

Disseminating the threads of the audiovisual to understand its political fabric:

By Deepti Dutt Srinath

Introduction to the politics of the audiovisual:

The politics of the audiovisual constitutes a rich and multifaceted domain within the critical discourse while encapsulating a diverse array of theoretical perspectives that delve into the intricate dynamics between cinema, ideology as well as power structures. At its core lies Andre Bazin's influential theory of realism, which posits that the photographic image serves as a faithful reproduction of reality while capturing the essence of the world without distortion or manipulation. He further emphasizes the authenticity of the cinematic image that has profoundly shaped film theory and criticism, also influencing perceptions of cinema's role in representing and interpreting reality. However, this notion of cinematic realism is not without its complexities and critiques, in particular, with regard to its perceived ability to redeem and /or liberate reality from its temporal and spatial constraints. The problematic aspects of Bazin's theory prompt further interrogation, as other theorists question the extent to which cinema can transcend its representational limitations and effect transformative change. Kean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni's influential article "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" advances a new ideological approach to cinema, which argues that mainstream media outlets perpetuate dominant ideologies and power structures through their representational practices. This ideological framing of cinema as a site of contestation underscores how media institutions shape viewer's perceptions and reinforce societal norms. Louis Althusser's apparatus theory further elucidates the role of cinema as an ideological state apparatus, positing that it operates to reproduce and disseminate dominant ideologies, therefore shaping an individual's understanding of reality. He further contends that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence, with cinema serving as a powerful tool for ideological indoctrination. Furthermore, scholars like Jean Louis Baudry explore the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus, highlighting the ways in which cinema captivates viewers and conditions their responses to the images projected on the screen. Additionally, Christian Metz's semiotic analysis delves into the role of psychoanalysis in understanding the

spectator's experience of cinema, emphasizing how the cinematic language and the narrative structure influences the viewer's interpretation.

The evolution of cinema as a political framework is further exemplified by filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, who formed the Dziga Vertov group in 1970s to experiment with politically charged filmmaking that challenged the traditional cinematic conventions. Godard's radical approach to cinema catalyzes further exploration of the subversive potential of audiovisual media in challenging prominent ideologies as well as power structures. Michael N. Goddard's work on militant anti-cinemas further expands and exemplifies on this theme, where he examines how filmmakers have sought to subvert the cinematic apparatus and challenge dominant narratives. Finally, Jacques Ranciere's concept of the 'emancipated spectator' disrupts traditional norms of spectatorship while blurring the boundaries between acting and viewing, agency and passivity. Ranciere's critique underscores the transformative potential of cinema and highlights its capacity to empower audiences and also provoke critical reflections.

In light of these theories and perspectives, Karen Barad's agential realism emerges as a potent framework for understanding the active apparatus of cinema, most importantly, highlighting the entangled relationships between cinema, ideology and the material world. In her book, 'Meeting the Universe Halfway', Barad posits that reality is not a fixed or objective entity but emerges through various intra-actions that blurs the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human. Through a reverent rendition, built upon her strong background in physics and quantum mechanics, this reconceptualisation of reality offers new possibilities for understanding how cinema shapes and is further shaped by ideological forces. She underscores the dynamic and interactive nature of the audiovisual medium. While the politics of audiovisual remains a fertile ground for critical enquiry, it affords a complex exploration of the interplay between cinema, ideology and power structures. This essay looks into some major aspects of cinematic theories and analyses them through the lens of Barad's concepts. Further, it aims to understand these concepts with the example of a film documentary.

Exploring concepts of Plato's cave Allegory, Bazin's photographic realism and Althusser's apparatus theories in view of Barad's concepts:

The realms of philosophy, film theory and critical theory intersect in a captivating exploration of reality representation and ideology – These explorations are looked at in more detail in this section about Andre Bazin’s theory of photographic realism, Plato’s allegory of the cave and Louis Althusser’s apparatus theory, each offers profound insights into the nature of perception, truth and power. In order to gain a deeper understanding, these theories are viewed further from the perspective of Barad’s agential realism, reconstruction of reality and intra-actions offering a rich terrain for critical enquiry into the nature of perception, representation and power dynamic within the audiovisual medium.

Bazin’s Photographic Realism:

At the heart of Andre Bazin’s seminal work lies a fundamental inquiry into the essence of cinema and its relationship to reality. Bazin’s theory of photographic realism emerges as a response to the technological advancements in cinema, particularly concerning the advent of photography. Central to Bazin’s argument is the notion that the photographic image processes a unique ontological status, serving as a faithful reproduction of reality. In his influential essays, Bazin contends that the mechanical process of photography, devoid of human intervention, allows the camera to capture the essence of the world without the distortion or manipulation of reality. He writes, “The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.” This emphasis on the authenticity and objectivity of the photographic image challenges traditional modes of representation and invites viewers to engage with cinema as a window into reality.

Plato’s cave allegory:

Plato’s allegory of the cave stands as a timeless metaphor for the complexities of perception, truth and illusion. In this allegory, Plato invites us to imagine a group of prisoners chained inside a cave, facing the wall where shadows are projected on, from the objects passing by outside the cave. As Plato elucidates, the cave represents the realm of sensory perception, where individuals are bounded by their limited understanding of reality (given the limitedness of the extent of sensory perceptions). Further, the allegory serves as a potent critique of how our perceptions of truth are shaped by the illusions of the material world. This questions the essence of cinematic experience, through how our own limited expanse of sensory

perceptions interprets the visual information which potentially deforms or intervenes the perception of truth in the illusory and illustrative cinematic experience.

Furthermore, the question then arises, if Bazin's photographic realism holds because of our altered perceptions of cinematic experience. While Bazin rightly points towards the authenticity of the photographic image as the object itself, Plato's allegory offers the distortions caused in individual perceptions of Bazin's window to reality.

Althusser's Apparatus theory:

Louis Althusser's apparatus theory offers a compelling framework for understanding how dominant ideologies are reproduced and disseminated through social institutions. In his seminal essay, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses", he posits that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. He says, "Ideology has no history" and "cinema has no history". From an Althusserian perspective, cinema serves as a powerful tool for ideological indoctrination, perpetuating dominant ideologies and power structures through its representational practices. Further, he points towards how cinema functions as a site of ideology contestation, shaping viewer's perceptions and reinforcing societal norms. We can already unwrap the intervention of the viewer's states of understanding and its correlation with the representative cinematic apparatus in this theory. Beginning from Bazin's doctrine where he explores the idea of the photographic image as the reality in itself preceded by no underpinning role of the observer, to Plato's cave allegory, where he underscores the interplay of perceptions in that which is perceived, Althusser posits the perpetuating narratives as the focal target aimed using the cinematic arrow. The affordances of which, can challenge the power dynamic perspectives through its representative qualities in the societal schema.

Intersections and interactions with Barad's theories:

In the dialectical interplay between Bazin's photographic realism, Plato's cave allegory, and Althusser's apparatus theory, when layered alongside Karen Barad's agential realism, reconstruction of reality and intra-actions, we are propelled into a multifaceted exploration of reality, representation and power dynamics within the audiovisual realm. Andre Bazin's theory, rooted in the emergence of photography and

its impact on cinema, asserts that the photographic image is a faithful reproduction of reality, devoid of human intervention. This perspective resonates with Plato's allegory where prisoners' mistakes shadow for reality, challenging *our (an individualistic)* understanding of perception and truth. Althusser's apparatus theory extends this discourse by looking at cinema as an ideological state apparatus or tool that perpetuates dominant ideologies in society. These theories underscore the role of cinema in shaping collective perspectives of reality and reinforcing societal norms.

In contrast, Barad's agential realism offers a paradigm shift in our conception of reality by rejecting the notion of a preexisting world awaiting discovery. Instead, she argues that reality emerges through intra-actions between human and non-human actors, challenging the boundaries between subject and object, observer and observed. Barad's framework invites us to consider the entanglements between agency and materiality, destabilizing traditional understandings of representation and truth. In this context, Barad's concept of intra-actions highlights the dynamic and contingent nature of reality, where individuals and their surroundings co-constitute with each other through ongoing interactions.

This is further emphasized in her chapter on 'Diffractions' through her book. In this chapter, Barad delves into the concept of diffractions as a methodological and conceptual tool for understanding the entangled nature of phenomena. Drawing on insights from quantum physics and feminist science studies, Barad argues that diffraction offers a way to approach the world that acknowledges the mutual influence and interactions between different elements in our environment. Most prominently, she highlights that rather than relying on reflection and representation, diffraction emphasizes how the light waves interfere with each other and creates patterns of interference that are unique and unpredictable. Barad suggests that diffraction can be applied beyond the realms of physics to analyze the complex entanglements of matter, meaning and ethics in scientific and social practices as well. Through diffraction, Barad seeks to challenge traditional dualisms and binary thinking which limits us to the black and white but fails to account for the large grey are in between. This opens up new possibilities for understanding the interconnectedness and inseparability in the way with which we meet the universe, or more to the context here, underpins how we interact with the cinematic apparatus as our chosen source of information received.

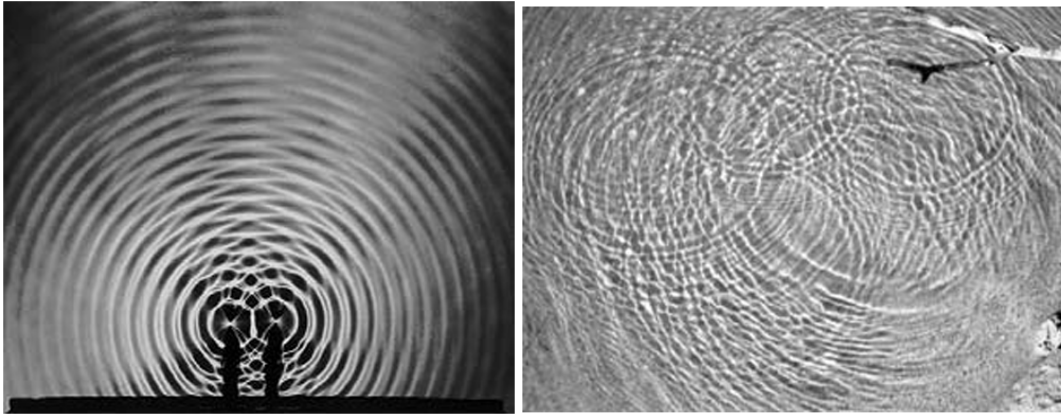


Fig 2 and Fig 3 : Source: Meeting the universe halfway, Page 71, Karen Barad.

Photograph 3a by Karen Barad. Photograph 3b from Berenice Abbott, "The Science Pictures: Water Pattern," reprinted with permission of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

While Bazin, Plato and Althusser underscore the role of representation in shaping an individual's understanding of reality, Barad's agential realism challenges is to rethink the very foundations of our epistemological frameworks. By foregrounding the relational and contingent nature of reality, Barad's framework invites is to consider the implications of intra-actions for our understanding of agency, materiality and the reconstruction of reality itself. From a Bazinian perspective, cinema serves as a window into reality, offering viewers an unmediated glimpse into the world as it truly is. However, Barad's agential realism complicates this notion by highlighting the role of intra-actions in shaping our perceptions of reality. In Barad's framework, cinema becomes a site of dynamic interactions, where filmmakers, subjects and viewers co-constitute the reality through their intra-actions. This challenges the traditional dichotomy between subject and object, inviting us to reconsider our approach and understanding of agency, representation and power dynamics of the audiovisual realm.

Furthermore, Plato's cave allegory offers a compelling metaphor for how cinema mediates our perceptions of truth and illusion. The underpinning message of which, is the prisoners who are unaware of the true nature of the world beyond the cave. Similarly, cinema also operates as a powerful tool for shaping an individual's perceptions of reality, perpetuating illusions and reinforcing norms of the societal 'cave'. However, through Barad's framework, the site of the cave becomes a dynamic site for interactions, where individuals and their surroundings encompass

each other with ongoing intra-actions. Additionally, while Althusser focuses on the processes of ideology in shaping and determining subjectivity, Barad shifts this focus on to the dynamic nature of agency which he says emerges through the entanglement of diverse sets of elements. While Althusser highlights the role of power and domination in subject formation, Barad's theory offers a more nuanced understanding of the layers of agency as distributed and relational. However, both theories contribute in unravelling the nature of individuals as situated within the broader socio-political contexts and the mechanisms of knowing and indenting our surroundings and the world.

Unwrapping these threads of theories through the lens of documentary films:

The documentary case study - "The Arbor", Clio Barnard, 2010.

"The Arbor" is a groundbreaking documentary film directed by Clio Barnard, and was released in 2010. It delves into the life of Andrea Dunbar, a working class playwright who rose to fame in the 1980s for her raw and uncompromising portrayals of life on the Buttershaw Estate of Bradford, UK. However, rather than following a conventional linear biographical approach of narration, Barnard's film offers a unique and a multifaceted exploration of Dunbar's life and legacy. Furthermore, one of the key reasons why 'The Arbor' serves as an excellent example in the study of Barad's work is its innovative approach to storytelling. In this documentary, through a combination of footage, reenactments, and interviews, the film challenges the traditional notions of reality and representation. Barad's theories of agential realism, reconstructing of reality and intra-actions provide a framework for understanding how the film disrupts binary distinctions between facts and fiction, while simultaneously highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of perceived reality.

Additionally, 'The Arbor' explores themes such as memory, time and identity which are in a way central to Barad's work. This film incorporates multiple perspectives and interpretations of events in contrast to the traditional approach of hammering in individualistic beliefs and interpretations. Due to this unique aspect, the film demonstrates how reality is contingent upon the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals. Through techniques such as lip-syncing and directly addressing the camera, Barnard creates a sense of authenticity while also

acknowledging the constructed nature of narratives, echoing Barad's assertion that reality is always mediated and contingent upon context and inference. Moreover, the documentary offers a profound exploration of the socio-economic and political realities of the life on the Buttershaw Estate, which exemplifies the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors within the environment. Through cinematography, mise-en-scene (the compositions for the camera) and the sound editing choices, this film captures the complex web of relationships and power dynamics that shape an individual's lived experiences. This approach in filmmaking reflects Barad's notion of intra-actions, emphasizing how the reality is reconstructed through ongoing interactions and negotiations between various entities.

In essence, to breakdown the aspects of Barad through the documentary film:

Agential realism -

Reality as Intra-Active: Barad's concept of agential realism suggests that reality is not a pre-given but in fact, it is continuously reproduced through intra-actions between entities. In 'The Arbor', this idea is reflected in the film's exploration of the Buttershaw Estate and the lives of its residents. The interactions between the individual, the environment and the social structures shape the reality that is depicted in the film.

Material-Discursive practices: Barad emphasizes the inseparability of material and discursive practices in the production of reality. In the documentary, Barnard employs a while set of filmmaking techniques such as cinematography, editing and sound design to construct various narratives. These practices shape the representation of Andrea Dunbar's life, her family's experiences and the sociopolitical context of the Estate.

Reconstructing reality –

Challenging conventional narratives: Barnard's approach to storytelling challenges traditional documentary narratives. Through a combination of footage, reenactments and interview, the film reconstructs Dunbar's life in a non-linear and fragmented manner. This reconstruction reflects Barad's idea that reality is not fixed but is in constantly perceived and construed.

Subjective and Perspective: The film explores the subjective nature of reality and the multiplicity of perspectives. By juxtaposing a different account of events and experiences, Barnads highlights the complexity and ambiguity of truth. For example, in the scene of the film (Fig. 1), where 2 narratives of memory reconstruction, are enacted by 2 different actors of the similar scenario of being locked inside the room as a child, highlights this point of subjective and perspective. This aligns with Barad's notion that reality is always partial and contingent upon perspectives and positions of the observer.



Fig.1: The 2 actors re-enacting a memory with different narratives in the documentary film 'The Arbor'

Intra-actions –

Interconnectedness of entities: The film portrays the interconnectedness of human and non-human entities within the environment of the Buttershaw Estate. Through the arrangement and compositions designed for the camera by the means of lighting, setting, sound design etc, it captures various layers of dynamic relations of individuals, their environment and social structures that shape their life. Similarly, Barad's concept of intra-actions emphasizes the mutual constitution of reality through relationality.

Agency and Entanglement: Highlighting the agency of individuals and entanglements between different actors, the documentary posits as a good example of Barad's theories. Whether it is the character's interactions with each other or their responses to external forces such as poverty and addiction, the film illustrates how agency emerges through various intra-actions. Thus, resonating further, Barad's theory that holds agency as a distributed and emergent phenomenon within relational contexts.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the exploration of the politics of the audiovisual medium reveals a complex interplay between representation, power and agency. Through the lenses of prominent theorists such as Bazin, Althusser and Barad as well as exploratory analysis of the documentary filmmaking in 'The Arbor', this essay delved into the multifaceted nature of the audiovisual and its political implications. From Bazin's emphasis on the indexical nature of photography to Althusser's theory of interpellation and Barad's agential realism, each of these perspectives offers valuable insights into the working of images and narratives in shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it. By acknowledging the politics inherent in the construction and reception of audiovisual inputs, we are compelled to discern and critically engage with the representations presented to us while recognizing its potential to both reinforce and challenge dominant ideologies. Therefore, the threads of the audiovisual appear undeniably political, serving as sites of contestation, negotiation and transformation in an individual's quest for social justice and collective liberation.

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