

THE VANISHING POINT

How did we get here? As the twenty-first century unfolds, several seemingly unprecedented phenomena evoke ghosts of past histories that suggest we may have been here before. Forms and arguments gone acquire new relevance, as retrospective signposts for the contemporary. **India Since the 90s** assembles texts and images from diverse academic disciplines and cultural practices, to look again at the millennial turn that is shaping our present.

Series Editor

Ashish Rajadhyaksha

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India Since the 90s

THE VANISHING POINT

Moving Images After Video

edited by

RASHMI DEVI SAWHNEY



Tulika Books



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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

India Since the 90s

THE VANISHING POINT: *Moving Images After Video* is the third in our series of six volumes titled *India Since the 90s*. The series is published bilingually, in English and Chinese, and is intended to provide a historical frame for our present. As with the other volumes, almost none of the texts and images used here have been originally created for these books. Many of them are well known. What is new here, therefore, apart from their choice of selection and their assemblage into this particular order, is their re-presentation into something of a cognitive mash-up. This form is intended to give these works an afterlife, attempting both estrangement and refamiliarization, as we seek to re-describe an era that is our very recent past and, in some instances, our actual present.

Over the second decade of the twenty-first century, even as we have seen totalitarian state apparatuses roll out emergency measures of extraordinary control, including nationwide lockdowns, in the name of the public good, we have been incessantly reminded of longer histories – reminded, notwithstanding the radically new nature of various phenomena at play (the new viruses, new technologies, new modes of organization and ‘occupation’, new systems of regulation), that even ‘unprecedented’ developments can force larger historical frames with which to view both their time and ours.

As clarity slowly emerges around the ‘new normal’, to use the phrase of the moment, the uncertainty of our time sees the cover-ups of normalcy occasionally lifted to give us a glimpse into what lies beneath. It is almost as though the growing emphasis on social distancing lies in inverse proportion to the impossibility of *historical* distance. Even as our capacity to imagine stable utopian futures drains away, it is reinvigorated by a textual prescience, as texts and images produced in other times and other places begin to say something in conditions their makers could never have anticipated. We have discovered, it seems, an entirely new ability to read uncanny significances.

Such a definition of the ‘normal’, this series argues, takes us relentlessly and compulsively back to other moments in time, which too had encountered a similar uncanny everyday. This is not a return to origins. Rather, it is the discovery, in such moments, of the ghosts of other moments. Today’s stories, however things pan out, cannot be told without recognizing in them the spectres of the 1990s, the decade that launched a globalization whose end might well be signalled in 2020. And the 1990s cannot in turn

be comprehended without accessing yet another equally ‘new’ moment in history – the 1940s – when the Indian state was imagined, politically and administratively.

The present volume turns to a practice of the moving image that comes after the cinema. It simulates the cinema even as it re-presents – recycles – what used to be the cinema in a radically different medium. As it brings what was once the cinema into a new ecosystem of data storage and circulation, of cutting/pasting (or what one text in this volume refers to as *thundu*, the insertion of ‘cut-pieces’ of censored-out material) and meme-making, the book also returns the moving image into the garbage heaps and recycled second-hand markets that have been over the years its natural archives. As these archives house what was once the cinema in modes of data manufacture, storage and circulation, they too build their ambitions, define their own manifestos.

Back in 1968, a documentary filmmaker working for the state-owned Films Division had inserted two frames (or a one-twelfth of a second flash inside a film) that said ‘F*ck Censorship’. It must have appeared to viewers back then as a hallucinatory ‘did-I-really-see-that?’ experience of strange ghosts in the celluloid machine. Just under forty years later another filmmaker, clinging to his dead camera for dear life as he was submerged by the all-devouring tsunami wave that hit Tamil Nadu, brought a different value to the ghosts his camera had captured. Two years earlier, numerous all-seeing light-weight cameras with built-in sound recorder and portable editing suites had witnessed the consequences of a massacre that took place in the town of Godhra in Gujarat. The violence inaugurated a new era of state authority with the ‘Gujarat experiment’, as it came to be known.

The convergences, as political documentary made common cause with the larger world of social media, gave documentary filmmakers a new role within a multi-disciplinary political avant-garde. Such an avant-garde has built on earlier battles, like the famous battle for freedom of speech in the cinema fought by the filmmaker K.A. Abbas in a legendary Supreme Court case in 1970, that was reprised in several other legal challenges to the state in the decades that followed. In 2004 it transformed many of the locales of earlier battles. Concepts that had once defined the cinematic *auteur*, such as the historic binary of realism and censorship, took a new turn as the moving image moved from the centre to the peripheries of the state.

As the decade wore on, the battles too shifted geographically from cities to rural and semi-metropolitan locations (such as, this book shows, Purulia in Bengal, Malegaon in Maharashtra and the villages of Telangana), which saw in musicals, comedies and spoofs the rise of a vibrant, largely unregulated, cinephiliac, no-budget moving-image economy. Over time they included souped-up renditions of once-revolutionary music with communist adherences. They also brought to images and sounds distributed on cheap CDs, pen-drives or local terrestrial cable (or even on regional satellite TV), a political edge that reprised previous battles over linguistic and cultural self-representation that had once defined the nation-states of the twentieth century.

As with other volumes in this series, this one too is framed within the battles for citizenship that defined the millennial turn, when the abstract ‘people’ of the Constitution of India were re-embodied, in the public domain, as new subjects – new viewers and new makers – in all their desiring, elusive and terrifying immediacy. As also in other

volumes, here too there is an emphasis on the way Article 21 of the Constitution, or the right to 'life and liberty', took multiple new turns, as technologies associated with the regulation and ordering of covert space saw battles over state action. Such action has meant something very particular to the moving image. In 2021, shortly before this volume went to press, the Government of India abolished the FCAT – the Film Certificate Appellate Tribunal – to create what many have dubbed a 'super-censor', a parallel arrangement bypassing and potentially superseding the established censorship mechanism. Two months before the abolition of FCAT, a Digital Media Ethics Code was released by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology directly targeting 'intermediaries' of digital content, from Twitter to all social media platforms, messaging platforms, all web publishers and OTT platforms.

That was not all. Shortly thereafter, an entire apparatus of state regulation of the cinema was restructured – an apparatus that had been assembled after Independence following the recommendations of the S.K. Patil Film Inquiry Committee of 1951, which included the National Film Archive of India, the Films Division and what would later become the National Film Development Corporation. This mechanism of governance, defined in large measure by the Cinematograph Act, 1952, has been controversial. Whatever its history, or its ambitions to give a new nation its own new cinema in its own self-image, its redefinition in 2021 certainly signals an end, as much to the cinema itself as to the self-identity of the old Nehruvian state.

Each of the volumes exists on its own, as conceived by its editor. A common feature across the texts has been to introduce a glossary of keywords. Several of these are from the Indian languages, some are names of people, yet others are acronyms or abbreviations, while others are English words used in India in ways that divert sharply from dictionary definitions. All are being re-presented here, by way of explanation and for purposes of estrangement and refamiliarization.

Perhaps the only common element across the titles, apart from the interest in the period following the 1990s in India, is an interest in a triad of concepts that we may name *politics*, *space*, *technology*. The pendular movement of the political spaces, until recently spaces of public existence, increasingly turned into spaces of negotiation between *state* and *planet*, a twenty-first-century variation of the old local–global divide, defining both virtual and physically occupied space. Technology is apparatus, frame, mode of mediation and surveillance. Three further terms, in turn, produce the *habitus* for these concepts: *democracy*, the *body* and the *text*. Even as key democratic concepts such as freedom need to be defined anew in times when bodies – both physical and virtual – occupy complex political domains, the text – as *prescient*, as *re-interpreted* and as *meme* – too finds itself bearing new responsibilities.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha

Series Editor

Bangalore, 1 January 2022

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On 12 December 2020, thousands of workers at Wistron, a Taiwanese company contracted to manufacture iPhones by Apple Inc. in the Narasapura industrial area, in Kolar district of Karnataka, vandalized the factory. The workers had not been paid for months, it was reported, and in a world only just recovering from the damages of the pandemic, their desperation was screaming out. The losses to Wistron were to the tune of 200 million dollars, and Apple's Public Relations firm had to rush in to do damage control.

The episode speaks to all the contradictions that the 'moving image' holds out to us today. The iPhone symbolizes the most tantalizing fantasies about the moving image in the twenty-first century: sharp high-definition images captured with multiple powerful cameras, easy navigation, clean interface, cutting-edge design, video and sound technology good enough to make professional films, all fitting into a pocket. On the other hand, there is nothing new about the condition of the work force, whose sweat-shop economies represent a very old struggle, even as they manufacture new objects of global desire. The mobile phone as the ubiquitous apparatus of the moving image opens up difficult questions beyond the realm of aesthetics. *The Vanishing Point* glances back at the last three decades from this vantage point, where the analogue and digital worlds create an illusion of convergence.

The term 'moving image' has commonly come to be associated with experimental and expanded cinema. In this volume, it is used to refer to a range of image-

valances, all of which can potentially be accessed through our mobile phones: popular cinema, artists' films and videos, documentary, YouTube videos, and others. One might view these diverse image-types collectively as a demographic marked by commonality and difference, constituting a Republic of Images.

Flashback to 6 December 1992: The Babri Masjid¹ is demolished by a mob of 1,50,000 'volunteers' (*kar sevaks*) led by prominent members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Television channels broadcast images of the mob dancing in jubilation, to a vengeful cacophony. The Mediastorm Collective's documentary film, *Kiska Dharm, Kiska Desh* (Whose Country Is it Anyway?) was made just a year before this damning episode. 'We decided to place the Babri Masjid dispute at the centre but sought to understand its reverberations across the country', says Mediastorm in their essay in this volume. 'Eleven years after our documentary, we saw the worst carnage ever in the history of independent India – the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat² led by the state government. Many asked Mediastorm to rush to Gujarat to make a film on the violence and trauma of the riots. But we just could not. The time for neat analysis was over – Gujarat had rocked the country to its core. We were no longer sure if a documentary could even remotely capture the violence and terror of 2002. *Perhaps a new form was required for this*' (emphasis mine).

Soon after the horrifying pogrom of 2002, the BJP was defeated and a progressive alliance of left and secular parties led by the Congress formed the government in 2004. It was a jubilant respite. Geeta Kapur's essay on the transformative potential of the 'critical documentary' is written in this hopeful moment. She issues a clarion call to artists to essay the role of 'artist-citizens,' referencing a longer trajectory of the avant-garde, and asks provocatively, 'is culture what artists make?' The question bears reflection nearly two decades on, as the populist narrative justifying the destruction of constitutional values, public institutions, mob violence and vigilantism is fuelled by a mediatized propaganda of the seditious desires of an elite class termed variously as 'anti-nationals', 'pseudo-intellectuals', 'painted and dented women' and 'urban naxals'.³ The answer to Kapur's question – as argued by cultural theorists – is that culture resides within the quotidian and the ordinary, and is created by and belongs to everyone.

The texts and images selected are demonstrative of the making and re-making of culture (through cinema and the visual arts), as practices grounded in complex negotiations with the state, history, memory, capital, desire, technology, prejudice, law, body, power, ethics and hope. In keeping with the objectives of the *India Since the 1990s* series, the anchoring triad of space, politics and technology has determined the logic of selection. The authors, filmmakers and artists who have so generously permitted reproduction of their work will, I hope, also indulge its repurposed use in the volume. Readers are urged to view/read the texts and images in this volume as 'documents of the present', and, notwithstanding the intentional arrangement, are invited to draw their own conclusions.

Other Ways of Seeing

Three sections and two inserts make up the totality of the book. The first insert is a visual essay with a brief commentary on ‘the Cinema of Prayoga’ by film historian and curator Amrit Gangar, who coined the term in 2005 as a rejection of terms like ‘experimental’ and ‘avant-garde’.⁴ An unlikely candidate interrupts the assemblage of filmmakers he usually associates with the term. This is a one-page facsimile of an article by the filmmaker Saeed Akhtar Mirza, published in 1980, where he makes a sensational statement: that ‘a certain kind of cinema exists only because a certain kind of State exists.’ States are not culturally naive, says Mirza, and exist to perpetuate the interests and rule of certain groups over others. The second insert, ‘The Trial’, elaborates upon this further by way of a 2004 judgement issued by the Bombay High court on Anand Patwardhan’s documentary, *War and Peace*. Patwardhan, a towering figure of Indian documentary, has quite literally taken the state by its horns, turning to constitutional rights time and again, defending freedom of expression, and in the process, expanding the legal interpretation of the term ‘freedom of expression’ itself.

Gangar, the Prayoga filmmakers, Mirza and Kapur speak to each other’s – often divergent – reflections on the relationship between aesthetic form, state control and political art. They are joined by other voices in the second section of the book, titled ‘Artist as Citizen’. That these are female voices is an editorial choice I have made. Featured here are multi-media artist Sheba Chhachhi; documentary filmmakers Deepa Dhanraj and Paromita Vohra; theatre director and filmmaker Anamika Haksar; visual artists Pushpamala N. and Sharmila Samant; new media artist Afrah Shafiq; and documentary directors and film theorists, the Mediastorm Collective.

Mediastorm, started in the mid-1980s, was (they say) an ‘accidental’ formation, created in spontaneous response to the Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights Under Divorce) Bill, enacted following the Shah Bano case (of a 62-year-old woman who claimed alimony after being divorced by her husband under Muslim Personal Law). In 1983, the Yugantar Film Collective was founded by Deepa Dhanraj along with friends. Stills from her films *Molkarin/Maid Servant* (1981, 16 mm), and *Something Like a War* (1991, 16 mm) – now part of a major digitization project by the Arsenal Film Archive, Berlin – feature in the volume. Speaking of another documentary (on the 1984 riots between Hindus and Muslims in the city of Hyderabad), believed lost and now being restored at Arsenal, Dhanraj says it had scratch marks even on the negatives. ‘At one point, we were filming a riot, and some men threw a very compact ball of vermilion – they had made it like a little rock, like a missile – straight at the lens. [Cinematographer] Navroze [Contractor] didn’t stop shooting. . . . The vermilion entered the lens and the magazines, there

were scratches, and we kept it all in. . . . These are material questions, but they're also theoretical questions.⁵

All major movements in modern history have rallied around the right to representation, the right to 'be seen and heard', none more forcefully than the feminist movement. A consensus that 'the master's house cannot be dismantled with the master's tools' (as Black American writer and civil rights activist Audreya Lorde phrased it) demanded a *new idiom* and *form*, true to the experiences of women (or any other 'identity community'). Paromita Vohra creates a first-person fictional narrator who is often uncertain, vulnerable and even unreliable. 'The idea of a created person, who moreover is a capricious character, strong in personality, overtly performative and hence a bit unreliable, creates, I believe, two dynamics', she says. 'First, it does not compel the subjects in the film to an obvious personal intimacy with the filmmaker. Second, it also demands from those in the audience an intimacy of engagement. . . . This demand also arises from the fact that the narrator is obviously an unreliable, prejudiced or half-informed character who is not grounding the viewer.' Vohra's article is punctuated by multi-media artist Afrah Shafiq's interactive website inspired by the 1905 Bengali short science fiction story 'Sultana's Dream' by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Shafiq's project emerges from her research at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSS) archive in Calcutta. Using archival material, she creates an interactive audio-visual account of the infamous 'women's question' in nineteenth-century colonial India with playful, irreverent characters who speak for themselves and join the 'first persons' of Vohra's documentary pursuits.

The mythic depiction of women is often a direct consequence of a denial of individuality, something that defines the work of both Nalini Malani and Pushpamala N. In Pushpamala's *Indrajaal/The Seduction* (2012, b&w, silent, 4 min 30 sec, looped video), the conflict between lead characters of the *Ramayana* (Rama and Ravana) is transferred on to a performative encounter between their siblings, Lakshmana and Surpanakha. In a revenge episode, Lakshmana cuts off Surpanakha's nose, in retaliation for Ravana's abduction of Sita. As blood gushes out of Surpanakha's (performed by Pushpamala herself) nose, the video completes its loop and a dancing Lakshmana appears on screen again. 'I am interested in the citational mode as a way of delving into a kind of collective memory, or modern folklore', explains Pushpamala. 'By being in the work, I insert a specific subjectivity and my own modern sensibility into the picture, and break the codes.⁶ One is inside the image, not just outside, looking.'⁷ Pushpamala's work has been interpreted in many ways: as postmodern feminist art, and photo-performance and video art, that works variously through 'masquerade', 'gestus', 'fetish', 'citation' and 'iconophilia'.⁸

Malani's use of citation and mythology has been widely written about.⁹ Her article in this volume, 'Can You Hear Me?', reflects upon her animation

work, ranging from 8 mm film in *Dream Houses* (1969) to iPad animations in *Notebooks* (2017 onwards). 'The many issues that I think of and want to talk about in these *Notebooks* animations come from a wide range of stimuli. This could be daily politics, other people's writings, or something mundane I might have just experienced.' 'Why does Modernism form such a threat in these days of growing orthodoxy? Why limit the freedom of the other?', Malani ponders, adding, 'In the face of extreme domination by the state there is no way out of the darkness but to find a language in satire even as one squirms around trying to find ways to look for the light.' Her question-statement, 'Can you hear me?' begs a return query: *Who is being spoken to? Who is the audience, the spectator, the listener here?*

The 'spectator' is a densely theorized figure in cinema studies, although art history (not visual studies) has conventionally been more interested in the art and the artist. Multi-media artists Sheba Chhachhi and Sharmila Samant have been invested in taking their work to diverse audiences, the people. Samant, known for her community-based and activist work (along with the late Tushar Joag), started Open Circle, a platform to establish dialogue and collaborate with non-artists, setting up art shows at several unconventional public venues.

Nancy Adajania's essay on Sheba Chhachhi highlights an adventurous trajectory, which she suggests is crucial in understanding Chhachhi's art. Her experiments with 'staged portraits' and her interest in female ascetics and dissident and subaltern spiritual traditions have produced powerful images of women, the women's movement, collectives, and a possibility of articulating resistance on feminist terms. Adajania places this within her own long-standing inquiry into constructing the 'pre-history' of new media or inter-medial art in India.¹⁰ She draws our attention to works produced by Chhachhi, each one experimenting with different modes of exhibition and production, often in public spaces like malls, slums, museums, community centres and highways.

Three Films and a Trip: Gods, Horses, Eyes

Readers are invited to navigate the book as they might an exhibition. While the contents have been classified into three sections, several of the texts and images can be read against the grain, and in a sequential logic completely different to the order of their presentation. The three lead images for each section, for example, form their own parallel narrative. The images are: a still from Mochu's *Cool Memories of Remote Gods* (2017, 14' 48' digital video); a frame from Anamika Haksar's *Ghode ko Jalebi Khilane Le Ja Riya Hoon* (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis, 2018);¹¹ and montaged frames from Avijit Mukul Kishore's film *Squeeze Lime in Your Eye* (2017).

The common thread (I see) running through the three films is that they are

psychedelic in their ambition; they straddle reality, fantasy, dreams, desires and memories, blurring them to etch out a sharpened relationship between image and reality, history and the present. Set in the remnants of hippie trails in India, *Cool Memories* documents the fading traces of 1960s counterculture groups as a phenomenon contemporaneous with the development of the personal computer and cybernetics. Mochu sets off on a search to find residues of this spiritual-techno-fictional past. A still from the film opens the Raqs Media Collective's essay in this volume, 'Now and Elsewhere', on the 'contemporary'. The trails reveal a decaying corpse,' says Mochu, 'one with a vampiric ambition.' As computers promised machines to replace the human mind, counterculture desired to recreate mystical experience as customizable 'internal technologies'. The Woodstock generation's dream of universal harmony lay reduced to psychedelic posters, cheap reworks of surrealist paintings and new age mixes of religio-techno-fusion music, as shown in the video.

Anamika Haksar welds together documentary footage, animation, special effects, folk art and devised theatre, to address an incredibly challenging subject: the precarious lives of people living in abject poverty.¹² She explains the complex processes that went into the making of the film, which included seven years of grounded research in Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), the decision to use theatre and the visual arts (visual artist Archana Shashtri was a close collaborator on the film), and instructions to the editor, Paresh Kamdar, to 'keep the randomness in the edit'.¹³ 'The lives of the homeless and marginalized are so unpredictable and precarious, it's impossible to depict them through narrative logic', says Haksar. In the image used in the volume, a Lenin-inspired cart-loader (played by the actor Gopalan) who aspires to be a workers' union leader is seen towering above a city square, unfurling a gigantic red communist flag. In the square stand hundreds of workers, singing revolutionary songs. However, the dream of the great revolution doesn't materialize, and instead the film is strewn with minor acts of subversion, often enacted as dreams or fantasy. Mickey Mouse distributes sweets in a remand home, a pick-pocket runs along an unending parapet, a labourer bottles up his *malik* (master) in a glass jar.

The final image, in the continuum of the three that open each section, is a montage of modified frames from *Squeeze Lime in Your Eye*. Cinematographer and documentary filmmaker Avijit Mukul Kishore turns to Kausik Mukhopadhyay, who migrated from Santiniketan,¹⁴ Bengal, to Mumbai and started making art out of discarded mechanical objects. He collects, fixes and repurposes household objects (toasters, telephones, bulbs, printers, computer keyboards, monitors and so on), bringing them back to life as playful kinetic sculptures. Poet and critic Ranjit Hoskote's catalogue essay on the film states: 'Riffing on the scientific working model and the booby trap as they do, these fantastic, seemingly whimsical ensembles refuse to sit still. . . . Calibrations of speed, an interplay of the regular and the

erratic, a counterpoint between anticipation and unpredictability are integral to the performance: for these kinetic sculptures play their role in an eccentric ballet or marionette dance of mechanical and cybernetic objects.¹⁵ In this volume, Mukhopadhyay (and Mukul Kishore's film) pay homage to the millions of workers in informal and quasi-legal media economies who recycle, repurpose and copy analogue and digital content and media infrastructures, for reasons of passion as well as for livelihood.

Shanghai Express to the Future

The third section of the book, 'Post Cinematic Flows', addresses 'new' media cultures which emerged post liberalization when the flow of goods, technologies and capital began to travel across national borders more easily. The impact of the opening of the media economy – from one national television channel in 1991 to hundreds of options via satellite and cable television – led to radically globalized desires and fantasies of consumption. Concomitantly, it generated an intense anxiety about the erasure of 'cultural values' that popular cinema (rebranded as 'Bollywood') monetized, extending its markets to the diaspora, which now constituted its preferred balcony audience. Two interesting imaginations of cinema's audiences emerged at this time: the 'diaspora film', referring to the large-budget, star-studded film shot in North America or Europe, professing conservative 'Indian' cultural values appealing to nostalgic non-residential Indians (NRIs); and the 'multiplex film', used to describe films, often made in English or Hinglish, displaying an urban-cosmopolitan sensibility, with 'non-star' actors, produced on relatively smaller budgets, for an elite and English-speaking audience small enough to fill a multiplex hall. Unequivocally, the figures representing both these imaginaries of market and audience were Bollywood's biggest star, Shah Rukh Khan, and Calcutta's rugby player, Rahul Bose. The old tussle between Bengal and Bombay (cinema) had returned in a new form.

As Indian cities, and indeed Indian cinema – now well into twenty-first century circuits of global, capitalist aspirations – rushed headlong into a quest for a makeover, both faced the question of direction; where do they want to go next? Urban planners dreamt of a glitzy metropolitan skyline evacuated of slums, as Sharmila Samant's film *Shanghai Tales* (2006) critiques.¹⁶ Inner-city areas of Mumbai, including Girangaon, home to the fierce 1980s textile mill workers' strikes, were lying derelict and seen to be in need of redevelopment. Fearing a piecemeal approach by the development authorities, a group of urban planners and architects began a study of the city's existing infrastructure. The *Gentricity* project by Ranjit Kandalgaonkar, Saurabh Vaidya and Aditya Potluri was produced as a response to this survey, to portray the 'strange contradictions,

unique patterns and peculiar forms of existence' that were already in place among the communities residing in these neighbourhoods.

Previously (publicly) undisplayed images from the *Gentricity* series illustrate Ashish Rajadhyaksha's essay, which, in asking searching questions about 'cinema's future', issues a checkmate prognosis to cinema. Bombay cinema, he says, is held back by an 'analogue cultural memory, which prevents it from becoming its VFX-heavy, digital superhero ego ideal'. Referencing Indian cinema's biggest superheroes – Shah Rukh Khan and Rajinikanth – he turns to what he sees as the 'signature achievement of Indian cinema studies', i.e. the link between cinema, everyday life and politics. '*Cinema stands at the cusp of narrative, apparatus and citizenship*. . . . Today, the Indian superhero's ability to walk through walls fundamentally depends on the skill of the *spectator* to manoeuvre the star-hero through them. If the fan fails, the hero too must' (p. 236).

Meanwhile, We the People

In the meanwhile, elsewhere, fans had become cinephiles and producers. Multiple local media industries had begun to flourish across smaller towns in India in the new millennium. These new sites of media production stake their own 'right to representation' on a form of cinephilia.¹⁷ Madhuja Mukherjee's essay describes the production of low-budget films in the districts of Purulia and Bankura in West Bengal. Manbhum, explains Mukherjee, represents both language and land/location, and contrary to popular assumption, a map of 'Bengali cinema' would include videos in the Manbhum, Santhali, Nepali and Rajabhangsi languages, in addition to films in Bengali that 'flow outside cinema theatres, beyond both national and global copyright regulations'. Inserted in Mukherjee's essay are stills from Faiza Ahmed Khan's documentary film, *Supermen of Malegaon* (2012), responsible, perhaps single-handedly, for generating popular and critical interest in Malegaon as a *phenomenon*.¹⁸ The Malegaon film industry, located around 300 kms from Bombay/Mumbai, was subsequently theorized variously as an example of exuberant cinephilia through spoofs and remakes, and as a multi-sited spatial network of trade and economic systems.¹⁹ Manbhum videos, Malegaon spoofs and the meteoric rise of smaller industries – like Bhojpuri cinema after Manoj Prasad's 2001 film, *Saiyya Hammar* (My Sweetheart) – are collectively taken to indicate the growing inability of pan-Indian cinema to address its once-upon-a-time national publics.

Its increasingly dispersed publics include, as we see in S.V. Srinivas's essay, internet and television audiences repurposing cultural forms associated with earlier Maoist movements in Telangana's long history of political struggle from the 1940s. 'How can emerging patterns of media consumption help us to understand today's mass politics?', asks Srinivas, suggesting that, 'What we are witnessing is

not the evisceration of the original or the death of the cinema but the transition to a new situation and the emergence of new locations and modes of publicness' (p. 292).

The 'public' is a very special category of film-viewers, quite distinct from the fan, spectator or audience. The spectator can be a singular entity or a part of a gathering; the fan can be an individual but derives agency only as part of a collective club; the audience is always plural and consists of anonymous members which cultural ethnographers have attempted to inject with identity. The public, in contrast, is always multiple, and is perceived to be discerning, all-knowing, and wielding subtle powers over that which they are public of. The gravity of the nomenclature was conveyed in popular idiom by a song from the film *Roti* (Bread, dir. Manmohan Desai), released in 1974, just a year before the Emergency was declared: '*yeh jo public hai woh sab jaanti hai*' (the public knows all). Geeta Patel's text interrogates the sentiment of public protests against the film *Fire* (1996, dir. Deepa Mehta), for its portrayal of a homoerotic relationship. The protests came from a variety of publics: right-wing Hindutva groups who claimed that homosexuality was alien to Hindu culture, and queer groups who stated that the film's portrayal of lesbianism was deeply problematic. Patel reflects upon the opposition the film faced from young female students of Indian origin in North America – the diasporic public – who were outraged by the film's representation of 'Indian masculinity'. Referencing a parallel strand of 1998–99 parliamentary debates on the opening up of the insurance industry to foreign investment and the episodic blows to secularism through the 1990s, she extrapolates the risk, usually attached to the individual body, to that of the body politic now including the public who expresses collective indignation. This, says Patel, forms the idea of the 'culturally immutable' nation, entrusted to protection by the public and, in turn, guarding the public from possible (external) danger.

The Trial

The two major aspects of legislation around cinema are concerned with the regulation of the image itself (censorship and freedom of expression) and the regulation of the circulation of the image (copyright and intellectual property).

Censorship regulations are grounded in a peculiar imaginary of 'another – less able – person' who needs to be protected from 'potential harm, hurt or corruption'.²⁰ At the root of this imagination is a world divided into adult-like, discerning individuals and infantile others who need to be guarded from a speculative danger. Orders issued in two court cases have been included here as inserts, signifying the judicial courts as performative sites where the aesthetic limits of cinema are shaped. One is the controversial 1970 Supreme Court judgement by Justice Hidayatullah in Khwaja Ahmed Abbas's petition against

The Union of India, for the complete removal of film censorship. The second is a 2003 petition by Anand Patwardhan against the Censor Board. The texts of the two judgements together reveal the subjective mechanisms through which the law is interpreted and its provisions extrapolated. It can be debated *ad nauseam* about whose reason determines the scope of the 'reasonable restrictions' clause in Article 19(2) of the Constitution.

Copyright regulations emerge from the logic of property, with potential for monetization. In April 2008, Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc. filed a case in the Delhi High Court against the proprietor of Cinema Paradiso, on grounds of copyright infringement. Cinema Paradiso, claimed Warner Bros, was violating copyright law by renting out in India, DVDs bought in North America and Europe. Earlier, in 2002, Time Warner Entertainment Company Ltd had filed a case, along with seven of the world's largest media conglomerates, against Arun Kumar Gupta, the proprietor of Lamhe: The Music Shop, a small DVD and CD outlet in Greater Kailash I, New Delhi. The plaintiffs included, in addition to Time Warner, Hollywood's most powerful production houses: Columbia Pictures, Disney, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Tristar, Twentieth Century Fox and Universal Studios. What possible threat could a small CD/DVD rental shop in Delhi pose to these media giants? Jeebesh Bagchi's essay refers to the 2002 Time Warner case, citing the affidavit filed by the corporation: 'It is alleged that even a single rental of a film by the Defendant is capable of causing irreparable injury and damage to the plaintiffs. . . . The potential for damage is immeasurable and irreparable' (p. 223). Addressing the paralysing anxiety around the regulation of the cinematic object and, by extension, cinema's publics, he argues that the 'prohibitory sign' curtails lived practices of quotidian creativity in media and technological improvisation within the 'shadow city'.²¹ The media, he writes, is haunted by the fear of 'a spectre': *the leaky, rapidly circulating, sensorium of cinematic affect and objects dispersed across material and digital forms, produced by the 'fecund copy'*. 'The vitality, dynamism, conflict and inventiveness visible in this social world demands a more complex description of the entanglement of technologies, subjectivity and desire' (p. 218). Bagchi focuses on informal economies of media production running from makeshift tenements, and the ecology of the 'copy' as digital objects that threaten to escape their legally sanctioned habitat, the copyrighted CD or DVD. Lawrence Liang's essay on the *digileak* picks up precisely this question of the metamorphosis of analogue cinema into its digital avatar.

Archives of History

'As time passes,' say Raqs Media Collective, 'the reasons for remembering other times grow, while the ability to recall them weakens. Memory straddles this

paradox. We could say that the ethics of memory have something to do with the urgent negotiation between having to remember (which sometimes includes the obligation to mourn), and the requirement to move on (which sometimes includes the need to forget). Both are necessary, and each is notionally contingent on the abdication of the other' (p. 9). All six essays in the first section, 'Remembrance and Forgetting', are acts of remembrance narrated from points in time in the future. The past is a time left behind, which can only exist in the present through objects that have outlived it, or through memories that struggle to pull it back into consciousness in the form of images and emotions. In another sense, the past is that which has disappeared or 'gone past the eyes'. 'What does disappearance do to the telling of that which has disappeared?' asks Raqs (p. 9). The central object of disappearance posited in this section is cinema (or film) itself. How do we narrate the history of film, after film?

Documentary filmmaker R.V. Ramani asks this question through a moving note on his chance encounter with the 2004 tsunami. Coincidence has emerged as a major aesthetic underwriting Ramani's films, making his work deeply contingent on time. He battled the waves, desperately trying to hold on to his Sony PD 100, as his essay here documents. Seven years later he made a film in memory of his camera, *My Camera and Tsunami* (2011). Ramani's memoir and his *Tsunami* film illuminate crucial challenges that historians of Indian cinema have faced: *how to construct a moving image history in the absence of legitimate documents, of well-preserved prints, of archives themselves?*²²

Sudhir Mahadevan takes us on a flashback with three possible answers to this potentially paralysing question. The first through Kamal Swaroop's *Tracing Phalke* (2013), which chronicles the filmmaker's journey in search of D.G. Phalke (known as the 'father of Indian cinema'). Merging documentary, re-enactment and archival research, Swaroop creates an experimental film and a historical record. The second protagonist is the Indian-American director Krishna Shah, who dreamt of a cross-over between Hollywood and Bollywood way back in the 1960s. In 1979 he directed *Cinema Cinema*: a flashback of film history narrated through a fictional film screening to impassioned audiences of the single screen theatre, who are 'interactive, haptic, profoundly engaged and resolutely social' (p. 34). The final protagonist is the unremarkable director Hiren Nag, who made a one-film-wonder with *Film Hi Film* (1983). Strung together as a dramatized account of a producer's desperate struggle to make films, it weaves in 'unused' and incomplete sequences from films (recovered from various studios) that were begun but could never be completed or released. It constructs a history of cinema through found footage, repurposing the footage from junk into a meta-narrative. Taking the archive as a heuristic, Mahadevan describes cinema's propensity to make its own past through relentless reuse rather than preservation. *Film Hi Film* reminds us of the possibilities of the 'reserve' – that which is not yet deployed – as outlined by Pad.ma in their sharp manifesto on the

digital archive, placed as an Epilogue to this volume. The millions of hours of CCTV footage, says Pad.ma, are not just leftovers of the surveillance machine. They are its constitutive accumulation, the mass that awaits the event. The archive in this sense is sympathetic to practices which sabotage capitalist accumulation, and which have an interest in the future: in the 'unrealized'.

Sebastian Lütgert aka Robert Luxemburg – one of the authors of 'Ten Theses on the Archive' – contributes a cryptic note, densely strewn with references to personal friendships. Along with collaborators, he transforms cinema into both data and painting, in the process of creating an archive that beckons the possibility of property as a commons, generating surplus through distribution rather than accumulation. Lütgert's account within the narrative unfolding in this book can be seen as both a dream and a promise.

Return of the Repressed

Indian cinema, from its infancy, has battled self-doubt and an acute anxiety about living up to an imaginary ideal of 'quality'. Film magazines and debates in newspapers and periodicals are replete with analysis of 'what ails Indian cinema'. This has been an obsession for Bombay cinema in particular, forever fretting about its inferiority to Bengali films. Bengali cinema, on the other hand, has borne the historical burden of 'taste', which, Subhajit Chatterjee's article might suggest, continues to be a legacy it battles. Taking readers into the seedy bylanes of exploitation cinema, Chatterjee's interview with the Ghosh brothers (the most prolific producers of this genre in Bengal) explains the production economy of these low-budget remakes. History here is not told, but retold. Could this be the final fantasy of contemporary Bengali cinema? The pursuit of liberation from its cultural history, possible perhaps only through reincarnation?

In an inverted situation, Darshana Sreedhar Mini writes about Malayalam cinema's desperate attempts to erase its embarrassing past. The dark secrets that must be concealed, in the manner of a *film noir*, refer to soft-porn films from the 1980s and 90s. Her essay deploys K.R. Manoj's film *Kanyaka Talkies* (Virgin Theatre, 2013) as a first-person narrator, telling the story of the irrepressible history of celluloid soft porn.

One of the repeating images used in this volume, and particularly in the article by Raqs, is a frame grab from the famous song from K. Asif's magnum opus, *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). In this song, Anarkali (played by Madhubala) declares her love for Prince Salim (Dilip Kumar), and has to pay for such audacity of a 'mere slave girl' by being buried alive behind brick walls. Elsewhere one has argued that Anarkali may indeed be the irrepressible uncanny of history, resurfacing repeatedly, sometimes as a meme and at other times as a spectre.²³

Let us return to the question: what does disappearance do to the *telling* of that which has disappeared? The ‘telling’ here becomes an act of crucial intervention, keeping that which seems to have gone past the eyes alive in other ways. One of the irrefutable disappearances with the phasing out of celluloid film is the bond between image and reality, what Geeta Kapur suggests one might view as ‘spectres without footprints crisscrossing the threshold of objectivity’ (p. 139). What is erased is a clearly mapped relationship between world and image. A new contractual arrangement between the material world, image, meaning and representation takes on fluid forms, where the image is larger than life, and life itself is part of and smaller than the image. This creates an ‘enmeshed view’, comprising multiple components that piece together a perspective that is simultaneously an aerial shot and a close-up, telescopic and microscopic, resting on the surface of the skin and piercing through it.

Kaushik Bhaumik’s conversation about Kashmir with the Desire Machine Collective (DMC) gives an uncanny and chilling account of such a sensorium. The conversation is triggered by an art installation about a theatre repurposed as a military camp. Cinema, the site of desire, is transformed into a location of violence. ‘The cinematic apparatus is dismantled, but the seats remain . . . a theatre of the absurd is being played out in the dark, without an audience or any reference to time – delirious new ghostly images invoked anew where the flow is disrupted, the past disconnects from the present’ (p. 91).

* * *

What new insights can a book on ‘the moving image’ reveal about history? The answer is in the epistemology of the moving image itself: what is the knowledge of images, what does the image know? In the long trek over centuries to what we have come to understand as ‘modernity’, the birth of cinema in the late nineteenth century ambushed the project of science; a double agent disguised as technology, or the first child of science. Cinema captured the irrational desires and fears of the modern world, masquerading as both document and narrative. It did so with great flourish and *élan* until its very substance, celluloid film, was overtaken by digital video, and a new relationship between ‘world and image’ was established. A history of the ‘recent past’ generated through the moving image as documentary evidence or archival record – as this volume attempts – yields anachronistic accounts saturated with time. Three ways of ‘looking’ have been demonstrated here. The first is cinema looking back at its own past, the second is women artists looking at and looking back at the world, and the third is the state looking at its publics as they return the gaze. The volume has been a long time in the making, and is marked deeply by the challenges posed to the sustenance of a seemingly normal life during a global pandemic. The characteristics of its time leave traces

on any piece of writing, and the surreal rhythm of the two years that this book was in the making is stained across these pages.

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