

Article

**Mayank Dutt Kaushik**

**Tergiversation of Virtualized Trans-National:  
Whose Gaze is it Anyway??**

**Abstract**

*When the true King's murderers can roam free, A thousand magicians arise in the land.*

*Where are the feasts promised?*

*Where is the wine?*

*The new wine, dying on the vine*

- An American Prayer by Jim Morrison

What happened to the promise that technology's embrace—the internet's expanse, cinema's allure, mobile phones' reach, VR headsets' immersion, Google Maps' guidance, and Instagram's allure—would unveil feasts of connection, yet the new wine, like dreams, fades on the vine? From the outset, humanity has strived to broaden its perceptual horizons, from the primal depictions found in cave paintings to the innovative perspectives of the Renaissance, exemplified by Brunelleschi's groundbreaking experiments and lifelike frescoes. Advancing through the ages, from Robert Barker's expansive landscapes in the 18th century to the emergence of hyper-realistic digital panoramas, optical toys, and 3-D graphics, simultaneously the sound advancements and then the immersive worlds of film, television, simulation advancements, mutated techno-anthropological universal, and the latest in virtual reality experiences. The evolution of reality media has been characterised by motility and anionic digital aberrations. This paper posits that these shifts at the fringes of reality in media aren't just straphangers but the drivers of esemplastic change, pulverising it into a degenerate. This research paper aims to integrate and re-contextualize methodological interventions and concepts from several seminal works—such as Debashree Mukherjee's exploration of cine-ecology in late colonial Bombay (1920s–1940s) and Tejaswini Ganti's ethnography of Bollywood production and distribution during the 1990s–2000s. It situates these insights within the broader context of contemporary industrial transformations in the Indian film industry. At its core is a rigorous examination of recent developments (post-2019 COVID lockdown), resulting in protests and negotiations led by SAG-AFTRA in 2021, juxtaposed against the backdrop of emerging technological advancements and transformative software tools such as Adobe, Sora, Colorlab AI, Runaway, Da Vinci Resolve, and Unreal Engine, as well as the mushrooming field of generative AI. These software platforms transcend their utilitarian roles as mere production tools, becoming catalysts for restructuring the industry's methodological and infrastructural paradigms. Prominent examples in the domain of expanded cinema in digital production are utilised to present the current state of mediated technology. Francis Ford Copolla's *Megalopolis* (2024), a virtual production curated via ICFX; and *Remember this place: 31°20'46"N 34°46'46" E* (2023) by Patricia Echeverria, a VR documentary that delves into the resilience of

communities facing displacement, spotlighting VR's role in preserving cultural heritage and collective memory in Palestine. The paper delves into the profound impact of these cinematic configurations on global filmmaking, spanning technological, economic, industrial, and social dimensions. From groundbreaking collaborations with major studios like Disney, FX, Netflix, and Amazon on Virtual Production to the rise of new documentary genres like Virtual Reality and 360° immersive projects showcased at prominent film festivals globally (Cannes, Tribeca, Venice, Mami, Sundance, etc.), these productions challenge conventional norms. As they transition from niche, festival-curated circuits to the mainstream media landscape, they symbolise a genre asserting its significance and demanding acknowledgement and respect. The central inquiry of the paper revolves around exploring the foundational infrastructures and material components of these virtual new-media technologies. While these transformations may not have fundamentally altered the filmmaking process, they have spawned numerous opportunities for experimenting with new media possibilities, offering a diverse array of choices to filmmakers. This world of VR isn't limited to the peripheries of entertainment, gaming, animation, or art exhibitions. Still, it has rapidly burgeoned into the world of retail, medical procedures and operative interventions, learning, communication channels, architecture, porn, and the potential metaverse of Zuckerberg's *empathy machine*. Even Indian cinema is embracing virtual production in films like *Bholaa* (2023), *Ganapath* (2023), *Shoorveer* (2022) on Disney Hotstar, and Nitesh Tiwari's *Bawaal* (2023), to name a few. The pivot of this transfiguration lies within an innovative ecosystem of production setups, such as Canon's NorthStar, Annapurna Studios in Chennai, Media Monks in Noida, Phantom FX, and so on. This expanding digital ecology signifies a paradigm shift in the array of tools available for filmmaking, underscoring a profound transformation and exacerbating the digital divide.

**Keywords:** multisensory, immersiveness, networks, virtualised transnational flows, virtual worlds, borders, identities.

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The transnational flows of cinema and new media in our era have been orchestrated via digital software, apparatus, the internet, and cloud computing. The previous modes of bifurcation based on production, distribution, and exhibition generate a lag in the current media ecology, which amalgamates all these categories into one bloc of affect through the vectors of digitalisation and global interconnectedness, ultimately mediated through various mediums and produced as a transnational pixel. The pervasive nature of capitalism in our network society has given rise to the phenomenon of being "born-transnational," akin to a digital baby already provided with the mechanisation of subjection into the laps of global networks and virtual hybridisation.<sup>1</sup> The act of archiving and posting a baby's content on social media as a digital object generates a flow that, in turn, alters the frames of identity and presence. However, the unfettered capitalism of today's unfree markets, run by oligopolistic cartels, creates these restricted markets by deferring the release of cutting-edge technology to maximise profits through a single commodity designed to last for years, even when we may already be ten generations ahead in research and development and prototype creation. The important consideration would be to imagine every digital act as plugging into a vast AI machine already in place, fusing brains to create a wonderful multisensory ecology through which the potlatch of our becoming transindividual passes. Already, we witness a shift from society, history, politics, family, and home towards solitary trans-

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<sup>1</sup> Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.7312/walk16594>

individual existences in continuous AI connectivity via biofeedback loops. In this context, the world of Virtual Reality (VR) and immersion becomes a critical point of departure into the global realm of software and interface interconnectedness. The idea of Virtual Transnationalism thus holds profound implications for cultural identities, collective memories, and spectatorial experiences in our increasingly digitalised world. Now, all of this can be singularised on a single platform by a single medium that translates all human experience into a common code: digital.

In the late 1960s, as Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze* set, the musical world was ablaze with lyrics that conjured a kaleidoscope of phantasmal visions. Correspondingly, Ivan Sutherland engineered a metaphorical *Purple Haze* experience by engineering a seismic shift in computer-generated graphics. However, his pioneering work was on a scale that, albeit smaller by today's yardstick, laid the groundwork for the vast array of possibilities we currently thrive upon. His tour de force, *The Sword of Damocles* (1968), marked a critical juncture. This avant-garde contraption consisted of a head-mounted display boasting twin cathode-ray tube monitors connected with a comprehensive system of mirrors and prisms.<sup>2</sup> This apparatus ushered forth the earliest semblances of augmented reality—a prescient precursor to the immersive virtual worlds we now encounter. It's important to emphasise that during this nascent stage, realising a complete and fully functional virtual reality environment was a Sisyphean task due to the constraints imposed by limited software and hardware resources.

Incorporating Debrah Shaw's insights from her seminal article *Transnational Cinema: Mapping a Field of Study*, which delineates phases in cultural shifts rather than pinpointing precise moments in time, the paper acknowledges the everyday-evolving landscape of Virtual Reality (VR).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Arjun Appadurai's concept of "scapes" in cybernetically enmeshed spaces, including technoscapes and mediascapes, converge into the transnational pixel, digital filaments, reflecting a virtualised globalisation process.<sup>4</sup> This convergence manifests in pre-production, production, post-production, distribution, and exhibition, all mediated through digital and virtualised flows. Collaborations with major studios and the emergence of new documentary genres in Virtual Reality and immersive projects challenge conventional norms and assert their significance in the mainstream media landscape. Debashree Mukherjee's analysis of Bombay's cine-ecology underscores the intricate interplay between film production, urban landscapes, and labour dynamics, particularly in the digital era where a cohort of digital cine-workers leads the adoption of innovative tools like Unreal Engine and AI workflows rendering a beat of digital unmooring of images.<sup>5</sup> So for Mukherjee, a 'modern' city is central to cine-ecology, whereas in our contemporary media landscape - digitality refracting peripheralisation of Immersion, i.e. virtuality, is essential. While virtual production and AI-driven tools offer benefits such as cost efficiency and creative freedom, they also raise concerns about authenticity, job displacement, and ethical implications. Thus, the paper advocates for a nuanced approach to embracing these technologies, acknowledging their opportunities and challenges within the filmmaking industry. These new media plugins are agathokakological, but simultaneously, they also form an anterior state of development for the cinematic factory, which is still under the pack of disingenuous stars. Hollywood's conjectured exodus, the findings of

<sup>2</sup> McMahan A (2003) Immersion, engagement and presence: a method for analyzing 3D video games. In: Wolf MJP, Perron B (eds), *Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 67–86.

<sup>3</sup> Shaw, Deborah. 2018. "Transnational Cinema: Mapping a Field of Study" in *Routledge Companion to World Cinema*, eds. Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison and Alex Marlow-Mann. Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge

<sup>4</sup> Heyman, J. McC., & Campbell, H. (2009). The anthropology of global flows: A critical reading of Appadurai's 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy'. *Anthropological Theory*, 9(2), 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499609105474>

<sup>5</sup> Mukherjee, Debashree. *Making Movies in a Colonial City*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. p.14

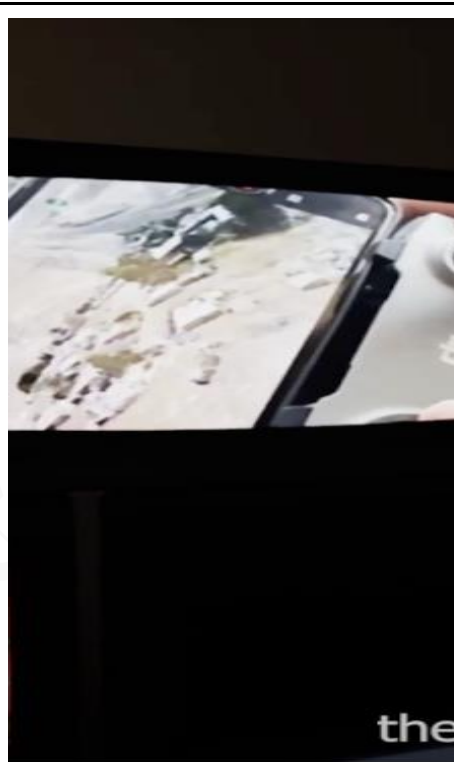
The Justice K. Hema Committee's report in India, and the dismissal of Eddie Egan by Lionsgate all underscore the global crisis the cinematic medium is currently facing.

Drawing from Tejaswani Ganti's *Producing Bollywood*, I emphasise the quest for respectability and professional distinction within the industry, spotlighting issues of creative autonomy and technological adaptation. The example used in this paper is a product of a major film festival, which generates an expanded space and site for a multiplicity of virtual productions. My exploration mirrors Ganti's focused approach as I delineate the perspectives and boundaries of cine workers navigating new technological landscapes. Furthermore, the emerging genre of immersive productions similarly wrestles with challenges of respect and acceptance on the festival circuit or even the theatres. While the entirety of VR-AR-MR-XR immersion remains uncertain, the software applications expand, and a return of the studio system (virtualised via software) within Virtual Production is gaining momentum. This is evident from the substantial investment in 2023-2024 and the establishment of virtual production studios across major Indian cities. Additionally, Walter Benjamin writes "that the equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice, and the sight of immediate reality has become a blue flower in the land of technology" in our times.<sup>6</sup>

**A- Remember this place: 31°20'46"N 34°46'46" E (2023) by Patricia Echeverria.**



**Fig. 1** showcases a screen grab from the VR documentary Remembering, which vividly portrays the virtual archiving of a lost place.

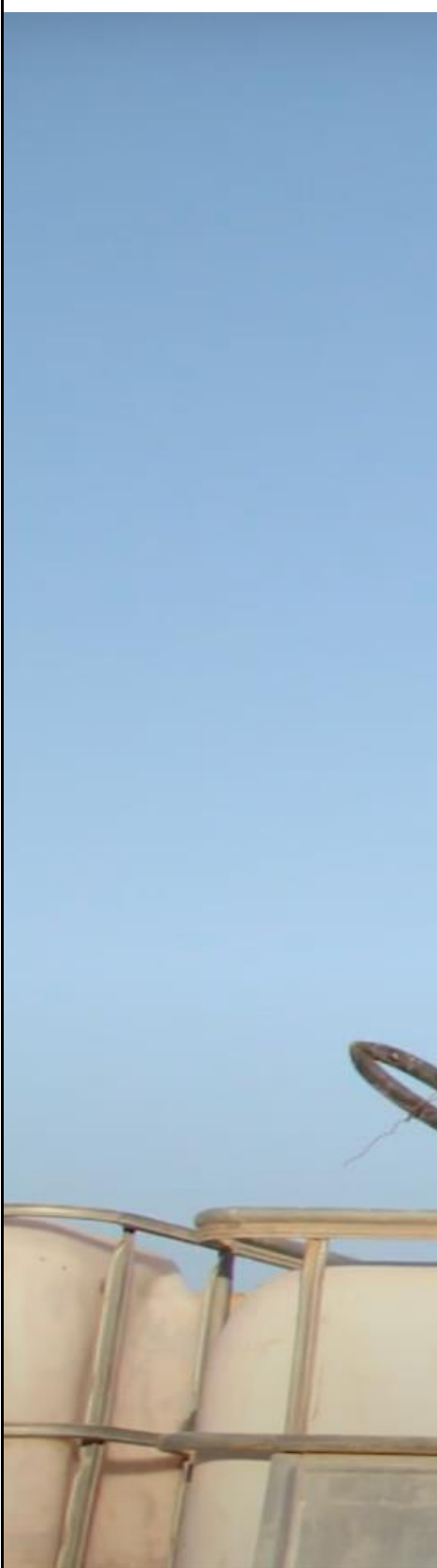


**Fig. 2** illustrates a multi-screen interface inspired by media reportage of Palestine, serving as one of the portals within the documentary.



**Fig. 3** captures a poignant moment from 'Remembering,' showcasing the simultaneous disappearance and presence of land, homes, communities, and lives.

<sup>6</sup> Zohn, Harry, Hannah Arendt, and Andy Blunden. n.d. "Walter Benjamin." Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed May 15, 2024. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.



**Fig.4** illustrates a human installation that was subsequently brought to life through virtualisation in the film.



**Fig. 5** portrays a dilapidated home alongside its digital remnants.



**Fig. 6** illustrates an Avataric interaction between multiple users.



Patricia Echeverria's VR documentary, set in Ramallah, Palestine, sheds light on the struggles and resilience of communities amidst geopolitical challenges. This VR experience documents threatened Bedouin communities, preserving their memories and homes in a virtual universe that rejects the universal longing for "home."<sup>7</sup> The film virtualises and archives an evacuee's property and properties under threat of destruction. Through the density and immersion of VR, virtualised transnational aesthetics reframe borders as porous membranes, fostering interconnectedness and empathy. The burgeoning genre of immersive experiences capitalises extensively on themes related to refugee camps, exile, migration, and borders. From prominent film festivals to significant art exhibitions, these 360-degree immersive installations aim to transport spectators/users to distant lands, where a mere change in perspective entails a shift in gaze. Leading non-governmental organisations, including the United Nations, prominent institutions such as MOMA, and prestigious events like Cannes, Berlin, and MAMI, leverage these mediums to inspire action and foster positive change on a global scale. As Alain Millon writes, "Across virtual bodies, our culture constructs its image; hence, the idea of transnational virtual body is also a political issue, one that will determine not only the image but also the degree of agency our culture is willing to accord to this transnational body living in the digital time of the post-postmodern schizophrenic world."<sup>8</sup>

Ivan Sutherland's concept of the "machine to be another" (TMBA) illuminates the intricacies of empathy. This concept triggers responses marked by "proprioceptive transference," emphasising its role in evoking embodied empathic reactions rather than constructing a deeper cognitive understanding of others.<sup>9</sup> This prompts a critical examination of VR's capabilities, as Sutherland argues, to replicate internal states by primarily reproducing physical conditions that may influence them. While TMBA may not consistently foster social empathy engagement, it remains a relevant avenue for exploring alternative paths within immersive media. Practices such as performance, Virtual Production, media installations, meta-Gamic channels, and other digital co-creative endeavours hold promise for extending VR's impact beyond individual empathy experiences and nurturing collective social engagement. Therefore, social and collective VR interactions offer an opportunity to cultivate more profound empathy. Furthermore, alterations to one's digital representation within virtual environments can significantly influence behaviour and cognitive states, instilling empathetic predispositions. However, scholarly discourse lacks consensus on whether VR, as a narrative medium, inherently elicits empathy through its immersive nature or is still a trick. Empathy emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by cultural and personal factors. Thus shaping virtual reality interactions and fostering variations in empathy awareness among individuals.

Acknowledging that VR mechanisms do not uniformly enhance understanding of others' emotions or automatically intensify empathic responses is essential. However, as I've presented throughout this paper, it's crucial to recognise that, in the post-COVID-19 world and the new order of content creation, production, and distribution, VR has expanded into multiple trans-medial permutations and combinations, animating pixels that, in turn, digitise reality through digital apparatuses. Essentially, the central argument I've endeavoured to convey is that on this expanded scale, where new devices and configurations are at the disposal of filmmakers, issues that were once stumbling blocks five years ago have become obsolete. Perhaps Zuckerberg's assertion that virtual reality is an "empathy machine" is not entirely accurate, but it represents a new modality for evoking empathy. Therefore, while the current fascination may be with big screens, 100-inch smart TVs, or

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Robaard, Meike. "Cyborg Incorporated: Mechanics, Aesthetics, and Cyborg Narrativity in David Cronenberg's Videodrome and eXistenZ." \*Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)\*, ISSN: 2547-0044, 2019, <http://ellids.com/archives/2019/12/3.2-Robaard.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Sutherland IE (1965) The ultimate display. In: Multimedia: From Wagner to virtual reality, Proceedings of the IFIP congress, pp. 506–508. Available at: <http://worrydream.com/refs/Sutherland%20-%20The%20Ultimate%20Display.pdf>

projectors, 360° videos and virtual worlds will capitalise on this trend once they become normalised, provided access issues are resolved. It's essentially about having trust issues when trying out a new drug. Professor Kaushik Bhaumik explains, “One wears one's being in the universe's entropy as an avatar costume.” It's this framework wherein, post-COVID, the techno-human interconnectedness quotient has increased by quite some decimals, and everyone is almost a version of Joaquin Phoenix from *Her* (2013) interacting, coqueting, and therapising themselves via cybernetic enmeshments powered by algorithmic data systems - akin to a Bonsai generating universal imaging in an inherently scalar transnational world. It's also a fact that audiences haven't turned into *Yannick* (2023) as a mode of spectatorship and engagement with this theatre of virtuality. *Remembering*, employs visual elements fabricated from 3D reconstructions of real sites, spaces, and artifacts and recorded localised soundscapes and community acousmatics. The production utilises immersive narrating. To summon reminiscences of erased histories and spaces and transpose them into a virtual realm. The preservation process through digital means becomes a political act that is only plausible within the context of XR technologies.

### Marking the flows of Transnationalism in the film:

1. We witness the convergence of activists from diverse backgrounds in Ramallah. Here, local Palestinians intersect with cross-border advocates, linked through a shared fidelity to BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) and conflict resolution. Their exchange of ideas and solidarity forms a global network of activism transcending borders.
2. The international media spotlights the plight of Khan al-Ahmar, a Bedouin village facing demolition. Through the lens of outlets like the New York Times and European press, the struggles of this community become a global concern. This flow of information and attention brings the village's story to the forefront of international discourse, influencing its fate.
3. The aspiration for peace bridges the Israeli-Palestinian divide, as seen in the director's initial interest in collaborating with Israeli artists on VR projects. While this endeavour may falter within the confines of Ramallah, the intent underscores a desire for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.
4. Patricia Echeverria and Lubna's collaboration epitomises cross-border solidarity. Lubna, hailing from a recognised Bedouin village in Israel, extends her efforts to support unrecognised Bedouin communities within Israel. Together, they traverse physical and metaphorical borders, amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalised communities on both sides.
5. Using VR—XR techniques to virtualise and digitalise multiple sites. Collaborations across the metaverse, i.e., across hemispheres. Furthermore, virtualising the archive.
6. The multiplicity of narratives, perspectives, and identities. Finally, I can enter a major film festival (Venice) without subtitling it into English. (A device to activate ethical interculturalism, if it's possible).
7. The temporality of chance “So I ended up in Ramallah just by chance, without planning,” says Patricia Echeverria in her podcast *Voices of VR*.
8. The Venice Immersive exhibition mode, a global platform for screening films, is accessible online from 10 am to 11:55 pm via a designated link.

Drawing from Laura Marks' *Experience—Information—Image: A Historiography of Unfolding in Arab Cinema*, the concept of ‘unfolding’ in virtual worlds involves the gradual exploration and discovery of digital environments, while ‘enfolding’ encompasses the integration of layers of meaning and functionality within

these spaces, thereby enhancing the immersive experience.<sup>10</sup> In her work, Anna Tsing delves into the rationale behind frictions and the intensification of landscape transformations. Similarly, friction may emerge from the convergence of various stakeholders and interests in virtual reality devices or expanded cinema technology.<sup>11</sup> This could entail tensions between the virtual experiences offered to users, the tangible realities of their production, and disparities in access to technology and digital content. Ravi Sundaram, in *Post-Post-colonial Sensory Infrastructure*, contends that tapping into the energies of new urban information ecology and platform capitalism, as explored in this paper, gives rise to labour issues highlighted by unions such as SAG-AFTRA on one end, and the networked and profit-maximising endeavours of data brokers and constantly surveilling and data-collecting algorithms deployed for profit generation.<sup>12</sup> Something similar to what Terranova and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun have been trying to underscore through their recent scholarship. Furthermore, the new Transnational aesthetic is purely digital, so much so that all its components are made of binary codes (0,1).<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary digital-cine-ecologies represent a dynamic force transitioning from spectatorship to creation and consumption, characterised by a pervasive fascination with immersion into screens and content consumption across multiple devices. While the art world has embraced VR frameworks for producing and consuming art, the cinematic realm grapples with its apprehensions regarding the medium's meaning and materiality. Nonetheless, the emergence of VR documentaries revolutionises the archival process, enriching archives by transforming them into photorealistic, interactive VR objects and virtual environments. Integrating virtual reality (VR) technology into filmmaking exemplifies Simondon's framework of individuation in digital cine-ecology. Initially existing as a potential tool with various capabilities, VR undergoes an individuation process as filmmakers experiment with its integration, aiming to enhance storytelling and engage audiences. Through dynamic interactions between filmmakers, VR technicians, and audiences, new narrative forms and cinematic experiences emerge, blurring the boundaries between traditional cinema and immersive storytelling. This transformative shift highlights the evolving landscape of contemporary filmmaking driven by technological innovation and creative exploration. Furthermore, I draw from Debashree Mukherjee's usage of the phrase, *cultural techniques*, which refers to the close relationship between humans and technology in how we create and use tools, machines, and media. It suggests that technology and culture are not separate but deeply intertwined. This concept highlights that humans shape technology, and technology, in turn, shapes human behaviour and culture. Through her interdisciplinary lens, she reveals cinema as a dynamic realm where audiences and filmmakers jointly traverse the landscape of modernity, propelled by innovative narratives and advancements in production, despite encountering persistent challenges—similar to the objective pursued in this research paper.

Emmelhainz's assertion that contemporary capitalism prioritises interactivity over content underscores a fundamental shift in economic dynamics.<sup>14</sup> In this paradigm, the value of time becomes a commodity, eclipsing all other considerations. Central to this concept is the notion of the "gated community," epitomised by the ubiquitous username and password, which serves as the cornerstone of Deleuze's "control society,"

<sup>10</sup> Marks, Laura U. 2010. "Experience—Information—Image: A Historiography of Unfolding in Arab Cinema" in *Cinema at the Periphery*, ed. Dina Jordanova, David Martin-Jones and Belén Vidal. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 232-253. <https://www.sfu.ca/~lmarks/downloads/files/Unfolding%20in%20Arab%20Cinema.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Tsing, Anna. "The Global Situation." *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 327–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656606>.

<sup>12</sup> Sundaram, Ravi. 2015. "Post-Postcolonial Sensory Infrastructure." *e-flux* 64, pg. 3.

<sup>13</sup> n.d. SAG-AFTRA | <https://www.sagaftra.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Emmelhainz, Irmgard. "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Amongst Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015.



surpassing Foucault's "society of discipline." As he suggests, virtualising networks into the cloud is imperative for instilling a sense of security among users, relegating cybersecurity activities to the obscure recesses of hyperspace—a parallel to how we conceal sewage pipelines beneath the surface, out of sight and out of mind. This confluence of ideas illuminates the intricate interplay between technology, power dynamics, and societal structures in the digital age, prompting critical reflection on the implications of our increasingly interconnected and surveilled existence. Today, expanded cinema is the electronic, digital cinema, the simulation of space and time, and the simulation of reality. And since what is at stake here is the re-correlation of virtual body-world constellations, we will anyway need to consider viscerally about visual-perceptual environments and the bodies—both avatars and physical bodies—that inhabit them.<sup>15</sup>

In the digital realm, borders take on diverse forms, influencing interactions and experiences online. Data protection laws like the GDPR establish virtual borders governing the flow of personal information across international boundaries. Internet censorship, exemplified by China's Great Firewall, erects virtual barriers, restricting access to foreign websites and platforms. Cultural and linguistic disparities create virtual borders within social media platforms, shaping content moderation and community standards based on regional norms. Technological access and digital literacy inequalities also contribute to digital divides, forming virtual borders that hinder participation in the global digital landscape. The proliferation of digital technologies has undoubtedly democratised access to cultural production tools, empowering individuals to create and share content worldwide. However, this democratisation is accompanied by a commodification of culture within the digital economy, giving rise to challenges such as intellectual property disputes, platform monopolies, and the exploitation of cultural workers. Behind the facade of accessibility lies a complex web of invisible labour and affective labour, where manual labour fuels the data mining operations of big tech companies, turning social data into capital. This labour exploitation extends to software production, where microtasks on platforms like Mechanical Turk underscore the new constellations of power that undergird digital technology production. Moreover, the dynamics of digital labour have ushered in a collapse of presumption, blurring the lines between producers and consumers in the sharing economy nexus. In this landscape, algorithms wield unprecedented power, relegating workers to the status of digital nomads navigating a labour market fraught with insecurity and inequality. Amidst these developments, the emergence of Web 3.0 holds promise as a decentralised utopia where blockchain technology emancipates users from the centralised control of platforms. However, this techno-utopian vision must be met with scepticism, as blockchain alone cannot address the underlying power dynamics and economic injustices inherent in the digital landscape. Without a concerted effort to confront exploitation and inequality, Web 3.0 risks perpetuating the same exploitative structures under a new guise.

Bill Brown highlights the nuanced interplay between materiality and media in W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen's edited collection, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. He delves into how technological progress shapes our understanding of the material world, notably through materialisation and dematerialisation processes. The transformation of reality into virtual pixels and its subsequent rematerialisation via VR technology constitutes a multifaceted process. This journey involves transitioning from individual experience to a trans-individual immersion, followed by a return to reality, illustrating the complex dynamics of interaction and immersion inherent in virtual environments. The deep-rooted desire for immersion serves as an anaesthetic for the cybernetic state of being, addressing the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I?' with the answer that one can be anything and everything and be anywhere and everywhere within the virtual world.

In conclusion, Marijke de Valck's exploration in "Screening World Cinema at Film Festivals - Festivalisation and (Staged) Authenticity" elucidates the framework of festival strategies, which can be applied to the

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<sup>15</sup> Denson, Shane. *Post-Cinematic Bodies*. Meson Press, 2023, p. 56.

emergence of major film festivals curating special events for immersive technologies such as VR, XR, and 360° experiences.<sup>16</sup> This trend underscores the evolving cinematic presentation and consumption landscape, where authenticity is contested and reshaped through festivalization. Moreover, significant investments are being directed towards these technologies, exemplified by the substantial AI-VR-XR investments in media in India, totalling over 90,000 crores. Cinema often echoes the chorus of its extinction, a thematic undercurrent that seems to arise concurrently with each fresh wave of technological amelioration or cultural upheaval. This theme is foregrounded again, framed by the recent SAG-AFTRA protests in Hollywood and the global integration of AI, VR, AR, and MR technologies into cinematic workflows. These technologies are becoming pivotal accoutrements across pre-production, production, and post-production stages, remodelling the architectonics of the cinematic medium. Manovich's *Software takes command* and echoes contemporary global media ethos. As the industry further adapts, the challenge lies in ensuring that these innovations integrate seamlessly and generate commercially successful films that ensure the transition of such technologies from mere devices to active sites of cinematic experimentation. If cinema is dead and the digital corresponds to the post-cinematic moment, AI-VR frames it, adding another dimension and touch to Interactivity and Immersion. The stardom and spectacle of Hollywood are what it takes to orchestrate a capital base for the acceptance and proliferation of new media technologies. Projects like Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis* (2024) embody the developing phase. With its commercial success, this technology could gain significant momentum, potentially disrupting the traditional innovation-invention order (if and only if the stars embrace it).<sup>17</sup> Current global art/exhibition space programming is curated with a surplus of VR-AI experimentation. Healthcare, too, is synthesising such tech within its current flows. It's just the maudlin cineastes and the cybernetic apocalyptics who aren't accepting the newer additions. With the launch of Google's AI editor, the ontological affirmation of reality through photography and its indexicality has been profoundly interrogated—encompassing debates around data surveillance, big data, data colonialism, digital labour, AI ethics, and VR regulations. However, the fundamental question remains: Is this truly a novel development? Does it enable diverse groups to experiment, innovate, and design new production modalities? As the clock ticks down to the European Union's implementation of harmonised AI regulations in two years, the hottest question in the tech world is poised to erupt into the public sphere: the fundamental ethical dilemma: Are AI models being trained on public and private data? Whether it's ChatGPT or Gemini, large data sets fed into the LLM models might invigorate these AI systems with far-reaching consequences for creativity, privacy, and intellectual property. Discussing AI in conjunction with VR is crucial because, in virtual production, AI-driven workflows and plugins render smoother and provide glitch-free experiences. AI and VR technologies are now vital in crafting cinematic beats on LED sets, enhancing the final product and rendered graphics. The spatiality of VR, with roots tracing back to optical toys from protocinema and early cinema, has converged with new media technologies to generate novel modes of production. Here, immersion and interactivity become gateways to new narrative forms, like Hale's Tours and the panoramas of early cinematic experiences.<sup>18</sup> From a cinematic perspective, VR dynamically transforms objects based on the viewer's perspective, embracing multiple viewpoints and diverse destinies without contradiction. This democratisation of media challenges us to reconsider how mass media is evolving—how the ordinary becomes extraordinary, and vice versa, as temporalities and perspectives intertwine. The ontological conditions of signal, noise, repetition, and difference are a few of the frameworks that position the virtual worlds, wherein the Avatar and the notion of splintered desire take the frontal seat. The shift towards interactivity, exemplified by post-World War II

<sup>16</sup> Stone, Rob, et al., editors. *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema*. Routledge, 2018. Chapter by Marijke de Valck, "Screening World Cinema at Film Festivals - Festivalisation and (Staged) Authenticity."

<sup>17</sup> Not just the actors but everyone involved, including the technicians who contribute to the star power, are acknowledged.

<sup>18</sup> Slugan, M. (2020). *Fiction & imagination in early cinema: A philosophical approach to film history* (pp. 59–83). Bloomsbury Academic.

communication strategies that involved direct targeting, invites us to question our identity within the communication process. In gaming, for instance, interactivity allows us to explore who we are and where we are—philosophical inquiries that resonate deeply within the immersive worlds of VR, where the avatar becomes a vessel for existential exploration.

This return of the spectator, reminiscent of early cinema, situates interactivity within a philosophical realm, challenging traditional narrative systems and directorial approaches. As Mario Slugan contends in his monograph *Fiction & Imagination in Early Cinema*, the narrator—an attraction in early cinema—gradually fades in the classical system, replaced by elements such as moral judgment, suspense, psychology, and mood conveyed through voice, tense, and characterisation.<sup>19</sup> Auteur theory, championed by figures like Godard and Griffith, showcases the constructed nature of cinema, displacing the narrator and revealing a space for imagination. While Griffith's moral stance is explicit, Godard's deconstruction of cinema highlights the illusion of authorship and the complex history of cinematic form. In this context, gaming redefines the philosophical implications of interactivity, with the implied narrator controlling the text, pushing players to make sense of and interact with the visual and narrative elements on the screen. Artificial software is now set to become the variables that determine the difference in the narrative integration of contemporary media. NVIDIA's turning into the most valuable stock in August 2024 is a marker of the same.

Through the lenses of cinema, media, and interactivity, we observe the intersection of historical performative bodies moving through space with live-action and non-historical realities. This transcendental category evolves as forms change, whether in filming a president or reflecting the media's intricate relationship with reality. As narratives and genres transform, so too does the space they inhabit, with media logic rooted firmly in the present and continually engaging with reality. Interactivity in virtual and synthetic worlds aligns with a Deleuzian argument. These synthesising concepts are not natural but architectural, offering a new understanding of how media shapes our reality experience. Historically, cinema's technical evolution—from lens grinding to gauge determination—has been driven by a DIY ethos where the most effective solutions were often the cheapest. However, as Coppolla's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* demonstrated, while technological advancements have made specific cinematic effects possible, they have also introduced significant costs. F.F Coppolla's \$120million *Megalopolis* (2024) is at the other end of this spectrum. The system within which digital effects operate is expensive. At the same time, the software itself may be inexpensive; it runs on complex and costly operating systems, making the entire production ecosystem an expensive endeavour. This paradox of cheap technology underpinning an expensive system reflects the logic of media proliferation: innovation thrives on simplicity and cost-effectiveness. However, as these innovations become industrialised, they enter a sophisticated and commodified system. Once a site of cheap tricks and in-camera effects, the camera has become a sophisticated piece of technology where innovation has been superseded by commodification. The recently launched Blackmagic URSA Cine Immersive is the real-time materialisation of the argument. This shift reflects a broader trend in media technology, where production tools are becoming increasingly complex and costly, even as the basic elements remain affordable. As media history demonstrates, this pattern of simplification and sophistication is recurring. The history of cinema, featuring its intricate interrelation of technological systems, narrative, and spectator engagement, continues to evolve, shaped by the ever-expanding possibilities of AI, VR, and other expanded cinema technologies. As these technologies continue to develop, they will undoubtedly redefine the cinematic experience, challenging our understanding of media, reality, and the role of the spectator in this new, interactive landscape.

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<sup>19</sup> Slugan, M. (2020). *Fiction & imagination in early cinema: A philosophical approach to film history* (pp. 167–201). Bloomsbury Academic.

*I don't like Anthropomorphizing AI.*

- Satya Nadella

Chief Executive Officer, Microsoft

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**Mayank Dutt Kaushik is a multidisciplinary artist, scholar, and Commedia dell'Arte practitioner whose work encompasses video art, dramaturgy, gaming engines, exhibitions, and academic research. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Cinema Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, focusing on cybernetics, trans-genres, gaming, digital performance, expanded cinema, and posthuman aesthetics.**