



© Jake Hills on Unsplash

LOOKING HORIZONTALLY AT CINEMA USING INDIANCINE.MA TO THINK ABOUT THE DIGITAL APPARATUS



© Charulata (Satyajit Ray & R.D. Bansal) India, 1964

Jenson Joseph

In 2013, soon after my PhD in Film Studies, when I started working on projects for [PAD.MA](#) and [INDIANCINE.MA](#), the buzz around these online resources for videos and films was that they make objects easily accessible to the researcher. They were “open archives” that came to us, inviting researchers to use the material in whichever way they wanted, and exhorting them to build the archive by constructing their own mini-archives around chosen objects - as opposed to the closed-ness of the official archive, difficult to access and mobilize, given its inclination to protect its material from damage through use.

However, soon the excitement shifted to exploring possibilities they offer in evolving radically new methods of doing film and media studies, similar to how the concept of Digital Humanities began to be proposed as a new mode of practicing humanities in the West and in Europe. Works that researchers have done on/for/using [indiancine.ma](#) included uploading films, textually annotating them scene by scene, subtitling films, attaching

Indiancine.ma is an annotated online archive of Indian film. It is intended to serve as a shared resource for film scholars and enthusiasts in India and beyond. Initiated by [pad.ma](#), the website was built with [pan.do/ra](#), and launched in February 2013 at Jaaga in Bangalore, with support from the [BOHEN FOUNDATION](#), [THE FOUNDATION FOR ARTS INITIATIVES](#), and the Goethe Institute, Bangalore. Berlin-based [OX2620](#) and Mumbai-based [CAMP](#) are also among the other major organizations associated with [INDIANCINE.MA](#).

relevant documents and texts to films, tagging films and scenes according to themes, creating lists and edits, and so on. As an example of how [indiancine.ma](#)'s tools have been used imaginatively, consider Debashree Mukherjee's project on three rare Hindi films from the late 1930s directed by the prolific German filmmaker Franz Osten for Bombay Talkies, using a combination of annotation window, edit mode and tagging, to foreground a history of labour in

film industry in Bombay. She uses annotations to “open out the body of the films to multiple extra-diegetic references and histories” by privileging “analyses of craft and build biographies of little-known practitioners”.¹ Such modes look to me as though the universe of films - or the universe we captured in cinema - had been made available to us *as an object* by the new apparatus of the internet, for us to grasp, to play with, to cut and recombine, to cull from, to make entirely new objects from, and so on.

Placing this sensation in conjunction with the fact that we decided to call these platforms ‘archives’ (instead of ‘websites’, for example) tempted me to think that this is the moment when images and visual media forms are being converted into data, as the result of digitization. Thus, initially I came up with the formulation that a tool/apparatus like [indiancine.ma](#) is called an archive perhaps because it is imagined to produce and hold an archive (of data) that digitization has brought into existence. If this is so, the task before the

¹ MUKHERJEE, D. (2014). THREE BOMBAY TALKIES FILMS FROM THE 1930S. [INDIANCINE.MA](#). RETRIEVED FROM [HTTPS://INDIANCINE.MA/DOCUMENTS/DTG](https://indiancine.ma/documents/dtg)



© Jake Hills on Unsplash

user-scholar is to convert these data into information, as data don't speak or communicate on their own. I was also delighted at the irony of it: cinema, especially popular cinema in India, which had gained the notoriety of communicating all too much by excluding the viewer entirely from the process of meaning-making, has now been rendered into data that do not communicate until they are given a form, that is information. Some interesting options in the toolbox on *indiancine.ma* offer a particular method of arranging these data so that they attain a distinct form, which we could call a horizontal view of cinema.

Flusser's media theory suggests that the arrival of camera already introduces the regime of knowing the world as "a swarm of particles and quanta" which we can calculate and compute (Flusser 2011:10). Challenging and replacing the linear text and its historical view of the world, technical images assemble "a computed universe in which particles are arranged into visible images" (ibid). If we take this proposition seriously, the view that the tools of *indiancine.ma* offers of cinema is a mode of apprehending the world that was inaugurated much earlier, as far back as when the camera was invented. Interestingly, our cinema itself has occasionally provided with allegories of what we

Screenshot of the timeline of *Dev D* on *indiancine.ma* [1]; © CAMP Mumbai, India

If traditionally we look at a film projected vertically, the new apparatus offers a distanced look at the institution of cinema, as if we are getting a horizontal view - across similar films, through similar clips from various films, by getting a view of the edges of film prints, and so on. For example, in the image given above, you can see the timeline view of the 2009 Hindi film *Dev D* (Anurag Kashyap) arranged according to keyframes. Also, see an "EDIT" made out of scenes from Hindi films from various decades, which have become etched in the public memory as Hindi cinema's shifting registers of relating to the iconic city of Bombay (now Mumbai). The edit takes us horizontally through films.

But the question remains as to whether this is a new mode of looking at objects made possible by the new digital apparatus, or is it a *visualization* of the processes of abstraction, or of generating knowledges about the world, in - to borrow a term from Vilém Flusser - the universe of technical images?²

do with technical images. Recall Satyajit Ray's famous 1964 film *Charulata* in which the heroine - an aspiring writer - uses her opera glasses to look at the world afresh, as if it is an allegoric representation of how the Indian New Wave Cinema tried looking at the world afresh, against the available masculine wisdom. Decades later, *indiancine.ma* also offers us a more elaborate visualization of what we do to our worlds with technical images. But, in addition, it also offers us a view of the tools and the processes, teasing us to own up to the agency of the universe we create rather than displacing it onto the technological apparatus.

About the Author:

Jenson Joseph is an independent researcher based in Pune. He completed his PhD from the University of Hyderabad in 2013. Chapters from his dissertation have been published in *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, positions



© Jenson Joseph

asia critique, *Thapasam* and *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* (forthcoming). He is currently completing a monograph on the history of recent media practices in Kerala. His research interests are in the field of history of media, cinema studies, transformations in contemporary media practices, and theories of subjectivity.

² FLUSSER, V. (2011). *INTO THE UNIVERSE OF TECHNICAL IMAGES*. MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS