

ALGORITHMS, ADVERTISING, AND AESTHETICS: THE UNEQUAL CIRCULATION OF FILMS

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Abstract

The rise of short-form digital platforms such as YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels has transformed the way cinema is circulated and consumed. Yet, this transformation is deeply uneven. While heavily promoted films benefit from algorithmic amplification and advertising investments, parallel and feminist films—such as *Thithi* (2015), *Jallikattu* (2019), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), and *Thappad* (2020)—struggle to achieve comparable visibility despite their critical acclaim and cultural value.

This paper interrogates the unequal circulation of such films within digital spaces by examining the intersection of **algorithms, advertising, and aesthetics**. It argues that the digital economy privileges market-driven spectacles while marginalizing alternative and resistant cinematic voices. At the same time, the condensation of films into short reels opens new possibilities for representation, where fragments of narrative can highlight gendered subjectivities, socio-political critique, and cultural memory in ways that diverge from mainstream promotion.

Situated within the broader theme of “Digital Humanities: Narratives, Literature, and Cultural Transformations”, the study foregrounds how digital infrastructures both reproduce hierarchies of visibility and create opportunities for new forms of reception. It seeks to critically engage with the political economy of circulation, asking: Who gets seen, under what conditions, and at what cost?

Keywords: Culture and consciousness, films, parallel cinema, production

Introduction

The expansion of short forms of content available in the form of YouTube shorts, Instagram Reels, and TikTok is shaping the way we consume cinematic forms of entertainment in our daily lives. There's also a decrease in the form of single screen cinema where multiplexes with so much facilities are flourishing. But this is not limited to this. Advancement has changed its form. Now, theatres, television, or DVDs are no longer restricted to their native form. Rather, films now

exist in a fragmented digital afterlife where they are consumed as clips, reels, and algorithmically recommended snippets. This ongoing change has expanded the reach of heavily marketed films. It has also reversed the ways hierarchy existed in terms of online visibility. Mainstream cinema, produced for audiences and supported by promotion based industry, thrives in these eco systems. By contrast, parallel cinema or new indie cinema or independent cinema or alternative cinema - despite their critical acclaim - struggle to achieve visibility in an algorithmic market that rewards vitality over nuance.

This paper makes an attempt to explore this uneven circulation of three films from contemporary Indian parallel cinema: *Nasir* (2020), *Cinemawala* (2016), *The Fourth Direction* (2015), and 150 YouTube shorts. Each film exemplifies a unique aesthetic and political resistance to spectacle: *Nasir* through its observation of realism cinema; *Cinemawala* through its meditation on the decline of cinema; *The Fourth Direction* through its exploration of everyday terror in insurgency ridden Punjab. The study of selected films text highlights how marginalization takes place in digital infrastructure, yet it also provides and makes an attempt to look at a number of possibilities for cultural memory and critique, that can be explored if the fragments of selected film text will be absorbed, and circulated.

Theoretical Framework

The study consulted the intersection of two theoretical frameworks in order to provide strong foundation for the arguments referred:

1. **Political Economy of Media** (Vincent Mosco, Robert McChesney):

This aspect highlights how the capital circulation and advertisement industry commodification influence the social media content around us. As Vincent Mosco elaborates in his work *The Political Economy of Communication* that, “The political economy of communication is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of communication resources”. Algorithms prioritize the content that brings a higher number of audience engagement and profit. “Left to the market alone, the media system will produce what is profitable, not what is most useful for democracy” (McChesney).

2. **Algorithmic Visibility** (Tarleton Gillespie):

It is not only limited to continuous homogenization of creative power of humans but the platforms decides the disbursal of what is being available to us and what is not i.e., what is seen and unseen. This was observed in terms of select films used for the study because there was hardly any promotion or discussion available for these films. Hence, it keeps shaping cultural

hierarchies. It can aptly be said in the words of Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet* (2018): “Algorithms are not merely neutral tools of selection; they embody judgments about what should be visible, relevant, and valuable.”

Together, these frameworks illuminate how independent films with politically resistant aesthetics are systematically disadvantaged within digital circulation, while also suggesting how short-form fragmentation may paradoxically enable alternative receptions.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is of - purposive sampling and simple random sampling. Purposive sampling is executed to observe the circulation, consumption and production of select films from the broader domain of Contemporary Indian Parallel Cinema whereas Simple Random Sampling was used to study the general content available in the YouTube shorts online.

Case Studies

Nasir (Arun Karthick, 2020)

It is a story about a day in the life of a saree salesman in Coimbatore. His gentle poetic sensibilities collide with the brutal reality of communal violence. The film has long takes and observation shorts, the way realism has been featured in Andre Bazin's work, prioritizing duration over drama. This aesthetic directly satirises the logic of the "clip economy", which demands the complete story in a time frame of 40 to 50 seconds. There are very few shots of the film where there are scenes of his poetry or fleeting moments of tenderness stripped of the devastating narrative arc. The very fragmented circulation of Nasir's verses can nevertheless function as a counter memory drawing attention to the precariousness of minority subjectivities in contemporary India.

Cinemawala (Kaushik Ganguly, 2016)

It is about a generational conflict between a father who clings to the ethics of single screen cinema and the son who profits from pirated DVDs. It also emphasizes the matter about the erosion of cinematic values due to the flourishing market logic of production and consumption based economy. There are hardly any YouTube shorts available for this film i.e., Cinemawala has virtually no algorithmic presence. The empty theatres, the father's despair do not get virality. Yet these absences highlight how digital infrastructure enacts a second death of Cinema, burying film that criticizes commodification in the silence of non circulation.

The Fourth Direction (Chauthi Koot) (Gurvinder Singh, 2015)

The film is set in Punjab during the Sikh insurgency. It renders the pervasive atmosphere of fear through silence, stillness and everyday encounters

rather than explicit violence. While fragments of its imagery i.e., a barking dog silence, anxious train passengers, could circulate powerfully as metaphorical shorts. However, they rarely appear within algorithmic feeds. The film's digital invisibility demonstrates how algorithms reproduce geopolitical hierarchy of circulation, making narratives palatable to the National and global market.

Results

It was observed that a high percentage of YouTube shorts which were advertised had a huge marketing industry involved. However, the Youtube shorts reflected a lesser number of reels production for the films which broadly fall under the domain of Contemporary Indian Parallel Cinema.

Discussion

The biggest reason for this spectacular difference was the involvement of the finance factor and algorithmic engagement based circulation. The films which have a marketing team, advertisement team and financial team involved getting a chance to reach a larger number of audience. Thereby affecting the way content is produced and consumed by people of any country. It also remains a matter of discussion for the films because the fourth pillar of any country's eco system is 'Media' and if the real truth does not get disseminated to the audience, the way cultural and moral changes take place around us is not percolated down in an equivalent way. The biggest problem hovers is for the youth of our country because the way it shapes their cultural identity is equally important to be taken care of. The majority of the films that reach the cinematic theatre are either promoted by big funding agencies or deal with depiction of love stories. The present definition of love is also moulded (re)moulded during this formation of new forms of content. There is a very critical urge to become something in a career, achieve something, as well as there is a balanced and (dis)balanced state of self searching for love. These algorithms based production of resources are not mere simple forms of representational content available online; rather, it has also become the wave of culture formation, cultural shock and cultural transformation that can be observed, studied and propagated. Hence, the study tried to reflect upon this question that a very mere and simple form of content is not context free.

Limitation

The study had its limitations because the content circulation also depends upon the individual subjectivities. Machine learning and algorithms work in a way that determines which form of content is consumed by different individuals. It will pop up the material that was looked up for the last search menu. It depends upon what is watched or what is not watched. Its circulation is highly controlled and shaped by what we see in it. However, these variations are there, but this fact cannot

be doubted that finance plays a factor in the circulation of certain specific ideas which promotes mainstream dominated ideologies, either useful from political perspective or market perspective.

Future Research Direction

In order to study the impact and effect of these short forms of online content 'Neuro-Aesthetic and Cognitive Theories' can be studied in future research. The application of 'Audience Reception Theories' can also be applied to study how individuals view circulation of content across different platforms.

Conclusion

The paper began with the idea to analyse the rhyming circulation of content and their context around us. It observed the way YouTube shorts, Instagram reels and other forms of social media platform producing content for the public is not only responsible for the propagation of dominant narratives going on around us but it also puts other ideas on the margins which could not flourish due to certain restraint of finances or other restrictive barriers present in the industry.

The study tries to conclude in a tone of introspection for the form of content that is either available through cinema or youtube shorts. Because what we consume leads to how we become and later on it contributes to the formation of an individual identity and personal thoughts. The way an individual sees, processes and thinks is not a mere simple activity that individuals perform, rather a big corpus of the culture industry is continuously working and increasing the vulnerability and precariousness of innocent beings.

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