

# **The Cinema Is Missing:**

## **In Search of the Ontological Temperature of Being in Northeast India**

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

by

**Mriganka Madhukaillya**



Department of Design,

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

November 2020

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(Roll No. 136105005)

Under the supervision of

Prof. Utpal Barua



Department of Design,  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

June 2021



May my speech be based on the mind;

May my mind be based on speech.

*Mudgala Upanishad*



Guwahati, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021

### **Certificate**

It is certified that the matter embodied in the thesis entitled **The Cinema Is Missing: In Search of the Ontological Temperature of Being in Northeast India**, submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by **Mriganka Madhukailya**, student of the Department of Design, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India, has been carried out under my supervision. It is also certified that this work has not been submitted anywhere else for the award of a research degree.

Utpal Barua

**Professor**

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**Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has taken a long route, but it has helped me carve a new trajectory in my academic life. I am grateful towards IIT Guwahati for the support throughout these years of research and for the fact that I was allowed to pursue my artistic career parallelly to my duties as Assistant Professor, as well as Head of the Media Lab, within the Department of Design. My colleagues in the department were always a source of encouragement. I am especially thankful to Prof. Gautam Biswas who, as Director of IIT Guwahati between 2014-2019, supported my vision and my work.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank some of the teachers in my life: Prof. K.D. Krori, the late Kumar Vyas, Prof. S. Balram, the late Prof. M.P. Ranjan and Prof. Vinayan Kodoth from NID Ahmedabad, who instilled in me a desire to take up teaching and research.

In writing this thesis, Stephen Zepke, Leon Tan and Dr. Aparna Sarma have been instrumental, by providing me with resources, insightful conversations, and encouragement. Prof. Sanjib Baruah has been very important for my understanding of the stakes of researching Northeast India and his work provided me with many of my concepts. Discussions with Prof. Prasenjit Duara have helped widen the scope of my research.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of the thesis committee, Prof. A. K Das, Prof. Sachin Kakoty, Dr. Pratul Kalita, and to Prof. Utpal Barua, my supervisor, who offered support and encouragement throughout the thesis.

My student Ashish Khandaliker gave a helpful hand in putting together Annex 2, the statistical style analysis. I would also like to thank Anupa Lahkar and Sasikala Singh who helped me to compile research materials at various stages.

I am particularly grateful to Cristina Bogdan, my partner and a true philosopher and friend, whose insights and tireless support enabled me to complete this thesis.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents, Bonti and Goya Sharma, for supporting me spiritually throughout writing this thesis and my life in general.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Uma Chakravarty.



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**THE CINEMA IS MISSING:  
IN SEARCH OF  
THE ONTOLOGICAL TEMPERATURE OF BEING  
IN NORTHEAST INDIA**

*“The future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed.”*

*William Gibson, 1993*

*“It is the pattern maintained by this homeostasis, which is the touchstone of our personal identity. Our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body every day with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not the stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.”*

*Norbert Wiener, 1954*

*“What are called structures are slow processes of long duration, functions are quick processes of short duration.”*

*Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, 1952*

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Abstract

The present investigation looks at cinematic forms from Northeast India in order to understand whether this specific geo-body has been the locus of the creation of an indigenous cybernetic modelling of the world. As the title indicates, my position is that the cinematic medium as such was not fully used as a modelling tool; the thesis attempts to understand this situation by addressing it from a variety of angles: coming from the history and philosophy of cinema; from indigenous conceptions of time in relation to Indian and western ones; from technology, both analogue and digital; from design and cybernetics.

The **core question that this research asks pertains to the cybernetic potential of cinema**. In other words, this research sets out to explore the localised control feedback loop or rhythm structure in cinema and liberate it from the singular closed loop system.

As a product of Western Modernity, created in order to respond to the industrialized time of the production line, cinema has made its way into the Northeast imaginary in complex ways. In the course of the thesis, I analyze both mainstream movies from Assam and avant-garde attempts from both Assam and Manipur, in order to understand how the medium was received and explored, and to what ends.

Furthermore, I make a case for the non-western turn in contemporary cinema, by looking at innovative ways in which Asian filmmakers have exploded the conventions of montage-based cinema. By touching upon my own practice with the media collective Desire Machine Collective, I attempt to compare the translation of different concepts of time into technical conventions.

The analysis will lead us to explore the possibility of developing conventions to create an ontological cinema. In that sense, the implied negative assessment in the title is but an opportunity to reflect upon further possibilities of a changing medium in a radically changing world.

## 1.2. Research Context

Before delving into the theoretical aspects of the research, it is essential to note its path-breaking aspect, which is also the reason for the many difficulties behind drawing complex conclusions at the end of it. Northeast India has not lacked, over the past two centuries, researchers, anthropologists, missionaries, religious scholars, etc. coming and studying its rich and very diverse culture, in all its aspects. There are papers and books on almost all aspects of its natural settings and society, including on its cinema. However, all of these studies look at the Northeast as a historical and ethnographic object: it is as if the authors envisioned it locked in time, sometime before the arrival of the British colonizers, perpetually deploying its rich traditions, technically and technologically untouched by modernity and ultimately globalization. Data is gathered, stories and myths are written down, objects are catalogued, and yet no ontology emerges, no understanding of the specific mode of addressing being in the world. At the other extreme, the Northeast is investigated from a journalistic perspective, looking at decades of unrest, this time completely disconnected from the anthropological perspective. Practically there is no coherent narrative of the space, one that would make sense of both the traditional tribal configuration and its explosion in reaction to the disruption of its rhythms. Having researched the subject for almost 20 years, I can say that I have never encountered a study in which contemporary philosophy, stemming from the west but also from

non-western spaces, was brought up in order to shed light on the imbrications of the Northeast as geo-body. Thus, this space remains philosophically unviable: it cannot emerge as a model for the world, because it is not modelled in the first place. It is perceived merely as a collection of ethnological objects, associated but also disconnected from a violent political context.

My work has been concerned with shedding light on my own context, thus for almost two decades I have been mapping the various approaches to the Northeast and attempting to unify them using contemporary tools. This thesis is an expression of that effort. It stems from my artistic practice, which has manifested mostly as film-making, and my teaching experience during which I have developed design tools, including systems modelling. Both these practices are based on transdisciplinary research and the usage of contemporary tools, from data visualization to more theoretical notions coming from speculative philosophy. I have attempted to apply all of this knowledge and experience in this research, in order to think the Northeast differently; my entry point has been its cinema, and my selection of films reflects on the intention to bridge the anthropological and the political with the philosophical. In a sense, the effort has an experimental aspect to it, as I am walking unthreaded paths: I am bringing together research which as Professor of Design I would rarely be encouraged to use, such as ancient Ahom chronicles, with philosophical ideas from the likes of Heidegger, Stiegler and Deleuze, whom I have understood through self-study as well as through encounters with numerous professors and researchers whose work I quote extensively. I use anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss to look at the systemic changes which lead to the political unrest of the 1980s, and break down my own films, laden with emotion and questioning, to address the communal roots of a crumbling world. Thus, the thesis is a back and forth between practice and theory, between anthropology and history, between myth and philosophy. Acknowledging the lacunae in the current research on the Northeast does not automatically mean that I can address them: my purpose is to produce a philosophical work, which would then open the way to more specific

research, in which contemporary tools are used intelligently in order to extract the highest knowledge and possibilities from this complex culture.

### **1.3. Aims, Objectives and Methodology**

The aim of this research is primarily to offer a complex understanding of the ontology of Northeast India as developed from the state of its cinema.

The objectives are: to study the various notions of cinematic exercise in Assam and Manipur; to select appropriate methods/ techniques/ tools for studying the time code in the selected films; to combine concepts from various disciplines, as well as forge new ones, capable of bringing together a coherent understanding of Northeast India as geo-body; to put forward a theoretical formulation, based on the investigation of the concept of time in Northeast cinema, pertaining to ontological cinema.

My methodology, as hinted to in the previous section, is to cross-reference findings and tools from various disciplines which in the years spent studying the Northeast have proven essential for its understanding. I have identified these tools and concepts empirically, and their ultimate test has been my ability to translate them into my own cinematic practice. In a sense, my tools and my practice are diametrically opposed on the hermeneutic circle, the understanding of one leading to the better usage of the other, and so on. I conceive of this entire method as pertaining more to design than to art, in fact I am making a case in this research for something called “ontological design” which, as I will explain in the first chapter, stems from designers who had based their work on Heideggerian readings. Thus I should refine my claim that I am producing a philosophical work by saying that I am producing one pertaining to ontological design, something which incorporates the “practical” aspect of a philosophical

investigation. In fact, the ability of this concept to transcend the very western dichotomy theory-practice is what led me to use it in a work which claims to function outside of western ontology, or in any case builds its way out of it.

More specifically, my methodology has involved first of all gathering data, over the course of the last 20 years, on the society and natural setting of Northeast India: its history, geography, myths, religions, social structures, material culture, immaterial culture, language, technology, etc. For this thesis, I have selected for over 3 years the aspects relevant to my argument: they pertain mostly to the organization of time, religious practice, linguistic and oral encodings, finally political developments.

At the same time, I have selected a handful of films from Assam and Manipur which can be used to reflect upon the way in which cinema was understood in the context thus highlighted. These two states are in fact the only ones in the Northeast with a relevant cinema culture.

These films presented themselves as relevant choices for various reasons, perhaps the most important one being their treatment of rhythm, an element which in the course of the research undertaken for this thesis has become an entry point for addressing the specificity of cinema. In analyzing these films, I question the manner in which the directors were able to think through the medium in order to put forward worldviews which are personal as much as they are collective, at times even specifically indigenous.

Some, like Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti*, the first Assamese film, are important for both form and context: in this case, the film represents a personal effort to work through a new medium, at the time entirely alien to the local culture. Others, like *Kanglai Haroba* and *Sangai - the Dancing Deer of Manipur* from the famed Manipuri director Aribam Syam Sharma, are documentaries working specifically with the question of ritual, which *Joymoti* had touched upon via narrative. These three films offer me the opportunity to discuss cinema as a

sophisticated visual and intellectual construct, whose purpose is none other than embodying an ontology which owes nothing to modernity.

The 1963 commercial success *Maniram Dewan* is another film addressing a local myth, this time however the director is in full control of the specific technique of narrative cinema, thus moving even further away from an indigenous conception of cinema. On the other hand, Aribam's *Sanabi* employs performance within the narrative to alter the codes of classical cinema.

I further included three of my own films, created as part of Desire Machine Collective, to extend the argument to the contemporary period and its new technological challenges. *Residue*, *Noiselife* and *Invocation* are cinematic essays in which my work to understand and imagine an ontology growing from the roots of my context is perhaps at its most coherent. For the purpose of this research, these films are also set in dialogue with selected works from contemporary Asian cinema which are engaged in a similar effort to overcome the codes of modernity and produce authentic images of the non-western experience of the world.

This focus on the Northeast is complemented throughout by sustained research into western philosophy and history, from which I try to extract elements that will shed light on the idea of cinema as cybernetic modelling. A subset of this corpus is that of cinematic studies, which constitute a very important part of the present work. I am specifically interested in thinkers who bridge philosophy and cinema, such as Gilles Deleuze, as well as in those who think cinema in cybernetic terms, moving away from its totalizing western understanding. A specific tool I use is the analysis of shot lengths, a simple yet effective proof of the way in which cinema organizes reality.

The aim of the research can thus be reformulated as trying to think the Northeast through cinema and to think a definition of the new cinema through composing an ontology of the Northeast. It is an ambitious goal, not only because it has not been attempted before, but also

because it requires a command of a variety of disciplines and their tools, something which I can only hope I will have proven in the course of this paper.

#### **1.4. Motivation**

The main motivation of this research is to formalize my theoretical interest in time, while practicing cinema. This position was strengthened by the remark of Deleuze in his last book, *What is Philosophy?*, where he claims both that the sole purpose of philosophy is to discover new concepts, and the possibility of cinema to be the new philosophical medium.

The current research is aligned with systematic attempts over the past decades, undertaken in universities and other research institutions in the western world, to recuperate and rethink pre-industrial or non-industrial practices and systems, in order to reform the failing modern paradigm. This has translated into numerous researches in which ancient Indian thought, among other systems, has been appropriated into a global paradigm that in fact is nothing else than the ever-expanding western one, which then is repackaged and sold to the entire world.

My long engagement with Indian philosophy, as well as with the systems of thought of Northeast India, has lead me to understand my responsibility to work with this knowledge in the contemporary context: to make its concepts alive and relevant for the altered culture we are living in, having lost access to our ancient knowledge, whilst being overwhelmed by the violence of industrialization. It is my utmost belief that the wealth of knowledge in Northeast India can bring significant changes to current philosophical, cultural, technological issues at a global level.

My attempt to work with this knowledge is thus both a response to the status of contemporary Northeast Indian culture, and a move to reposition Northeast Indian philosophical ideas in the sphere of global theoretical debate. My claim is that the concepts I thus bring to light can contribute to a better understanding of Northeast culture from a design and technological perspective, and at the same time, following my cybernetic reading, be applied in the creation of new media objects.

### **1.5. Thesis Organization**

Following the introduction, the second chapter sets out the theoretical background of the study, first of all by offering definitions of the key terms that form the underlying conceptual apparatus. It discusses the ontological turn in philosophy and moves on to thinking about the decolonization of time in relation to cinematic practice. Time is defined as economically as possible in the context of a non-philosophical research: it is addressed culturally, from both western and non-western perspectives, and specifically from the angles which will further prove useful in our investigation. The question of ontology is brought forth via Indologist Raimun Panikkar's definition of time as "the ontological temperature of being" – a formula that inspired the title of the present research – and investigated in relation to the western world (as 'modernity') and in Northeast India, using the leading notion of myth. Two terms I use together in order to address the specificity of the Northeast, geo-philosophy and geo-body, are also explained, as is the specific understanding I have of cybernetics in relation to cinematic practice throughout this thesis.

The third chapter studies the idea of cinema from the perspective of its fundamental link with modernity. Two main definitions are put forward: cinema as prosthesis of perception and

cinema as cybernetics. Historically, the theory of montage as an organizing principle of cinema is contextualized and discussed, with a particular interest in its subversive uses by avant-garde western directors. The work of two North-eastern film-makers is brought to the fore in this context, so as to understand their usage of a medium completely alien to their culture, and to attempt an assessment of the grounding of their cinematic principles.

The fourth chapter examines the twin notions of geo-philosophy and geo-body in relation to the new timecodes developed by Asian film-makers towards the end of the 20th century. Northeast India is more closely investigated as a geo-body, with the help of the complementary notion of *zomia*. Ancient image making strategies are evoked in this context, to better define the specific image schema that I was able to compose with data collected from the region. Finally, the work that I have done with the new media collective Desire Machine Collective is brought in to draw lessons on contemporary possibilities of filmic research that is based on a thorough understanding of local cosmogonies and temporalities.

The fifth and last chapter functions as a conclusion and allows for the elaboration of a coherent cybernetic theory of cinema stemming from Northeast India. The main concept developed is that of *the cybernetic reorganization of the world*: this combines the possibility of ontological design and the expanding digital technology, and allows for the return to a conception of the world in terms of contingency, as opposed to the linear, causal organization put forward in modern cinema.

A possible continuation of the present research is also outlined: a formulation of an ontology for Northeast India, achieved through the investigation of the history and philosophy of technology of the region. Several roads are thus open towards the creation of new time conventions, for which cinema is a privileged tool.

## Chapter 2: ONTOLOGY AND TIME

This chapter investigates the ontological turn in philosophy and proposes to think about the decolonization of time in relation to cinematic practice.

Ontology, the philosophy of being, is the basis of every worldview put forward and embodied by a culture. Western ontology, derived from Christianity and fundamentally altered in the modern period by the so-called ‘Dual Revolution’ – industrialization and liberalization – was imposed on the entire world through colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, there is a different way to perceive the world apart from the Eurocentric industrial world view.

Questioning of the Western model started from inside, whilst its imitation in the non-western world triggered other types of contestations. At the same time, there is still a memory of different ontologies; many non-Western (indigenous, rural, etc.) populations of the world conceive of the community and the relationship with nature, knowledge, historical experience, memory, time, and space as configuring ways of life that cannot be reduced to Eurocentric conceptions and cultures.

Such is the case of Northeast India, a region marked by its tribal configuration, as well as its belonging to *zomia*; both these characteristics, which first set it apart within India itself, and then from the Western ontological model, are also the basis of its culture – and thus, of its cinematic production, which is our object of inquiry in this paper.

According to CK Raju, “Time beliefs relate to values. Political control of human behaviour, by ‘fixing’ values, can hence be achieved by manipulating time beliefs. For example, Augustine changed time beliefs in early Christianity (from quasi cyclic time to apocalyptic time) to induce people to behave in a way he regarded as appropriate. More recently, global political control through ‘soft power’ has again been related to the globalisation of culture by Huntington” (Raju, 2003, p. 89).

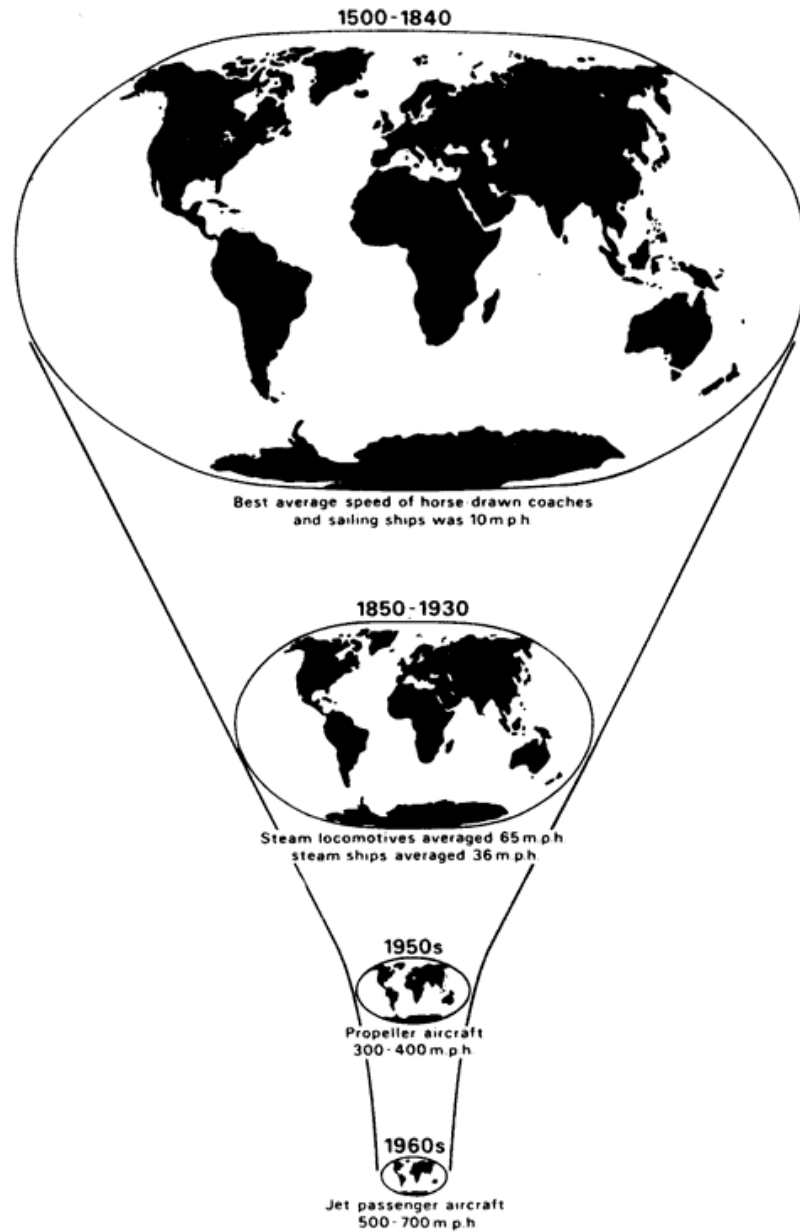


Fig. 2.1: The Shrinking Map of the World.

Source: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, 1992.

The urgency of this research is related to the dysynchronicity we face as the after effect of the acceleration introduced by various modern technologies over the years. Korean

philosopher Byung-Chul Han discusses this question in his books, explaining the absence of rhythm which is producing this timelessness. For example:

“Today’s temporal crisis is not a crisis of acceleration. The age of acceleration is already over. What we experience today as acceleration is only one of the symptoms of temporal dispersal. Today’s temporal crisis is caused by a dyschronicity which leads to various temporal disturbances and irritations. Time is lacking a rhythm that would provide order, and thus it falls out of step. Dyschronicity lets time whizz, so to speak. The feeling that life is accelerating is really the experience of a time that is whizzing without a direction” (Han, 2017, p. 9).

Thus, my discussion of the production of an indigenous perception of time through cinema needs to be seen as an attempt to respond to this dysynchronicity brought about by western modernity; my analysis builds toward a series of potential responses, some historical and some speculative, to the question of the impoverishment of perception under the spell of modern technologies.

## **2.1. Definition of Key Concepts**

Our investigation is rooted in design understood as a mode of organizing experience and knowledge. Hence, the philosophical concepts which are used throughout the research are not dealt with as they would be dealt with in a highly theoretical text. Instead, the most fruitful definition for the purpose of the research is being used throughout, taking care of course to expand and contextualize it. Obviously, such notions as ontology or time have a huge genealogy and it would be impossible first of all to deal with it separately as a part of this research, second to propose a new understanding of the terms. Instead, such terms are taken as useful tools in

our investigation, as basic notions that allow us to navigate the complex world opened up by cinema, between theoretical formulations and experiential propositions.

### **2.1.1. Ontology**

Let us start thus with a clear definition of our main concept, as proposed by Hamilton in his book on Indian philosophy:

“Ontology is concerned with being: it is about what there is. This can be a response on any scale from the microscopic to the cosmic to the question What is there? However one approaches ontological (what is there?) issues, the point is to ascertain the ‘status of being’ of what there is. This is called ‘ontological status’” (Hamilton, 2005, p.16).

Therefore, ontology is an inquiry into the status of beings, but not necessarily organic or even real ones:

“If one considers, say, a park as experienced in a dream and the supermarket where one does one's shopping, one can readily see that these two have different statuses of being – their ontological status is different. Similarly, an oasis seen in a mirage is of a different ontological status from an oasis one can locate by means of a map reference. Whatever there is has an ontological status. This need not be immediately obvious: during the dream or experience of the mirage, the park and the oasis seem to have the same status as the supermarket or map referenced oasis. But in fact their status is different, and this difference can be understood in terms of reality. The supermarket is ‘more real’ than the dream park; the map-referenced oasis is ‘more real’ than the mirage. But the dream park and mirage do also have some kind of reality or status: they are experienced ‘as real’, and it is only with hindsight that one realizes they are ‘less real’ than other experiences.

In the context of a worldview or philosophical system, its ontology is what it says there really is – even if we cannot immediately discern it – independent of any possible mistaken interpretations on our part of the dream/mirage kind. Through the ages in East and West, many different ontologies have been put forward. Some state that what we see is what there really is; others that our normal waking state is analogous to a dream state, and what really exists is different from that” (Hamilton, 2005, p.16).

For the western world, the ontological framework sets aside the living and the non-living – more precisely, the non-thinking – beings since the dawn of modernity. Descartes famously wrote, “I think, therefore I am”, leading 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers to coin the term “correlationism” to designate the western ontology as defined by the necessary connection between thinking and being (Meillasoux, 2009). In practice, this has led to denying an ontological status to anything outside the human being, something which, as we will explain later, contrasts fundamentally with non-western ontologies.

### **2.1.2. Time**

The immediate implication is that the prevailing understanding of time has oscillated between a subjective and an objective one, neither compatible with the other. The objective understanding of time results in the compartmentation of lived experience into units ranging from the second to the year, whilst conceptualizing units outside of direct human experience, such as the millennium or the epoch. From Aristotle onward, this has been a preferred approach to time in the western world, which gradually moved away even from cyclical rural time, and fully embraced the industrial time of the town and city. Time is seen as the product of human

rationality, and a coordinate which must be uniformly imposed on the entire world of living and non-living beings.

On the other hand, the cosmic speculation of time in India had gone through various modifications and restructuring, starting with organizing through rhythms of the ritual year; later Upaniṣadic texts began to explore entirely new ways of thinking about time. The movement away from the more integrated view of the material and immaterial as one reality in the Vedas, towards a radical dualism between the spiritual and the material in later Indian thought, informs many of the new ideas of time that emerge in the Upaniṣads, including that of time as an abstract construct.

While discussing and deriving the typology and temporality in Indian tradition, Prof. Panikkar discusses three intuitions on the nature of time in Indian philosophy. The first intuition is about time being lived or experienced, which he proposes as the ontological temperature of being for the ancients.

“A first intuition on the nature of time could be formulated by saying that **time is lived or experienced as the ontological temperature of being**, that is, as that which manifests the activity of every being, and consequently also its existence as intelligible and its degree of reality be it provisional or ultimate. In other words, time ‘is the revealer of all beings’” (Panikkar, 1974, p. 161).

In this definition, I see a similarity with the description of the molecular mechanisms controlling the circadian rhythm, as made by Nobel Prize winners Jeffrey C. Hall and Michael Rosbash:

“Life on Earth is adapted to the rotation of our planet. For many years we have known that living organisms, including humans, have an internal, biological clock that helps them anticipate and adapt to the regular rhythm of the day. But how does this clock actually work?” (NobelPrize.org)

This similarity is interesting to note and will be taken up later. This conception of time through ontology can help develop the non-industrial idea of time. Panikkar's formulation of time as ontological temperature of being seems to be perfect to consider cinema as an object-oriented medium, in order to derive a philosophy of time for technology.

Panikkar discusses two more intuitions which gave rise to time concepts in Indian traditions; alongside the already mentioned idea that time is a lived and experienced entity, he explains that it is also a by-product or a result of ritual action. It is the foundation of all action since there is no action without change and no change without time: "From time all beings emerge" (Maitrya Upanishad). He synthesizes the two intuitions into the third one, by introducing the so-called circular conception of time and the popular Indian conception of vast cyclic time, which is contingent and enclosed in finitude.

In Northeast India, however, the conception of time is more directly determined by a conjunction between the mythical indigenous cosmogony and the everyday life in the village. Let us give the example of the time measurement system within the Khasi tribe. The smallest unit amongst the Khasis regarding conceiving and regulating time is the khyllipmat, the brief moment it takes to wink. For longer measurement or another term is the time to finish a serving of betel-nut (Simon, 1966, p. 14). The composition of the Khasi week consists of eight days, each day connected to a market day. The calculation of the months corresponds to the lunar calendar and it is also connected to the agricultural season. Each month was named after a human activity or natural phenomenon. They were not equal in length but later got adopted into the Christian calendar. Kyllalyngkot (turning of the fire brands), Iaiiong (black season, because of storms), Risaw (reddening landscape, because of the reddish autumn tint of the leaves) are some names of the months as conceived by the Khasis.

Similarly, the Ao Nagas followed a measurement of time corresponding to agricultural cycles and lunar cycles. Some of the words which are still used in the villages correspond to the time of day and night: Enjung Meshi (noon, when it is the time for the midday meal), Akpo meshi (early evening, when it is time to feed the pigs), and so on (Ao, 1999, p. 180). We might say that, as these two examples show, nature has been conceived in the Northeast region as a sort of automata for calculating time – a conclusion that is consistent with Panikkar’s first definition of time mentioned above. Additionally, this opened the possibility of a dialogue between such ancient local fertility cults and the mainstream tendency towards deification of nature inherent in Indian thought.

What is important for this research is the encounter between such different conceptions of time which took place with the advent of colonization. Clock time encountered what we might call a *cosmopoetic* time, meaning the time of the everyday creation, which is never lived outside the cosmic time, the time of connection with the divinity. The violent clash that ensued led to radical alterations to the perception of time – hence of the world – for the indigenous people.

### **2.1.3. Cybernetics**

Coined from the Greek word “kubernetes”, or “steersman” – the same root of the English word “governor” – cybernetics is a discipline emerged out of the necessity to regulate the flow of information in feedback loops in order to predict, control, and automate the behavior of mechanical and biological systems. The famous Macy Conferences of 1943-1954 provided an interdisciplinary forum to integrate information theory, computer models of binary information processing, and neurophysiology in order to synthesize a totalizing theory. Norbert

Wiener, who is acknowledged as the founder of the discipline, wrote his famous book *Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* as an outcome of these conferences, in 1954.

In the initial years, cybernetic theories were tested as military applications. Wiener, after writing about the experiences of the war in *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, advocated the use of cybernetics to improve social conditions, and cautioned about the dehumanizing potential of technology.

The discipline of cybernetics received currency in various corners of the world as the system aspects of the organization were transformed into the use of machines. While not directly related to cybernetics, simultaneously there were a lot of artistic actions which could be loosely seen as an independent manifestation of the aesthetic concern with the regulation of a system through the feedback of information amongst its elements. The most prominent example of this tendency premiered in 1952, American composer John Cage's *4'33"*. Written for piano but having no notes, this piece invoked the ambient sounds of the environment (including the listener's own breathing, a neighbour's cough, the crumpling of a candy wrapper).

Following the pioneering work of composers like Cage, Lejaren Hiller, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Iannis Xenakis in the 1950s, techniques such as audio feedback and the use of tape loops, sound synthesis, and computer-generated composition reflected a cybernetic awareness of information, systems, and cycles.

The medium of cinema is a great environment for examining cybernetic processes since the work of every filmmaker consists in "using time manipulation and other cinematic techniques to re-apply a recorded series of events back to that series of events itself, and through such operations to bring the future of the messages into the imagination of the dreaming

spectator. The spectator's trance attests to loops of self-adaptation where the perception in the cinema is located" (Holl, 2017, p. 33).

Cybernetics focuses on understanding the dynamic processes by which the transfer of information amongst machines and/or humans alters behavior at the systems level. At a system level, a new technology introduces a new set of conventions to the user/viewer or to the system itself. This set marks the new changes within the system itself. It is from this perspective that this research looks at cinema as a tool for cybernetic modelling in the second chapter, a notion which is crucial to the points put forward in the conclusion.

#### **2.1.4. Ontological Design**

One of the advantages that French philosopher Bruno Latour sees in the word "design" (in addition to its modesty, its attention to detail and the semiotic skills it always carries with it), is that it is never a process that begins from scratch: "to design is always to redesign. There is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem" (Latour, 2008, p. 5). One could emphasise the need to organise or design new conventions of technology using a different time code.

"We encounter the deep questions of design when we recognize that in designing tools we are designing ways of being" (Winograd & Flores, 1986, p. xi). An important aspect explored in this thesis is the idea of the ontological design of time; cinema could be one of the mediums used to design time.

The term ontological design, as well as its practical possibility, was explored by Tony Fry and the collaborative duo Fernando Flores and Terry Winograd, who built on the foundation of the work of 20th century philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Like the

ontological turn in philosophy, ontological designing implies a radically different understanding of design as practice and object than those generally universalised; it also implies different ways of understanding how we, as modern subjects *are* and how we come to be who/what we are in the modern world.

This attempt led these thinkers to the primary source, Heidegger. Relevant to this thesis, in “On the Way to Language” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 17), we read that cinema cannot reveal an authentic sense of world since it is “captured and imprisoned within the objectness of photography,” a fact that reflects the forgetting of Being typical of the “Europeanization” of humankind and the world. This enquiry inaugurates the possibility to reinvoke the rhythm inherent to any ontology.

There have been many attempts and initiatives to extend the arguments of Heidegger around “the ontology of equipment”, “worlding” and “thinging”, in order to develop the methodology for ontological designing. These concepts require a brief explanation at this point. When we develop or use an equipment it depends completely on its appropriateness and not on its property. The same equipment may not be appropriate for many instances. Worlding was first coined by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927). He transformed the noun (world) into the active verb (worlding). Heidegger’s (1971) worlding and thinging are inextricably intertwined, for without things that thing, there is no worlding – the thinging of the thing is the worlding of the world. What the philosopher is proposing is that the creation of a world is a continuous process, which has to be undertaken in full consciousness.

The introduction of modern design had replaced the existing ways of beings with modern (industrial) ways of beings. Only a few design cultures survived the overarching imposition of modern principles. In the contemporary context, there is a necessity to explore the potential of ontological designing, to revert the conventions governing the usage of certain

technological objects. Since ontology deals with specific concepts of beings, it is crucial to redesign such conventions.

What I am encountering at this point through cinema is the possibility of worldmaking. With various tools and equipment available to the filmmakers, primarily after the digital turn in cinema, various conventions of aesthetics and editing have become possible. There has been a rupture in image making in cinema through various montage patterns by directors redesigning or innovating the medium through appropriating the site specific ontology in the time code.

This rejection or overcoming of modernity signals the potential and possibility of ontological design in cinema. For that we have to deal with the incomplete project of deriving the ontology of image and time in order to transfer it into the technique.

To support this claim, we can bring in Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar, famous for his work on the alternatives of the so-called third world in the post-developmental era; he identifies the ‘One-World world’ as the key problem:

“... the idea that we all live in a single world ... largely conceived of from the perspective of the Euro-American historical experience and exported to many world regions over the past few hundred years through colonialism, development, and globalization” (Escobar, 2015, p. 86).

We could also see the potential of engaging with the recently coined term of “cosmotechnics” by Chinese media philosopher Yuk Hui (2019) who, while addressing the question of technology in China, puts forward the proposal that each conception of technics corresponds to a specific worldview, related to a civilization, and that each such civilization needs to fulfil its technological potential via a return to its ontology. The purpose of this operation is to counter the unifying and ultimately reductionist understanding and usage of technology in the western logic: as an intimate consequence of colonization and globalization,

technology as we know it today is solely a western construct, stemming from its dualistic mode of operating.

The very condition of this thesis turning the search from cinema to ontology stems from a chance encounter of a text by Indologist Raimund Pannikar about ancient time tradition in India. This text has helped me understand the various constitutive elements of Indian philosophy.

One could not avoid, on this trajectory, the contribution of Heidegger's essay on technology and ontology. Heidegger referred to the threat posed by the technological paradigm as an "ontological condition". Thus it becomes imperative for us to study the ontological conditions and disruptions, and put forward various efforts to regain grounding.

### **2.1.5. Geo-philosophy & Geo-body**

This grounding is ultimately a function of knowing and – to an important extent – of being part of a system which in return offers the conditions for a life of dignity and meaning. With the stated argument that the entire world is and has been for a while a series of variations on a single model, the grounding I am talking about can only take place in a non-western space. The assumption that all the thinkers mentioned above, as well as myself, are making, is that such spaces still exist. I am making a case in this research for Northeast India as such a space of possibilities, if addressed correctly.

It is useful at this point to bring into the argument the possibility of philosophy as geo-philosophy, something that the duo Deleuze-Guattari had posited in their last book, *What Is Philosophy?* Their thinking has been crucial for my artistic practice: the name of the collective I have worked with comes from their writings and the idea of desiring machine has been

extremely fruitful when producing work from a non-hegemonic position. Geo-philosophy is a concept that comes precisely from their opening up towards non-western thinking in the context of their response to the capturing of the senses by global financial capitalism, and the blockages in terms of mental health that come with that. In their last book they define philosophy as the creation of concepts, and what they are trying to do with the term geo-philosophy is forge a concept that will not betray philosophy when it encounters the world; they are looking to reinsert philosophy into the plane of immanence – meaning, the space of everyday life which is not separated from the plane of the divine, like in the so-called book religions which posit a god that is unknowable and unreachable. They start to think of philosophy in relation to the space where it has generated:

“Philosophy is geophilosophy in precisely the same way that history is geohistory from Braudel’s point of view. Why philosophy in Greece at that moment? It is the same for capitalism, according to Braudel: why capitalism in these places and at these moments? Why not in China at some other moment, since so many of its components were already present there? Geography is not confined to providing historical form with a substance and variable places. It is not merely physical and human but mental, like the landscape. Geography wrests history from the cult of necessity in order to stress the irreducibility of contingency. It wrests it from the cult of origins in order to affirm the power of a ‘milieu’ [...]. It wrests it from structures in order to trace the lines of flight that pass through the Greek world across the Mediterranean. Finally, it wrests history from itself in order to discover becomings that do not belong to history even if they fall back into it: the history of philosophy in Greece must not hide the fact that in every case the Greeks had to become philosophers in the first place, just as philosophers had to become Greek” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2015, p. 99).

Further along, they make a crucial addition to this description, by writing that, “We today possess concepts, but the Greeks did not yet possess them; they possessed the plane that we no longer possess” (idem, p.101). This plane, the plane of immanence which made possible thinking that was free, courageous, responsible and dangerous in the sense that it created worlds, is determined by geography understood as a set of conditions touching on all the layers of existence. For Deleuze and Guattari, the global capitalist world, with no geographical determination because its center is everywhere and its boundaries nowhere, cannot offer the grounding for a geo-philosophy. As they write themselves, “We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present. The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist” (idem, p.108).

Since the duo wrote this book in 1991, their understanding of philosophy as geo-philosophy has sparked the imagination of the non-western artists and thinkers, especially in Asia, which at that moment was going through the massive social, political and cultural changes which turned it into a zone of great influence. Deleuze and Guattari had also drawn upon Chinese, Indian and Japanese thinking to recreate the plane of immanence which the western world had lost with the advent of capitalism. In their previous book together, the two-tome *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, they had also looked at what French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had termed “the savage mind”: a system of thought based on “the science of the concrete” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 1). Savage thinking is present in Asia prior to the birth of the great nation-states and to institutionalized religion, but in certain regions it continues to exist in parallel to this configuration – Northeast India is, of course, one such case.

This mode of thinking that arises in the absence of the federalizing power of the nation-state, a thinking which is grounded in a physical space and in the cosmology generating the way of life in that space, is a geo-philosophy in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari. Thai historian

Thongchai Winichakul derived a similar term to define the historical configuration of the people living outside the logic of the nation-state in South-East Asia:

“[t]he concept of the geo-body [...] is used by Thongchai Winichakul is a construct that is different from the actual historical entities that occupied the space of today's Thailand, not just in their geographical shape and extent but more importantly in the nature of their conceptions of space and sovereignty. The geo-body makes claims to areas, peoples, and cultures that are in fact historically unverifiable because these people did not associate sovereignty with territorial boundedness. The conditions that make possible the geo-body and its history are the new conditions of knowledge-production, in particular the discourse and technology of modern geography and map-making that displace, or rather, conquer premodern geographical discourse” (Duara, 1995, p. 478).

What is clear from both these proposals is that the fundamental connection one has to untie in order to recreate the plane of immanence where man is again in the presence of the divine and of meaning, is the one between the totalizing logic of capitalism, with its crushing hierarchies, physical colonization and parasitic relations to everything outside it, and the equally totalizing logic of western philosophical thought, which always needs to ‘conquer’ and destroy other worldviews. The conceptual connection I am making between the two notions – geophilosophy and geo-body – allows me to tie, even closer than Deleuze and Guattari had been able to, the social and political realms with that of ontology: specifically, I am attempting to think the question of being as stemming from a space which had been outside of the deadly connection highlighted above. The resistance of the Northeast as geo-body to the totalizing western modernisation is not on the surface: it needs to be uncovered from underneath layers of borrowed ideas and ways of life, through research that is not violent as it would be if foreign thinkers would try to obtain salvation from it, but as one belonging to the space. In a sense, geophilosophy is asking of the space one belongs to the question formulated by Deleuze and

Guattari in the passage quoted above: why *is* this specific mode of thinking in the Northeast? And as a researcher looking to uncover it: how can one reconnect to this specific mode of thinking once one has uncovered it?

## 2.2. The Ontology of Modernity

We arrive thus at an important point, where we must define modernity and the way in which this term is used throughout the thesis. The project of modernity is connected to a certain organization of society through infrastructural connections and a logic of perception. It is fundamentally a western European project and it must be analysed as such.

Two opposite frameworks have been constructed in the post-Renaissance European science and Christian scriptures: evolutionism and creationism. Evolutionism considers man to be a product of nature, moving progressively from simple to complex, from unorganized to organized, from lesser to greater. Divine creation holds God as an active agent in the evolution of man and the universe. The difference between the formulation of science and the Christian ideas of creation is more probable than real, for both are structured around similar views of the universe. According to science, man makes his own history and civilization. Protagoras, the Greek sophist, has said, “Man is the measure of all things.” The Biblical account places man at the centre of the purpose of creation. Man alone is entitled for progress and liberation.

In his book *Homo Deus*, historian Yuval Harari discusses the ontology of modernity in terms of a new religion, that of humanism. The basic tenet of this project is that the human being is indeed at the center of the world, having replaced God as an ordering principle; furthermore, “humans must draw from within their inner experiences not only the meaning of their own lives, but also the meaning of the entire universe. This is the primary commandment humanism has given us: create meaning for a meaningless world” (Harari, 2016, p. 454).

Humanism further split into liberalism, socialism and evolutionary humanism (e.g. nationalism, Nazism), which held different conceptions of the role of society or of human experience, without however moving away from the credo that human freedom – which translated in most cases as a belief in the free market – is the most important thing to safeguard. In the name of this freedom, the western world engaged in ‘liberating’ people and places that had no desire to be liberated, and went on to impose liberal democracies upon centuries-old societies with extremely different worldviews, once these had managed to regain their independence.

This brief account of western modernity should only serve as a backdrop for the process of understanding the tremendous social as well as philosophical fight that the rest of the world has had to put up in order to escape the full absorption into liberal democracy and humanism. The 20th century was a particularly intense battleground, but from the vantage point of the present, we can say that humanism has clearly dominated all other worldviews. It has done so even if not in the form of liberal democracy, since the other possible ways include socialism and nationalism. These three versions of humanism represent the worldview of all countries and social groups today, with the exception of rather isolated indigenous communities, and certainly in a hybrid form within societies with very sophisticated traditions, such as of course is India.

This point is relevant for the analysis part of the present paper, which deals mostly with film production undertaken in the 20th century. However, I would like to highlight already that the situation thus described is no longer entirely true, as we are moving globally towards singularity. In this case, a cybernetic understanding of the world is necessary, and humanism is no longer the perfect framework for addressing the world. That is why this paper also discusses cinema from the perspective of cybernetics, in fact it considers cinema as a cybernetic tool for modelling the world.

In this sense, the present paper makes a case for researching and integrating non-western ontologies into our current global worldview, in order to counter homogenization and ultimately entropy and destruction. The aim and tendency of western ontology is to become global and suppress all other possible worldviews, thus weakening our understanding of the world and even placing our survival under question. In the rest of this chapter, I will be looking at various alternatives to western ontology: attempts to overcome it, as well as developments of other ontologies in India, then more specifically in the indigenous culture of the Northeast.

### **2.2.1. Overcoming Modernity**

“The anthropology of time emerged in an era when there was a complex argument in Western society and thought regarding notions of temporal diversity (‘local times’), as opposed to temporal singularity and similarity; conceptions of time as ‘atomistic’ units (‘instants,’ ‘clock minutes,’ etc) as opposed to conceptions of time as motion or ‘flux’” (Munn, 1992, p. 94).

In the novel of Ahmed Tanpinar *Time Regulation Institute*, the main character is Hayri İrdal, who narrates the novel and presents it like a memoir. He discusses his and other people's formation of time perception based on the introduction of clocks during Ataturk's modernisation process of Turkey. What we must understand from this story is the fact that the modern worldview thrived on its becoming global and therefore imposing itself on cultures which were entirely different. As a religion, humanism is similar to the other book religions in that it defines itself in universal terms: only when every place and every body is part of it has it become what it really is meant to be. And at that point, we will have in fact reached singularity, with capital as the sole scope of all existence:

“By the ‘colonization of time,’ I mean that the social use, meaning, organization, and experience of time are dominated by the needs of capital, rather than the needs of human beings. Developing a political consciousness about time that is able to identify how the colonization of time functions is more complicated than simply convincing individuals to value their time differently” (Shippen, 2014, p. 2).

Civilisations in Egypt, Babylon and China had created timepieces in order to represent the flow of time. The interesting aspect is that water clocks show time as an irreversible medium. It is flowing continuously. This is in conflict with the Western notion of time. As the mechanical clocks can be reversed at any moment, we see time less as flowing, and more as intervals which can be reversed and rearranged. This very perception of time influences the films that moderns make. Elliptic editing, flashbacks, flash-forwards – these are instruments to reverse and rearrange time. Time and space are separate entities. In Eastern philosophy, however, time and space are inseparable. In addition, time is not simply a linear form.

Taking a bird’s eye-view of the reactions of the non-western world to the imposition of modernity as a system on them, we can see that they range from initial confusion, coupled with violent struggles, to concerted responses that would ultimately lead to the decolonial efforts in the second half of the 20th century.

I quoted the Turkish example of the mild confusion in reaction to the imposition of the modern time code. The main concerted responses came from India, China and Japan; the Kyoto School and the Neo-Confucian School both put forward an attempt to overcome modernity through revisiting ancient philosophical traditions, in dialogue with western philosophy.

As Western modernity was building its framework of thought and action, India was still engaged with a mythical understanding of the world. Until its encounter with the Western colonizers in the 18th century, its various schools of thought were elaborating on truths revealed

centuries before; tradition had not lost its federating power like it did with the European Enlightenment, and the overwhelmingly rural society lived by an understanding of space and time which owed more to the organic world than to the artificial world of man. The sophistication of the Indian system of thought was impenetrable to the colonizers, who at best regarded it as an exotic source of ideas and at worst – and more commonly – as something to be tamed, ‘civilized’, in order to be conquered.

It is argued that the perception and conception of time in India existed outside of linear progression: mortal time (autobiography and death), agricultural (the seasons and labour), simultaneous time (events occurring in different places), cyclical time (ideas of reincarnation and regeneration), geological time (the natural world), mythical time (fantasy and storytelling), oral time (songs and folklore), ecological time (accelerated time and climate change) and it is sans industrial.

Japanese scholar Yasuo Yuasa in his book *Overcoming Modernity: Synchronicity and Image Thinking* (2009) discusses that ancient peoples, whether of the West or the East, assumed a *common* epistemological stance in understanding nature before Plato. The subsequent shift towards a rationalistic stance did not occur in either India or China. His concern is to work from the positions offered by these two major cultures to overcome modernity, particularly its rationalistic views of nature and the human being. These views assume a Cartesian dualism that ontologically divides the mind and the body, to which he proposes the “mind-body integration” as an alternative thesis. I will be discussing the implication of this idea for image making in the third chapter.

### 2.3. In Search of the Ontology of Northeast India

The Northeast occupies a special position in India, both geographically and culturally. Its ties are more evident with Southeast Asian tribal cultures, and a large part of its territory and system of organization falls into what James C. Scott famously termed *zomia*. The state of Assam covers mostly the plain areas around the river Brahmaputra, with the other seven states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh occupying the hilly areas around it.

The case I am making in this research is that there is not one unifying ontology of the region, neither in geographical, nor in historical terms. First of all, there are various layers which have come together over time – from prehistory, to Sanskritization and its hybrid negotiation in the region, to the Ahom period and then to the colonial times – and have created a sophisticated worldview which owes more to myth and what some anthropologists call animism, than to modernity. In addition to this, the landscape itself has been an essential factor in shaping the worldview of the people, something which conjugated with the status of the region as a frontier throughout history.

Thus over the next pages I will break down the worldview of the people of Northeast India according to a series of themes: its landscape and geography; its tribal knowledge; its myths, stories and legends, as part of a larger process of detribalization and Sanskritization; its writing system and its orality codes. I conclude with a reflection on the term ‘cosmopoetics’, which I consider a relevant tool for presenting the patchwork of conceptions of the world in this region as lived experience.

In this context we can then move on to analyze the place of cinema, a deeply non-indigenous technology for this space. The guiding question throughout these pages is whether the image – and implicitly moving-image – production of Northeast India corresponds to its

cosmology and mythology. Inasmuch as it can be answered in the affirmative for the pre-colonial (pre-modern) period, the time frame which concerns us is much more complicated. The reason I am going through such a variety of ontological sources is that the parallel analysis of modern image production in the Northeast has shown a growing disconnection with the indigenous worldview: what I am concerned with is the possibility of identifying the latter in the 20th century cinema production and, what is more, of creating a cinema which truly addresses this worldview, to the detriment of the western, industrialized one.

All of the sources discussed in the next sections – from tribal to Puranic, from oral accounts to chronicles – have never made the object of a unified ontological account of the region: I have thus attempted to sketch one such account, with the limited scope of later employing it in relation to the analysis of cinematic production. My position is that, even though it is difficult to directly point at one or another of these sources within a specific cinema – for example, to identify Kali time in the treatment of a character in an Assamese film – these layers of a complex worldview are inherently present in the image production of the region. The question is whether the medium is consciously employed in order to account for this worldview, or whether it is mechanically used in an alien logic. In the next chapter, I discuss attempts by two filmmakers, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Aribam Syam Sharma, who are remarkable for their conscious effort to embody the indigenous worldview in their films. Needless to say, they are isolated, individual cases; they are also a source of inspiration in methodological – philosophical – terms for my own work, which I discuss in the third chapter also in relation to the sources detailed over the next sections, in order to assess my ability to render the indigenous worldview in a manner that makes sense in the contemporary times.

### 2.3.1. A Hybrid Negotiation

The first aspect to consider when looking at the Northeast is its spatial situation: this will be more thoroughly discussed in the third chapter, when the region is analyzed as a geobody, with the concept of zomia as a guiding principle. At this point, it is enough to point to the indigenous nature of the culture in the region. This layer, which flourished before the process of Sanskritization, remains pervasive throughout the society, and it is relevant to this day for understanding the mind of these savages by design.

The many conceptions and formulations of time in Northeast India were due to various cosmogonies but there were certain similarities which made the intercommunity dialogue possible. The latter existed before the arrival of the British Empire in the Northeast, i.e before 1826. The existence of the lingua franca “Nagamese” indicates such communication. Time concepts were developed amongst indigenous people in Northeast India according to the season cycles, positions of the sun and moon, ritual or sacred times. The calculation of months was based on the lunar cycle and it was shorter than the Christian calendar.

The study or anthropology of time became crucial to the western culture as the different notions of temporal diversity appeared in contrast to the singular atomistic conception of time in industrial cultures. Prof. Prasenjit Duara, while recovering the Asian traditions in order to interrogate the crisis of global modernity, discusses the importance of considering diverse ways of conceptualising the passage of time in various traditions (Duara, 2014).

The Australoid, Mongoloid and Alpine elements along with the close companion of animistic and fetishist beliefs have laid the primary foundation of socio-religious life of early Assam. The advent and systematic settlements of the Brahmanas in early Assam facilitated the process of Sanskritization and Detribalization of the tribes of the region. However, scholars differing on the earliest date of the commencement of these two processes have propounded

different theories. Referring to the Agn Videgha-Mathava episode of the Satapatha Brahmana, P.C. Choudhury has put forward the 8th century BC as the earliest date of the spread of Brahmanical culture to the region of northeast.

“The hill societies of the Northeast had a rich oral tradition of cosmography and creation myths. Two Sanskrit sources, Yogini Tantra and Kalika Purana in ancient Assam, provide useful hints to the changing conceptualization of sacred space and cosmography. These texts reflect the transformation of a local tantric goddess of the Garo hill tribes into a puranic goddess called Kamakhya, who eventually merged with the mother goddess Durga under a Koch Bihar king who rebuilt the Kamakhya shrine in 1565 ad on a sacred hillock named Nila-chala, meaning ‘blue mountains.’ It has been suggested that ‘Kawia-rupa’– an old name for Assam – was derived from the goddess Kama-khya” (Kakati, 2003, p. 65).

Scholars are in consonance with the fact that the process of Sanskritization and Detribalization are two of the major factors of socio-cultural change in early Assam (Boruah, 2008), which throughout this section needs to be read as an almost synonym to the Northeast as a whole.

“Assamese religion can be analyzed as a rich, complex, and **hybrid negotiation or dialectical exchange among a wide variety of pre-Hindu indigenous traditions and the Sanskritic Brahmanic traditions coming from central India**. The most popular festival in Assam today, for example, is the spring *Bohagi Bihu* in mid-April that marks the start of the agricultural cycle. Celebrated with great fervor by Assamese Hindus and tribal communities alike, the *Bihu* is a rich synthesis of various influences that combines Hindu prayers and offerings with highly erotic songs and dances that reflect indigenous fertility rites” (Boruah, 2008, p. 167).

According to Boruah (2008, p. 167-177), there are roughly six major periods in the Sanskritization process of Assam: (a) Vedic and Brahmanic influences in the early history of Kāmarūpa; (b) Śaiva traditions in ancient and medieval Assam; (c) the Śākta traditions that became powerful from roughly the 8th to the 18th century; (d) Hindu Tantra, which flourished from the 10th century onward; (e) the Vaiṣṇava reforms that swept across Assam from the 16th century onward.

Assam is an important case for the larger understanding of Hindu traditions as they have adapted to and interacted with a variety of non-Hindu local traditions, producing some of the most fascinating forms of Hinduism in South Asia. Indeed, it is a powerful reminder of the fact that “Hinduism” itself is less a homogenous, singular, neatly bounded category than an extremely complex, dynamic, and hybrid tradition that has assumed many different forms in different parts of South Asia as it encountered a wide variety of indigenous cultures.

There was a necessity to create a bounded entity because of the linear conception of time through modernity and history writing for nation building. Colonial administrators and scholars relied mostly on the Brahmin view of Indian society and culture. Northeast India presents an unique case, as the ontology of time was formed by various interactions of local traditions, Hindu cosmological worldview and animist tantric traditions.

Northeast India doesn't adapt to one ontological system. In terms of belief systems, there is still a polyphony of cosmogonies. After the disintegration of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa in the beginning of the 13th century, Sankaradeva established the “Eka sarana” religion to overcome all the differences; it was a movement towards slow spiritual regeneration. He made his philosophy accessible through songs, dramas, stories and devotional incantations. This brought together the non-dual philosophy to everyday life. In philosophy this was

translated into an egalitarian fold, rooted in the Bhagavata Purana, with a strong Advaita influence.

### **2.3.2. Mythic Time**

If we have considered western ontology to be defined by the project of modernity, the evidence seems to point to non-western ontology as being defined by myth. For Mircea Eliade (in Campbell, 1957, p. 173) Indian myths are a product of culture and time and they codify the archaic creation. He emphasizes that they are myths before they begin being Indian. This approach opens up a dialogue with these myths as philosophical systems. He discovers the connection between myth, as an original form of culture, and time. Myth is significant as it throws a perspective on the structure of time. The structure of myth brings together events which took place in a primordial, a-temporal moment, which constructs a notion of sacred time. In most traditional societies, myths cannot be connected to any time or in any manner one chooses: one can only invoke them during specific seasons, in the forests at night, or around the fire before or after the rituals.

There is no real distinction between man, animal and spirit in the indigenous myths of Northeast India. For example, in one myth a woman gives birth to twins, of whom one is human and the other a tiger; in others, animals talk and often behave like humans; of two brothers, one is the father of mankind and the other the father of spirits. There are many stories of marriage of human beings with gods, spirits, animals, as well as leaves, trees and, sometimes, even fire. Man is not unique even in the possession of knowledge. Primordial knowledge came to him from birds and animals.

Northeast India comprises various indigenous groups linguistically belonging to the Tibet-Burman division of the Sino-Tibetan or Tibet Chinese family according to Linguistic survey of India. Despite the linguistic variations there is a rich repertoire of myths and legends which are derived from common traditions. According to Baidyanath Saraswati, who in 1995 edited the first volume of an important collection on Indian cosmogonies, it is not known whether the fivefold constitution attributed to man in classical philosophy – earth, water, fire, air and sky – exists in the tribal tradition:

“Indigenous cosmogony refers to a variety of elements, some of which are self-existing and others created. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, refer to water, egg, cloud, rock, wood and the great personage as the self-existing elements of the first order. According to the tradition, from these were created elements of the second order: earth, sky, sun, moon, wind, fire and all living creatures. The third order of elements were then formed: colour, direction, form, smell, etc. The fourth order was attributed to knowledge” (Saraswati, 1995, p. 8).

What is truly relevant for the Assamese context is the worship of the Great Goddess. This is particularly striking as Kali is the goddess of time – in the abstract as well as manifest form. The abstraction of time in cosmological structure of Tantric-Saktic tradition is done through portraying goddess as supreme being (Beane, 1973, p. 58):

“I resemble in form Brahman...

from me emanates the world

which has the Spirit of Prakriti and Purusha

I am empty and not empty,

I am delight and non-delight

I am knowledge and ignorance,

I am Brahman and not Brahman,  
I am the five perishable and imperishable elements  
I am the whole world  
I am the Vedas and not the Vedas ...  
I am not born and am born  
I am below, above, and horizontal”



Fig. 2.2: Budhi Gosani (Tribal Durga).

Late medieval period. Mangaldoi.

Collection of Assam State Museum.

The abstraction of time is achieved through the conception and invocation of the deity Adya Kali as form (-lessness) which it is not possible for the profane mind to imagine, grasp, or reach. This divinity possesses a fundamental cosmological structure of mythic time through deification, which is without beginning, without attributes, and without contingency.

Kali is one of the multiple names of the Great Goddess, of Shakti the spouse of the god Shiva; and this name of the Great Goddess connected with the Sanskrit word kala, “time”: Kali thus becomes not only “the Black”, but also the theistic manifestation and personification of Time.

All the forms of nature personifications of the goddess invariably converge into the abstract notion of Energy and its inherent power of synergy. All the visible forms of nature, despite their outer appearances, mountains, streams, rivers, fields, vegetations, etc. are said to be endowed with an invisible energy of shakti that constitutes their subtle nature. Nature’s sakti is visible everywhere in the cyclic movement of germination, growth and decay of life. Sakti is the energetic feminine potency of the Earth Mother, the life line of the living earth. The earth

is an animated and live organism with an efficient network linked to the biological vision of the ecosystem.

The Kalika Purana (Sanskrit: Kālikā Purāṇa, ca. 10th century) is a religious text considered as one of the eighteen Upapuranas. The extant text contains 98 chapters with over 9000 stanzas and is the only work of the genre dedicated to the worship of the goddess Kali in her manifold forms such as Girija, Devi, Bhadrakali, and Mahamaya. This text describes in detail the rivers and mountains at Kamarupa. The theistic manifestation of the continuity and correlation between cosmic time and ritual time, mythic event and sacred space, as well as sacred reality and sacred action centered around Kali as the great goddess (Mahadevi). The great goddess as a symbol of eternal time continuum, time embodiment, and time transcendence appears in the form of the cosmogonic-mythic event.

The most widely used word to designate time today is *kala*, which means the vital force, the time of life, the long life, the existential span or duration of every being. The idea of world-cycle (*kalpa*) is a general feature of Indian mythology and philosophy. In the literature of the *Puranas*, one encounters a splendid conception of the cosmological process in terms of recurrent creation and suspension. As an example of the gigantic scale of measurement for time one could refer to the *Vayu Purana* where a world-cycle is conceived as a day of Brahma, the creator god, followed by his night, i.e. cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*). The time-span of a world-cycle is divided and subdivided according to different scales as equivalent to so many manvantaras, mahayugas, yugas etc. The whole process is calculated in terms of billions of human years. It is very likely that the idea is associated with Vedic astronomy. The world-cycles can be compared to one another in terms of non-specific similarity just as one day resembles another, but the idea of precise repetition involving the return of the particulars does not occur. The idea of world cycles occurs in the epics as well as in the Upanishads.

Tantric Yoga is the force of time and its divisions. We overlook how time transmits us to the deeper cycles of the universe, when in fact it is an astonishing way to come into a more profound congruence with the cosmos. Tantra seeks unity between the inner and the outer, between the personal and the universal. Many of our sadhanas create personal harmony but don't directly bridge the gap between 'I' and 'thou'. One way to effect a greater integration is to investigate and interact with 'kala' or 'time'.

The clock time that is so commonly used around the world is not an arbitrary concoction (as opposed to the modern Julian calendar, which is arbitrary). Clock time is directly based on the movements of the sun, moon and earth. Rarely, however, do we wonder what time is really based upon, nor do we wonder how this time takes its manifestation within us. If we investigate our personal interaction with time cycles we seek a Tantric understanding of the universe, which is by definition holistic and integrated. The essence of Tantra is the balance of opposites, both within and without. To understand and connect with the sun and moon is to understand balance on a larger scale. This knowledge can help on the quest to understand the inner balance between our personal sun and moon.

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss considered the tales as miniature myths having a complementary relationship. It is very important to study these myths in order to understand their world view or ontological system. In the first chapter of his seminal *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lévi-Strauss attempted to characterize two modes of thought, or methods toward acquiring knowledge. One, the "science of the concrete" or mythical thought, is prior to the other, modern scientific inquiry. Mythical thought is based on the observation "of the sensible world in sensible terms" (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 1). Scientific thought, on the other hand, explains the imperceptible and thus forges new systems of knowledge. The two systems further differ in the degree of determinism that each assumes. That is to say that magic presumes a causal relationship between an observed similarity among members of a class and their

characteristics. Lévi-Strauss stressed that both scientific and mythical thought should be understood as valid and that one does not supersede the other. They are two autonomous ways of thinking, rather than two stages in an evolution of thought.

In recent times, myths are being in currency again in contemporary philosophical discourse to understand the present. Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, while dealing with the ontology stemming from the Amazonian spirit, discovers the pre-cosmic world in the myths which are in contrast with the finite and external differences constituting the species and qualities of our contemporary time (Viveiros de Castro, 2001). Building on the structural work of Lévi-Strauss, he forges a concept that has a similar goal of bringing together various myths into a system, whilst creating a fundamental break with the typical time-space categories of the western system. “Multi-naturalism,” the concept that covers the multiplicity of understandings of nature for Amerindian peoples, is opposed to the western “nature,” which is one and is that which culture is not. For Viveiros de Castro, the Amerindian people do not consider nature as universal; on the contrary, it is dependent on perspectives: humans perceive nature differently than animals, and animals perceive nature differently than spirits, yet none of these natures is absolute and they are all just as true. This however doesn’t imply that the Amerindians are relativistic. Their ontology is rather based on relations that can be exchanged; the structure of the relation is stable and can be called objective. Because of multi-naturalism, Amerindian ontology doesn’t have the pitfall of modern ontology, that is to say, a reconception of nature doesn’t imply a reconception of culture. In other words, the Amerindian ontology is based on a cultural similarity between humans and non-humans.

A similar work needs to be undertaken for the Northeast indigenous space, where cosmogonies were transformed into myths, and later the synthesis of animist and classical myths gave rise to new ones which were written down into several Puranas. The original indigenous cosmogony is thus wrapped in several layers of discourse; my understanding is that

this original ontology manifests as *trance*. Myths were stories told by those who participated in the group, while rituals were the actions performed by the members of the group. The socialisation through the assemblage of myth, ritual and trance created an important space-time for a community to share.

American anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, while documenting Balinese culture in extensive field notes and through the innovative use of still photographs and motion picture film, made two important contributions to the study of trance and socialisation in a non-western society. Among the works they produced from their research in Bali are the film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952) and the book *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (1942). The film depicts a performance of Balinese people dancing while going through violent trances, stabbing themselves with daggers without injury. They are then restored to consciousness with hot water and incense. This allowed the anthropologists to show the difference with our society, in which a trance such as this may be considered one of violence and possibly schizophrenia, but in another it is normal or sacred. This film is not an ethnographic illustration but a powerful tool in systematic cultural research and is recognized for incorporating systems to cultural behaviour.

Bateson had the desire to re-introduce ‘the mind’ back into scientific equations. The technique of dance and trance he observed and researched was used to regulate emotion and violence. Bateson’s ideas and films influenced later many cybernetic modelling projects, among which the one by Maya Deren, whose work we will discuss in the next chapter.

In this chapter, we have attempted to lay the foundation of the possibility to investigate the ontological characteristics of the Northeast from myths, rituals and texts, in order to derive its technological spirit. A tool to investigate this notion more specifically is cinema, which we will proceed to address.

### **Chapter 3: CINEMA AS PROSTHESIS AND CINEMA AS CYBERNETICS**

After establishing the theoretical basis of this research by looking into the question of time and the way in which it has structured radically different worldviews, we now turn to the second element in our title: cinema. In the considered definition opening this chapter, cinema is inextricably linked to the question of time, in the sense that it is an ideal medium for representing time in modernity. The history of the medium shows its dependency on modern means of production, which in turn rely on representation as a structuring principle of reality.

The chapter follows the construction of cinematic practice within the modernist canon, then its reception and tension outside of this framework. It is interesting to observe that challenges to the canon have been brought concomitantly from inside and outside – in the former case, by people who allowed their thinking to be hybridized by non-western practices, figures such as British-American anthropologist Gregory Bateson or Russian-American artist Maya Deren. These challenges ultimately become part of what is known as avant-garde cinema, although the conscious intention may have originally referred not so much to new forms as to new ways of thinking cinema.

At the same time, non-western filmmakers proved initially less brave in breaking the canon: this is something which applies to Northeast India as well, as our research will show. This begs the question: why do artists outside the modern world not systematically test the elasticity of the cinematic medium, preferring instead to conform to the canon and only occasionally import local elements with a decorative or illustrative function? What does challenging the canon mean in fact? From analyzing the first attempts in Assamese cinema, we link back to the idea that cinema is a means of showing a worldview, and that cinematic innovations correspond to philosophical rather than formal ones; thus, the difficulty in

producing such changes becomes evident when we analyze the beginnings of Northeast Indian cinema.

### **3.1. Cinema as Prosthesis: an Apparatus to Capture Perception**

German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his essay “The Age of the World Picture” (2013), describes the modern age as a double movement where the observer man becomes the subject and the world becomes the image. These two positions create the ontological foundation of modernity: man as subject and world as image.

The invention of cinema provided the opportunity to realise this potential to capture or extend the prostheses of perception. Some of the early cinema examples, such as Méliès’s *Impossible Voyage* (1904) and the Lumière Brothers’ *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1895), fail to present a transcendent reality, or present a kind of “epistemological nullity” (Buck-Morss, 2019, p. 46-47). It is not until the version of montage proposed by Eisenstein that reality within the cinematic image was ‘bracketed out’ and it became phenomenological.

In order to synchronise the senses to create order in the cinematic montage, so as to use it in service of the Russian state, Eisenstein studied and finally utilised various techniques from Europe and Asia. His vision already announces the openings brought about by a later generation of so-called avant-garde film-makers in the west, while at the same time allowing us to understand the hesitations of the first non-western film-makers to challenge a medium which was at the same time completely new yet strangely accommodating of the non-modern. The history which is by now standard, of the classicization and the fixation of the cinematic medium, was both prefigured and challenged by the principle of montage as it was conceived in the early decades of the 20th century.

### 3.1.1. Western Modernity and Montage Theory

For the purpose of this research, we must define modernity both chronologically and conceptually. It is essentially a western concept, which covers the technological, social, economic and ultimately civilizational shift which occurred in Western Europe from 1789 onwards, what famous British historian Eric Hobsbawm calls “the Dual Revolution”, meaning the conjunction of the British industrial revolution and the French political revolution (Hobsbawm, 2010 (1)). There are many historians who might choose to stretch this period earlier into the Renaissance, but given the connection to industrialization which is essential to our thesis, we will follow the initially proposed chronology.

What is more, we reject the existence of “modernities”, in the sense that this phenomenon would have replicated uncritically even if problematically in non-western contexts. Decolonial theory from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward has strived to displace the central position of western thinking in ordering the entire world and has made a point of dismantling the model-like quality of western modernity. The South American research group Modernity/Coloniality developed a sustained research into the inextricable connection between the two terms in their title: according to them, modernity is but the other side of the coin on which coloniality is. Therefore, what we perceived as “modernities” in spaces which had been colonized by western powers is nothing more than the other side of modernity, but not its multiplication, which would imply some sort of carefree inventiveness. Coloniality is what made modernity possible – without the slave power and the resource exploitation, western economies would not have been able to develop at such an explosive pace – and at the same time it was reinforced by modernity, in the sense that the industrialization of the colonizers aggravated their power over their subjects and extended their conquests. As Silvia Federici has showed in her ground-breaking study *Caliban and the Witch*, the destruction of western

peasantry – the class which resisted industrialization – was influenced by, as well as further incentivized, the destruction of the people of the colonies, in a vicious circle which led to a standardized world of labour exploitation under the automation of capitalism (Federici, 2004).

In that sense, modernity has been theorized most clearly from inside the western culture until approximately the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, modernity is, intellectually speaking, an expression of the rise of critical theory, proposed initially by German idealist philosophers contemporary with the beginning of the period marked above, then continued in the work of other German, as well as French and American theorists. Criticality presupposes a rational approach to objects and phenomena, with the purpose of understanding their essence: that one element which contains their entire reality and the knowledge of which amounts to knowing it in the philosophical sense. In its Marxist development, criticality takes the form of dialectics, a method by which the formulation of a thesis is countered by the formulation of its antithesis, in order to better reach a working synthesis, which in turn will constitute an action and a formulation of a new thesis.

In the perceptual field, dialectics is best embodied in the new medium produced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: cinema. In order to understand how the cinematic medium fits into the perceptual universe which gave birth to it, we need to look at the elements which defined this universe and which represent a real rupture with the past. Cinema cannot be unlinked from industrialization, both as a technology and as a tool of perception and reorganization. We can represent its relation to industrialization on a hermeneutical circle, with each element being understood through the other, and each element being revealed by the other. Thus, cinema has actively sought to embody the rhythm of the factory world, whereas the changes in the perception of time produced inside the factory milieu are responsible for the development of new tools of vision, such as cinema. It is without a doubt that cinema has been understood as the best embodiment of classic modernity – in a sense, it was the perfect medium for that

specific period in world history, the one most able to express it and communicate it. Let us now unfold this argument.

### ***3.1.1.1. The Assembly Line, the Railway, and the Discrete Division of Time***

In his seminal trilogy on ‘the long nineteenth century’, British historian Eric Hobsbawm discusses the violent transformation of the feudal economies of Europe into liberal ones, at the expense of the rural populations. The condition for building the industrial world was to have a large mass of labouring people: the peasantry thus had to be “turned into a class freely capable of disposing of its resources; a step which would also automatically achieve [...] the creation of a large ‘free’ labor force composed from those who failed to become bourgeois. [...] In other words, the peasants had to lose their land together with their other bonds” (Hobsbawm, 2010 (1), p. 187).

Once forced out of their natural ecosystem and fragilized economically, socially, as well as spiritually, the peasants engaged in a long exodus to the new urban centres which hosted factories and workshops owned by the new powerful class, the bourgeoisie. It is worth quoting a long passage from Hobsbawm in order to understand how the move from village to town was accompanied by a structural change in the way the new masses would engage with the world:

“In the first place, all labor had to learn how to work in a manner suited to industry, i.e. in a rhythm of regular unbroken daily work which is entirely different from the seasonal ups and downs of the farm, or the self-controlled patchiness of the independent craftsman. It had also to learn to be responsive to monetary incentives. British employers then, like South African ones now [n.b.: in 1966], constantly complained about the ‘laziness’ of labor or its tendency to work until it had earned a traditional

week's living wage and then to stop. The answer was found in a draconic labor discipline [...] but above all in the practice where possible of paying labor so little that it would have to work steadily all through the week in order to make a minimal income” (Hobsbawm, 2010 (1), p. 184).

What we see here is a radical ontological shift for Western peasants, who are gradually turned into semi-automatized masses. This shift is intimately connected to the question of time: it opposes a certain organic experience of time to a mechanized, uniform and profit-oriented one, imposed from above and not reached through natural / gradual movements by the subjects themselves. This time of the factory, of the salary, of the working day and week, corresponds to a new vision of the world as a huge assembly line whose purpose is to produce infinite profit and growth for the select few, who in turn rule over the masses as they would over inanimate and conscious-less creatures.

The concept of the assembly line is at the core of the capitalist – and hence modern – organization of time, and it is useful to describe it precisely in order for the contrast with rural and magical time to appear very clearly; the latter would still be the time of the colonized people living outside of the direct influence of the westernized cities, a time which we will have to investigate whether it permeated cinema and when. But let us first build a solid case for the unified time of modernity, such as it was proposed by F. W. Taylor at the end of the 19th century under the name of “scientific management”. Taylorism, as it will widely be known, had a single task:

“... how to get more work out of workers. This aim was pursued by three major methods: (1) by isolating each worker from the work group, and transferring the control of the work process from him, her or the group to the agents of management, who told the worker exactly what to do and how much output to achieve in the light of (2) a systematic breakdown of each process into timed component elements (‘time and

motion study'), and (3) various systems of wage payment which would give the worker an incentive to produce more" (Hobsbawm, 2010 (2), p. 183).

Time in capitalism became an efficient mode of organization, linked with money and production. Because of the need to increase production, the former appreciation of individual craft was replaced by an impersonal assembly line in which none of the workers had ownership of the final product, nor were they encouraged to spend more time than was initially allocated in order to bring their craft into the work, even in the small part of the process they had some sort of control of. In fact, as Marx would theorize throughout the second part of the 19th century, workers had been alienated from their work.

Time spent outside of the factory would also become gradually colonized by this principle of efficiency: workers had to use it wisely in order to fulfil their needs, but also to entertain themselves. It is logical that the entertainment they would crave for would be in line with their perceptual habits, hence the increased presence of moving images in the collective imaginary from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward.

Very soon, social movements would appear to counter this inhuman tendency of capital to subjugate people for profit. Marxism will posit class struggle at the basis of its ontology and produce the notion of dialectics in order to organize reality. This in turn will be used by liberal thinkers to better understand the logic of capitalism, but it will also become a key tool in the creation of the most emblematic visual rendering of the capitalist reality, namely cinema. But first we must look at another element which will organize perception in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and which had been, for several decades, the main indicator of the level of industrialization of a country: the railway.

German media theorist Friedrich Kittler proposed in the late 20th century to look more closely at the connections between various technologies which define the modern age. From the perspective of what Fredric Jameson had called "the cultural logic of late capitalism" –

postmodernity – it was possible to regard all these technologies under a unifying logic: cybernetics. Kittler’s main argument is that the invention of the railway itself started the idea of an accelerated network of people and goods. He discovers how the British Empire was founded on the premises of a “fleet of beings”. This assembly line of transaction also became the main technique behind the technological convention of cinema: the montage principle.

“It could also be said that it was the railway, at the very latest, which installed (in computer terminology) bidirectional traffic and gave modern media the model of divided lanes of traffic. Collisions have since then come to be known as derailings and passers-by really are just passing by” (Griffin & Kittler, 1996).

### ***3.1.1.2. Dialectics***

In the formulation of the montage principle, one cannot deny the contribution of the Russian revolution and of its necessity to create a medium to communicate across various groups of people, through the creation of a network. Russian montage was influenced by dialectic materialism, which was also behind the Bolshevik idea of transforming Russian society through structural deterministic principles. But one cannot deny all the experiments of various innovators to introduce a certain kind of movement into the captured time – a clear example is the photography of that time.

It was imperative for the Russians to have a theory that would allow them to utilise film to its fullest potential. Without montage theory, film technology was primarily centred around the technology of the cinematographic device, i.e. the camera. We could see how later, while compiling the language of new media, Lev Manovich articulates that any technology is usable

once its conventions are invented. In the case of cinema, it was compositing and montage which made it usable as a cultural interface for the whole world (Manovich, 2002).



Fig. 3.1.: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *War of the Future* (1930). Photographic collage.

The argument I would like to make here is that montage or dialectical materialism became the organizing mechanism for both technology and society, with the purpose of creating a universal language for cinema. Time to time there have been ruptures to question the montage principle once film became the most dominant public interface in the world, whether it was the

New Wave in France or the dominant auteurs in the '60s making films from various parts of the world with a new aesthetic.

Let us now focus our attention on the most influential theorist and practitioner of montage, Sergei Eisenstein. In only six films made over a period of two decades, supplemented by an important body of theoretical writings, the Russian director formulated the principles of montage as they would be used in the creation of films all over the world, independently of what may have been local aesthetic theories. In fact, Eisenstein's brand of montage would function as the universal language of cinema especially after its co-optation in Hollywood productions, which would set the standard for mass cinema for most of the 20th century.

Eisenstein is already interesting for the discussion of the connection between cinema and modernity, because even though his sources of inspiration are not exclusively western European, the principle he derives from them belongs entirely to modernity and to the logic of the factory and the railway we have explained above.

This influence of Asia on European modernism was not limited to cinema. Even Heidegger developed his concept of the term *technê* – taken from Ancient Greek, where its meaning covered both the notions of art and technology – while researching Orientalism. His interest was to explore alternatives to the overtechnologization of western modernity which he calls *Gestell*, or “enframing”. Heidegger also saw the danger or threat posed by the technological paradigm as an “ontological condition” which requires an “entire transformation of our understanding of being” (Williams, 2014, p. 6). Thus it becomes imperative for us to study the ontological conditions and disruptions through various efforts to regain that. Heidegger will return as a guide in the last chapter of this research, where we will discuss his investigation into *technê* not merely as a return to nature, but as a reconnection with craftsmanship that would lead to thinking technology as an “organic wholeness” (Williams, 2014, p. 7). For the moment, let us look at the manner in which Eisenstein derived his

conception of montage from various artistic sources and how he conceived it as an ontological operation.

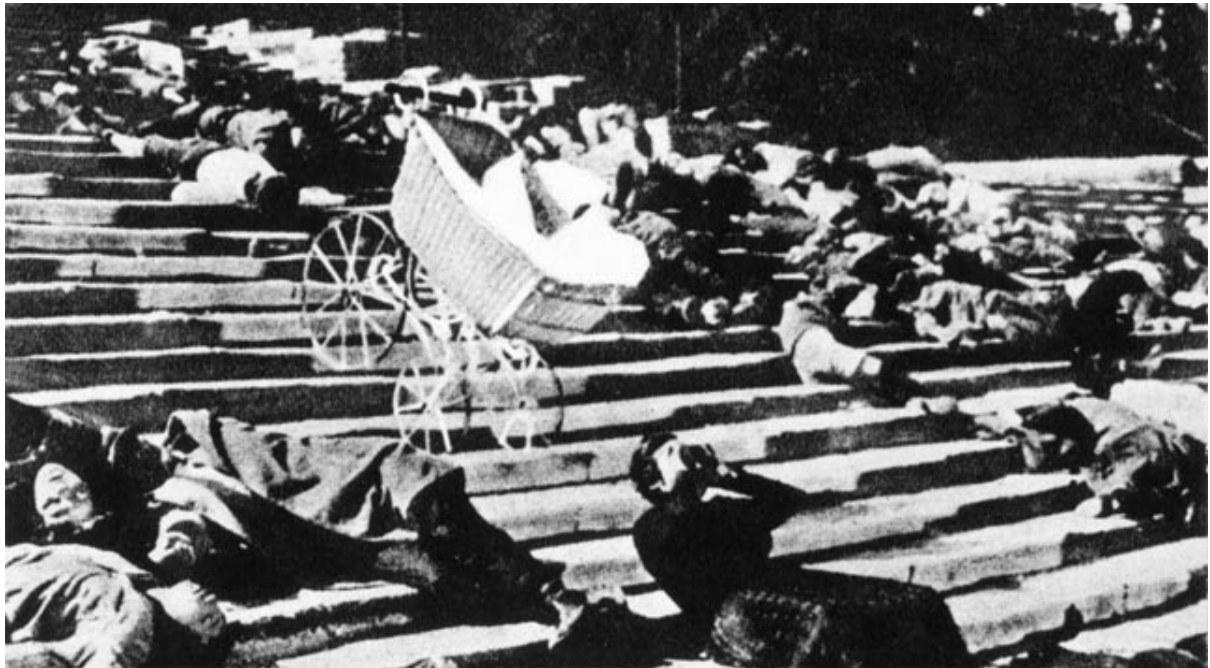


Fig. 3.2.: Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925. The Odessa Steps scene. Film still.



Fig. 3.3: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Steps*, ca. 1930. Photography.

In retrospect, film historians have found that one of the main sources which helped Eisenstein develop montage theory was his study of Japanese aesthetics, especially Kabuki theatre and haiku poetry. Eisenstein reconnected these styles to the nature of Japanese writing systems.

After years of cinematic experimentation and “a thorough analysis of the nature of audiovisual phenomena,” Eisenstein believed that the conscious manipulation of this sensory synchronization could allow the filmmaker to converse with his or her audience on higher, deeper, and subtler levels of communication by more closely replicating the multidimensional sensory stimulation of actual lived experience. In his book *The Film Sense*, Eisenstein postulated that the unique nature of the cinema produces a holistic and transcendent “synchronization of the senses” through the integration of word, image and sound, and the accumulation of successive images and sounds to construct perception, meaning, and emotion (Eisenstein, 1947, pp. 60-61).

The montage technique is one that implies no real temporal continuity whatsoever. Montage is achieved with a collection of symbolically related images, cut together in a way that suggests psychological relationships rather than a temporal continuum.

“The films of Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, Vertov etc. pressed you to take a view, manipulated you, ‘battered’ you, cozened you. We feel this strongly when we see their films now, because the ideology they championed is so freshly, comprehensively discredited” (Le Fanu, 1998).

Le Fanu also quotes a review of Eisenstein’s biography by the British historian Orlando Figes, who glosses montage as “the dynamic juxtaposition of images to force people towards ideas and emotions”. “Eisenstein”, says Figes later in the same review, “invented modern advertising techniques. Yes, that's it, one finds oneself murmuring. The lost world of

Bolshevism and the modern world of consumer capitalism are united in this recourse to montage” (Le Fanu, 1998).

For thinking montage in the context of this research, Eisenstein is neither friend nor foe. We have understood through the last hundred years of cinema that cinema plays an important role for organizing societies. We have also learned from Deleuze’s cinema books that there were many attempts and styles of editing cinema. Eisenstein, for example, devised montage for the specific need to create a cultural convention for Russian society – this is clear from the synchronicity with the social theory of dialectics upon which the revolution was based. Thus cinema was a cybernetic tool to control and regulate a diverse society like Russia. We could also refer to an observation which will be developed later, regarding the importance of trance in Haiti in the work of Maya Deren: it is remarkable how Deren’s form and editing style were trying to be in synch with the vibrant trance rituals of the Haitian society.

So, montage or continuity editing is a set of conventions which are embedded in the technology used in a certain society. The idea of liberating technology and connecting to the technological spirits of different societies could not only be a liberating act for cinema, but also an act of breaking out of the confinement of the structural control of western conventions.

The possibility of various editing systems as seen in the works of Eisenstein, Kulesov and Pudovkin makes it clear that the main objective of montage was to act as a guiding principle for the synchronisation of the senses. Cinema was used to unite a society which had been forever divided during the Tsarist times. But one thing must be clarified here: the nature of montage presupposes the idea of a society based on the industrial logic of assembling and transmission. We could thus see later pioneers like Paradjanov, Tarkovsky and Sokurov coming out of the confines of montage.

Deleuze's books on cinema provide an important push to the idea of thinking beyond these industrial canons like montage. Montage was also about organizing societies into modernist terms. According to Deleuze's biographer, François Dosse, the philosopher constructed classifications and taxonomies from various cinema cultures, through developing concepts like perception image, the impulse-image, affect, the close-up, and the face. For example, "Deleuze directly adopted this theme of lability in *The Image-Movement*, where he argued that water was a signature characteristic of French film; Jean Renoir expressed this motif of waterways and landscapes most intensely." (Dosse, 2011, p. 403)

### **3.1.2. Narrative Cinema**

The main development of montage theory was in the narrative cinema of both Hollywood and the Soviet socialist realism. After the initial period of experimentation allowed in the 1920s and 1930s, during which it was possible to formulate radical image theories and put them to work in non-commercial features, cinema came to be understood as a powerful means of mass communication – more specifically, as a means for crafting and imposing a specific worldview upon the masses.

The experiments of the first decades of the 20th century produced effective formulas for creating films in a mode analogous to the assembly line. At the other end, their organisation of reality – their message – was a reinforcement of the same Taylorist principle.

Narrative cinema, derived from theatre – and hence from literature – rather than from the investigation of the specificity of the cinematic medium, became the main formula for the reproduction of reality and its imposition on the entire world. Experiments outside this logic were relegated to the so-called avant-garde, an elitist and isolated ecosystem forced to function

by different rules and hence have a limited impact on the larger audiences. Directors such as Eisenstein saw their films classified as avant-garde in order to remove them from the commercial circuit, where they would be seen by many people.

Benedict Anderson in his iconic work *Imagined Communities*, argues that the loss of a conception of temporality “in which cosmogony and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men [...] indistinguishable” (Anderson: 2006: 36) was essential to the creation of the modern western notion of the nation, which is the political pendant of industrialization.

“What has come to take the place of the medieval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from [Walter] Benjamin, an idea of ‘homogenous, empty time’, in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson, 2006, p. 36).

This time is, according to the historian, was quintessentially expressed in the narrative form imposed by the novel and the newspaper – the system constructed around this perceptual core was discussed in the first part of this chapter.

The major breakthroughs in editing technique are conventionally attributed to Griffith and Eisenstein, namely continuity editing and Soviet montage. The most striking aspect of the montage principle and of continuity is that an individual scene is broken up into countless different shots; and that those shots, when stitched together, preserve continuity of movement or “flow”, as well as respect for the scene's geographical integrity. This false notion of bringing together different elements to create a singular linear entity presents the whole foundation of modernism through the rise of individualism. Editing, in Griffith’s hands, confirmed the genius of cinema for excitement, thrills, suspense, along with the pleasures of audience identification. Continuity editing was also known as invisible editing. This meant that the cuts between the

shots were matched to the action: the seamless editing made the audience watch something and not even realise that it had been edited. The idea is thus to create a smooth flow between all of the clips so the narrative of the story will be obvious without interruptions.

In the non-western world, the introduction of the time of simultaneity was an even higher violence to the indigenous worldview. Resistance co-existed with syncretic attempts to maintain the cosmogonical-historical time within the logic of the narrative, however the top-down imposition of the temporality of the colonizers ensured that the collective imaginary would be ruled by this alien conception.

Directors also approached cinema initially through the logic of narrative – even though, as we have shown, this was not indigenous to their ontology. The first gesture when starting to work with a new medium is usually to imitate, if possible to imitate the best accomplishments using it. This was reinforced by the logic of colonialism, which had isolated the colonized people from their original knowledge, whilst at the same time feeding them the western logic in order to ‘civilize’ them. (Incidentally, indigenous logic was captured by the westerners and further denied to the colonized.) This is the reason why, in the case of the cinema we are studying, that of Northeast India, the most notable attempts at filmmaking belong to the logic of narration and have strictly no connection to indigenous ontologies. Cinema, as a means of reorganizing the world, is therefore missing: what we have are stories told with a borrowed language.

### ***3.1.2.1. The Tendency of Continuity***

Cinema has been crucial to the formation of our perception of time, and it has done that essentially through narrative. Now that we have a better understanding of the way in which

narrative functions as a homogenizing tool in regard to reality, let us turn to an essential work for this research, that of American theorist Barry Salt.

Salt started a statistical style analysis of films as a way of quantitatively comparing films or groups of films in respect to their average scale of shot (long shot, medium shot, close up etc), average shot duration, camera movements and other features. Being a physicist himself, he tried to make his arguments by studying groups of films from various decades from Hollywood. His idea was to derive a quantitative logic or stylistic pattern inherent in those films. His idea was also to understand the technological freedom the medium was offering to the filmmakers.

What is relevant for our thesis is his study of the average shot length of films and the conclusions he drew from it. He writes,

“[I]t is also important to note that average shot lengths for the work of different directors at any period cover a continuous range, and there is no sharp distinction between directors, although there is a tendency for a director to stick to approximately the same A.S.L.” (Salt, 1974, p. 21).

What Salt is pointing out here is the fact that in Hollywood, directors may employ a variety of styles and genres – from comedy to drama, from action movie to romance – yet their average shot length would not vary in a perceptible way. The implication is that the perception of the audience – in this case, we can confidently say the masses – is homogenized and standardized; reactions to a wide range of subjects, emotions, stories or characters are determined by the rapid rhythm in which the images are presented to our senses, thus creating a flat perception only thinly disguised by the flickering lights of the screen. Considering the fact that Hollywood cinema has been, until the rise of Asian cinema, the standard experience, the consequences are far ranging, surpassing the mere area of entertainment. Indeed, the

argument of this thesis is that Hollywood cinema is a prime example of cinema as apparatus designed to capture perception.

This study of continuity of Hollywood films was later pursued by another American film theorist, David Bordwell. His argument, which we have foreseen in the previous paragraph, is that even though there have been significant stylistic changes in cinema over the last 40 years in Hollywood, this move has not been coupled with any relevant technological change. One of the salient new styles features a major intensification of the continuity of films, without rejecting traditional continuity (Bordwell, 2002, p. 24-25).

Throughout this research, I employ the tools developed by Salt and Bordwell in order to produce a series of statistics on the corpus of films I am analyzing. For the next section, I will be focusing on examples of narrative cinema from Europe and the US, in order to understand how these impacted cinema making in Northeast India.

Following Bordwell's study, we observe that between 1930 and 1960, most Hollywood feature films, of whatever length, contained between 300 and 700 shots, so the average shot length (ASL) hovered around eight to eleven seconds. In the mid- and late 1960s, several American and British filmmakers were experimenting with faster editing styles. Many films of the period contain ASLs between six and eight seconds, and some have significantly shorter averages: *Goldfinger* (1964) at 4.0 seconds; *Mickey One* (1965) at 3.8; *The Wild Bunch* (1969) at 3.2; and *Head* (1968) at a remarkable 2.7 seconds. Even though there has been an attempt from Europe to counter the overarching influence of Hollywood style, in terms of stylistic continuity and the editing rhythm, it doesn't serve any purpose. Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1962) which introduced a new style in editing, the jump cut, records the ASL at 11.2.

Currently most films are cut more rapidly than at any other time in U.S. studios; it is hard to imagine a feature-length narrative movie with an ASL averaging less than 1.5 seconds. The implications of the intensification of continuity onto narratives are worth observing. This

acceleration is playing an important part in what we are going to discuss in the next section. There is a control function of this loop nature of cinema which tries to homogenize rhythms and perceptions like any other global commodities.

*Maniram Dewan*, a 1963 film by Sarbeswar Chakrabarty is relevant to discuss in this context. The director is clearly deriving his work from the iconic *Joymoti*, which we will be discussing in detail in the next section of the thesis. *Maniram Dewan* also creates a myth, that of a freedom fighter in the Assam of the 19th century, but in contrast to the pioneering work of Jyotiprasad, it proposes no deep change in terms of style: it just intensifies the rhythm. If we take a look at the statistics in Annex 2, we clearly see how similar they are to the very typical Hollywood one; the film does not reject traditional continuity.

If we look further at the comparison of films we consider in this thesis, we will observe that for the movies *Kanglai Haroba*, *Sanabi* and *Maniram Dewan*, all of which are narrative films produced in the Northeast between the 1960s and the 1990s, the ASL values are close to the trend line for those respective years, meaning that there is absolutely nothing specific in regard to their formal characteristics which might have arisen from building on indigenous techniques of capturing perception. We can thus see, with this example from the Northeast, that the Hollywood apparatus had indeed become the norm, spreading its power to all corners of the world where making cinema was attempted.

*Maniram Dewan* stands out on the other end, both as the lengthiest film and as the fastest cut film. About a thousand cuts are distributed in about 2 and half hours of runtime. It brings down the average shot length to ~8seconds. Given this, it may be argued that the film may pose the most cognitive load on its audience, firstly in the amount of information



Fig. 3.4.: Sarbeswar Chakrabarty, *Maniram Dewan*, 1963. Film still.

that could be delivered on ~2.5 hours of video and audio, and secondly in the effects of such rapid cutting. However, that could also depend on the story itself. The graph for *Maniram Dewan* shows a lot of data points at low height and sparsely interspersed points at more of an average height. This may be seen as a pattern of a set of shorter shots followed by lesser longer shots. It has a sharp peak that stands out on the graph.

### ***3.1.2.2. Disrupting Narrative Cinema***

In fact, any attempt to contradict or experiment outside of this continuity system remains in the confines of avant-garde or experimental cinema. It is worth asking what is the possibility

of developing various conventions of editing techniques in respect to the development of cinematic technology.

Within narrative filmmaking itself, there were many attempts to disrupt its logic and come up with alternative modes of addressing a story. Many filmmakers tried to challenge or change the conception of cinema by introducing various new ideas: Robert Bresson's "cinematograph" is a good example. He wanted to liberate cinema from the notion of photographed theatre. In his *Notes*, he imagined: "I have dreamt of my filmmaking itself as it goes along under my gaze, like a painter's eternally fresh canvas" (Bresson, 2016, p. ix).

Similarly, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a film famously composed entirely of stills, disrupted the convention by providing time in duration. He placed stillness at the middle of the moving image sequence and movement in the middle of still frames of photography.

Another example is the more contemporary *Le quattro volte*, a 2010 film by the Italian Michelangelo Frammartino. The title comes from Pythagoras, who spoke of each of us having four lives within us – the mineral, the vegetable, the animal, and the human – "thus we must know ourselves four times". In order to approach this idea, the film adopted the technique of long takes (up to ten minutes), static camera, big distance between the camera and its human subjects, and a lot of the banality of daily life, such as walking, eating, or just plain mooching around.

These are examples taken from across the chronological and geographical spectrums, invoked here in order to emphasize the fact that narrative cinema, in its classical or in its disrupted form, has been the unchallenged form of expression. It is no wonder that the first Assamese film, which in 1935 is also the third Indian film ever made, immediately installs itself in the realm of narrative. What is interesting to look at closer is the motivation behind the specific choices made by Jyotiprasad Agarwala: his interaction with the medium itself, the

choice of the story, the insertion of elements of ritual, the meaning he gave to the entire enterprise on the aesthetic, social and political levels.

Continuity editing maintains temporal continuity through combining more-or-less related shots, or different components cut from a single shot, into a sequence to direct the viewer's attention to a pre-existing consistency of story across both time and physical location. What we have observed in all the films we have considered for the thesis is that they displayed various desires of the filmmaker; Jyotiprasad was both influenced by montage and by German expressionism and he tried to create and innovate regional cinema through *Joymati*.

What we see in *Maniram Dewan* is the idea of intensified continuity and montage both at work. More close framings in dialogue scenes, more rapid editing (Fig. 6.15., where the frequency is very high) subscribes to the continuity editing pattern dominant of that time. What is interesting in the cinema of Aribam is that he uses the idea of continuity editing but he is also trying to find his own style. *Kanglei Haroaba* and *Sangai* both are studies in temporality. They are useful to understand, for the future development of time concepts.

### **3.1.2.3. Freeing the “Technological Spirit” of Assam**

Jyotiprasad Agarwala was a polymath genius – filmmaker, author, essayist, musician and playwright. At the time of the making of the film *Joymati*, he was already well known in Assam. His educational trajectory took him to Edinburgh in 1926, only to leave it in 1929 when he moved to Germany to learn filmmaking. He met with Himanshu Rai, one of the pioneers of Indian cinema, best known as the founder of the Bombay Talkies studio in 1934 and director of *The Light of Asia* (1928); with Rai's recommendation, he became an apprentice at the UFA studios in Berlin.

In his essay, “Asomor Film Silpa Gorhat Asomiya Dorkhokor Dayitwo” (“The Responsibilities of the Assamese Film Viewer in Shaping Assamese Cinema”, currently only available in Assamese), Agarwala mentions that the inspiration for *Joymoti* lay in the realistic film traditions of English and Russian cinema and, as such, the film would go against the grain of the popular Hindi and Bengali films of the day, which he saw as more theatrical (Gohain, 2007, p. 12).

The script of *Joymati* was based on a play (*Joymoti Kuwori*) by Lakshminath Bezbaruah, a noted Assamese author and playwright. A historical figure, Joymoti, the eponymous heroine of the play, emerges from the turbulent phase of the rule of the Ahom dynasty in the seventeenth century, when uncertainty and political upheaval threatened the stability of the kingdom.

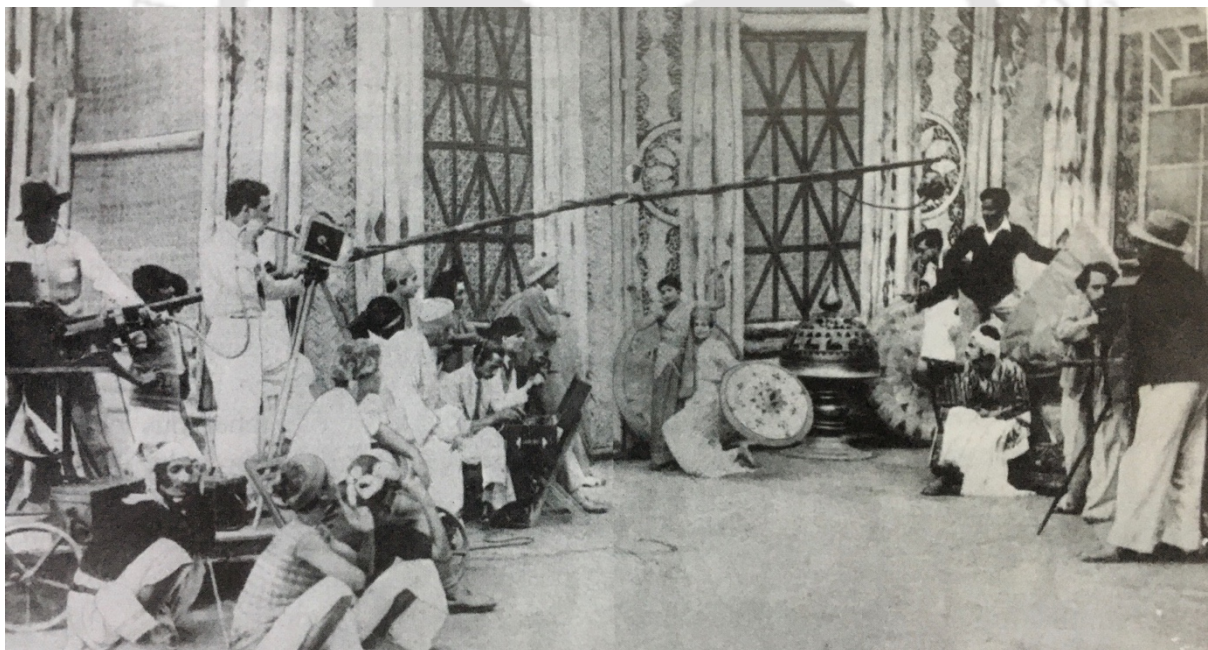


Fig. 3.5.: Jyotiprasad Agarwala shooting *Joymoti*.

What is important to observe in the cinema of Jyotiprasad is his imagination to see the radical importance of the cinematic technology he had encountered in Berlin. Assam and Northeast India were never part of the colonial plan or the innovative period of early cinema in

what was being formed as a nation. Through his later writings and his attempt to develop cinema culture, it could be derived that the sheer search for the “technological spirit” (Jun, 2018, pp. 81-88) was the main motive for Jyotiprasad to use cinema as a medium in Assam. It was completely an individual and personal pursuit, in contrast to the studios and production system of Europe, Bombay, etc.

Very far from the actions regarding cinematic innovation in Assam, Phani Talukdar complained that experimentation as such, cannot be attributed to Assamese filmmaking until now. In most cases, the filmmakers were imitating advanced states in this regard and producing films of average merit to satisfy their amateurish desire only. Furthermore, due to the high cost of film production, the indigenous innovators kept themselves from experimenting with cinema and relied on the conventions available at that time. The norm being analogue technology, was also one of the reasons experiments couldn't happen at all.

Jyotiprasad accepted the responsibility for the technical and other faults in his pioneering work *Joymoti*, but at the same time he was saddened by the fact that the Assamese viewers and critics failed to show even a little bit of patience and forbearance towards these glitches, which were justifiably due to the nascent state of Assamese cinema. He averred that there were certain things in *Joymoti* that deserved the critics' attention but were ignored summarily. He stated that although some writers and intellectuals made a proper cultural evaluation of his films, most viewers and critics were disappointed with the film which did not follow the theatrical, highly emotional artificial acting pattern found in the Bengali and Hindi films of the time, and hence made harsh stinging comments on the quality his film.

In his own words:

“Generally Bengali and Hindustani (read Hindi) films are absolutely artificial. Even the famous Bengali and Hindustani film directors, it seemed, cannot distinguish between

stage acting and film acting. Those who have compared the Hindi films with the English films definitely understand this difference. While the stage acting is artificial, the film acting is natural. In the same way the film must also have a very natural setting. But even today the Bengali and Hindustani films have not reached a stage where acting is natural. And these Bengali and Hindustani films have shaped the expectation and tastes of Assamese viewers. Only those Assamese viewers who enjoy the top class English and American films can make such discrimination. The general Indian audience having developed such a dubious taste, the film producer would run into loss, if the film is made with the right direction and the proper cinematic acting prescribed for film making. For, if it is not made to the taste of the viewers it will fail at the box office. The knowledgeable ones know how V.S. Santaram, one of the top Indian film directors had to compromise with standards in making *Shakuntala* only to meet the demands of the box office. The same problem had to be faced in making *Joymoti*. In making this film I followed the real norms of film direction and acting as found in the English and Russian films. I paid minute attention to the normal way of speaking, the typical Assamese speech pattern and the usual mode of delivery used by Assamese people. I noted in detail the beauty and the peculiarity of speaking the Assamese language among the leading Assamese gentry as also among the common Assamese people, both male and female. A long period of 30 to 40 years of viewing translated Bengali dramas and witnessing Bengali films has made Assamese people forget the beauty of speaking Assamese language in its own style. I particularly did this to make the upcoming Assamese generation aware of it. Unfortunately, only a small minority of the audience could grasp my intention and expressed satisfaction over it. Many even accused me of total ignorance about acting and dialogue delivery in films. I directed the film and the actors in it with the most realistic outlook, which is symptomatic of all modern English and

Russian films. That is why my heroine behaves with patience and dignity that befits one from the Assamese royalty and avoids popular histrionics. Reticence is a characteristic of noble Assamese ladies and Joymoti displays that to perfection” (Sarma, 2013, p. 69).

With Jyotiprasad we have thus a case for what we might call the *peripheralization* of a culture, which in this case is done precisely via the cinematic medium. The mere fact of exporting the new technology to a place like Assam, which until then had been functioning in the logic of *zomia* (see Chapter 4), and in any case as an independent entity trading on a par with its neighbours, participated in creating a mimetic relationship between the culture where the technology and the worldview it brought about emerged, and the space where it was being rashly introduced. Jyotiprasad deserves the immense credit of realizing this, perhaps not in these terms exactly, but certainly he understood that not having the mental space and the distance to understand and assimilate the medium properly will simply lead to those who have the means to use it to simply imitate its results. There was not going to be any world creation under these circumstances, merely the implementation of a mimetic situation, whose pendant would be of course that the disturbed culture would be turned into a periphery of the aggressive one. For many decades, this would indeed be the case in Assam.

One thing is clear: in order to create a distinct film tradition with the challenges of technical and support *Joymoti* displays unique characteristics in terms of the application of time concepts. The quantitative study associated with this thesis (see Annex 2) makes visible how uniquely shots were distributed without following the industrial standard of montage. In the ASL analysis of *Joymoti*, the data displayed falls somewhere in between the above two. It has 266 shots distributed in ~2hours of its runtime. Its ASL comes to be about 13s.

The jagged nature of its graph is more pronounced in the beginning and towards the end, telling us that shots having wide differences in their lengths lie around each other; while

the middle part bears comparatively lesser disturbances with low height data points, which tells that they are shorter in length and the gaps in length among nearby shots are relatively less pronounced. Like *Maniram Dewan*, it also has a singled out sharp peak. The longest shot in *Joymoti* is 137.6 Seconds.

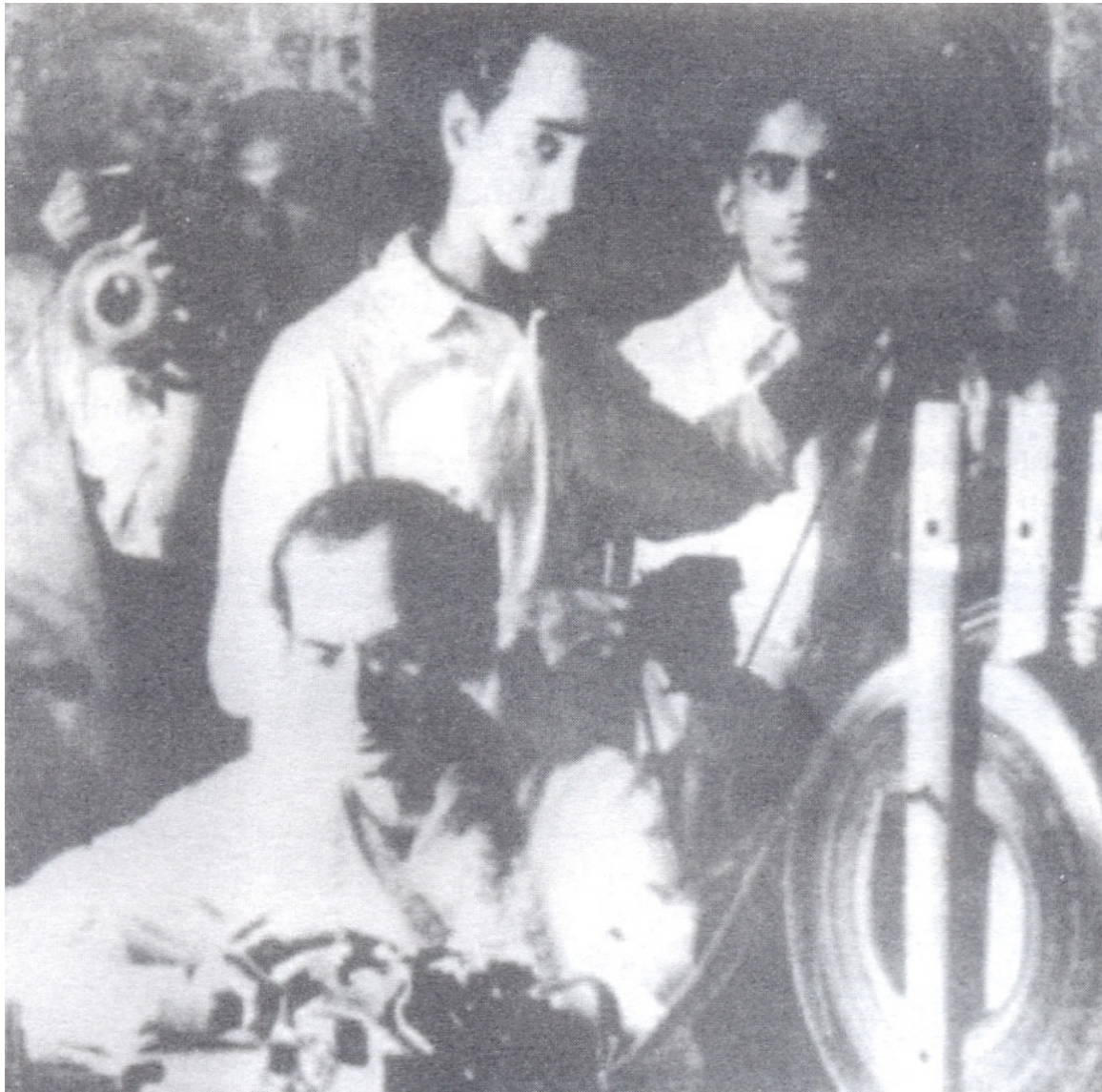


Fig. 3.6.: Jyotiprasad at the editing table of *Joymoti*.

The longest shot in *Joymoti* is 137.6 seconds. Comparing it with the film style and technology in the forties, it was very much above the mean ASL of that period in Hollywood, which was 8.5 seconds. In *Joymoti*, the ASL is 13.7. This signifies Jyotiprasad's attempt to

create unique conventions going beyond the logic of the dominant mass culture. The uneven curve also suggests the deployment of time from various origins. Jyotiprasad being a musician, writer and performer, was thus a polymath who tried to create an indigenous notion of total art, an intention which he mentions in his writing on cinema.

*Joymoti* was released in 1935, being shown first at Calcutta's Raunaq Mahal theatre and subsequently at Bhaskar Natya Mandir in Guwahati. The film's reception, as far as can be gleaned from written accounts, was mixed. For instance, Agarwala's friend, Umesh Chandra Barua, criticised it in the April–May issue of *Abahon*, saying that if the novelty of the product was set aside, *Joymoti* as a film had glaring faults in terms of screenwriting, tempo, camerawork and sound. On the other hand, playwright Lakshminath Bezbaruah praised it in the 19 March 1935 issue of *Tindiniya Asomiya* as an attempt to make a film with a distinctively Assamese cultural idiom.

Apurba Sarma, a well-known writer, author of a biography of Agarwala titled *Jyotiprasad as a Filmmaker (and the Forsaken Frontier)*, puts forward some important arguments to legitimise Agarwala's endeavours as 'something different' from the rest of cinema in India during the early period of the medium. The construction of *Joymoti* as the 'ideal' Assamese film then depends on a number of factors. For instance, Sarma cites the influence of Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc* and Jyotiprasad's debt to world cinema, as well as the forging of a vernacular cinematic realism through screenplay, acting, mise-en-scene and detailed observation of Assamese social life (Sarma, 2013, p. 35). *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the contemporary masterpiece by Carl Dreyer, was inspired by the theme of a woman's protest against the powerful royalty for the good of the people. There is an uncanny similarity to the theme and treatment to these two films. Furthermore, the impact of Agarwala's stay in London and Berlin, and the English and Russian influences on him, cannot be divorced from the history of the film.

### 3.2. Cinema as Cybernetics: Avant-garde Cinema as Cybernetic Modelling

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze made a very important connection between two notions which we are considering here: cinema and philosophy. According to him (Deleuze, McMuhan, 1998, p. 48) both cinema and philosophy enable the movement of images facilitated by diverse brain stimuli and speedings of neurons.

A paradigm proposed in recent years by Japanese philosopher Yuasa involves the integration of space-and-time and mind-and-body, thematics brought together through what Yuasa calls “image-thinking,” a mode of thinking that incorporates image-experience (Yuasa, 2009). Film theorist Ute Holl has taken this connection between cinema and philosophy further, by placing it under the sign of cybernetics:

“If we view cinema as a psycho-physical machine, this not only shows images to be rhythmic impulses, it also shows that certain brain functions can be triggered by means of cinematic tricks. All these reactions, which take place underneath the level of perception that is capable of conscious decision, can best be described, following Walter Benjamin, as reactions of the optical unconscious.

All three basic functions of film technology, camerawork, editing, and projection, can thus also be seen as psycho-physical technologies, as consciously treating perception and reality at the same time, but which entirely evade conscious perception, ‘a conscious manipulation designed to create effect’, as Maya Deren put it. The basis of all film technology is cutting up, recording, and projecting single images. And this is the technological consequence from the old chronometry in physiology and psychology” (Holl, 2017, p. 23).

Ute Holl considers that the cybernetic process in cinema would then be a matter of changing perception and regulating this perception through the effects of film, even before the

meanings of these effects are even formed. The cinema is thus a good place to examine cybernetic processes, since the links between nervous systems and apparatuses have constantly been synchronized, aligned, and optimized in its history. This means that a feedback process had already emerged in the research, before any film screening, as a gradual refinement of the trance in the act of seeing movement.

Most importantly she identifies cinema as a good object for examining cybernetic processes since the work of every filmmaker consists in using time manipulation and other cinematic techniques to re-apply a recorded series of events back to that series of events itself, and through such operations to bring the future of the messages into the imagination of the dreaming spectator. The spectator's trance attests to loops of self-adaptation where the perception in the cinema is located.

Heidegger's challenge to the philosophy of subjectivity and his re-thinking of the question of Being have transformed modern thought. In his book, *On the Way to Language* (Heidegger, 1971, p. 17), we read that cinema cannot reveal an authentic sense of world since it is "captured and imprisoned [...] within the objectness of photography," a fact that reflects the forgetting of Being typical of the "Europeanization" of humankind and the world.

The modern cinema experience and the western montage model organise the world and its experience in a certain discrete way. The dialectics of organisation is at play. One could clearly identify that dialectical materialism was applied to montage theory of cinema. The question is: to what extent has this type of organization been or become definitive for the entire world? Or if, on the contrary, it has not ceased to be challenged, has it been or is it being replaced by a new one, stemming from the non-western world?

What was developed through editing or montage as the form of communication is the inherent tendency of the history of film theory to associate editing to the paradigm of communication, language. Pudovkin, another innovator in editing theory, associated the work

of editing with linguistics. That made the viewer's work as some sort of reading. The emphasis of editing was given less to the sensuous characteristic and more on the goal of the story in narrative conventions of early cinema. The subversion of this expectation of the narrative happened when some of the early avant-garde filmmakers privileged the sensuous over the narrative forms. Fernand Léger, for example, made the film *Ballet Mécanique* on the basis of the sensual dimensions of the objects (Carroll: 1979). This notion of the sensual or sensational drove the whole spirit of the avant garde and later that became the sole spirit behind the rupture in Asian cinema. I will be more specifically discussing this in relation to the cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Chapter 4.

### **3.2.1. Visible/ Invisible**

However, the blind spot of the cinematographic conception within the European and American systems was first explored by the filmmakers labelled as 'classical avant-garde'. In the beginning of the 20th century, up to the Second World War, European and American filmmakers, aware of the constraints of Hollywood and parallelly interested in developing the young medium, were innovating by learning from other cultures.

“The 1910s and early 1920s saw the creation of a number of abstract films, especially in the context of futurist, constructivist, or Dadaist art movements. The non-representative, non-photographic images of these early abstract films challenged dominant ideas about the nature of cinema: while these films emphasized movement and rhythm, they also rendered the cinematic image independent from photographic realism. Film works by Oskar Fischinger and Walter Ruttmann (who created the abstract *Opus 1-4* films before his famous film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* from 1927)

emphasized forms and movements that were organic, pulsating, reminiscent of natural movement, and intended to facilitate a mimetic response in the spectator” (Pollmann, 2018, p. 50).

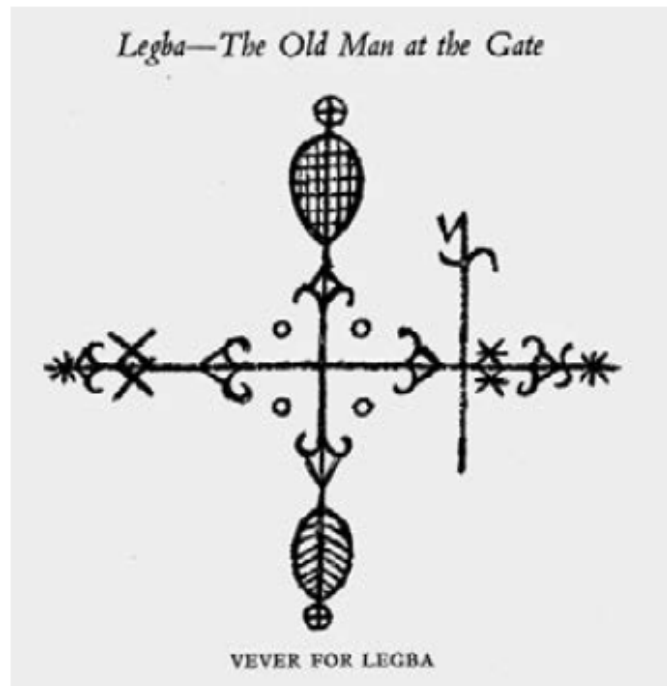
For the purpose of understanding the context in which the first cinematic work in the Northeast was produced, we must therefore focus on these classical avant-gardes. I would like to consider only two cases: that of the Russian Dziga Vertov and of the Russian-American writer and filmmaker Maya Deren.

Vertov is interesting to bring into discussion in order to think with him through the idea of accident, as it is used in the iconic *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The montage which follows the principle of accident, instead of that of synchronisation, ultimately contributed to the development of cinema as cybernetics and not of narrative cinema. Later Lev Manovich (2002) derived the new media principles and basis for his software studies from studying *Man with a Movie Camera*. This film introduces a new language of cinema by distancing itself from the language of theatre and literature. It was a complete experiment in the cinematic transmission of visual events.

Maya Deren’s cinematic work is absolutely essential to my research because it was built on the concept of trance. In my opinion, this takes the possibilities of cinema to an entirely new level, allowing for an opening towards the non-western cosmologies and technics. Ute Holl, a guiding theorist for this thesis, bases her own concept of cinema as cybernetics on the experiments of Deren.

Deren’s work comprises a few films, yet all iconic. My focus is on the documentary she shot in Haiti. After seeing the raw footage of what was to become the ethnographic film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952), shot by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in Bali, Deren obtained

a grant from Guggenheim to travel to Haiti to shoot a ritual and do a comparison to the Bali film.



Legba – life – is the link between the visible mortal world and the invisible immortal realms. He is the means and avenue of communication between them. (...) Since he stands at the cross-roads, he has access to the worlds on either side, as if he were on both sides of the mirror surface which separates them. – Maya Deren, 1953. In: *Divine Horsemen. The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York 1973. p. 97.

Fig. 3.7.: Maya Deren, Diagram of the Haitian Legba.

From *Divine Horsemen. The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York, 1973.

The voodoo film *Divine Horsemen: the Living Gods of Haiti* documents the possession ritual of the Voudoun divinity Legba. The word *vodû* is of Fon origin and means “spirit” or “sacred energy”. At the climax of the possession ritual, the film depicts a group of young girls being transformed into dangerous witches and men and women threatening to stab themselves with knives.

*Trance and Dance in Bali* opened a different perspective for Deren. In her notebooks, she recorded how the experience was ecstatic. She also recorded part of the insight she achieved

through this film, which is how chance, choreography and suspense could expand the technical aspect of cinema through dance and human choreography rather than montage.



Fig. 3.8.: Teiji and ChereI Ito. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*

Edited from Maya Deren's original footage, 1977.

These experimental films of the 1940s examine the emotional effects of cinematic processes thus making it available for such techniques to be available to be used to possess. The work of Mead and Bateson also attracted Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics, to engage them to explore sociological uses of cybernetics models during the famous Macy conference. He was interested in discovering connections between social technologies, and the theory of communication.

Deren proposed an alternative model to reconstitute the cinema by structuring it alongside two axes. She suggested that the horizontal axis be the axis of events and actions,

whereas the vertical axis is the “poetic axis of mood, tone and rhythm” (Nichols & Deren, 2001). This axis is thus synonymous with depth. This can definitely be seen as something she had derived from the rituals she documented in Haiti.

This philosophical interest in rhythm and trance espoused by Bateson and Deren offers an interesting connection to the work of the Manipuri filmmaker Aribam Syam Sharma. It is possible to address his work in the frame of what in the west is called avant-garde cinema, yet in the following two sections, as I analyze a few films from this author, I would like to make a different case: when exploring ritual through rhythm and trance, Aribam is not undertaking a formal exercise, no matter how liberating it might be for content itself; instead, he is building a world beyond the visual, in which the spiritual connections between the various layers of reality stem from the indigenous cosmogony of the frontier land – of zomia.

### **3.2.2. Ballet and Ritual**

Situated between a crucial crossroads of South and Southeast Asia, Manipur has been a meeting place for various ethnic groups and cultures including Tibeto-Burmans, Tais (Shans) and Indo-Aryans. Most of the major ethnic groups merged to form one entity called the Meitei. There are also many groups and ethnic communities who were not assimilated into the Meitei social fold: Loi, Meitei Brahmin, Meitei Pangan, Bishnupuriya, Kachari and the Kuki and the Naga. Manipur has evolved from a collection of heterogeneous principalities into a homogeneous society.

The religion of Manipur can be studied under two categories: traditional animist religion or pre-Hindu religion; and the advent and rise of Hinduism. The traditional Meitei religion is animist in principle and worshipped natural phenomena such as fire, the sun, Soraren (the god

of rain and thunder). Festivals or rituals such as Lai Haroaba display how the traditional belief system in the Meitei society evolved from a higher order of polytheism to a still higher order of monotheism. The Manipuri films are essentially Meitei in content and theme, not necessarily in form and style.

Aribam Syam Sharma, the cinematic maverick from Manipur, single headedly put Manipur on the world cinema map. *Imagi Ningthem (My son, my precious)*, scripted by renowned writer M.K. Binodini, his long-time artistic collaborator, was the first Indian Film to receive the Grand Prix at the Festival des Three Continentes, Nantes.

Trained in both philosophy and classical music, keeping a distance from the influence of Bombay cinema, Syam Sarma created a new idiom for the cinema from Northeast India. In one interview (Phanjoubam, 2009) he clarifies:

“As for me, it's a conscious choice to stay far away from the popular commercial type.

I am true to my art and my cinema is a natural extension of the unique culture, history and the ancient civilization of Manipur”.

Due to his classical music training, Aribam's films always pay great attention to the musical rhythmic structure. This invention of reality through studying musical structure reaffirms the argument of this thesis that there are different rhythms possible in cinema. For example, Manipur's astonishing vitality and inventiveness in the performing arts comes alive with his work *Sangai – The Dancing Deer of Manipur*, which was declared the outstanding film of the year in 1989 by the British Institute at London Film Festival. It captures on screen the exquisite ballet “Keibul Lamjao” with a delicacy and grace that matches the original. The ballet was written by MK Binodini and performed by the ballet unit of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal. At the core of the ballet lies the concern for the future of the near extinct brow-antlered deer – the Sangai. Lauded as the state animal of Manipur, the sangai (*Cervus eldi eldi*) occupies a mere 15-20 sq. km. of floating marshland known as *phumdi* on

the southern edge of Loktak Lake, a naturally occurring wetland. Culturally, the sangai is venerated in Manipur. Popular folk legends associate the sangai with the bridge between the human soul and nature. To kill a sangai is to symbolically destroy the delicate binding between humans and nature; thus, this dancing deer is the way that Manipuri tribes express their love for nature.



Fig. 3.9.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sanabi*, 1995. Film still.

*Sangai – The Dancing Deer of Manipur* stands out in a characteristic way from the lot of films discussed in Annex 1. The ~45minutes of runtime are distributed in 45 shots of the film. As such, its average shot length comes to about a minute. The graph tells us that it starts off with some shorter shots after which it progresses into longer shots. The shot length drops erratically at some points along the narrative, such as towards the end.

Aribam's background in classical music helped him to explore various timecodes for his cinema. He could find connection to the rhythm of the Manipuri/ Maitei society, which is perhaps best exemplified by his film *Kanglei Haraoba*. There were other explorations of cinema through various musical traditions of India: Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani's *Dhrupad* and *Khyal Gatha* are such examples.

While explaining his exploration and application of local indigenous cosmogonies and his filmic culture, he affirms (Phanjoubam, 2009):

“A look at our history and culture tells us loud and clear that we are a people who cannot do without expressing ourselves. Look at our dances, look at the Lai Haraoba festival, we have preserved our whole philosophy, our cosmology, our conception of creation itself in our performing art and music. It is also through our dances and music that we have been educating generation after generation of our children about our relationship with the cosmos”.



Fig. 3.10.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Kanglei Haraoba*, 1992. Film still.

The main idea behind choosing to discuss *Kanglei Haraoba* in this thesis was to understand how studying various rituals might have influenced Aribam to find his style and technique for his feature films.

According to Prof. Singh's article (Singh, 1987), the etymological meaning of the term Lai Haraoba is "merry making of the god and goddesses". The term is derived from the creation myths of the Meiteis. Through the ritual, the divine act of creation of human beings is enacted to please the gods. The ceremonies rituals and dance around the invocations of deities for three days comprises the observation of Kanglei Haraoba.

The ritualisation of the myth of creation around the Kanglei Haraoba has the purpose to allow the people to practically observe and participate in the Meitei ontological system. The Meitei concept of creation also revolves around cyclicity.



Fig. 3.11.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sanabi*, 1995. Film still.

There are many regional variations of the Lai Haraoba on the basis of variations in dances, songs, rituals etc. Kanglei Haraoba, the one documented by Aribam, is one of the types of Lai Haraoba which is performed in the Imphal valley of Manipur. The main ritual on the first day of the festival is Lai Sekouba. The festival takes place during an auspicious time in the afternoon. The ritual objects are brought out of the shrine and carried in a procession. Each participant of the procession dressed in traditional costume carries a ritual object like an eshaiphu (earthen pitcher) or the shenkha (pan box). The villagers follow the procession in two rows from the oldest to the youngest.

In the film, Aribam documents every moment of the ritual by showing the Maibis – multifaceted religious functionaries who have several traits combined together in a single personality – possessed by supernatural powers in their communication with the divine beings; the ultimate purpose is to communicate back to the mortals. During the Lai Haraoba ritualistic festival, the Maibis take the most important role; they dance and chant and the devotees follow them in ritual procession. The Maibis take a leading role in performing all ritual worship in the Meitei society. On the first day of the festival takes place the Lai Ekouba ritual. It is an act of invocation of the spirit of the deities from nearby water (a pond or a river). All the participants of the Lai Ekouba are lined up in a certain order.

Aribam's seventh feature film, *Sanabi* (The Grey Pony) (1995) received the National Film Award and also entered into Indian Panorama. It was shown at the Cairo international Film Festival. It tells the story of Mangi, a wayward youth who loves Sakhi, a dance artiste of the same locality. Sakhi refuses his proposal. The film ends with Mangi stealing the pony reared by Sakhi's father with great affection and care, to fulfil his love with Sakhi.

*Sanabi* bears the regional signature of Manipuri realism – sparse with consistent temporality – which was derived from the research and documentation he did on various rituals and traditions. One of the most remarkable characteristics of Aribam's cinema is his style that

doesn't bear any sign of being a filmmaker from the fringe or the frontier. His training in Indian classical music, his technique and pace, are a very significant part of his *Sanabi*. This simple, quiet film attempts with economical means to put forward a philosophy for Northeast India that is entirely derived from rhythm and time.

### 3.2.3. Towards an Ontology of Trance

At this point, it is possible to speculate on the possibilities that Jyotiprasad and Aribam have opened for Northeast cinema – possibilities which have not been taken up by contemporary filmmakers, who all prefer to produce works in line with mainstream narrative cinema, featuring perhaps local stories and settings.



Fig. 3.12.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sanabi*, 1995. Film still.

The rich traditions of rituals in the region has its roots in the combination of layers discussed in the previous chapter, and it is alive today. However, these rituals constitute a relevant subject mostly for anthropological studies, carried out by foreign scholars rather than indigenous ones. In my own endeavour to research the roots of a Northeast worldview beyond the current globalized surface, I was able to discuss with many such scholars. I will mention here Irene Majo Garigliano, an Italian anthropologist who spent almost 10 years living and working in Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. During her stay, she made an excellent documentary on the rituals performed during the Deodhani festival in the temple, rich with footages from behind the scenes, explanations of the way in which the dancers live the trance, and details of the rules that the ritual imposes on them.

The main feature of this three-day festival is the dance of the deodhās. The deodhās, Assamese males, become possessed by the goddess Kamakhya (and the other deities connected to her) and dance to the beat of drums. The festival and the dance also highlight the fusion of mainstream Sakta Tantra with the indigenous practices.

The gestures and the movement of the deodhāi dancers displays the practical ontology of the time concepts through deification, which is without beginning, without attributes, and without contingency.

Studying the documentary film *Ghora: Waiting for the Goddess* (2014) that Garigliano co-authored with the film-maker Alessandro Cartosio, we can see the similarities between the deodhāi dancers and the Legba possession in Haiti as shown in Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen*. This 'bodily vehicle' for the oracle deity in both cases receives and transmits the cosmic rhythm through various bodily gestures and trance movements.

We could use the same argument to study one of the films specifically chosen for this thesis, *Kanglai Haraoba*. The unique style implemented by Aribam Syam Sarma to document the ritual is to apply the repetitive rhythmic structure determining the ASL of the film. This

technique also produces some sort of slow trance-like effect in the viewer's perception which was primarily intended for the observer or the participant of the ritual. Maya Deren also embraced or incorporated the perspective of the Haitian. That cinematic position could be seen when she moves along with the possessed in a drunken-like movement. In this world of rituals, objects, people, and deities are not self-contained, individualistic, and atomized entities like in the western world. This non-western form of human choreography allowed social structures and identities to be fluid, paradoxical, uncertain, and open, while at the same producing a cohesive effect for the community.

We can therefore, in the final part of this thesis, address the question of the possibilities which are open to image makers if they want to think cinema as a cybernetic tool to remodel the perception of the world from the Northeastern viewpoint. The argument so far has carried us towards the notion of trance, which must be understood as both a challenge to linear thinking and an anchoring point for the development of an indigenous cybernetics. However, before making a case for the reinsertion of trance into cinema, it is important to understand the archaeology of this challenge of linearity within Asian cinema: this inquiry will allow us to thicken the argument towards a cinema of trance and to situate it historically as well as geographically.

## Chapter 4: GEO-BODY AS GEO-PHILOSOPHY

### 4. 1. The Question Concerning Technology in Asia

After our critical overview of narrative cinema and its specific timecode, embraced by western directors as well as by non-western ones looking to be accepted in the western logic, we must turn to the fundamental manner in which the status quo was challenged in the second half of the 20th century by film-makers from outside the western world. Drawing their sources from both indigenous thinking and practices, as well as from the pioneering – and later obscured – work of early 20th century directors, the remarkable figures in Taiwanese, South Korean, Thai, Chinese and finally Indian cinema who have taken the stage in the past decades, have put forward original and sophisticated worldviews.

In this process of challenging the west, a philosopher has recently started to be considered an important ally for Asian thinkers and practitioners: Martin Heidegger, one of the most important thinkers to mark the crisis of modernity in the west. He believed that this crisis, demonstrated by the political and social chaos of the Weimar republic, no longer allowed any scope for a new philosophical point of view. Heidegger's writings on modernity came decades after the Second World War to focus explicitly on the problem of technology. His essay “The Question Concerning Technology” is explicitly devoted to this concern. For Heidegger, technology is a way of revealing (Heidegger, 2013, p. 12). Essentially, then, technology is not about machines, complex techniques or the manufacture of artefacts in Heidegger's conception. The essence of technology is itself not technological (Heidegger, 2013, p. 35).

In Heidegger's ontological perspective, technology is neither neutral nor instrumental. It reveals Being in a particular way. Reflecting on the Ancient Greeks, Heidegger notes that the root of the word ‘technology’ is technê. For the Greeks, technê meant a revelation of something,

an uncovering or a bringing to light. The word *technê*, according to Heidegger, then means a mode of knowing. Thus, we can see that from his reflections on the Greek *technê*, Heidegger can conclude that modern technology is also a manner of bringing forth out of concealedness. Heidegger notes that the manner in which modern technology reveals what is concealed is very different from that of the Ancient Greeks. The Greek experience of *technê* was a revealing of what lay in potential.

Heidegger explicitly elaborated (idem, p. 19-21) on the term *das Ge-stell*, which he uses as a key expression when describing the nature of modern technology. Various English translations exist for the term *das Ge-stell*, for example, 'composite', stressing the 'provocative positing' involved in 'the compositing', and 'enframing'.

It is productive to see cinema in the light of the logic of enframing. Cinema as a technology is the main historical manifestation of the subjectivism introduced by Western metaphysical thought. Metaphysical subjectivism views the human being as a subject standing before an object of perception. This view of the world as an object results in its instrumental use and domination.

In his discussion of the emerging world picture in the already mentioned essay "The Age of the World Picture", Heidegger further illuminates the nature of species subjectivism (idem, p. 132-136). The world conceived as a picture is a metaphysical reduction of the world to a human representation. Now, the inclusive representation of the world as an object becomes the basic human experience and the world picture becomes humanity's main measure of reality. By 'world picture', Heidegger means that we have effectively reduced the world to our representation of it. The human subject, in effect, begins to 'create' his own reality.

#### 4.1.1. Image Tradition in Ancient Asia

According to Yuasa's already quoted study, in the oral traditions of the ancient world, the natural philosophers questioned the origin of the cosmos by positing the primal elements such as earth, water, fire, and air; these carried a symbolic meaning involving a projection from the pre verbal archaic mind. For the epistemological subject who is anchored in the standpoint of ego-consciousness, this means that the authentic understanding of Being must be *passive* in nature, because it occurs vis-à-vis intuition, which is a passive cognition involving image-experience.

The theory of the elements holds the view of nature where matter is unified with life or spiritual activity. This worldview recognizes the activity of divinity within nature. In other words, even though these natural philosophers refused to regard gods according to anthropomorphic images, they still retained the feeling of the sacred that people of the mythological age felt toward the great nature. What Thales called "water" was not just the water we see in our everyday life, but was a symbol designating the invisible power that operates within nature.

In Asian societies, the five *mandala* rings refer to the five elements designating earth (*prithivī*), water (*āp*), fire (*agni*), wind (*vāyu*), and sky (*ākāśa*). Of the five *ma n dala* rings, earth, water, fire, and wind bear an image pretty similar to those conceived in Greece. While the fifth element, "sky," appears to be unique to India, there was in Greece, after Plato, a movement to think of a fifth element. The Indian idea of understanding nature in light of the five elements dates as far back as the *Upanisads* of the sixth century bce. It states that everything existing in the cosmos is made out of a combination of the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and sky. These images eventually become associated with the yogic theories of self-cultivation and Indian medicine [*āyurveda*], and gave rise to the idea that divides the body into

five parts to *correlate* the human body with nature. While the Esoteric Buddhist theory of the five *ma n ḍala* rings incorporated such ancient ideas of India, it identified the fifth element with the “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) that Mahāyāna Buddhism thematizes.

Although the *mandala* is usually taken to mean the essence of the mind, it is important to understand the fact that it is a symbolic sign designating the fundamental structure of the cosmos. Mahāyāna Buddhism’s view of dependent origination, as represented by the *Heart Sutra*’s statement that “form is emptiness,” is originally based upon the view that takes *the* psychological cosmos and the physical cosmos as one.

Therefore, ancient image-thinking may be understood as an unique kind of thinking that evolves at the stage when literal and verbal intellectual thought develops to replace the images that were chiefly based upon the intuitive feeling of the mythological age. In the process of moving from the mythological age to the historical period, the methodological attitude of understanding nature by employing sign-images appeared in a variety of cultural spheres.

In the very early age of cinema, while working towards solving the barrier of sound and sight, Eisenstein considered various sources to bring about the synchronization of senses through cinema: the writings of Karl Von Eckartshausen, Arthur Rimbaud’s poetry, with the most important being the audio-visual thinking of Chinese philosophy. He was particularly interested in diagrams and we can see an example below, taken from his book on cinema:

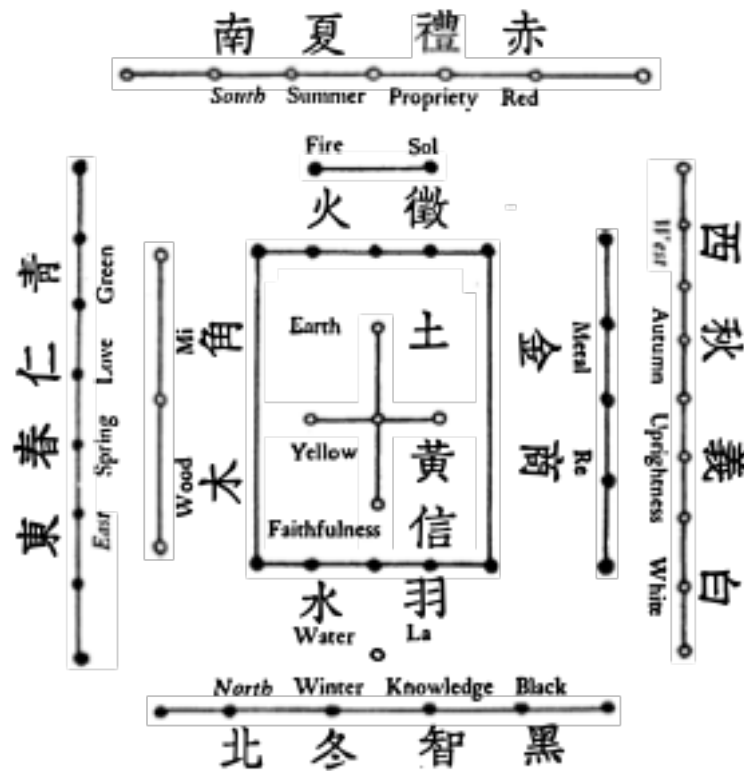


Fig. 4.1.: Sergei Eisenstein, Diagram of Yang and Yin. From *The Film Sense*, 1947.

According to Sung tradition, this law (bo 't'u) was delivered to the world in the form of a diagram. Deriving from the principles of Yang and Yin, upon which is based the entire system of Chinese world-outlook and philosophy. It is possible thus to affirm that an important layer at the basis of cinematic thought is of Asian origin, or was derived by Eisenstein from a variety of Asian sources. Inevitably one wonders whether the ends which were left loose after cinema tied up into the fixed form of montage + narrative could be reinserted into the fabric of the film; certainly new principles need to be put forward, from positions previously left unoccupied. One could see very clearly the motivation of new Asian filmmakers to look back to the image traditions of ancient Asia to come up with alternative ways to reassemble cinema.

After the two World Wars, the western world was again looking towards Asian and Oriental philosophy to supplement the intellectual and moral enfeeblement. In the last book of Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, which was essential to this research for its forging of the concept of geo-philosophy explained in Chapter 1, they look at various iconographic and knowledge systems like Chinese hexagrams, Hindu Mandalas, Islamic “imaginals” etc. to understand the systems of thought which are based on figures. They discover that mandalas are calculations on a surface of various correspondences of cosmic, political, architectural, divine and many organic levels (Deleuze & Guattari, 2015, p. 89).

Later, in an important article, Prof. Laura Marks developed her theory of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics through geology. Through Deleuze she illustrates the geological conceptualization of the world as a massive plane. The passing of time – strata differentiating themselves – gives rise to certain events, and eventually transformation or destruction happens all from this plane. The Earth is that from which all images emerge and to which they all return (Marks, 2009). It is interesting to see the resonance of this thought with the various illustrations of eschatological myths.

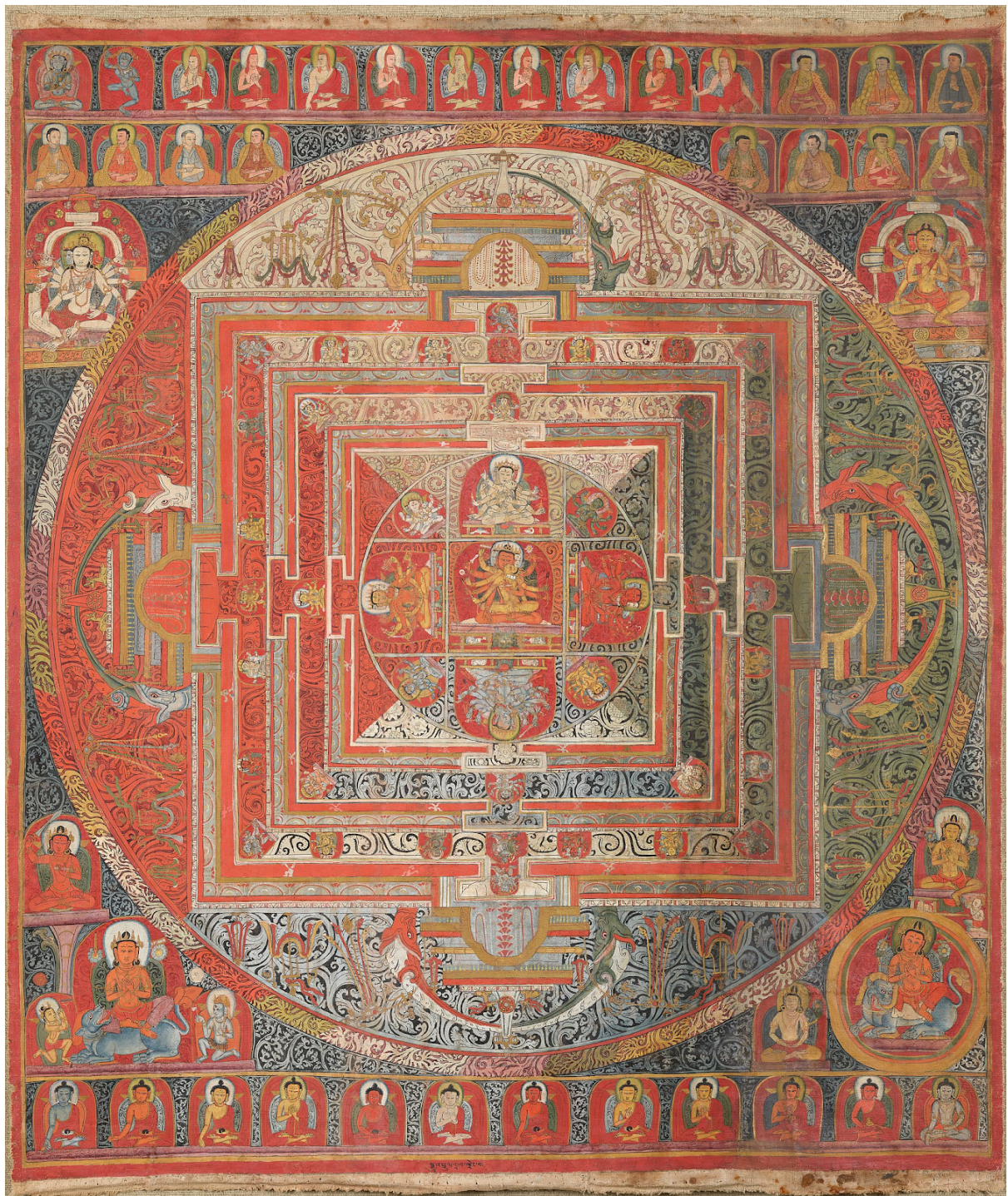


Fig. 4.2.: Manjuvajra mandala with 43 deities, from Tibet. Tempera on cotton.

Measures 71 by 85 centimetres (28 in × 33 in). Held at the Museo d'Arte Orientale.

## 4.2. Geo-Aesthetics: A Critique of the West through the Challenging of Narrative Time

Fredric Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* offers a reading of some of the most interesting films of the last decades and a general account of filmic representation in the postmodern world. Jameson poses some essential questions: How does representation function in contemporary film? How does contemporary cinema represent an ever more complex and international social reality? (Jameson, 1995)

The cinematic direction in the films discussed by Jameson – Edward Yang's *The Terrorizer*, Kidlat Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare*, Andrej Tarkovsky's *Andrei Roublev*, as well as Godard's *Passion* or Allan Pakula's *All the President's Men* – can be understood as a continuation of Thongchai Winichakul's critique of the geo-body (1997). The geo-body, a conceptual framing that links seeing subjects with visual representations, enables the imagination of national space by mapping bodies; it will be discussed in more depth in the following section, where Northeast India will be addressed as geo-body. The present research is concerned with how the aesthetic techniques of film reorient the imagination of national space through a reconfiguration of the geo-body of film. In that sense, the concept forged by Jameson, geo-aesthetics, is extremely useful.

There have been attempts to explore the effects of Asia in New Media which look at the trajectory of the Asian influence on Western art, while investigating the effects of new media art. The most interesting such attempts, among which I would like to mention the conference titled *Asia Effects in New Media*, held in 2006 at the Maryland Institute College of Art, highlight the rhizomatic effect of Asia on Western art and culture. Although art based on new technology can be easily associated with visions of a Western techno-utopic paradigm, unwritten histories interrupt this common understanding and collapse the logic of the East/West dichotomy. The objective of the conference mentioned above was to trace how media cultures and new media

art reflect Asian tendencies that redefine cultural territories and deconstruct canonical understandings of space and time. As per the statement of the organizers,

“The term ‘Asia Effects’ is troubling because it can be viewed as pejorative, territorial, centering, and simply a counter-weight to Western ideologies and cultural constructs. But ‘Asia Effects’ is used here to work off of those very expectations with a critical edge (or a wedge) which might serve as an ‘approach’ / an ‘iteration’ of cultural interpretation that traces paths between East and West and breaks down binary perspectives. Whether it is the western artist who utilizes an Eastern sensibility to produce the avant-garde or the Asian economist importing western technology to produce a so-called modern nation, the radical in culture creates ‘clouds’ of ‘Asia Effects,’ that are not about Eastern philosophy, people, or land but about networks of ideas... of seeing the world in a manner that calls on our anticipation of Asia and interrogates it critically.” (Cheon, 2006)

In that sense, I would like to address at this point a number of attempts in Asian cinema from the 1990s onward to think cinema geo-aesthetically.

#### **4.2.1. Assessing Asian Modernity**

It is interesting that the revolutionary potential of cinema was influenced by the Chinese worldview and philosophy. Even though this became latent in the overarching homogenizing factor of modernism, this reference came back by way of the pioneer of Taiwanese cinema: Edward Yang.

Yang’s cinematic work could be seen as a parallel to the philosophical work undertaken by the Kyoto School, as mentioned briefly in the first chapter of this research. His main question

throughout his films could be rephrased, in the terms of this thesis, as, “What hope is there for Taiwan to reach a state where its ontology is revealed and is able to break through the pervasive logic of western modernity, in order to create a true experience of life?” The context is that of a country which had experienced an economic boom which had pushed it at the forefront of global industrialization, in the process dismantling the traditional social formations, as well as rendering its ethics and philosophy into a layer of spectacle designed to hide the endless greed of capitalist expansion. As two film scholars who analyze Yang’s *A Confucian Confusion* summarize the idea,

“Edward Yang saw that modern ideology had a rather problematic future because interpersonal relationships are vitiated. The most salient symptom of this is a ubiquitous acceptance of hypocrisy. Confucianism then emerges as a political ideology that deviates from Confucius’ teachings. Advocates of this ideology convince some people that the doctrines of Confucianism are solely for instrumental use to gain financial and political benefits. They impose a moral structure by preaching Confucianism as emphasizing social order and hierarchy. This, as Yang viewed it, encourages hypocrisy.” (Law, Lo, 2016)

Yang did not part with narrative cinema or montage, yet his thinking through the age-old layer of Confucianism, which had been the country’s system of governance on the political as well as personal level for many centuries, allows him to take apart the clichés of the western time-space, which are nothing but the organizing structure of modern society, such as Taiwan had imported in his time. Confucian thought, in its original formulation, was concerned with the ethical relations between various social instances – between ruler and the ruled, between parents and their offspring, between husband and wife, between siblings, and friendship – and Yang opens up the image in order to give the space and time for these relationships to unfold in a way that they can be actually seen by the viewer. His long sequences allow one to

experience the complexities of the human relations, with the spoken, performed as well as the implied messages. Then, the films themselves focus on well-defined characters, who are observed over periods of time long enough for us to understand the transformations they go through. A new perception of time thus makes its way to the screen: instead of the cut-up time of montage, yet not in the realist Bazinian logic either, the time of experience in Edward Yang's films quietly ignites the possibility of a different cinema in Asia.

What is meant here by Edward Yang's realism in comparison to Bazin's model is that Edward Yang invented and expanded the model of cinema beyond the French ontological image schema and proposed a possibility of a geo-aesthetic (according to text by Jameson already quoted above). This argument is further developed by many film makers from Taiwan, China and many South East Asian filmmakers. They also mark Yang as the main influence to disrupt or reinvent cinema from a new perspective. The fifth generation filmmakers in China were graduates from the Beijing Film Academy after the cultural revolution of 89. A huge break from the Chinese cinema that came before it, this movement has associations with experimentation, allegory and a sense of creative freedom following years of oppression. This also allowed to break away from Russian montage.

The new movement in cinema in Asia and slow cinema in general could be explained through Deleuze's schema of image in his cinema books. The action-image system of classical and montagist cinema entered a period of crisis in the 1940s when confronted by the trauma of the post-war proliferation of "spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (Deleuze, 2005b: xi). In the new post-war environment, the action-image emblematic of the movement-image regime begins to break down and give rise to the time-image: an uncertain, dislocated set of image-sound relations in which time "rises up to the surface of the screen" (Deleuze, 2005b: xii).

Yang's realism updates Bazin's proposal of cinema. The experiments in duration that lead to contemporary slow cinema (most notably in the tendency toward long-take styles and 'temporal excess') took an extreme step through cinema of Lav Diaz and Wang Bing. In an interview with Brandon Wee (conducted after the completion of the final version of his first digital work *Evolution of a Filipino Family* [1994-2004]), Diaz summarizes his technique:

"I avoid close-ups when treating the characters I create in my films. I prefer long and oftentimes static takes, just like stasis—long, long takes in real time. My philosophy is [that] I do not want to manipulate the audience's emotions. I want them to experience [Evolution of a Filipino Family] the way they would experience their normal lives" (Wee, 2005).

There is no standard rule or theory which governs the difference between "slow cinema" and the longtakes. Slow cinema comprises of long takes but as quoted above many filmmakers uses this technique to overcome montage and achieve experience of the moment in realist terms. The question of slowness in cinema has generated controversy over its aesthetics and politics, Mathew Flanagan's 'Slow Cinema': Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film (2012; unpublished PhD thesis) proposes contingencies within the trend of contemporary slow cinema through incorporation of three principal characteristics: a minimal, or non-, narrative structure; the use of the long take, often accompanied by the long shot, to present unspectacular events in their entirety (including passages of temps mort, or substantial pre- and post-action lags); and an emphasis upon stillness, both of the frame and of visual content (in order to draw attention to composition and minor, localised movement).

The models proposed for modern cinema by Andre Bazin and Gilles Deleuze are complementary. Bazin was hopeful for the Italian neorealist cinema. His model of the long take was based on the possibility of this technique to exit classicism and on the possibility of

neorealist trends in Italian cinema. But it is not clear from his writing whether he was interested in the possibility of an ontological notion of cinema. Besides, after the 1990s there were other factors which filmmakers were dealing with beyond classicism and montage. Bazin is thus indeed a friend, but the proposal in this thesis is to rethink cinema beyond Bazin's concept of cinema. Bazin's investment in the realism of the image is common to much contemporary slow cinema. In short, cinema is a cybernetic tool, so the conventions and rules have to be more localized. This is possible due to the digital proliferation. But there are other dangers too. The principal difference between much of the cinema of which Bazin wrote (the cinema, necessarily, of his time) and more recent slow cinema is that the latter presents this sense of the world in a deeply rigorous form designed for contemplative spectatorial practice. Another difference observed in the particular formal innovations that are evident in the field of slow cinema are unthinkable in line with the classical aesthetics of the Bazinian model, and are better understood by Deleuze's model of the time-image (which poses problems at the level of the mental rather than at the level of the real).

#### **4.2.2. New Narrative Forms: Sensational Inaction and Arrested Timecode**

There has been a rapid surge of filmmaking in Asia where filmmakers started not conforming to dominant and conventional narrative forms. I have been very interested in this new wave in Asian cinema which started in the 2000's primarily from East Asia (Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, etc). This experience of film viewing privileges my own practice and allows me to understand the cultural basis of such film events.



Fig.4.3.: Lav Diaz, *Norte, the End of History*, 2013. Film still.

In a film review of *Norte, the End of History* (2013) for *Sight and Sound* film magazine, distinguished Australian film critic Adrian Martin put forward a scathingly negative criticism of Filipino director Lav Diaz's style in filmmaking. He described the film as,

“[...] a ‘degree zero’ of artlessness: conversations in long shot go around and around, scenes drain away, performances are hit-or-miss, the atmospheric sound is thin and unexpressive (Diaz abhors soundtrack music) and many situations (such as characters sitting in cafes or ambling down roads) are repeated over and over without significant variation or development... as the years pass... Diaz's ‘formula’ hardens, it becomes more difficult to excuse the lack of inventiveness and craft in his work in the name of some spurious ‘neo-neorealism’.” (Martin, 2014)

But what got consolidated by films from various filmmakers from China, Latin America and many non-western contexts is the following phenomenon: a politics of time that actively insists that a temporal shift in Western European aesthetics constitutes a revolt against the establishment. This event could also be considered as an ontological longing for a time code.

Slow cinema is one of the important ruptures or feedback which developed simultaneously from various parts of the world. Regardless of the director's geographical

origin, slow cinema is influenced by the Eastern perception of time. Indeed, Lav Diaz explained in a panel discussion in Newcastle AV Film festival (Taylor, 2012) that his films reflected the Filipino perception of time. Before the advent of the Spanish colonisation and the introduction of mechanical clocks, time had been seen as spatial in the Philippines. According to the broader Eastern time-philosophy which we have explained in the first chapter, time had been governed by nature, not by man.

The original contribution of slow cinema presents a form of time that seems, at first sight, unnatural to many viewers and posits a contradiction to the dominant montage theory, by allowing time to flow in the montage without cutting an event short, and thereby equally allowing a story to unveil in its organic way. Humans can usually perceive two forms of time. One is cyclical, which is the timecode of nature. And then there is the linear time of modern subjectivity. The experience of slow cinema shocks the viewer by introducing another form of time on the screen than the linear one of western modernity: a cyclical time that is independent of us and that runs in parallel to us. This time is shared and distributed in the realm of spirit, animal or ghost.



Fig. 4.4.: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Tropical Malady*, 2004. Film still.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's non narrative films privilege characters and atmospheres over plot in unfolding the story. He assembles various Thai folk plots, personal memories and variations of his dreams to create an atmospheric effect instead of narrative actions to move the plot ahead. My work with Desire Machine Collective has a similarity to his technique of using film experiments to disrupt the narrative and utilising the loop (in those works which are presented as film installations) where beginning and end are not really clear.

Weerasethakul's films *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Blissfully Yours* (2002) illustrate effortlessly what happens when the temporality of the images is not being motivated by plot but by some sort of narrative pause. There is an important disjuncture here when there is an introduction of the Buddhist notion of being in the narrative, as opposed to the action being the fundamental element of the narrative, following the tradition stemming from Aristotle. Apichatpong shares the sensibility with the early avant-garde artists and filmmakers to disrupt the canonical flow of characters, motive and narrative.



Fig. 4.5.: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, 2010. Film still.

The singularisation of modernity and tradition is used by the avant-garde in many instances. French thinker Félix Guattari, one of the most important influences for my work, studied the Japanese “singularity,” the combination of technological modernism with pre-industrial cultural traits in Japan (Genosko, 2002). This singularity through the combination of two or many streams of parallel discourse can also be seen in the films of Apichatpong. He uses on the external surface a forward flowing convention of narrative cinema (the specificity of medium requires duration to have a beginning and an end). But the interior narrative is conveyed through loose actions, extended shot duration or sensual extension of spatio-temporal timecodes.



Fig. 4.6.: View of the looper designed for screening *Residue*.

Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2011.

The possibility within the discourse of the art installation to contain loops, where beginning and end are not visible, facilitated many such experiments by various filmmakers. While installing *Residue*, the Desire Machine Collective film I will be discussing in the next chapter, for the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 and then at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York, as a 35 mm loop projection, this idea of circular temporality as an open ended loop was conceived. An unique looper 35 mm print for 39 minutes was built specifically for this film.

The control loop of modernity was designed around the idea of assembly line or progression. According to David Scoma who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the question of the development of loop-based cinematic techniques and their application in early cinema,

“Within the realm of film, the Griffith and Eisenstein models of cinematic editing techniques (as the most popular – and near-monolithic – narrative aesthetic criteria) effectively disregarded most other approaches, including looping. Despite the evidence for the consistent use of repetition and looping in multiple ways throughout the course of cinematic history, some theorists and practitioners maintain that the influx of the technique within digital cinema in recent years represents a sudden breakthrough, one that has arrived simply because technology has currently advanced to a point where their utilization within digital formats now makes sense both technologically and aesthetically” (Scoma, 2008, p. iii).

For Lav Diaz, the main framework for deploying his stylistic device of the long take comes from a more revolutionary take as a reaction to the tyranny and imposition of time from outside. The long take comes as a liberation from that framed time code, freeing our lives from intensified continuity. More than tradition, it seems Lav Diaz is interested in liberation. It becomes clear from an interview (Ingawanij, Chulphongsathorn, Lertwiwatwongsa, Tioseco, 2016) that

most of his films and his style become an attempt to get the mind out of the constant colonial rule in the Philippines.

In conclusion, this passivity is radical in terms of the invention of new concepts and languages through this new motor schema of image making. Apichatpong's empty and loose plotlines are the carrier of empty time and space. The very design of his films creates a film experience that provides the audience with the freedom to think and bring and explore imagination and ideas outside of the film. In this sense, one could imagine the ontological design in practice here.

The synthesis of many such temporalities is both beyond cinema and deserves attention as a design problem, inherent in the formation of India as a modern nation state, attending to the attention of western values. What we understand as India today is a synthesis of many civilizations, primarily the Indus Valley civilization with its urban culture in Mohenjodaro (currently in Pakistan), Harappa and Lothal (in Gujrat) and various innumerable tribes around them at various levels of Palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures, with economies varying from primitive food gathering, hunting and fishing to settled agriculture. These pre-Aryan people had different beliefs, customs and religious rituals – from animism, spirit worship and magic, to the worship of Mother Goddess, the sacred tree, etc.

I believe India in the current form remains one of the few places in the world with communities coexisting, at various stages of human evolution, such as hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, industrial culture and information age. Through the various stages of this evolution, there have been constant negotiations, transformations through various cultural metamorphosis like detribalisation, industrialisation etc. People at various stages of this evolution had different rhythms and temporalities to their lives. There are still people living in pre-feudal or pre-capitalist conditions, who struggle to find a unitary pace for their existence.

Most of the socialist theories imported to develop the Indian modern state were designed to modernise and to implement the value of western notion of industrialisation as intrinsic.

Cinema in this case could be a great archive to understand the transformation occurring within the logic of spectacle or the failed attempt of parallel movements such as the leftist movements of the seventies to ensure a space for polytemporalities. Finding a non-alienated temporality according is thus a design problem which could be solved by developing notions such as ontological design.

Developing or proposing a model for non-alienated cinematic temporalities is a complex process which involves establishing a productive feedback loop among various practices and disciplines. We have seen this at work in the case of Maya Deren: her study in Haiti was influenced by the work of Bateson and Mead in Bali, which in turn helped Deren to be part of the Cybernetic group meeting of the Macy Conferences.

The main challenge in India, specifically in Northeast India, is the coexistence of various temporal ontologies. What we have learned so far from this thesis is the deployment of modernist rhythm of industrialisation in cinema. What was left behind in this process were the non-industrial forms of expression and lives. The scope of this study is limited to only the temporal dimension of cinema. Now the next challenge is whether it is possible to recover or develop the ontology of time. It would be difficult to impose a universal model.

The cinema of Apichatpong was a real event in my life. His films explore the way that spirituality is strongly linked to questions about the constancy of human memory and the complexities of the relationship between Buddhist-shamanist spirituality in Thailand and identity formation in a shifting world. Perhaps its most complete and explicit expression is in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. This film is a perfect case study for exploring how cinema, as memory, can offer a form of reincarnation or continuation of life beyond, bringing to the forefront the idea of circularity and contingency in an engulfed situation,

similarly to what was proposed by Panikkar while deriving the ontological temperature of being (i.e., time) for India.

Cinema can only present itself through evidence.

#### **4.3. Building A Strategy for Accessing the Ontology of the Image in Northeast India**

The targeted overview of recent Asian cinema in the previous section leads us to conclude that in order to work in the logic of geo-aesthetics, one can choose either the critical road of confrontation with the dominant model of image production, or the ontological road of thinking through the logic behind the construction of the image as it stems from the historical, geographical and philosophical context.

The image schema of modernity is based, according to philosopher Vilém Flusser, on the alpha numeric representation of the world (Flusser, 2002, pp. 112-113). Its cinema, as we have seen, falls under the same schema. We have looked at the responses from Asian directors who place themselves inside the terrain of modernity to explode its space-time schema. We have also mentioned early Indian cinema and its pronounced connection to myth, as in the case of the iconic *Raja Harichandra* and the previously analyzed *Joymati*, *Sanabi* and *Kanglei Haraoba*. The schema behind these films is one of ritual. In the previous chapter we could thus note a certain similarity of approach between Jyotiprasad and Aribam, as they both were interested in exploring the new cinematic medium available to them at various moments to represent their worlds and related worldviews.

However, we have affirmed that ‘the cinema is missing’ in Northeast India; what does that mean? Succinctly put, the efforts of isolated figures such as the two directors have not been able to create the space for the representation of the worldview from Northeast India. The strong

precedent of Aribam Syam Sharma, who tries to use in his fiction the learnings from the two documentaries we looked at, must be taken up by the new generation in order to bear fruit. With the clarity afforded by the passage of time, I can place my cinematic work in this lineage.

Thus, the move that I am conceptualizing in this thesis, from an affirmation of a lack to a proposal to address it, stems in reality from my artistic practice. Simply put, I understood work such as the one made by Aribam through my own experiments, through my own attempts to record the rituals which I found encapsulated the spirit of my territory. The subsequent research which led me to writing this thesis has been important inasmuch as I was able to correctly identify the exact sources of what I perceived as a specific ontology of the image in Northeast India. In the closing section of this chapter, I would like to build a case for Northeast India as geo-body, with a specific image tradition, and **ask whether it is possible to create a strategy in order to access this ontology of the image**. By looking at my two of my own films, I do not mean to present them as a success story, simply discuss them as part of a such conscious effort at creating this strategy.

#### **4.3.1. Northeast India as Geobody**

In his essay “Life as a Field Trip”, Yi-Fu Tuan emphasized the importance of experience in engaging with the world: “as soon as we are awake, we are in the field (world), experiencing. Experience is a key word in the humanist geographer’s lexicon. What is it? Simply put, it is how an animal, especially a human animal, apprehends reality through all its senses and mind” (Tuan, 2001, p. 43). His essay reaffirmed my belief in understanding geography as being more important than history in processing experiences.

*Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* by Thongchai Winichakul provides the essential concept for bringing together the two aspects which are relevant also for

mapping the Northeast: geography and ontology. Extending this argument, David Zhou and Satish Kumar, in their 2011 article “Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geobody of India's Northeast”, attempt a history of “mapping” Northeast India in a broader sense as a cultural universal over a relatively long period. As they affirm in the introduction, “It is not a history of cartography, but it focuses on the interface between cartography and cosmography, which were, in turn, shaped by imperial power and geographical knowledge” (Zhou & Kumar, 2011, p. 141).

It is thus possible to look at Northeast India as the north-eastern borderlands of South Asia, but the region can also be described as the north-western borderlands of Southeast Asia. The idea that South Asia is a discrete geographical region separated from Southeast Asia is a fiction. There are no ‘natural’ geographical boundaries separating South and Southeast Asia along the India-Myanmar border. Political scientist Sanjib Baruah makes a further case for Northeast India as being culturally located between South and South-East Asia. It is thus a difficult project to identify and isolate the ontological system of the region, as it has always been interspersed with various traditions and beliefs systems from its borders and within.

The people of the region are no less diverse, representing a complex mixture of ethnic and linguistic groups that include Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Shan. Today, the state of Assam alone contains 23 recognized tribal groups, including the Bodo Kacharis, Rabhas, Lalungs, Mikirs, Khasis, Jaintias, Garos, and Nagas, each with their own unique cultures, dialects, and religious traditions. It is worth noting that several of these indigenous communities, particularly the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos, have traditionally been matrilineal and have worshipped a variety of powerful goddess figures, which may very well have influenced the development of Śākta Hinduism in Assam.

Finally, there is a case to be made for the influence of the landscape on the worldview of the populations living in this region. The space is defined by two elements: the river

Brahmaputra that traverses it, creating plains which it floods every year, in a continuous action of visual and physical remodelling; and the relationship of the plains to the surrounding hills, which constitutes the basis of the religious as well as socio-political exchanges in the region. The lack of fixity in this landscape has left its mark on the people: as we have analyzed in the first chapter, when we looked at the myths and cosmogonies stemming from this space, the only constant throughout the century has been change itself – or perhaps we can say, contingency. Furthermore, there is a case to make for the place which this region occupies in the pan-Indian imaginary: “The lack of ‘fixed’ position for Assam within the Indian political imagination is countered locally by a seemingly permanent agrarian culture created by the unquestionable presence of the Brahmaputra River which dominates life and the economy along its banks” (Saikia, quoted in Zhou & Kumar, 2011, p. 142).

The question of geography and landscape brings us to the more specific theoretization of zomia, a term which since it was coined in 2002 by historian Willem van Schendel, has served both to illuminate a system of resistance to governance, and to claim this very possibility of resistance as a model of political and philosophical stance in the era of globalization.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, James C. Scott addresses the question of how certain groups in the mountainous jungles of Southeast Asia managed to avoid a package of exploitation centered around the state, taxation, and grain cultivation. Certain aspects of their society seen by outsiders as backward (e.g., limited literacy and use of written language) were in fact part of the “arts” referenced in the title: limiting literacy meant lower visibility to the state. Scott's main argument is that these people are “barbaric by design”: their social organization, geographical location, subsistence practices and culture have been carved to discourage states from annexing them to their territories. Addressing identity in the introduction of his book, he writes:

“All identities, without exception, have been socially constructed: the Han, the Burman, the American, the Danish, all of them ... To the degree that the identity is stigmatized by the larger state or society, it is likely to become for many a resistant and defiant identity. Here invented identities combine with self-making of a heroic kind, in which such identifications become a badge of honor” (Scott, 2014, p. xii).

Following Scott, it is thus possible to argue that the specific identity of the Northeast region of India has been shaped by its status as a frontier land, and even more specifically, as a frontier to the so-called ‘civilization’. The hill tribes formed an ecosystem with the plain kingdom of the Ahoms, marked by economic and symbolic exchanges; this ecosystem constitutes the first geographical-historical layer of the Northeast. Then comes “the implementation of colonial power in marshalling all available resources in surveying, mapping, and demarcating India's Northeast borderland as the ever-shifting ‘turbulent frontier’ that attracted imperial concern for order and stability” (Zhou & Kumar, 2011, p. 143). Basically, the region has functioned as a border territory from colonial to postcolonial times, one which in that sense needs to be known – read *mapped* – in order for those mapping it to better locate the resources which they can extract from it. Since the advent of the British colonists, people as well have been moved around according to a logic completely alien to the territory: for work, for political balance, for coercion of all kinds. The turbulent history of the late 20th century in the entire Northeast is further proof that the violent mapping led to an even more violent manipulation of the territory and its people, with very little inclination to address their specific concerns or to build frameworks for them to bring forth their visions for the world. A typical position of the local people is to consider themselves as subjects to colonial powers which have only changed names, but not strategies or intentions.

In that case, it remains a challenge to untangle the conceptual as well as practical results of these mappings from the complex layers of culture which have developed from ancient times

in this region. In other words, one needs new tools to perform for Northeast India an operation analogue to the de-orientalising of Indian culture: with the knowledge drawn from a geographical-historical understanding, one must address the variety in time and space of the local cultures, beyond simplistic notions of craft or the bag of labels that comes with analyzing indigenous culture.

The interest for the indigenous register during post-independence India started with Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist who worked extensively in the Northeast. Ramachandra Guha, in his biography of Elwin, *Savaging the Civilised*, recounts the warning registered by the anthropologist while dealing with the indigenous populations of Northeast India. He was deputed by Nehru to advise on the administration of these regions and in that context wrote *A Philosophy for NEFA* to formulate both a policy and a philosophy for the administration of the North East Frontier Agency, and to inform the personnel of facts about the area and its people. He was worried that any transformation of the belief or religion of the indigenous population will alienate them from their community and further make their status deplorable in the larger context of India.

In one of my email exchanges with Prof. Phillipe Ramirez, an anthropologist from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique [CNRS, the main state research agency in France], regarding the possible search for blind spots in the ontology of Northeast India, he remarked:

“[A]s you know, the region is very diverse, so even if the opposite point of reference is mainstream India (also very diverse) you cannot expect to find values or representations common to at least the majority of Northeasterners. [...] your quest is very important, as local ideologies have almost not been studied in this region. We have excellent ethnographies but almost nothing on religion particularly. The reason being that the Brit[ish] had not the tools to enquire about non-Hindu ideologies.”

A position which is important for me is that a superficial turn or 'return' to indigenous sources comports a dangerous claim in the age of global capitalism. Very often in the world of contemporary art, artists 'discover' ways of being or doing, in cultures with which they have remote connections, extract elements which are alluring for the distress that modernity has left us in and that all those susceptible to see their work will experience, and combine these elements in works whose message ranges from self-help to calls for an abstract revolution. Apart from the obvious lack of substance in these proposals, the danger is to lead the disenchanted moderns to believe that they have unlimited access to a knowledge which is not theirs in a strong metaphysical sense: it does not belong to them historically and they do not deserve access to it just because they have been left helpless by their own ontology. A further danger is that the indigenous culture risks being depleted of its power, once it is revealed: not necessarily because the artist in question has touched its core, but because this can lead the endlessly greedy capitalist machine to lay its claim on it, to expand into it just like into any other open market. This process has led, since the 20th century avant-gardes and their 'exploration' of non-western cultures, to a profound disruption of the social and cosmological organisations in many parts of the world. The consequence is the current ontological homogenization – which, in turn, leads to the desperate search for difference. Inasmuch as this thesis represents an engagement with ontological difference, it is essential to recall the methodology behind it: over 20 years of field as well as academic research, consistent travels and exchanges in the region, as well as an effort to address indigenous culture with contemporary tools in order to assess its currency. It is my firm belief that only sustained research into a culture can constitute the basis for a creative engagement with it: in other words, the art that one might produce when working with a specific culture needs to achieve the status of ontological inquiry, and not remain on the level of aesthetics.

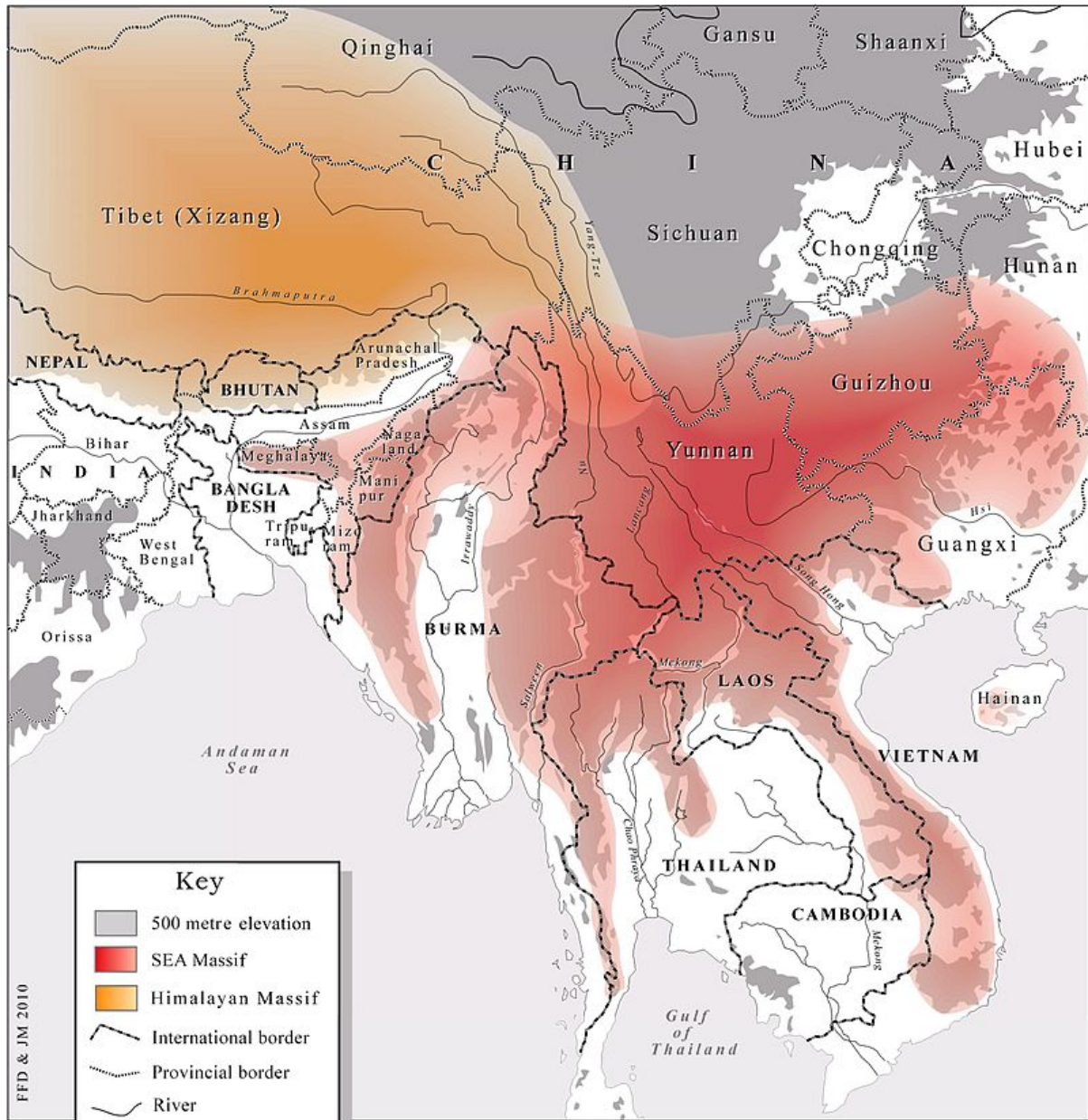


Fig. 4.7.: A Map of Zomia.

The Southeast Asian Massif (in red) and part of the Himalayan Massif (in yellow).

Gray background indicates land above 500 metres.

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### 4.3.2. Ancient Image Strategy in Northeast India

The princely states of Manipur, Tripura, and the Tai-Ahoms of Assam meticulously maintained royal chronicles. About two hundred buranjis (meaning “storehouse of knowledge”) have been discovered in Tai-Ahom language and Assamese. The Ahom Buranji (translated into English by Golap Chandra Barua in 1930) opens with a creation myth that presents a cosmological view of the Tai-Ahom world. God was depicted as a shapeless lump of flesh suspended in the sky like a swarm of bees. The Ahom creator had a pair of golden spiders erect eight pillars in eight corners of the Earth. The spiders connected the Ahom mountains by a rope to a pillar on Mount Meru of Hindu mythology. Indeed, the fabric of the Ahom universe was interwoven by spider webs of Tai-Ahom and Hindu myths. The verticality of such a local cosmograph stands in sharp contrast to a horizontal map of bounded territories delimited by modern state interests (Anderson, 2006, pp. 170-178).

In medieval Assam, which was when the art of manuscript illustration flourished, saw the emergence of three distinct schools of painting. The earliest style, what is known as Tai Ahom, was a continuation of the Shan style of painting that prevailed across the borders of the Patkai range. The Phung Chin manuscript is a treatise on the Ahom conception of heaven and hell as modified by animism and Hinayana Buddhism and was written in the Tai language.

Ahoms innovated an unique way of chronicling time through a form of history writing which is called Buranji, the record of events as expression of cyclical, cosmological patterns where human and supernatural agency was incorporated in the discussion.

The subjects are directly placed on the blank surface of the folio. No landscape serves as background. The majority of the illustrations are of human or of semi-divine beings all depicted in a form that is anthropomorphic. The human figures are all in frontal view though the faces are portrayed in three-quarter profile. The colour palette of the Tai artists was limited

to blue, red, black and gold, and the thick usage of these colours gave the paintings a lacquered look.

The next style to emerge was that of the Satriya School, the first illustrated example of which we find is the 17th century Chitra-bhagavata or, to use its original name, the Adi-dasama, the text of which was rendered into Assamese by Sankardeva, recovered from the Bali Satra of Nagaon. The main patrons of art in Assam were the Satras (Vaishnavite Monasteries), founded under the influence of Sankardeva who, during the 15th and 16th centuries, used various literary and artistic mediums to propagate his Bhakti cult. The Satras also had the social and intellectual environment conducive to the perusal of such activity.

This manuscript is executed on Sancipat folios. The tangible space that the pictorial narrative intersects is linear, and the affirmation of the same narrative through the medium of depiction and to a certain extent expression, is largely figural. The figures are staged in a manner that is sequential and histrionic delineation of meaning dominates artistic verbalization. The rendering of context by realization of lococentric elements such as landscape is not entirely absent.

With the flourishing of the Satras during the 17th century, the Khanikars arose as artists within these institutions, proficient in the art of mask making, costume design, making wigs, make-up and other activities related to dramaturgy. As they developed skill in such vocations, they were perhaps granted or even encouraged to work on manuscript illustration. Individuality of motif arose in this tradition and exotic elements from other Indian schools were incorporated in a creative and independent manner, and not merely imitated.

One of the most fascinating examples we can see in the manuscript titled *Anadi Patan*, which explores the illustration of the cosmos and the metaphysical realm. I will discuss them in detail in relation to a film I made, which is explicitly drawing on this source.

### 4.3.3. The Missing Image or, Cinema that is Missing

Indian film scholar Aparna Sharma made, to my mind, the sharpest observation regarding the essential gesture behind one of the most important works I made as part of Desire Machine Collective – a gesture which I had been striving to attain since the beginning of my practice:

“*Residue’s* evocation of absent humans at the level of absent memories constitutes a creative articulation of marginalized peoples, forgotten and unseen. This move writes against the absenting and erasure of a certain dimension of history from a perspective near to those who were impacted by that history” (Sharma, 2015, p. 162).

Evoking the absent humans is, to me, a manner of *invoking* the possibility of an indigenous ontology of the image: that image which not just represents the missing people, but reveals their place in the world. It was not uncanny to find a resonance with the project of Desire Machine Collective in the cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who also produces most of his images from a similar repressed zone in Northeast Thailand. Northeast India and Northeast Thailand share a similar political history and have both witnessed military interventions to suppress indigenous peoples’ movements.

The lack of fixity and the contingency which define Northeast India as a geo-body are also not the ideal sources for a linear type of cinema, driven by narrative and the synchronization of the senses through montage. While our work with Desire Machine Collective drew more explicitly on the political unrest of the recent decades, it was unconsciously tributary to the modes in which time and space had been conceptualized in the region we were part of. Thus, none of the films explore narrative as a form of historical account; instead, there is an increasing awareness of the need to think the image through the conceptualization of time which ultimately reveals the meaning of all actions and positions. Understanding time as “the ontological

temperature of being” was an arduous process, a struggle to bring forth the violence perpetrated on this region and its people, a violence which is nothing else than the fact of blocking the flow of time as lived by the indigenous people of the land. The various forms of colonialism that pushed the Northeast from a border region to a periphery have also disconnected the people from their indigenous perception of time, leaving them incapable of creating the images of their world.

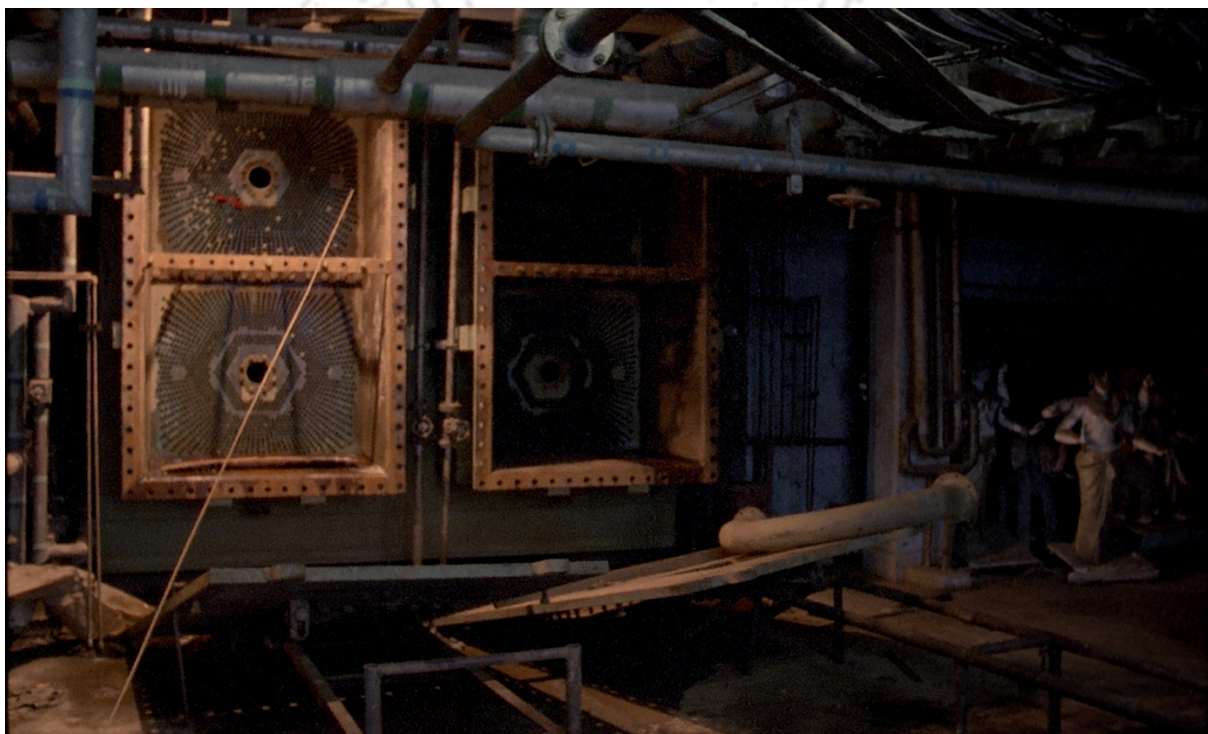


Fig. 4.8.: Desire Machine Collective, *Residue*, 2011. Film still.

While working on this research I could gather how this ontological temperature has been transforming over time. This instability or lack of a unified consistent framework for ontology also was responsible for the absence of cinema in terms of finding an unique timecode. In a conversation with Dr. Aparna Sharma regarding some of my work with Desire Machine Collective, I tried to analyse the logic behind making images for film, primarily the 2011 film *Residue*. She wrote later in her book:

“*Residue* now typifies a specific take on the documentary image wherein its meanings are not limited to visible evidence or information. Instead, the image is used as a provocateur for temporally-inflected associations and memories: those dimensions of experience that are not concretely present and that are only suggested through the performance of filmic elements, here the camera’s contemplative gaze upon the power plant. As we observe the dust-laden, halted pressure meters and other provisions we sense that an achingly long while has passed since the power plant stopped operating. It is as if passing time has been accumulating in the material textures of the things we see. The deepening decay all across the site, the sheets of dust and rust on the power plant machinery – these are the many layers of time that have been silently building upon this site, its surfaces and its skin. Time is now not an objective flow of instants, but we sense it as an arrested category, passing yet accumulating” (Sharma, 2015, pp. 155-156).

Her observation brings together several aspects which I have built into the image with each of the films I made. Certainly there is a tribute to the slow cinema pioneered by Asian filmmakers, or rather there is an acknowledgement of how this type of image has allowed all non-western filmmakers to disconnect from progressive linear time and start digging into their own cultures for an ontology of time. In the case of *Residue*, the image is working through the layers of memory in order to access that strategy which will take the viewer beyond causality, into the time outside of time embodied by Kali – that time which is even beyond cyclicity. *Residue* makes no space for regressive positions such as nostalgia: instead, it tries to work with both contingency and eternity in order to create a space where the human touches the divinity in a gesture that is simple yet meaningful, responsible yet appeasing.

It is also a very personal effort to go beyond the mental and spiritual constraints of secular modernity and its mechanical temporality, which has never been able to respond to the

questions asked from this geographical and historical space. This geo-body itself, the Northeast, is revealed in the search for an indigenous time:

“Though the experience of time that *Residue* evokes has been provoked by the power plant’s closure, its specific qualities – of halting and arrest, accumulation and passage are not purely the outcome of this singular event. These qualities are embodied by the site, the power plant as a space and our experience of these qualities comes about by observing and gazing at this site. Thus it is space, constructed by the camera’s gaze that gives us a sense of the particular qualities of time at this site. Our experience of time is shaped by the image of space” (Sharma, 2015, p. 156).



Fig. 4.9.: Desire Machine Collective, *Residue*, 2011. Film still.

The space is almost a living body, claiming its dignity and the very possibility of its uninterrupted existence. It contains all the history of the humans and the non-humans, as well as all the time which has been kept from surfacing in a world dominated by progression. Is this

the missing image that we have been looking for? For me, it functioned as a turning point where I started to understand what I had been looking for and work my way towards capturing it.

A subsequent film, the 2016 *Invocation*, commissioned by the British Museum in response to the famous Assamese illustrated textile Vrindavani Vastra, took further the cinematic inquiry into the possibility of reconnecting to the ancient indigenous ontology of image.



Fig. 4.10.: Vrindavani Vastra, detail.

The piece was designed in the 17th century by Srimanta Śankaradeva, a Vaishnavite saint and scholar, and woven by Assamese weavers led by Mathuradas Burha Aata; it illustrates episodes from the childhood of Lord Krishna and falls into the image schema devised in the

illustrated manuscripts of Medieval Assam. I have already referred to the one called *Anadi Patan* which illustrated the cosmic and metaphysical notion inscribed in the sacred text.



Fig. 4.11.: Vrindavani Vastra, detail.

By decoding the iconological metaphors in the illustrated Neo-Vaishnavite manuscripts, it is important to examine the metaphors of the socio-religious syncretism. This is also the case for the Vrindavani Vastra. A recent paper argues that,

“the fabric was part of Śaṅkaradeva’s vision of an inclusive social growth through religion, evident in his belief in *Eka Sarana* dharma, when *Krishna* standing for the supreme consciousness instructs Uddhava in the Bhagavata:

O Uddhava, (transcending everything) ignore Vedic injunctions and prohibitions. Renounce both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* types of *karmas*, and give up what is learnt and what is to be learnt (*The Bhagavata Purana*)” (Sengupta, 2020, p. 3).

Śaṅkaradeva's idea of social change also depended on this praxis: an aesthetics of performance that would be participatory and explorative, inductive of the holy. The *Vastra* would create that space on various levels: in the process of weaving it, as a hanging piece in the holy space, and in the process of activating it through dances and rituals, in which both participants and spectators could experience a reconfiguration through choreography:

“The difficult part is of course in devising the performance space, involving humans and monsters, for example in the instance of Krishna slaying *Kalia*, as has been said before. But, unlike Brahminical dictums, as expounded in the Raghunandan Code, where rules of ritualistic conduct are passed down through generations, Śaṅkaradeva's emotive oeuvre means that one has to learn by doing. Nothing is fixed. Even the explanations of religion or morality are to be examined and understood deeply. For example, the *Vastra* includes scenes of Krishna hanging by a tree and playing his flute, as he watches various pitcher women bathe. This incident, part of the myth of the hero also contextualizes him and gives him a human limitation and form. There is an antecedent gravitas against seriousness, which dilutes the question of fear” (Sengupta, 2020, p. 4).

The piece thus immediately opened up the possibility of being activated through moving image. I approached the *Vastra* in that way: having spent many months on the river island Majuli, the epicenter of the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, I worked with the local master craftsman who creates the masks used in the rituals associated with the piece, and put together footage of the space as both frame and active scene for the now absent textile. In the absence of this magnificent and iconic piece – it goes without saying that it belongs to the collections of the British Museum and will most probably never return to Assam – it was possible to read the same absence of people that *Residue* evoked: the world we have access to, the world which

is given to us, functions according to rules which are not of our making and is bound to end – or has already ended – in a spiritual impasse.

The time of *Invocation* thus becomes an eschatological time: a call for the time when the space of absence will have been gradually re-built, by understanding the logic which assisted its original creation. It is the Messianic time, “marked [...] by prefiguring and fulfilment” than Anderson says has been forever disrupted by modernity (Anderson: 2006: 24). In “The Question Concerning Technology”, Heidegger framed this quest for what is primal as an intellectual pursuit which is in fact already spiritual: “in the realm of thinking, a painstaking effort to think through still more primally what was primally thought is not the absurd wish to revive what is past, but rather the sober readiness to be astounded before the coming of what is early” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 22).



Fig. 4.12.: Desire Machine Collective, *Invocation*, 2016. Film still.

The astonishment in front of the primal can only happen in silence – one could say, it is itself silence. The *Invocation* has no sound, just as the essence of the oral system at the foundation of the textile piece was an invocation of that originary silence of the cosmos.

“While language is not ignored in the *Vastra*, the visual is independent of written signs. The structure of the words is just so much of geometrical shapes, more or less triangles. Knowledge stems here not just from written words alone but from image, texture (including the texture and weaving of the fabric), lines, geometric shapes, gesture, movement and musical expression. Even the words, bereft of the personality of the speaker or the heavily loaded premise in which it was originally delivered had a twofold effect on the audience that was basically familiar with the sound bites” (Sengupta, 2020, p. 6).



Fig. 4.13.: Desire Machine Collective, *Invocation*, 2016. Film still.

The movement inside the film frames, as well as the way in which these frames are put together, I can now understand as *trance*:

“[*Invocation*] is trancelike and dreamily romantic; a subjective collection of images from the natural world imbued with ideas from the spiritual one, pieced together by an unreliable narrator behind a camera lens that occasionally blurs.” (Soin, 2016)

All these elements coming together in a film that itself functions as a ritual, represent the closest I was able to get to reconnecting with the ontology of ancient Assamese images. The cinematic apparatus allowed me to explore the possibility of an image which is non-linear, oral yet silent, performative, mythical – in other words, cosmopoetical. It can thus be said that with this film I could achieve a revealing of the technological spirit of my own culture, by kneading the image tradition across different technologies.



Fig. 4.14.: Desire Machine Collective, *Invocation*, 2016. Film still.

Having now analyzed in such detail two of my works, I cannot claim to have made ‘representative’ work about or for the Northeast, as the films of Desire Machine Collective have

been shown in the closed circuits of the international contemporary artworld. In that sense, they have not been reinserted into the fabric of the collective imaginary, in a similar fate as Jyotiprasad or Aribam's attempts. However, the consistent work that went into conceptualizing images that tap into the ontology of ancient images and rituals, has grown over the years into a corpus whose relevance is becoming more and more clear with time. Its circulation has increased, more and more people from various contexts have access to it, and it is permanently alive through interactions: it has become a source for several research projects, including the present thesis, and thus continues to feed into the knowledge production around the Northeast. This is of course a consequence of time: one can observe the effort behind these works as a coherent one, perhaps even a progressive one, and engage with it as a complex whole.

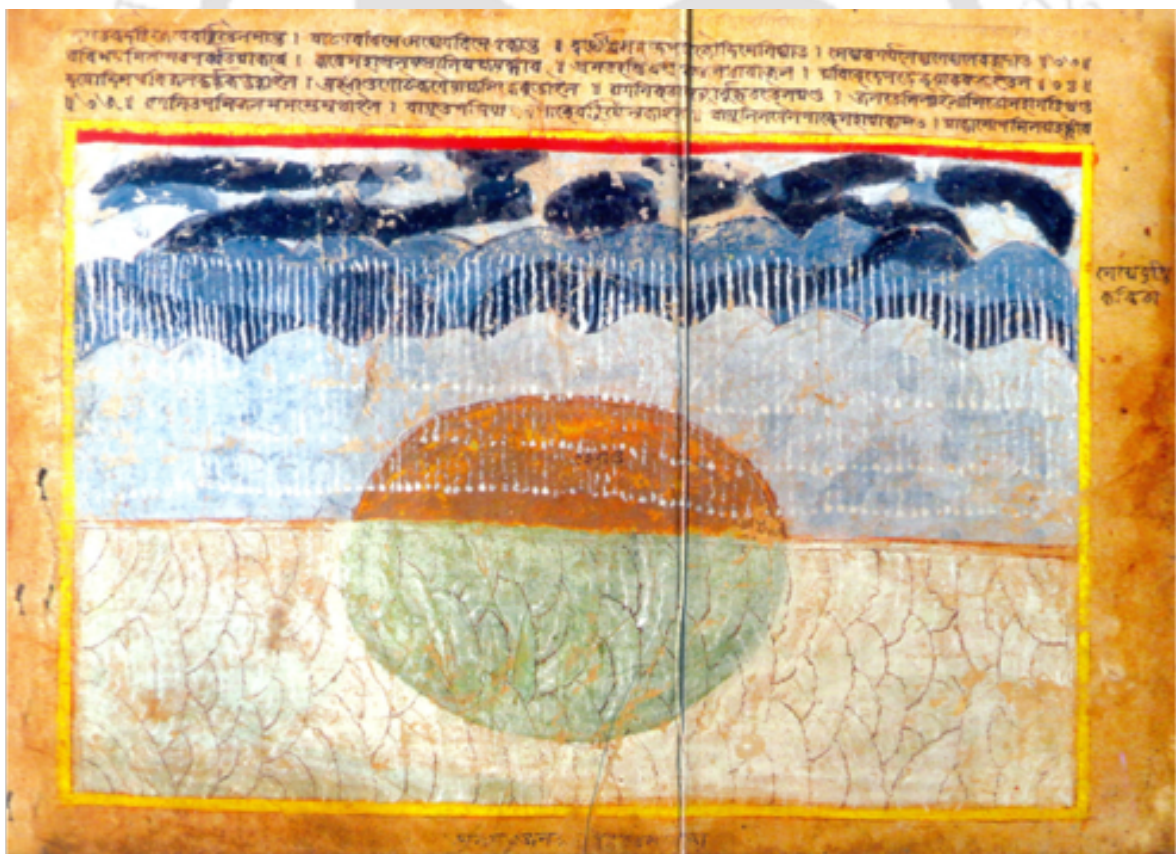


Fig. 4.15.: *Anadi Patan*, detail. An illustrated manuscript from Kuji Satra, 18th century.

Collection of the Assam State Museum.

I would also like to record the fact that image making in all these cases is not celebratory, instead the motivation always was to unite the social self and the probable understanding of the ontological condition of the world we reside in. There is an interesting feedback from Aribam's documentary films such as *Kanglai Haraoba* towards his feature films such as *Sanabi*, in terms of the controlled use of time. This is something I was able to learn from and apply myself: the image production needs to be verified by its participation in the collective worldview, at the same time as it verifies itself the possibility of the collective. A process which is ongoing in the cinema of the Northeast, and to which this research is but a humble contribution.

It is also worth understanding, along with the central argument of this thesis about the absence of cinema, the demand for a separate time zone for Northeast India. The western and eastern extremities of India are separated by one hour 56 minutes. Assam proposes to adopt the old, unofficial *bagan* time, which is a whole hour ahead and was designed to allow tea gardens to get their work done by daylight alone. One of the vocal proponents of this demand is Jahnu Barua, an Internationally acclaimed Assamese filmmaker who also worked in Indian Space Research Organization in his formative years. He complains: "The government has, time and again, given baseless excuses on this subject. Russia has 11 time zones, the US has 6 time zones, and Mexico has 3. How do they operate this smoothly?" (Baruah, 2010). This demand for a separate time zone could also be connected to a question of placing cinema from the Northeast in the larger canon of Indian cinema.

In this thesis, the main objective of considering the quantitative analysis of the ASL (Average Shot Length) of the selected films is to build an argument for the absence or impossibility to apply or create a cinematic convention in an ontological sense: this is due to the relationship of cinema with the dominant cinematic convention, inherent in the technology itself. The existence of regional cinema from the 60's to the late 90's depicted the possibility of a pluriverse similar to the federalism expected of the Indian Nation state. Regional cinema,

primarily from Assam, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Kerala and Karnataka, opened the possibility of this regional universe to the world.

Regarding the quantitative analysis of my own films, it is fair to say that it is rather converging with the argument of the “missing cinema”. *Residue*, *Noiselife* and *Invocation* bear ASLs of 31.9, 38.8 and 16.7 respectively. All of them were produced for the gallery and museum system of display. I want to record here that due to the unavailability of support and space for projection, my early film experiments were appropriated in the independent cinema festivals and art galleries. In all honesty, they do not come close to any new model I could propose at this time. *Residue* and *Noiselife* quantitatively are close to the ASL of many works of slow cinema, but the pace is still conservative. I am yet to apply some of my learnings from undergoing this thesis. ASL is certainly not the only parameter, and there are other ontological concepts that I want to translate into techniques of time.

My argument around the element of “missing” is also not to dismiss all the efforts of filmmakers and movements that happened in various parts of Northeast India and specifically in Assam – starting from the cinematic realism of Padum Barua’s *Ganga Silonir Paakhi* (1976), to Gautam Bora’s *Wosobipo* (1991). I have clarified already in the beginning how I use the term “cinema” in this thesis. There was a dearth of usage of ethnographic elements as part of documentary or films made in indigenous languages. Rarely films could escape the apparatus of realism and develop an independent style. This is where the control aspect of cinema as a cybernetic principle operates through institutions, production machinery, dominant conventions. This thesis is a provocation as well as a moment to think through how to reorganize the mind and put it into cinematic projections.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### TOWARDS A CYBERNETIC REORGANIZATION OF THE WORLD

The main argument of this research has been that cinema in Northeast India is missing, which is due to the conception of cinema in this context: a cybernetic modelling of the world. What this means in fact is that the technological spirit in Northeast India is trapped in western technology, because conventions are trapped and the imagination is blocked. As Heidegger asserts at the end of his essay “The Turning”: “we do not yet hear [the call of Being], we whose hearing and seeing are perishing through radio and film under the rule of technology” (Heidegger, 2013, p. 48).

After the second world war, cinema became the biggest mass controlling medium, as well as a modelling tool of reality. After researching and analyzing films from both the studio system and the spaces of the avant-garde, we have understood that cinema works as a principle illustrating the organisation of any society. We need to also emphasise the transformation of society with the advent of technology change, with the passage from analogue to digital technology. Cinema in the 21st century could be one of the mediums used to design time. In order to develop a new type of cinema, the research of ontological systems and traditional myths is required. The digital realm offers the potential to explore the cosmological organization of time in specific contexts.

Cinema today doesn't only document certain characteristics of a culture or attempts to introduce multiple worldviews. Cinema presents a possibility for many ontological systems which are under the pressure for a unidirectional worldview. This possibility of looking beyond Western naturalism (such as subject-object dualism) from Northeast India through cinema can be productive considering the coexistence of multiple worldviews and how cinema as a principle can help us in the process of worldmaking.

Dealing with the materials from Northeast India to further investigate a possible ontological system of the image, we find the most correct definition of the indigenous mind in Lévi-Strauss, where he defines it as people “without writing” (Lévi-Strauss, 2002). In order to identify the blind spot in the investigation of various myths as a possible source for an ontological system of the image, we have to again refer to Lévi-Strauss and his articulation of primitive minds with the “logic of the concrete”. Understood that way, myths are not just a mental abstraction, but a kind of reaction to a concrete situation or experience. They are quantitative and multidimensional. We could give the example of the *Panchatantra*, which has been described as a book of fables or a collection of stories in secondary literature. In the Indian tradition, *Panchatantra* is a technical and scientific treatise dealing with government and political matters.

One of the most productive aspects of organizing the discipline of New Media Studies was Lev Manovich’s conception of cinema as a cultural interface (Manovich, 2002). This notion of interface liberates any medium, cinema in this case, from the Euro-centric art history and conventions. The application of two of the most important principles of new media, modularity and variability, could be useful to practice the various axes available in the sensible dimension of the cinematic interface.

The scope of this thesis, however, goes beyond cinema. Cinema helps us understand the speed of our time. What strikes me in Bordwell’s paper on intense continuity in Hollywood films is how this concept influences the nervous system. The decrease of ASL, which became less than 3 seconds, signifies how acceleration is decreasing the size of our planet and that thus the ‘information bomb’ has been triggered.



Fig. 5.1.: Desire Machine Collective, *Residue*, 2011. Film still.

This investigation of ontological systems of Northeast India builds on the principle of the three interacting and interdependent ecologies proposed by Félix Guattari: those of mind, society, and environment, which he derived from Gregory Bateson's study of mind as an ecological system. Mental illness has been affected in the same way as the climate. Inspired by the ecosophical and philosophical writings of Guattari, this thesis' main motivation has been to explore the many ways that aesthetics – in the form of visual art, film – can act as a catalyst, allowing us to see the world differently, beyond traditional modes of representation. The influence of Guattari's attempt to break down the 19th century Kantian dialectic between man, art, and world, in favour of a non-hierarchical, transversal approach, to produce a more ethical

and ecologically sensitive worldview, has motivated me to accept cinema as an ecosophical tool to understand the world.

### **5.1. Rhythms and Trance: Towards A Cybernetic Reorganization of the World**

Recalling the concept of technological spirit forged by Heidegger, we can think of cinema in the late 20th century – and up to this day – as an immediate revealing of the limits of being:

“Cinema simultaneously offers the possibility of a copy of reality and the entirely artificial dimension of this copy. With contemporary technologies, cinema is capable of producing the real artifice of the copy of a false copy of the real, or again, the false real copy of a false real and other variations. This amounts to saying that cinema has become the immediate form (or ‘technique’) of an ancient paradox, that of the relations between being and appearance (which are far more fundamental than the relations everywhere exhibited between the virtual and the actual)” (Badiou, 2006).

As I understand this analysis, cinema is much more than a technique: as I have argued throughout this thesis, the fact of it being a specific technique becomes truly relevant when assessed against its ability to make a world. I have thus looked at the history of these efforts, and the question at this point is: what does cinema need to do today in order to be relevant? As a potential reply, I would like to introduce Steven Shaviro’s brilliant exegesis of “The Rhythm-Image,” which he proposes as the title for the unwritten third volume of Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema* series. Critics of the digital hype have claimed that, although digital technologies are having large effects in the realms of style, narrative has nonetheless remained classical. According to Shaviro, Deleuze’s two *Cinema* volumes analyze two different regimes of the

cinematic image: *The Movement-Image* (1983) and *The Time-Image* (1985). These books seek “to isolate certain cinematographic concepts [...]. But today, we need new concepts for a new (third) regime of images: new affordances due to digital technologies; new articulations of time and space; new articulations of sound and image”. Stanley Cavell had already written that “the aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not given... Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium.” (Cavell, quoted in Shaviro). Hence, this third “image” that Shaviro calls for “must be fully **audiovisual**, rather than just a new sort of visual moving image.”

Looking at my work with Desire Machine Collective as discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, I see the argument of Prof. Pisters around the idea of filmmaker as metallurgist, returning to the (audio-visual) archives and digging up never seen before or forgotten materials. The method of developing works such as *Noiselife* was to reassemble stories, thoughts, and affects, bending our memories and historical consciousness (Pisters, 2016).

Cinema evolved as the technological imaginary capturing perceptions and codifying rhythms of various things like trains, birds, horses, humans etc. With the urgency of industrialisation of the last century, it was imperative to use cinema as a cybernetic device to control the rhythm, narrative and perspective of human societies by homogenising them. Salt and Bordwell emphasised that the intensity of continuity was increasing in Hollywood since the 40’s, 50’s and up until the 90’s. The ASL becoming less than 3 seconds determined the sensory limit of attention. Cities and lives were determined by the same montage principle – one could see the failure of city design of Chandigarh as one such example of modernist montage imposed on Indian imaginary. The structural changes brought in by modernism were in fact much more violent than recent technological conditions of singularity: as this thesis discussed extensively, the cybernetic model of cinema as embodiment of industrial time was exported to the entire world, contributing to the alteration of indigenous worldviews and to the

enframing of the technological possibilities of these cultures. The simple exercise of the ASL analysis of a handful of films from Northeast India suggests that perception – of time and thus of the world – has been standardized, and only through concerted effort can it be steered in a different direction, which at the same time is a reconnection with the distant origins.

In any non-western context the ontological system was recorded in the form of myths and cosmogony. For example, in the Assamese case, the eschatology of Vishnu Puranam describes the nature and properties of time through a narrative form, which could easily be inscribed into the mind. In the future, it would be productive to go back to myths and find the agency in which time was encoded: I have argued in my third chapter that in the case of Northeast India, this would indeed be a very productive path towards creating an indigenous cinema.

Furthermore, it is very important to put forward the ontological design of time in the geo-aesthetic terms. Music was such an example of ontological designing of time codes: we have discussed this when looking at the work of Aribam and Jyotiprasad. Digital technologies are of course dramatic cases of radical innovations that opened up unprecedented domains of possibilities (as were printing, the automobile, and television earlier); they transformed an entire set of daily practices. Thus, every tool or technology is ontological in the sense that, however humbly or minutely, it inaugurates a set of rituals, ways of doing, and modes of being (Escobar, 1994). It contributes to shaping what it is to be human.

Cinema, understood as such, can be said to have given the proper technological basis to observe, simulate and then control human lives. Avant-garde cinema pointers like Maya Deren understood the impact of studying the rhythms of various societies, especially outside of the western world. Other systems could thus be derived and implemented on the basis of human programming. By looking at the sophisticated examples of reprogramming undertaken in recent Asian cinema, to which I humbly hope to align my own work, I am confident that the

understanding of the cybernetic potential of cinema has lead and will continue to lead to the creation of new worlds, philosophically distant from, if not incompatible with, the western model. As Chinese philosopher and media theorist Yuk Hui affirms,

“we are witnessing the end of unilateral globalization. Until now, so-called globalization has been a largely one-sided process, entailing the universalization of particular epistemologies and the elevation, through techno-economic means, of a regional worldview to a putatively global metaphysics. We know that this unilateral globalization has reached its end [...]” (Hui, 2017).

A conclusion as well as an incentive at this point is to take forward the argument of Ute Holl: using cinema for time manipulation and leading to the spectator’s trance contributes to the loops of self-adaptation where the perception in cinema is located. In an important interview regarding cinema and time image, Gilles Deleuze reaffirms many points which he had made throughout his writings:

“Cinema not only puts movement into the image, it also puts it into the spirit. Spiritual life is the movement of the spirit. One goes quite naturally from philosophy to cinema, but also from cinema to philosophy. Their unity is the brain. The brain is the screen. I don't believe linguistics or psychoanalysis are of great help for the cinema. On the other hand, there is the biology of the brain, molecular biology. Thought is molecular, there are molecular speeds which make up the slow beings that we are. Michaux’s saying: ‘Man is a slow being, who is only made possible by fantastic speeds.’ The circuits and links of the brain do not pre-exist the stimuli, granules or corpuscles which trace out of granules. Overflow simply puts the image of self-movement, never ceases to trace and retrace the circuits of the brain. There again, it's for better or for worse. The screen, namely ourselves, can be the tiny deficient brain of an idiot as much as a creative brain” (Deleuze, McMuhan, 1998, p. 48).

The discussion on rhythm is very important in this thesis. From the absence of cinema in Northeast India, I have arrived at the idea of rhythm through observing rhythm as the central element of organization of most non-western societies. The kinship system in non-western societies is based on a shared ontology of rhythm and time. Trance rituals, music, dance, etc. are such apparatuses with which cooperation within a group is established. Invocation of a non-human, spirit-like deity is mostly shared to assemble individuals with strict totems and taboos. The periodic and perpetual property of the natural world has intrigued and influenced all the ancient and primitive societies. One of the basic laws of universe is the law of periodicity, governing all living and non-living. According to Rowell (2015),

“The concepts of temporal organization in the music of early India reflect the influence of the prevailing ontology. The musical experience, as traditionally conceived, appears to demonstrate a confluence of two simultaneous streams of time— a physical, divisible, external time and an internal stream of continuous time, devoid of any distinctions: ‘Time is a form and formless too,’ in the words of the Maitri Upanishad; temporality in music is understood as manifestation of the cosmic process of continuous creation.”

The human perception was always tuned to the natural world and the circadian rhythm. After the advent of the industrial revolution, it was slowly tuned to the machine world. Prof. M. Schaffer (1994, p. 110) thinks that works of avant-garde musicians who brought noise inside the music blurred the relationship between the music and environmental sounds. This move was disruptive and create a disjuncture into the neural motor schema. This explains most of the dissonance in mental ecology.

The properties of the organism are enmeshed with the planet’s geophysical parameters by the circadian ( $\tau$  about 24 h) clock. The evolution of the processes whereby the matching of

the endogenous biochemical network to the daily cycles of night and day occurs is but one aspect of the self-optimization of the living system. The circadian clock, ubiquitous at least from cyanobacteria to humans, is underpinned relaxation times of component reactions. The discoveries of molecular mechanisms controlling the circadian rhythm by Jeffrey C. Hall, Michael Rosbash and Michael W. Young allowed us to peek inside our biological clock and elucidate its inner workings. Their discoveries explain how plants, animals and humans adapt their biological rhythm so that it is synchronized with the Earth's revolutions. The main gist of their discovery is that our wellbeing is affected when there is a temporary desynchronization between our external environment and this internal biological clock. There are also indications that chronic misalignment between our lifestyle and the rhythm dictated by our inner timekeeper is associated with increased risk for various diseases.

This circadian clock is responsible for the temporal organization of a wide variety of functions, including sleep disorders, mood and affective disorders such as major depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, as well as the risk of metabolic and cardiovascular disorders. Recent research also focuses on the role the retina plays in the organization of the circadian system by synchronizing the brain's central clock with the external day through transduction of the daily light/dark cycle (Tosini, Iuvone, McMahon & Collin, 2014, p. 1).

The effect of intense continuity in cinema has been to accelerate all spheres of life, including the rhythm of the circadian clock. This light signal entering via the retina, affecting the nervous system and trying to create a single control loop has many flaws. There are many researches from the cold war era, when the brainwashing and control techniques completely depended on the control of the rhythms. Today, neuro-pharmacologists in different labs in the world are busy devising chemicals which will induce homogenous rhythms for further control for consumption. It is my conclusion, after studying cinema from a cybernetic point of view, that there is no chance for the well-being of most people unless we spend more time studying

ontology and myths from the non-western world and create systems based on these; otherwise, we will remain trapped in the “homogenous, empty time” of the single control loop of western modernity.

It is very important to register at this point the concluding remarks of Yuk Hui’s book *Recursivity and Contingency*:

“If cybernetics is the end of philosophy, in the sense Heidegger has attributed to it, and if recursivity becomes a ‘synonym’ for process philosophy, then a post-European philosophy can be perceived only by reappropriating this cybernetic moment through different technological thoughts” (Hui, 2019 (2), p. 278).

Modern media such as cinema reorganized societies through the pace of modern culture, which was mostly a product of industrialization. Apart from the length, the idea of pace being slower could be seen as an attempt to explore the possibility to recover or reinvent cosmotechnics, via exploring different conventions of cinema. In order to recover from the ever-increasing speed of capitalism, various existing cultural movements could be seen as an attempt to rescue extended temporal structures from the accelerated tempo of late capitalism, such as ‘slow media’, ‘slow travel’ and ‘slow food’ and slow cinema.

## **5.2. Cosmotechnics in Northeast India: Possible Continuations of the Research**

In this case, the task before us is to build on the findings of cinema as potential tool for a cybernetic remodelling of the world, and address the full possibility of this reorganization from the specific point of view of the local from which we have been speaking so far, Northeast India. As I have tried to prove throughout this thesis, the position is not arbitrary, nor reductively emotional, and certainly not circumstantial: thinking the local is a philosophical as much as a political position. Putting forward an ontology which is not framed by western modernity

cannot be done from an abstract universal position and, as far as my work and research have taught me, neither can it be done from inside the western world. It is of course important to have full knowledge of the system one is pitted against – and this thesis incorporates ideas from western modernity and works to break up its logic into useful bits – but this knowledge must be overcome. It is high time the non-western world addresses itself using different tools, tools forged within this space. The fact of locating oneself within **a local which is lived** allows for this overcoming of modernity to be performed not as simple antagonism – thus producing yet another duality – but as ontology: as an understanding of being as lived experience.

Cinema has afforded me the entry point to this work: I was thus able to think of a universal system from a local which on many occasions has proven a fragile platform. Historically, establishing a universal code for cinema by introducing the possibility of a mass culture has erased other possible world views. Epistemology, in that sense, is the slave of modernity, of industrialization. Why do we reject other worldviews, then speak of ‘world cinema’? My position is that Northeast Indian cinema, just as much as any other conscious attempt at working with the medium in order to put forward a specific worldview, is simply ‘cinema’, it does not need an extra label to position it in regard to the western model. What I hope for, in fact, is for spaces such as the Northeast to open up the category of cinema and redefine it, so that its western history becomes simply that: a background, no longer an essence.

To this effect, I align my work with that of contemporary researchers who aim to forge the necessary tools for this mutation. Living and working in India, I am especially attentive to research stemming from China: from Joseph Needham onward, this powerful culture has not ceased to benefit from synthetic research, which has aided it in its effort to propose to the world a coherent cultural alternative to the west. A recent body of work from media philosopher Yuk Hui, which I have referred to throughout this thesis, offers a new tool to all those engaged in understanding non-western ontology. **Cosmotechnics**, according to Hui (2017), “is the

unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or art-making. There hasn't been one or two technics, but many cosmotechnics.”

With this notion in mind, we can now recall the proposal made in the course of this research to consider myth as the ontological ground for thinking the Northeast Indian context: in this sense, the time of the myth, as some cinematic projects we have analyzed here have endeavoured to show, is the manifestation of the technological spirit within this culture. The future work, as I am able to envision it at the end of this paper, comprises investigating the history and philosophy of Northeast Indian technology in its relation to mythical time, in order to develop a cybernetic model for the world.

From all the cosmogonies in Northeast India we know that the consciousness is not centred around humans only, it is distributed amidst birds, spirits, Sun, Moon, rocks, butterflies etc. This opens a new research possibility towards a history and philosophy of technology in Northeast India.

A group of researchers led by D. M. Bose, Samarendra Nath Sen and B. V. Subbarayappa had put together *A Concise History of Science in India*, published by the Indian National Science Academy in 1971. There are also two series of encyclopaedic endeavours to cover the history of philosophy in India: *A History of Indian Philosophy*, edited by Surendranath Dasgupta, and *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, edited by D.P. Chattopadhyaya. These constitute extremely valuable resources for a future inquiry into technology in India, and more specifically the Northeast, if framed using not just scriptural and historical sources, but contemporary philosophical research as well, which is missing in all of these books. There has rarely been any attempt to derive the technological spirit to understand the logic behind the material cultures of various traditions. Recently, however, the study of Prof. Amrendra Kumar Thakur from North East Hill University, Shillong maps out the

technological evolutions of mostly tribes from Arunachal Pradesh through studying crafts and tools.

As I have tried to show throughout this paper, the most important project for any non-western space is to research its ontology with the explicit purpose of proposing a viable world, something which cannot be done without a prior understanding of both the local context and the tools which have global currency and have built modernity into its universal status. To research the history and philosophy of technology in Northeast India is thus to use tools from scriptures, documented rituals, fieldwork, contemporary philosophy, art and political thinking, in order to uncover the technological spirit and set it free, thus composing an ontology which has never existed, yet is truer to this world than anything it has experienced until now.

In order to conceptualise the ontological system for the image schema, based on duration and temporality, we might have to set more clear tasks for the future; we need to do research and create affective methodologies, by developing or creating concepts of a special kind, including philosophical concepts, theories, doctrines, arguments, and methodologies.

Can worldviews become ontologies? The development of ontologies is usually the task of natural scientists and of knowledge system engineers. Most machines are developed via the implications of ontology. As we discuss cinema, is it enough to just apply various editing styles to implement an ontology? How can one translate or transfer the ontological temperature to a cinematic system?

# ANNEX 1

## TECHNICAL FILES OF THE FILMS

### ANALYZED IN THE THESIS

1. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, *Joymoti*, 1935
2. Harbeshwar Chakraborty, *Maniram Dewan*, 1963
3. Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sangai*, 1989
4. Aribam Syam Sharma, *Kanglai Hairoba*, 1992
5. Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sanabi*, 1995
6. Desire Machine Collective, *Residue*, 2011
7. Desire Machine Collective, *Noiselife*, 2014
8. Desire Machine Collective, *Invocation*, 2016

Original title: জয়মতী

English title: **Joymoti**

Year: 1935

Region: Assam

Director: **Jyotiprasad Agarwala**

Cast: Aideu Handique, Phunu Barooah



Fig. 6.1. Poster of the film *Joymoti*.

**Plot summary:**

Set in 17th-century Assam, the film recounts the sacrifice of Joymoti, an Ahom princess tortured and killed by the Ahom king Borphukan for refusing to betray her husband Gadapani by disclosing his whereabouts. The event is interpreted in contemporary patriotic terms, and calls for a greater harmony between the people of the hills and those of the plains. The hills are represented by the leader Dalimi, a Naga tribeswoman who shelters the fugitive Prince Gadapani.

**Background:**

Joymoti was the wife of the Ahom prince Gadapani. During the Purge of the Princes from 1679 to 1681 under King Sulikphaa (Loraa Roja), instigated by Laluksola Borphukan, Gadapani took flight. Over the next few years, he sought shelter at Sattras (Vaishnav monasteries) and the adjoining hills outside the Ahom kingdom. Failing to trace Prince Gadapani, Sulikphaa's soldiers brought his wife Joymoti to Jerenga Pathar where, despite brutal and inhuman torture, the princess refused to reveal the whereabouts of her husband. After continuous physical torture over 14 days, Joymoti breathed her last on 13 Choit of 1601 Saka, or 27 March, AD 1680.

Joymoti's self-sacrifice would bear fruit in time: Laluk was murdered in November 1680 by a disgruntled body of household retainers. The ministers, now roused to a sense of patriotism, sent out search parties for Gadapani who, gathering his strength, returned from his exile in the Garo Hills to oust Sulikphaa from the throne. Joymoti had known that her husband alone was capable of ending Sulikphaa-Laluk's reign of terror. For her love and her supreme sacrifice for husband and country, folk accounts refer to her as a *Soti*.

(Source: Wikipedia)

Original title: মণিৰাম দেৱান

English title: **Maniram Dewan**

Year: 1964

Region: Assam

Director: **Sarbeshwar Chakraborty**

Cast: Phani Sharma, Pabitra Borkakoti, Utpal Dutta, Dilip Hazarika, Bhuban Choudhury

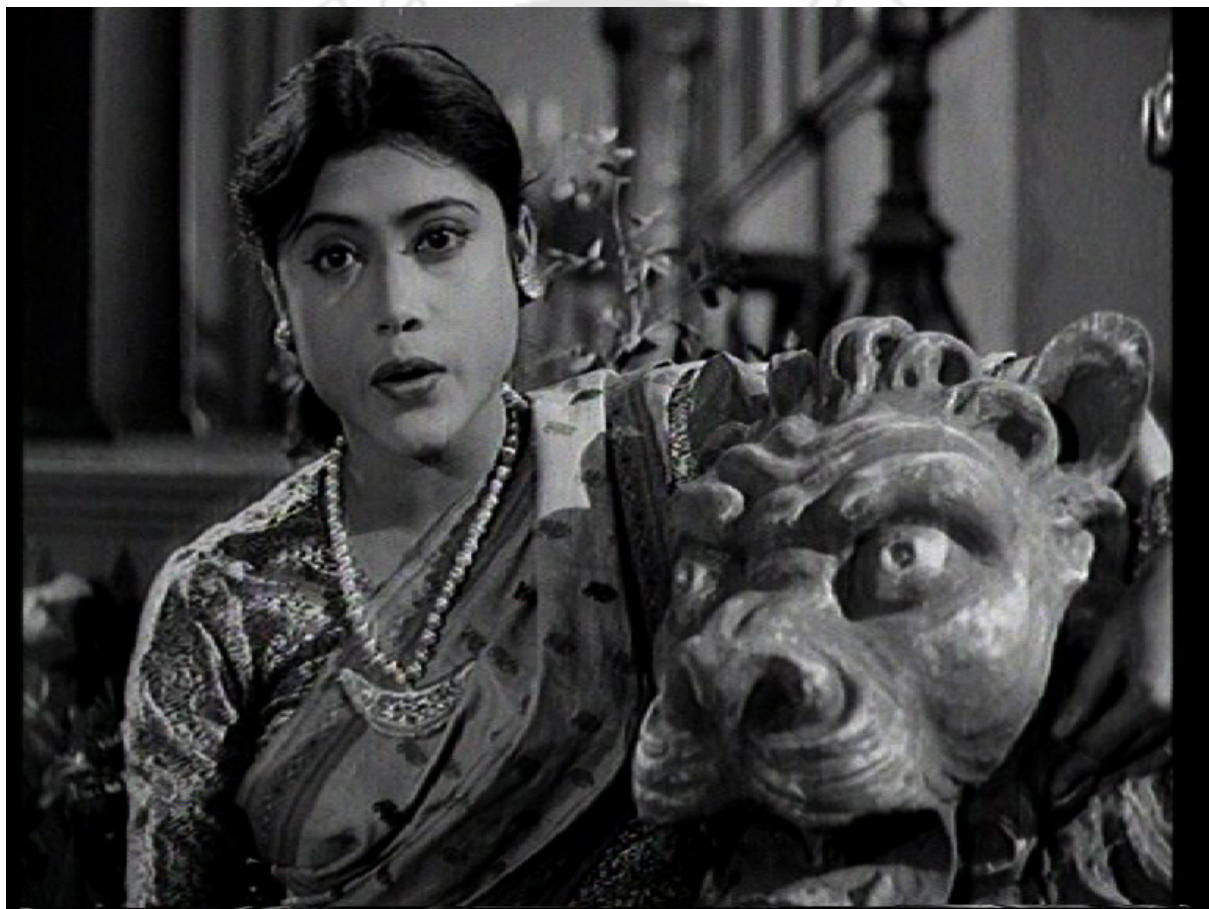


Fig. 6.2.: Sarbeshwar Chakraborty, *Maniram Dewan*, 1963. Film still.

**Plot summary:**

The film follows the life of Maniram Dutta Baruah, popularly known as Maniram Dewan (17 April 1806 - 26 February 1858), an Assamese nobleman in British India. He was

one of the first people to establish tea gardens in Assam. A loyal ally of the British East India Company in his early years, he was hanged by the British for conspiring against them during the 1857 uprising. He was popular among the people of Upper Assam as “Kalita Raja” (king of the Kalita caste). After his death, Maniram's tea estates were sold to George Williamson in an auction. Several folk songs, known as the “Maniram Dewanar Geet”, were composed in his memory.

**Information:**

The film won the President’s Silver Medal for the Best Regional Film in Assamese in 1964. It was the first Assamese film which had five prints. It was probably the first Assamese film that was telecast by the Doordarshan Kendra of New Delhi in 1983. It was re-telecast by the Doordarshan Kendra with the English subtitles prepared by late Apurba Choudhury, who was basically a tea planter.

(Source: The Assam Tribune)

Original title: **Kanglai Haraoba**

Length: 60 minutes

Year: 1992

Region: Manipur

Director: **Aribam Syam Sharma**

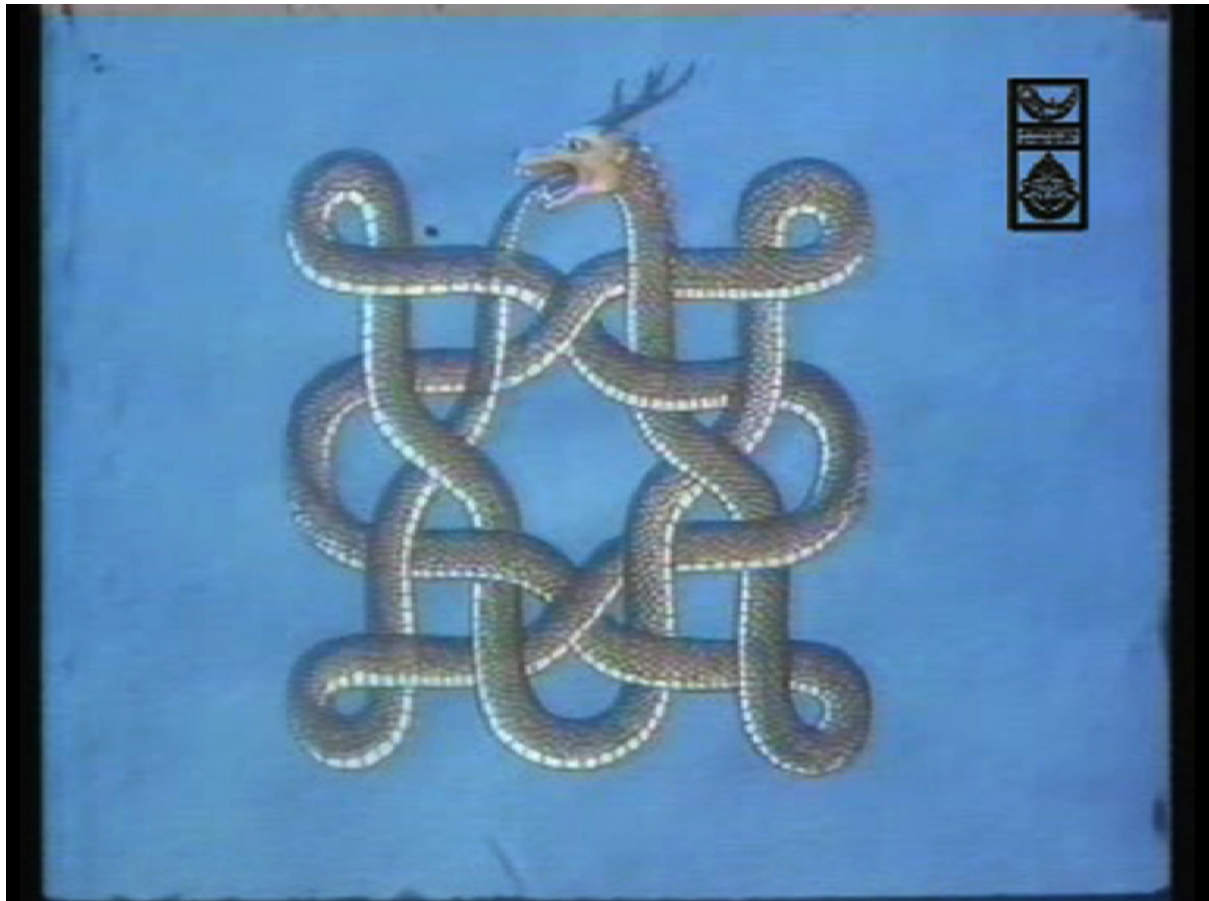


Fig. 6.3.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Kanglai Haraoba*, 1992. Film still.

### **Description:**

One of the variations of Lai Haraoba prevalent in Manipur, Kanglai Haraoba is a symbolic re-enactment of the primordial creation of the universe. The festival begins with the installation of two images in a temporary shrine. A ritual procession is taken out from the temporary shrine to the riverbed. The spirits of the water are invoked by the maibis. First, two leaves are floated. An egg, pieces of grain, silver and gold are placed between these leaves.

They represent the first seed of creation. Earthen pots are filled with water. Threads emerge from them. These represent the umbilical cord.

The procession returns to the shrine. The threads from the filled pitchers are connected to the navel of the deities. This is the moment of transmission of life from the primordial waters to the deities. The energized deities now empower the maibis. She is the medium.

Every day over several days, different sequences are danced representing different aspects of creation. The total cycle of life on Earth is enacted. The present film, compiled from the archival recording made by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1976, captures some of the moments of this ritual festival of Manipur.

Rajni Maibi, one of the greatest hereditary priestesses, conducts this Lai Haraoba which is particular to Kanglai.

(Source: Sangeet Natak Akademi on [archive.org](http://archive.org).)

Original title: **Sangai – The Dancing Deer of Manipur**

Length: 25 minutes

Year: 1989

Region: Manipur

Director: **Aribam Syam Sharma**

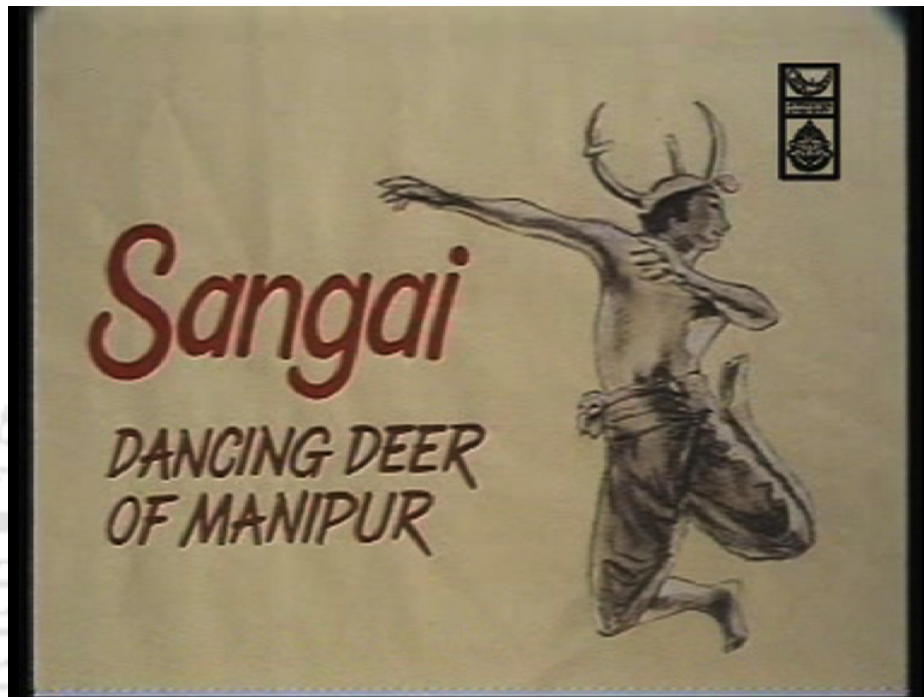


Fig. 6.4.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sangai*, 1989. Film still.

**Description:**

The film captures on screen the exquisite ballet “Keibul Lamjao”. The ballet was written by MK Binodini. At the core of the ballet lies the concern for the future of the near extinct brow-antlered deer – the Sangai.

**Information:**

The film was honoured with the Outstanding Film of the Year 1989 by the British Film Institute

Original title: **Sanabi – The Grey Mare**

Length: 112 minutes

Year: 1995

Region: Manipur

Director: **Aribam Syam Sharma**

Cast: Sushila, Deben, Nabakumar, Indu, Lala, Kumarjit & others



Fig. 6.5.: Aribam Syam Sharma, *Sanabi*, 1995. Film still.

### **Plot Summary:**

*Sanabi – The Grey Mare* is the story of a beautiful dancer, the thief who loves her, and an exquisite Manipuri horse. It all begins when divorced Sakhi, who dances with the State Dance Academy, returns to the home of her father Ojha Birchandra, the owner of Sanabi the beautiful grey mare. Mangi the thief comes around to see Sakhi, his childhood friend. She ignores him, but he persists. During the course of the film, Sakhi performs several classical dances in their entirety. To attract Sakhi's attention, Mangi steals Sanabi.

Original title: **Residue**

Technical details: film, 35mm, 39 minutes, looped

Year: 2011

Region: Assam

Director: **Desire Machine Collective**



Fig. 6.6.: Desire Machine Collective, *Residue*, 2011. 35 mm film. Film still.

**Description:**

*Residue* was shot in a disused thermal power plant outside the artists' hometown of Guwahati in Assam. The 39-minute film shows the abandoned power plant being gradually overcome by the surrounding forest, with decaying industrial forms and nature merging into one entity. The work forms a poetic reflection on the cycle of creation, destruction and memory.

**Background:**

Commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as part of the exhibition *Being Singular Plural*. Also exhibited as part of the Indian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennial, 2011.

Original title: **Noiselife**

Technical details: video installation with sound, single channel video with stereo sound, 32 minutes, looped

Year: 2014

Region: Assam

Director: **Desire Machine Collective**



Fig. 6.7.: Desire Machine Collective, *Noiselife*, 2014. Exhibition view, Project88, Mumbai.

### **Description:**

“Landscape and architecture bear witness to melancholia, decay and desire. From politics to folklore, poetry to drama, these films map out a collision of tradition and modernity.

*Noiselife* is an exploration of schizophrenia and the colonisation of human sensibility by ‘noise’ in a post-industrial sonic environment...”

(Source: EXCAVATING LOSS – BFI)

Original title: **Invocation**

Length: 14'25''

Year: 2016

Region: Assam

Director: **Desire Machine Collective**



Fig. 6.8.: Desire Machine Collective, *Invocation*, 2016. Film still.

### **Description:**

*Invocation* is a celebration in silence of the vitalism of the physical world through observations that dissolve the physical, mental and emotional “individual self” into larger and more potent entities. It also explores the links Assam had with Tibet several hundred years ago.

### **Background:**

Commissioned by the British Museum for the exhibition *Krishna in the Garden of Assam*, organized around the Vrindavani Vastra textile piece.

## ANNEX 2

### STATISTICAL STYLE ANALYSIS

#### Comparison of the 9 Indian movies with Barry Salt's database of 11K+ movies

The films considered here are *Joymoti*, *Kanglai Haroba*, *Maniram Dewan*, *Sanabi*, *Sangai – The Dancing Deer of Manipur*, *Raja Harishchandra*, *Residue*, *Noiselife* and *Invocation*.

The length of each shot was plotted against its shot number and graphs obtained for the progression of each film. Data points plotted higher on the graph show the film spending more time on that shot. Conversely, data points plotted low on the graph show the film not spending much time on that shot.

## Runtime and Number of Shots

Movie	Year	ASL
Raja Harishchandra	1913	10.6
Joymoti	1935	13.7
Maniram Dewan	1963	8.1
Kanglai Haroba	1982	12.7
Sangai	1989	60.6
Sanabi	1995	13.6
Residue	2011	31.9
Noiselife	2014	38.8
Invocation	2016	16.7

Fig. 6.9.: Statistical style analysis. Average Shot Length of the 9 films.

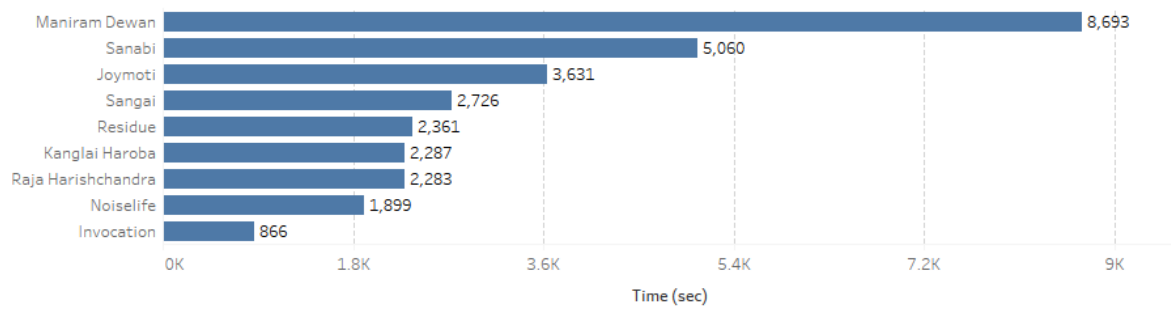
Below is the list of 9 Indian movies whose ASL and the release date was compared with Barry Salt's database as well as within themselves.

The below bar graphs show the runtime and the number of shots in each of the five movies sorted in the descending order.

Out of the 5 movies Maniram Dewan has the longest runtime as well as the highest number of shots.

An interesting movie to note here is Sangai. Sangai has just 45 shots but runs for 2726 seconds, i.e. about 45 minutes.

### Runtime



### No of Shots

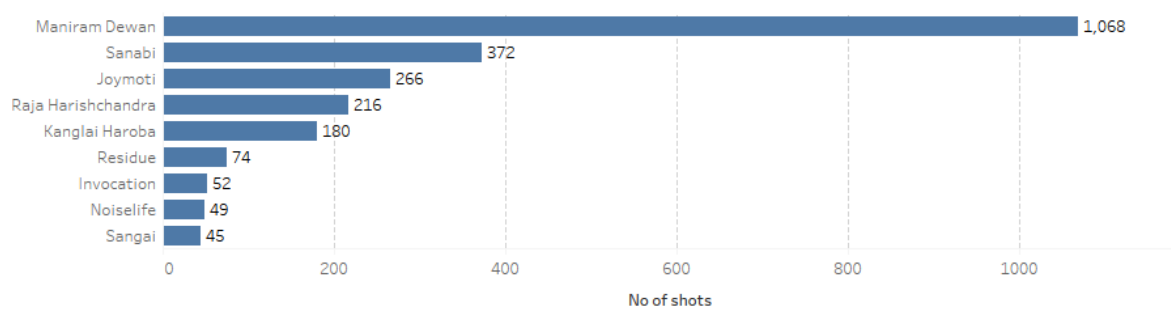


Fig. 6.10: Statistical style analysis. Runtime and number of shots of the 9 films.

## Spread of Shots

The box plot shows the spread, median, 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile quadrants of the shot lengths. Here median is shown by the line dividing the light and dark shades of grey, 25<sup>th</sup> percentile by the lower end of grey and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile by the upper end of grey.

Again, the movie *Sangai* stands out prominently from the rest of the four. The median shot length (MSL) is 43.8 seconds, which is almost 8 times that of *Maniram Dewan* (MSL = 5.5), the movie with the shortest MSL.

*Joymoti* and *Sanabi* have similar characteristics, except that the longest shot in *Joymoti* is 137.6, while the longest one for *Sanabi* is 98.4.

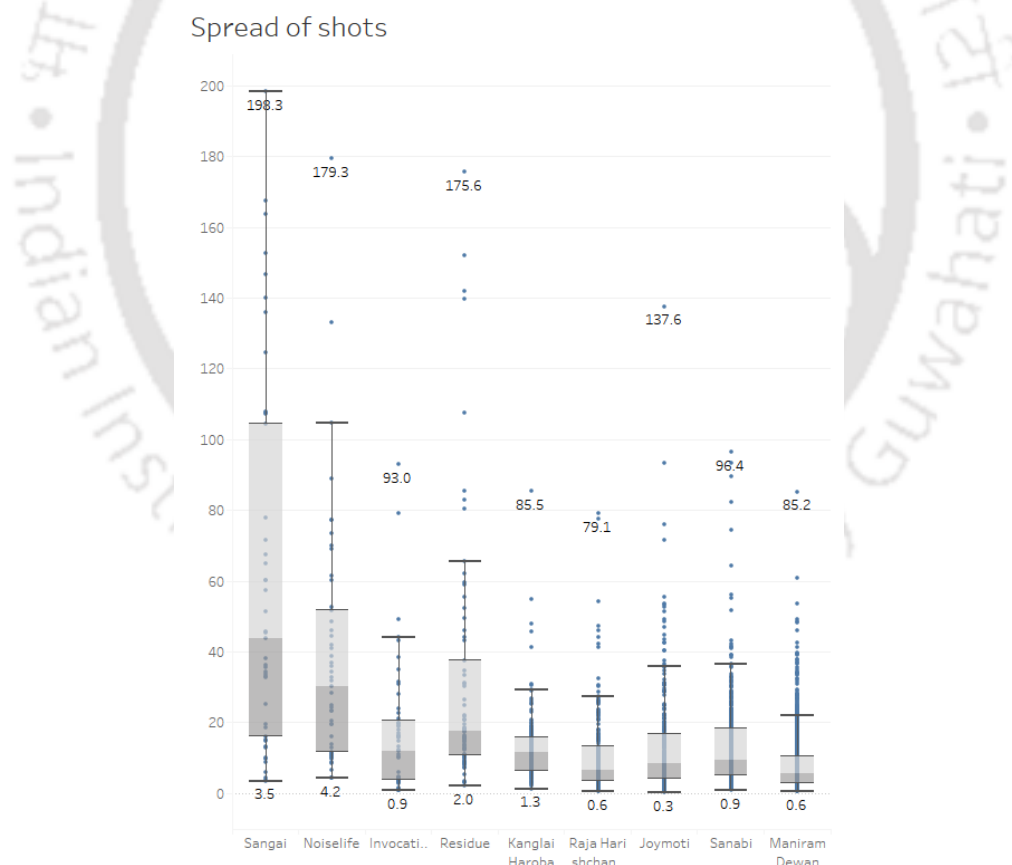


Fig. 6.11.: Statistical style analysis. Spread of shots of the 9 films.

## Comparing the ASL and Year

In the below charts, each dot represents the ASL for a movie. The Y axis denotes the ASL while the X axis denotes the years.

Comparing just the ASLs, the movies *Raja Harishchandra*, *Noiselife*, *Invocation*, *Residue* and *Sangai* stand quite apart from the movies of their times.

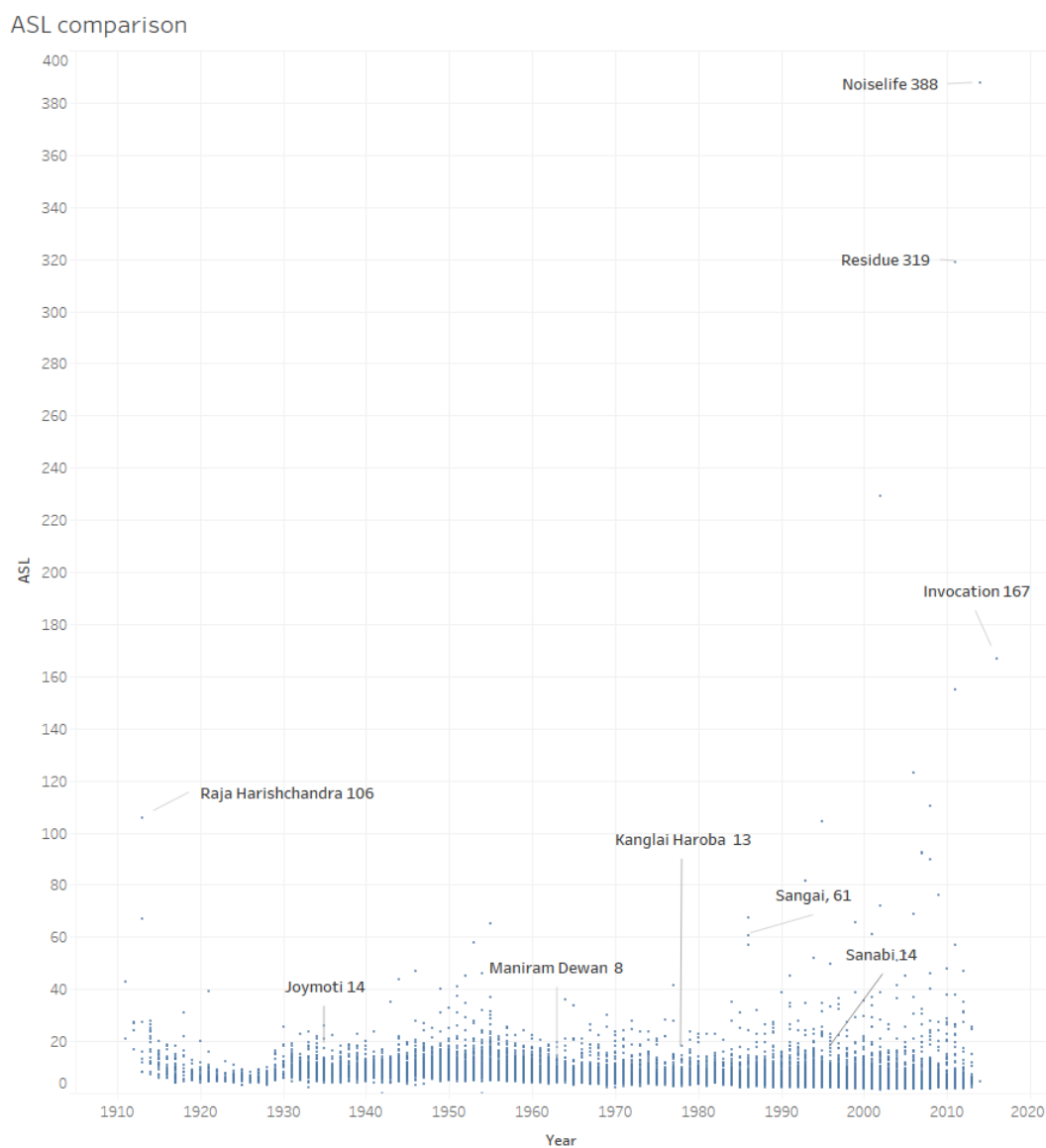
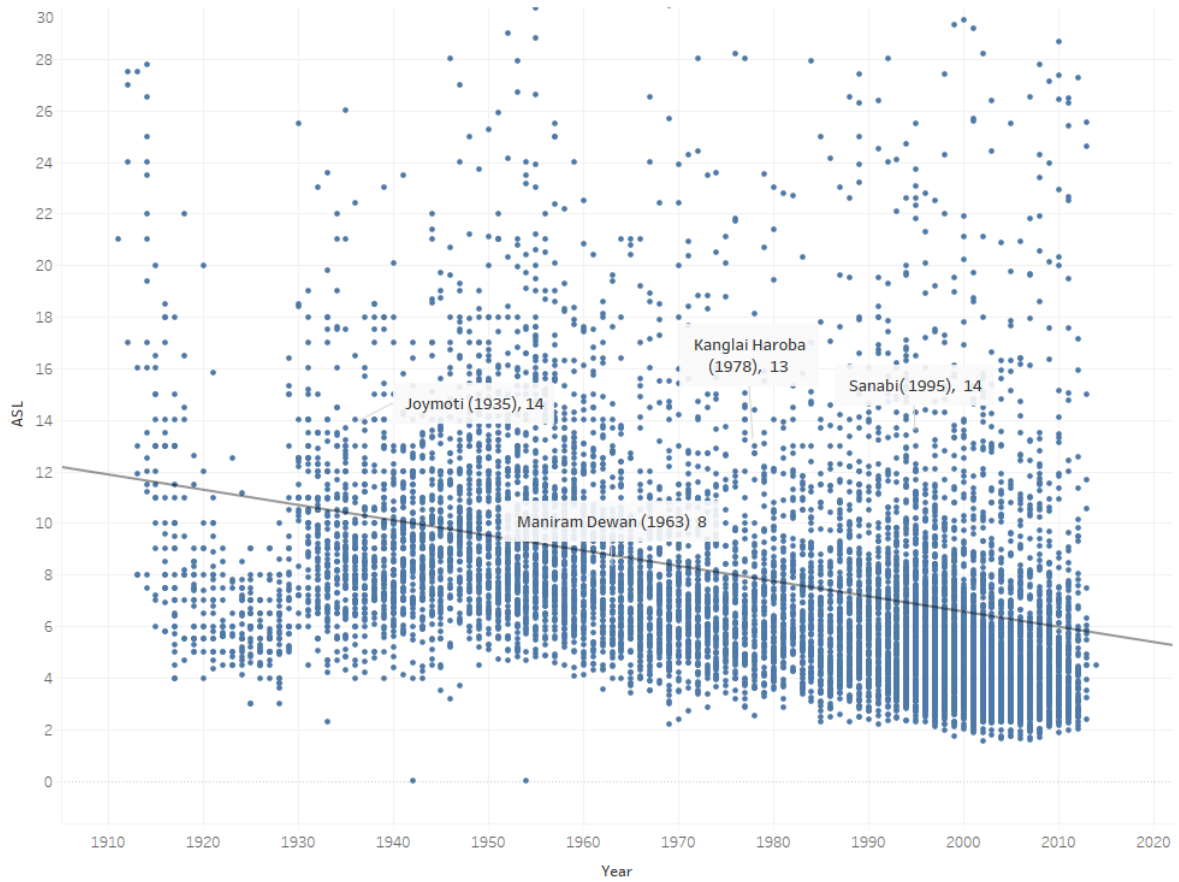


Fig. 6.12: Statistical style analysis. ASL comparison of the 9 films.

ASL for Movies from Barry Salt's Database



Zoomed in view

Fig. 6.13.: Statistical style analysis.

ASL of the 9 films compared to ASL for movies from Barry Salt's database.

For the movies *Joymoti*, *Kanglai Haroba*, *Sanabi* and *Maniram Dewan*, the ASL values are close to the trend line for those respective years. And *Joymoti* (14), *Kanglai Haraoba* (13), and *Sanabi* (14) are very close among themselves.

However, upon deeper examination in the following line charts it can be found that the movies are quite different from each other.

*(P-value for the trend line above < 0.0001*

*Equation of the trend line:  $ASL = -0.0590364 * Year + 124.639$*

*P value is a measure of significance for the trend line. A value of < 0.5 is usually considered statistically significant. Therefore, here it can safely be concluded that the ASL for cinema have indeed been falling over the years.)*

Movie	No of shots	Runtime (sec)	ASL
Joymoti	266	3631	13.7
Maniram Dewan	1068	8693	8.1
Kanglai Haroba	180	2287	12.7
Sanabi	372	5060	13.6

Fig. 6.14.: Statistical style analysis.

Comparison of number of shots, runtime and ASL for 4 movies.

As is evident in the above table, the number of shots, as well as the runtimes, are vastly different for all the 4 movies, however the ASLs come out to be pretty close to each other.

The following line charts further display the fact that the shape of the charts too is vastly different for the 4 movies mentioned above.

# Lengths of Individual Shots

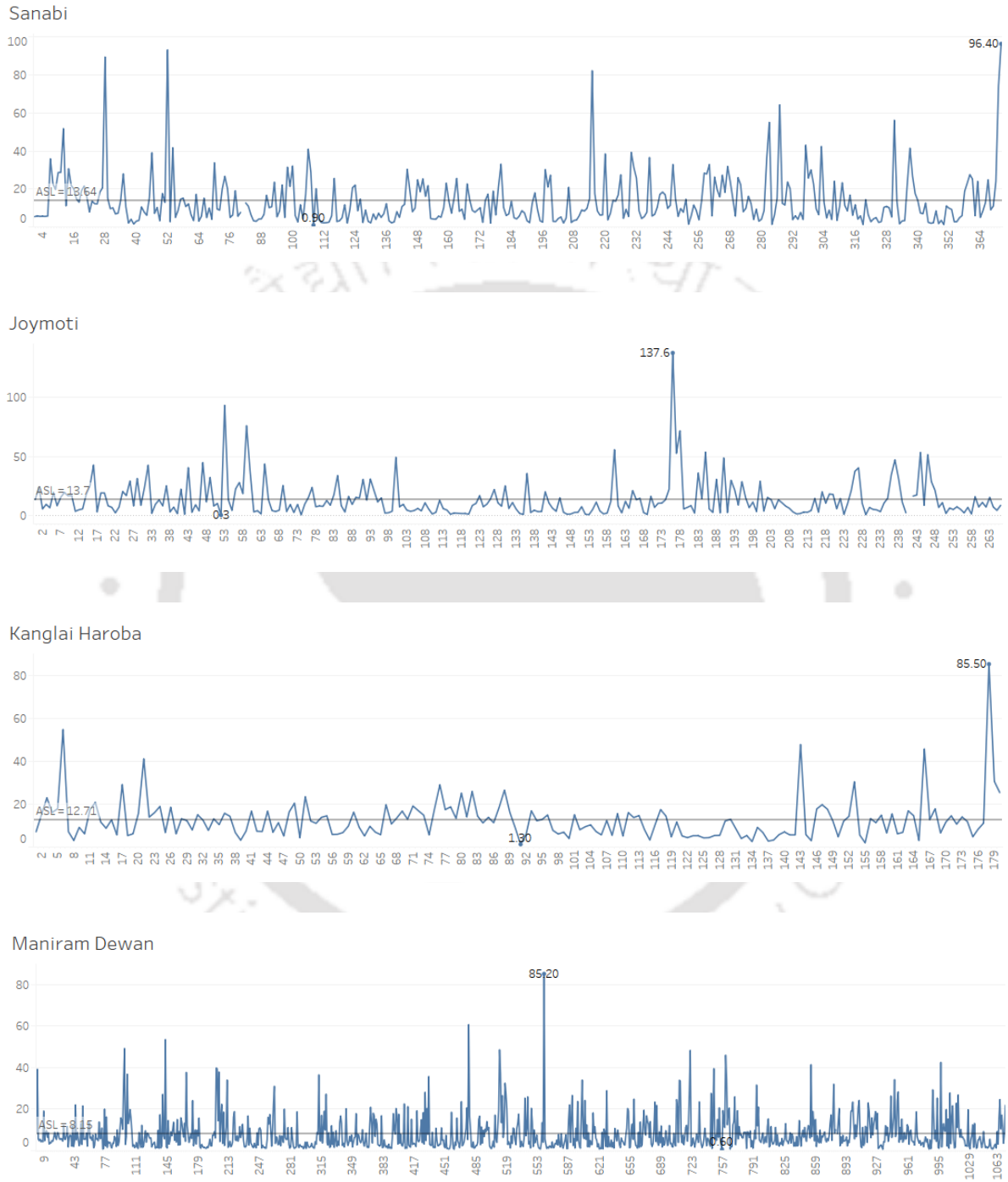


Fig. 6.15. : Statistical style analysis. Length of individual shots for 4 movies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that each of the 9 movies are quite unique in their own way.

The ASL for 5 movies of *Raja Harishchandra*, *Noiselife*, *Invocation*, *Residue* and *Sangai* are very different from any of the movies in Barry Salt's database and not just the movies from their own time.

For the remaining 4 movies – *Joymoti*, *Kanglai Haroba*, *Sanabi* and *Maniram Dewan* – , even though the ASL values are very close to one another, upon closer examination it can be found that all of them are very different from one another in number of shots, runtime and spread of the length of shots over the course of the movie.

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