

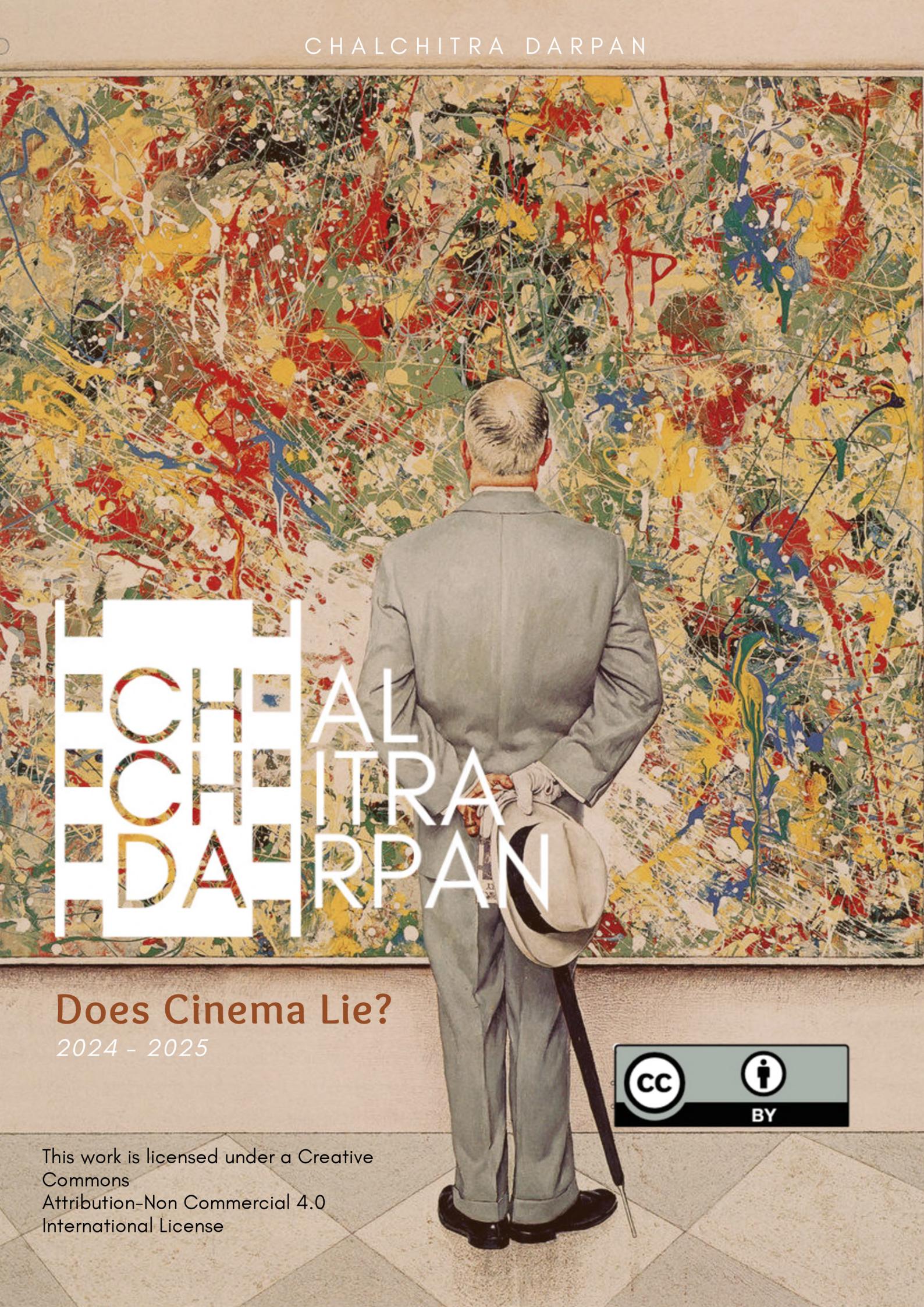
# CHALCHITRA DARPAN

2024-2025



*Does Cinema Lie?*

THE UNDERGRADUATE FILM JOURNAL  
CELLULOID



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## Does Cinema Lie?

2024 - 2025



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MIRANDA HOUSE  
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI



CELLULOID  
THE FILM SOCIETY  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dear Readers,

We are extremely pleased to present to you the fourth edition of our beloved Chalchitra Darpan, Celluloid: The Film Society of Miranda House's academic journal. Being Delhi University's only undergraduate film journal, we are delighted to continue providing a platform for students and scholars to engage in discussions about media and cinema. We are thrilled to present six carefully chosen pieces on the theme 'Does Cinema Lie?' that add to the rich body of existing literature on the subject. As a journal run wholly and solely by student participation, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to all the people who have made this latest edition possible.

The fourth edition of Chalchitra Darpan would not have been possible without the initial efforts of Lakshmi and Prapti in giving us a head start by developing the theme for this year. A special thanks to Rohith for working with us in developing the website for Chalchitra Darpan and providing it with a distinctive internet identity.

We would like to thank Amrit, President of Celluloid, for being an invaluable pillar of support throughout this process. Her steadfast commitment to independent scholarship inspired us to strive for excellence in all spheres of the journal. A heartfelt thanks to the Celluloid Student Union (24-25) for ensuring a smooth and uninterrupted editorial process even in the face of procedural challenges.

We must commemorate the unflinching perseverance of the members of our editorial board- Aarushi, Roha, Prerna, Aiyesha and Isha, through the unique challenges that the compilation of such a journal poses. They have displayed a tireless spirit of meticulousness that has been instrumental in bringing this issue to fruition. We thank Devananda and Diya for their unparalleled aesthetic ideation that has elevated artistically, the crux of this year's theme.

We would be remiss to not thank the editors and contributors of previous editions of the journal for the benchmark that they have set for us in upholding the standard of academic inquiry in film scholarship that we were inspired to maintain.

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the contributors of this edition for bringing their diverse perspectives and for collaborating with the editorial team to produce the finest rendition of their ideas. A special note of acknowledgement for all those who responded to our call for papers and shared with us their deeply interesting insights on the theme. Lastly, dear readers, a sincere gratitude to you for supporting our journal. We hope you enjoy reading the 4th edition of Chalchitra Darpan as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you!

Deevya and Sahaana  
Editors in Chief

## A NOTE ON DESIGN

Creating the design concept for *Does Cinema Lie?* stemmed from the core idea that absence and ambiguity could be more powerful than excess. Having a starkly different illustration style from the previous editions, I knew which elements had to be retained while also figuring out a way around monotony. I adopted a minimalistic visual vocabulary, letting the starkness of the question speak for itself.

The colour palette involves warm tones such as brown, red and yellow. Brown symbolizes earthiness, decay, and grounded reality. In the context of *Does Cinema Lie?* it represents fossilized layers of truth that gets buried over time with distortion. The stark yellow in fonts forces the readers' attention, urges them to think and confront; so does the bold and block letters in the typography used in cover designs. Through a conscious decision to do away with imagery, the design compels the reader to confront their own expectations and to consider how much of the "truth" in cinema is constructed or selectively omitted.

Through these choices, *Does Cinema Lie?* creates a visual language of silence, confrontation, and ambiguity — asking the audience not to consume an answer, but to wrestle with the question itself.

**Diya Deepu**  
Design

## A NOTE ON ILLUSTRATION

The illustrations are created using the traditional medium of watercolor. Aligned with the theme "Does Cinema Lie?", the use of overlapping translucent frames evokes a sense of perceived 'truth' layered over subtle foundations of deception. The color palette avoids stark contrasts, instead creating a seamless interwoven experience of colours.

**Devananda**  
Illustrator

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## EDITORIAL

Cinema, we are told, is a pervert art. In teaching us how to desire, what motives does this pedagogy encompass? Is the medium upfront about this pedagogy, or does it pretend, does it mask?

The theme for the 4th edition of Chalchitra Darpan, Does Cinema Lie?, sought to explore the myriad ways in which cinema both represents reality and constructs it. The exploration of truth in cinema raises complex questions about the nature of storytelling and more importantly, the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers. This raises the question of whether films should always strive to tell the truth or if there is value in creative interpretations that challenge conventional narratives.

Dramatic irony, that dates back to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, illustrates how audiences can be privy to more information than the characters inhabiting the action, hence the emergence of a difference in perception of the narrative. This raises the question: can the distortion of truth enhance a film's emotional impact and thematic depth? For instance, films like The Matrix challenge viewers to recognize that what appears to be reality may actually be a constructed illusion, promoting questions about truth and authenticity. On the other hand, films like Triumph of the Will (1935) employ grandiose visuals and stirring speeches to create a glorified image of the Nazi regime. While it presents itself as a documentary, the film selectively edits reality to promote an ideology.

Now, documentary films and biopics of real-life historical figures are traditionally defined as non-fiction cinematic works that aim to document reality, often with the purpose of educating audiences and preserving historical records. While filmmakers have the right to artistic expression, they also bear the responsibility to represent historical events accurately, particularly in docudramas that claim to be based on true stories (Ashely Cope 2024). Documentary films as a genre occupy a unique space in the cinematic landscape, often trying to straddle the line between fact and fiction, truth and interpretation. Using the insignia of truth, implicit apparently in the very genre, the contrast between educating audiences and edifying ideas is further an area to be explored (Jill Godmilow 1997). This raises questions about the authenticity of the genre: How true should documentary films be to reality? Can distortions be justified in such a form? Documentaries can be seen as a discourse of sobriety that aims to convey real events and truths, yet they inherently involve a degree of artistic interpretation and manipulation (Bill Nichols 1997). So, what constitutes authenticity in genres such as documentary filmmaking?

As film criticism evolves, audiences are increasingly encouraged to scrutinise the underlying messages of films, regardless of their artistic deftness. The creative liberty that can be excused by invoking cinematic poetic licence is a complex issue. Filmmakers must consider whether lying or distorting reality is necessary for entertainment and escapism. Representation in cinema becomes a philosophical endeavour as filmmakers balance

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objective documentation with subjective interpretation, and the influence of this representation on personal and collective experiences is significant. All this ultimately leads us to seek the answer to this one question: In the face of such complexity, how do we navigate the labyrinth of truth and fiction to finally be "liberated" in our understanding of cinema?

We'd like to introduce the articles and essays included in this edition of the journal that engage with these questions and more.

In Elvis, Priscilla, and Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story: Obscuring Minority Voices through the Commodification of the 20th Century Musician, Debolina Bhattacharyya analyses the myth-making and lack of historical accuracy prevalent in the music biopic genre films, of particularly white musicians. Examining the three films mentioned in the title, she argues that the music biopic genre fosters a dangerous form of verisimilitude by erasing the critical involvement of marginalized groups and that the consequences of this omission foster an uncritical idolization of musicians and reinforce social structures that continue to marginalize voices outside the dominant narrative.

Akshita Kumar, in her essay "Hitler Persists: A Cinematic Comparison of Emotional Politics, Scores, and Visual Narratives from the Third Reich to the 21st Century", looks at the appeal of propaganda music and films by analysing the aspects of cinema such as background scores, lighting, cast, dialogues, presentation, etc during The Third Reich such as The Triumph of the Will and Titanic (1943). She also examines the reflective narratives of contemporary times such as The boy in striped pyjamas and Jojo Rabbit to compare and contrast how cinema was used as a medium of propaganda and the ways in which they were criticised.

Shina Noor Ahmad's Heroism Requires Ability : The case of Rohit Mehra from 'Koi Mil Gaya' is an examination of the ableist narrative of heroism propagated by cinema and the implications of such constructions on our perception of what constitutes as the ideal and the glorious.

In Kaushiki Ishwar's Diagnostic Essay on Speculative Fiction Films Where We Understand Realism and Deleuze in Postmodernism, she investigates the interplay realism and abstract concepts in speculative fiction films and how these films, which go beyond conventional narratives, dive into worlds where the fantastical becomes a means of uncovering deeper truths, combining the realistic and the implausible. Exploring the connection between Deleuzian philosophy, speculative fiction films and postmodernism, she seeks to deconstruct the very essence of realism and argues that reality, as experienced, is only one of many possibilities, prompting viewers to consider the created nature of life and the transformational power of imagination.

Pavaki Kapoor, in her essay Realism vs Fiction: Defending the "Frivolous", analyses realism and its elevated status in cinema. She professes and defends her disagreement with its perception as an inherently richer genre of film, doing so through the critical exploration of genres like fantasy, sports and war films.

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In The Lies 'Eat The Rich' Cinema Feeds us, Atulya Saurabh examines the inherent and ironic capitalistic entrenchment of cinema that claims to be a radical upending of class structures.

These essays are attempts at interrogating the ideological narrative frameworks of the cinema that they have chosen to explore and are a labour of honest scholarly inquiry. They reflect, in every single iteration, the ardour to not just consume, but dissect.

Signing off

*Deevya Deo, Editor in Chief*

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ELVIS (2022), PRISCILLA (2023), AND  
WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY  
(2007): OBSCURING MINORITY VOICES  
THROUGH THE COMMODIFICATION OF  
THE 20TH CENTURY MUSICIAN.

DEBOLINA BHATTACHARYYA



## *Introduction: Fame Sells!*

In the twentieth century fame became a financial commodity to be managed, with the entire market of celebrity centering on an attention economy rather than on talent or merit. The celebrity became a marketing tool. "Stars are made for profit...are part of the way films are sold" (Dyer, 2004).

Since the 1960s, musical biopics—films which tell the stories of star musicians—have become a prominent genre of films. Their allure is in their promise of truth – a sense of ‘authentic’ intimacy between spectators and a public figure. As George Custen (1992) writes, “Unlike the fictive discourse out of which the rest of Hollywood’s canon is acknowledged to be fabricated, biopics’ putative connection to accuracy and truth makes them unique.”

However, the financial investments involved in filmmaking necessitate a degree of creative license. Verisimilitude in the musical biopic, although primarily obligated to historicity, must also condense a life story into a few hours to entertain a large audience. The bargain is dramatisation without a compromise on authenticity. To echo Custen (2001), “a film that wander[s] too far into biofantasy inevitably [draws] sarcastic critical comment.” But most twenty-first century biopics are more concerned with crafting or extending the mythology around the central character.

## *Verisimilitude and Authenticity: Biopic or Biofantasy?*

The contemporary musical biopic is a multimedia cultural text that is more invested in synergistic cross-promotion than cultural uplift or fact-based education. It is better understood as a polysemic text because, as Angela McRobbie (1984) describes, the multiplicity of meanings accessible in cultural products results in a wide range of consumer investments and interpretations.

Like early cinema, biopics employ “the aesthetic of attractions” (Wilson, 2016) by enlivening the past. They participate in “the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star.” (Dyer, 2004). Serving as vehicles to reinforce the elevated status of musical icons, they trade more on the allure of the mythic life story. They expose Hollywood’s creation of celebrities, displaying a consistent tendency of backstage reflexivity. The stars, themselves, are often involved in the production of these films. The production of their life story presents an opportunity to reframe controversial moments or retroactively rewrite events for the ever evolving cultural zeitgeist. Thus, biopics simultaneously reinscribe the efficacy of Hollywood illusionism and popular entertainment while also exposing it as a facade, a process Jane Feuer (1986) describes as “a pattern of demystification and remystification”.

The result is a narrative that defines the syntax of the stories categorized in this genre. Life events portrayed are often altered or shoehorned into a formula, including the addition of fictional characters and incidences. As Richard Altman (1989) complains, “biographical events are ignored in order to make the semantic givens of the biopic conform to the syntax of the show musical.”

## *Walk Hard (2007) and The Biopic Formula*

Marketed as a “send-up of every musical biopic ever made” (Sony Pictures, 2013), *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Jake Kasdan, 2007) is a parody film that lampoons the formulaic nature of this genre. The narrative of fictional protagonist Dewey Cox mocks the syntax of contemporary musical biopics which usually includes: sex, drugs and rock’n’roll, failed relationships paired with success in industry and rise/fall narratives over a music career trajectory. It is a “film à clef” (Brackett, 2001) that utilizes “authentic inauthenticity”, a contradictory strategy wherein, “the only authenticity is to know and even admit that you are not being authentic, to fake it without faking the fact that you are faking it” (Grossberg, 1993). The tropes it deconstructs serve as a checklist for future films, expanding the audience’s expectations while guaranteeing continued investment in the genre. The initial promise of authenticity is now replaced by an audience awareness of the profit motivated deceptions common to the genre.

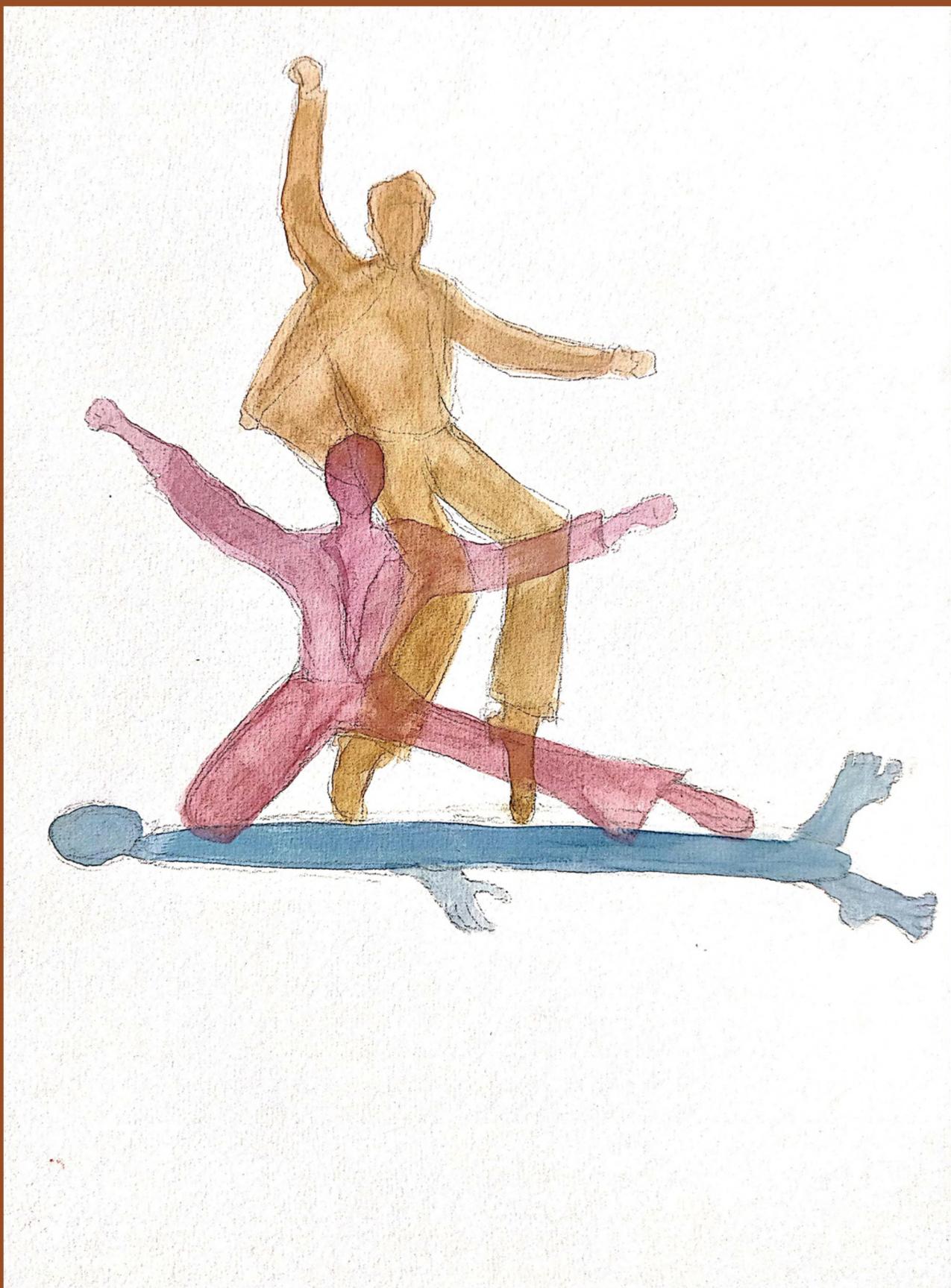
Among the celebrities whose lives inform the career trajectory of the movie’s fictional protagonist is the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley.

## *The Myth of the King: Elvis (2022) and Priscilla (2023)*

In his brief but suggestive genealogy of “love-and-death pop idolatry,” Michael Atkinson situates Elvis as the star that established for the second half of the twentieth century, “the prototype for every pop myth imaginable.” Around the time Elvis was gaining attention, “...celebrity began to be commonly represented not only as useful to selling and business, but as a business itself, created by selling” (Gamson, 2007). He symbolized the twentieth-century version of the heroic pioneer blazing trails into an unknown frontier, an unlikely rebel who set the stage for a countercultural insurgency that would later shake the sixties. A “living category crisis,” Elvis offers entrance to a variety of social identities, as a commodified celebrity, a white musician with Black influences, and a man whose figure is steeped in androgyny (Cowan, 2010).

Baz Luhrmann’s *Elvis* (2022) and Sofia Coppola’s *Priscilla* (2023) are two biopics that present the life of Elvis but from distinctly different perspectives. Luhrmann frames the story through the eyes of his exploitative manager, Colonel Tom Parker, illustrating the ruthless commodification that befell him. In “The King as Proletarian: Thinking about Elvis Presley as a Worker” Martin Cloonan highlights the irony of Elvis being referred to as ‘the King’, saying, “Ultimately, then, the fate of the “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” was far more proletarian than it was regal. He was simply worked to death” (Cloonan, 2023). Luhrmann’s portrayal attempts to echo this characterization, but the signature maximalist directorial style results in a glorification of the very syntax *Walk Hard* deconstructs.

In an attempt to align the narrative with a post #MeToo culture, the film forwards a sanitized portrayal of the conversations around cultural appropriation, race relations and gender dynamics. From crying at Martin Luther King Jr.’s death to having a close friendship with B.B.



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King, Luhrmann fabricates Elvis' relationships while erasing his proximity to controversial president Richard Nixon, in order to navigate white guilt regarding attribution and appreciation.

As a teen growing up in Memphis, Elvis created an identity by patterning himself on what he observed and imagined of African American masculinity. Thus, his rise to fame, for many African Americans, was less about innovation and more about continuation, representing the perpetual exploitation and misappropriation of black labor and artistry (Bertrand, 2007). Additionally, it undermines his power dynamic with his wife, Priscilla Presley, who was 14 and a decade younger than Elvis at the time of their meeting. It proliferates a culturally advantageous representation of Presley, creating a false sense of intimacy for a 21st century audience.

### *Victim or Abuser: A Binary Construct*

By focusing on his exploitation at the hands of his manager, the film foregoes conversations about Elvis as an exploiter. Elvis' lack of control in his professional life led to a hyper masculinization and powerful expression of it in his personal life.

Based on Priscilla Presley's 1985 memoir 'Elvis and Me', Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla* (2023) highlights the issues underscoring the mythos of the King and depicts the control he exerted over his wife. Although moments of violence are depicted in both films, in Coppola's film, Elvis is undoubtedly a symbol of masculine power. His choice to begin a romantic relationship with someone he calls "just a baby", his refusal to engage sexually with her, and his infidelity paint a different picture of the person behind the persona. He dictates her clothing, undermining her autonomy and manipulating his relationship with her to mirror different dynamics between men and women. At different points in the film, she exists as different tropes of femininity based on what Elvis wants from her. In essence, Coppola's film depicts Elvis as wielding a toxic masculine power specifically over Priscilla to show the areas of his life in which he was an abuser while Luhrmann highlights his victimization and aligns him with feminine experiences of hyper-sexualization and objectification.

Coppola also contests the narrative presented by Luhrmann of Elvis as a 'de-segregator'. While both films ultimately acknowledge the power that Elvis was inherently afforded as a white man during the Jim Crow era, Coppola depicts black absence, suggesting that Presley upending the racial order of the 1950s and 60s was an inadvertent consequence of the music he wanted to pursue.

However, in an effort to critique the power imbalance inherent in the relationship, Coppola erases certain personality traits of the protagonist and defines her in relation to Elvis. This version of Priscilla proliferates the dangerous conception of the 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986). The film ends with Priscilla driving away from Graceland and chooses not to depict her development post her divorce, diluting her agency and confining her character to an abusive relationship. The one-dimensional representation of Elvis in both films also fails to encapsulate his experience as both victim and abuser.

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### *Conclusion: Artistic License or Deception?*

Both films encourage an investment in the cultural product that is Elvis. The individualistic, star-focused form of the current musical biopic inherently obscures the racial and gender imbalances inherent in the creation of the commodified celebrity. Luhrmann's characterization presents a digestible, cliche version of Elvis that rewrites the problematic nature of his ascension to fame while Coppola's version reinforces antiquated ideals of victimhood. Each film selects events or neglects historical details to further a specific narrative. One wants to legitimize the mythos of the singular progressive male genius while the other wants to center a female voice historically relegated to the background of a more culturally prominent male figure.

Ultimately, Coppola's film adds dimension to the product of Elvis, acting more as a companion piece than a critique.

The initial purpose of biopics was to serve as a memory repository for a central subject, a documentation of a life lived. The psychological expectation of entertainment from films clearly undercuts this promised authenticity. Most criticisms of modern day biopics are waived off with retorts of artistic license. Yet, this response usually results in the inevitable flattening of characters, the erasure of complicated real-life socio-cultural dynamics and alteration or addition of events to suit a narrative.

Most films are expected to be fictional. The biopic specifically differentiates itself more in the vein of a dramatised documentary. Condensing multiple characters in the interest of time is different from the addition of fictitious events to further a cultural narrative. However, the dangers of deception in this form of storytelling are not just proliferation of dangerous cultural beliefs but also misrepresentation of the subject in ways further subjecting them to the capitalistic exploitation they suffered while they were alive.

The question remains- can audiences expect truth from a medium majorly concerned with entertainment? When considering biopics, should there be limitations on artistic license?

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HITLER PERSISTS: A CINEMATIC  
COMPARISON OF EMOTIONAL  
POLITICS, SCORES, AND VISUAL  
NARRATIVES FROM THE THIRD  
REICH TO THE 21ST CENTURY



AKSHITA KUMAR

"This order wasn't given to us by earthly superiors. It was given to us by God, who created people." (Heinrich Himmler, 1943) This invocation and assumption of divine authority is a classic example of state propaganda, one that erases individual agency under the guise of sacred duty. The state narrative is designed to subsume people to authority, to pressurise them into blind submission of the self, and of any personality left within (Aleeza Sherif, 2025). Hitler was no different—he wanted loyalty and extermination of all those he considered to be "unfit for the evolution or progression of the Aryan race". The intense racism and baseless hatred present within the Nazi ideology propaganda demanded loyalty out of people. Ignorance prevailed, and personal beliefs were pushed aside as they created an environment of fear and later used it to induce loyalty.

With a manipulated bunch of dangling and unquestioning puppets, they moved forward with their most harmful tool—propaganda—the process of brainwashing people into believing that Hitler, the Führer, is their god; their only god. People were isolated from their immediate loving or unloving surroundings, and then similarly isolated creatures—for they were robbed of their humanity—were put together to follow the "word of God". For all others, the "word of God" was spread by propagandist tools, in particular, cinema.

The word 'propaganda' itself has been continually analysed to decode its implications and usages. While the word 'propaganda' literally means spreading information, for the purpose of this essay, 'propaganda' carries a tainted agenda, a narrative waiting to be imposed. "Here, propaganda connotes the dissemination of particular messages of a dishonest and dangerous kind—ones usually associated with authoritarian and tyrannical regimes. Propaganda is associated with the manipulation of large numbers of people and is seen to involve deliberately misleading them, either by obscuring reality with a partial or slanted view or through downright lies." (Alan Sennett 2014 , 46)

Propaganda aims to present the "truth". The concept of truth is a heavily contended one, where everyone believes their version to be the absolute truth (Jack W. Meiland 1997, 568). Hence, in order to present the truth, they often distort the reality of other "truths" existing. Several elements, such as half-truths, half-lies, emotional appeal, and scapegoating marginalise other identities and instill superiority complex, forcing people to believe the truth they want to spoon-feed them. An incredibly impactful way to do so is via cinema. Propaganda, when used in the form of cinema, plays with human psychology. First, it convinces you that you need a saviour. Then, it presents itself as the only salvation. Once you submit, it strips away your capacity for doubt, erasing curiosity, morals, and guilt. What remains is an organless body following words—a personification of the political propaganda of the state. The state undeniably has resources far beyond any private actor to carry out propaganda and to influence both the economy as well as the social environment of the country.

The Third Reich (January 30, 1933 – May 8, 1945), under the rule of Hitler, was one of the eras when cinema was used strategically to heighten emotions, garner support, and weaken the

enemies by a display of sheer volume. The visual turn in propaganda is presented as a casteless, classless entity, nationality bound by loyalty, furthered by targeting the youth. All elements of fascism, racism, mass killings, and genocide were suppressed and hidden under the cover of "weeding out weaker elements," and what was shown were unquestioning, conflict-less, disciplined organs and extensions of the Nazi Party (Dan Olson, 2017).

In reality, the internal politics of the Nazis was thoroughly conflicted, aimed only at eradicating and erasing all those considered "impure" or "unfit". Mass killings of higher and superior members were authorised by Hitler (Dan Olson, 2017), but no one was to ever know about it. Hence, what was to be known was the grandiose of the Nazi Party—a facade put up for people to redeem honour and loyalty for their country, effectively using media as a tool to persuade all those at home or all those with an inclination towards satisfying their superiority complex.

"Among many valuable insights, studies of films have helped to refine the simplistic view of the Third Reich as a totalitarian regime by suggesting that its ideological goals were often tempered by the demands of the economy and that its authoritarian control was as much a result of the internalization of nazi values on the part of German citizens as of bureaucratic centralization. Paradoxically, the medium which so masterfully creates timeless illusion and fantasy may well prove to be an indispensable tool for understanding one of the most frightening realities of modern history" (David Weinberg 1984, 123)

The Third Reich had a Ministry of Propaganda. "The establishment of a separate department for film within the Ministry of Propaganda in March 1933, the creation of a *Reichsfilmkammer* in July 1933 with ten divisions encompassing every aspect of movie-making, the appointment of a *Reichsfilmdramaturg* in February 1934 to act as an official censor for film scripts and to administer a ratings system for films in distribution—all seem to point to the determination of nazi officials to rid themselves of the nefarious influence of the 'Systemzeit' upon German film" headed by their lead propagandist, Joseph Goebbels (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, accessed in 2025).

The need to establish such a ministry in itself explains the kind of mass brainwashing and manipulation the Nazi Party was partaking in. According to Goebbels, the message should ideally be disguised. "He believed that propaganda had far less of an impact once the audience became conscious of the message. Hence, he tended to favour the production of entertainment films that engaged the viewer and delivered messages through an emotional involvement with characters and storyline." (Alan Sennett 2014 , 48)

Their main aim was to establish the victory of faith and intimidate opposition voices. Both Hitler and Goebbels were obsessed with films and often screened films in their homes and offices. Goebbels was the central figure behind executing the Nazi film policy. "The Nazis understood that repetition and grand visual spectacle were essential in solidifying their

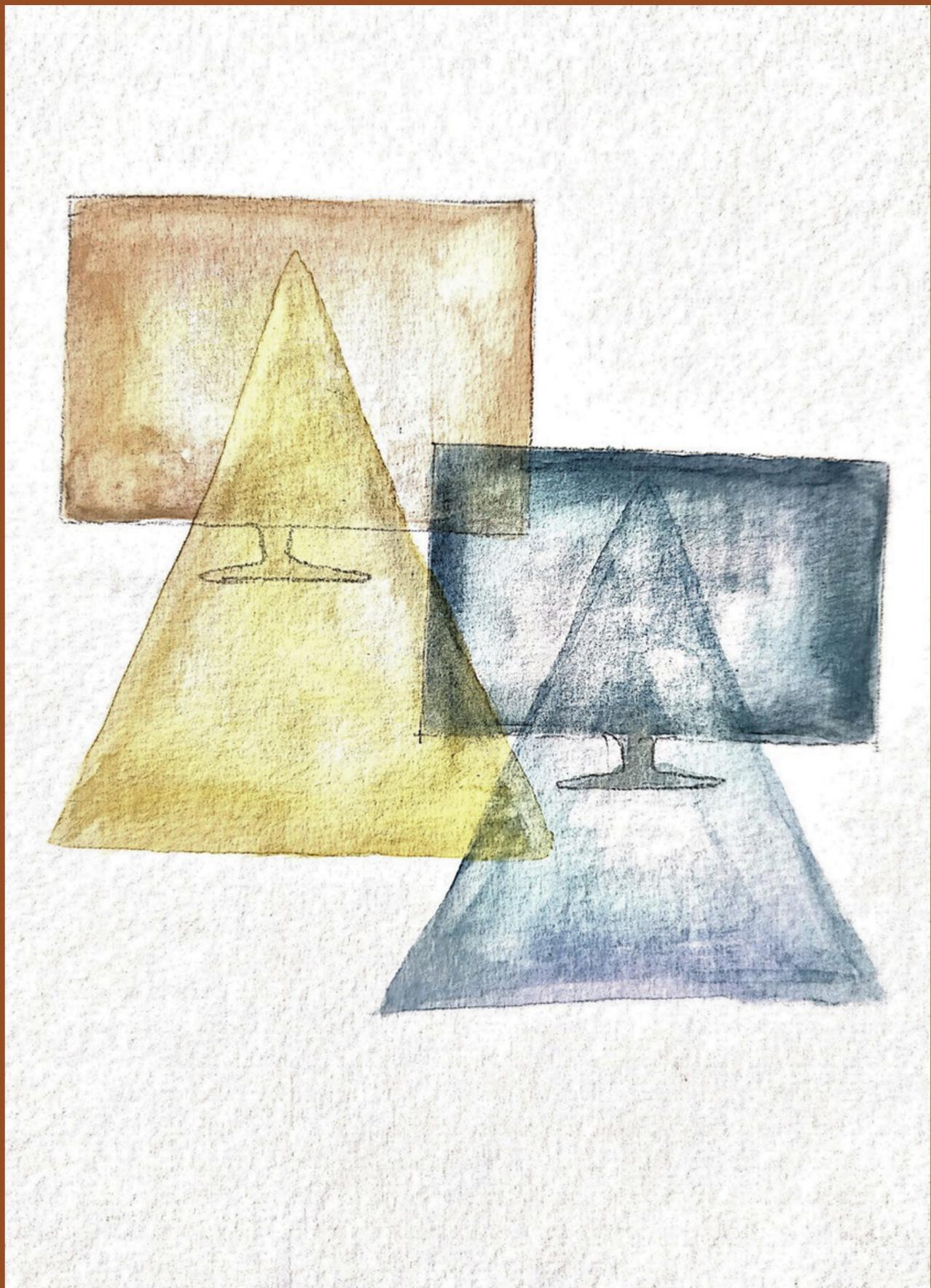
ideology in the minds of the people." They appointed Leni Riefenstahl as the lead filmmaker for the Nazi propaganda films. She herself was an interesting character who at one point in time claimed, " To me, he [Hitler] is the greatest man who ever lived; Hitler to me is the greatest of all," yet contradicted her beliefs in contemporary records where she claims that she never was/is a Nazi (John Fraser, Anthony Dorrell, and Sarah Wilson 1981, 66).

Some of the popular propaganda films under scrutiny are *Triumph of the Will* (1935), *Titanic* (1943) and the 1941 German propaganda films. These movies employed background scores, dialogues, cast, and other technical tools of filmmaking to their advantage to evoke the emotions of people and build a wall of grandiose which only the so-called Aryan Germans were privy to, excluding all other nationalities from their achievements and success, creating a community feeding into their illusion. This illusion then later controlled the way they thought, the way they perceived things, and the way they behaved. One such film that is considered to be the pioneer of propaganda films is *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, massively funded by the state to promote the illusion of the Führer and one nation.

"Riefenstahl was given unprecedented facilities, generous state funding, and access to the party hierarchy. Accounts give different figures, but it seems that at least 170 people were directly involved in the filming. Apart from SA and SS bodyguards, these included: eighteen film cameramen and sixteen assistants with thirty cameras; sixteen newsreel cameramen; four sound trucks; and twenty-two chauffeur-driven cars. In addition, Riefenstahl was provided with an airship and a plane. She was able to set up special camera positions, which included a camera lift on an iron flag mast in the stadium. There was also to be an opportunity to restage shots at a later date. Music was to be composed by a leading film composer, Herbert Windt." (Alan Sennett 2014, 49)

Upon analysing the film, the entire film consists of continuous marching, creating a sense of a never-ending path towards victory. All these men are supposedly shown to be equal despite empirically recorded violent conditions of the regiments. The idea of "one people, one Führer, one Reich, one German" was to showcase an uncanny sense of unity via representation of multiple SA and SS troops of the regiment. The dream of equality was to be created by reciprocating a sense of unity.

There are scenes where the men are shown helping each other, the kids are reaching out to Hitler, smiling in his presence, yearning to touch his hands, and the people in general are doing only one thing - looking up to their Führer and doing whatever he demands them to. This is eerily discomforting, and this discomfort is created by using the technique of *repetition*. The flags are repeated; so are the troops, so are the so-called revolutionary speeches of the party generals, and so are the people claiming "*Heil Hitler*". Continuous repetition creates persuasion, and ultimately those who are watching it uncritically tend to get intimidated and impressed. The troops look no less than groups of ants huddled together, marching to get food, and as their daily pattern, they do it again and again and again.



This movie particularly was also meant to enforce the concept of the “Aryanisation” of ideologies. Filmmaking in general was considered to be dominated by Jewish interests, and Hence, Goebbels and the other members of the party feared the domination of other films. This also led to an oppressive crackdown on other films being released in the theatre:

“The final factor impacting upon the structure and administration of the film industry under the Third Reich was the commitment to eliminate all non-Aryan personnel and ideas from movie-making.” (David Weinberg 1984, 110)

This ideological domination can also be seen in the covert use of language in the film. Using dialogues such as “*reject the bad*,” “*weed out the weaker elements*,” “*the party is Hitler, the country is Hitler*” all indicated the intended exclusion. According to Dan Olson (2017), an Alberta-based documentarian, it wasn’t the first time that aerial shots were being captured or moving cameras were being employed. What makes it a great example of propaganda films is the volume and scope it presents its audience with—again, the creation of grandeur by using long shots that stay with you. The longer shots feed into the feeling of longevity, hence the common belief of “*a people who doesn’t hold with the purity of its race will perish*,” but those who do, shall be victorious.

According to Susan Sontag, “*Triumph des Willens/Triumph of the Will* (DE, 1935) was a film whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda.” The most enabling part of the entire film is the continuous background score. A viewer shall only receive two sorts of sounds—trumpets and speeches.

The film has recurrent periods where, first, they have the trumpets, then the people, then the speeches, and repeat. The music never leaves the film unless it is to employ the evocative speeches. It is imperative to note that propaganda music itself is a great tool for evoking emotions amongst people, particularly nationalist ones, which can later morph into hypernationalism. This, combined with all the factors discussed above, makes it stand apart from the other propaganda movies of that time.

Over time, the audiences have learnt to view propaganda films critically, from a perspective that resists the implications of the visual narrative. In contrast to propaganda films, reflective films dismantle the illusions of power—revealing the hypocrisy and brutality of those who fashioned themselves as divine rulers. These films shift the lens to the oppressed, exposing the consequences of unchecked ideology. One such movie in those near years was *The Great Dictator* by Charlie Chaplin in 1940. It is a brilliant movie that employs the similarity between Chaplin and Hitler (given their eerily similar birth details that always bothered Chaplin), humour, and irony to call out the sheer madness of Hitler’s rule. Here again, the background scores play an important part. There is a contrast between propaganda music and an almost funny noise aimed at showcasing silliness and confusion, often noticed in Chaplin’s movies, going back and forth to create dissonance. This

dissonance trivialises the attempt of propaganda while effectively calling out the entire grandiose that Hitler built. Sure, this can be considered a propaganda film as well, but it is here that we aim to distinguish between propaganda and PROPAGANDA.

Propaganda as a tool is widely used, especially in this capitalistic world built upon advertisements and globalised ideals. The spread of ideas includes the agenda set by these people. Every political party, corporation, and religious organisation indulges in spreading propaganda to gain a specific follower base or voter base. In order to build one, they need to extensively sway people and hit the nerve that resonates within large masses or create a "common enemy" to fight against hence initiating the process of "othering". However, such propaganda takes the bolder route of PROPAGANDA when the process of brainwashing people turns violent and extreme. Nationalistic ideals often surpass rationality—as in the case of any other war. The need to exterminate and continue the process of "othering" communities is what makes a propaganda successful. People are gaslighted into buying into it, the process of which has been discussed earlier. If they don't, they are treated as social outcasts.

A little far into the timeline, we have two other films—The Boy in the Striped Pajamas (2008) and Jojo Rabbit (2019)—that are contemporary films looking at the rule of Hitler through a different lens, analysing the marginalised perspective and exploring the torturous experiences of the people who suffered from intense backlash and the Holocaust.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas directed by Mark Herman is a heart-wrenching film that uses ironic symbolism, contrasts, and both wide and low angles to effectively foreshadow death. This brilliant movie is about a German boy whose father has just been promoted to a superior position in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The young boy, with his innocence still intact, makes a Jewish friend, and (to give no further spoilers), the rest of the movie follows, creating the saddest, most gut-wrenching ending. It effectively shows how an innocent child can be both a victim and a perpetrator of Nazi state-implemented propaganda.

It brutally captures the devastating irony of a world where a child's purest friendship is doomed by the very ideology his family upholds, leaving you with a haunting reminder of how blind allegiance breeds tragedy. The music, the lack thereof, the objects, the dialogues, and the contrasts are all employed to reflect and stand in stark opposition to how propaganda films operate.

Similarly, the movie Jojo Rabbit also portrays the progression and changing of beliefs in a young boy who undergoes a complete transformation once his "god", his "Führer" and his "blessings" lead to the public execution of his mother. Both of these films showcase the brutality and suffering imposed upon the Jews while also revealing how childhood innocence has the potential for change—though it remains limited due to the overwhelming presence of propaganda.

These films directly engage with and actively oppose the idea of propaganda—specifically Nazi propaganda—showing the other side while employing the same techniques but for different purposes. While wide shots in *Triumph of the Will* were used to showcase continuity and longevity, the wide high-angle shots here are used to highlight the dire situation of prisoners in Auschwitz. By contrasting these two types of films, the viewer can critically understand the propagation of so-called “truth” and its devastating consequences for the excluded masses. The results of propaganda films are captured and exposed as the essence of these reflective films.

According to Edward Bernays's *Propaganda* (1928), “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.

In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.”(37) The results reflect upon the study of propaganda, audience and their evolving understanding according to the portrayal of narratives by those with enough resources to pull off a film screening. So, Does Cinema Lie? Or do they merely persuade? And in shaping perception, do they shape history itself—turning narrative into memory, and memory into truth?

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## **Heroism Requires Ability: The Case of Rohit Mehra from 'Koi Mil Gaya'**

**SHINA NOOR AHMAD**

The honorary title of a hero is often bestowed upon the ones who defend the crooked façade of the societal order. No wonder then that the label is so ubiquitous, every home-maker who gives up her own dreams to rear her children is hailed as a heroic martyr. A hero is truly, “less the iconoclast more the traditionalist” (Meadows). One of my professors gave a lecture around the concept of heroism and this was a fundamental step towards my own sensitization. I could not get over the fact that a society that needs a superhero is a society that one should be wary of. There is an urgent need to put our guards on with regard to the way the idea of heroism is shaped around us.

The ideological State Apparatus of the cinema is very often the means through which people are introduced to superheroes. The political unconscious of this artform creates heroes that are shaped out of certain prejudiced perceptions. The very tradition of heroism in itself is rooted in problematic biases. The ancient Greek understanding of a hero relied on the idea of a “perfect man”. Weber elaborates on this broad term and brings in the element of charisma. Quite importantly, he noted that these charismatic heroes were “bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered supernatural”, and thus of exclusive access. The ideal of a hero is as such based on the exclusion of certain bodies and minds. There is only space for men, the requirement specifically being of a perfect man. A perfect man does not include the paraplegic Batman who had to be cured out of his disability nor does it include the crippled Xavier from X-men who could not take up active roles and had to be confined to the passive role of being the leader. The bodily mutations for these heroic X-men is not something to be proud of, they need to be cured, they are a disability. A *perfect man* is created out of parameters that blatantly reek of ableism. This article intends to highlight this ableist bias by shedding a critical light on the character of Rohit Mehra from the 2003 Bollywood film, ‘Koi Mil Gaya’.

It might seem like a strange thing to choose Rohit from a long catalogue of Marvel/ DC heroes but since when were a cape or a costume the mandatory requirements of creating a hero? Theoretically, Rohit Mehra does check a lot of boxes that can be considered as parameters for classifying as a hero. To start off quite simplistically, he is hailed for upholding the ideals of humanity, brotherhood, and friendship all because he went the extra mile to protect his newly found friend from space, Jadoo. In the process, he almost gets ready to become a fugitive who runs all over the world to keep Jadoo away from the police. Not just that, he even gets brutally beaten up at the hands of the cops. In Oliner’s understanding, this ultra-altruistic urge is what makes a hero different from the general mass of people. This also ties up to the understanding of considering saints as heroes of their times.

Initially the film shows Rohit as a naïve guy who just tries to help out his friend from another world while highlighting his inadequacy. If one analyses the film very carefully, one might see how the film implicates Rohit’s intellectual disability as the reason for this lack. While Rohit and Nisha try to figure out what exactly does Jadoo need for survival, it is in fact the latter who manages to guess that it is ‘*dhoop*’ (sunshine) that Jadoo requires.



Carlyle's major theorization on the idea of a hero characteristically describes the hero as someone who can be a role model. However, given the fact that Rohit is unable to use intellectual prowess at a rather crucial moment, he does not classify as someone worth emulating. Towards the end of the film, we do see him becoming Carlyle's conceptual "great man" who upholds the right ideals in a corrupt epoch, truly deserving "satkar" or respect (as the narrative puts it). However, a metamorphosis has to take place before this is possible, Rohit Mehra needs to be hammered into normativity first, that is the condition for his heroism. His Messianism is not enough. As Spencer has rightly put it, "Before the great man can re-make his society, his society must make him." This great man is thus reconstructed. He is cured by his literally other-worldly friend.

When I first thought of the film critically, I could not help but think of the bigger question of WHY here. WHY DID ROHIT MEHRA HAVE TO BE CURED? The answer lay in the myopic ableist lens of heroism. Without being cured, Mehra could have never fit into the long tradition of heroism. This might seem like a convoluted turn to the article but we also need to bring in the concept of supercrip narratives to fully decode the crux of the problem here.

Nothing in the film before Rohit's metamorphosis makes him charismatic in the conventional sense as he needs to be to classify as a hero. He is in fact portrayed as an unfortunate and infantilized victim which is very much in tune with how supercrip narratives operate. Superlative lens and language is constantly applied to him. He is the guy who gets ignored by his love interest while she is busy cheering for the local jock during a basketball match, he gets shooed away from a computer class and is bullied heavily by the local loafers. He is so victimized that his mother had to come to his rescue and take a stand for her "abnormal" son who deserves to have been blessed with an "adult mind". There are two crucial points in the film where this victimization drives Rohit to the edge:

- After the match where he gets ignored, he tries to practice on his own and is severely beaten up by his bullies.
- When he is emotionally disturbed by the fact that his love interest might end up marrying someone else.

At the first juncture, Jadoo enters the film, after Mehra desperately asks Krishna for 'Shakti' (power). At the second juncture, Jadoo cures Rohit. As a matter of fact, this trajectory is very crucial for his heroic journey. It is quite interesting to note here that Jadoo in its embodiment is quite akin to Krishna himself. This becomes particularly apparent if one considers the fact that traditionally Krishna's skin color is portrayed with shades of blue. In fact, even quite like Christ, Jadoo also possesses healing powers. Given this information, the cure almost becomes a *vardaan*, a boon of exclusive supernatural powers. This trope of a *vardaan* is not very unusual if one looks at the Indian superhero tradition. 'Amar Chitra Katha' is considered a pioneer in creating superhero comics from the stories of mythology and the concept is predominant there. Even in the case of 'Raj Comics' from the 1980s a notable example of such a *vardaan* is the character of Shakti in the 'Parmanu' series, who is transformed into a reincarnation of Goddess Kali herself.

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From here on, Rohit starts acting like the perfect, charismatic man. As soon as he is healed, he does not even require his glasses. He becomes so intellectually gifted that he can solve a mathematical problem simply by reading it. It is in fact worth noting that he ends up becoming an orator of sorts who actually does take a stand against disrespect and lectures a teacher on basic ethics. The capacity for rhetorics has traditionally been linked to heroism and charisma, particularly in the case of totalitarian dictators like Hitler.

His story becomes an epitome of the superpowered, supercrip narrative which is "primarily a fiction, television or film representation of a character who has abilities or powers that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability" (Schalk). Josè Alaniz's remarks, noted by Schalk also become quite important in this regard,

*Superpowers overcompensate for a perceived physical defect or outright disability. Often the super-power will erase the disability, banishing it to the realm of the invisible, replacing it with raw power and heroic acts of a hyper-masculine fashion.*

Largely in the second half of the film one sees how Rohit is subsumed into the hyper masculine order of normative heroism. Rohit takes recourse to the language and the ways of his oppressors. He was the one who was getting beaten up for being the weaker person and he starts doing the same. During a fight scene, we see how he is triggered by the remark, "yeh kya paas karega rey jo abhi tak maa ka doodh peeta hai" (how will he pass the ball who is still being breastfed) and after having fought, he replies using the same misogynistic discourse, "lagta hai tune maa ka doodh nahi peeya, agli baar peeke aana" (I think you did not have mother's milk, next time come having drunk). This dialogic exchange is a clear indication of Rohit getting subsumed into the phallogocentric structure of the symbolic order that belongs to the upholders of toxic masculinity. He develops a macho personality with his ripped muscles and apparently fashionable clothing. He becomes the typical macho who does not talk to kids and the one who is also an ideal partner, as per the logic of the film because he embodies the necessary physical and mental capabilities. While earlier in the film, he could only dance under the influence of alcohol, he now ends up becoming the guy who can make the entire club groove to his moves.

He starts enamoring girls around him to make his love interest feel insecure. He gets so entrenched in his macho brand of heroism that he ends up completely flouting the idea of consent and agrees on a bet to get kissed by Nisha if he manages to win a petty basketball cup. It almost becomes a modern-day duel, where divinity also interferes to help the righteous hero when he ends up in deep waters. Ultimately, he becomes a knight in shining armor who asks for the hand of his lady-love after overcoming all trials. Finally, the story culminates into how he rescues his friend.

After Jadoo leaves Mehra again had to inhabit his disabled body. However, it seems that this time if his experience continued, it would have been a bit different, owing to the idea of reward and tokenism. Goode has involved the perspective of exchange theory and studied the ties of public celebration of heroes (*satkar* in terms of the film's narrative) with the distribution of prestige in society. This is quite evident in the fact that Mehra's lady-love decides to stick with him even though he becomes the same, old Rohit who was getting helplessly bullied.

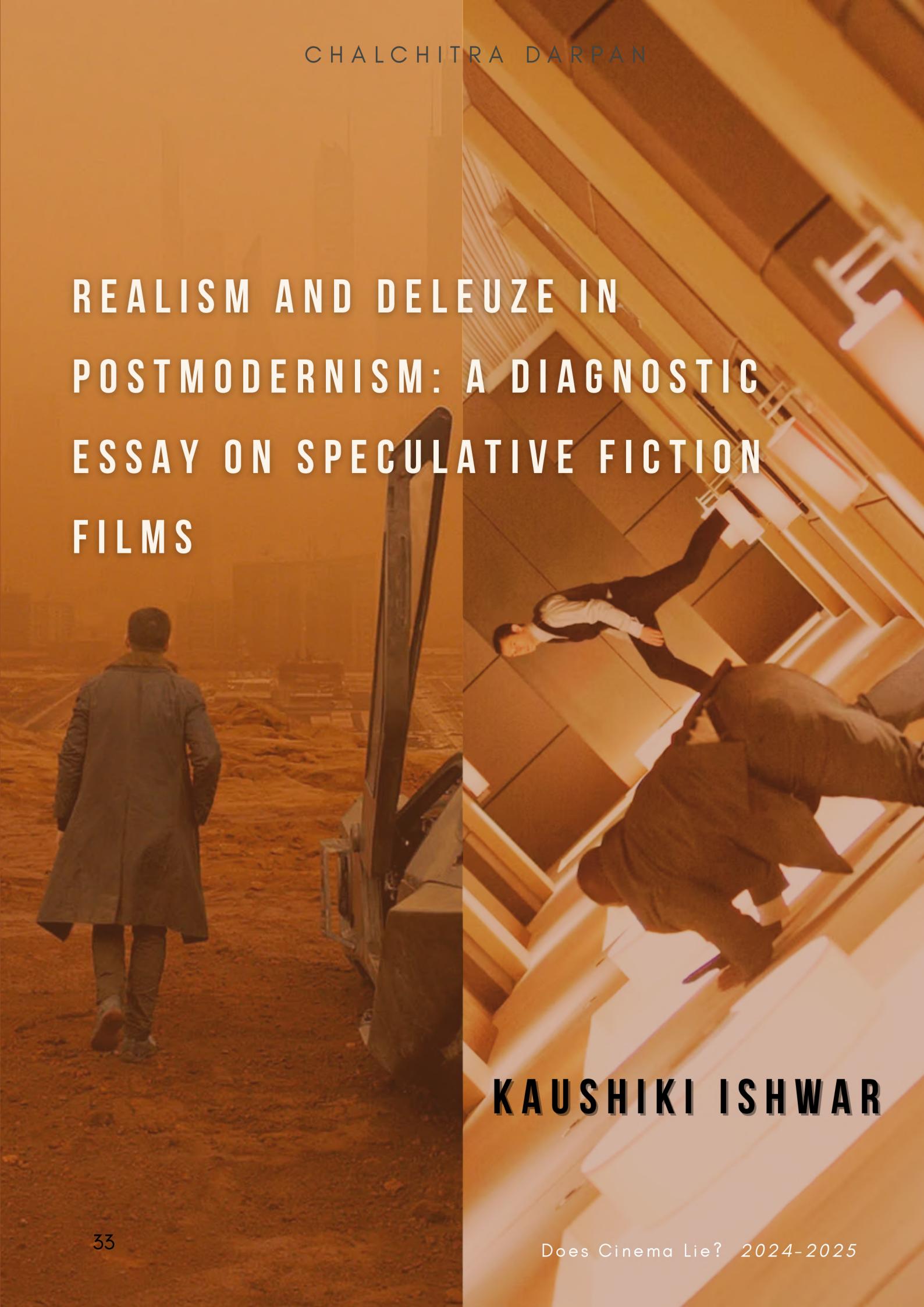
This mainstream production made to be consumed at leisure turns out to be a product of interpellation of normative ableism. In turn, it becomes a means of indoctrination. The scathing evidence of this fact is provided by the inclusion of the final *miraculous cure* through which Rohit gets rid of his disability forever. It is portrayed as the ultimate boon which reinforces the idea of disability being a pitiful state of deviance that needs to be cured. In the process the narrative also completely ignores the heroic potential of a disabled body and mind and uses unrealistic means of *curing* it to appropriate it into the normative discourse of masculine ableist heroism. The narrative's obsession with *cure* is thus a glaring statement of exclusionary politics that is responsible for pushing disability to the margins.

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# REALISM AND DELEUZE IN POSTMODERNISM: A DIAGNOSTIC ESSAY ON SPECULATIVE FICTION FILMS



KAUSHIKI ISHWAR

## *Realism and Its Discontents in Speculative Fiction Films*

Realism, as a cinematic convention, has historically been tied to the idea of mimesis—representing the world in a manner that aligns with human perception and experience. Classic realism in cinema operates on a continuity editing system, linear narratives, and character-driven plots that reinforce the stability of the world and subjectivity. However, speculative fiction films often disrupt these conventions by introducing non-linear storytelling, unreliable perceptions of reality, and technologically mediated experiences.

In postmodern cinema, realism becomes a contested concept, often subject to subversion and fragmentation. Speculative fiction films challenge the assumption that reality is a stable, objective entity by embracing hyperreality, simulation, and fluidity. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum is particularly relevant here, as speculative fiction often constructs worlds where the distinction between the real and the simulated is blurred. Films like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) problematize realism by questioning whether reality itself is an authentic construct or merely a representation mediated through technology and memory.

Gilles Deleuze's film philosophy, particularly his distinction between the movement-image and the time-image, provides a critical framework for understanding speculative fiction films within postmodernism. Deleuze argues that classical cinema is dominated by the movement-image, where action and reaction sequences follow a logical cause-and-effect structure. In contrast, post war modern cinema introduces the time-image, which breaks linear continuity and emphasizes a fragmented, subjective experience of time.

In speculative fiction, the time-image is particularly prevalent, as films within the genre frequently experiment with nonlinear temporality, memory manipulation, and alternative realities. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) epitomizes the Deleuzian time-image by constructing a multi-layered narrative in which time is experienced differently across dream levels. Similarly, *Arrival* (2016) presents a radical reconsideration of time and language, embodying Deleuze's idea that cinema can transform our perception of reality itself. These films operate beyond classical realism, embracing a postmodern logic where time is fluid and identity is contingent.

Another crucial aspect of postmodern speculative fiction cinema is its engagement with hyperreality and simulation. Baudrillard's theory suggests that in postmodernity, signs and symbols no longer refer to a concrete reality but rather to other signs in a self-referential loop. Speculative fiction films often depict worlds where hyperreality prevails, questioning the very notion of authenticity and truth. A quintessential example is *The Matrix*, where the constructed digital world, the Matrix, is indistinguishable from reality. The film interrogates the nature of existence in a world dominated by technology, reflecting postmodern anxieties about simulation and control. Similarly, *Ex Machina* (2015) explores the boundaries of artificial intelligence and human consciousness, challenging the distinction between real and artificial life.

These films illustrate a fundamental shift in cinematic realism: rather than striving to represent reality as it is perceived in the physical world, they construct new realities that force audiences to question their own perception of the real. This aligns with Deleuze's assertion that cinema has the power to alter how time and space are understood, effectively reconfiguring subjectivity in the process.

In addition to challenging realism and temporality, speculative fiction films frequently engage with the fragmentation of subjectivity, a hallmark of postmodern thought. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a unified, coherent self, instead proposing that identity is constructed, fluid, and often unstable. Speculative fiction films frequently depict protagonists whose identities are in flux, shaped by external forces such as technology, memory manipulation, or alternate realities.

Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* exemplifies this theme through its protagonist, K, whose sense of self is constantly questioned due to his ambiguous origins as a replicant. Similarly, *Total Recall* (1990) explores the instability of memory and self-identity, posing the question of whether one's personal history is an authentic experience or an implanted construct. These films resonate with Deleuzian ideas of subjectivity as a process rather than a fixed entity, demonstrating how speculative fiction serves as a space for interrogating postmodern conceptions of the self.

### *Speculative Fiction as a Postmodern Aesthetic*

Beyond narrative and thematic concerns, speculative fiction films embody a distinctly postmodern aesthetic, characterized by intertextuality, pastiche, and self-reflexivity. Postmodern cinema often blurs genre boundaries, incorporates elements of parody, and plays with the viewer's expectations. Films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) merge dystopian, action, and Western tropes in a hyper-stylized visual spectacle that defies conventional cinematic realism.

Moreover, the rise of digital effects and CGI in speculative fiction films contributes to their postmodern nature. The seamless integration of digital imagery into the cinematic landscape raises questions about the nature of visual representation itself. When entire worlds are constructed through CGI, as in *Avatar* (2009), the traditional distinction between filmed reality and constructed illusion collapses, reinforcing the postmodern notion that all realities are mediated representations.

Speculative fiction films serve as a crucial site for exploring postmodern concerns regarding realism, temporality, subjectivity, and simulation. Through a Deleuzian lens, these films disrupt classical cinematic realism by introducing time-images, fragmented subjectivities, and hyperreal worlds. As postmodernism challenges the very foundations of meaning, speculative fiction emerges as a genre uniquely suited to question the nature of reality itself. By embracing narrative experimentation, visual innovation, and philosophical inquiry,

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speculative fiction films continue to redefine the boundaries of cinematic realism, offering audiences a compelling lens through which to interrogate their own perceptions of existence and truth.



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# REALISM vs FICTION

DEFENDING THE “FRIVOLOUS”

PAVAKI KAPOOR

## CHALCHITRA DAR PAN

Realism is used to describe the filmmaking strategy that values a film primarily as a documentary medium. French critic André Bazin and German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer advanced realism in cinema in the 1930s. Realism seeks to honestly show what is in front of the camera to the audience, leaving the content untouched and letting audiences draw their own conclusions. Bazin, thus, believed that realism is more democratic since it does not manipulate audiences' emotions.

Within the genre, realism tends to focus on mundane aspects of everyday life. Shots are usually static with little movement, and the camera often frames scenes at the eye-level. There is no artistic flair to lighting and composition. Scenes are shot on site rather than on custom-made sets. The films are edited for continuity rather than artistic effects that would distract the audiences. Music and sounds are primarily diegetic, coming from the characters' world in real time.

One thing to note is that no matter how carefully it may be defined, genre is ambiguous and fluid, where the interpretations of the audience, producers or critics shape its understanding. This is neither a negative nor positive attribute, rather serving to categorise and guide the expectations and the experience of the film.

Due to the focus of many such thinkers on realism, it became the gold standard, with films mirroring real life being seen as more profound and intelligent, elevating realism to the status of "high art." Movements like Italian Neorealism and Indian parallel cinema reinforced this hierarchy. Realism in India through the works of Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal and Govindan Aravindan reflected the lived reality of many people and also put Indian cinema on the radar for many global film enthusiasts. The Indian government also funded these ventures and state support helped realism gain more credit as a superior or more appreciable movement.

A lot of opinions suggest that realism is elevated in cinema and considered better art than fictionalised movies and fantastical representations. I would like to disagree. While realism occupies a very crucial place in cinematic storytelling, it may not inherently have more artistic value than other genres.

Cinema, regardless of genre, certainly plays an important role in understanding the psyche of the audience, which becomes the project of cultural studies.

### *Cultural Studies and Popular Cinema*

The media is one of the strongest and often misunderstood sources of cultural pedagogy. Media shapes how we behave, think, feel, believe, fear, and desire. Cultural studies analyses mass or popular culture, like graffiti, comic books, mass cinema (as opposed to art cinema), popular music (as opposed to classical music), the open spaces of the city (as opposed to art galleries), sports, etc.

Mass culture was used as a pejorative term and had been dismissed as inferior by many. The status of "true" or "standard" culture was claimed by the culture of the elite. As a result, academic studies also only brought into their purview classical or great works that occupied this position, in turn framing the standards of judgment and ideas of taste. Thus, the very term "culture" was identifiable by the practices of a smaller section of the population. This legitimised certain art with an aura of respectability while others were relegated to the realm of "popular culture."

The project of cultural studies, by contrast, avoids cutting the field of culture into high and low, or the popular against the elite. As a result, cultural analysis gradually shifted its focus, extending its lens to the everyday life of the masses. Under these circumstances, films which hold a true mirror to mass culture have begun to be studied by academics.

A lot of people may say realism does not get the same degree of attention from the audience because it cannot be understood by everyone or it is not meant to be understood by an average consumer of art. I would disagree and say that art is not better simply because less people understand it. That would almost feel like intellectual elitism where just because something is consumed by the masses, it is not worth equal attention!

Popular media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era. There is no ex nihilo creation. Culture is produced and not natural, which is why cultural artefacts cannot be studied only within the aesthetic realm. Similarly, a film has to be analysed as a cultural product by exploring how it is made, marketed and consumed to explore connections with other aspects of social reality. Such analysis might enable one to read and interpret one's culture critically. Artistic elements, including film, are nourished by the existing social landscape and by extension seek to influence it.

Just because art or cinema is mainstream, massy or enjoyed by many people is not necessarily an indicator of lower artistic value. If anything, it is worth analysing what kind of cinema gains popularity since it helps us understand the psyche of the population consuming it. It helps identify the stories and trends that capture public imagination and this should definitely be of concern to everyone that occupies that society since it is likely to reflect their ideologies, opinions and interests. Consumption patterns help us realise what people are engaging with which can become the starting point for a lot of important (and necessary) conversations. Issues do not disappear just because no one is making movies about them, on the contrary they may get brushed under the rug. If anything, "bad" cinema may help bring existing faults into public consciousness and facilitate constructive discourse.

## Challenging Realism

Despite using fictional storytelling that does lie to the audience in its depiction of reality, there are various examples of films and genres that do not exclude intelligent conversations. They make heavy topics easier to digest, increase the audience base, and also possibly tackle challenges such as censorship.

For example, Iranian filmmakers managed to avoid censorship by depicting realistic issues through dramatised or indirect portrayals. For instance, in Maryam Tafakory's video essay Irani Bag (2020), bags are used as intermediaries to symbolise forbidden physical contact between men and women. A man and a woman on a motorbike are separated by a bag, symbolising both connection and division.

This depiction would not typically be considered cinematic realism because it employs symbolic objects to represent human interactions. One may categorise it as formalism or expressionism due to the deliberate creation of a symbolic device (even if out of necessity) rather than letting one arise naturally. In this sense, one may also say that even realistic films challenge the construct of purely observational storytelling, sometimes utilising deliberately constructed narrative techniques.

Many such methods underscore how filmmakers creatively depict tensions, navigate censorship, and craft narratives that resonate with audiences without having to adhere to structures of realism.

This essay will focus on entertainment cinema and dramatised fictional genres and the conflicts they seek to address.

## Fantasy

There has been a boost to the fantasy fiction genre in Hollywood and global cinema which has brought to the fore the unknown and the magical. Fantasy has its existence independent of reality and has been most undermined in modern thought, going back to Aristotle and the hierarchy placing reality over fantasy. Reality has been praised and taken into serious account with even critics, writers or readers of fantasy associating it with escapism. Trying to define fantasy by making an evaluation with reality would limit our perception of fantasy, its elements and function.

A significant problem faced by the fantasy fiction genre is not being taken seriously by the academic world. As explained by Bechtel, reading fantasy is often characterized as a guilty pleasure or indulgence, carrying an implicit stigma. Ursula Le Guin names this phenomenon the "genrefication" of fantasy, a process by which genre becomes not a neutral descriptive term, but rather a label applied only to those types of literature that are other- than-serious.

Eric Rabkin said the fantastic does more than extend experience; the fantastic contradicts perspectives. Considering this, Lance Olsen suggested that post-modern fantasy has become the literary equivalent of deconstructionism, interrogating all we take for granted about language and experience, giving these no more than a shifting and provisional status.

The absence of magic in our real world is what makes it a potent metaphor. Its fluidity and indeterminacy make it a valuable tool for representing what Zygmunt Bauman (2005) calls the "liquid life" of the 21st century. With constant scientific advances, science fiction paints a reality that feels aspirational or even achievable. So, when our lives feel more and more like science fiction, fantasy serves as a trope to defamiliarise us from our surroundings and bring new perspectives to our everyday experiences.

Fantasy's contemporary resonance may be in the way the genre negotiates two intertwined preoccupations of our era: technology and nature. Fantasy films and games create spectacular virtual worlds through CGI that defy reality. However, these virtual worlds evoke not the future, but the past, an era before industrialisation. While we are living through a time of great technological advances, we are also navigating looming ecological catastrophe.

The fantasy genre gives us an opportunity to re-imagine our relationships with both. Fantasy seems like a modern extension of animism, which sees everything in the world as infused with meaning and consciousness. It is not difficult to imagine why this perspective would resonate with audiences given the growing distance between humanity and the natural world.

The Marvel cinematic universe (MCU) can be used as an example to clarify the author's argument. The MCU is difficult to characterise with films falling into the science fiction (sci-fi) genre but also incorporating elements that it doesn't quite provide explanations for, or ones that are difficult to conceive with the scientific reality we see around us. However, it certainly takes the world around us and puts it in an alternate plane with enhanced superheroes, alien invasions and mythological characters.

The appeal of marvel may firstly lie in the epic superhero fantasy that a lot of people tend to enjoy but that will not be the focus of this essay. What marvel also does is manage to use fantasy world(s) to comment on issues around us. We see a film like Black Panther incorporating the nature and technology dilemma as described above, while also talking about global resource distribution and the exploitation of natural resources in the global South by the global North.

Fantasy and its handling of reality can also be explained using a more local example of a Bollywood movie of the same genre. Paheli by Amol Palekar serves as a female centric love story that captures and explains the struggle of a woman, especially a wife, in a patriarchal society. Lachchi falls in love with who she believes is her husband, Kishan, but later finds out

is a ghost. The movie uses talking dolls, natural phenomena like storms, and magical elements like ghosts to distance itself from reality while showcasing the (very real) conflict between duty and choice in a poignant way using the liberty that the fantastical genre provides. The film chooses to go the happy route (which is not true to the original text) but is it bad for a movie to instill hope for change through the assertion of individual desire over social obligations?

## *War*

Another genre that tackles reality by placing it within artificial constructs is the war genre. Film historian Stephen Bottomore in "Filming, faking and propaganda: the origins of the war film 1897-1902" (2007) notes that the birth of cinema coincided with imperialist military conflicts such as the Spanish-American War (1898), the Boer War (1899-1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and audiences were fascinated with the idea of seeing on-screen re-enactments of battles.

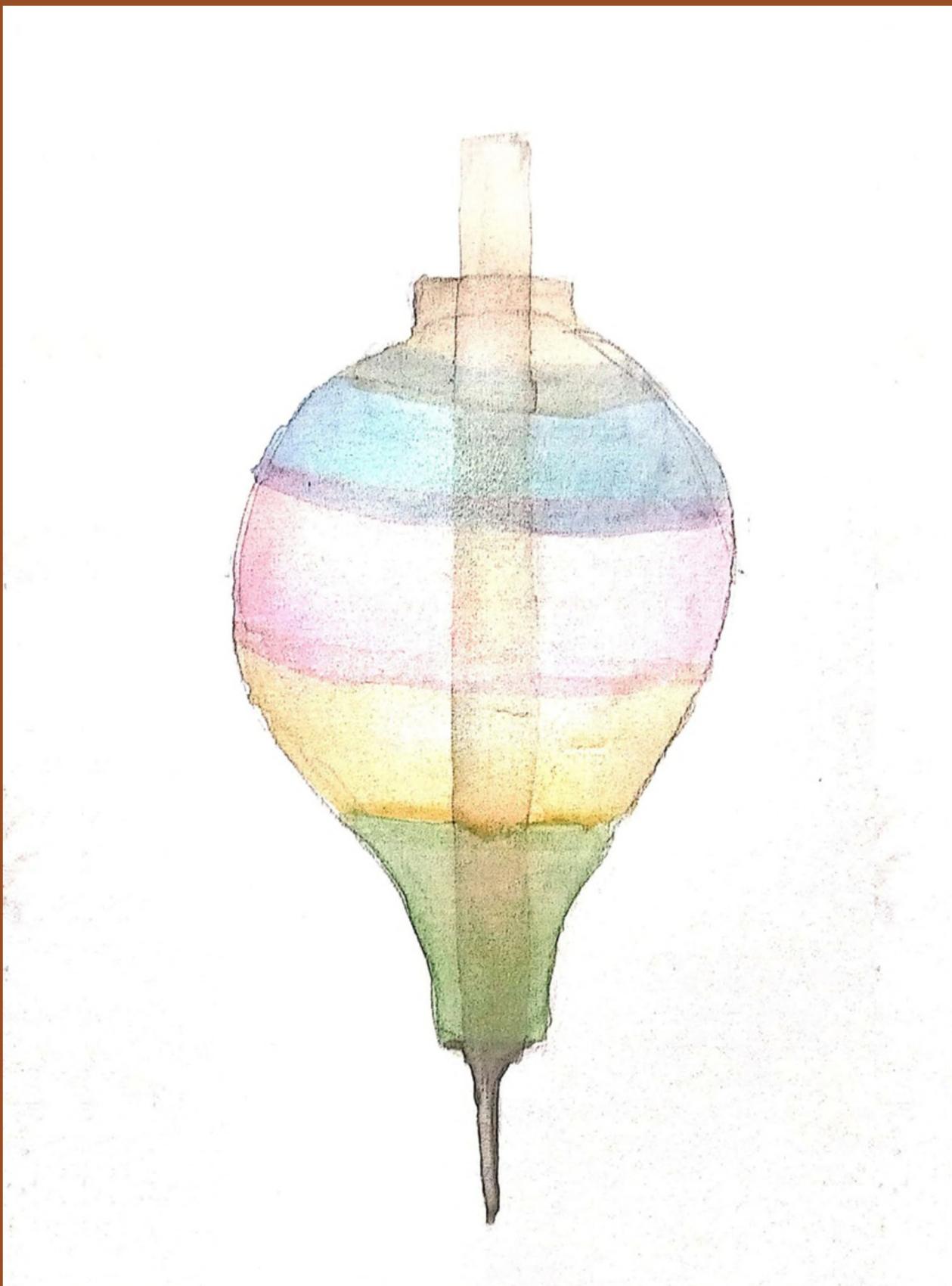
While the term "war" refers to an official governmental declaration of explicit hostile action, the genre usually includes police actions, coup d'états and even societal conflicts such as gang wars. War films mainly focus on reasons, techniques, and the obstacles and struggles of participants to maintain or to impose a certain way of life.

The war genre involves high stakes narratives mostly involving life or death scenarios, often including extreme heroism or villainy, the roots of power or the extreme desire for power. Langford notes that many war films focus on small military units that have to overcome personal tensions to be able complete a larger mission. The focus on the microcosm can be seen as representative of multiple similar units facing similar conflicts in other battlefields.

A specific conflict of war is the act of invasion, whether in the role of an aggressor or a victim of aggression, frequently becoming the inciting incident that propels the plot forward. War narratives thrive on large-scale storytelling that looks at the effect of actions on a big society or even the whole world. Many believe world order is worth great sacrifice to maintain and war highlights this desire for orderliness, stability and a familiar domain. The plot lines, the themes, the characters' dilemmas inherent in the war genre speak to an audience that may find either inspiration or solace in knowing they are not alone in wanting an existence that is understandable and acceptable.

The fantasy is removed from the "ordinary life" of the audience. The audience can gain comfort with the knowledge that any difficulties arising from conflict in the film will not be directly met outside once the story ends.

Focusing on the characterisation of the hero, the classic war genre protagonist believes in justice and is willing to fight, or even die, for the sake of humanity or the oppressed. There is inspiration and comfort in the idea that some distant entity that is not the self will take on the heroic role and risk everything to fight for people beyond their personal interest.



Robert Murphy, in The British Cinema Book, referring to the British experience in World War II, noted that for many people the war was a period of intensity and excitement when things which normally would have seemed impossible became possible. The characters in this era's war films struggled with moral and physical problems and victory came at some cost. The war had a transforming effect, turning timid civilians into warriors, almost as if the war was a tool for people to realise their potential. War films may also allow people to believe they could transform into this hero if the need arose.

It would be very easy to place Captain America within this context. If we look at the original comics, they came up precisely during a period of war when countries wanted to project their strength while also needing to provide assurance to their citizens that things will be fine because their heroes are better than the other country's heroes.

The film shows us the underdog (through some scientific interventions) rises to heights that he would not have achieved under normal circumstances. The good guy that we pity at the start becomes powerful and leads his side to victory, and we even directly see Hitler and the Nazi regime being referenced in the film. The audience may be able to project their feeling of hopelessness onto the character and through Steve Rogers' journey, find new found inspiration to tackle whatever challenges wait for them outside.

When character traits and journeys are moved into the realm of a fictional story, the lived experiences and painful memories of actual conflicts or war can be displaced and resolve some anxiety. The Freudian theory of displacement as a defense mechanism can be considered to be utilised in war narratives, where films allow audiences to process and express feelings of anxiety onto a less threatening substitute that is not the cause of distress.

Ursula K. Le Guin noted its usefulness for examining the difference between good and evil. Imaginative literature continues to question what heroism is, to examine the roots of power, and to offer moral alternatives.

Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, in his book "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre" (1970, translated by Richard Howard) defines fantasy "...as any event that happens in the known world that seems supernatural". War is a fact we interact with everyday "as any event that happens in the known world." But when we move war into a "supernatural" realm where reality is different from the world we occupy, it opens up possibilities for new perceptions of events.

*"Telling a story in a futuristic world gives you this freedom to explore things that bother you in contemporary times. So, in the case of the Hunger Games, issues like the vast discrepancy of wealth, the power of television and how it is used to influence our lives, the possibility that the government could use hunger as a weapon, and... first and foremost to me - the issue of war."*

-Suzanne Collins, writer of The Hunger Games

Another example is *The Kingsman series*. The series adapts the war genre for a world where conflict is often dealt with through diplomacy not direct hostile action. The series incorporates this into the plot making it a modified war genre film that speaks to present realities while also providing the same platform for heroism and displacement that a classic might offer. This conflict is not only limited to hostile foreign powers but also extends to shady capitalists that are trying to profit off of people's lives by exploiting their need for medicine to ensure health. War can be navigated through different lenses, with different "enemies" while still offering the same satisfaction of victory and ideological battles.

Grodal notes that audiences have a desire to explore agency, morality and social exchange and the fantasy genre facilitates this by moving war into a realm where the reasons and realities of war can be assessed with less discomfort.

Hollywood films like *White House Down* (2013) and *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) exist on alternate planes within understandable and relatable worlds. These films fulfill the desire for war stories that do not hit extremely close to reality and their popularity speaks to a form of displacement that the mind uses to substitute fear or anxiety towards a reality that may be dangerous. Roland Emmerich believes that by creating these possible disastrous albeit fantastical scenarios there can be an increased awareness of the likelihood of consequences that could be caused by governments or citizens who are not diligent in sensing possible threats.

Going back to the MCU, we see invasions by an alien entity that seems to be equipped with technology so good that it is like magic and unless a few heroes put aside their differences and cooperate the world will end (or half of it at least). The alien entity in the case of the movie happens to be actual extraterrestrials and the magic part is kind of true, hence the lie. However, we see how it provides the scope for relating it to similar conflicts playing out in the real world, talking about collective responsibility above individual glory (or even survival), and providing insight into power struggles, while also placing it in a realm that is fictional enough to escape from routine earthly troubles.

## Zombies

Another example of adept use of the fantastical alternate plane can be zombie movies. These stories substitute the "other" or the basis of conflict for fantastical creatures we are yet to encounter: zombies. However, the story continues to exist in a relatable world and its message for diligent awareness is the same. In a manner similar to the war genre, it utilises

# CHALCHITRA DARPAN

displacement and allows the audience to project their anxieties onto characters in the film. Instead of the “enemy” being identities familiar to us in the real world, in this case they are zombies. Due to this, the zombie genre may allow greater focus on human nature during times of extreme conflict and social issues that surround humanity, rather than a stronger focus on the “other.”

Especially after COVID-19, the global community has an increased anxiety about the risk of viral contamination. The fear of science failing us in a moment of crisis, the threat of biological warfare and the paranoia around an apocalypse is not that unfathomable. Zombie stories reflect many common fears we all have like the fear of illness, death, monsters, and even other people. Displacing this concern with “turning into a zombie” allows the audience to see the idea reflected on screen but keeps it distant enough to avoid reminding us of the history of epidemics humans have gone through. Additionally, the entertainment value ensures a good box office collection.

To provide an example, *Zombieland* takes a bunch of people with very low chances of survival: a meek boy, a sad middle-aged man who just wants a Twinkie, and two sisters who would betray them in a heartbeat. Not an ideal team but despite all odds they survive. The movie highlights individual conflicts, the desire and need for social community, and the lengths people will go to ensure their well-being. The characters go through an intense period of change that equips them with an understanding to evolve into better versions of themselves and survive through a virus, loneliness and internal struggles.

## *A Defense of Indian Mass Cinema*

Post independence, particularly after the Nehruvian era, when the commercialisation of Bollywood increased, the distance between commercial and art film became wide. Ashis Nandy in his essay “An Intelligent Critic’s Guide to Indian Cinema” states that there are three categories of films: commercial film, middle-brow cinema and art films. The common characteristic of these three categories is that they depend on the middle-classes for legitimacy and critical acclaim.

Commercial cinema uses cultural traditions and world views as tools for entertainment, turning them into grand, theatrical spectacles. It simplifies specific audience issues and focuses on their external, visible aspects rather than their deeper psychological roots, making it what Ashis Nandy calls “anti-psychological.”

Akaitab Mukherjee in his essay “Theory of Indian Cinema” notes:

*“Therefore stereotypes such as the grandiloquent stylisation of the Muslim aristocratic traditions of north India, Rajput valour, Bengali romanticism, Goan Christian simplicity are available in Hindi cinema.”*

Every value and sentiment portrayed in commercial cinema is subject to the judgement of the market. Thus, films may try and incorporate as much as they can to appeal to an audience as diverse as the population of India, particularly the Indian middle class.  
48 Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy in their introduction of “Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and Iconic in Indian Cinema” write:

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Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy in their introduction of "Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and Iconic in Indian Cinema" write:

*"Popular culture, especially popular cinema, now began to look like a crucial battle ground where the battles between the old and the new, the traditional and modern, the global and the local were being fought through the renegotiation of myth and fantasy life."*

This seems to provide strength to the argument that important conversations need to be brought into mainstream cinema, albeit packaged with entertainment, if public sentiment has to be reflected, gauged or modified. To quote Shabana Azmi:

*"Change in cinema has to come from the mainstream. Otherwise you are preaching to the converted."*

Azmi herself has found critical success through parallel cinema and done exemplary work in the field of realistic cinema. However, as per her statement, mass dialogue can only be facilitated through content that is consumed at a large scale.

Ashis Nandy writes:

*"Popular film ideally has to have everything - from the classical to the folk, from the sublime to the ridiculous and from the terribly modern to the incorrigibly traditional ... An average 'normal', Bombay film has to be, to the extent possible, everything to everyone. It has to cut across the myriad ethnicities and lifestyles of India and even of the world that impinges on India."*

In her essay, "National identity and the realist aesthetic: Indian cinema of the fifties," Chakravarty explores how cinema (and literature) in the 50s used a particular version of realism to reflect and shape the cultural response immediately following independence. This form of realism dealt with questions of individual and national identity, maintaining cultural continuity with the past but also locating oneself within a global context, and a search for the "real" India. Other than depicting everyday life, it was used as a strategy to articulate and diffuse the ambivalent attitudes of the people.

However, Chakravarty also points out several limitations of this realist aesthetic. While aiming for authenticity, realism of this era may have glossed over the complexities and contradictions within Indian society, leading to oversimplified portrayals. The push for a unified national identity through cinema also occasionally suppressed diverse voices and narratives, limiting the ability to fully capture the multifaceted reality of the country.

Bollywood's appeal may primarily be the possibility for people to see a diverse range of identities represented in cinema, or even a single movie, which helps attract audiences that want to be able to project themselves onto the characters they see on-screen. This is not to say that poor representations or bad portrayals should be accepted. However, representations that are relatable might help people identify with a film more strongly as opposed to the specificity that realism (frequently the project of art cinema in India) is characterised by, in which plot lines based on unfamiliar identities may be difficult for people to relate to in a similar fashion. While people may be able to appreciate at an aesthetic level the depth of the project, its mental impact may or may not be the same.

The popularity of commercial cinema may also lie in its distinct aesthetic appeal. Mukund Lath highlights that songs play a key role in popular Hindi cinema, and their placement alongside dramatic scenes aligns with traditional aesthetics codified in Bharata Muni's Natyashastra. This approach is non-linear and frequently breaks away from realistic or naturalistic ways of depicting action. From performances of Hindu epics to Parsi theatre, the predecessor to Bollywood, Indian storytelling has always embraced stylisation and heterogeneity of discourse.

Indian art films rely heavily on Western theories and aesthetic standards. Their analysis often reflects ideas shaped by Western thought, influenced by rules of enlightenment. The storytelling and structure of commercial cinema may be particularly familiar to audiences and hold the appeal it does, especially in a country where a lot of people have grown up reading or watching stories that have multiple subplots unfolding, include musical and dance renditions and end on a high, happy note.

Chakravarty too points out that the concept of realism, rooted in Western artistic traditions, does not align seamlessly with Indian aesthetic philosophies, which often emphasise spiritual and symbolic representations over literal ones.

To clarify, we can use the example of sports films, which have gained a lot of popularity in recent times. This helps connect mainstream cinema in India to the genres mentioned in the essay so far. Babington identifies a "basic plot" across most films featuring sport: "the overcoming of odds by individual or team" often culminating in a climactic last minute victory. However, there can be occasional variations by incorporating loss, avoiding winner-loser binaries and romantic subplots.

Similar to the war and zombie genres, they include themes of prioritising the collective good over individual glory or satisfaction. Even utilising themes of displacement, sports films can be used in constructing personal and social identities like class, gender or sexuality, albeit in a specific construct most of us may not have to encounter in everyday life.

The popularity of these films also lies in the affirmative pleasures sports provide. Sports are emotionally charged and can provide high moments full of adrenaline in many people's lives

which is actively recreated in the genre. Just like mass cinema, sports films seek to create spectacles that can attract a broad audience across cultural lines.

Additionally, sports films also provide a sense of teamwork and camaraderie that can lead to victory. Social psychology says people want to have in-groups they can identify with and feel secure within. It gives them a sense of identity and belonging. There is always an "other" in our lives that creates conflict. This "other" may not be a person but a situation, a moral dilemma or anything that generates significant pressure on an individual. The strength to defy all odds and for your side to win may certainly be something people use as a source of comfort in situations like these.

If we look at the Bollywood film Chak De! India, firstly, we would see it humanises players that we often see as distant entities or celebrity crushes that pop up on our screens only to play sports and then disappear. They joke around, struggle, have families and get late to practice. It is also a feel-good inspirational movie that carries a very strong motivational factor for when life gets tough. Coupled with emotional songs, friendships, and a happy ending, it is a classic commercial success formula. However, it is also constructed in a manner that reflects societal realities. From the sexism prevalent especially in the field of sports, to certain identities in India being ignored or marginalised, to the religious politics that assess people's loyalties on the basis of their identity, the movie does not fail to engage with real world discourse, but on the contrary facilitates it.

### *Conclusion*

Realism as a genre includes specific themes that reflect reality and also technical styles that are observational rather than deliberate in constructing meaning, similar to a documentary style. Realism's popularity has been due to how it offers authentic stories that can make strong connections with the audience's lived realities. It seeks truth even when exploring mundane or painful aspects of reality. This allows it to be a powerful medium for reflecting unpleasant social and political realities and acting as a tool to subvert them. It becomes a source of resistance, especially for people who find representation in the mainstream content difficult and marginalised identities often ignored by popular cinema.

However, cinema reflective of the reality that a lot of people occupy may not be desirable for many, so as to not want a constant reminder of what is already familiar and painful. A lot of people consume cinema as a form of entertainment and may wish to indulge in the escapist fantasy it creates. Even within a realistic construct, there may be feel-good plot lines and happy endings that contradict the lived reality of everyday life, providing hope and comfort. It might provide strength by demonstrating that change is possible and happy endings can exist. It is worth considering if a lot of people glorifying realism in cinema are the ones at the centre of the difficult themes it shows.

Secondly, do these films show the central characters as subjects or are they being relegated to the status of objects that people in positions of power discuss from the

outside? A lot of people appreciate realism for its commitment to authentic stories, especially of marginalised communities, but are these stories authentic to the reality of the people producing or consuming them? We do not want to sensationalise issues or monetise them for the sake of content but deal with them with the sensitivity and nuance they deserve. The desire for realism should not dominate conversations in a way that confuses it for good storytelling.

Additionally, genres that rely on fictional worlds and exist on alternate planes may not be merely escapist tools utilised by unintelligent creators or audiences that wish to consume cinema as a passive interest. On the contrary, these fictional recreations may become ways to discuss issues that exist in the real world without facing too much discomfort or even censorship.

This is not to say that realism is not good art or a genre that a lot of people would not want to see more of, but that it should not claim artistic superiority over other genres that “lie” to the audience. Realism’s history of socio-political engagement does not take away from the power of fantastical or fictional narratives at doing the same through an alternative lens.

Good storytelling needs to get more attention over content that gets popular purely due to its commercial success or big budget production labels. However, we may benefit by not shaping this measure of goodness as the accuracy of cinema in reflecting reality but rather how well it manages to resonate with the audiences and their inner world.

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THE LIES

'EAT THE RICH'

CINEMA FEEDS US  
ATULYA  
SAURABH

Movies have been a part of the cultural fabric of the society ever since their inception and subsequent fame. Through the evolution of technology, they have now gained the ability to provide a visual understanding of almost every human and superhuman experience. Their immense success has led to the creation of multiple film industries around the world. These movie industries, much like many other commercial occupations, are ultimately profit-driven<sup>1</sup>. The industries are dependent on their audience, which keeps them functioning and gaining the profit they need. This in turn helps them produce more and have the audience return to the cinemas. To make movies more appealing, filmmakers incorporate trending topics within the films. One such prevailing trend is the growing superficial criticism of capitalism. This has evolved into the 'Eat the Rich' genre of films. Movies and media are owned by wealthy industry giants such as large media or production houses. As one might observe, movies or media in general do not function in a vacuum to society. They partake in the production and spread of ideas that cater to the people in positions of power. More often than not, the movies that are commercial in nature are based on the ideas that would be beneficial to them fiscally. To understand the genre of 'Eat the Rich,' we will look into the Marxist understanding of the production of ideas.

"The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." This quote by Karl Marx forms the basic premise of the theory of production and the controllers of production, which is the ruling class. Later, Italian Marxist Gramsci explains how these ruling ideas essentially act as a system of social control over the proletariat classes. In his paper 'Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,' author Thomas Bates discusses how Gramsci explains how people consent to be ruled in a capitalistic society. Furthering this, Althusser, in his 'ideological state apparatus,' states that through the psychological means of inculcating the way one perceives and evaluates the world, the state propagates its ideology in civil society, and media becomes one of the tools to control<sup>2</sup>. One of these preferred media tools is movies. According to capital realism, the only viable system in the world with regard to political as well as economic systems is capitalism, and no alternatives exist<sup>3</sup>.

Mark Fischer writes, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism." This idea, when put in the context of the film industry, makes the idea of 'Eat the Rich' movie genre a farce, since it also ultimately participates in the system these movies criticise as capitalism. More than a structure, it becomes the only way in which one assumes the world to properly function in.

The aim of this paper is to look into how movies perform capitalism, and through three case studies, namely *The Menu*, *Saltburn* and *Parasite*, it will look into how the Eat the Rich cinema, although different in stories, ends up participating in the same system it criticises.

## *Capitalism*

At the very core, the idea of capitalism is exploitation of the working class. According to Marx, society is divided into structure and superstructure; the former is the proletariat, and the latter is the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, or the capitalists, maintain their control and power over the proletariats by controlling three important things: the means of production, the control over the political aspect of state and lastly, the ideas and values of the society<sup>4</sup>. Going back to the quote stated initially, we can assume that the ideas that affect the bourgeoisie positively are being spread through media that is consumed on a mass scale; thus, this restrains people from developing a consciousness for their emancipation.

## *Movies and Capitalism*

Movies, as stated previously, are largely profit-based ventures; similarly, the producers of the movies largely too, then fall into the same profit-making category. As the author Andrew deWaard talks about the workings of major media studios like Paramount Pictures, Columbia, 20th Century Fox, etc., they function under huge parent companies like Viacom (now Paramount Global), Sony and Disney<sup>5</sup>. Within the American media market, there are 5 mass media corporations under which the majority of the media is aired. These are the Walt Disney Corporation, Comcast, Paramount Global, AT&T, and NewsCorp. They earn a significant chunk of the revenue that the media generates. There are horizontal and vertical subsidiaries that work to effectively increase this control they have on the media as well as increase their political influence<sup>6</sup>.

## *Saltburn : A Riches to Riches Story*

Released in 2023, Saltburn earned more than 20 million dollars at the worldwide box office<sup>7</sup> and was extremely viral on social media. Starring Barry Keoghan, Jacob Elordi, and Rosamund Pike, among others, it is a recent addition to the genre of Eat the Rich movies.

It is set in the house of the same name and follows Oliver, who has a difficult life. Befriending Felix, the heir of an extremely rich family, Oliver is invited to his home at Saltburn. The movie follows how Oliver, in an extremely long and meticulous manner, lies, manipulates, cheats and murders his way into taking over the house. Oliver lies about his upbringing, claiming that his household was troubled; however, as the movie progresses, his lies unfold and it is revealed that he had a comfortable upbringing. His story was carefully crafted to get closer to his aim of getting the Saltburn estate by becoming friends with Felix, who is murdered after he learns the truth.

Saltburn is an example of the movies that criticize the capitalist class and hurt people participating within simply for being rich; however, the tone shifts when the main character participates within the same system; hence, rags-to-riches stories are essentially stories of participating within the system of capitalism as a part of the capitalist class and never realistically addressing the harms of hoarding wealth. These movies, then, are not inherently



anti-capitalist because the movie fails to, or rather doesn't, question the hoarding of wealth or the exploitation that leads to it.

The movie largely does not fall under the ambit of Marxist aspirations. It is not a critique of capitalism in any shape or form and instead is a participation within the same system as long as one is benefiting from it. It thus misses out on the message it aims to spread of being a movie that truly is 'eat the rich' in nature. The audience instead is told that being the exploiter is not a bad thing in and of itself. Rather, it enforces arbitrary morals on the individuals. If the individuals are not seen as worthy or if they have certain eccentricities whose actions are not agreed to by the audience, then the violence that happens to them is portrayed as acceptable. Applying the concept of hegemony given by Gramsci, we see a subtle difference in the way that it can be seen in the movie. We see Oliver being the person that is essentially formulating incidents and accidents that make the Catton family essentially consent to him not only living with them but also becoming a part of the house until he is bribed to leave. In the end, we also see him manipulate events until all the assets of the family, including the Saltburn estate, are bequeathed to him. Hence Oliver, the person who is supposed to be a protagonist, follows the classical stereotypes of the capitalist class and ultimately becomes the criticised figure. While the movie does not ever outwardly justify Oliver's actions, it also does not criticise it. Hence, in the ending of the movie, where we see Oliver happily dancing across the estate, we realise that the movie does not aim to dismantle capitalism but to co-opt it to benefit the protagonist.

The movie was produced by creator Emerald Fennell alongside actress Margot Robbie and Josey McNamara. It was distributed by MGM in the United States and by Warner Bros. Pictures internationally.

### *The Menu- Literal 'Eat the Rich' story*

Featuring an ensemble cast of talented actors like Ralph Fiennes, Anya Taylor Joy, Nicholas Hoult and more, The Menu is a black comedy horror film that was released in 2022 and went on to garner a box office collection of almost 80 million dollars<sup>8</sup>.

The plot is based around an extremely lavish dinner course being served to a select group of people on a remote island by a world-renowned chef. The movie then goes on to show how the meal was designed to be the last meal of everyone's life with the exception of Anya Taylor Joy's character, Margo. The guests are all essentially held hostage and are to be killed. All except Margo.

Throughout the movie, the characters on the island, with the exception of the chef, his team, and Margo, are often criticised for lying, cheating, deceiving, and more. The movie's nature is largely anti-capitalist; however, that sentiment is delivered without any structural critique of capitalism. While we might be able to attribute that to the fact that it was intended to be a dark comedy, the criticism it aims to deliver then largely falls flat.

The movie addresses the capitalist class as evil and punishes them. When viewed from a Marxist lens, the idea about a revolution by the working classes as well as dissolving the class divide is not addressed in the movie; instead of disregarding the system, the movie actively punishes the people who participate in it. It never questions the structures that put the bourgeoisie at the top of the hierarchy, which is the system of capitalism. The movie fails to question the class divide from its roots. In terms of the hegemonic ideals, we see these people actively realize that consent to be ruled by a certain class is manufactured out of ideas<sup>9</sup>. There are no themes where they deal with ideas of a revolt or uprising to dismantle the system rather than looking at people in the system as bad individuals. Like the last movie, this movie never pushes the idea of a collective consciousness<sup>10</sup> and fails to take into consideration the racial and ethnic diversity when dealing with the idea of 'Eat the Rich.'

The movie was famously produced by actor Will Smith alongside Adam McKay and Betsy Koch and distributed by Searchlight Pictures, which has been owned since 2019 by Disney.

### *Parasite: An international anomaly?*

Parasite winning the Oscar for Best Picture in 2019 was a historic moment, as it became the first non-English language movie to do so. The South Korean movie directed by Bong Joon-Ho and starring Song Kang-Ho, Cho Yeo-Jeong, Choi Woo-Shik and others is a brilliant critical commentary on the class divide within the country. The story follows the Kim family, their struggles and how their lives get entangled with the wealthy Parks family. The movie shows how, after a series of events, violent acts, and injuries, the family is fragmented.

Although a great critique, it ultimately gives the idea that no matter what you do, the class divide is deep-rooted. The ending suggests that someone at the end of the hierarchy might have to work tirelessly for years for even basic necessities like buying a house. The movie is a very realistic interpretation of what living in a capitalistic society looks like, with the rich being able to live in houses with all amenities and luxuries while others suffer in less than ideal situations. The movie's message shows the rigidity of social stratification. Hence it becomes a bleak check of the reality of living in a capitalist world.

The movie earned over 250 million dollars at the box office<sup>11</sup> and is distributed by CJ Entertainment, which is a second-tier chaebol (a conglomerate of businesses, usually owned by a single family) conglomerate<sup>12</sup>.

### *Anti Capitalism and the lack of intersectional representation*

Erik Olin Wright, in his 2016 essay "How to Be an Anti-Capitalist," mentions that within anti-capitalist struggles, four strategies have been used: taming, smashing, resisting, and escaping<sup>13</sup>. In these movies, although we see a sense of anti-capitalist consciousness, we don't see them participating towards any collective ideals if analysed through Marxist interpretation. Oliver very clearly participates in the same capitalist fervor; Margo was only free on the boat; back in the world, she will still be participating in the same system and the

Kims very clearly realise that they cannot attain social mobility no matter how much they work. There is a sense of perpetual gloom of participating in the system. One cannot escape it alone without real collective action. The movies that are part of the 'eat the rich' genre are individualistic and lack any collective strategy.

There is a lack of representation of multiple identities in the movies mentioned. The nonexistent intersectionality makes any attempts towards change superficial. The oppression of people is of varying degrees. The inequalities faced because of one's gender, color, or sexuality, in addition to class, are either not mentioned at all or are mentioned very minutely (such is the case in *The Menu*). The conjunctions of these identities when talking about class inequality are extremely important, as these are interacting systems in real life. So, to apply the theory of intersectionality, as given by Black feminist Crenshaw, it becomes important to understand suppression at multiple levels. The experience of a group of people who face discrimination in a highly racial, ethnic and class-divided society<sup>14</sup> is not taken up in the movies at all. The intersection of multiple identities and their oppression has always been pushed under the rug.

### *Conclusion*

The expansion and proliferation of 'Eat The Rich' cinema in recent years does not reflect an anti-capitalist motivation; instead, it co-opts the ideas and the unrest seen in the public and instead uses it for making a profit. By validating revenge fantasies as class conflicts, the movies aim to provide the audiences with emotional purgation by having them vicariously experience emotions from the oppressed perspective<sup>15</sup>. This is done without political substance and hence fails to provide a critique on the system of exploitation.

The narratives presented in *Saltburn*, *The Menu* and *Parasite* still function within the ambit of Fischer's Capitalist Realism, as they do not seek to provide any alternative systems to capitalism and instead aim to be a part of it, to punish a few people who participate in the exploitation or accept it as it is. The movies allude to structural and systematic inequalities but are not able to propose a way of dismantling the same. The system in all these movies remains individualistic.

Furthermore, extremely important narratives of intersectionality dilute the critique that they try to put forth. The experiences of women, racial minorities, people from the LGBTQIA+ community and others are either played off as tropes or are simply absent. The experiences then, unlike reality, become universalised in the films and do not depict genuine issues, further hurting the validity of these movies as critiques of capitalism.

Cinema is a part of media that allows the ideas to be proliferated in the society, but they are constricted by ownership and distribution. True critique of capitalism must start with the criticism of the system that exploits millions of people and until that happens, Eat the Rich cinema will just be a genre enforcing and reproducing ideas of inequality and misery.

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# Does Cinema Lie?

2024 - 2025

Norman  
Rockwell

Does Cinema Lie? 2024-2025

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## CHALCHITRA DARPAN TEAM 2024-2025

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