DASTAVEZI THE AUDIO-VISUAL SOUTH ASIA

Between Documentary and Dastavezi: A Slow-Paced Approach to Theorizing Transnational Film-Practices

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Introduction

This is the first edition of *Dastavezi*, a journal for scholars and filmmakers, filmmakers as scholars, and filmmaking scholars working on regional and transregional South Asia. *Dastavezi* aims to be a platform for the dialogue between textual and audio-visual productions in current research. The trajectory 'from documentation to *dastavezi*' is meant to indicate a shift from hard and fast boundaries between filmic and academic practices and genres towards conceptualizing new connectivities. The Urdu term '*dastāvez'* implies a 'bond,' an 'instrument,' and an 'action' pointing towards a variety of potentialities linking various forms of knowing, perceiving, and creating. In our journal, we wish to expand on the Hindi/Urdu adjective '*dastāvezī*' (usually used as '*dastāvezī film,*' a translation of the English term 'documentary film') to emphasize how audio-visual experiments have the ability to bind together, (mutually) instrumentalize, and through their performance also transgress academic and filmic genres. We understand this usage in accordance with the way documentary film maker and scholar Paromita Vohra (2011) has described alternative genealogies of the experimental documentary film in South Asia.

With this journal, we hope to contribute to a tendency within the social sciences and humanities which increasingly accepts documentary film not only as an object of study, but as a suitable medium for academic research, expression, and output.

Dastavezi wishes to create a forum where the shifting boundaries between academic research and filmmaking can be renegotiated and where creative tensions between transnational and local publics instigate novel discussions about representation and misrepresentation, aesthetic forms, as well as the politics of time and funding in filmic and academic practice. In short, the journal is interested in the particular ways 'academic' and 'filmic-aesthetic' knowledge overlap and how this intersection may instigate new forms of sensing and representing South Asia within (trans-)cultural power asymmetries. A couple of examples from the current volume can demonstrate this.

Aditya Basu's short film *Kaifiyat* (2016) translates community memory into fictional form. The filmmaker defines the Urdu term '*kaifiyat*' as 'denoting a continuing condition and its mood, often a lyrical expression of this mood' (in this volume). The film attempts to evoke tonality (an aesthetic arrangement of expressive space) instead of emphasizing narrative (an unfolding of linked events in time). Basu's work represents a crucial contribution to *Dastavezi*'s conceptual stakes, as it opens up the boundaries between reality and regional reference to South Asia. *Dastavezi* is not primarily about the established form of the documentary genre, but about formal explorations that establish a new space beyond generic limitations (be they audio-visual or textual). *Dastavezi*, therefore, goes beyond the geo-political territory of South Asia, including all territorialities that can be linked with it (symbolic, imaginary, [trans-]national, [trans-]regional, and [trans-]local). The visuals of Basu's film—using a forest in California to represent Kashmir—are an example for this. The mechanical recording of *some* reality through the camera is not testimonial *per se.* Memory and mediated post-memory (Hirsch 2001) are part of what it means to live within highly mobile communities of Kashmiri Pandits, many of them suffering from exile.

Basu deeply engages us with the mobility of the deictic space of film practice through his personal experience of film production in the United States, as well as Kashmiri Pandit community memory. By connecting film and essay, we learn how the author's imagination of an implied US American audience expresses a Kashmiri Pandit's experience of exile through the trope of a 'Navajo returning to his native land.' This intermediality makes Basu's contribution a fascinating exercise to negotiate between 'non-narrative film' and contextualization made possible only through a close reading of the filmmaker's essay.

Mobility, however, does not only pertain to deictic shifts, experiences of exile, and mobile forms of producing and negotiating films (Mukherjee 2012; Schneider 2015; Kramer 2019). Mobility also implies the shifting positions between producer and protagonist that have become an increasingly salient feature of independent documentary practices due to developments in communication and technology since the digital turn. Cheaper equipment, smaller cameras, and more options to edit and present material have brought about a democratization and decentralization of both, the production as well as the circulation and consumption of documentary film. Such developments pertaining to the emergent prosumer culture (producer + consumer) enable new relationships between research in academia and amateur/professional visual cultures. They also give new momentum to the ways in which documentary filmmakers approach their protagonists and audiences.

One excellent example for the possibilities of rearranging spaces emerging out of filmmakers' new forms of mobility is Yaminay Chaudhri's *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* featured in this issue. Chaudhri's project transgresses traditional methods of film making and screening by attaching a projector to a rickshaw in Karachi. Her 'mobile cinema' screens cell-phone video clips which were shot by local communities as a response to Chaudhri's question 'What do you do on a day off?' When the films were brought back to the community and projected on walls in public spaces, the cell phone filmmakers turn into audiences of their own products, and the gathered audience turns into protagonists of the screened films. Chaudhri's *Mera Karachi Mobile Cinema* produces a looping effect presenting and representing the communities' everyday life in Karachi. Such mobile forms of filmmaking question the triangle of filmmaker, protagonist, and audience and thus open our attention to more entangled ways of representing South Asia's day-to-day life. Chaudhri's project poses the question about how social scientists might in their work also shift between their roles as researchers, protagonists, and audience members.

Mahera Omar's contribution to this volume is another crucial example for the close resemblances between academic and filmic practice. *The Rebel Optimist* is an intimate portrayal of Parween Rahman, an urban planner in Karachi who was shot in 2013 by the land mafia. By depicting Rahman's exceptional life, as well as hinting at the hazy circumstances surrounding her death, the film is not simply an epitaph, but rather an active agent in creating her as a philanthropist. Through its meticulous qualitative research in and around Orangi Town, one of the world's largest slums, the

documentary portrays the grim reality of the area's turf wars centring around property and access to water. Through her essay, Omar reveals the challenges and obstacles she encountered during her fieldwork and film-work in Karachi. Irregular visits, changing vehicles, and random schedules are but a few of the safety measures the filmmaker needed to take—a situation akin to the circumstances of ethnographic field work in other areas of Pakistan (Schaflechner 2018).

The films and essays in this journal portray a variety of convergences and exchanges between filmic practice and social science research. That is to say, social scientists have understood the potentialities of multi-layered storytelling rendered possible by film, and artists as well as filmmakers have looked towards methods in social science to further their methodological reflection (Köhn 2016). Documentary film and ethnographic practice, in fact, share a particular interest in the aesthetics of the everyday. Both, filmmakers and cultural anthropologists often question binary oppositions and hegemonic taxonomies by focusing on everyday life-worlds with all of their sensual complexity. In her contribution, Fathima Nizaruddin points to the importance of focusing on the various planes of lived experience beyond stereotypical notions for her film and academic work. Her documentary *My Mother's Daughter* could be seen as both, the medium and the result of research, thus extending the notion of 'research' to the form itself.

Furthermore, both social scientists and filmmakers are interested in localizing their work through context specific concepts by putting them into dialogue with transatlantic theory. In her academic work, Fathima Nizaruddin (2017) has recently exemplified how the concept of *tamasha* (from Hindi/Urdu '*tamāśā;*' show, entertainment) challenges generic boundaries by comic modes and irony to undermine alleged 'antinational' contents in the context of India's nuclear program. She shows how *tamasha* points to a particular way of ridiculing seemingly invincible scientific-realist forms of representation (p. 214). Deeply rooted in South Asian cultural contexts, the concept of *tamasha* challenges traditional forms of 'the sober' documentary voice in its role as a pedagogical format that perpetuates the telos of the modernizing postcolonial state. By linking *tamasha* to Rancière's theory of 'dissensus' (2015), Nizaruddin localizes and uses transatlantic hegemonic theory as a supplement to her practice.

Converging Temporalities

The production of transcultural concepts (through the link between academic and filmic practices) needs to be embedded in more global forms of producing, funding, and circulating academic as well as filmic knowledge. Discussions on the globality of political economies are not only entangled with technological innovations (e.g. digital audio-visual technologies, storing devices, and non-linear editing software), but rather require a conceptual openness to approaches towards different cultural moments.

We already see the world around us from within historical material arrangements that direct our attention and has formed our abilities to see, hear, and read. The emergence of the digital documentary has the potential to enable us to refine our sense-perception in a more open-ended process and beyond the earlier material scarcities (film, video tape, etc.). Film used to be expensive, the potential of refinement resulting from the abundance of audio-visual representation, therefore, needs to be understood against economic backgrounds. Together with the surge of mass-creativity, we are witnessing the emergence of fast-paced, low-context, actuality-based footage (the building blocks of audio-visual evidence now often turned into stand-alone attractions on platforms such as YouTube). Such tendencies are embedded within an acceleration of our everyday perceptions through digital communication and the rise of actuality-based footage as spectacle. This is, of course, not altogether new since early cinema already had presented actuality footage as an attraction (Gunning 1990). What is new is the environment audio-visual actualities have entered into after the emergence of the digital. Digital editing software, for example, provides us with an opportunity to almost immediately react to communicative events. Such reactions, however, are often produced within the click = money-oriented infrastructures of social networks. It is thus particularly important for scholars and filmmakers to think about the different ways of how to 'become public' (McLagan und McKee 2012, 10) through and beyond social media networks in national as well as transnational publics. Such dynamics of *becoming public* are also crucial to understand the creation of evidence (both audio-visual and as a result of social sciences) beyond the articulations of rhetoric voice and argument. Rhetoric articulations may follow realist patterns that aim to convince through references to 'facts' that are ready-available in online archives as decontextualized 'raw-material' in instantaneous time (Udupa 2015). For example, media-savvy Hindu nationalists in India are archiving 'documentary' data on their homepages. This data is meant to serve as 'evidence as a riposte' (Udupa 2015, 222),

a kind of 'realist' knowledge production (Rajagopal 2001) that is delinked from complex epistemological protocols which involve deep, long term investments into the aesthetics of both research and the presentational form.

Accepting this to be foundational for the current conjuncture, often framed through concepts such as 'populism,' 'post-truth,' and 'digitalization,' we deem a critical engagement with questions of 'time' as one important vantage point to rethink theoretical and practical interventions against information capitalism. For example, do filmmakers and anthropologists follow the rhythms of the phenomena under scrutiny, or do they primarily stick to the career-schedules outlined by neo-liberal academia and film practice? Drawing from academic and the filmmaker's experience, our journal proposes an unhurried and intermedial exploration of complex sensual forms of knowledge. Such 'Slow Theory' (SloTh) could be one important counter-strategy to the decontextualizing tendencies of our time and the hegemony of neo-liberal academia.

In his work on transnational representation of democratic theory, Michael Saward (2011) describes 'Slow Theory' as marked by at least three dimensions: As theory done slowly and attentively, as a way to emphasize that theory's conclusions call for slow actions, and, finally, as theory that considers its own understanding of temporality to be crucial in its production (p.3). For Saward, '[s]low theory stresses close consideration and mindfulness of the particularities of locality and culture' (*ibid.*). While we agree with Saward in his basic assumption that theorization needs to be conscious of temporality and dialogically open to culturally specific contexts in the production of knowledge, we also aim to extend his concept to engage with aesthetic forms (written or audio-visual). Artistic and scholarly practice may slow down perceptions and enable differences to appear if done being mindful of temporality and the conceptual labour of the practitioners involved. This also criticizes the current political predicament which is marked by a shift from epistemological protocols of scholarly/journalistic/political culture to synchronic political space (my 'evidence' vs. your 'evidence' as a question of positionality and spectacle). Time, thus, becomes one of the most crucial components in the struggle against what Wendy Brown called a 'neoliberal rationality' (2015).

With its approach, *Dastavezi* wants to counterbalance the fast-pace of information capitalism and its flattening of evidence. Moving slowly not only helps to contextualize and situate knowledge within transcultural mediascapes and flows (Appadurai 1990) between South Asia and Europe, but also allows us to utilize the

advantages and avoid the disadvantages of both, academic as well as filmic practice. Slow paced approaches, thus open an ethical field which is conscious about the drawbacks of the information capitalism machinery but does not shy away from harnessing its practice of branding in the process of *becoming public*.

Commonalities and Creative Differences between Filmic and Academic Practices

The following will introduce three theoretical perspectives which aim to stimulate a discussion about the relationship between social science research and documentary filmmaking.

(1) REPRESENTATION. Social scientists and documentary filmmakers alike attempt to capture the world around us through a variety of aesthetic expressions—be they textural or audio-visual. Even though the medium of these expressions varies, both fields claim a shared reality. Differing from, for example, feature film or fictional prose, for a documentary genre to be recognized the implied audience needs to agree with the validity of the production's 'voice'[1] which bears witness to actual events (Corner 2011, 72). Academic research and documentary film, therefore, often share a wide range of protocols—such as accurate time and space relations, verifiable statements, or the possibility of a third party to (re-) scrutinize the events documented—which are crucial for the validity of their truth-claims. This is especially important when working with the testimonial status of images and words on the Global South, where questions of representation and misrepresentation have been particularly pertinent. Both, documentary film and social sciences, thus, often come into existence as an argument and a rhetoric voice that references events taken to be real (Nichols 2016).

(2.) AFFECT. Documentary films mediate knowledge through multiple ways of emotional mobilization. Gilles Deleuze, for example, has elaborated on how films affect us differently than texts. In his books *Cinema 1* (2001) and *Cinema 2* (2005)*,* he explores ways to rethink philosophical concepts of time and movement after the emergence of cinema. For Deleuze, cinema is not just another object to write *about*, but an expression of one of his main philosophical concepts: *life as becoming*. Grossly simplified, Deleuze thwarts stable notions of being and instead claims that fluidity,

movement, and becoming are prior to stasis. With Deleuze, cinema ceases to be a system of signs, languages, and metaphors which refer to some deeper or hidden meaning (Marks 1998, 140). Film becomes a 'machine' with the ability to move people beyond arguments, rhetoric voices, or the logics of representation.

While affective aspects are often central to filmmakers, social scientists usually do not consider them important to the ways in which they communicate knowledge. Academics, however, often wonder how to make their voice more prominent without losing critical positions and methodological protocols in the process. Social scientist might, in fact, learn about more creative ways of public-address from filmmaker's ways of becoming public. South Asian documentary practices have been particularity marked by experiments with the aesthetics of form and ways of becoming public (Wolf 2007, Vohra 2011, Schneider 2015). These are often highly contextualized ways of creating and interacting with publics (Kishore 2017) within a volatile sensorium (Mazzerella 2013). In other words, in moments when our filmic or academic articulations open up to mass-communication, effects contrary to what filmmakers or academics intended to say can emerge (Ghosh 2010). Since *the* public is an imagined relationship between strangers, actors addressing this abstracted public will always talk to unknown listeners (Warner 2002). Protests against the US Indologist Wendy Doniger, for example, whose book *The Hindus* was banned in India or flash mobs attempting to disturb screenings of films considered 'anti-national' are only a few examples from South Asia. This line of thinking about the visceral aspects of our filmic and academic practices within increasingly affect-driven information capitalism is of growing importance (Berardi 2009). Scholars and documentary filmmakers alike need to tackle questions about emotional mobilization of an imagined audience of strangers at, what Mazzarella called, the 'open edge of mass publicity' (Mazzarella 2013, 37).

(3.) AESTHETICS. Jacques Rancière's work converges aesthetics and political theory. For him cinema is not representational, but rather a question of dissent through aesthetics: A different sense-formation between medium, spectator, and filmmaker. Cinema's aesthetics—mixing of images, editing, and montage—are, for Rancière, the defining characteristics of modern-day politics. Most significantly, modern political life and cinema are lacking any necessary 'plot' which determines their rules (Panagia 2018, 53). Modern aesthetics and politics, in fact, cannot rely on any underlying form which they would simply *represent*. Rancière, therefore, needs to look for other ways than organising the relationship between 'reality' and 'representation.' In *Film Fables*

(2006), he critiques notions that oppose documentary to fictional film on the basis of their respective relationship to 'the real.' Documentary and fictional film, Rancière argues, are not opposed to each other as documentary deals with acts of the everyday and fictional film with scripted sequences. To the contrary, *both* produce systems of 'internally coherent signs' (*ibid*). Since our age is marked by an abundance of information, the act of constructing meaning, is 'the work [*oevre*] of fiction' (*ibid.*). The documentary genre, however, is marked with novelty as it is not an 'effect to be produced,' (as is the case in fictional film), but rather a 'fact to be understood' (*ibid.*). This renders documentary as a special branch of cinema since it triggers 'contestation[s] over the real' or the 'common' (Baumbach 2010, 65). Academic output similarly triggers contestations as it claims the right to facts being understood. This entanglement of documentary and academic output as ways to challenge our notions of 'common sense' is mutually beneficial and can fruitfully be extended by elaborating on their affective potentials.

We hope to establish *Dastavezi* as an open archive of audio-visual knowledge, which supports filmmakers and scholars working on South Asia and encourages them to use documentary film as a legitimate source of academic production. By providing films with Digital Object Identifier (DOI) numbers, *Dastavezi* aims to make audio-visual productions visible for academic and non-academic audiences within and beyond the structures of the market domain. This will help to widen the horizons of the existing field of documentary film-studies, visual-anthropology, and film practices on and from South Asia.

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[1] Film scholar Bill Nichols has engaged with 'voice' through questions of rhetorics as an epistemological necessity of any documentary practice which 'might speak with multiple purposes and to different ends but in ways that strive to compel belief as much as they might please or prove. Rhetoric gives a distinct voice to those who wish their perspective and their interpretation to enter into dialogue with that of others' (Nichols 2016, 106).