

Film, Photo, and Text: Relation–Making, Intensive Genres, and Realism

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Throughout *Dastavezi's* brief existence, this introduction has become a train of thought and a conversation for both of us, where we reflect on the ever-changing landscape of multi-mediated forms of knowledge production in and from South Asia. This reflection—which we called Slow Theory—emerges from two of our fundamental convictions:

1.) New ways of theorizing the world demand thinking with and through new forms of art and media. 2.) Phenomena from the Global South help to “air out” (Viveiros de Castro 2003) a form of theory that has become accustomed to utilizing mainly North American and European case studies and philosophers.

In this issue, we, therefore, increase *Dastavezi's* range of contributed media to include photo essays reflecting on the potentialities of image and text regarding labor migration in Kerala (Karinkurayil) and religious nationalism in Pune (Larios).

In the last two issues, we argued that multi-mediated research challenges and extends the textual focus of social sciences. This challenge leads us to ask various new questions: How does social science research benefit from incorporating new media? How does time matter in academic and audio-visual cognitive labor? And, crucially, which novel criticisms become urgent at the crossroads of these processes? These three moments—relation-making, time, and critique—are a heuristic key for our attempt to theorize the connection between audio-visual and textual contributions. While these three are mutually interdependent and productive, in this issue, we will mainly focus on one of them: relation-making.

Furthermore, we will put two theoretical approaches in conversation with our contributions. First, Rosi Braidotti's (2017) reading of critical neo-Spinozism—which she puts forward in her work on feminism—will be helpful to think intensive genres through contributions by Bazaz, Larios, and Shepard. Second, Karen Barad's agential realism

(2012) will help us to conceptualize the epistemic stakes of the joint work of Etmüller, Ewald, and Kramer as well as Karinkurayil's essay on memory and stale images.

Relation-making and the postcolonial

In its most basic meaning, relation-making implies a creative dynamic connecting heterogeneous fields, methods, and discourses. This central objective of bringing audiovisual and textual knowledge "into relation" is expressed by the journal's name: *dastāvez* implying "a 'bond,' an 'instrument,' and an 'action' pointing towards a variety of potentialities linking various forms of knowing, perceiving, and creating" (Schaflechner and Kramer 2019, 1). In the last issue (2020), we focused on different forms of relation-making. Saeed, for example, demonstrated how it is a strategy for becoming public, and Schaflechner showed how relation-making might yield novel questions through multi-mediated research.

What do we mean when we speak about making relation and its critical or emancipatory potential for Slow Theory? As a heuristic device for *Dastavezi*, relation-making needs to respond to what we consider central to our work in and from South Asia: a critical view on power-relations, epistemic forms of violence, and conceptualization. Relation-making needs to have a firm base in post- and decolonial critique and strive for novel ways of engagement through the interactions between text, audio, and the visual. In this sense, relation-making is a part of Slow Theory's methodology and its ethical trajectory to overcome sedimented representations of South Asia. Relation-making's critical potential for *Dastavezi* lies in the combination of various media which produce our research in intensified genres (see below). We develop *Dastavezi's* ethical trajectory by drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti and her engagement with the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. To situate her approach with respect to *Dastavezi's* decolonial aspirations, we need to take a closer look at Gayatri Spivak. Her influential text, "Can the subaltern speak," has made the critique against Deleuze one foundation of postcolonial theory (Spivak 1993).

Spivak argues that the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, supposedly critical of European traditions, had little interest in the postcolonial situation and mainly understood resistance based on the European subject. For Spivak, the subaltern needs to have access to the Eurocentric episteme in order to speak and resist. Subtle forms of hegemony and epistemic violence, she argues, are lost in Deleuzian theory. Spivak is not alone in this criticism. Others, too, have pointed out that while Deleuze and Guattari

have experimented with anthropological cases, they never directly engaged with the life-worlds of colonized people (Bignall and Patton 2010). For Kaplan, their interest in Anthropology is part of a long tradition of using the Global South as a “metaphorical margin” and not as a site of “theory production” (quoted in Bignall and Patton 2010). Such and similar criticisms have thwarted postcolonial scholars intense engagement with theories emerging from the Spinoza-Nietzsche-Bergson-Deleuze trajectory. Following the work of Robinson (2004) and Robinson and Thompson (2010) this rejection is grounded in the two theories' fundamentally different understanding of desire. One states that desire is produced through a constitutive lack, and the other that desire is multiple and revolutionary. While the exact nuances of this difference are far beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important to sketch the outlines of this difference.

In a nutshell, Lacan states that both individual and social identities are founded on the idea of a constitutive lack (Stavrakakis 1999). This ontological principle has become the foundation of a variety of concepts, such as “antagonism” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), “dislocation” (Laclau 2005), “the Real” (Žižek 2008), or the “political difference” (Marchart 2013). As the main matrix to understand forms of representation, repression, and othering, the concept of lack has also entered much of the postcolonial literature. Thinkers that have been widely cited in the postcolonial context include (amongst others) Lacan (appropriated by Homi Bhabha, 2000), Laclau (used by Partha Chatterjee, 2004), or Derrida and Althusser (both in Spivak above, 1993).

Desire in Deleuze and Guattari does not have a lack at its core. On the contrary, similar to the *conatus* (Spinoza) or the *will to power* (Nietzsche), it is productive and revolutionary. Deleuze and Guattari's first joint work, *Anti-Oedipus*, had a variety of targets but at many times was a polemic against Lacanian psychoanalysis and its obsession with the idea of a constitutive lack (2004). Here we come back to Spivak's arguments above. Robinson and Thompson argue that her dismissal of Deleuze builds on a misunderstanding of desire as something other than a deterritorializing force, which cannot be captured under one structure. Their refusal to accept lack (or antagonism) as constitutive has sidelined Deleuze and Guattari's influence on postcolonial theory. Recently, however, their critical neo-Spinozist approach has been championed as a missed opportunity to think emancipation beyond the dialectic put forward in much of postcolonial theory (Bignall and Patton 2010).

To sum up: relation-making is not only *Dastavezi's* methodological but also ethical foundation. By ethics, we mean a critical and creative dynamic. It is critical as a way to encounter power structures, and it is creative by striving to go beyond these structures.

Intensive genres

This approach becomes vital for imagining the coming together of various media in *Dastavezi* and the forces triggered between them. Close exchanges of multi-mediated forms of research produce an affective and discursive surplus beyond the boundaries of these respective media. In other words, something that is neither textual, visual, nor auditory emerges from the relation between all of these. Braidotti's notion of the "intensive genre" might be helpful to approach this process through our contributions.

Writing on Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Virginia Woolf, Braidotti speaks of the intensive genre, which "cuts transversally across a number of established literary forms" (2008, 45). Using the literary relationship of Virginia Woolf and her companion Vita Sackville-West, Braidotti shows how their connection is much more complicated than the term "same-sex" suggests. Their being together, she writes, is not "modelled on the dialectics of masculinity and femininity [but rather is] an active space of becoming" (Braidotti 2008, 55). Out of their correspondences emerges for Braidotti an intensive genre: a form of skillful writing which displaces sedimented categories.¹

Bazaz and Gaur's film pushes our understanding of intensive genres further when read together with the interview featured in this issue. *Paradise on a River of Hell* unfolds in a limbo where the narrative creates layers of meaning in progressively complex ways so that it often becomes difficult for non-Kashmiri audiences to understand. The appropriation of the tourist gaze, however, draws the film closer to desires nourished by the Hindi film industry. It makes us wonder about the lacunae between the available narratives on the region, the conflict, and its religions. In other words, the filmic address

¹ Inspired by her work, we adopt the term to address an assembly of text and audio-visual production. In this process, formerly independent media are now taking part in an affectively charged new milieu which, most importantly, aims for its *potentia* instead of *potestas*. This crucial separation goes back to Spinoza, who distinguishes between joyous and sad affects. Affects are relations where "the body's power of acting is increased or diminished" (de Spinoza 1996). For example, some bodies may encounter others and compose with them, which leads to new possibilities and agencies. These relations are joyous. Other relations, however trigger forms of decomposition, i.e., limiting their field of acting and thus are called sad affects (Deleuze 1988). In this sense Deleuze and Guattari also speak of active desire (schizophrenic) and reactive desire (paranoiac; see Robinson and Thompson 2010). Desire as power can have various expressions, such as power over (*potestas*) and power of the people (*potentia*). Relation-making as *potestas* makes hierarchical distinctions and builds empires. As *potentia*, however, it means power to do something, i.e. the realm of capacity, ability, and agency. As an intensive genre, relation-making opens doors, connects with people, and produces new subjectivities. Only affirmative relation-making has the power to produce qualitative change, as it aims to go beyond already established and sedimented structures of power.

includes a South Asian longing for the Valley of Kashmir while simultaneously its alienation—through the fisheye lens—keeps this desire at a distance. Here the filmic thinking pries open a paradox: to repeat affects coded in South Asian visual culture may create some genuine openings, however, always under the threat of misappropriation.

This paradox materializes in the conversation with Bazaz. The allegorical form enables as much as prevents what his film can do. Bazaz is caught between the desire to make a “Kashmiri film” and the impossibility of making the film forceful under the current conditions, which are determined by the hyper-representation of the Valley of Kashmir in nationalist discourse and South Asian visual culture. But with the interview alongside the film, we can encounter the film *again* as non-representative beyond questions of Kashmiri and Indian identity that may hinder its reception. Bazaz’s words on his (and Gaur’s) film are quite conscious about this shift towards the non-representational; what we above called the intensive genre:

[...] film is a constant search for that which remains hidden in the seen, the visible. It is thinking in the sense that it seeks revelation. Film is thinking in as much as thinking is a form of awareness that reveals the care that is always involved in the human condition. It is a form of touch.

This is not merely the addition of a filmic gaze to the human eye, but, in this case, relation-making producing a film-thought.

In his photo-essay on the festival of Shivaji Jayanti, Borayin Larios describes his images as “tools” that enable him to engage with research subjects in ways that go beyond textual production. With McDougall he speaks of the image as a “reflection of thought” which excludes the potential infinity of frames within the visual field for the one chosen in a snap. The moment in which a picture is taken is one of thought: faster than words could ever express. In a way, we are back at the question Kramer asked Bazaz on “filmic thought:” there is a particular way of thinking through the camera—a thinking that is neither linguistic, textual, nor abstract but within the aesthetic potentialities of the camera. This capture, however, also establishes a “barrier between the subject and the photographer.” Larios calls the photographer a “thief,” taking something without giving it back: a question of power as well as rhythm. He points out that his subjects often demand this capture, mistaking him for a journalist. The ethical issue needs to be counterbalanced by the ethical-political demands of research. After all, these movements are not harmless, colorful portrayals of a religious tradition but participant forces of Hindu nationalist hegemony. The aesthetic investment of these nationalist processions

is captured through the camera. This makes the drive behind these celebrations palpable and effectively links them to nationalist and regionalist desires. Larios skillfully analyzes the various layers of meaning hidden in plain sight—the textual interpretation yields an understanding of the “hidden in the seen” to use the words of Bazaz. If we did not read the text together with the photographs, some of Larios’ images could uncritically reproduce a color-saturated spectacle. The photo essay is an intensive genre produced between text and images. With the text, we reread the images as allegorical, conflictual, representative of ideal citizenship, gendered, and shot through by power asymmetries. The Indo-anthropologist contextualizes the photographs. What remains beyond this is the lingering beauty of the photographs, their technical *rafinesse*, and, finally, the singular expressivity of their subjects captured in the moment—resisting text and context.

Another interesting contribution is Shepard’s work on women’s spaces in Pakistan. *For my Country* is one part of a series entitled *The Other Half of Tomorrow* on Pakistani female cricket players set in a country obsessed with the sport. For Shepard, Pakistan’s close relationship with cricket is a form of continuous “myth-making” where heroes are born. Even the country’s current prime minister, Imran Khan, is still celebrated for leading the national cricket team to victory in the World Cup some 30 years ago. Such is the stage for her portrayal of Pakistani female cricketers who are motivated by their love for the sport and an urgent sense of patriotism.

Similar to how Virginia and Vita’s relationship goes beyond the category “same-sex,” the cricket player’s affirmative practice is not merely a way to find a place for women within Pakistan’s patriarchy but rather an active restructuring of it. The intensive genre produced between Shepard’s essay and film allows us to see cricket’s potential as it creates stages and publics for women in Pakistan. The intensive genre shows the affirmative (and in itself intensive) power of cricket: film and essay produce a space allowing us to understand how cricket has its own intensities between and above notions of masculinity and femininity. Sana Mir, the former team captain, and other players show how their roles as athletes and their lives after *The Other Half of Tomorrow* have made them into role models for Pakistani girls *and* boys.

Entanglement, realism, relation-making

When talking about relation-making, we imply a connective process spanning over a large variety of planes. This includes academic fields (anthropology and film studies), materialities (actor-networks between human and non-human actors), as well as human

to human relationships (filmmakers, ethnographers and their interlocuters, protagonists). A realist approach to relation-making, for example, is found in the production and conceptualization of *Sufis Entangled*.

The essay as well as the film *Sufis Entangled* is co-authored by Eliane Etmüller, Sarah Ewald, and Max Kramer. While Etmüller and Ewald portray multiple conflicts emerging around the term “Sufism,” Kramer ponders the film’s form. Their essay provides us with the production context where we get a sense of how different motivations, frustrations, and cultural understandings drive the most conflictual situations captured in the film. What emerges is a picture of what is at stake in making a film that doesn’t try to fix the meaning of Sufism to one tradition or even the mental image of religious traditions. Here “entanglement” can be appropriated to rethink documentary realism itself. The writing as well as the film *Sufis Entangled* sheds light on documentary realism and the epistemological stakes of the filmic medium. For this, we briefly need to rehearse the broadest contours of the realism debates in philosophy and film.

The classical realism from Aristotle to modern day scientism starts with mind-independent, individuated objects or material entities (e.g., the laptop you have in front of you, the atoms that make up your bones, and so on). Such approaches are called “correspondence theory” as they are primarily concerned with representation as a correct or incorrect mirror of reality. Another approach could be called the realism of the sublime: the terror of the real breaks into our world, disturbing the precarious order that humans tried to establish through always fragile symbolizations (a rather influential genealogy here links Lacan, Heidegger, and Kant). Many of the epistemological debates in documentary film studies can be traced to some variants of the positions given above (see Nichols 2002). Instead, *Sufis Entangled* radicalizes some assumptions within this scholarly trajectory and traces a *performative tradition* of theorizing documentary film.

Documentary scholar Stella Bruzzi (2006) is an important contrarian to more classical realist approaches to documentary film. She appropriates Judith Butler’s theory of performativity to claim that documentary audiences are not primarily concerned with the cognitive reality status of the image. Instead, within the performance of the film audiences negotiate multiple realities. By this she means that viewers do not exhaust their understanding of reality by its link to the technical recordings of light (Nichols 2002; 2016). Bruzzi, instead, focuses on how the documentary status of the images initiates multiple negotiations between audiences’ expectations and the possible worlds evoked by the film. Bruzzi’s perspective puts emphasis on human agency in the meaning making

of a documentary film. This constructivist view of the documentary film centers on the performance of representations as somewhat cut off from the becoming of matter. *Dastavezi*, however, puts forward a critical posthumanist approach to multi-mediated research that decenters the representational in the production of knowledge.

Physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad's work is crucial in this regard (Barad 2012). Her concept of "entanglement" addresses how matter and discourse establish a phenomenon through cuts within a performative becoming. This means that the phenomenon—in our case a documentary film—does not mirror some reality "out there" but that a certain performative arrangement of discourse and matter "cuts" materiality in such a way that the phenomenon emerges. Barad develops this concept by referring to physicist Niels Bohr who investigated the way an apparatus establishes a field of objectivity that is not external to the phenomenon but constitutive of it. If you measure something through an instrument, the instrument itself is co-constitutive of the objective reality. This new causal intervention becomes possible through what Barad calls the "cut." For Barad, everything in this process is active: the measured, the measuring device, and the measuring humans. What "matters" is how these cuts produce a phenomenon through their relations and how they increase agency. She calls this ontology "agential realism," a form of realism that is action-oriented and does not claim the individual existence of pre-cut matter.

Sufis Entangled could be seen as the result of an apparatus that provides these "intra-actions." The film's form brings Barad's agential realism to life. The documentary genre is frequently geared towards questions of reality. *Sufis Entangled* produces a particular way in which the real is claimed and formally transformed through its material-discursive apparatus. The Sufi traditions encountered in the film are always performed in contested ways, as parts of material-discursive cuts. These involve filmmakers, cameras, cultural expectations of what interviews are, what others may think of "Islam" and "Sufism." Of course, these lists are never exhaustive. To speak about entanglement shouldn't extend a sense of causality to some incomprehensible notion of complexity. Understood with the heuristic of relation-making, complexity enables us to trace the internal cuts within these material-discursive arrangements that make new forms of knowledge possible.

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil's contribution about withering memories in Kerala can also be read in a realistic fashion. Following the wilted traces of a "lost generation," his stale images provide a sensorium for us to enter one of the largest migration flows in Kerala's history. While these laborers were the beginning of crucial cultural shifts in Kerala,

their voice has often been muffled in local (Kerala) and translocal (Malayali) mainstream culture. Absent and simultaneously represented as “the other” of innocent and meek rural existence, the stale images of their struggle remind us of the materiality of memory. Karinkurayil’s essay produces a relation between the particular conditions in Kerala, the heat, the humidity, and the way in which objects are packed away. His images thus do not *represent* a history of forgetting, they are also not the reason for it, but they have a part in performing it.

Karinkurayil’s writing, too, performs these withering dynamics. His essay starts out with clearly marked edges, revealing bits and pieces of this otherwise ignored part of history. Recreating the layers underneath the stale surfaces, his text becomes a witness of “Gulf biographies”—or better, a witness to their absence. Increasingly, however, his writing, too, performs the oblivion of lower class labor migration. While semantics unearth solid forms of memory initially, they increasingly wither in the course of writing, producing more and more loosely associated and fractured structures. Just as stale images only allow us to surmise the whole picture through partially visible objects, so the progressively elusive style of writing makes the reader glean completeness of meaning by investing into partial structures, sentences, and word-clusters. Documenting “absence” as a way to reveal migrants in popular culture is one powerful way to point at collective amnesia. Karinkurayil’s digital snapshots as well as his text, however, have something more to add: they capture a dynamic of withering.

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