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Special Issue 5.2 – Visual Storytelling and Entrepreneurship:  
The Representations of Daily Life  
(Winter 2025)

Special Issue Editors: Erick Behar-Villegas and  
V́ctor Manuel Jiḿnez-Rodŕguez

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# Introduction to the Special Issue



# Guest Editors' Introduction

## Visual Storytelling and Entrepreneurship: The Representations of Daily Life

ERICK BEHAR-VILLEGAS AND  
VICTOR MANUEL JIMÉNEZ-RODRÍGUEZ

**Keywords:** visual storytelling, entrepreneurship

A symbolic story takes us back to ancient China during the Liang dynasty. A famous painter called Zhang Sengyou had painted four mesmerizing dragons on the walls of a temple. However, he did not fully paint their eyes, fearing they may come alive. Some of the monks of the temple told him to complete the painting and after refusing, he finally gave in and added the dots. As he feared, his painting came to life, and the mighty dragons flew away.

Wherever we look through the long threads of history, visual representations accompany cultural meanings that stay in our minds, even in our hearts. That this is relevant in a more economic dimension is perhaps at first less clear than it could be. But visual representations of products, customer journeys, entrepreneurial efforts, and so much more are part of our daily interactions. And entrepreneurs play a fundamental role here. In the words of Marguerite Yourcenar,<sup>1</sup> who wrote the memories of emperor Hadrian of Rome, merchants—one type of entrepreneur—were the first ambassadors of any culture, as they had the first contact when offering their products, ideas, and, of course, tales.

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1. M. Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Gallimard, 2019).

Entrepreneurs, ancient or modern, can be seen as storytellers. They are also agents of change that transform reality in ways that deserve to be told. They navigate uncertain environments that often require repurposing their business model and, therefore, the story they tell their surroundings.<sup>2</sup> Entrepreneurial journeys and their dynamic production of artifacts, whether it is products, services, concepts, new realities, etc., also have a visual dimension that sheds light on the character, setting, and plot of each story. In a context where artificial intelligence has become a powerful tool of visual dissemination—think about the creation of storyboards or AI-based imagery and videos—entrepreneurs will keep facing challenges but perhaps also resort to tools that help craft journeys in a way that does not deteriorate their creativity.

With this special issue, the *Global Storytelling* journal is honoring the incredibly rich reality of visual representations and moving images that pervade the world of entrepreneurship. The latter is a cultural engine of its own. If we think of the concept of how attractive a certain culture may be for a person who travels the world, part of the charm is linked to what entrepreneurs have invented and put out there in a market. Think about the beauty of third-wave coffee, which became popular at the turn of the millennium. In essence, the third wave asked people to see coffee beyond a drink or a quick need in the morning. One could track the origin, live the experience, test different methods and varieties, and imagine the whole supply chain along the myths that go all the way to ninth-century Ethiopia. But without entrepreneurs, we would not have the third wave, nor the beautiful machines or any of those neatly designed gadgets.

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2. E. Behar Villegas, Z. Goh, and G. S. Horowitz, "Designing a Good Story for Better Policies: Entrepreneurship at the Crossroads of AI-Powered Visual Storytelling and Sensemaking," *Human Technology* 20, no. 3 (2024): 420–45, <https://doi.org/10.14254/1795-6889.2024.20-3.1>.

## Works Included in This Special Issue

In this special issue, we present three research articles and three essays that discuss a rich variety of settings where visual storytelling and entrepreneurship come together. Rajat Sharma shares the compelling power of Bollywood, going deeper into the reimagination of representations in the film industry. With a particular interest for gender-related issues, his article provides some visual examples of how a world as immense as Bollywood is handling change. The impressive example that takes place in India, where homosexuality was decriminalized by the Supreme Court in 2018, portrays how a movie—in this case *Fire* (1998)—can become a catalyst of change, where the filmmaker acts an entrepreneur, naturally surrounded by risk and uncertainty.

In his article on influencer marketing, Max Beck addresses the symbolic power of verification badges, which have been trending on social media as a new way to represent trustworthiness. For him, however, the general-purpose verification that we are used to could benefit from more specialized verification symbols that operate as visual cues. One of the fundamental elements of this article is the role of micro-visual storytelling, which differs considerably from macro forms that we are used to in filmmaking, suggesting that trust also arises thanks to micro visuals that tell stories.

Using the example of Webtoon—a digital comics platform—Fernando García shows us how transmedia storytelling is transforming business models. The essential idea here is that creators are able to multiply the format of their story through technology, albeit in ways they normally would not have easily produced on their own. For example, take an artist who would love to create digital animations of their paintings but does not know where to start. They then use the platform and animate their own art, being able to work with other artists at the same time. The gist of García's article lies in the potential of “narrative expansion,” which lies at the heart of a noble goal: democratize storytelling and allow technology to help without losing the essence.

Ralf Ruthhart, a German entrepreneur and novelist, gives us some perspectives on the power of visual storytelling and B2B, a world that some may consider dry and technical while also imbued with the power of the visual. We believe that creators can learn from this essay by discovering the charm of B2B interactions, perhaps as a motivator toward an entrepreneurial journey that thrives on storytelling talent.

Lastly, together with two book reviews, we present a short essay on filmmaking through the power of silence in Ethiopia along with a critical essay on the importance of ecological narrative, a fundamental aspect in storytelling that can be seen as the context of the story beyond its setting. In the end, it is hard to fully grasp a story without understanding what narratives and metanarratives drive its meaning creation.

We hope that regardless of your background, whether you are a film expert or enthusiast, an entrepreneur, a physicist, or a painter, you will enjoy this special issue and think about how creativity shapes much more than markets but even our own cultural landscapes.

# Research Articles



# Reimagining Representations: Transformative Genderness and LGBTQ+ Visibility in Contemporary Bollywood

RAJAT SHARMA

## Abstract

Indian popular cinema has long been critiqued for advancing a postcolonial bourgeois nationalism through its moral and affective regimes. In the current political climate, where an emerging Hindu nationalist state increasingly tightens control over narratives, new forms of socially engaged and entrepreneurial efforts in filmmaking have begun to emerge. Enabled by global over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix and Prime Video, this wave of films invests in inclusive representations and socially relevant storytelling that challenge hegemonic discourses on gender, sexuality, and nationhood.

Through close readings of popular hits such as *Bala* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), *Badhaai Do* (2022), and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), this article examines how contemporary Hindi films act as cultural entrepreneurial efforts, negotiating aesthetic, political, and market risk. It argues that these films employ humor, genre hybridity, and melodrama to radically queer traditional institutions such as marriage and family, foregrounding emotional vulnerability, female agency, and LGBTQ+ visibility within the mainstream. While these films remain entangled within neoliberal circuits of production and consumption, they nonetheless produce counter-hegemonic imaginaries that unsettle both patriarchal and nationalist orthodoxy. Ultimately, the article situates this emergent cinematic practice as a form of visual entrepreneurship, where storytelling becomes a site of speculative

politics, enabling new ways of imagining social change and representations in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Bollywood/Hindi cinema; cultural entrepreneurship; gender and sexuality; queer representation; Hindu nationalism

## Screening the Forbidden: Indian and Lesbian

In 1998, Deepa Mehta's Indo-Canadian film *Fire* (1998) was released in Indian cinemas, having been cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), commonly known as the censor board, without any suggested cuts. After a couple of weeks of running in the theaters, the screenings were disrupted by violent protests led by the obstreperous Shiv Sena,<sup>1</sup> a right-wing group claiming to be the upholders of Hindu tradition and morality. More than two hundred Shiv Sena members trashed cinema halls and burned posters of the film that portrayed a homoerotic relationship between two women from a traditional Hindu family.

*Fire* explores the complexities of female desire and societal constraints within a traditional Indian Hindu family structure. The film is situated in a patriarchal household of Ashok and his younger brother Jatin who run a takeaway and a VHS store in contemporary Delhi. It interweaves the stories of a newlywed Sita (Nandita Das) married to Jatin and infertile wife of the older brother Ashok, Radha (Shabana Azmi). Sita, in her unhappy arranged marriage, finds herself stifled by expectations of motherhood and wifely obedience while her husband continues to spend his time with his Chinese girlfriend. Radha, Ashok's wife, on the other hand, is trapped in a

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1. Shiv Sena, which translates to "Army of Shivaji," is a right-wing political party in India that is rooted in Marathi regionalism and Hindutva ideology. It was founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray and was later succeeded by his son Uddhav Thackeray. The party has been associated with various controversies, including incidents of hooliganism, criminal behaviour, promoting religious intolerance, and engaging in moral policing.

loveless marriage defined by her husband's ritualistic testing of his celibacy. The film contrasts the women's experiences with the hypocrisy of the men, where one is trapped in religious dogmas while the other is indulging in infidelity. Their lives have been made meaningless by husbands who view them solely as reproductive vessels or unpaid domestic servants. The crucial relationship between Sita and Radha develops as a form of rebellion against these oppressive constraints, leading up to their sexual intimacy and eventually their escape from the oppressive environment.

The women's departure from the enforced societal norms and repressed sexuality and their newfound sense of agency make the viewer contemplate the broader implications of their defiance and somehow scared the moral police. The protests by Shiv Sena workers prompted the cultural minister, Pramod Navalkar, a Shiv Sena leader, to request the CBFC to review its decision on the film's certification. However, the CBFC maintained its integrity and reaffirmed its earlier decision, allowing the film to continue screening without any cuts.

The anxieties and moral policing surrounding *Fire* reveal two significant insights. Firstly, it highlights the threat posed by women's agency and autonomy, particularly their sexuality, to the patriarchal Hindu order. Secondly, it highlights the intersection of sexuality and religion, made evident in the statements made by Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray. He questioned why lesbians were depicted in a Hindu family and agreed to withdraw Shiv Sena's opposition and allow the screenings of the film if the protagonist Sita and Radha's names were changed to Muslim names (Shabana and Saira).<sup>2</sup> His rhetoric suggests that the objection was not solely to the portrayal of a same-sex relationship but rather to the fact that it was depicted within a traditional Hindu family. Gayatri Gopinath has argued that the film and its ensuing controversy necessitate a deeper examination to understand how the

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2. "India: Thackeray's Terms for Screening of 'Fire,'" (*Chennai*) *Hindu*, December 14, 1998.

challenges to “state-sanctioned sexual subjectivities”<sup>3</sup> are managed within dominant community and national narratives and how these challenges simultaneously threaten the stability of those narratives. The violent backlash from Hindu nationalists requires recognizing the interconnectedness of heteronormativity and contemporary nationalism as systems of oppression. Therefore, it becomes important to understand notions that both reinforce and challenge these nationalisms.<sup>4</sup>

An unintended outcome of moral policing was the counter demonstrations outside Delhi’s Regal Cinema. A few days after Shiv Sena’s attack, more than three hundred people gathered outside the cinema holding signs and posters.<sup>5</sup> One that caught attention and was reproduced in dozens of newspapers<sup>6</sup> the following day read “Indian and Lesbian.” This marked one of the first instances in which lesbians in India publicly asserted their visibility at a protest. In her extensive work on queer activism in India, anthropologist Naisargi Davé has highlighted the importance of the “Indian and Lesbian” sign in positioning Indian lesbians as subjects of national politics. She argues that before this moment, lesbians and their political concerns existed within what she describes in Deleuzian terms as a “field of immanence.”<sup>7</sup>

This essay examines how gender and sexual politics have evolved in mainstream Hindi cinema. Beginning with the post-liberalization era when globalization brought diverse TV content to Indian audiences, it traces how the subsequent arrival of Netflix and other global OTT platforms have fostered new socially conscious entrepreneurial filmmaking focused on inclusive representation and pressing social issues. Among a few films and OTT shows that are mentioned, this paper looks closely at *Badhai Do* (Give

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3. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2005), 139.

4. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures*.

5. Ashwini Sukthankar, “The Invisible Women Become Less So,” *Times of (Mumbai) India*, January 3, 1999.

6. Naisargi N. Davé, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Duke University Press, 2012).

7. Davé, *Queer Activism in India*, 139.

congratulations, 2022), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020), *Bala* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Savdhan* (Let the marriage be fruitful, 2017), and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (How I felt when I saw that girl, 2019). These films, that were blockbuster hits, introduce a discourse on gender politics through subverting traditional masculinities and femininities or queering traditional rituals through LGBTQ+ representations. The emerging films analyzed in this study are marked as an entrepreneurial endeavor because they actively challenge dominant narratives and traditions within India's current right-wing Hindu nationalist environment. Furthermore, the emergence of these films is situated as responses to legal shifts (like Section 377 decriminalization) and new distribution technologies (OTT platforms). Filmmakers had essentially invested in unproven narrative territories with uncertain market returns.

This emerging body of socially conscious, gender-subversive films may also be understood through the lens of cultural entrepreneurship. Rather than simply riding the wave of decriminalization or OTT access, these filmmakers operate within a field of aesthetic and symbolic risk. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital,<sup>8</sup> their investments in narratives that challenge gender norms and nationalist orthodoxy mark a strategic deviation from Bollywood's mainstream, majoritarian scripts. As Devasundaram argues in his work on hybrid Indian cinema, these ventures reflect a new entrepreneurial orientation—one that blends independent ethos with commercial ambition.<sup>9</sup> Gopal, too, situates New Bollywood's affective and formal shifts within the broader transformations in media financing and audience segmentation.<sup>10</sup> Rather than treating cultural entrepreneurship as a separate analytic thread, this study embeds it within the representational

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8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Polity Press, 1993).

9. Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram, *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

10. Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

politics of risk, allowing us to see how these films subvert market orthodoxy and state-sanctioned norms in tandem.

## Criminalization to Recognition: The New Sexual Politics

Twenty years after the *Fire* controversy, in 2018, the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality by abolishing a portion of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law that had criminalized consensual homosexual acts. This coincided with a significant shift in media consumption patterns: First, the arrival of global OTT platforms like Netflix and Prime Video in 2016, followed by sporadic growth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Indian media landscape transformed as OTT platforms transitioned from a luxury to a daily commodity, experiencing a surge in subscribers and viewership, particularly during the pandemic-induced closure of cinema halls.<sup>11</sup> Kulkarni, focusing specifically on women viewers, reveals how women navigated the relocation inherent in experiencing cinema on digital screens.<sup>12</sup> She contextualizes her findings within the broader precarious migrations and displacements experienced during the pandemic. The lockdowns and eventual partial openings of the cinema left many film viewers dependent on OTTs to watch films from the safety of their homes. The confluence of legal reform and evolving media consumption patterns created fertile ground for exploring and representing LGBTQ+ narratives in new and accessible ways. This shift is perhaps exemplified by the release

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11. Divya Madnani, Semila Fernandes, and Nidhi Madnani, "Analysing the Impact of COVID-19 on Over-the-Top Media Platforms in India," *International Journal of Pervasive Computing and Communications* 16, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPC-07-2020-0083>.

12. Damini Kulkarni, "Screening Bodies: Women Watching Cinema in Post-Pandemic India," *Interactive Film & Media Journal* 2, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v2i3.1507>.

of films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020) directly on OTT platforms, indicating a growing acceptance and normalization of LGBTQ+ themes in mainstream Indian media.

Before proceeding into an analysis of *Shubh* or other similar films borne out of this conflux, it is crucial to clarify that LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema, while perhaps limited or marginalized, was not entirely absent prior to it. A thorough review of literature by Arora and Sylvia notes that a growing body of scholarship in Indian film studies examines queer representations in Bollywood since the 1990s, mirroring the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement in India.<sup>13</sup> Their work, as well as that of other scholars, has noted that the prevalent discourse surrounding nonconforming gender and sexualities in popular Hindi cinema are limited in the sense that queer-coded characters are often relegated to stereotypical roles: comic relief, villainous caricatures,<sup>14</sup> or “pathologized as scheming, predatory, or deranged.”<sup>15</sup>

However, a few scholars have done an against-the-grain, queer reading of Hindi cinema.<sup>16</sup> Shohini Ghosh employs an exercise called “retrospective queering” to reveal that although explicit representations of homosexuality were infrequent, many films contain subtle yet discernible markers suggestive of queer themes and identities. She evokes the homosocial relationships between men as the plotline for many Hindi films. She argues that even though explicit depictions of homoeroticism were largely absent from mainstream popular cinema until the 1990s, Hindi cinema nonetheless exhibits a

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13. Anupama Arora and Nikki P. Sylvia, “‘Just like Everyone Else’: Queer Representation in Postmillennial Bollywood,” *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2201398>.

14. Shohini Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities: The Phobic and the Erotic in Bombay Cinema’s Queer Vision,” in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Subhabrata Bhattacharyya and Brinda Bose (Seagull, 2007).

15. Arora and Sylvia, “‘Just like Everyone Else,’” 544.

16. Dinah Holtzman, “Between Yaars: The Queering of Dosti in Contemporary Bollywood Films,” in *Bollywood and Globalization*, ed. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (Anthem Press, 2010); Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities”; Shohini Ghosh, “Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities,” in *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*, ed. Robert Leckey and Kim Brooks (Taylor & Francis, 2010).

persistent preoccupation with the theme of friendship and the intense emotional bonds between male friends. This sustained focus on intense, often emotionally charged same-sex relationships, even in the absence of explicitly sexualized representation, offers a fertile ground for queer readings and interpretations.<sup>17</sup> Gopinath also indulges in similar queer readings; however, her work focuses primarily on diasporic cultural production located between the context of nationalism and globalization.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, since Hindi cinema abstains from representing (even heterosexual) love or romance through sexual explicitness, the coded friendship of Hindi cinema may have enduring possibilities for queer readings. Ghosh points out blockbuster Hindi films such as *Sholay* (Embers, 1975), *Namak Haram* (The traitor, 1973), and *Anand* (Joy, 1970) for their homoerotic subtexts buried under the texts of friendship and platonic love.<sup>19</sup> Meheli Sen has also done a queer reading of Shah Rukh Khan, the star of *Paheli* (Riddle, 2005), which is a remake of Mani Kaul's esoteric art film *Duvidha* (Dilemma 1973).<sup>20</sup> However, instead of decoding the homoerotic, she analyzes how the film challenges traditional heterosexual norms by presenting an inherently unconventional romance between a woman and a male ghost. The film narrates the story of a wife (Rani Mukerji) whose husband (Shah Rukh Khan) is away on a business trip. During his absence, she is visited by a ghost (also played by Shah Rukh Khan) who has assumed the husband's appearance and is romantically interested in her, effectively supplanting the absent husband. Sen interprets that the use of doppelgängers serves to critique the heteropatriarchy as the ghost's presence complicates the traditional family structure and legitimizes female sexual desire. However, at the same time as *Paheli*, there was another wave

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17. Ghosh, "False Appearances and Mistaken Identities."

18. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*.

19. Ghosh, "False Appearances and Mistaken Identities"; Ghosh, "Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities."

20. Meheli Sen, "The Mirror of Desire: Queerness, Fan and the Riddles of Paheli," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 58, no. 1–2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.13110>.

of films that did not shy away from dealing with queerness rather directly and not just metaphorically.

## Changing Channels, Changing Representations

The 1990s marked by liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy were a significant turning point in the country's socioeconomic landscape. This period saw the introduction of new economic policies that opened up the Indian market to global influences, leading to profound changes in various sectors. One of the most notable consequences of the new policies was the emergence of transnational communication, which enabled the transmission of information across national borders via satellite broadcasting technology. The liberalization policies allowed private and foreign broadcasters to operate in India, leading to a rapid expansion of television channels. The entry of foreign channels such as Star TV and domestic channels such as Zee TV and Sun TV marked the beginning of a new era in Indian television that characterized a more diverse range of content compared to the one previously offered by state-owned Doordarshan. It was challenged by more than forty private channels in the 1990s,<sup>21</sup> which sporadically grew to eight hundred channels catering to 740 million viewers by 2013.<sup>22</sup> This development marked a significant shift in the way information was disseminated, allowing for the global exchange of ideas and cultures. The impact of liberalization on Indian television has been extensively studied by scholars, who have identified a wide range of effects on the country's media landscape.

Mathai has done an extensive comparative study between pre- and post-liberalization periods to understand how the evolution of television in

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21. Sudhansubala Sahu, "Revisiting Television in India: Mapping the Portrayal of Women in Soap Operas," *Sociological Bulletin* 67, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022918775502>.

22. Vanita Kohli-Khandekar, *The Indian Media Business*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2013).

India has been marked by a significant expansion of its functions over time.<sup>23</sup> Her analysis reveals a strong correlation between Indian broadcast media's evolution and government policies, superseding the influence of global technological advancements. She observes that television has undergone various stages of development, with each era adding new roles and responsibilities to its repertoire. This gradual transformation has not only reflected the changing social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of independent India but has also played a crucial role in shaping it. Fernandes focuses on the social and cultural upheavals concerted through a redefinition of the relationship between the national and the global, with the effect of liberalization policies on Indian TV.<sup>24</sup> The material conditions of globalization that were a consequence of these policies gave rise to a national political culture that she believes was increasingly defined by a "culture of consumption."<sup>25</sup> For her, the anxieties generated by the prospect of globalization are frequently redirected onto the terrain of gender politics.

The trepidation of globalization being projected on gender politics has also been addressed by other scholars. Mankekar examines consumerism in the post-liberalization TV era. However, she looks at it with the interplay of the erotic. She discusses how TV and advertisements had eroticized consumer goods, linking sexual desires with consumer aspirations.<sup>26</sup> An interesting intervention Mankekar offers is a reading of the erotic (coded as post-liberalized, modern lifestyles) and the validation of family values as a

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23. Shanthi Mathai, "Indian Television in the Eras of Pre-Liberalisation and Liberalisation," *Media Watch* 6, no. 2 (2015).

24. Leela Fernandes, "Nationalizing 'the Global': Media Images, Cultural Politics and the Middle Class in India," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344300022005005>.

25. Fernandes, "Nationalizing 'the Global,'" 613.

26. Purnima Mankekar, "Dangerous Desires: Television and Erotics in Late Twentieth-Century India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021911804001020>.

synthesized phenomenon of the “westernisation and globalization of Indian Culture.”<sup>27</sup>

Sahu on the other hand has directly examined the representation of women in Indian television soap operas across three different historical phases.<sup>28</sup> The first phase (1959–1983) focused on education and information, with limited reach and representation of women. The second phase (1983–1991) was dominated by Doordarshan (the state-owned TV channel), where narratives began to include women but often reinforced traditional roles and stereotypes. And finally, the third phase (post-1991), marked by liberalization, led to a proliferation of private channels and a shift toward entertainment, where soap operas became the dominant genre. She argues that even though the post-liberalization era saw more intricate representations of women, with some soaps portraying women as empowered, they still reflected and perpetuated patriarchal societal norms rather than challenged them. Contrastingly, Agarwal and Patnaik have tried to map the literature on “masculinities” in Indian TV soap operas.<sup>29</sup> Even though their indistinct work fluctuates between understanding masculinity in the Indian context and its evolution over time, they realize that the research on masculinity in the realm of Indian TV might be quite limited. Nonetheless, by briefly examining the trajectory of male characters in television soap operas, their research contributes to a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of masculinity in contemporary India.

The supplanting of state-sponsored, didactic entertainment on Doordarshan by globalized, transnational broadcasting on an array of TV channels transformed the cultural practices of the urban middle class, eliciting both anxiety and enthusiasm. Television, with its vast reach and psychological presence, became a space of quotidian negotiation and reconstruction of

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27. Mankekar, “Dangerous Desires,” 403.

28. Sahu, “Revisiting Television in India.”

29. Mehul Agarwal and Pranta Pratik Patnaik, “(Re)Visiting Masculinities in Indian Television Soap Operas,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2259264>.

Indian cultural values—in the context of globalization—without exonerating “tradition.” The globalization of content opened new discourses and representations on the erotic, (female) desires, masculinities, and more importantly an emergence of queer spaces in electronic (as well as print) media, challenging conventional family values and sexual normativity.

While scholars have examined the emergence of new cultural values in Indian television, insufficient attention has been paid to parallel developments in the film industry. These cinematic transformations are equally—if not more—significant when analyzing emerging initiatives and their impact on India’s evolving film landscape. Ghosh has attributed the proliferation of queer representations in TV sitcoms of the 1990s to the rise of a wave of queer films<sup>30</sup> such as *Daayra* (The square hole, 1997),<sup>31</sup> *Darmiyaan* (In between, 1997), and *Tamanna* (Desire, 1997). She employs the word *queer* as a strategic and provisional label to disrupt the dominant sex-gender binary. She recognizes that the traditional categories like “gay” and “lesbian” often reinforce binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, whereas queer for her “embraces desires that are transgendered and transsexual.”<sup>32</sup> Even though I thoroughly agree with her deliberation to disrupt the binaries, her allusion to the term *queer* does not hold true for these specific films.

Interestingly all the three films deal with *hijras*. Unlike Western critics’ blatant gaffe about homosexuality or lesbianism “so outside the experience of these Hindus . . . that their language even lacks a word for it,”<sup>33</sup> the word *hijras* and *hijras*<sup>34</sup> within themselves are a community that has existed for a long time. There are various terms used to describe the hijra community

30. Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities.”

31. However, Ghosh forgets to mention that the film that follows the story of a transvestite and a rape survivor was not allowed a theatrical release in India due to its sensitive nature.

32. Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities,” 435.

33. Roger Ebert, “Fire Strikes at Indian Repression,” *Chicago Sun Times*, September 17, 1997.

34. For a proper and more nuanced approach to it, please see Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (Bloomsbury, 1996). She delves deep into language and the complexities of lesbian identities. She finds words for homosexuals,

such as hermaphrodites and transgendered individuals,<sup>35</sup> considered the “third sex”<sup>36</sup> or “eunuch-transvestites.”<sup>37</sup> Lal notes that the hijras challenge conventional categories of gender and sexuality, embodying a unique position within Indian society that resists the rigid classifications often imposed by modern knowledge systems.<sup>38</sup> The hijra community is recognized for its complex identity, which includes elements of castration, asceticism, hermaphroditism, bisexuality, and street performance, all contributing to their self-definition.<sup>39</sup> Hijras are often seen at births, weddings, and other important ritualistic ceremonies, where it is considered important to receive their blessings. They also have a significant presence in the political sphere. In 1998, Shabnam Bano (popularly known as Shabnam *Mausi* [Aunt]) became the first hijra to become a member of the Legislative Assembly. Reddy has noted that contemporary Indian politics has witnessed a growing visibility and empowerment of hijras, who are now being acknowledged as a vital and dynamic force in the country’s social and political landscape.<sup>40</sup> She observed that hijras are perceived as more approachable and effective than usual politicians, with some hijras taking their political responsibilities seriously and improving civic amenities in their areas. Therefore, with the hijras being such a visible and vital part of the sociocultural fabric of

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peculiarly lesbians from *shaktic* traditions who do not need to contextualize themselves through the West.

35. Vinay Lal, “Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality,” *Social Text*, no. 61 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488683>.
36. Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth, 1999). She explores this from the aspect of ancient Hinduism. She notes that the “third sex” was itself further “divided into four categories: the male eunuch, called the ‘water-less’ because he had desiccated testes; the ‘testicle voided,’ so called because he had been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the ‘not woman’” (22). Nanda also explores the existence of these phenomenon in Islam.
37. M. D. Vyas and Yogesh Shingala, *The Life Style of the Eunuchs* (Anmol, 1987).
38. Lal, “Not This, Not That.”
39. Lal; Takeshi Ishikawa, “Hijras,” *Indian Literature* 55, no. 6 (2011): 266, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23348755>.
40. Gayatri Reddy, “‘Men’ Who Would Be Kings: Celibacy, Emasculation, and the Re-Production of ‘Hijras’ in Contemporary Indian Politics,” *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971610>.

Indian traditions, their growing representation in films cannot merely be a consequence of globalized broadcasts of transnational communication and deviations from normative gender/sexuality roles portrayed in them. While the positive representation of hijras in mainstream Hindi films is a remarkable achievement, it is essential to concede that it does not necessarily subvert the dominant patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideology. Hijras have been effectively absorbed and assimilated into the Hindu (as well as Islamic) cultural and religious order, making their presence a familiar and nonthreatening sight. However, the more radical and marginalized aspects of the queer spectrum, including homosexuality and homoeroticism, remain a source of anxiety, contestation, and repression for the Hindu nationalist order. This was evident in the discussion above about the film *Fire* and the subsequent protest by Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena workers.

Nonetheless, queer representations in films in the new millennium coming out of the liberalization era became more frequent. Scholars have noted films like *My Brother Nikil* (2005) being born out of the conundrum of liberalization, changing sexual politics, new funding sources, and the influence of independent documentaries dealing with LGBTQ representations.<sup>41</sup> While these films kept distressing the Shiv Sena, other moral police films such as *Girlfriend* (2005) became a curious case for agitating the Hindu fundamentalists as well as women and queer rights activists. The film follows a complex relationship between a lesbian, Tanya; a closeted bisexual (who is reformed into heterosexuality by the end), Sapna; and a heterosexual man, Rahul. Tanya and Sapna share a deep and intimate bond, which is initially portrayed as a close friendship but later revealed to be a romantic and physical relationship. However, Sapna's perception of their relationship is ambivalent, and she does not reciprocate Tanya's romantic feelings. The arrival of Rahul, a male love interest, disrupts the dynamics of their relationship, and Tanya's unrequited love for Sapna is exacerbated by her growing

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41. Devasundaram, *India's New Independent Cinema*; Shohini Ghosh, "Queer," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492762111028975>.

jealousy toward Rahul. The film vilifies the lesbian as a jealous, murderous schemer and ends with her death. At the end of the film, Rahul and Sapna pay their respects to Tanya's grave, serving a piteous reminder of closeted Sapna's reformation into the heterosexual order. The film includes two intimate lesbian scenes, bordering on the edge of soft pornography. While these agitated fundamentalists, such as blatant serving to the male gaze and abhorrent representation of the lesbian as a vengeful maniac annoyed women and queer rights activists. Therefore, while there were new discourses on gender and sexual politics, mainstream Hindi films were still conferring positive queer representations.

## From Broadcast to Broadband

If liberalization-induced transnational communication opened the possibilities of discourse on sexual politics and a growing visibility of queer representation in film and media, then the arrival of global streaming services provided new liberties to explore these representations as well as possibilities to dismantle the conventional mainstream codes of masculinity and femininity. In 2018, Anurag Kashyap, who had already been a victim of the censor board several times, codirected India's first Netflix original series called *Sacred Games*, based on the homonymous novel by Vikram Chandra. The series cast popular Bollywood actors in lead roles. It revolves around a distressed cop, Sartaj Singh (Saif Ali Khan), who struggles to find his place in the midst of a corrupt and dysfunctional police force. His life turns upside down when he receives a cryptic phone call from Ganesh Gaitonde (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a notorious crime lord who has been missing for sixteen years. Gaitonde's ominous warning to save the city within twenty-five days sets off a chain reaction of events that delves deep into India's dark underbelly. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative explores Gaitonde's origins and his rise to power as Mumbai's crime lord. The series is an important break-away from conventional narrative structures of Bollywood. The result was a

refreshingly authentic portrayal of characters who were not alienated from the public sphere. The trajectory of Gaitonde's life is intimately tied to the volatile vicissitudes of Indian politics, with his rise to power mirroring the nation's own periods of turmoil and transformation. The Emergency, the Bofors scandal, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the demolition of the Babri mosque, and other political upheavals in India influenced his personal, professional, or even spiritual developments on his path to become a crime lord. The public sphere that had been missing in Bollywood since liberalization was compellingly reinstated through this intricate weaving of personal and political.

Furthermore, characters in *Sacred Games* were complex and multidimensional, engaging in natural and spontaneous interactions, cursing and swearing profanely. They discussed politics, intimacy, and relationships and indulged in actual sexual acts rather than the formulaic soft pornographic or metaphorical depictions. The relationships were also nuanced and beyond the mimetic heterosexual depictions. In the first season, Gaitonde falls in love and has an intimate relationship with a transgendered person named Kukoo. In the second season he develops a sexual relationship with a man, Guruji. *Sacred Games* was a breakthrough. It marked a significant turning point in the Indian streaming landscape, which till then was merely a platform for international content and light entertainment. *Sacred Games* opened the possibilities for it to become a medium for impactful and socially relevant storytelling. In an interview, the codirector Kashyap said that streaming platforms represented a promise of liberty.<sup>42</sup>

In their edited volume, Waugh and Arroyo discuss the significance of sexual revolutions and how the internet and digital culture have influenced sexual expression and identity.<sup>43</sup> Situating confession as a cultural practice of self-referential storytelling, they make it a crucial aspect of contemporary

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42. Sonia Faleiro, "Netflix v Modi and the Battle for Indian Cinema's Soul," *MIT Technology Review*, March 24, 2021.

43. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo, "Introduction," in *I Confess!*, ed. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

sexual discourse. They have argued that the advent of the internet and digital platforms has heralded a “third sexual revolution.” This section of the paper reads the queering of the mainstream in the advent of digital platforms as a challenge to the discourse on traditional gendering. Furthermore, queer cinema here is not just something focused specifically on sexuality but also, as bell hooks put in one of her talks, queer here is “being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and it has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”<sup>44</sup> This might be an exaggeration in the sense that these films perhaps do not radically challenge the status quo, but it holds true because some of the films discussed can be read as queer in the sense that they displace the conventional cinematic codes of masculinity and femininity and subvert traditional, cultural, or fratricidal institutions employed in contemporary mainstream Bollywood. While the majority of current Bollywood films construct a linear masculine male protagonist to be the flag-bearer of a new muscular nationalism, these films show men, albeit sometimes heterosexual, as vulnerable, emotionally aware, and riddled with real issues. These men possess a distinctive combination of resilience and pliability, enabling them to resist the constraints of the heteropatriarchal framework or find ways to subvert or redefine it.

The 2019 film *Bala* is an apt example of such representation. It offers a scathing critique of societal beauty standards in India, especially the expectations of fairness and shame around baldness. The film starts with a young, popular fourteen-year-old student named Bala (Ayushman Khurrana) and his rather dark-skinned classmate and friend Latika (Bhumika Pednekar). Bala mocks his bald teacher in the classroom by drawing his caricature on the blackboard, triggering the whole class into a laughing frenzy. In the following scenes he also ridicules Latika for being dark skinned and calls her demeaning slurs (that are unfortunately common in Indian vernacular).

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44. bell hooks, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,” talk presented at the New School, YouTube, May 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

These incidents set the tone for the rest of the film, which delves into the complexities of social standards of beauty, identity, and self-acceptance.

Bala grows into a young man struggling with premature baldness, a condition that becomes an obstacle to his personal and professional growth. His profession as a fairness cream salesman and him being replaced for becoming bald becomes another evident commentary on the societal pressure to conform to traditional beauty standards. While Latika grows up to become a lawyer, she is repeatedly rejected by prospective suitors because of her dark skin. Even though the film relies heavily on the heteronormative institution of marriage, it critiques it by showing how societal expectations in these practices can lead to commodification and objectification of individuals and how societal pressure to conform to beauty standards can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. In a curious departure from mimetic representations, the male hero in this film is vulnerable and insecure and battles these emotions throughout his daily life. Remarkably, the patriarchal, standardized constructs of male and female beauty, for the first time, become the source of anxiety of the male hero. Having tried hundreds of remedies—from dubious quackeries to legitimate medical options—Bala ultimately relents and agrees to wear a toupee. His reluctant acceptance shows his resigned wedging into the social construct of presenting a perfect exterior. However, with his renewed confidence, Bala courts and decides to marry his crush, a beautiful, fair-skinned online influencer named Pari (Yami Gautam). Pari, who seems to be an obtuse social media personality, is surprisingly self-aware. She understands her status in society is mostly because of her beauty (read: fairness).

Bala's conscience is conflicted and he reveals the truth about his baldness and the toupee to Pari. When she finally finds out the morning after their wedding, Pari furiously walks out on him, subsequently sending a court notice to annul their marriage. With his childhood friend Latika as his lawyer, Bala finally seeks to save his marriage but ends up having a self-realization. Another notable departure from mainstream narratives is the film's courtroom scenes, which reveal a nuanced presentation, refraining

from vilifying any of the parties involved. While it could have been easy to belittle Pari for leaving her husband for something as shallow as physical appearance and hair, the film takes a thoughtful approach without shifting blame on individuals and their obsession with physical beauty. As Latika defends Bala in the court, she makes Pari admit that her initial attraction to Bala stemmed from his charm and intelligence and not merely his looks. However, Pari also contends that Bala's failure to disclose his baldness indicates a lack of self-acceptance, which can affect the viability of any relationship. Bala ultimately concedes that Pari has that right to seek annulment as love cannot be mandated by law and that a relationship lacking genuine affection is destined to fail.

Back at his job at a fairness cream promotional event, Bala has an epiphany about the superficial beauty constructs being perpetuated in society as well through his sales campaigns. As a symbolic act of self-acceptance, he removes his toupee, making a statement and bravely facing the laughter that had haunted him till then. His publicly accepting himself marks another interesting departure, as it makes the film and its climax inherently about self-love rather than stereotypical heterosexual love. At the point where the hero usually gets together with the heroine in mainstream films, Bala gets himself. He resolves the conflict of societal constructs and pressure that had been pushing him away from accepting himself. This is further established in the final scenes where Bala, who now has feelings for Latika for supporting his journey of self-acceptance, rushes to propose to her. Interestingly, swaying away from the standard Bollywood narratives, Latika rejects his proposal. Instead of being a bitter scene about rejection, Latika and Bala's friendship reimagines heterointimacy through displacing the heteronormative, monogamous marriage in favor of a passionate friendship.

Ayushmann Khurana's characters in other contemporary films have been part of a broader dialectic of contemporary masculinity in Bollywood. His characters in other films such as *Vicky Donor* (2012) and *Dream Girl* (2019) showcase a shift from traditional hypermasculine portrayals to more nuanced and emotionally aware male characters. In *Shubh Mangal*

*Savdhan*, Khurana and Pednekar appear together again. Khurana plays the role of a young marketing professional named Mudit. The story unfolds as Mudit, characterized by his inherent shyness, struggles to initiate a conversation with his crush Sugandha (Pednekar) despite his numerous attempts. Finally, he musters up the courage to send her an online marriage proposal. Sugandha, unhappy with this approach, takes her time to contemplate the proposal, ultimately framing her decision as a significant and independent choice in her life.

The plot thickens when Sugandha's parents are away, allowing Mudit and Sugandha the opportunity to get intimate. However, as things heat up, Mudit, feeling visibly uncomfortable, unexpectedly decides to leave. When Sugandha expresses concern over this abrupt change of plans, Mudit claims to have a "gents' problem." He cleverly alludes to his predicament using a limp biscuit, which leads Sugandha to deduce that he is experiencing erectile dysfunction. What follows is the same plot as *Bala*, of comical trials and errors, quackeries, and medical advice for Mudit to find a solution to his erectile dysfunction.

However, this time his love interest and soon-to-be-wife Sugandha is by his side. Once again, even though centered around the heteronormative institution of marriage, the film explores the sexual and emotional vulnerability of men and displaces conventional gender roles. As the various attempts fail, Mudit and Sugandha's family suggest calling off the wedding. Sugandha stays adamant about her decision to marry Mudit, who she has now fallen in love with. Sugandha's character evokes a strong sense of female agency, a departure from the usual mainstream narrative. The film also subverts the dominant cultural narrative of marriage, where women are often shown to be passive recipients of male desire rather than active participants in the relationship. The protagonist's struggles with erectile dysfunction and his emotional vulnerability subvert the traditional notions of masculinity that are commonly perpetuated, not just in mainstream Hindi cinema but in popular media in general. Masculinity, which is often constructed around the ideals of physical perfection such as chiseled muscular bodies, aggression,



Image 2.1: Mudit metaphorically establishes his erectile dysfunction through a limp biscuit.

Source: R. S. Prasanna, dir., *Shubh Mangal Savdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/Eros International, 2017), screen grab.

and sexual prowess, is replaced in this film with a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the male experience. The film's depiction of Mudit as a sensitive and vulnerable individual is notable for its refusal to reduce him to a docile or powerless character who can be coerced out of his will. When Mudit's future father-in-law takes him to a veterinarian to find a solution for his "problem," he threatens to call off the wedding if the issue remains unresolved. Mudit refuses to be intimidated and instead stands his ground, insisting that he will marry Sugandha regardless of her father's approval. In this sense both Mudit and Sugandha assert their autonomy and agency throughout the film to break through the oppressive familial structure. Finally, much against the will of their families and breaking a lot of gendered stereotypes, they finally get married. Once again, like *Bala*, even though the film is headed for an inevitable end to the heteronormative institution of marriage, without the promise of typical heterosexual intercourse and procreation, their marriage

subverts the institution and reimagines heterointimacy, displacing sexual intimacy through (platonic) love.

Together *Bala* and *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* offer a departure from conventional gender portrayals in Bollywood. These films present female characters with agency and autonomy, actively shaping their lives rather than passively responding to male desires. Concurrently, the male protagonists exhibit emotional vulnerability and awareness, deviating from stereotypical macho masculinity. Even though both the films start with a wedding, their ends can be read as a subtle subversion to the traditional cultural institution. In this context, marriage is not just a heteronormative, procreative partnership but also a site of social and cultural negotiation, where the male protagonist's insecurities and anxieties about his (im)potency, masculinity, and social status are worked through and resolved. These resolutions are often asymmetrical (in a nontraditional way), with the female protagonist being more educated, independent, and confident than the male protagonist. This asymmetry marks an interesting representation of the changing social and economic dynamics of contemporary India, where women are increasingly taking on more prominent roles in the workforce and society.

## Queering the Rituals

The film noted in the section above, starting with marriages and weddings, also marks an engaging evolution from Sangita Gopal's observations in her seminal work dedicated to marriages and conjugations in popular Hindi cinema.<sup>45</sup> The core inquiry of her study revolves around understanding the implications of the couple form in New Bollywood cinema,<sup>46</sup> exploring its

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45. Gopal, *Conjugations*.

46. For Gopal, New Bollywood distinguishes itself from its predecessor through significant industrial changes, including increased capitalization, professionalization of production processes, adoption of advanced technology, and a shift in audience demographics. The cinematic landscape of New Bollywood showcases a diverse range of genres, from grand

connections to themes of conjugality, film form, cinematic institutions, and societal dynamics. She argues that New Bollywood represents a new cinematic order emerging from the socioeconomic changes following India's economic liberalization in the early 1990s. This transition is characterized by a focus on postnuptial couples who are depicted as already conjugated at the narrative's outset, contrasting with classic cinema that centered on courtship leading to marriage. Through the analysis of films featuring postnuptial couples, she illustrates how these portrayals of marriage and domestic life reflect significant cinematic transformations in the postmillennial era, marking the evolution from classic Hindi cinema to New Bollywood. If Gopal's post-liberalization, postnuptial pair indicates that the traditional couple is being utilized in a manner distinct from the romantic pairs typically depicted in classic cinema, then these films mark another significant shift from that. The evolution here from the post-liberalization subject introduces a new subject characterized by altered gender power dynamics, which navigates the courtship process but, unlike its classical counterparts, does not necessarily culminate in marriage. The neoliberal individual now grapples with anxieties and challenges that come from within (impotency and balding). The neoliberal subject becomes the architect of the tribulations that it ultimately seeks to overcome. Unlike the post-liberalization subject of Gopal, the neoliberal subject is not outside the influence of the social sphere (of the extended family, the clan, and the community) and is not necessarily individuated. Furthermore, these films subvert conventional representations of weddings and marriages, effectively queering them. Another film serves as a compelling illustration of a rather more direct queering of matrimonial institution as well the neoliberal subject not individuated from the influence of extended family.

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spectacles to socially conscious narratives, reflecting a departure from the homogeneity of classic Hindi cinema. This cinematic diversity is exemplified by the works of filmmakers like Karan Johar, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, and a variety of genres spanning from romantic comedies to socially relevant dramas and experimental indie films.

In a spiritual successor to *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan*, Ayushman Khurana appears again in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020) that was released directly on OTT. Like the other two films, this one also starts with a wedding. However, this film queers mainstream Hindi cinema and perhaps even weddings and marriages. Based in the pre-Section 377 era, the film centers around Aman (Jitendra Kumar) and his boyfriend Kartik (Ayushman Khurana) who, unbeknownst to their families, live and work together in Delhi. The narrative unfolds as Aman's mother invites him to attend the wedding of his cousin, with the ulterior motive of arranging a "normal" heterosexual marriage between him and a family friend's daughter. Therefore, the film's main storyline is woven around weddings and marriages accentuating the ironies around them. The plot thickens when Aman and Kartik ironically travel on the Vivah Express (Wedding Express) for Aman's cousin's wedding. On the Wedding Express, surrounded by the frenzy of celebrations and family members, Aman and Kartik have a private, passionate moment, and a spontaneous kiss between them is witnessed by Aman's father, Shankar. Aghast and agape by the sight of his son kissing another man, Shankar retches and pukes. This marks the shaking of the hilarious but otherwise traditional patriarchal order.<sup>47</sup> This incident prompts Kartik to suggest that Aman disclose his sexuality to his father. Shankar's efforts to separate the gay couple at the cousin's wedding fail, ending in a public display of affection that shocks the extended family and the guests. The repercussions of Aman's revelation of his sexuality and his affection for Karthik sends ripples through the family, leading to confrontations and a refusal from the cousin's fiancé to proceed with the marriage due to Aman's sexuality.

What follows is an exploration of the conflicting demands and negotiations of romantic (homosexual) and familial love. Aman seeks his father's validation and acceptance while declaring his love for Kartik. Ironically, while Aman's father pressures him toward a "normal" heterosexual marriage,

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47. Notably, this is also India's first on-screen gay kiss.

the very institution of heteronormative marriage crumbles and collapses. A heated exchange between Aman and his parents reveals the inherited pressures and traditions that forced them into their own arranged marriage. Admitting their prior love interests and lingering feelings, they acknowledge living a “half-life” in their arranged marriage. They recognize that they are imposing the same unfulfilling existence onto their son.

Vergheese<sup>48</sup> has used Jasbir Puar’s seminal work on assimilation of certain queer subjects<sup>49</sup> to provide a rather Western, reader-oriented interpretation of the film. The term *homonationalism* that Puar created refers to a form of nationalism that incorporates certain queer subjects into the discourse of the nation-state while excluding others. It’s relevant to note here that Puar was writing specifically in the context of the United States.<sup>50</sup> Vergheese applies a postcolonial context—a concept where a nation-state presents itself as progressive and modern by accepting and promoting the rights of certain queer individuals, typically those who are upper caste, upper class, and cisgender, while continuing to marginalize and exclude more vulnerable queer communities. Through this she argues that “because Aman and Kartik are both upper-caste, upper-class Hindus, they are palatable queer subjects,”<sup>51</sup> This interpretation suggests a lack of familiarity with either the film itself or with the Indian caste system, or a mere misapplication of Western contextualized, homonationalist theory to Bollywood. While, Aman and Kartik are definitely Hindus, Kartik is not upper caste. His explicit mention of his father’s occupation as a *lauhar* (ironworker) juxtaposed against Aman’s father’s profession as a scientist (biologist) underscores a clear caste and class distinction. Furthermore, even though there is a class difference, Aman’s

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48. Namrata Vergheese, “‘Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill’: Emergent Homonationalism and the Construction of a Palatable Queer Subject in Post-Section 377 Bollywood Cinema,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 60, no. 5 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2375507>.

49. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 2nd edition (Duke University Press, 2017).

50. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

51. Vergheese, “‘Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill,’” 679.

upper-class status is debatable. Both Aman and Kartik hailing from small towns and residing in the capital city on modest salaries (evident from Aman's mother's frequent taunts about his financial situation) suggests a different socioeconomic reality.

## Beyond Representations

*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is heavily reliant on the themes of weddings and marriages. This pronounced focus on matrimonial rituals can be interpreted as an attempt to assimilate the queer narrative into the broader framework of Hindu nationalism as argued by some scholars.<sup>52</sup> However, a nuanced analysis of the final wedding scene presents an alternative perspective, challenging this seemingly straightforward alignment.

In a subversive turn of events, the heteronormative marriage arranged by Aman's parents is disrupted when the prospective bride absconds with the family jewels. Seizing this opportunity, Kartik assumes the role of the bride, cross-dressing in traditional attire to participate in the wedding ceremony with Aman. The ritual progresses precariously until Aman's father finds out. This fiasco prompts the priest to refuse to officiate the ceremony, calling it unnatural. Undeterred, Aman and Kartik co-opt and queer the ritual, appropriating an iconic Bollywood song from the film *Sholay* (1975). The 1975 film had been central in the discussion on retrospective queering of mainstream Hindi films by Shohini Ghosh<sup>53</sup> and queer readings by other scholars<sup>54</sup> where the preoccupation with friendship and the intense emotional bonds between male friends is read as homoerotic. Kartik and Aman

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52. Verghese,; Sohini Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family: Politics of Normativity and Travails of (Queer) Representation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2021.1940549>.

53. Ghosh, "Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities."

54. Holtzman, "Between Yaars"; Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures*.



Image 2.2: Kartik cross-dressing in the traditional bridal outfit.

Source: Hitesh Kewalya, dir., *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/T-Series, 2020), screen grab.

performing the traditional wedding ritual while singing the iconic song “Ye Dosti Hum Nahi Todenge” (We will not break this bond/friendship) from *Sholay* instead of the priest’s sermons constitutes a profound queering of the rituals, traditions, and institution of wedding and marriage. “Ye Dosti Hum Nahi Todenge,” a song that has even been referred to as a “a gay male anthem”<sup>55</sup> in the context of *Sholay*’s homoeroticism, cyclically adds to the layer of retrospective queering as well. Arora and Sylvia have further argued that this song’s rendition, especially in the context of the film’s comedic tone, subverts traditional sex/gender roles through its campy and queer/transgressive performance.<sup>56</sup> They also observe the fact that this whole ritual plays out in the family’s ancestral home makes it more subversive to the heteropatriarchal order.

55. Gopinath, 101.

56. Arora and Sylvia, “Just like everyone else.”



Image 2.3: Aman and Kartik carrying out the wedding ritual. As the priest stands shocked in the back refusing to say the sermons, the couple sing an old Bollywood queer anthem to complete the ritual.

Source: Hitesh Kewalya, dir., *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/T-Series, 2020), screen grab.

The 2022 film *Badhai Do* (Give congratulations) also essentially queers the heteronormative marriage discourse and remarkably also the fratricidal order. The film depicts a lavender marriage between a closeted gay cop and a closeted lesbian school teacher. Forced to hide their queer identities and desires from their family, Shardul (Rajkumar Rao) and Suman enter into a marriage of convenience to maintain the façade of traditional legitimacy and social respectability while pursuing their individual interests and desires in private. Therefore, the film’s portrayal of queer subjectivities is constructed through the disruption of the privileged centrality of the heteropatriarchal family and the ambiguous practice of sexuality in everyday life. This dynamic is further emphasized by their heteronormative performances. In a particular scene where Shardul’s senior visits their home, he adopts the role of a chauvinistic husband who has effectively “domesticated” his wife.

This ostensibly humorous portrayal not only acts as a semblance for their lavender marriage but also highlights the underlying imbalances of power that exist within the context of gender relations in heteronormative marriages. The portrayal of parenthood within heteronormative discourses is similarly subjected to satire. When Suman is persistently pressured by Shardul's family to conceive, the same family members simultaneously lament the challenges of parenthood, expressing how it disrupts personal life and consumes one's time.

The film also presents queer identities with greater finesse than most films before it. In a poignant scene, Suman reveals her arranged marriage to her swain Rimjhim—whose character is noteworthy for representing a northeastern identity. This moment emphasizes the persistent taboo surrounding homosexuality in post-Section 377 India. On one hand, Suman, who has concealed her true identity from her family, deals with the complexities of a lavender marriage, yet her situation appears comparatively better than Rimjhim's, who has been ostracized by her own family. Interestingly, Suman asserts that their sexual identities constitute a part of their lives rather than defining their entire existence. Furthermore, when Rimjhim begins to live with Suman and Shardul, this arrangement further subverts the traditional heteronormative household structure. In a departure from the often-romanticized and sanitized portrayals of queer relationships, this film presents a more grounded and realistic depiction of queer domestic life, replete with the everyday conflicts and challenges that arise in any intimate partnership. Amid the ups and downs of their queer domestic life, Shardul also finds a partner, intriguingly with a lawyer.

Of course eventually the charade of their marriage is exposed to the family and their sexualities are outed. The familial revelation notwithstanding, the protagonists still opt to maintain their arrangement, although with another motivation. Initially the arrangement was necessitated by familial expectations whereas now it is driven by the imperative to conform to state-sanctioned norms, specifically the requirement for a heteronormative family structure in order to facilitate the adoption of a child. The film's

denouement is characterized by a nuanced exploration of the tensions between tradition and nonnormative familial configurations. Despite the family's initial reservations, they come to accept and even celebrate their nontraditional arrangement, as evidenced by the reconfigured ritual welcoming the new baby. Suman's partner Rimjhim is participating in the rituals where traditionally it should have been the parents. The momentary interruption, occasioned by the arrival of Shardul's senior, serves to reinstate the tension between tradition and nonnormative familial configurations. As Rimjhim unhappily and unwillingly leaves the ritual to not offend the guests (Shardul's senior and his wife), the screen fades to black, signaling the end. However, the ending takes a bold turn when Suman's father invites Rimjhim to rejoin the ritual, emphasizing the importance of the mother's presence in the ceremony. This gesture not only underscores the family's glad acceptance of their nontraditional arrangement but also visibly discomforts the visiting guests. In a remarkable display of agency and courage, Shardul seizes this opportunity to challenge the status quo, inviting his own partner to join the ritual, thereby reconstituting the traditional familial structure. Like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan's* final scene that queered the traditional ritual of weddings, *Badhaai Do* ends with the four queer individuals participating in the ceremony together. This image serves as a powerful testament to the possibility of queer familial formations and the reimagining of traditional rituals to accommodate nonnormative relationships.

Nonetheless, there have been films dealing with queer subjectivities such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (How I felt when I saw that girl, 2019) that have been accused of normalizing the Hindu familial and patriarchal order.<sup>57</sup> These critiques suggest that, rather than subverting or challenging existing power structures, these films may inadvertently perpetuate the very norms and values that have historically marginalized queer subjects.

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57. Arora and Sylvia; Deepanwita Dey and Sonal Jha, "Disrupting Heteronormativity: Queer Subjectivities and the Family in *Badhaai Do*," *South Asian Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2024.2429031>; Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family."



Image 2.4: The ceremony for the baby traditionally done by parents is also attended by Suman's partner Rimjhim. Finally, Shardul's partner also joins the ceremony, challenging traditional familial notions.

Source: Harshavardhan Kulkarni, dir., *Badhaai Do* (Junglee Pictures, 2022), screen grab.

The opening sequence of *Ek Ladki Ko* unfolds as a seemingly conventional heteronormative narrative, punctuated by elements of magical realism. A struggling playwright named Sahil (Rajkumar Rao), notably portrayed as Muslim, falls in love with Sweety. Eventually, the narrative reveals the protagonist's identity as a closeted lesbian. While it's true that the narrative revolves around Sweety's internal struggle with her queer identity and her desire for patriarchal acceptance, analyzing the film solely through a more Western, contextualized reading<sup>58</sup> limits whatever subversive capacity the film could hold. There is no doubt that Sweety's queerness is sanitized

58. Her assertion that the film implies the patriarch's preference for a lesbian daughter over a daughter married to a Muslim man is a thorough misreading. This interpretation is refuted by a single viewing of the film, highlighting a significant gap in her comprehension of the film's actual thematic concerns.

and disciplined through her deference to the family. This is reinforced multiple times in the film and perhaps epitomized in her agreement to marry Sahil or any other boy for the sake of her family's honor, reconfiguring her as a sacrificial good daughter and sister despite her queer transgression.

However, the film's suggestion of a potential heterosexual marriage between Hindu Sweety and Muslim Sahil, juxtaposed with Sweety's lesbian identity, presents a complex scenario that excludes it from the heteronormative Hindu nationalist fold. The film's engagement with these themes within a specific sociocultural milieu requires a more nuanced understanding than afforded by a simplistic, isolated application of Western theoretical frameworks.

In 2020, a popular Indian jewelry brand, Tanishq, had to withdraw its advertisement after a right-wing orchestrated backlash on social media.<sup>59</sup> The ad for a new collection called Ekatvam (unity) depicts a baby shower organized by Muslim in-laws for the Hindu bride. The ad and the brand were attacked for promoting *love jihad*—a term used by right-wing Hindu groups claiming that Muslim men are luring Hindu women to convert to Islam through deceitful romantic relationships.<sup>60</sup> Often centered around forced conversion to Islam,<sup>61</sup> the *love jihad* conspiracy theory, a prominent feature of Hindu nationalist discourse, exemplifies a broader pattern of Islamophobic narratives within India. The proliferation of such narratives, amplified by the near-total dominance of right-wing media outlets, has led to the appropriation of *jihad* terminology as a pejorative suffix applied indiscriminately to baseless accusations against the Muslim community.<sup>62</sup>

59. BBC, "Tanishq: Jewellery Ad on Interfaith Couple Withdrawn After Outrage," BBC, October 13, 2020.

60. Charu Gupta, "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 51 (2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25663907>.

61. Jyoti Punwani, "Myths and Prejudices About 'Love Jihad'," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 42 (2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24480870>.

62. There have been countless Islamophobic conspiracies such as "thook jihad" (spit jihad), alleging that workers in Muslim eateries spit in the food they cook. Alishan Jafri, "'Thook Jihad' Is the Latest Weapon in Hindutva's Arsenal of Islamophobia," *Wire*, November 20,

In 2021, one of the oldest wellness and consumer goods brands in India, Dabur, found itself in similar predicament. Dabur launched an ad for its skin care range a day before the (North Indian) Hindu festival Karwa Chauth. Rooted in matrimonial contexts, Karwa Chauth is a traditional celebration where women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the safety and longevity of their husbands. The ad depicts two women preparing for the Karwa Chauth ritual. In a departure from traditional expectations, the women perform the ritual for each other instead of their husbands, subtly establishing them as a lesbian couple. This act significantly queers the tradition, imbuing it with new meaning and challenging established heteronormative associations. Needless to mention, the ad faced significant backlash, attracting condemnation not only from fringe Hindu nationalist groups but also from mainstream political figures. Dabur was forced to apologize and took the ad down.<sup>63</sup>

Such controversies are not isolated incidents but rather symptomatic of a recurring pattern wherein marginalized groups, including Muslims and LGBTQ+ individuals, are seen as threats to the established Hindu nationalist order. In analyzing the Hindu nationalist backlash against the film *Fire*, discussed in detail in the previous sections, Kumar has argued that for the “Hindutva world-view, India is for Hindus, and should not accommodate homosexuals, Muslims, Pakistanis, lesbians or art that troubles these national definitions or constructs alternate subject positions.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, while *Ek Ladki Ko* does unarguably represent sanitized and disciplined queerness through a deference to the fratricidal and patriarchal order, its reading as a complete assimilation into the heteronormative Hindu nationalist fold

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2021. These conspiracies are a part of bigger marginalization of Muslims through economic boycotting following the social boycotting that the Hindu right has seemingly achieved.

63. Ratna Bhushan, “Dabur Apologises for Fem Ad,” *Economic Times*, October 25 2021.

64. Sanjeev Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy: Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim ‘Other’ in Bollywood Cinema,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340>.

appears overstated. This assertion is validated by the documented backlash from Hindu right-wing groups and political figures against any perceived subversion of Hindu identity. While existing scholarship has focused on *Sweetie's* preoccupation with patriarchal approval,<sup>65</sup> a close reading of her widowed father Balbir's narrative arc reveals a crucial yet overlooked dimension. Balbir, a clothing factory owner, harbors an unfulfilled passion for cooking, constantly seeking solace in the kitchen despite his mother's persistent disapproval. This running gag in the film about his mother catching him cooking and watching cooking shows the mother's adherence to traditional gender roles, wherein cooking is relegated to the feminine sphere. Consequently, Balbir, the patriarch himself, becomes a victim of the very system he embodies, subtly challenging the frequent portrayal of women as the sole victims of patriarchy. This nuanced portrayal shows the often-unacknowledged ways in which patriarchal structures that enforce traditional gender roles often constrain men, preventing them from pursuing passions deemed feminine. Although the film's conclusion adopts a didactic and melodramatic tone where Balbir finally comes to accept her daughter's sexuality, it simultaneously liberates Balbir from the restrictive gender roles. In the epilogue of the film, he finally musters the courage to pursue his romantic interest and fulfil his lifelong dream of opening a restaurant. This act signifies the patriarch's emancipation from the oppressive system that confined both him and his daughter, perhaps offering a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the pervasive impact of patriarchal norms.

## Conclusions

The transformation of gender and sexuality represented in the films discussed above fundamentally challenges deeply entrenched heteropatriarchal norms.

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65. Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family"; Verghese, "'Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill'"; Dey and Jha, "Disrupting Heteronormativity."

Traditional Bollywood has long reinforced patriarchal structures through hero-centric narratives, where male protagonists embodied strength, stoicism, and authority while female characters served primarily as romantic interests or familial supporters. The emergence of emotionally vulnerable male characters and empowered female and queer perspectives represents a direct confrontation with these normative structures. Nonetheless, it is important to note that queer representations in these films often remain somewhat superficial, as they tend not to deeply engage with the intersections of caste, class, and other dimensions of queer existence pervasive in Indian society.

These films function as sites of resistance against right-wing Hindu nationalist narratives that often promote traditional gender roles and heteronormativity as essential components of an “authentic” Indian culture. By presenting alternative portrayals of masculinity, family, and sexuality, these films implicitly challenge the cultural homogeneity projected by nationalist discourse. They represent a social commentary that operates outside formal political structures. In particular, the challenging fratricidal representations in these films, more peculiarly highlighted in *Badhai Do* and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, play a crucial role in challenging the current Hindu nationalist order. Bollywood, through its depiction of familial relationships and national identity, serves as a platform for imagining the nation.<sup>66</sup> Sen argues that Bollywood’s representation of the family, particularly the figure of the father, can be seen as a way to negotiate and reflect the evolving notions of nationhood and identity in contemporary India.<sup>67</sup> In her cleverly titled book *Cinematic ImagiNation*, Viridi argues that Hindi cinema constructs a “fictional nation,” resolving internal tensions through moral conflicts

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66. Meheli Sen, “‘It’s All About Loving Your Parents’ Liberalization: Hindutva and Bollywood’s New Fathers,” in *Bollywood and Globalization*, ed. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (Anthem Press, 2010).

67. Sen, “‘It’s All About Loving Your Parents’ Liberalization.”

presented within a deliberately generalized spatiotemporal setting.<sup>68</sup> She argues that the homogenization of diverse ideological viewpoints establishes cultural hegemony, naturalizing a particular cultural formation and repressing internal differences based on class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and community. She recollects the recurring motif of the “nation and/as family”<sup>69</sup> in Hindi films that is frequently challenged yet ultimately resolved through devotion to the fiction of “nation.” Therefore, the contestation of familial and patriarchal orders in these films offers a counternarrative to the hegemonic discourse on nation-building and the construction of national identity. By challenging traditional family structures, these films position the family as a site of negotiation and creation of new identities rather than their assimilation into the nationalist discourse. Consequently, this paper has emphasized the significance of these portrayals, as they provide a critical perspective to examine the interplay between refiguring familial dynamics and nationhood. Though Hindi cinema still has considerable ground to cover in fully challenging gender and sexual politics—particularly in offering truly liberating queer perspectives that break free from traditional monogamy and other cultural institutions—it remains important to observe, acknowledge, and perhaps even celebrate these emerging departures. Even if these steps appear modest, they represent meaningful shifts in cinematic representation that gradually expand the boundaries of what can be imagined and portrayed. These incremental changes, occurring within the constraints of commercial cinema and societal expectations, lay important groundwork for more profound transformations in how Indian film engages with gender, sexuality, and tradition in the years to come.

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68. Jyotika Viridi, *Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Film as Social History* (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

69. Viridi, *Cinematic ImagiNation*, 34.

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# Influencer Marketing, Interface Signals, and Microvisual Storytelling: Toward a Credible Verification Framework for the Creator Economy

MAX BECK

## Abstract

This article explores how interface-level symbols like verification badges function as micro-visual storytelling mechanisms that compress complex signals of identity, professionalism, and credibility into a single visual cue. Bridging influencer marketing, platform studies, visual semiotics, and information economics, this essay critiques current general-purpose verification systems and proposes a theoretically grounded framework for a specialized influencer marketing verification badge. The framework draws on signaling theory, platform governance, visual semiotics, and relational labor to contextualize trust formation and risks in influencer economies. It outlines a three-tiered badge evaluation model and introduces design and governance considerations to ensure signal credibility and reduce manipulation of metrics and eligibility criteria. The paper also addresses platform-specific affordances and genre-cultural differences, ultimately arguing for a contingent, auditable, and ethically sensitive signaling infrastructure to support transparency and quality in digital marketing ecosystems.

**Keywords:** verification badges; influencer marketing; platform governance; visual semiotics; storytelling mechanisms

## Introduction: Platforms, Trust, and Visual Signaling

In the evolving landscape of digital marketing, visual storytelling has emerged as a dominant force, fundamentally reshaping consumer behavior and decision-making processes.<sup>1</sup> In the creator economy, interface signals like verification badges play a crucial role in shaping user perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and professionalism. While general verification systems were originally designed to confirm identity, they have since become marketable symbols of social capital, prone to misinterpretation and manipulation. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) now allow users to purchase verified badges via subscription services, weakening the original function of these symbols. This dilution creates a critical problem in the multi-billion-dollar influencer marketing industry, where brands struggle to distinguish professional, effective partners from a sea of amateurs and fraudulent accounts.

This paper conceptualizes the verification badge not merely as a functional marker of identity but as a form of micro-visual storytelling: a compact, visual heuristic through which platforms and users narrate credibility in attention-scarce environments.

Unlike traditional visual storytelling, which unfolds through narrative content, micro-visual storytelling operates at the interface level, delivering its narrative payload in a single, pre-attentive glance. Verification badges are not just interface decorations—they are narrative devices loaded with social, commercial, and semiotic meaning. As such, they demand deeper theoretical treatment.

Bridging concepts from media semiotics, trust transfer theory, signaling theory, and digital labor, this essay proposes a multidimensional verification

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1. Erick Behar-Villegas, Zhen Goh, and Gary S. Horowitz, "Designing a Good Story for Better Policies: Entrepreneurship at the Crossroads of AI-Powered Visual Storytelling and Sensemaking," *Human Technology* 20, no. 3 (2024): 420–45, <https://doi.org/10.14254/1795-6889.2024.20-3.1>.

framework that reflects not just identity but also professional competence, ethical conduct, and content integrity—dimensions increasingly relevant in both commercial- and public-interest domains of influencer marketing.

## Literature Review: Signaling, Semiotics, and Interface Trust

### *Signaling Theory and Information Asymmetry*

Markets plagued by information asymmetries require mechanisms to signal quality. Influencer marketing is such a market: Brands cannot easily distinguish between professional creators and opportunists. Spence's signaling theory<sup>2</sup> and Akerlof's adverse selection model<sup>3</sup> show that credible signals must impose costs or constraints that low-quality actors struggle to imitate. In digital ecosystems where badges can be purchased, signaling shifts from merit-based recognition to self-declared legitimacy, this weakens credibility.

### *Platform Governance and Political Economy*

Platforms are not neutral actors. Gillespie,<sup>4</sup> van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal<sup>5</sup> describe platforms as gatekeepers whose choices around visibility,

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2. Michael Spence, "Job Market Signaling," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 87, no. 3 (August 1973): 355–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>.

3. George A. Akerlof, "The Market for 'Lemons': Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84, no. 3 (August 1970): 488–500, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1879431>.

4. Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media* (Yale University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300235029>.

5. José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190889760.001.0001>.

monetization, and interface design shape public discourse. Subscription-based verification shifts badges from merit-based signals to pay-to-play features. This can undermine credibility and illustrates platform incentives that prioritize revenue over epistemic trust.

### *Visual Semiotics and Micro UX as Meaningful Signs*

Badges are visual signs. Drawing from Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images*,<sup>6</sup> interface elements can be analyzed through representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. A checkmark once denoted identity validation; today, it may connote status, customer-support access, or pay-to-play participation. The visual uniformity of badges masks a semiotic complexity that varies by platform, genre, and audience.

### *Trust Transfer and Interface-Level Heuristics*

Trust Transfer Theory explains how institutional trust migrates to less familiar entities via proxy symbols, including verification badges.<sup>7</sup> Combined with narrative transportation theory,<sup>8</sup> badges act as framing devices that position influencers within emotionally resonant storytelling ecosystems. Evidence

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6. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857>.

7. Chien-Hsin Liao, Ju-Kuei Hsieh, and Sushant Kumar, "Does the Verified Badge of Social Media Matter? The Perspective of Trust Transfer Theory," *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing* 18, no. 6 (2024): 1017–33, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-10-2023-0339>.

8. Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 701–21, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>; Tom van Laer, Ko de Ruyter, Luca M. Visconti, and Martin Wetzels, "The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model: A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Consumers' Narrative Transportation," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 5 (February 2014): 797–817, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673383>.

suggests verified badges can strengthen trust and downstream attitudes—with relatively stronger effects for smaller creators—but outcomes are contingent on context and content quality.<sup>9</sup>

### *Relational Labor and Authenticity Performance*

Influencers do not merely produce content—they perform relational labor.<sup>10</sup> Authenticity becomes currency. Verification symbols, when interpreted as markers of professionalism, may enhance trust; when seen as purchased, they may disrupt parasocial intimacy. These tensions must inform any attempt at verification reform.<sup>11</sup>

## Micro-Visual Storytelling: Interface Symbols as Compressed Narratives

Micro-visual storytelling can be used to describe the way compact interface symbols—badges, icons, watermarks—encode broader narratives of identity, reliability, and trust. The badge is one such compressed narrative, a single mark conveying identity, competence, and ethics (figure 1).

Examples include Airbnb’s “Superhost” (reputation via sustained high ratings), LinkedIn skill assessments (platform-proprietary competence signals), and TikTok verification evolving from celebrity authentication toward mixed identity/benefits signaling within a subscription model.

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9. Liao, Hsieh, and Kumar, “Does the Verified Badge of Social Media Matter?,” 1017–1033.

10. Nancy K. Baym, “Connect with Your Audience! The Relational Labor of Connection,” *Communication Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2015): 14–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2015.996401>.

11. Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (Yale University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300218176.001.0001>.



Figure 3.1: Proposed influencer verification badge (brand-agnostic). The badge compresses identity validation, professional competence, and ethical disclosure into one symbol.

*Source:* Original artwork by the author.

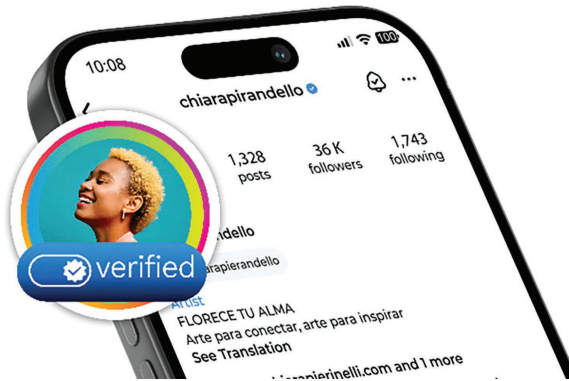


Figure 3.2: Contextual placement of the badge on a profile screen. Proximity to name, handle, and biography increases legibility and supports split-second credibility judgments.

*Source:* Original artwork by the author.

These badges function as narrative compressions, allowing instant heuristic decisions. But when the cost of obtaining them decreases or meanings become ambiguous, their trustworthiness collapses.

To show narrative compression in the context of the creator industry, figure 2 illustrates the badge on a profile screen. Placing the badge near core identity elements—name, handle, avatar, and biography—foregrounds credibility at decision points.

Beyond profile screens, audiences also encounter competence cues in high-velocity surfaces such as story rings, where rapid, pre-attentive

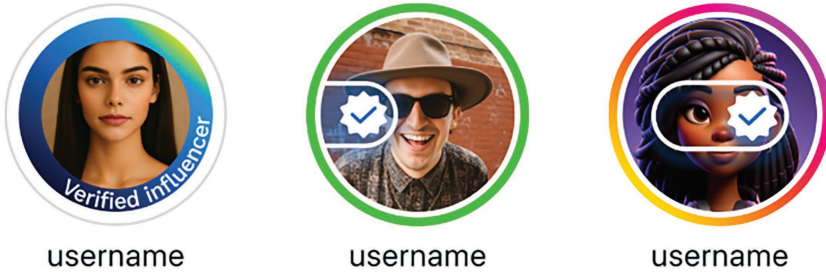


Figure 3.3: Avatar-ring variants as micro-visual storytelling. (A) “Verified influencer” bezel; (B) competence rosette overlay; (C) platform-native ring style.

Source: Original artwork by the author.

judgments are made. Figure 3 presents three brand-agnostic avatar-ring variants that preserve platform visual grammars while adding a compact competence/ethics cue.

## Framework Proposal: A Multidimensional Verification System

To address the information asymmetry plaguing the influencer marketing industry, this framework moves beyond simple identity checks to evaluate the specific competencies that brands and audiences value. The proposed influencer verification badge evaluates creators across three core dimensions. Each includes both qualitative and quantitative indicators, audited periodically through a combination of peer review, automated analytics, and platform-partner verification.

### *Dimension I: Professionalism and Business Competence*

Credentials and Expertise: Verified education, certifications, work experience (e.g., via third-party databases or credentialing services).

Portfolio and References: Case studies, client reviews, completion rates, and campaign consistency.

Project Management Skills: Brief adherence, punctuality, responsiveness, communication quality.

### *Dimension II: Creative and Content Quality*

Visual and Narrative Excellence: Aesthetic quality, originality, storytelling ability.

Platform Proficiency: Technical understanding of formats (e.g., Reels, Shorts, TikTok trends).

Engagement Metrics Integrity: Engagement authenticity audits (bot analysis, retention curves).

### *Dimension III: Ethical Standards and Social Responsibility*

Disclosure and Transparency: FTC compliance, labeling of sponsored content, affiliate disclosures.

Inclusive and Responsible Content: DEI sensitivity, accessibility features, tone.

Value Alignment and Public Conduct: History of problematic behavior, brand mismatches, reputational risks.

A radar view illustrates how verified creators could differ by profile rather than a single composite score (figure 4).

## **Market Implications and Industry Applications**

The implementation of a specialized influencer verification badge can create significant value across the creator-economy stack by addressing persistent market inefficiencies and redistributing trust more transparently.



Figure 3.4: Three-dimension verification profile. Professionalism and business competence, influencer expertise and content quality, and social responsibility/ethics are scored separately to avoid single-metric distortion. *Source:* Original artwork by the author.

### *For Brands and Advertisers*

The verification badge can contribute to risk mitigation and brand safety. Verified competence and ethics reduce partner risk as trust builds up, contributing to reputational spillover and regulatory exposure. Also, it streamlines vendor onboarding and legal review.

With regards to procurement efficiency, the badge is useful as a replacement of ad-hoc vetting with standardized criteria. This may help lower search and due-diligence costs for clients if part of the work has been carried out in the verification process. Additionally, this may contribute to supporting request-for-proposal (RFP) scoring rubrics beyond vanity metrics. On the other hand, the badge can contribute to a better performance alignment through the facilitation of fit between an audience and the influencer.

Instead of basing the decision of cooperation with an influencer on follower counts, the badge can be linked to outcomes.

### *For Agencies and Platforms*

In the context of service level agreements (SLA), the badge has operational benefits that include the simplification of scoping and the adherence to timelines. For platforms, this may mean that recommendation engines can sharpen their matchmaking, reducing false positives and possibly curbing fraud. This implies betterments for measurement and audit procedures, where a standardized disclosure has all the necessary data that can be used even to compare influencers and their cooperation across campaigns.

### *For Professional Creators*

Professional creators may benefit from the existence of badges due to market differentiation through signals, projecting credibility to premium buyers. This may have effects on their pricing strategy; for example, toward premium pricing. Also, the badge can become a motivation element for further upskilling that goes in line with higher pricing. If this relationship is sustainable, creators can systematically build their reputation and be recognized for it on platforms.

### *For Audiences and Consumers*

With regards to audiences, the kernel of the badge is that transparency can grow toward better decision confidence. With clearer disclosure, consumers have data for informed decisions. Multiplying this effect will have an impact on the environment of the consumer and influencer, contributing to trustworthy ecosystems where spam and scams are weakened.

## Practical Recommendations

For brands, it may prove practical to embed verification tiers in briefs/RFPs and evaluate uplift with pre- and post-rollouts and lightweight in-campaign micro surveys linked to session-level outcomes. Agencies/platforms should provide on-view instrumentation and shared schemas so exposure, retention, and survey signals aggregate cleanly across campaigns. Under this model, creators place badges at decision nodes (profile header, story rings, feed headers, near video CTAs) and maintain visible disclosure/ethics checklists; brand-side email can complement this with BIMI/VMC (Brand indicators for message identification/verified mark certificates) that are DMARC-aligned (domain-based messaged authentication, reporting, and conformance) to increase sender recognizability.

## Risks, Governance, and Implementation Trade-Offs

Any quantifiable badge system risks manipulation. Engagement metrics, portfolio prestige, or algorithmic scoring can be strategically optimized in ways that erode meaning. Insights from audit-culture scholarship suggest building safeguards against metric capture:<sup>12</sup> randomized audits, cross-platform triangulation, and hybrid scoring that resists single-metric optimization.

Who governs the badge? Platforms have incentive to retain symbolic control. An independent body—perhaps a nonprofit industry consortium—may be needed to standardize criteria. Cross-platform adoption will require platform buy-in, possibly incentivized by advertiser pressure or regulatory nudges.

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12. Marilyn Strathern, “Improving Ratings’: Audit in the British University System,” *European Review* 5, no. 3 (1997): 305–21, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1234-981X\(199707\)5:3<305::AID-EURO184>3.0.CO;2-4](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1234-981X(199707)5:3<305::AID-EURO184>3.0.CO;2-4).

A badge in beauty content may signal different expectations than one in news commentary or political satire. The verification system must be sensitive to genre conventions and cultural codes. One-size-fits-all designs risk misfire.

Formalizing trust may unintentionally suppress dissent, experimentation, or critical storytelling—areas that often push culture forward. Incentive-compatible designs must balance advertiser interests with creative freedom and democratic expression.

## Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

Verification badges operate as more than functional labels—they are powerful narrative instruments that shape platform trust ecologies. The proposal here—while theoretical—is designed to initiate deeper scholarly and industry discourse around interface signals, trust formation, and creative-economy governance. Finally, the next steps as part of a research and work agenda can be useful to understand the effect of badges.

- Empirical Research: Cross-platform A/B testing of badge visibility, effects on user behavior, trust perception, and conversion.
- Ethnographic Work: Interviews with creators, audiences, and brand managers to understand how badges are interpreted and deployed.
- Governance Studies: Exploration of coregulatory badge models (industry–platform–civil society collaborations).
- Semiotic and Cultural Analysis: How do badge meanings shift across geographies, genres, and generations?
- Badges are not neutral. They are cultural artifacts, economic tools, and symbolic contracts—all in one. If designed well, they can strengthen trust. If not, they risk deepening inequality, opacity, and content commodification.

## Acknowledgments

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## Declaration of AI Use

ChatGPT (OpenAI; accessed September 20, 2025) was used to provide language editing, alternative phrasings, and assistance with organizing and formatting references during manuscript preparation. All AI-assisted output was reviewed and edited by the author, and the author takes full responsibility for the content. The tool was not used to generate empirical results or original data analyses, and no confidential or personal data were entered.



# From Panels to Platforms: How Webtoon Pioneers Transmedia Storytelling in Startups

FERNANDO GARCÍA-CRUZ

## Abstract

This article examines how Webtoon, a leading digital comics platform, functions as both a pioneering transmedia storytelling ecosystem and a low-risk incubator for intellectual properties (IP). Drawing on the concepts of minimum viable story (MVS) and narrative venture capital (NVC)—introduced here as original analytical frameworks—the study explores how Webtoon enables creators to test narrative prototypes, gather audience feedback, and scale into larger media franchises, mirroring the iterative development cycle of startups.

The essay also compares Webtoon’s model to Netflix and Spotify, analyzing similarities in how these platforms disrupted their respective industries by reshaping distribution models and consumer habits through storytelling as a core business driver. The findings argue that Webtoon’s approach offers a scalable and repeatable model for startups in creative industries, where story becomes the product and platforms act as accelerators.

This synthesis bridges media studies, entrepreneurship theory, and platform economics, offering both academic and practical implications for scholars, creators, and innovation strategists. The study concludes with reflections on the evolving nature of storytelling in platform capitalism and the strategic role of MVS in the attention economy.

**Keywords:** Webtoon, transmedia storytelling, minimum viable story, narrative venture capital, platform capitalism, digital comics, creative entrepreneurship, media innovation, startup ecosystems, content incubation.

## Introduction

Storytelling has long been recognized not just as an art form but as an engine of cultural influence, economic value, and technological adaptation. In the age of digital platforms, the narrative itself has become both the primary product and the strategic driver of entire business models. Webtoon—originally a South Korean innovation—has emerged as a dominant global player in the digital comics space, reimagining the ways stories are created, distributed, and monetized.

While print comic books and serialized strips historically thrived in newspapers, pulp magazines, and direct-market shops, Webtoon situates the comic strip/comic book hybrid within the infinite-scroll architecture of the smartphone era. This shift is not merely a change in format; it is a reconfiguration of the creative economy. Episodic, visually rich storytelling—optimized for vertical scrolling—functions as the minimum viable story (MVS), a narrative prototype that can be tested in real time with a global audience.

In this sense, Webtoon acts as a narrative incubator, mirroring the role of venture capital in the startup ecosystem. Just as venture investors seek early-stage products with potential for scale, Webtoon fosters early-stage stories that can pivot, evolve, and ultimately expand into multiple media verticals. The analogy is more than metaphorical: In both cases, initial iterations serve to validate market fit, build a loyal user base, and attract larger investments—whether from streaming platforms, publishers, or studios.

However, this is not without historical precedent. From the earliest days of mass media, comic strips and comic books have displayed transmedia tendencies. Superman's 1940s radio serials; Batman's Republic Pictures serials; Dick Tracy's radio, film, and animated adaptations; and Peanuts' holiday television specials all demonstrate that the union of image and text has always been inherently adaptable. Notably, Superman's creators initially

sought a comic strip deal, not a comic book one—signaling that cross-media potential was embedded in the medium from its inception. Webtoon’s innovation lies in digitizing and accelerating this process for a platform-driven, global audience.

The objective of this article is threefold:

1. To examine Webtoon’s transmedia storytelling strategy and its capacity to function as a low-risk IP incubator.
2. To introduce and apply the concepts of MVS and narrative venture capital (NVC) to the study of digital storytelling platforms.
3. To compare Webtoon’s industry disruption to that of Netflix and Spotify, analyzing both similarities and differences in their use of storytelling to reshape business models.

In doing so, this paper situates Webtoon within the broader context of platform capitalism, as articulated by Nick Srnicek<sup>1</sup> and the attention economy, highlighting the opportunities and tensions inherent in a creator-driven yet platform-controlled ecosystem.

## Historical Foundations: Comics as Natural Transmedia

The concept of transmedia storytelling—narratives unfolding across multiple platforms, each contributing uniquely to the whole—may seem like a modern invention. However, comics as a medium have been inherently transmedia since their earliest days. Their hybrid nature—uniting visual art and written text—lends itself to adaptation, expansion, and migration across formats. From the earliest comic strips in newspapers to serialized graphic narratives, the medium’s DNA has been tied to cross-platform potential.

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1. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Polity Press, 2016).

### *The Origins in Comic Strips*

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, comic strips such as the *Yellow Kid* and *Krazy Kat* established the visual-linguistic grammar that continues to define sequential art. These short, episodic narratives were published in newspapers, reaching massive audiences and offering a form of daily serialized storytelling. The combination of visual immediacy and episodic pacing made them ideal for adaptation into other media. In many cases, comic strips were repurposed as illustrated storybooks, theatrical performances, or early animation shorts.

Creators and publishers quickly recognized that the union of image and text could transcend the printed page. The fixed visual representation of characters provided a ready-made identity for audiences to connect with while episodic narrative arcs offered a flexible framework for expansion into radio, film, and merchandise.

### *From Strips to Serial Storytelling in Other Media*

The 1930s and 1940s brought an explosion of cross-media storytelling rooted in comic properties. Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, stands as a landmark example. Contrary to what might be assumed today, Siegel and Shuster originally sought a comic strip syndication deal, viewing that format as the most prestigious and financially secure option at the time. It was only when they failed to secure syndication that Superman debuted in *Action Comics* no. 1 (1938)—a pivot that would forever alter pop culture history.

From there, Superman expanded rapidly: the 1940s radio serial introduced new story elements (including Kryptonite) that would later be integrated into the comics, while Fleischer Studios' animated shorts showcased dynamic visual interpretations. The character's adaptability across media demonstrated that comics could serve as both source material and iterative narrative playgrounds.

Similarly, Batman made his way into Republic Pictures film serials in the 1940s, with changes in costume design, character tone, and supporting cast tailored to cinematic storytelling. These adaptations often fed back into the comics, illustrating a bidirectional flow of influence between print and screen.

### *Dick Tracy, Peanuts, and the Expansion of Cultural Icons*

*Dick Tracy*, Chester Gould's crime-fighting detective, launched as a newspaper strip in 1931 and was quickly adapted into radio dramas (1934), film serials (1937–41), and later television. The character's distinct visual style—trench coat, fedora, and angular jawline—made him instantly recognizable across media while the serialized, cliffhanger-driven plots lent themselves to episodic radio and film formats.

In the case of *Peanuts*, Charles M. Schulz's minimalist yet emotionally rich strip began in 1950 and evolved into a multimedia juggernaut. The holiday television specials, starting with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965), demonstrated how the tone and pacing of a comic strip could be translated into longer-form storytelling while preserving the essence of the source material. Here, the move into television expanded the strip's reach and solidified its place in American cultural memory.

### *The Comic-to-Film Continuum Beyond Superheroes*

It is important to note that this adaptability was not confined to traditional superhero narratives. Works such as *From Hell* (Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell), *Sin City* (Frank Miller), *Scott Pilgrim* (Bryan Lee O'Malley), and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill) illustrate that even idiosyncratic, genre-blending comics can successfully migrate to film while retaining core narrative and visual elements. In each

case, the source material's graphic specificity served as a production blueprint for costume design, framing, and tone.

### *Lessons for the Digital Age*

These historical precedents show that comics have always been predisposed to transmedia expansion. What has changed in the Webtoon era is the speed, scale, and accessibility of that process. In the print era, adaptations required negotiations with syndicates, studios, or publishers—gatekeepers who controlled distribution and capital. In contrast, Webtoon allows creators to bypass many of these traditional barriers, testing an MVS directly with audiences and attracting media interest based on demonstrated engagement metrics.

The historical trajectory from comic strips to multimedia franchises underscores two critical points relevant to this study:

1. The inherent adaptability of comics as a medium is not a new phenomenon but a foundational characteristic.
2. Webtoon's platform model digitizes and democratizes this adaptability, aligning it with startup-like iteration cycles that reduce risk and accelerate transmedia growth.

### *FROM PRINT TO MULTIPLE MEDIA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY*

Long before the advent of digital platforms, comics demonstrated an inherent transmedia potential. The union of image and text—a defining characteristic of comics—made them adaptable to various media formats, from radio to film. This adaptability was not accidental; many early comic creators actively sought cross-media opportunities as a means to expand their audiences and revenue streams.

For example, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, originally pitched the character as a comic strip, believing that syndicated newspaper placement would provide broader and faster exposure than comic books. When the strip failed to find a buyer, the character debuted instead in *Action Comics* no. 1 (1938). Almost immediately, Superman crossed into other media, with a radio drama in 1940 (*The Adventures of Superman*) that introduced iconic elements such as Kryptonite and Superman's catchphrase, "Faster than a speeding bullet."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Batman, created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, transitioned from his first appearance in *Detective Comics* no. 27 (1939) to a Republic Pictures serial in 1943, expanding his narrative reach beyond print. These adaptations were not mere translations; they introduced visual, auditory, and narrative innovations that fed back into the comics themselves.

### *SERIAL STORYTELLING AND NARRATIVE PORTABILITY*

Serial formats in early comic strips—such as *Dick Tracy* by Chester Gould—were particularly well suited to adaptation because their episodic structure mirrored the pacing of radio episodes and film serials. *Dick Tracy* moved from newspapers to radio in 1934 and later to live-action serials, each medium adding its own stylistic layer to the detective's mythology.

Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* offers a different example of narrative portability. Debuting as a daily newspaper strip in 1950, *Peanuts* expanded into television specials, beginning with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965), that not only preserved the comic's humor and melancholy tone but also became cultural touchstones in their own right. Schulz's characters existed simultaneously in print, animation, and merchandise, foreshadowing the transmedia franchises of today.

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2. Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* (Chronicle Books, 1998).

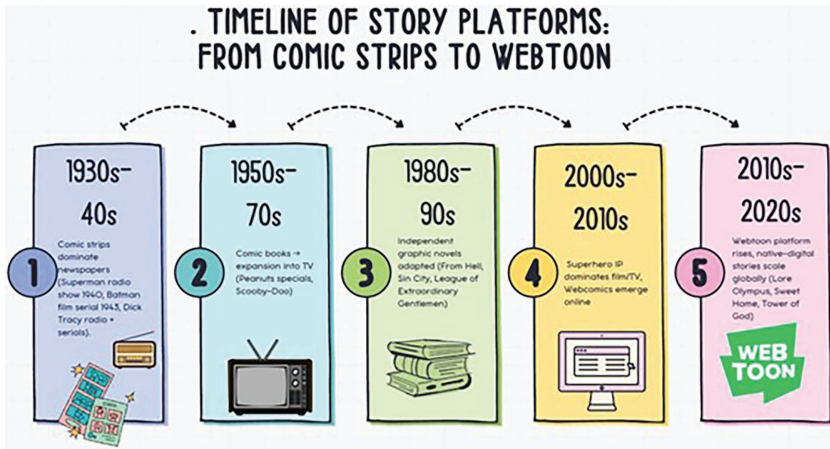


Figure 4.1: This timeline illustrates the evolution of storytelling platforms from early twentieth-century comic strips to late twentieth-century independent graphic novels adapted into film and, finally, to twenty-first-century digital platforms like Webtoon. The visual highlights the inherently transmedia nature of comics and their adaptability to new media ecosystems

Source: Created by the author based on historical media evolution.

### *The Early Creator's Mindset Toward Transmedia*

Archival interviews and industry histories reveal that many early comics creators were not passive participants in transmedia expansion—they actively sought it. This entrepreneurial mindset mirrors that of today's Webtoon creators, who often view their digital series as a stepping stone to adaptations, merchandise, or other media deals. In both cases, creators understood that the fusion of images and narrative text gave their properties a unique adaptation advantage: Visuals could guide filmmakers, animators, and merchandisers while the written component anchored character voices and plot structure.

### *From Early Adaptations to Modern Webtoon Practices*

This historical lineage provides critical context for understanding why platforms like Webtoon are so effective as IP incubators. Just as *Superman*, *Batman*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Peanuts* proved that stories could migrate successfully across media, Webtoon titles like *Sweet Home*, *Tower of God*, and *Lore Olympus* show that the process has only accelerated in the digital age. The difference lies in scale, speed, and audience participation: While mid-twentieth-century adaptations often took years and were shaped by studio executives, today's digital platforms can identify a promising IP, measure audience enthusiasm, and greenlight adaptations in months.

This historical continuity underscores the central thesis of this article: Transmedia storytelling is not a digital invention but a structural feature of comics as a medium, one that platforms like Webtoon have optimized for the contemporary media landscape.

## Webtoon as a Transmedia Ecosystem

Webtoon represents more than a publishing platform for digital comics; it is an ecosystem for narrative incubation. Its design, monetization model, and creator support infrastructure position it as a digital-era transmedia accelerator—a space where ideas can be tested, refined, and scaled into multiplatform intellectual properties.

### *From Panels to Platforms*

The transition from traditional comic publishing to Webtoon's vertical-scroll format reflects a broader shift in media consumption habits. Traditional comic books, constrained by print production cycles and physical

distribution, relied heavily on retail channels and editorial gatekeeping. Webtoon eliminates much of this friction. Its mobile-native design aligns with the habits of global audiences, allowing stories to reach millions without the delays or costs of physical production.

Creators can upload episodes at will, maintain direct interaction with their readers, and receive immediate feedback through comments, likes, and reader analytics. This direct creator-to-consumer pipeline enables rapid iteration—akin to software development’s agile methodology.

### *Minimum Viable Story (MVS)*

Borrowing from Eric Ries’s concept of the “minimum viable product,”<sup>3</sup> this paper proposes the minimum viable story (MVS) as a narrative framework tailored to digital platforms. An MVS is the smallest coherent narrative unit that can engage an audience, establish tone, and introduce a world worth returning to. In the Webtoon format, an MVS might be a single episode of thirty to sixty vertical panels—enough to hook the reader without requiring a fully developed plotline or world.

This approach mirrors the iterative nature of startups:

- **Test:** Launch a narrative seed to gauge audience reaction.
- **Measure:** Use engagement metrics—subscriptions, episode completions, comments—to determine viability.
- **Pivot or Persevere:** Refine narrative elements, character arcs, or pacing based on data.

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3. Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (Crown Business, 2011).

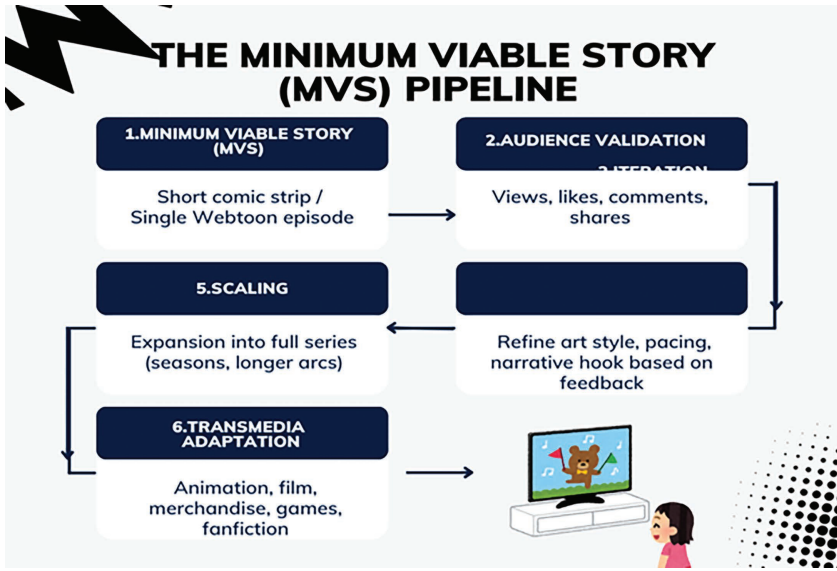


Figure 4.2: The minimum viable story (MVS) pipeline.

Source: Created by the author (conceptual visualization based on Lean Startup model).

By lowering the cost of entry—both financially and creatively—MVS empowers creators to experiment with high-concept ideas without committing to years of development before release. In many cases, these narrative seeds grow into full-fledged series that later attract adaptation offers from streaming platforms or publishers.

Figure 2 illustrates the process by which a small narrative unit—such as a comic strip or short Webtoon episode—functions as an MVS. The pipeline demonstrates how creators test audience engagement, gather feedback, iterate on narrative or artistic elements, and ultimately scale their stories into full-length series or transmedia franchises, including animation, games, and merchandise. The model parallels the Lean Startup methodology applied to storytelling.

### *Narrative Venture Capital (NVC)*

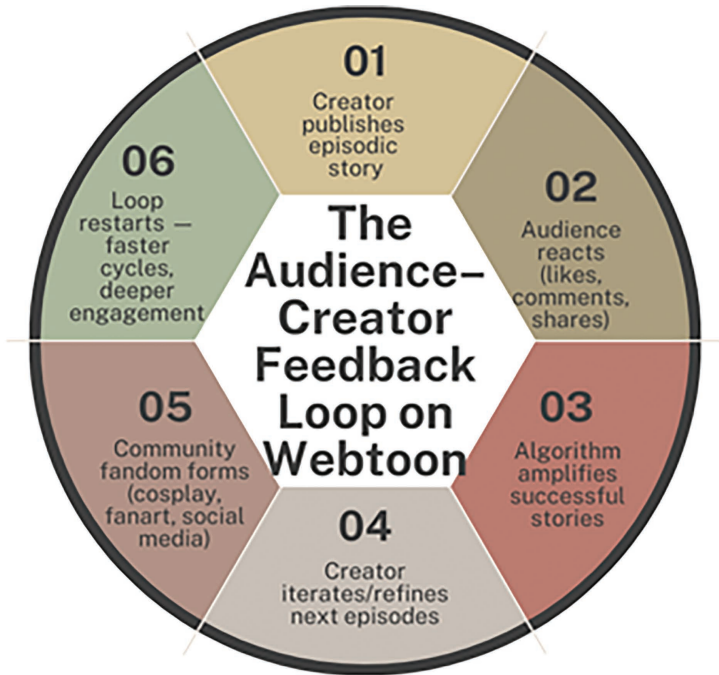
Just as venture capitalists invest in early-stage startups with high growth potential, Webtoon acts as a narrative venture capital (NVC) platform. Here, the “investment” is not monetary in the traditional sense but infrastructural—providing distribution, audience access, monetization tools, and, in some cases, marketing support.

Under this model, Webtoon’s ecosystem serves several VC-like functions:

- **Deal Flow:** The platform hosts thousands of creators, increasing the likelihood of discovering breakout IPs.
- **Proof of Concept:** Popular series generate hard engagement data, serving as validation for studios or publishers considering adaptation deals.
- **Portfolio Diversification:** Webtoon spreads its bets across genres, styles, and markets, reducing reliance on any single franchise.

This process significantly reduces the risk for traditional media investors. By the time a Webtoon property is adapted into animation (*Tower of God*), live action (*Sweet Home*), or print (*Lore Olympus*), it has already demonstrated market demand.

Figure 3 illustrates the cyclical relationship between creators and audiences on the Webtoon platform. Creators publish episodic content; audiences respond through likes, comments, and shares; algorithms amplify successful content; and creators iterate in response to audience input. This loop accelerates narrative innovation and represents a form of cocreated storytelling unique to digital platforms.



**Digital feedback accelerates narrative innovation compared to traditional publishing.**

Figure 4.3: The Audience-Creator Feedback Loop on Webtoon  
Source: Created by the author.

### *Platform Economics and Power Asymmetries*

While Webtoon democratizes distribution, it also operates within the logic of platform capitalism.<sup>4</sup> The platform controls key levers: discoverability algorithms, monetization policies, and the terms of adaptation deals. This creates both opportunities and tensions for creators. On one hand, creators

<sup>4</sup> Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.

benefit from unprecedented access to audiences; on the other, they may face constraints on revenue share, creative control, or rights retention.

Recent studies on creative labor in the platform economy<sup>5</sup> highlight these asymmetries. Webtoon's position as both enabler and gatekeeper mirrors dynamics seen on YouTube, Spotify, and Netflix—platforms that offer global reach while concentrating power in algorithmic and corporate structures.

**case studies: *LORE OLYMPUS, TOWER OF GOD, SWEET HOME***

*Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe began as a Webtoon Original in 2018, reimagining Greek mythology in a contemporary visual style. Its success led to print editions via Del Rey and a planned animated series by the Jim Henson Company. The series' episodic structure made it an ideal MVS candidate, quickly proving its appeal through massive reader engagement.

*Tower of God* by SIU originated in 2010 on Naver Webtoon, eventually becoming one of the platform's longest-running hits. It was adapted into an anime in 2020, leveraging a decade of serialized storytelling and fan investment.

*Sweet Home* by Kim Carnby and Hwang Young-chan, a horror-thriller Webtoon, transitioned into a Netflix live-action series in 2020, demonstrating the direct pipeline from platform serialization to global streaming.

Table 1 compares selected Webtoon titles that successfully transitioned from initial MVS-style beginnings to larger transmedia expansions. Each case highlights the narrative hook tested, markers of audience engagement, and eventual adaptations into other media, demonstrating how Webtoon functions as a low-risk incubator for intellectual property (IP).

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5. Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York University Press, 2019); Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (New York University Press, 2019).

Table 1. Case studies of webtoon titles as MVS → transmedia success.

Title	Initial MVS Hook	Audience Validation	Transmedia Expansion	Notes
Lore Olympus	Modern retelling of Greek myths, romance angle	Massive readership on Webtoon (1B views+)	Print edition (Del Rey), animation (Warner Bros)	Example of myth adaptation with strong fanbase feedback loop.
Sweet Home	Horror-survival short episodes	Millions of views, viral fandom	Netflix live-action series	Early episode format allowed test of pacing, suspense.
Tower of God	Progressive, game-like quest	Strong global fan following	Crunchyroll anime, merchandise	Worldbuilding expanded from core quest.
The God of High School	Martial arts tournaments	Fan-driven hype, cosplay	Crunchyroll anime, games	Emphasis on visual dynamism adapted well into anime.

Source: Created by the author.

In each case, the Webtoon format allowed creators to validate and grow their audience before securing high-budget adaptations, thereby reducing risk for external investors.

### *The Feedback Loop: Cocreation and Iteration*

Webtoon’s comment sections and rating systems foster a participatory culture in which readers influence story development. This feedback loop functions as a form of real-time market research, enabling creators to identify which characters resonate, which plotlines falter, and where pacing adjustments are needed. Such iterative engagement strengthens audience loyalty and increases the likelihood of successful transmedia expansion.

## Comparative Platform Disruptions: Netflix, Spotify, and Webtoon

### *Industry Disruption Through Storytelling-Driven Models*

Netflix, Spotify, and Webtoon each disrupted a traditional industry—film/television, music, and comics, respectively—by leveraging platform-based distribution and storytelling as a core differentiator. While their business models diverge in specifics, all three exemplify how digital platforms can reshape consumption habits, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and cultivate direct relationships with audiences.

Netflix transformed television and film distribution through a subscription-based streaming model, freeing audiences from linear broadcast schedules. Spotify redefined music access with its freemium streaming service, emphasizing discoverability and personalization. Webtoon reimaged comics for the mobile-first era, introducing a vertical-scroll reading experience optimized for smartphones.

In each case, storytelling—whether in the form of scripted series, curated playlists, or serialized comics—was not just a product but the engine of user retention and platform growth.

### *Business Model Innovations*

#### **NETFLIX**

Core model: Subscription video on demand (SVOD).

Key innovation: Investment in original content (*House of Cards*, *Stranger Things*) to reduce reliance on licensed material.

Storytelling impact: Data-driven commissioning allowed Netflix to identify narrative trends (e.g., true crime, nostalgia-driven fantasy) and produce targeted hits.

### *SPOTIFY*

Core model: Freemium with premium subscription tiers.

Key innovation: Algorithmic personalization (Discover Weekly, Release Radar) and playlist culture as a form of “micro storytelling.

Storytelling impact: Playlists themselves became narrative arcs—sequenced emotional journeys, thematic collections, or curated “story-worlds” in audio form.

### *WEBTOON*

Core model: Free-to-read with microtransactions (“Fast Pass”), advertising, and adaptation partnerships.

Key innovation: Mobile-optimized vertical scroll format and creator monetization pathways.

Storytelling impact: The episodic release model mirrors television season arcs but at a granularity suited for mobile binge-reading.

### *Similarities in Disruption Strategies*

- **Disintermediation:** All three platforms bypassed traditional gatekeepers—studios, labels, and publishers—to give audiences direct access to content.
- **Data-Driven Content Decisions:** Netflix’s viewer metrics, Spotify’s listening data, and Webtoon’s reader analytics all inform creative and acquisition strategies.
- **Original IP Development:** Each platform invests in exclusive content to differentiate itself—Netflix Originals, Spotify Podcasts/Live Sessions, Webtoon Originals.
- **Global Reach with Localized Content:** Netflix commissions region-specific hits (*Money Heist*, *Kingdom*), Spotify curates local charts,

and Webtoon develops regionally popular series while enabling international translation.

### *Differences in Storytelling Implementation*

- **Narrative Length and Format:** Netflix focuses on long-form episodic arcs, Spotify on thematic and mood-based sequences, Webtoon on bite-sized, serialized storytelling that builds over time.
- **Audience Interaction:** Spotify listeners influence algorithms passively through plays and skips; Netflix gathers behavioral data without direct narrative feedback; Webtoon integrates active community feedback into story development.
- **Creator Autonomy:** Webtoon allows more independent entry points for creators compared to Netflix and Spotify, where production is often fully commissioned or label-driven.

Table 2 presents a comparative analysis of Netflix, Spotify, and Webtoon, focusing on their disrupted industries, narrative or content units (episodes, songs, or strips), revenue models, and the role of storytelling in shaping their business strategies. It underscores the parallels in how these platforms use serialized, modular content to drive engagement and monetize audiences.

### *Webtoon in the Context of Platform Capitalism*

As Srnicek<sup>6</sup> argues, digital platforms thrive by controlling infrastructure, extracting data, and locking in network effects. Webtoon mirrors this dynamic. While it democratizes access for creators, it retains ultimate

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6. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.

Table 2. Comparing Business Models of Netflix, Spotify, and Webtoon

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Traditional Industry Disrupted</b>	<b>Content Unit (Story/Song)</b>	<b>Revenue Model</b>	<b>Role of Storytelling</b>
Netflix	Film & TV distribution	Episode/Season	Subscription (SVOD)	Serialized storytelling drives binge-watching; algorithm recommends based on arcs.
Spotify	Music distribution	Song/Playlist	Freemium + Ads/Subscription	Narrative of artists' brand & playlists create emotional connections with listeners.
Webtoon	Comics publishing	Episode/Chapter (MVS)	Freemium + Microtransactions + Ads	Episodic narrative hooks build habit; fans invest emotionally before monetizing.

Source: Created by the author

control over discoverability and monetization terms. Similar critiques have been made of Spotify’s royalty model<sup>7</sup> and Netflix’s opacity in viewership metrics.<sup>8</sup>

The difference lies in the narrative centrality of Webtoon’s product. While Netflix and Spotify deliver stories and music largely as finished works, Webtoon offers in-progress narratives that evolve in real time with audience participation. This makes it both a content platform and an iterative storytelling laboratory.

### *The Role of Storytelling in Business Model Shifts*

Netflix: Storytelling drives subscription retention; cliffhangers and bingeable arcs keep churn rates low.

7. Andrei Morris and John Powers, “Control, Curation, and Profit in the Streaming Music Industry,” *International Journal of Music Business Research* 8, no. 2 (2015): 177–191.

8. Lobato, *Netflix Nations*.

Spotify: While music is inherently nonnarrative, playlist sequencing and podcast storytelling create thematic continuity that deepens engagement.

Webtoon: Serialized comics leverage the MVS concept to hook readers early, then build investment over months or years—turning casual browsers into loyal communities.

The convergence of these models highlights a shared strategic insight. In the attention economy, story is the product and platforms that master the pacing, delivery, and emotional arc of that story gain competitive advantage.

## The Role of Minimum Viable Storytelling in Digital Media Platforms

### *Defining the Minimum Viable Story (MVS)*

MVS extends the lean startup concept of the MVP<sup>9</sup> into the realm of narrative creation. An MVS is the smallest complete narrative unit that can engage an audience, convey a distinctive voice, and spark further investment—whether that investment is emotional, temporal, or financial. It prioritizes core story elements—character, conflict, and context—while postponing full-scale worldbuilding or complex subplots until the audience demonstrates sustained interest.

In the context of Webtoon, an MVS might be a single episode of thirty to sixty vertical panels that introduces compelling characters, establishes a hook, and delivers a payoff sufficient to encourage the reader to subscribe or return. By analogy, in Netflix an MVS could be the pilot episode of a new series while in Spotify, an MVS could be the initial episode of a serialized podcast or the release of a small EP that tests market appetite before a full album.

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9. Ries, *The Lean Startup*.

### *Why MVS Matters in the Platform Economy*

The platform economy<sup>10</sup> rewards speed, adaptability, and audience responsiveness. An MVS fits neatly into this environment because:

- **Lower Risk:** Creators can test ideas without committing to multiyear production schedules.
- **Rapid Feedback:** Platforms provide real-time engagement metrics, allowing creators to pivot quickly.
- **Scalable Story Growth:** Successful MVS launches can be expanded into long-form projects, merchandise, adaptations, or cross-media spin-offs.

### *MVS in Webtoon: From Experiment to Franchise*

Several high-profile Webtoon series began as modest experiments before evolving into transmedia properties:

*Lore Olympus:* Early episodes focused on reintroducing Hades and Persephone with modern dialogue and visual humor. Its popularity validated the concept before more elaborate arcs and complex art direction were introduced, eventually leading to a Del Rey print deal and a Jim Henson Company adaptation.

*Sweet Home:* Began with a simple horror premise—isolated apartment residents facing a mysterious threat—but built out character backstories and thematic depth after audience traction was established, culminating in a Netflix adaptation.

*True Beauty:* Started as a light commentary on makeup culture and grew into a layered romantic drama with international licensing and live-action adaptation.

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10. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

These cases illustrate how Webtoon functions as a low-risk narrative incubator, where MVS serves as a market test before large-scale media investment.

### *MVS Across Media Platforms*

**Netflix:** Pilots often serve as MVS equivalents, testing the viability of series concepts before full-season commitments. The streaming model enables “stealth pilots” within anthology formats (e.g., *Black Mirror*), where each episode can validate new creative approaches.

**Spotify:** Serialized podcasts frequently release “Episode Zero” or limited miniseries to gauge audience interest before committing to long-term production. Additionally, curated playlists function as MVS-style “story samplers” in musical form.

While Netflix and Spotify use MVS for content validation, Webtoon uses it for both content and creator validation, identifying not only which stories resonate but which creators can sustain an engaged audience over time.

### *MVS as a Driver of Narrative Venture Capital*

In the Narrative Venture Capital model, MVS serves as the pitch deck: a concise, compelling demonstration of a story’s potential. Just as startups present MVPs to secure investment, creators present MVS episodes to attract platform promotion, monetization opportunities, or adaptation deals. Data from the MVS phase provides the “due diligence” evidence that media investors seek—audience size, retention rates, demographic appeal.

### *Academic and Industry Implications*

For media scholars, MVS offers a framework to study narrative scalability—how stories evolve from minimal viable forms into transmedia franchises. For industry practitioners, MVS provides a strategic tool to balance creative ambition with market realities. By focusing on the essential story hook and validating it early, creators and platforms alike can reduce creative waste and maximize return on investment.

## Industry Disruptions Through Digital Platforms: Comparing Spotify, Netflix, and Webtoon

### *Introduction: Disrupting Traditional Media Industries*

Over the past two decades, digital platforms have redefined the business logic of their respective industries. Spotify disrupted the recorded music business by shifting consumer behavior from ownership to access, replacing the album-centric model with a streaming-based, algorithm-driven experience.<sup>11</sup> Netflix similarly upended the television and film industries, moving from DVD rental to on-demand streaming, and later into content production while reshaping global viewing habits.<sup>12</sup> Webtoon, although operating in the creative publishing space, has enacted a parallel disruption by transforming the way comics are created, distributed, monetized, and adapted.

While these industries—music, video entertainment, and comics—differ in their production and consumption patterns, their digital disruptors share key characteristics:

- Platform-Based Distribution
- Data-Driven Curation

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11. Morris and Powers, “Control, Curation and Musical Experience in Streaming Music Services.”

12. Lobato, *Netflix Nations*.

- Direct-to-Consumer Relationships
- Scalable Global Reach

### *Storytelling as a Strategic Differentiator*

For Spotify, Netflix, and Webtoon, storytelling is not merely a product attribute—it is a core driver of user engagement. In Netflix’s case, original programming like *Stranger Things* and *The Crown* became cultural events, extending into merchandise, books, and games. Spotify’s narrative impact is subtler but evident in serialized podcasts (*Serial*, *The Joe Rogan Experience*) and curated playlists that construct thematic or emotional arcs for listeners.

Webtoon, in contrast, embeds storytelling directly into its value proposition. Every piece of content is a story and platform economics are driven by reader loyalty to ongoing narratives. While Spotify may use storytelling around music (through podcasting or artist branding) and Netflix delivers storytelling primarily in audiovisual form, Webtoon’s storytelling is the product itself, making narrative development and community engagement inseparable.

### *Business Model Shifts*

#### *SPOTIFY*

Transitioned from a unit-sale model (CDs, MP3s) to a recurring subscription model, supplemented by advertising. Its revenue model is heavily dependent on scale, with licensing agreements dictating margins<sup>13</sup>.

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13. Pedro Aguiar and Joel Waldfogel, “Platforms, Promotion, and Product Discovery: Evidence from Spotify Playlists,” *Journal of Industrial Economics* 66, no. 1 (2018): 1–32.

*NETFLIX*

Moved from physical rentals to an all-you-can-watch subscription model, eventually investing heavily in original content to differentiate itself from competitors and reduce licensing dependencies.

*WEBTOON*

Operates a freemium model, offering most episodes for free but monetizing through early-access “Fast Pass” features, microtransactions, advertisements, and cross-media deals (e.g., print publishing, adaptation rights).

Despite industry differences, all three platforms share an emphasis on reducing friction for consumers, leveraging recommendation algorithms, and building ecosystems where users spend extended time.

*Data as a Narrative Feedback Loop*

Data analytics plays a central role in how these platforms refine and expand content. Spotify analyzes skip rates, playlist additions, and listening time to influence promotional strategies. Netflix tracks viewing completion rates, drop-off points, and genre preferences to guide commissioning decisions<sup>14</sup>

Webtoon uses metrics such as subscriber growth, episode likes, comment engagement, and reader retention to identify potential breakout IPs. This real-time feedback allows creators to adjust pacing, tone, or art style mid-series—something far harder to achieve in traditional publishing.

This data-driven responsiveness enables what can be described as dynamic narrative iteration, aligning creative decisions with measurable audience behavior.

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14. Albert Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (Rutgers University Press, 2015)

### *Converging Disruption Patterns*

Three shared disruption patterns emerge:

1. **Global Access with Local Adaptation**  
Spotify's localized playlists, Netflix's regional productions, and Webtoon's translated and culturally adapted series all demonstrate a blend of global reach and local relevance.
2. **Content as an Ecosystem**  
Netflix franchises such as *The Witcher* and *Money Heist*, Spotify podcast networks, and Webtoon transmedia adaptations like *Sweet Home* and *Tower of God* show how platforms aim to retain users through interconnected offerings.
3. **Creator-to-Consumer Proximity**  
All three platforms remove traditional industry gatekeepers, enabling more direct engagement between creators and audiences.

### *Diverging Industry Realities*

Despite these similarities, there are critical differences:

1. **Asset Ownership**  
Spotify licenses rather than owns most of its core content; Netflix increasingly owns IP; Webtoon operates a mixed model, with some IP retained by creators and others controlled by the platform.
2. **Production Cost Structures**  
Music production costs per track are relatively low compared to Netflix's multimillion-dollar original series. Webtoon's episodic production costs fall in between, with scaling potential that makes it attractive to investors.
3. **Narrative Centrality**  
For Netflix and Webtoon, narrative is the main consumer draw; for Spotify, narrative is an emerging but secondary element.

### *Storytelling as the Common Disruptor*

In all three cases, storytelling plays a central role in customer acquisition, retention, and brand identity. For Netflix, serialized storytelling drives binge-watching; for Spotify, podcasts and artist narratives foster emotional connection; for Webtoon, serialized visual narratives directly sustain the platform's ecosystem. The MVS concept operates across all three: A single, compelling podcast episode, a Netflix pilot, or a Webtoon debut episode all serve as low-risk tests that can scale into global franchises if successful.

## **Conclusion: Narrative Innovation As the Scalable Core of Digital Platform Disruption**

### *Revisiting the Core Argument*

This article began with the premise that Webtoon functions as a low-risk incubator for IPs, paralleling the way venture capital functions for startups. By allowing creators to test narrative concepts through serialized, visually rich stories, Webtoon creates an MVS that can expand into fully fledged transmedia franchises. This conceptual bridge between entrepreneurship and storytelling offers a new framework for analyzing not just Webtoon but digital platforms as a whole.

Throughout this exploration, it has become clear that this approach is part of a longer historical trajectory. Comics have always possessed inherent transmedia adaptability due to their fusion of image and text, with early twentieth-century properties like *Superman*, *Batman*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Peanuts* demonstrating the ability to move fluidly between print, radio, film, and merchandise. The difference today is that digital platforms like Webtoon systematize and accelerate this migration, using

real-time data and global distribution to minimize risk and maximize audience engagement.

### *Comparative Disruption Patterns with Spotify and Netflix*

When comparing Webtoon's disruption of the comics industry to Spotify in music and Netflix in film and television, three key parallels emerge:

- **Platform-based distribution** eliminates traditional bottlenecks and democratizes access for creators and consumers.
- **Data-driven decision-making** transforms storytelling into an iterative process where audience feedback directly influences narrative development.
- **Global reach with local adaptation** enables properties to scale internationally while retaining cultural specificity.

These platforms also reveal important divergences. Spotify largely licenses rather than owns content, Netflix increasingly invests in proprietary IP, and Webtoon employs a hybrid model that balances creator ownership with platform-controlled franchises. Furthermore, while narrative is core to Netflix and Webtoon, it remains adjacent to Spotify's primary music-streaming business, even as podcasting brings it closer to a narrative-driven model.

From a storytelling perspective, each platform employs a version of the MVS framework:

- Spotify tests podcast pilots or limited series before investing in full seasons.
- Netflix gauges pilot episode engagement to greenlight full shows.
- Webtoon measures early chapter performance to decide on platform promotion, adaptation potential, or merchandising.

### *The Minimum Viable Story as a Theoretical Contribution*

The MVS concept emerges as one of this essay's original contributions. Inspired by Eric Ries's *The Lean Startup* (2011),<sup>15</sup> MVS is defined as the smallest unit of narrative capable of generating measurable audience engagement while being scalable into larger, more complex forms. It functions both as:

- **A creative tool**, enabling storytellers to test world building, character appeal, and pacing without committing to a multiyear production cycle.
- **A business strategy**, allowing platforms to allocate promotional resources based on proven audience interest.

By applying MVS across case studies from *Lore Olympus* to *Sweet Home* and comparing its function to similar practices on Spotify and Netflix, we see how digital platforms are converging on a risk-mitigation storytelling model that serves both artistic and economic goals.

### *Historical Continuity and the Entrepreneurial Creator*

The entrepreneurial impulse to expand narratives into multiple media is not new—it can be traced to the earliest days of comics. Siegel and Shuster's push to sell *Superman* as a newspaper strip, Bob Kane's involvement in the *Batman* film serial, and Charles Schulz's embrace of television specials all reflect a recognition that stories live longer and travel farther when adapted to multiple formats.

What has changed is the speed, scale, and creator autonomy. Whereas early comic creators often depended on syndicates, radio networks, or film studios to make adaptations possible, today's Webtoon creators can build massive global audiences independently before negotiating adaptation deals.

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15. Ries, *The Lean Startup*.

This reverses the historical power dynamic, giving creators more leverage and often enabling them to retain greater control over their intellectual property.

### *Platform Capitalism and Power Asymmetries*

While the opportunities for creators have expanded, platforms like Webtoon also operate within the logic of platform capitalism.<sup>16</sup> The aggregation of vast amounts of user data, the ability to algorithmically influence discovery, and the monetization of attention all position the platform as a powerful intermediary. This introduces potential power asymmetries in intellectual property negotiations, revenue sharing, and creative autonomy.

Addressing these asymmetries requires both creator literacy in business models and ongoing scholarly attention to how platform economics intersect with creative labor. Here, the conceptual framework of NVC—viewing platforms as incubators that provide early-stage narrative funding in the form of distribution, exposure, and data—can help map where value is created and who captures it.

### *Implications for Startup and Creative Industries*

From an entrepreneurial standpoint, the lessons from Webtoon extend beyond comics. Any startup operating in the creative industries can adopt the MVS + NVC model to:

- validate ideas quickly with real-world audience feedback;
- iterate rapidly while maintaining a cohesive narrative identity; and

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16. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.

- leverage cross-platform opportunities to expand intellectual property value chains.

For example, a game developer could release a narrative teaser (MVS) as a short playable experience, gather engagement metrics, and then decide whether to develop a full game, comic adaptation, or animated series.

Similarly, independent filmmakers could use serialized short episodes on a platform like YouTube or TikTok as their MVS, building a community before pitching a feature film adaptation. The same structural advantages that Webtoon offers to comic creators—low entry barriers, scalable reach, and measurable engagement—are replicable across media.

### *Future Research Directions*

This essay opens several avenues for future scholarly inquiry:

- **Cross-Platform Lifecycle Analysis:** Tracking a single intellectual property from the MVS stage through multiple media adaptations to assess value creation and audience retention over time.
- **Algorithmic Influence Studies:** Examining how recommendation systems shape narrative evolution and genre visibility.
- **Creator-Platform Contract Analysis:** Investigating how ownership, revenue share, and adaptation rights are negotiated in digital ecosystems.
- **Comparative Transmedia Models:** Mapping differences between Webtoon's approach and that of other comic-focused platforms such as Tapas or Lezhin, as well as contrasting with book-to-film pipelines in publishing.

## Concluding Synthesis

The convergence of storytelling innovation and platform economics is reshaping the cultural industries. Webtoon's model demonstrates that narratives can be developed, tested, and scaled with the precision of startup ventures, offering a blueprint for creative entrepreneurship in the digital age. By formalizing concepts such as the MVS and NVC, we create a shared vocabulary for both scholars and practitioners to analyze and design new storytelling ecosystems.

In the end, whether one is a comic creator on Webtoon, a showrunner for Netflix or a podcaster on Spotify, the principle is the same: The story is not just a component of the product—it is the product. The platforms that recognize, nurture, and strategically scale this truth will define the next era of cultural production.

## Disclosure

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Above all, the author expresses profound gratitude to his wife, Dulce Liliana, for her unconditional love and unwavering support throughout this process. At the end, we are all stories—but our story has given me the courage and strength to continue.



# Essays



# The Narrative Ecology of the Entrepreneurial Prototype

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## Abstract

Entrepreneurship and storytelling are dynamically tied as part of changing environments. In this essay, we argue that the prototype—an essential element of an entrepreneurial venture—tells a story that is shaped through time, especially by its environment. This ecological approach is inspired by Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg’s narrative ecology,<sup>1</sup> where several concentric layers of a system shape the center. The prototype becomes a fundamental storytelling device that also shapes its environment when it acquires a considerable level of visibility and legitimacy, which reminds us of the importance of visual aesthetics and their meaning to grasp the attention of an audience. Using four examples, we suggest how the visual dimension of the prototype becomes an essential part of a story that is able to shape its environment.

**Keywords:** Narrative ecology, Visual storytelling, entrepreneurship, prototyping

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1. William L. Dunlop and Dulce Wilkinson Westberg, “On Stories, Conceptual Space, and Physical Place: Considering the Function and Features of Stories Throughout the Narrative Ecology,” *Personality Science* 3, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.5964/ps.7337>.

## Introduction

More than two decades ago, Lounsbury and Glynn proposed that entrepreneurship is about creating culture with stories; that is, telling stories that mediate resources and legitimize new business identities.<sup>2</sup> “Cultural entrepreneurship” is, in their definition, the process by which narrative connects resource stocks (e.g., skills, networks, etc.) with the subsequent acquisition of capital and status. In this essay, we adapt a systems-based view to the entrepreneurial prototype, a protagonist of a story who shapes its environment at different levels. Following Houde and Hill, who argue that prototypes exceed their material form by incorporating multiple dimensions of meaning,<sup>3</sup> and Lim et al., who frame prototypes as filters and manifestations that materialize ideas,<sup>4</sup> we propose that the prototype, which has a visual nature of its own, may well be seen as the center of a narrative ecology.

If we accept Suchman’s classic premise of legitimacy as an essential resource, one that is built through time and that has a pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimension, then what counts is not just “what a company says” but *who* says it, *where* it circulates, and how the message is recombined inside an environment.<sup>5</sup> This is the gateway to an ecological vision. The official narrative is a node; legitimacy arises from the circulation and recombination of everything that happens within an ecosystem.

Entrepreneurship alone does not confer legitimacy to a project in a market. Legitimacy emerges, instead, from a metanarrative, in the broad sense of

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2. Michael Lounsbury and Mary Ann Glynn, “Cultural Entrepreneurship: Stories, Legitimacy, and the Acquisition of Resources,” *Strategic Management Journal* 22, no. 6–7 (2001): 545–64, <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.188>.
  3. Stephanie Houde and Charles Hill, “What Do Prototypes Prototype?,” in *Handbook of Human-Computer Interaction*, 2nd ed. (North-Holland, 1997), 367–81, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-044481862-1.50082-0>.
  4. Youn-Kyung Lim, Erik Stolterman, and Josh Tenenber, “The Anatomy of Prototypes: Prototypes as Filters, Prototypes as Manifestations of Design Ideas,” *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 15, no. 2 (2008): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1375761.1375762>.
  5. Mark C. Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches,” *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571–610, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>.

Lyotard et al., composed of all the stories that circulate and recombine visually and transmedially: press, networks, competitors, customers, fandoms, memes, public demos, reviews, forums, leaks, and counter-narratives.<sup>6</sup> Using the concept of spreadability,<sup>7</sup> this narrative ecology determines which version “remains” in the public mind and, therefore, which companies are legitimized (or not) by their key audiences.

## Conceptual Approach

Departing from Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, narrative ecology,<sup>8</sup> a concept based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory,<sup>9</sup> appears as a context and map of stories that are produced and interconnected at multiple levels of an environment. In this sense, entrepreneurial narratives are composed of stories that shape an environment while being shaped by it at the same time. They are woven into a “coherent and compelling plot” that transcends the personal and reaches systems where further personal and even group stories interact.<sup>10</sup>

Bronfenbrenner’s original approach, known as ecological systems theory, implied five concentric layers or systems that include a micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystem (see figure 1). One could see them as different layers of an environment that shapes the individual. Thus, the latter could be profoundly understood within those layers. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg apply this theory to propose a narrative ecology, one that is constituted by

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6. Jean-François Lyotard, Geoff Bennington, and Brian Massumi, “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 4 (1984): 571–79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772278>.

7. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814743515.001.0001>

8. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, “On Stories, Conceptual Space, and Physical Place.”

9. Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674028845>.

10. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, “On Stories, Conceptual Space, and Physical Place,” 3.

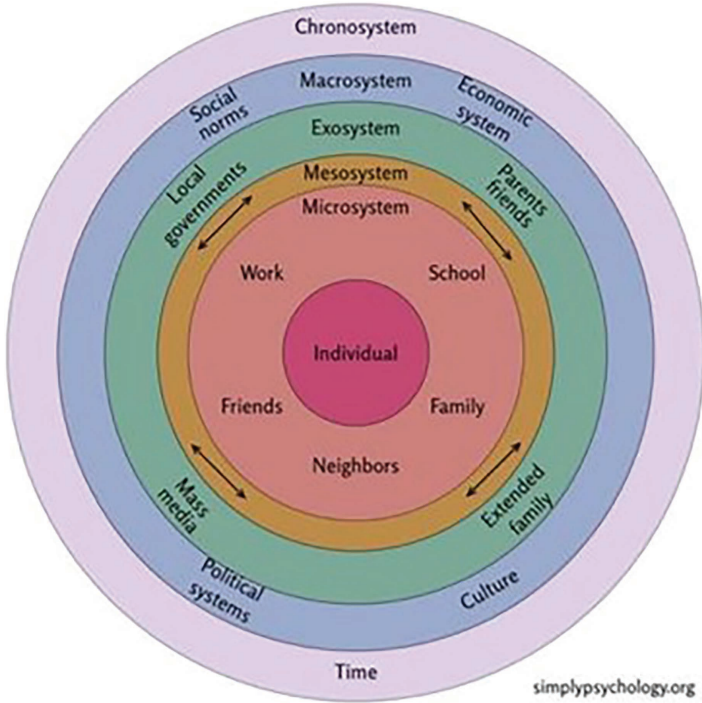


Figure 5.1: The original framework from Bronfenbrenner (2009) named *The Ecology of Systems*.  
 Source: <https://www.simplypsychology.org>

stories that appear at different distances to the center (from the autobiography over to a broader cultural tale that shapes the individual).<sup>11</sup>

Relevant to their approach is the issue of continuity (i.e., the idea that there is a “sameness” in the self that connects past, present, and future through a narrative). For them, the continuity of the self is connected to cultural continuity, where the latter is a “necessary precursor” of the former.<sup>12</sup> One could picture an entrepreneur in the creative industries that sees themselves connected to their culture through their own creations. These may be

11. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, 5.  
 12. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, 7.

Table 1. Prototype Perspective

<b>Bronfenbrenner/ Dunlop and Wilkinson</b>	<b>Approach from a Thought Experiment</b>	
Individual/Person	Prototype	The narrative origin
Microsystem	Immediate prototype environments	Close and controlled spaces where the prototype circulates first
Mesosystem	Connections between environments	Bridges between immediate communities and semipublic spaces
Exosystem	Influencing institutions and rules	Rules and actors that indirectly affect
Macrosystem	Cultural and ideological frameworks	Seasonal narratives
Chronosystem	Narrative time	The temporal trajectory

*Source:* The authors.

inspired in the stories that their surroundings offer, thereby constructing their own identity as cultural entrepreneur. Considering the role of film as a source of numerable personal stories and even as reflections of metanarratives, the self may understand its identity as being coshaped by what Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg consider a “shared framework.”<sup>13</sup>

In our thought experiment, we suggest seeing the prototype as a potential center of a system that can act as the individual does in the original model of Bronfenbrenner. However, the role of stories, as in a narrative ecology, is essential, even if we look at the center of the system as an individual or as a prototype, as the latter itself tells stories and is shaped by them. In line with the model, the prototype itself can hardly be understood without its layers of context (i.e., without its ecology). As presented in table 1, the macrosystem would include ideologies that frame the prototype; the exosystem would involve institutions, press, regulators, platforms; the mesosystem would be shaped by connections between communities and forums where the prototype is discussed; the microsystem would involve teams, expert users, and close testing; and the center— the prototype itself along its public

13. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg.

biography or timeframe—would be influenced by the chronosystem that involves its development through time.

Based on this parallel, we propose a *narrative ecology of the entrepreneurial prototype*, which suggests that the prototype lives in a concentric set of systems that shape it while it projects stories that coshape its environment, even altering it based on how influential it is. One can think of AI-based chatbots that materialized at a certain point as a prototype that told a story, one that became so influential with its functionality that it was capable of coshaping the environment at different levels. To exemplify what we mean by this narrative ecology, we can characterize the systems as follows:

- The narrative origin (Prototype): The artifact (physical or visual) and its first history of use (key gesture, context of use, “how it works” diagram, before/after comparison).
- Microsystem (immediate prototype environments): Close and controlled spaces where the prototype circulates first; e.g., extended team, beta testers, private/small forums, internal laboratories.
- Mesosystem (connections between environments): Bridges between immediate communities and semipublic spaces; e.g., technical threads, fairs, open forums, early adopter platforms.
- Exosystem (influencing institutions and rules): Rules and actors that indirectly affect specialized press, app stores, certifiers, regulators, B2B partners, platform policies.
- Macrosystem (cultural and ideological frameworks): Seasonal narratives; e.g., security, “AI in everything,” sustainability, austerity, disruption, dominant aesthetics (minimalism, brutalism, retro-futurism).
- Chronosystem (narrative time): The temporal trajectory; e.g., versions, logos, launches, crises, redemptions, adoptions, standardization.

This adaptation not only describes where the prototype’s stories reside but also how they change meaning when they move between levels and how

that mobility, amplified by visual storytelling and transmedia expansion, ends up defining a start-up's legitimacy in the public sphere.

A question that arises here is: What about the entrepreneur (i.e., the storyteller) of the prototype? In our line of thought, both the prototype and the entrepreneur tell a story and have a sense of continuity that shapes their evolving identity.<sup>14</sup> This implies that they overlap, as if two concentric systems (that of the prototype and that of the entrepreneur) were placed one above the other, linked by a narrative.

## Visual Examples of a Narrative Ecology of the Prototype

Narrative ecologies help us typify the narratives that emerge in the ecological model. Dunlop et al. identify four narrative families that cut across the system's levels: agency, communion, redemption, and contamination.<sup>15</sup> By intersecting this typology with the entrepreneurial principle of the prototype as protagonist, we can read and govern the same plots but shift the focus from the individual to the artifact's public biography (what the prototype does, shows, and convenes).

### *Agency*

Agency often describes stories of autonomy, achievement, control, and mastery when narrating a person (personal challenges, professional mastery, responsibility/accountability). Translated into the prototype, the same narrative is expressed as performative capacity and demonstrable control: The

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14. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, 7.

15. Dunlop and Wilkinson Westberg, 3–7.

artifact does something valuable, overcomes adverse conditions, or surpasses visible alternatives.

*AN AGENCY STORY: BOSTON DYNAMICS—ATLAS*

The humanoid prototype demonstrates functional mastery on stage: running, jumping hurdles, performing backflips, and linking movements with balance and trajectory correction in real time. The story of agency depends not on the team’s discourse but on the visible gesture, a performance recorded in continuous shot where the robot does *X* better than an average human under seemingly unprepared conditions (surfaces, heights, obstacles). The piece thus travels through levels: In micro, engineers standardize tests and make corrections; in meso, the video becomes a technical reference and object of analysis (sensor/stability breakdown); in exo, media and conferences display the mobility benchmark; in macro, the robot establishes itself as a symbol of mechatronic mastery. In time (chrono), new routines (handing over tools, more complex jumps) accumulate evidence and consolidate the interpretation: this prototype “can” and demonstrates it on camera (see figure 2).



Figure 5.2: Atlas is a revolutionary prototype of Boston Dynamics.  
Source: Boston Dynamics, <https://bostondynamics.com/atlas/>.

## *Communion*

The story of communion brings together relationship, intimacy, affiliation, and belonging: stories where the value is not “what I do alone” but what we achieve together. The challenges are social (trust, coordination, shared norms) and interconnected between actors. Themes such as friendship, love, unity, and belonging appear in literature. In entrepreneurial terms, when the prototype is the protagonist, these plots are seen as links that the artifact enables or strengthens between people and organizations. In other words, the prototype not only functions, it convenes, unites, and organizes.

### *A COMMUNION STORY: STABLE DIFFUSION*

Released as an open prototype (weights and code available), this dissemination model for image generation triggered a cycle of community codesign and open-source public documentation. The first release served as the “core building block”: It spawned community interfaces, direct improvements to the model, and a repository infrastructure where each fork and checkpoint records changes, issues, benchmarks, and user guides.

The community documented everything, from reproducible prompts and cookbooks to notebooks and space demos with executable examples. They also curated collections of resources (models, embeddings, workflows) and third-party tutorials that the ecosystem itself adopts as a reference. The result: The initial prototype not only “works” but grows through verifiable and traceable contributions. The legitimacy comes not from the original release but from thousands of public iterations that show concrete, reproducible, and comparable improvements (see figure 3).



Figure 5.3: Stable Diffusion is an example of open prototyping through community codesign

Source: École Cube, <https://www.ecole.cube.fr/blog/stable-diffusion-lia-generatrice-dimages>.

## Redemption

Redemption is the third type of story: an arc of progress that moves from negative to positive. In affective terms, it narrates improvement, repair, healing, learning, and salvation—from stumbling to overcoming, from suffering to well-being, from doubt to confidence. This same arc can be interpreted and displayed in the public life of a prototype when the object offers visible evidence that it has learned from its mistake and changed its performance (see figure 4).

### *A Story of Redemption: SpaceX Starship (2023)*

The first integrated flight (April 2023) ended in a fiery crash just minutes after takeoff. The “iconic failure” captured on livestreams set an initial negative frame. Within weeks, SpaceX publicly documented changes to the prototype, and the technical community produced breakdowns, simulations, and frame-by-frame comparisons. Subsequent flights (2023–2024) showed visible video progress of hot separation, complete ascents, plasma reentries, and controlled splashdowns that rewrote the narrative as iterative progress.



Figure 5.4: The SpaceX starship is an example of redemption and success after multiple failures.

*Source:* Wikimedia Commons.

The result: The narrative shifted from “spectacular failure” to “public learning and demonstrable improvement,” a clear case of redemption where the prototype, not the speech, provided the evidence that changed perceptions.

## Contamination

Finally, contamination is the reverse of redemption, a regressive arc where the emotional trajectory goes from positive to negative or from bad to worse, corrupting the original meaning. These are stories that begin with promise (success, hope, trust) and end in disappointment, loss, or reputational damage; or they begin in crisis and deepen the deterioration.



Figure 5.5: Google Stadia is an example of a promising console, backed by a tech giant, that did not succeed.  
*Source:* Wikimedia Commons

In the world of prototypes, this arc appears when public evidence undermines the initial promise and each new milestone increases the adverse interpretation (see figure 5).

### *A Contamination Story: Google Stadia*

It kicked off with a powerful gesture: playing without a console at maximum performance 4K/60fps; that is, ultra-high definition video resolution combined with a high frame rate, alongside instant switching and “feel[ing] like a local game.” In real-world use, the prototype showed visible friction: latency, compression, and hybrid ergonomics that added steps.

Table 2. Prototype Narratives

Narrative	Prototype Example
Agentic	Boston Dynamics—Atlas
Communion	Stable Diffusion
Redemption	SpaceX Starship
Contamination	Google Stadia

*Source:* The authors.

Side-by-side video comparisons established the frame rate as “not meeting the bar” compared to a PC or video game console. A sparse catalog and confusing model (subscription + purchases) didn’t offer an iconic scene to displace that frame. Corporate moves (studio closure, cancellations) certified the retirement of the prototype itself. “Stadia” became a meme of unfulfilled hype, an image that travels alone. Without a clear and replicable demo of redemption, the visual promise was tainted and the closure sealed that narrative.

## Conclusion

From a systems view that incorporates the role of story and that of the entrepreneurial prototype, one could assert that the prototype is the originator that is shaped by its environment. Whether it becomes legitimate or not is a question of success in a market. Legitimacy does not emanate from the entrepreneur’s original story but from the dynamic sum of all the levels that act on its origin (the prototype). Any variation in a subsystem reframes what others perceive and, over time (chrono), can establish or modify the dominant narrative.

The prototype is the entrepreneur’s new creation: Born with the intentions and assumptions of its creator, it soon takes on a public life of its own. As soon as it appears on the scene, it begins to be interpreted, tested, and narrated by others; its trajectory is driven by public opinion as it navigates the narrative ecology.

If we accept that stories can have a person or an artifact as their protagonist, then the social identity of both comes not from the physical object itself but from the narratives that surround it. And this fabric is not under the control of the creator—it is the uncontrollable and distributed result of how stories combine, collide, and sediment as they progress through the different stages (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono) of their ecology. In short, the prototype may emerge from the will of an individual, but its meaning and legitimacy are decided externally, in the collective conversation that adopts, discusses, or refutes it.

## Acknowledgments

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# Mission Innovation: Why Visual Storytelling Is Crucial in Business-to-Business

RALF M. RUTHARDT

## Abstract

Innovation alone is not enough—how it is explained to the market is crucial. Especially in the sensitive mission phase, when new products or solutions first encounter customers, communication about success or failure is decisive. Today’s business-to-business (B2B) target groups are under enormous pressure to stay informed; their attention spans are short and their willingness to read long texts is declining. Traditional communication quickly reaches its limits here.

Visual storytelling offers the solution: Images, videos, infographics, and interactive formats make complex issues easier to understand, lower cognitive barriers, and strengthen emotional connections. Studies such as the LinkedIn report *The Art & Science of Video Storytelling* show that marketing measures lose relevance without visually strong elements.

This article shows why visual storytelling is not a “nice-to-have” for start-ups and innovative companies but rather a strategic lever. It provides practical recommendations, identifies risks, and illustrates how companies can present their innovations in such a way that they are understood, remembered, and accepted by the market.

**Keywords:** storytelling; innovation; marketing; product management

## Introduction

Let's imagine a company that has a significant innovation in the pipeline that will take businesses a big step forward in digitalization. Marketing measures are launched to explain the innovation to the target group—and nothing happens. Months later, potential customers have already dismissed the news as irrelevant. Sometime later, a competitor appears and enjoys resounding success.

What could be the main reason for this? The company was unable to successfully explain the innovation and its benefits to the target group. It used too many words to describe the wealth of features and, in doing so, conveyed complexity above all else. It also ignored the limited time available to potential customers. Visual storytelling counteracts this.

Let's illustrate this with an example from around thirty years ago. Imagine a company that has brought a sensational innovation to market maturity. At that time, banks used to send payment details to account holders digitally in SWIFT format. Suddenly, the invoice and customer numbers provided by customers were no longer only available on a printed account statement but also in the electronic account statement. Yes, there was a time when printed paper was the basis for posting account statements in accounting departments. The fact that this changed was an opportunity for *innovative* software solutions at the time.

With the advertising message that account statements and thus customer transfers could now be posted automatically, the added value of an accounting manager was explained in two sentences. It was immediately apparent to potential customers that this would result in significant personnel savings. The functionality could be explained in a few words and the added value was obvious. It was a “paradise” for the market launch of this software solution.

When supplier invoices, customer orders, and many other business processes were automated a few years later, complexity arose. Such innovative solutions now consisted of several components, including neural logic,

workflows, and integration into enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems such as SAP. Two sentences were no longer enough to explain everything. It became complicated—and I myself experienced how elaborate marketing measures did not bring desired success. Too often we got lost in the details of functionalities when communicating with interested parties and failed to meet people where they were in terms of their technical and technological knowledge.

Let's go back to the beginning: In 2025, a company is in the start-up phase or wants to launch an innovation on the market. It faces a key challenge: How can it generate understanding, credibility, and enthusiasm in a very short time given that the attention of interested parties is limited and stakeholders are often confronted with high cognitive hurdles? Such hurdles can arise when subject matter is complex or explained using technical jargon.

One could argue that the digitalized world has simply become complicated or even complex. However, the promise of digitalization is different: simpler. Automated. Scalable. Attractive return on investment (ROI). Accordingly, the expectation of decision-makers is: Explain it to me in a way that I can understand with my knowledge and experience—and explain it to me in the limited time I have available for this decision.

This is where visual storytelling comes into play. This refers to narrative forms that rely heavily or predominantly on images, diagrams, animations, or videos. In the context mentioned above, this type of storytelling becomes a decisive factor. This is because the “missionary phase” is particularly risky for innovation. The aim is to communicate the unknown or even unimaginable to the target group in such a way that the probability of success and added value are highly rated. Success means that the innovation will work and added value is of great importance because it ultimately determines the speed of a purchase decision and the price.

In this “missionary phase,” visual storytelling is not just a nice add-on for entrepreneurship, but a necessity in our time. Let's take a closer look.

## The Missionary Phase: Characteristics and Requirements

I use the term *mission phase* here to refer to the phase in which a start-up or innovative company is no longer just developing a product but wants to bring it to market—a product or solution that goes beyond what is generally expected. In this phase, it is important not only to convince potential customers but also to bring them to a new level of knowledge and understanding. They must understand the function and primary benefit (USP) of the innovation and at the same time assess whether and how they can use it in their company. This must be done as efficiently as possible because decision-makers have limited attention, patience, and willingness to read in depth.

In the past, as shown above, innovations were often easy to communicate linguistically. For years now, we have been reaching the limits of acceptance among target groups when it comes to the sole use of language—written or verbal: Explanations of terms are needed. Abstract functions and technical details have to be put into words, which can be difficult, tedious, and potentially misleading.

Visualization significantly shortens the process of explanation and understanding. Here are some plausible reasons why visual storytelling is particularly important in the mission phase of an innovation in a B2B context:

1. Reduction of cognitive load and shortening of comprehension time.
2. Addressing more senses and more impact.
3. Appealing to multiple senses and greater memorability.
4. Gaining attention in a flooded information landscape.
5. Trust, credibility, emotionalization.

Let's look at some empirical evidence. In its report *The Art and Science of Video*,<sup>1</sup> LinkedIn Creative Labs shows that creative, visually powerful videos

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1. LinkedIn Creative Labs, *The Art & Science of Video Storytelling* (LinkedIn, 2025). [https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/business/marketing-solutions/global/en\\_US/site/pdf/wp/2025/the-art-and-science-of-video.pdf](https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/business/marketing-solutions/global/en_US/site/pdf/wp/2025/the-art-and-science-of-video.pdf).

are a key driver of campaign impact in B2B campaigns. In other words, the very short attention span and the audience's tendency to "switch off" are among the biggest challenges. Without strong visual or video-based storytelling elements, there is a risk of losing relevance.

Let's take a look at some neuroscientific aspects. Visual information is processed much faster than text and helps build trust and memory. It is now common knowledge that younger generations have a short attention span (approximately eight seconds). Nevertheless, this fact should be acknowledged. And once interest has been aroused, even complex content can be absorbed, provided the introduction is visual. The rationale behind this requirement for visual storytelling is self-explanatory. Our everyday lives are full of information. A lot of it floods in. The most nonsensical and unimportant stuff often grabs our senses with images, sound, and effects. In this social and communicative context, how is it supposed to work if important info is reduced to text? If marketing wants to be effective, even in B2B, it has to simplify complexity through visual storytelling, shortening decision cycles and making positive decisions possible.

Let's ask ourselves what visual storytelling might look like in the missionary phase. Explainer videos and product demos are key tools in the mission phase of innovations. They make it possible to immediately demonstrate the features and benefits of a solution—ideally in an interactive format. It is crucial that these formats are short and focused, highlight the most important USPs, and use a clear story structure: from the problem to the solution to the specific benefits, best illustrated with practical examples.

Infographics and process diagrams that visualize complex processes and structures are equally valuable. They reduce cognitive load by making connections visible at a glance. The key here is to use a consistent visual system and reduce complexity to the essentials—less is often more.

Interactive visualizations or augmented reality applications can be particularly effective. They allow users to explore content themselves and thus build a deeper understanding. Since these formats are resource intensive, it is advisable to start with pilot projects in order to gain experience.

Visual case studies link innovations to specific use cases, creating a human connection. Potential customers can identify with similar situations and more easily understand the benefits. It is important to ensure transparency, make clear before-and-after comparisons, and—where possible—show the ROI.

In addition, data visualizations and dashboards play a key role in making key performance indicators (KPIs), trends, or effects understandable and transparent. They help decision-makers make informed assessments. The top priority here is simplicity in presentation and regular updates.

Last but not least, visual brand and design systems ensure a consistent visual identity. Consistent colors, typography, symbols, and templates create recognition and make it easier for even smaller teams to create consistent communication materials.

As effective as visual storytelling is, it must be approached professionally. Over-visualization can be distracting or even appear unprofessional. The costs and effort involved should not be underestimated, especially in the case of complex video formats, for example. Added to this are cultural differences in the interpretation of visual codes, technical access barriers on the customer side, and the challenge of validly measuring the ROI of the measures. The latter in particular can become a risk if you position yourself with expectations that an expert audience can immediately refute.

Here are a few recommendations from my experience as entrepreneur:

- Visual storytelling should be planned early on, not just shortly before market launch.
- A “minimal viable visual story” is often enough to make an initial impact—it doesn’t have to be the perfect video or dashboard right away.
- An iterative approach with testing and feedback loops helps to continuously increase comprehensibility and relevance.
- A consistent design system and clear story architecture are cornerstones of coherent and credible communication.

- Different channels and contexts require adapted formats; a pitch deck has different requirements than social media.
- For global orientation, visuals should be as universal as possible or specifically localized to avoid cultural misunderstandings.
- Finally, it is important to define metrics for success in order to be able to demonstrate the impact of visualizations.

Let's return to our corporate scenario. A competitor enters the market and utilizes visual storytelling. This can be decisive in determining that they achieve market success, despite entering the market later and possibly offering an inferior innovation, while our example company does not. Therefore, in the mission phase of innovations in the B2B sector, visual storytelling is not a luxury but a strategic lever. It enables complex innovations to be communicated with maximum time efficiency, facilitates understanding across language and cultural barriers, attracts attention, and builds trust. Start-ups and growing companies that consistently use these tools have a better chance of successfully establishing their innovations on the market.



# The Power of Silence: A Business Storytelling Perspective of Ethiopian Cinema Through the Work of Sewmehon Yismaw

EMEBET WORKU AND ERICK BEHAR-VILLEGAS

## Abstract

We briefly explore the work of Ethiopian filmmaker Sewmehon Yismaw from a business storytelling perspective. Bringing together the narrative lens of *Bruner* (1991) and the idea of effecting change through the storytelling of *Denning* (2005), we suggest that Yismaw's work has built a cultural brand that highlights the importance of everyday life. Using silence in conversations and circular plots that are born in traditional Ethiopian storytelling he was raised with, his films have become a beacon of cultural identity that indirectly built a creative industries brand.

**Keywords:** visual storytelling; Nollywood; cultural entrepreneurship

An old Ethiopian adage says that if you put many spiderwebs together, they could tie up a lion. It is, in the beginning and the end, a matter of unity. The latter can be considered part of the essence of Ethiopian filmmaker Sewmehon Yismaw's work. In this brief essay, we adopt a business storytelling perspective to explore how Yismaw's work has built a path of cultural brand building that was born in traditional storytelling in the heart of Africa.

Born in the ancient city of Gonder in Ethiopia, Yismaw started out as a photographer and went on to become a renowned film director in his home country. Films such as *Ewir Amora Kelabi* (2016) and *Adey* (2022) reflect his



Figure 7.1: Sewmehon Yismaw on the set of “Fiker Eske Mekabir”

Source: Sewmehon Yismaw, personal archive.

background in traditional storytelling. They are based on circular plots and use silence to present realities of Ethiopian families. Instead of focusing on landscapes and costumes, the films are more about values and everyday situations of “normal” people (How do they talk? Why is silence so important? What is the meaning of gestures?).

The fame he has gathered has turned him into a brand or, perhaps better, a branded storyteller that uses the power of film to explore culture while driving change. It is common to hear that he doesn’t simply tell stories but instead reminds viewers of who they are and even could be. This takes us back to Bruner,<sup>1</sup> who saw narrative as a reflection of thought well beyond

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1. Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>.



Figure 7.2: Sewmehon Yismaw on the set of *Fiker Eske Mekabir*.  
 Source: Sewmehon Yismaw, personal archive.

logic. Narratives would appear as sensemaking devices that help us understand the world, something akin to what psychologists call “schemata.” The sensemaking process becomes stronger when narratives have authenticity—that is, that they appear plausible and true to those exposed to them. For Yismaw, preserving Ethiopian language is also paramount in this context. In a way, it is a form of cultural archiving where not only language but also silence appears as an important part of daily interaction.

When looking into his work from the strategic perspective of storytelling advanced by Denning,<sup>2</sup> stories—in this case, film—are a catalyst of

2. Stephen Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

change. He refers to his “springboard story” as a powerful short narrative that helps us imagine change. The idea is that this is eventually followed by action. Sawmehon’s films often uses this idea. A production like *Love Unto Grave (Fiker Eske Mekaber)*, inspired by the 1968 novel with the same name, is an example of this. It is not only about drama but also about generational conflict, modernity, and a necessary conversation on social change.

Denning also argues that leaders can use storytelling to build an integrated organizational identity.<sup>3</sup> Sawmehon has become a type of growing cultural leader who is using film to build new identities and shape the creative industries of his country. He uses his cultural knowledge as a strategic resource to build a brand anchored around a national identity.

The work of Yismaw brings together Bruner’s view of the world through a narrative lens with the strategic approach of Denning toward action.<sup>4</sup> It does so by capturing cultural meaning through film as it inevitably builds identity through the projection of real-life stories. In them, silence in conversations is a fundamental part of human interaction, one that paradoxically can even bring people closer together than words.

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3. Denning, *The Leader’s Guide to Storytelling*.

4. Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality”; Denning.

# Book Reviews



# Rethinking Propaganda, Sensory Rituals, and Audience Agency in *Cinematic Guerrillas*

Review of *Cinematic Guerrillas:  
Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences  
in Socialist China* by Jie Li, University  
of California Press, 2023

CHARLOTTE ADDISON

“If media theorist Marshall McLuhan defined media technologies as ‘the extensions of man,’ [then] Maoist guerrilla-inspired ideology and practice turned human beings into flexible extensions of media technology.”<sup>1</sup> So writes Jie Li, a professor of East Asian languages and civilizations at Harvard University, in her new book *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China*. Building on McLuhan’s concept, Li draws on the anthropologist AbdouMaliq Simone’s notion of “people as infrastructure” and the media scholar Joshua Neves’s idea of “people as media infrastructure” to reshape our understanding of propaganda during the Mao era.<sup>2</sup> Through this lens, she demonstrates that propaganda was disseminated not only through mass media but also enacted and embodied by the masses themselves, who became part of the media ecosystem.

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1. Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* (University of California Press, 2023), 3.

2. AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–29; Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing’s Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Duke University Press, 2020).

The core argument of this book is that in Maoist China, cinema functioned not only as a tool of propaganda but also as a conduit for embodiment, ritual, enchantment, and revolutionary participation, shaped as much by projectionists and audiences as by the state itself. The author's purpose is to theorize "propaganda as proselytization, mediation as mediumship, and reception as ritual participation."<sup>3</sup> Borrowing from Maoist warfare rhetoric, Li's term "cinematic guerrillas" refers to a range of people in Maoist propaganda networks: mobile projectionists who brought cinema and other media to the Chinese populace, guerrilla fighters celebrated in revolutionary films, and audience members who used guerrilla cinema-going and reception strategies to subvert propaganda goals. These human nodes fundamentally formed the core of Mao's propaganda infrastructure, embodying, mediating, and executing the revolution.<sup>4</sup> Li points out that little scholarly attention has been given to the people who watched and attended the cinema in socialist China, raising questions of "Who was cinema?" and "What do people do with and to cinema/media?"<sup>5</sup> In answering these questions, Li advocates for a shift in media studies toward a "recentering of the human body and spirit," highlighting human agency within media networks and mediation processes, thereby underscoring the importance of both messengers and audiences.

*Cinematic Guerrillas* is divided into two parts, consisting of a total of eight chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The first section centers on projectionists, their training, careers, performances, gender issues, and entrepreneurial practices. The second section turns attention to audiences and their reception of socialist cinema, exploring open-air cinema experiences, creative responses to propaganda films, foreign films, and what is referred to as "poisonous weeds" cinema.

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3. Guaraná, Bruno. "Cinematic Guerrillas: A Conversation with Jie Li," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Winter 2023), <https://filmquarterly.org/2023/12/12/cinematic-guerrillas-a-conversation-with-jie-li/>.

4. Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas*, 3.

5. Li, 26–30.

In this decade-long research project, Jie Li draws on Mao Zedong's theories of guerrilla warfare developed during the anti-Japanese war (the Second Sino-Japanese War) to foreground a guerrilla media theory. Li employs what she calls a "guerrilla methodology"—a flexible and resourceful approach that reflects the improvisational tactics of this style of warfare and the practices of media workers during the Mao era. She combines archival research with an expansive corpus of "memory texts," including memoirs and periodicals from more than twenty provinces. Additionally, Li conducted ethnographic fieldwork and provides oral histories with former projectionists and audiences, thus providing a grassroots account of how propaganda was created, circulated, and experienced. This innovative approach privileges media as a lived practice and highlights grassroots views. It also decentralizes hegemonic narratives by including rural projectionists and the masses.

One of Li's striking conceptual interventions is her analogy of Maoist propaganda as "revolutionary spirit mediumship." This metaphor sheds new light on cinema as a material, affective, and ritualized process. She argues that the revolutionary spirit was transmitted through media and mediated by human bodies, particularly mobile projectionists. Despite the state's opposition to religious traditions, the Maoist media network retained a ritualistic structure by replacing ancestral devotion with what Li terms "new political religiosities." Projectionists functioned like ideological shamans or missionaries, carrying films, records, slides, and live performances into remote areas to combat "feudal" thinking and promote communist consciousness. This assertion disrupts the view of propaganda as solely an ideological text and reorients our understanding to include its affective dimension.

Li adds another layer to the role of spirit mediums by identifying projectionists as agents who personify media labor. Chapter 2 highlights the physical and infrastructural dimensions of their work: Projection teams carried heavy reels, projectors, generators, and loudspeakers across mountains, paddy fields, and rough roads—battling mud, monsoon weather, and power

outages to set up outdoor screenings. This labor was central to cinema's operation and illustrates "cinema's physicality in terms of both corporeality and materiality."<sup>6</sup> She argues projectionists were more than film facilitators; they were extensions of the media system—living nodes connecting ideology, logistics, and infrastructure. In so doing, Li invites us to reconsider the labor performed by projectionists as the connective tissue of the propaganda apparatus, in which their bodies serve as vehicles for extending media technology. To sum up, Li describes projectionists as purveyors of propaganda who gave face and voice to the cinema experience, being honored as "labor models or superheroes" and praised for sacrificing and enduring hardships for the revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, in chapter 3, Li explores issues of gender through the case of the Hebei Three Sisters Movie Team, a mobile unit of female projectionists hailed as exemplary models of womanhood. Here, she explores their contributions and the challenges of navigating traditional gender roles and revolutionary ideals in socialist China. Li's analysis of gender contributes to an intersectional account of propaganda while revealing the tension between propaganda and practice, in which women's bodies and voices are used and constrained in service of the revolution. In this analysis, Li encourages readers to confront the utility of remembering women as "cultural cavalries" whose labor is often unacknowledged in histories.

Chapter 4 presents cinema as a medium of economic transaction. Although they appeared to be free or inexpensive, film screenings depended on local contributions, such as rural audiences providing labor, food, and sometimes housing for projection teams. As Li notes, cinema thus served as a covert means of extracting economic resources—grain, labor, and money—from rural communities to support political mobilization.<sup>8</sup> Li's examination of this "ritual economy" is significant because it reinterprets the

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6. Li, 89.

7. Li, 72.

8. Li, 122.

consumption of socialist films through the lens of sacrifice for the collective interest of accessing “spiritual food.”<sup>9</sup>

Moving from projectionists and their practices, the author shifts her focus to audiences and reception in the second part of the book. She assesses how audiences have become coconstructors of cinema’s meaning and experience. Chapter 5 parses out the multisensorial ways in which audiences engaged with and experienced cinema. Film screenings became like temple festivals where audiences participated in both political education and social ritual. In this context, audiences were expected to consume propaganda and become active disseminators of revolutionary affect “in a moving and exhilarating process akin to spiritual possession by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>10</sup>

Building on the sensorial focus, chapter 6 discusses the concept of “guerrilla reception.” It explains how film texts encourage viewers to adopt guerrilla techniques and promote “participatory surveillance,” especially through the involvement of projectionists.<sup>11</sup> This process transforms propaganda into participatory action. Chapter 7 explores how audiences interpret and receive foreign films from Soviet, North Korean, Albanian, and Indian cinemas. Chapter 8 concludes by examining the state’s efforts to address “criticism screenings” by exposing audiences to censored films in controlled environments to boost ideological resilience. These latter chapters collectively reveal the tensions between cinematic control and creative reception. They evince Li’s argument that cinema in Mao’s era functioned as a living infrastructure, simultaneously sponsored by the state and collectively redefined by its audience.

Overall, *Cinematic Guerrillas* offers a profound rethinking of propaganda and cinema culture in socialist China and, more broadly, of film history. The book makes a compelling case for studying the people in exhibition contexts, particularly projectionists and audiences, as active cocreators of

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9. Li, 136–41.

10. Li, 5.

11. Li, 177.

ideology, ritual, and media frameworks. Li's guerrilla-style research mirrors the decentralized networks she studies, creating an archive of Maoist media circulation from the ground up. One of the book's strengths is its focus on propaganda as a tangible, embodied value, reconceptualizing it as "revolutionary spirit mediumship" aimed at turning audiences into congregations. For readers and scholars of film and media studies, Asian studies, propaganda studies, and cultural and historical studies, this book is an insightful and valuable resource. Li's work raises further questions about the response to urban screenings and films about ethnic minorities in socialist China.

# In the Mood for Development

Review of *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman*, edited by Andrea Riemenschnitter, Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung, Routledge, 2025

SONG ABEL HAN

The edited collection *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman* offers one of the most nuanced accounts of the bildungsroman's evolution in the Sinosphere. Originally coined to describe Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's seminal novel of education, the bildungsroman reveals that youth in modern times is not merely a transition toward adulthood but also a problem—a symptom of the new possibilities for self-transformation that accompanied the rise of capitalist modernity.<sup>1</sup> While existing scholarship in Chinese studies has often treated youth discourse as central to national rejuvenation or postsocialist cultural memory, this volume adopts a broader Sinophone perspective, examining cases from Hong Kong, mainland China, Southeast Asia, and the global Chinese diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

In their introduction, the editors offer a comprehensive review of the Chinese bildungsroman, tracing its evolution from premodern youth

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1. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 2000).

2. Song Mingwei, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900–1959* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Li Hua, *Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Su Tong and Yu Hua: Coming of Age in Troubled Times* (Brill, 2011).

narratives, through the May Fourth and socialist periods, to contemporary global Sinophone cases. Following this, the collection is organized into four sections that examine, respectively, the global sixties, narrative innovations, urban precarity, and ecological concerns. The book's first section situates Sinophone literature across the blocs during the Cold War. Juxtaposing novels by Wang Meng and Jack Kerouac, Wendy Larson scrutinizes the surprising affinities between the bildungsroman from socialist China and that from capitalist United States, as both examples reject progress and celebrate anti-productivity visions of modern life. Specifically, the Chinese translation of Kerouac's *On the Road* influenced a generation of "sent-down" youth who later challenged revolutionary literary ideals. Mary Wong's chapter rereads a collection of new writers in 1960s Hong Kong. Published by a US-funded press, the collection presents a dual bildung: the coming-of-age stories of the protagonists as well as the artistic formation of Hong Kong's young writers who negotiate the 1960s riots and uncertain Cold War structures; Xi Xi's early short story on the Congo crisis is particularly noteworthy here. Mung Ting Chung's study traces how Hong Kong writer Wan Kin-lau renounced his modernist bildung to become an advocate of critical realism. His debate with another prominent Hong Kong writer, Ye Si—who represents the emerging Hong Kong identity—can thus be regarded as a missed opportunity for Hong Kong literature to both deconstruct the "free world" ideology and forge solidarity with global struggles.

The second section of this collection examines innovations within the novel genre. Sheldon Lu focuses on cases of transnational encounters of Chinese youths abroad, from the early twentieth century to contemporary times, arguing that recent works can transcend earlier traits such as self-Orientalizing fantasies. Enoch Tam uncovers a "history of objects" (*wujian-shi*) through Hong Kong novelist Dung Kai-cheung's *Works of Man: Vividness and Veracity*, illustrating how this family saga distinguishes itself from discourses of Chinese and Hong Kong modernities. As the author asserts, Dung's work poses the question: "What if the actors or agents of history

were not human beings but modern technological objects instead?”<sup>3</sup> Rereading the iconic Sinophone writer Li Yongping’s *The End of the River*, Alison Groppe argues that this haunted bildungsroman not only critiques Borneo’s colonial and imperialist past but also illuminates the lingering traumas of the present.

In the third section, writers turn to cinematic representations of precarious youth at the turn of the twentieth century. Examining documentary films on post-1990s Chinese youths, Kiu-wai Chu engages with several youth subcultures: the patriotic “little pinks,” the involuted generation and their “lying flat” movement, and rural migrants participating in the *shamate* trend. Unlike the conventional promise of progress in the bildungsroman, these coming-of-age narratives show how China’s rise occurs at the expense of many young people. Pheng Cheah revisits Anthony Chen’s award-winning film *Ilo Ilo*, which depicts a middle-class Singaporean boy’s upbringing alongside his family’s Filipina domestic helper. By highlighting the maternal sacrifices of both the boy’s mother and the helper, the film champions an ethics of self-care and suggests that labor migration can cultivate ideals that transcend the exploitation inherent in global capitalism. Yet for Cheah, the sentimental portrayal of transnational labor functions as an ideological mystification, preventing “a more searching examination of the economic inequalities of the international division of labor.”<sup>4</sup> Fiona Law focuses on introspective memories in postmillennial Hong Kong films’ portrayals of female coming of age, arguing that these nostalgic moments reflect midlife crises and a need to forge renewed connections to the self.

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3. Andrea Riemenschnitter, Kiu-wai Chu, and Mung Ting Chung, eds., *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema: Sinophone Variations of the Bildungsroman* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 142.

4. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., *Coming of Age in Chinese Literature and Cinema*, 196.

In the fourth and final section of the book, scholars ask what the bildungsroman—traditionally a human-centered genre—might learn from eco-centric perspectives and nonhuman agencies. Andrea Riemenschnitter regards Su Tong's *Shadow of the Hunter* (*Huangque Ji*) as an ecogothic bildungsroman, in which “disturbed planetary equilibrium develops patterns of nonhuman rage while a mature subjectivity’s constituents—such as moral consciousness, free will, dignity, reason, and compassion—are frequently forsaken.”<sup>5</sup> Reading Su’s dilapidated small-town setting alongside the utopian garden community in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Riemenschnitter argues that the reform-era children in Su’s work, left to themselves, can only succumb to the reproduction of moral and environmental depravity. Tracing land-writing and land-filming in the works of three Hong Kong female artists—Xi Xi, Wu Xubin, and Jessey Tsang—Winne Yee proposes an ecocritical approach to coming of age that acknowledges the limitations of developmental discourses. Hua Li examines the life trajectory of Mimi, the female protagonist in Chen Qiufan’s sci-fi *Waste Tide*, showing how she transforms from a victimized migrant worker to a rebellious figure and back to vulnerability. This posthuman, activist figure contributes to the genre of the Chinese bildungsroman, turning the sentimental portrayal of a female character into “a fighter, a community activist, and a cybernetic organism.”<sup>6</sup>

The case studies in the volume reveal that contemporary literature and film, emerging from a world of uncertainty, are fundamentally shaped by generic hybridity. To examine a bildungsroman, therefore, is to attend simultaneously to its intermingling of genres—adventure, science fiction, family saga, melodrama, and more. Yet the bildungsroman also carries an inherent contradiction: As the authors demonstrate, the process of growing up unfolds at the cost of deepening economic inequality, cruel optimism, environmental destruction, and biological exploitation. As Franco Moretti observes, once this contradiction is internalized, “the next step [is] not to

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5. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., 242.

6. Andrea Riemenschnitter et al., 296.

‘solve’ the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival.”<sup>7</sup> The authors—and the case studies they bring forth—thus challenge the meaning of *bildung* itself, illuminating how one might inhabit contradiction and create spaces where heterogeneous possibilities can take shape.

Both of the volume’s key terms, *Sinophone* and *bildungsroman*, have contested histories. Yet within the book—with the exception of Sheldon Lu’s chapter—*Sinophone* tends to be used more generically, referring to Chinese-speaking communities or works written in Chinese. For many contributors, *coming of age* becomes almost synonymous with *coming to terms*, framing growth not as linear progress but as a mood for development—an ongoing negotiation with oneself and the world. Still, when the meanings of these concepts begin to stabilize, do they risk losing their hermeneutic power? The volume therefore invites readers to consider what *Sinophone* studies might do when the Chinese language itself becomes the only common denominator. More crucially, when multiple authors mourn lost youth and persistent social immobility, we may ask whether the age of the *bildungsroman*—born of capitalist modernity—has perhaps reached a point of stagnation itself.

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7. Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 10.



# Entertainment Production as Contingency Planning

Review of *Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production*  
by Kevin Sanson, University of California Press, 2024

PATRICK VONDERAU

Production isn't what it used to be. Hollywood has gone a long way from physical film and television production to today's aspirational cultures of digital media and the twisted industrial system that manages and monetizes them. Accordingly, processes of film or television production now often are studied not so much in relation to the specificity of their products but in regard to work relations that aren't specific for Hollywood anymore. Rather than simply a practice, production today is seen as a global system of sometimes barely media-related actors and activities that includes data specialists (as in Violaine Roussel's current research) or financiers (Andrew deWaard) alongside legacy production companies and entertainment celebrities. It's a system that pushes for advances in labor theory (Vicki Mayer) and also requires us to think ethnographically through the media entertainment universe's various "specworlds," where "bringing rationality to the unpredictable supply chain lies at the heart of making profitable media."<sup>1</sup> Much like the infrastructure on which it is based, this new media work is "boring" rather than glamorous and thus asks for an approach that sees film production's "trucks, wardrobe

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1. John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (University of California Press, 2023).

trailers, massive cables, signs and barriers” as “trace elements of the more unsung, wearying, and less visible work screen media laborers perform”—a key premise of Kevin Sanson’s brilliant new book.<sup>2</sup> If media production is a social construct rather than just artistic craftwork and industry practice, a construct built upon material infrastructures and a global reconfiguration of labor much of which remains hidden, invisible, or obscured, how to study it?

For a start, it doesn’t hurt “listening to labor,” something Sanson now has done for almost a decade.<sup>3</sup> In *Voices of Labor* (2016), Sanson and coeditor Michael Curtin listened to various above-the-line and below-the-line professionals in film production to situate forms of what they termed “excessive labor,” or uncontrolled growing work pressures, on a map that included Hollywood’s “company town” as much as entertainment’s “global machine” and distant “fringe cities.” Continuing this line of work, *Mobile Hollywood* follows the experiences of below-the-line screen media workers in different parts of the world in order to understand “what value they provide in the name of labor”<sup>4</sup> and how such value cocreation may relate to the structures and operations of global capital expansion. What, exactly, are the job functions and working conditions of Hollywood service producers, location managers, and transportation teamsters and what can we learn by speaking to them about the industrial dynamics that coordinate geography in the economic and creative interests of Hollywood? In attempting to answer these questions, Sanson draws from more than twenty interviews in the United States, Europe, and Australia but also background conversations with production executives and film commissioners, observations at industry events, location visits, and analyses of trade papers, industry reports, or promotional materials. Based on this research, he astutely shows what it means to be employed (or not) within a mobile mode of production; how professional

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2. Kevin Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood: Labor and the Geography of Production* (University of California Press, 2024).

3. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (University of California Press, 2016).

4. Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood*, 172.

roles, conditions, and divisions of labor have changed; and also how media work now constantly leaks into other areas of social activity well beyond the making of movies, such as lobbying for reform, persuading municipal authorities, or appeasing suburban residents, not to speak of all the affective or emotional labor known from earlier decades of film production.

In doing so, Sanson demonstrates the need for a conceptually more rigorous understanding of both media work and media production. Too often screen workers have been seen as “either the happy faces of booming production hubs or the downtrodden victims of lost employment”<sup>5</sup> rather than as actors to be taken seriously in the ways they contribute to creation. How to think beyond precariousness in media work? A similar point has recently been made by French sociologist Jeremy Vachet in regard to music professionals navigating between a “compelled entrepreneurialism,” side jobs, and waged jobs outside the music industry, showing that media research across sectors needs to move beyond professional/nonprofessional or successful/nonsuccessful divides.<sup>6</sup> In his book, Sanson not only shifts the focus from creative work to value creation and value capture but also insists on looking at the global system of related work practices. He sets his research agenda against a backdrop of earlier works that, by his own account, have been limited to either small-scale or historical narratives of policy development and implementation or, alternatively, stuck in generalizing macro analyses of and polemic debates about Hollywood runaway productions and their financial incentives. Although inevitably contributing to a research field within the political economy of media that, in the wake of Toby Miller’s account of a new international division of cultural labor,<sup>7</sup> attempted to map the global

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5. Sanson, 14.

6. J  r  my Vachet, *Fantasy, Neoliberalism and Precariousness: Coping Strategies in the Cultural Industries* (Emerald Publishing, 2022).

7. Toby Miller and Marie Claire Leger, “Runaway Production, Runaway Consumption, Runaway Citizenship: The New International Division of Cultural Labor,” *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2001): 89–115.

impact of US runaway productions on macro level, Sanson aims to theorize the supply chains of today's media experiences from the ground up.

Taking its cue from social anthropology, most notably Anna Tsing's ethnographically informed work on global supply chains, as well as social and political theory, especially Sandro Mezzadra's and Brett Neilson's *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (2013), Sanson's account of mobile production is framed by an overarching interest in "friction" or crisis as symptomatic of a "fraught and contingent mode of production that subsumes disjuncture within and across its division of labor."<sup>8</sup> Rather than studying, say, production incentive systems in the Czech Republic or focusing on economic-cultural dynamics between the Global North and Global South, Sanson studies day-to-day practices of "contingency planning and collaboration among disparate stakeholders" that characterize the work of service producers or location managers, among others.<sup>9</sup> Redefining media work as a kind of coordination work means to look at skills and practices needed to "contain the disruption, disjuncture, and sheer messiness of Mobile Hollywood by constantly putting out fires or squashing, often temporarily and tentatively, potential impediments to capital expansion."<sup>10</sup> Occasionally, coordination workers may die, such as Carol Munoz Portal who was murdered while scouting locations for Netflix's *Narcos* (2015–2017) in Mexico;<sup>11</sup> always, however, are they embedded within subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements that come with new organizational styles and subjectivities. Accordingly, Sanson defines mobile production as "a distinct spatial assemblage that is generated by the protocols and processes necessary for it to maneuver back and forth across an elastic production geography. It is constituted by a translocal network of social relations and operational logics that certainly emerge from and intersect with particular national economies

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8. Sanson, *Mobile Hollywood*, 4.

9. Sanson, 11.

10. Sanson, 19.

11. Sanson, 102.

and local cultures but nevertheless reconfigures these territories into a geographic formation that is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>12</sup>

After laying out the framework and themes in the first two chapters, Sanson’s book proceeds through three detailed, grounded case studies on the aforementioned groups of workers and their experiences before concluding with a final and again more conceptually weighted chapter that describes how Hollywood adapted to travel restrictions and safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. His book testifies to the need for more research on “logistical coordination, service-oriented work, and relational labor”<sup>13</sup> that create the conditions for production today. It also shows the difficulty of defining what “production” in production studies actually is or has come to be. One might indeed argue that much of production isn’t production anymore and hasn’t been in a very long time. What I miss in this otherwise illuminating and richly researched book is a clearer differentiation between the various modes of production that have evolved over the past century and still come together simultaneously: classic studio production, the “projectification” of creative work in the wake of outsourcing and flexible specialization tendencies since the 1950s, and finally the “productization” of virtually everything, such as, for instance, urban spaces in London turned into a Harry Potter event space. In order to chart these developments, Sanson’s book also might have benefited from a cross-sectoral view on media industries, drawing together comparative developments in, say, games and music production. For an account so clearly interested in theorizing from the ground up, I also partly missed the proximity to the field, a sense of place, of being “there” in this field of mobile production, wherever it is.

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12. Sanson, 41.

13. Sanson, 35.



# From Blockbusters to Video Art: Transnationalism and the Visual Reimagining of Post-Socialist China

Review of *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* by Sheldon Lu, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

XIAO LIU

The concept of Chinese film is as vague and constructed as the notions of Chinese nationality. A substantial body of cultural analysis has grappled with the conceptual boundaries of “Sino” and “Chinese.” Sheldon Lu’s book *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (2021) examines Chinese cinema in the context of China’s globalization and economic transformation. Through close readings of films across various genres and visual forms, Lu seeks to reconfigure the concept of Greater China and its visual arts within a transnational framework. Rather than treating transnationalism as a recent or periodic development in Chinese filmmaking, Lu argues that transnationality has been embedded in the medium since its inception and is closely tied to the formation of Chinese national identity. In the book’s introduction, Lu conducts a meticulous literature review on transnationalism and its relationship to cinema. This review lays the groundwork for his subsequent analysis of a diverse, cross-genre collection of visual texts.

The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on nationhood, gender, sexuality, and masculinity; the second examines cross-media experience

and its representation of the local, national, and global. While the first four chapters follow a more traditional cinema studies approach, the later chapters push boundaries by analyzing independent productions and other flexible video-based works. Lu's interest in diverse genres allows him to envision film art in an updated media environment, providing a broader view of visual representations of the Chinese nation in a new era.

In part 1, Lu includes films produced through varied mechanisms: blockbusters that project a self-asserting national image on the global stage and also films from different regions of Greater China that explore various approaches to sexuality. In selecting such a wide range of works, Lu foregrounds "the cracks, gaps, tragedies, and absurd comedies that emerge from the process of national development."<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, his selection of films serves as a critique of the constructed image of the Chinese nation.

Chapter 1 examines feature films from a transnational perspective, tracing the intersections between China and Hollywood in shaping China's national image. Through a close reading of the film *China Peacekeeping Forces* (2018), focusing especially on its treatment of gender and race, Lu identifies a new genre of Chinese film emerging from China's ongoing globalization: a hybrid military/action film that is at once didactic, entertaining, and commercially appealing. This type of film, Lu argues, is a specific product of the post-socialist context as it "resorts to the resources and opportunities that have become available in the time of globalization."<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 2 examines narratives of sexuality through films featuring prostitutes and depictions of masculinity with antiheroic tendencies. Lu argues that although these films operate within heterosexual contexts, they do not reinforce heteronormativity. Rather, they critique patriarchal society, since "historical trauma and social oppression occur through the bodies and inside the psyche of female prostitute and male characters even as they

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1. Sheldon Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 19.

2. Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, 52.

seek liberation from patriarchal bondage.”<sup>3</sup> A particularly compelling contribution lies in Lu’s comparative analysis of how prostitution is portrayed across different historical periods in Chinese cinema. In his view, the trajectory of prostitute characters—from house sitter to streetwalker to border crosser—reflects the mobility and possibility of the modern age. At the same time, such mobility is not entirely liberatory; it also produces new forms of oppression and segregation in the context of globalization. The dialectics and subtleties of these transitions are vividly illustrated through Lu’s selected film corpus.

In chapters 3 and 4 Lu compares his transnational framework to concepts such as “Chinese-language film,” promoted by Hong Kong and Taiwanese scholars, and “Sinophone cinema,” coined to resist China-centrism. Lu reexamines renowned Chinese-language films produced in Hong Kong by placing them in their historical contexts, revealing the shift from one-directional migration to flexible citizenship. By juxtaposing female and male characters, as well as Hong Kong and mainland films, Lu builds his core argument: the handover and the globalization of China have profoundly affected the cinematic and social representation of masculinity.

Lu’s analysis in these chapters of what he calls the “mainlandization” process of post-handover Hong Kong cinema is especially insightful. He argues that this shift potentially accelerated the neoliberalization and loss of locality in Hong Kong cinema within a global and transnational framework.<sup>4</sup> From here, Lu transitions to an analysis of independent filmmaker Jia Zhangke, who frequently pays homage to Hong Kong’s popular culture. Jia’s films also exemplify evolving portrayals of masculinity. By comparing these seemingly unrelated subjects, Lu draws connections between masculinity in cinema and broader national narratives. For example, the protagonist of *Xiao Wu* (1997)—a lover of Hong Kong pop culture—embodies both a tribute to pre-handover heroic figures and a defeated, localized masculinity reflective

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3. Lu, 56.

4. Lu, 92.

of his own sociopolitical reality. Through a broader reading of Jia's work across three decades, Lu concludes that male characters serve as ordinary heroes precisely because they bear the burden of gender formation while enacting the multifaceted dimensions of life in post-socialist China.<sup>5</sup>

In part 2, Lu shifts attention to the blurred boundaries between mainstream and independent media, drawing on other scholars and organizing his material around the development of digital video. He argues that digital media "provides the condition for a more direct and fuller participation in social process," potentially helping to expand the public sphere.<sup>6</sup> Chapters in part 2 include analyses of ballet and its intersections with film to envision China's cultural communication with foreign countries. Lu also examines TV dramas featuring Russian female characters in China, arguing that the fetishization of the Russian female body reinforces the subjectivity and centrality of Chinese protagonists.

The final chapter analyzes multiple visual arts, including architecture, site-specific artworks, and photography that reflect the transformation of Beijing during and after the 2008 Olympics. Specific examples include paintings emerging at the intersection of the capitalist West and post-socialist China, monstrous architectural structures symbolizing national ambition and global aspirations, graffiti and poster art negotiating between propaganda and grassroots expression, and assemblage pieces involving Apple products and poetic reflections by migrant workers in Chinese Apple factories. Lu briefly touches on environmental issues as well.

In the conclusion, Lu reinforces the concepts of "internal globalization" and "walling" as defining characteristics of China's globalization process. He argues that, despite political constraints, Chinese cinema continues to reinvent itself within cyberspace, maintaining its role as a key reference for understanding contemporary Chinese society.<sup>7</sup> One of the

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5. *Lu*, 112.

6. *Lu*, 135.

7. *Lu*, 199.

book's notable strengths is its expansive media corpus. Lu does not limit himself to traditional film texts; instead, he engages with a wide array of visual materials—including painting, architecture, ballet, and television—to demonstrate how film, as an expanded medium, participates in a broader visual culture. This inclusive approach reflects the complexities of contemporary media and the increasingly blurred boundaries between film and other visual art forms. Lu's ability to weave these diverse materials within a coherent analytic framework invites readers to reconsider the relevance and adaptability of film studies in an evolving media landscape.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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Max is a long-term lecturer at CESA, where he teaches marketing and digital strategies. Internationally, he has been a visiting professor (Berlin International University of Applied Sciences) and guest lecturer for branding and digital business at various universities including New York University (NYU); Cass (now Bayes) Business School at City, University of London; University of Limerick; Rollins College - Orlando; and S P Jain School of Global Management.

He holds two master's degrees in international business administration from ESCP Europe (Paris–London–Berlin) and an MBA from Universidad de Los Andes. He is also certified in digital marketing strategies by Columbia University, New York.

Through his work, Max bridges academic research and industry practice, offering a comprehensive vision of how marketing and communication

## Contributors

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evolve in the digital age. His teaching and thought leadership position him as a key reference in the study and professionalization of influencer marketing in Latin America.

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## Contributors

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(MIT Press, 2019). Vonderau is cofounder of the NECS-European Network for Cinema and Media Studies.

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