Relation-Making, Time, and Critique
A Slow Theory Approach to Film and Social Science

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Abstract

With Dastavezi we link writings in Cultural Anthropology, South Asian Studies, and Critical Theory with audio-visual compositions and independent film. Establishing such connections takes time. Dastavezi provides a platform for slow- paced and multi-mediated research in the social sciences to propagate novel, alternative, and critical views on and from South Asia. With the help of the contributions to each issue (audio-visual and written), we reflect on the potentialities and challenges emerging from linking textual and audio-visual formats in social science research. We will continue to use the journal's introduction as a way to theorize the notion that critical research does not emerge through written discourse alone but results from aesthetic and affective processes that are present in it and intertwined with it.

Keywords: transnational film, slow theory, film studies, anthropology, time

Introduction

With *Dastavezi* we link writings in Cultural Anthropology, South Asian Studies, and Critical Theory with audio-visual compositions and independent film. Establishing such connections takes time. *Dastavezi* provides a platform for slow-paced and multi-mediated research in the social sciences to propagate novel, alternative, and critical views on and from South Asia. With the help of the contributions to each issue (audio-visual and written), we reflect on the potentialities and challenges emerging from linking textual and audio-visual formats in social science research. We will continue to use the journal's introduction as a way to theorize the notion that critical research does not emerge through written discourse alone but results from aesthetic and affective processes that are present in it and intertwined with it. As already laid out in the first issue, we suggest calling this form of critical and creative reflection *Slow Theory.*

Social scientists today—more than ever before—share a dearth of time for relation-building which respects the inner rhythms of different phenomena and beings at large. Today we may have much more temporal flexibility as compared to earlier generations. This, at least, holds for the academic Global North (which, of course, can also be found at universities in the 'geographical' South). Increased mobility and flexibility, however, continue to blur the lines between work and private life, producing the moral imperative of being 'always on'. Even when the coronavirus pandemic promised to drastically alter our commercial habits, enabling pseudo-monastic reclusiveness (quite well-suited for academics and filmmakers in the more contemplative stage), scholarly life turned into an array of zoom meetings, extra preparation for online classes, and heightened control through video recordings and new concerns about privacy. Being mindful of temporality is directly opposed to a 'free' disposal of time under the condition of self-exploitation, precarity, and control. In a world brimming with post-*something* metaphors (post-truth, post-fact, post-modern) we lack social studies research that addresses the problems *as they arise in their temporality.* How can we, as unrooted academics, relate our rhythms (biological and social) to a world in crisis?

In the process of developing *Slow Theory*, we follow a recursive strategy, where the content of our contributions—written as well as audio-visual— have an impact on our overall frame of analysis (Holbraad 2012). This follows recent developments in cultural anthropology, where a shift in perspective foregrounds ethnographies' ability

to create and redefine theoretical concepts (Das et al. 2014, Fassin 2014, Biehl and Locke 2017). Similarly, the contributors' reflections (written and audio-visual) in this issue are crucial for the way we imagine a *Slow Theory* approach towards research and its various forms of becoming public. We, therefore, don't consider *Slow Theory* as a ready-made and pre-packaged proposition, which will help us to understand the nexus of film and writing, but rather as a productive theoretical trajectory developing in and through *Dastavezi.* Thus, as a concept, *Slow Theory* is not representational but rather creative and ontogenetic as it produces new connections between audio-visual productions and writing. This productive-analytical openness puts theory and the multi-mediated research featured in this journal into relation. To further think about the implications of *Slow Theory* for connecting social science writing with film, we begin by taking inspiration from Isabelle Stengers' seminal call for a *Slow Science* approach as pertaining to the production of, and receptivity towards, different kinds of knowledge.

Slow Science

In her book *Another Science is Possible* (2018), Isabelle Stengers argues for an alternative approach within and towards the sciences. Overall the book makes a plea for scientists to be conscious about the results of their work and to engage with the social environments around them. While *Another Science is Possible* is mainly interested in the so-called 'hard sciences,' Stengers' critical engagement with the relationship between scholars and society is crucial for developing how *Slow Theory* imagines the link between film and social sciences.

In a time when the world is rushing to develop a vaccine for the global coronavirus pandemic (summer 2020), Stengers' arguments for a deceleration of science may appear odd. *Slow Science,* however, is much more a critique of cold, detached, and market-oriented forms of research than merely a critique of academic temporality. Her *Slow Science* is an ethical and methodological imperative, which urges scientists to push for dynamics of 'relation-making' (Stengers 2018, 101f). What sounds like a truism is a call to radically rethink and reinvent scientific institutions (Stengers 2018, 125) and, most importantly, to tear down the distinction between what is considered a (true) science and what isn't. While Stengers describes 'fast science' as a saturated space where scientists distinguish who matters for their research from those who don't (Stengers 2018, 116), *Slow Science* is marked by an openness to symbiotic arrangements and the possibilities that emerge when scholars engage with

other collectives—be they scientific or not (Stengers 2018, 103f.). By borrowing from Bruno Latour, she speaks of 'matters of concern.' These matters of concern connect the political with the production of knowledge and thereby help to overcome the dangerous ways in which responsibilities and the transformative force of science are abstracted and disavowed, mostly by natural scientists. Stengers emphasizes a symmetrical knowledge—opposed to the asymmetrical knowledge under conditions of fast science (Stengers 2018, 122)—which produces new ways for scholars to engage with the societies they live in, instead of merely remaining within confined scholarly planes (Stengers 2018, 109).

In *Another Science is Possible*, Stengers is mainly interested in the sciences and speaks only briefly about the role of other research areas such as the humanities (Stengers 2018, 125–126). Even then, however, her work misses the critical impetus we consider necessary for the social sciences—especially when working with and on the Global South (see section 'critique' below). Nevertheless, Stengers' arguments have significance beyond what she calls the 'hard' sciences.

From Stengers' *Slow Science* to Dastavezi's

Slow Theory

In our attempt to lay out what we mean when we describe *Dastavezi* as the platform for a *Slow Theory* approach to film and the social sciences, we will show convergences with but also divergences from Stengers' theory. The following will exemplify this based on three interdependent topics: relation-making, time, and critique.

Relation-making

Central to Stengers' work is her emphasis on relation-making. At one point she writes that *Slow Science* is a way in which researchers present themselves in a non-insulting way to members of other collectives (Stengers 2018, 100f). Stengers follows the philosophical ethics of Whitehead and Latour who have repeatedly called philosophers, social scientists, and 'natural' scientists to actively produce networks and relations in their efforts to create new worlds (Latour 1993, Whitehead 1967). Relation-making for *Slow Theory* not only pertains to how research is presented outside our usual peer-networks (what Stengers refers to as 'other collectives') but also how the

bringing together of different media potentially yields novel forms of understanding and producing research.

Firstly, relation-making means new encounters between academics and their environment. Research results from cultural anthropology and area studies often remain within their respective fields of interest and only at times gain general public attention. The reasons for them remaining within the ivory tower are manifold including, for example, academic jargon, the lack of accessible distribution platforms, or simply the fact that such outreach does not contribute to scholars' ability to secure tenure-track jobs. A *Slow Theory* approach foregrounds the importance of producing moments of relation-making with other collectives (i.e. non-academic publics, scholarly fields outside the social sciences, as well as our interlocuters) during the process of becoming public.

The practice of the scholar and filmmaker Yousuf Saeed is an example of relation-making as a way of becoming public. Aside from his work as a documentary filmmaker, Saeed has established the online audio-visual magazine *Iktara* as an archive and repository for the 'shared cultural history of South Asia—a digital platform for documentation and dissemination of history, heritage, and cultural legacy of India and South Asia through audiovisual and film media.'[1] His film *Campus Rising* (this issue) captures an important moment in India's recent past. Crucially, what both the film and the text address is the role of political mobilization on campuses in India today that have strong humanities and social science departments. The question of how arguments come to matter and how they are substantiated through the creation of a certain environment conducive to free debate is explored via sequences of protests and through multiple interviews.

Campus Rising questions what it means to be *properly* and *higher* educated in the eye of the nation-state. The film reveals how only a few people can afford to disentangle higher learning from citizenship and nationalism. While the tropes of the nation crucially change (from a Hindu nationalist to a more inclusive one), defending the university often needs to be coded in the language of rationality and factuality. This, however, is linked to a critique of the Indian middle-class's techno-centric aspirations where many want to see their children on the fast track of becoming engineers and medical doctors. Such and similar developments have rightfully been considered as

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1 See: http://etihas.in/what.html (access 20.07.20)

damaging India's intellectual culture. Humanist relation-making—that is, the free-flow of ideas and the infinite movement of self-education of the individual—however, is always threatened by being captured through the lens of the nation-state ideology. While the humanist university pertains to the inner time of autonomous scholarship it also detaches science from the concerns of different publics (Stengers 2018). This raises an important question: which possible rhythms of research can scholars enter when they are being mindful of the fact that what they are doing may be of concern to different people in different ways?

Another logic of relation-making is at work when we look at our attempt to theorize the connections between cultural anthropology, area studies, critical theory, and independent film under the concept of *Slow Theory*. While over-theorization and jargon may at times keep people from engaging with scholars' work (Billig 2013), conceptualizations drawn from empirical case studies can help to produce new relations. Think of anthropological conferences, where theories might often be the common language in which people can compare and speak about their particular ethnographies. This is a double-edged sword, as questions of representation, post- and decoloniality, as well as epistemic violence need to be addressed by theoretical language.

With the 'relation-making' of audio-visual productions and writing, *Dastavezi* (from the Urdu word '*dastavez*' meaning 'bond,' 'instrument,' or 'action') aims to be a platform for research which orients us towards the intertwined nature of affective and discursive knowledge. On a very basic level, affects can be described as visceral reactions or 'moments of intensity' in the body (O'Sullivan 2001). While the importance of bodily affects has for long been emphasized by proponents of the affective turn (Gregg et al. 2009, Clough and Halley 2007), its respective arguments have widely remained within the confines of academic textual production. Little has been undertaken thus far to provide avenues where affects are not only written *about* but also *produced* as a central part of presenting ethnography. The combination of different media caters to studies that need to involve affective performances to lay out their arguments.

One example is Schaflechner's film *Thrust into Heaven* (2016). Conceptualized as a multi-mediated research project, the film (2016), the academic paper (2017), and the essay (this issue) aim to provide a multi-mediated ethnographic *sensorium* as an answer to the question: 'What do we mean when we speak of Hindu women's forced

conversion to Islam in Pakistan?' In his contribution, Schaflechner focuses on one particular segment, i.e. the interviews of two Hindu women who have newly converted to Islam. The scene reproduces emotions of ambiguity and degradation, which, for Schaflechner, are central to cases of alleged forced conversion and marriage. While *Thrust into Heaven* set out to criticize the involved women's lack of voice, the analyzed segment reproduces the women's degrading representation. The scene's affective charge—brought about by facial expressions, the spatial distribution of the involved actors, as well as the film's editing—produces an aura of ambivalence, which is not a mere supplement to academic writing, but rather produces its arguments and affective statements.

Relation-making, at this point, is not merely the combination of two different registers. The written and the filmic plane do not observe the same phenomenon 'out-there,' albeit from different perspectives. A *Slow Theory* approach to social sciences (especially ethnography) takes the incorporation of different media seriously in its ability to create new research altogether. As the example above has shown, multi-mediated ethnography does not simply extend our perspective onto research, but rather produces an ethnographic sensorium, which instigates reflections and novel ways of engaging with research.

Time

Similar to Stengers' call for deceleration, *Slow Theory* emphasizes the politics of time in academic research. As already noted in the introduction to the first issue, we understand the slow-paced method as a form of research that is aligned with the rhythms and life-lines of the phenomena under scrutiny (Kramer and Schaflechner 2019, 6). Certain pilgrimages, for example, may appear only once a year, interlocutors might have to attend to urgent matters outside our ethnography, or lockdowns may make the gathering of interviews and testimonies impossible. In other words, ethnography, as well as ethnographic filmmaking, is—to a large extent—what happens outside the researcher's control and intention. A slow-paced methodology aims to foreground such contingencies and the value of long-term ethnography. This is particularity important as a way to counter the fast-paced and decontextualized forms of knowledge production characteristic of today's information capitalism (Kramer and Schaflechner 2019, 6).

We are, however, also conscious about the limitations of practicing slow-paced research for academics. Especially under short-term and precarious employment, slow-paced methods clash with more economically-driven concepts of time and funding structures. Film as a means to present anthropological research may serve as an example. Films often become a mere side project for anthropologists as their production frequently collides with teaching, admin, and writing responsibilities. Some projects, thus, might be forced to be executed in haste, while others may never materialize.

Time constraints may also be linked to the dearth of funding. While producing an independent film may be encouraged by some academic institutions—since the format serves as a marketable item decorating fellowship or university homepages—common academic funding structures only rarely financially cover the cost of professional production companies. A film produced without professional help will demand umpteen hours in postproduction for editing, subtitling, coloring, and so forth. Technical advances have certainly helped in the proliferation of small budget ethnographic films; more often than not, however, they demand personal financial investments from scholars and their cooperation partners.

Accepting this, *Dastavezi* aims to contribute to a 'slowing down' of material produced under such circumstances. Slowing down in this regard aims to revisit the links and possibilities developed in and through our academic research. Ali Kahn and Iqbal-Naqvi's film *Shabaz Qalander* (*SQ*) is an example of a 'slowing down' process in which scholars revisit years-long work through the contingencies of ethnographic film. In writing the essay, Ali Khan and Iqbal-Naqvi reflect on their own (and the whole team's) transformation process. Lumped together as 'white-collar city-slickers' (this issue) the team confronts their own colonial modernity during their time at the shrine. Unable to remain bystanders who merely hide behind the camera, Ali Kahn and Iqbal- Naqvi recall moments of affective charge at the site, causing a transformation of their perception of the shrine's rituals. *SQ* as well as the two authors' extensive essay shows how the saint's worship can be approached from a variety of planes. The two academics not only provide us with an in-depth historical and anthropological tapestry in their essay but make the crowd's (and to a certain extent their own) spiritual anticipation *felt* through filmic montage. Such additions are not merely a supplement to already established academic discourse but rather yield new questions (and answers) as they produce polysensory ethnographic life-worlds.

The essay on the making of *SQ* is furthermore crucial as it speaks about how the film needed to relate to the site's own temporality without the appropriate amount of funding. For *SQ* to become 'a film with scholarly depth which would appeal to both academic and lay audiences' (this issue) the team had to accept the shrine's own rhythm. Footage of the 'alam, a post associated with Husain's brother, for example, needed to be taken over a period of three years. The post's movement through the sacred space of Lal Shabaz Qalander only appears once a year during the days of Muharram. Filming it demanded expenditures of time as well as personal and financial effort to produce the ritual's ethnographic sensorium. In their co-written piece, the authors talk about how the production of *SQ* had to be done with a budget of merely 84 000.- Pakistani Rupees (around 900.- Euros at that time). While the script could build on Ali Khan's years-long research at the site, the film needed to be a group enterprise, and the production team had to agree to understand their work as a 'service to society' (this issue).

Taking our lead from *SQ* and its associated essay, we see that a *Slow Theory* approach not only aims to highlight moments of deterritorialization during the production of research but also foregrounds the importance of revisiting (slowing down) already established work through different or additional media. While research might be produced under 'fast-paced' circumstances (relating to time, money, and career opportunities), *Dastavezi* aims to provide an institutional platform from which scholars/filmmakers can—again—reflect on their work.

Critique

The term 'theory' in *Slow Theory* aims to emphasize our commitment to critical research on and from the Global South. While the Global South often functions as a metaphorical margin to the production of theoretical thinking (Kaplan 1996, 88), we aim to foreground critique of eurocentric theory through recursive change of analytical categories. In *Dastavezi* this recursivity is based on empirical case studies presented in film and writing from and on South Asia. Ali Rizvi's *Ghungroo* (Dancing Bells) is a good example of the coming together of theory and film.

Ghungroo portrays the practice of Dawood Bhatti, a male *Khatak* dancer in Karachi. At one-point Rizvi writes: 'Bhatti tackles the binary representation of gender and thus is emblematic of emergent discourses on gender identity and dance in Pakistan' (this issue). Contrary to media such as text and photography, the

film produces its own temporality through its movement of images experienced as duration. Documentary film intersects with space—tropes or representation (e.g. stereotypes of gender, stereotypes of places)—as well as with the actual space that is recorded. Rizvi's multi-mediated research, therefore, produces two kinds of rhythms: The film is staged and edited in such a way as to mediate the transformative power of dance performances, while his essay reproduces academic and theoretical work. But *where* and *when* does the space of theory—the immediate availability (to some) of a theoretical language on gender—intersect with a dance performance and its mediation through film? Thus, Rizvi's work poses interesting questions regarding time and critique.

Time has taken a back-seat in theoretical thinking over the last decades. The critical approach mentioned by Rizvi's essay operates primarily with metaphors of space, such as subject-positions, discourse (as patterns), and text-inscription. Time only emerges through the cracks of textual space as some form of difference in repetition. This results in a critique built mainly on the 'the social' as space, as a matter of topographic distribution. His film, however, presents the duration of a spatial practice; 'loitering' as a question of rhythm, sound, and dance (this issue). While the language of 'opposing binary positions' is properly available in theoretical space, Rizvi's film, alongside his essay, provides the possibility to sense and think *time with theory.* The durational character of the dance performance as well as the film's rhythm does not merely serve theory but embodies the concept of emancipation in novel ways.

Aside from the post-structural approaches to which Rizvi referred, there have been other traditions of thinking time, such as phenomenology and life philosophy, to name but a few. While speaking of 'matters of concern' as opposed to 'matters of fact', Stengers (who herself is close to the life philosophical tradition) takes up this Latourian differentiation to stress its temporal dimension. 'Matters of fact' can be understood as decontextualized resources. 'Matters of concern,' on the other hand, require hesitation, rethinking, imagination: they start a collective process of negotiation. They are not politicized; 'rather, what they require is to make people think about what concerns them, and to refuse any appeal to 'matters of fact' that would bring about consensus' (Stengers 2018, 3). We appreciate Stengers' differentiation; however, we think that a critical dimension is missing in her approach. Formulated in a question: who puts the choices of concern on whose tables and how does concern emerge out of emancipatory struggles? The question is not clearly advanced by Stengers. One could well imagine a world made of multiple stakeholders,

represented by think tanks and NGOs, discussing and debating with elected representatives about the most instrumental forms of knowledge.

The kind of agonistic politics we imagine is therefore not about taking an opposing stand outside of struggle but, more like Rizvi in this edition, to take part in the attempt to come to terms with problems as they impress on us a temporal and existential quality of their own. Time is the open possibility. By stressing the need to be mindful of temporality in the production of theory we plead for an openness towards global difference, often overlooked by being hedged into those frames which sell best and reproduce the academic class or the class of professional filmmakers. Our theoretical frames are not useless, but they need to be related to struggle. The particular struggle here is to be located at the intersection of the audio-visual, the text, and the precarity of filmmakers and academics who orient their work towards South Asia. Our understanding of critique is therefore geared towards the relations that could be built if time is taken seriously while approaching the above-mentioned problematic (film, text, precarity, South Asia).

Conclusion

Dastavezi is a platform for a particular way of linking writings in social science research with independent film on and from South Asia. We call this approach *Slow Theory* as it emphasizes the importance of relation-making, time, and critique when dealing with multi-mediated research. We do not imagine *Slow Theory* as a representational concept, but rather as the very act of creating relations and interdependencies between audio-visuals and writing for the sake of theory creation. The contributions to this second issue corroborate how a combination of writing and film supplies new planes from where to engage with social sciences. Such multi-mediated research adds affective aspects to traditional academic writing and has the potential to make our work known outside the confines of academic disciplines. Critical of the logic of the neoliberal university in producing knowledge*, a Slow Theory* approach aims to 'slow down' research that has been executed under time/financial constraints and invites filmmakers and scholars to revisit and re-reflect on their research. Their reflections— written as well as audio-visual—are a large part of our recursive strategy when developing a *Slow Theory* approach to film and writing.

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