolt during World War I. Beyond its stunning cinematography and impressive scale, *Lawrence of Arabia* delves deep into the complex psyches of its characters and the theme of imperialism. T.E. Lawrence, portrayed by Peter O'Toole, is assigned to the British Army's General and sent soon after to Arabia to assess the situation between the Arab tribes and the Ottoman Empire. Initially, Lawrence struggles to connect with the Arab people, viewing them through a lens of cultural and racial superiority. However, as the story unfolds, Lawrence transforms, developing a deep admiration for the Arab culture and a sense of identity as an Arab himself.

As Lawrence spends more time with the Bedouin tribes, he becomes determined to unite them and lead a revolt against the Ottomans. Despite facing numerous challenges and betrayals, Lawrence successfully orchestrates guerrilla attacks, leading to significant victories for the Arab forces. However, as the war progresses, Lawrence's idealism clashes with the political interests of the British and French governments. Eventually, Lawrence's dreams of Arab independence are shattered, leaving him disillusioned and haunted by the atrocities of war.

One of the initial scenes in the story, otherwise told as a flashback, depicts Lawrence in the basement of the British headquarters in Cairo, where his role involves creating maps of Middle Eastern locations. This particular scene establishes Lawrence as an idealist at his core, an intellectual existing in the realm of ideas. Significantly, his belief in the power of the mind over the physical world is exemplified when he extinguishes a match with his bare fingers. Lawrence embodies a mindset where the supremacy of the mind allows him to triumph over his body, refusing to be controlled or manipulated by pain or physical limitations. However, as soon as he is surrounded by the desert, it becomes evident that the new atmosphere operates on laws and principles that Lawrence is unprepared to fully comprehend and navigate.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism has been a critical framework for studying Western representations and perceptions of the East. It examines how the West has constructed and essentialized the Orient, creating a binary distinction between the "self" and the "other." Said argues that Orientalism involves the creation of an exotic, but homogenised portrayal of the East, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing Western superiority. *Lawrence of Arabia* exemplifies this through its portrayal of the Arab characters and their cultural milieu. The film touches upon the traditional narrative that depicts Arabs as mysterious, irrational, and exotic figures, often emphasising their backwardness and tribal mindset. The Western gaze objectifies and exoticizes the Orient, positioning the Western protagonist, T.E. Lawrence, as a mediator between two worlds. This perspective perpetuates the notion that the East needs a Western "saviour" or "hero" to bring order and progress. The film's narrative centres on Lawrence's journey and his role in uniting the disparate Arab tribes, thereby reinforcing Western superiority.

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While *Lawrence of Arabia* may be seen as a product of Orientalist discourse, it also contains elements that challenge and subvert these stereotypes. The character of Sherif Ali defies some Orientalist conventions by showcasing intelligence, dignity, and complexity. Additionally, the film offers glimpses of resistance and agency among Arab characters, challenging the narrative of Western dominance. Ali represents the Arab resistance against imperial forces and embodies the struggle for independence. From a psychological perspective, Ali's character showcases the impact of cultural identity on an individual's behaviour and loyalties. He serves as a foil to Lawrence, highlighting the contrast between Lawrence's British upbringing and Ali's unwavering loyalty to his people.

The enigmatic figure who fatally shoots Lawrence's companion and guide, Tafas, for drinking from his well without his permission is as aforementioned, the majestic Sherif Ali. Ali takes possession of the deceased Bedouin's pistol and symbolically assumes the role of the guide, offering his assistance to lead Lawrence in the right direction. However, Lawrence rejects Ali's guidance. This interaction provides insights into Lawrence's character. Firstly, he harbours a strong aversion to killing, particularly when it is purposeless and without reason. Later in the film, it is mentioned that he has a profound "horror of bloodshed." Lawrence holds death in disdain and regards it with contempt.

Lawrence exhibits a profound belief in his ability to manipulate chance and shape his destiny. This conviction becomes even more pronounced as he assumes the role of a Messiah. A striking demonstration of his determination occurs later in the film when Lawrence, accompanied by Ali, leads a group of Arabs across the formidable Nefud desert, a merciless expanse of inhospitable terrain. Against all odds, they miraculously succeed in reaching the other side of this seemingly impassable desert. However, there is yet another complication that awaits them. It is revealed that during the night, one of the men had unknowingly fallen asleep and slipped off his camel. Despite Ali's protests, Lawrence insists on embarking on a perilous mission to save the fallen comrade.

Despite successfully saving a fallen man and accomplishing what seemed impossible, T.E. Lawrence's journey in the desert proves to be more challenging than anticipated. T.E. Lawrence wrote in his autobiography¹ that "All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake up in the day to find it was vanity, but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible." The difficulties become apparent during a conflict between two Bedouin tribes on the eve of the attack on the port of Aqaba. Lawrence, to resolve the dispute, agrees to act as a mediator and carry out the execution of the murderer, who happens, by a mysterious twist of chance, to be the same man he risked his life to save earlier. Adhering to his word, Lawrence shoots Gasim down, but the act leaves him unsettled, as he realises he derives some strange enjoyment from it. This pivotal moment throws Lawrence into a crisis of identity. The desert adventure has caused him to question his entire sense of self. Eventually, he returns to his former colleagues at the British

¹ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Doubleday, 1926.

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headquarters in Cairo, but in a completely altered state. Clad in a different attire, he goes unrecognised, emphasising the transformation he has undergone.

According to Irving Howe's essay "T.E. Lawrence: The Problem of Heroism," Lawrence never intended to convince the Arabs that he had fully assimilated into their culture. Such an attempt would have been both absurd and detrimental to his leadership style. Instead, he employed a more nuanced approach, impressing the Arabs by demonstrating a remarkable resemblance to them in terms of stoicism, outward demeanour, and daily practices. However, he also consciously utilised this longing to enhance his public persona.² When Robert Graves commented on the existence of two selves within Lawrence—a Bedouin self yearning for the simplicity and ruggedness of the desert, and an overly civilised European self—Lawrence responded by acknowledging the destructive nature of these two identities. He found himself caught between them, sinking into a state of nihilism where he could not even find a false god in which to believe. The desert becomes a liminal space where Lawrence undergoes a profound transformation. He exists in an in-between space, not fully belonging to either the British Army or the Arab tribes. He illustrates the dynamic nature of cultural hybridity³ and challenges the notion of fixed, pure identities.

The latter half of the film revolves around the idea of two Lawrences: the physical Lawrence and the myth of Lawrence, represented by Jackson Bentley, an American journalist. Bentley's presence fuels Lawrence's belief in his invincibility and immortal image. However, Lawrence's proposed mission to enter the heavily guarded city of Daraa with a small Arab force demonstrates his detachment from reality. This inversion of roles emphasises the triumph of the desert over Lawrence's mind and highlights the psychological ambitions of the film.

Lawrence of Arabia War: The Arabs, the British, and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI by Neil Faulkner also explores the motivations and conflicting interests of the major players involved. Faulkner sheds light on the strategic importance of the Middle East and the competition between the British and French for control over the region. It explains the Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret treaty signed in 1916 between Britain and France, with the assent of Russia, during World War I. The agreement aimed to divide the territories of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East among the European powers in the event of an Allied victory. It established a plan for the partitioning of the region into different zones of influence, disregarding the aspirations of Arab nationalists for self-determination.

Steven Spielberg,⁴ who was involved in the restoration of the film, observed that the T.E. Lawrence story was relatively unfamiliar in the USA. As a result, fewer critics were overly concerned with historical and personal inaccuracies and inclined to attack David Lean and

2 Howe, Irving. "T. E. Lawrence: The Problem of Heroism." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1962, pp. 333-64.

3 Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. The work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis of coloniser/colonised relations stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. <https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity/>

4 For more information, refer to Steven Spielberg on "Lawrence of Arabia." [YouTube](#). American Film Institute, 27 February 2017.

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the film from a politically correct standpoint. However, certain films allow for the artistic interpretive licence, particularly when portraying larger-than-life characters. A straightforward chronology of T.E. Lawrence's actual life may not have captured the same romantically poetic essence as the film achieved through its artistic interpretation. Sometimes Lawrence disregarded historical truth for what he regarded as more important issues. These more important issues were political and artistic. On the one hand, the Arab cause was advanced in the face of Turkish, French, and British imperialism; on the other, an epic grandeur was attained, largely through extremely imaginatively rich and powerful descriptive language. With a vividness and intensity that none of the biographies can match, this descriptive portion of the literature brilliantly recreates the life Lawrence led during his two years among the Arabs. There are also countless instances of self-revealing commentary, confession, and reflection where Lawrence bares his soul, sometimes with the full aim more than others.

War films often grapple with the challenge of representation, as filmmakers face the dilemma of how to depict war while navigating political and societal expectations. During times of conflict,⁵ governments have used war films as a tool for propaganda, reinforcing a positive image of the nation or its military. However, this utilisation raises questions about the authenticity and objectivity of cinema. *The Green Berets*, directed by John Wayne, deviated from accurate war depictions by emphasizing anti-communist narrative instead of realism. The film not only suffers from misplaced intentions but also presents a biased and harmful view of the Vietnam War, depicting American soldiers as purely good and the Viet-Cong as entirely evil, oversimplifying a complex conflict. A similar fate has been suffered by Michael Cimino's 1978 film, *The Deer Hunter*. 'Whereas the social realist style of the Clairton sequences rely on a thickness of naturalistic detail, the Vietnam scenes draw on the thickness of corporeal experience and perception- specifically blood' (Chong.) For Peter Lehman, the critics who took issue with Cimino's unrealistic depiction of Vietnam appeared to be content with the authentic portrayal of the Pennsylvania steel town.

One may also question as to why David Lean, though displaying his penchant for thoroughness through the medium of a realist epic, did not take into account the extensive knowledge of the Arabic language that the real-life Lawrence possessed- a language, which in his opinion, was a meeting point for otherwise contesting Arabs. While Lean has commented that the script is essentially screenwriter Robert Bolt's conception of Lawrence, this oversight is significant when one tries to understand how "English" is considered indispensable by imperialists in the quest to be human and universally relevant. 'Narrative style and historical reality were in conflict in Lawrence of Arabia precisely because Lawrence as a vision, embodying the "best" of the British soldier of the past, was a patent lie as to what or whom such "soldiers" really served.' (Bohne)

The film employs outdated techniques, particularly the use of brownface to depict Prince Feisal, played by English actor Alec Guinness. While it is positive to see people of colour in

5 Chapman, James. *War and Film*. Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008.

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supporting roles as Arab nationalists, such as Mexican-American Anthony Quinn and Indian actor I. S. Johar, their casting reflects an unfortunate media tendency that treats all individuals with brown skin as interchangeable. The portrayal of Sherif Ali, a significant and complex Arab character, is done by Egyptian actor Omar Sharif, who engages in confrontations with Lawrence throughout the movie. In contrast, the Ottoman Turks are consistently depicted as aggressive adversaries, with a British Army officer casually labelling them as "bloody savages" without any objections.

While the movie does not explicitly address Lawrence's sexuality, there is speculation that he may have been queer, as indicated in a letter to novelist E. M. Forster, where he described himself as "funnily made up, sexually." The closest the film gets to a real incident is an inferred sexual assault by Ottoman Turk troops. The implications of the Turk grabbing his skin are unsettling and serve as a potent device. While it carries a sexual connotation, it also serves as a reminder to both the audience and Lawrence himself that he is a physical being made of flesh and blood. This scene suggests that the power of the mind is unable to triumph over physical realities. It is an incident which Lawrence has gone into more detail in his autobiography.⁶

The examination of T.E. Lawrence's personality delves into his rise and fall, delving into how he becomes captivated by the attraction of warfare, resulting in the erosion of his sense of self and submission to the savage customs of the desert. Martin Scorsese draws a parallel between Lawrence's character and Trevor Howard's self-destructive character in the film version of Joseph Conrad's *Outcasts of the Island* (1952) by Carol Reed: "The main character is not a saint, is not a man struggling to come to terms with God in his soul or heart. It is a character who is filled with unmoor and self-loathing. He is constantly pushing and testing himself. The film is always open to be viewed again and again, structureless in a way."⁷ As the story unfolds, Lawrence undergoes a profound transformation, embodying characteristics of both a hero, a monster, and a victim. The film portrays a tragic tale that goes beyond the defeat of the vanquished, focusing instead on the tragic aspects of triumph and victory.

⁶ Lawrence writes, "to keep my mind in control I numbered the blows, but after twenty lost count and could feel only the shapeless weight of pain, not tearing claws for which i was prepared but a gradual cracking apart of all my being by some too great force whose waves rolled up my spine till they were penned within my brain and there clashed terribly together, at last, when i was completely broken they seemed satisfied."

⁷ Martin Scorsese on "Lawrence of Arabia." [YouTube](#). American Film Institute, 21 December 2011.

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- *Outcasts of the Islands*. Dir. Carol Reed. 1952. Film.

The background of the image is a dark, somber scene of a city in ruins. The foreground is filled with piles of twisted metal and concrete debris. In the middle ground, a few skeletal remains of vehicles are visible, one being a dark SUV. The buildings lining the street are severely damaged, with missing windows, broken facades, and exposed structural elements. The sky is overcast and hazy, contributing to the overall atmosphere of despair and destruction.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Jannat Johal is an undergraduate student at Miranda House, pursuing a dual degree in History and English Literature. She has a keen interest in promoting Indian cultural arts and is an active member of the college's SPIC MACAY society. She is also a part of the college's film society, Celluloid. She has served her tenure as a blog head and as a member of the filmmaking team, exploring the nuances of cinema and its impact on society. Outside of her academic and extracurricular activities, she engages in reading psychological theories and experiments, which has influenced her understanding of human behaviour and its representation in art. Her literary interests include historical fiction and poetry, and she often delves into the intricate details of the past and the emotions that surround it. With a passion for both literature and the arts, Jannat seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the world of creative expression.

Diyasha Chowdhury is a student of literature at Miranda House, University of Delhi. She is constantly discovering and exploring works of literature and trying to use her love for words to make a difference. She is an enthusiastic part of the theatre society, and literary society and works for the gender sensitization cell. Her areas of interest are film studies, speculative fiction, postcolonial literature, popular culture, psychoanalysis, gender and queer theory. When it comes to film studies, she is an enthusiast in script writing as well as acting having previously been part of a short film festival where her script "Furaha" won the first prize. She aims to one day be able to work with literature and films in academia.

Udisha is a student of literature at Miranda House, University of Delhi. An ardent lover of literature, she is equally passionate about music, films, football and food. While pursuing her many hobbies, she is also a part of the college Theatre Society, Literary Society, Women's Development Cell and Film Club. She also holds various positions of responsibility in the Women's Development Cell and the Literary Society. Her interest in films ranges from Bengali Films to mainstream Hollywood films and her go-to genre is Romantic Comedy. In the future, she hopes to work on Gender Studies, Film Studies and Popular Culture.

Ritam Talukdar, a postgraduate student at NIT, Rourkela, pursuing an MA in Development Studies. He is a movie buff and tries to watch the big screen with a sociological lens.

Khushi Kumari Shukla is a postgraduate student pursuing a Master's in Political Science from Pondicherry University, Puducherry. As a feminist, she seeks to understand the interplay of gender and sexuality in everyday scenarios.

I am **Udhriti Sarkar** (they/them). I am currently pursuing an MA in Gender Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

CHALCHITRA DARPAN

Mrs Shilpa S, Asst Prof. and presently Heading the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Christ College, Mysuru, affiliated with the University of Mysore has more than 12 years of teaching experience. Practical experience in publishing "Shanthavani", Evening Daily, an accredited newspaper by the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI) as an Owner/Publisher and a Sub-Editor for almost a decade is additional. Also worked as a freelancer and hosted & participated in Interview sessions on a private news channel in Mysuru city.

Raghu Pratap is a writer-filmmaker and an undergraduate student of law at the Gujarat National Law University. His interests lie in memory, death, trauma and transgression. Working both in visual and written media, he articulates these concerns through various formal experiments. He has twice curated NE Shorts: Screening of Short Films from the North East, as well as various other film programmes. He is a contributor to a forthcoming anthology on North East India to be published by Mariwala Health Initiative (MHI). He has also worked and collaborated with NEthing Northeast, and the feminist publishing house, Zubaan Books. Raghu also writes extensively on politics, music, cinema and literature. His writings have appeared in The Assam Tribune, Riot Collective, Catharsis Magazine, and Asian Movie Pulse, among others. His film, 'A Night of Soap Water' was longlisted for Toto Funds the Arts 2023.

Siria Falleroni just graduated with honours in Chinese culture and language at Ca' Foscari University of Venice with a master's thesis on Beijing's independent documentaries. Her main research interests include China's independent documentary movement, slow cinema, poetry, and anthropology. She has been part of several juries at film festivals, which are her greatest passion along with Asian cinema.

Godwin Emmanuel is an Assistant Professor at the National School of Journalism and Public Discourse. He is an accomplished independent filmmaker, skilled video editor, and aspiring writer. He holds a bachelor's degree in Visual Communication and a postgraduate degree in Mass Communication and Journalism. With his experience as a senior video editor for Oracle and numerous successful freelance projects, he has honed his craft in the industry. Emmanuel has already released one short film and is actively working on more. He is a talented writer and may consider creating scripts for his films or collaborating with other writers to develop new projects. As an independent filmmaker, Emmanuel knows the value of networking and connecting with other professionals in the industry. He attends film festivals and industry events to showcase his work, build relationships, and identify new opportunities. With his impressive skills and dedication to his craft, Emmanuel is a rising star in the world of independent filmmaking.

CHALCHITRA DARPAN

CHALCHITRA DARPAN TEAM 2022-2023

Akshika Goel (*Editor-in-Chief*) majored in literature (22-23) from Miranda House. Proficient in the analysis of visual culture, she is invested in the theory and practice of films, photography, and art. She herself is an aspiring academician. She is currently pursuing her Master's by Research from IIT Bombay. Empathetic and curious, she brings home with her the characters she sees and reads. Great cinema, she thinks, is not the one which has the best shots or a grand narrative, but it is what submerges you enough that you drown in its world and come back alive from it with a piece of yourself, like a pearl from the depths of a bottomless ocean. A learner in earnest, she tries to dabble in multifarious fields of knowledge including economics, philosophy, cultural studies, and art history.

Anushka Joshi (*Editor-in-Chief*) pursued her undergraduate degree in English literature (Batch of 2023) from Miranda House, Delhi University. Fascinated by stories in all their iterations- be it photos, films, books, or visual arts, Anushka is interested in studying the intersection of society and its creative churning, and how the two form each other in turn. She is a master's student of heritage conservation and management at SHRM, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi.

Presently pursing her masters in Comparative Literature from University of Edinburgh, **Adrijaa** (*Editor*) is writer, dancer and theater practitioner from Kolkata, India. She has been an editor of anthologies and works as a freelance translator. On the days she isn't working on her research she can be found appraising teas.

Alekhya Singh (*Editor*) is an undergraduate student of literature at Miranda House, University of Delhi. Singh has an ardent interest in art history, poetry and astoundingly tragic cinema. Her key expertise lies in researching and editing. Although doleful, her writing is an attempt to grapple with the world around her. Singh is currently serving as the Vice President of BlueQuill, The Creative Writing Club of Miranda House.

Karizma Ahmed (*Editor*) is an undergraduate student of literature at Miranda House, University of Delhi. Ahmed has a profound appreciation for literary arts, moral and epistemological philosophy, and geopolitics. Her academic pursuits reflect an innate curiosity in the field of gender and conflict studies. Her key interests and expertise lies in research, writing and editing. Passionate for the written word, one can also often find her furiously scribbling down verses as a means of personal expression. Ahmed is currently serving as the Editor-in-Chief at M.Etch, Miranda House Newsletter and the Creative Director at BlueQuill, Creative Writing Club, Miranda House.

Isha (*Editor*) is an English literature graduate from Miranda House with a knack for creative and academic writing. Currently working as a Copywriter, she finds refuge in films and poetry.

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Shagun Das (*Editor*) is a Political Science and Sociology graduate from Miranda House. A recent graduate, Shagun has extensive experience as an academic editor, having previously served as a member of the editorial board for the sociological research journal, Vibgyor.

Prone to frequent self reflection, **Shirley** (*Journal Design*) seeks refuge from all that is mundane in the realm of art, with design at its forefront. Experimenting with various creative mediums serves as her anchor, allowing her to decipher the complexities of existence and maneuver through the intricacies of human connections. Inspired by René Descartes' profound declaration, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), Shirley has come to embrace a personal mantra: "I art, therefore I am." In the act of creation, she discovers not just an escape but a profound affirmation of her being.

Anjali (*Journal Design*) is a recent graduate from the English Department of Miranda House. Aside from literature, she loves design in all its forms. Her designs usually include solid shapes and collages along with a myriad of colors.

Asra Malik (*Journal Design*) has recently graduated from Miranda House, University of Delhi. In the dwindling process of her yearning to figure out her passion, she came across movies and films and couldn't get past the satisfaction they presented, which explains her interest in being a part of Chalchitra Darpan's team. With her impromptu ideas and constant spontaneity, she comes up with doable-fun stuff to do, and you'll have the best time. She's a calm person who doesn't get worked up much and likes to dive into things by questioning and resolving her choices in transit. Her areas of interests include political science, international relations and policy research.

Amrit (*Illustrator*) is a student of sociology and an interdisciplinary artist based in Delhi. She's interested in navigating spaces between multimedia storytelling, documentary filmmaking and visual communication. With a keen eye for art and culture, her craft embodies a unique blend of creativity, compassion and scholarly inquiry.

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