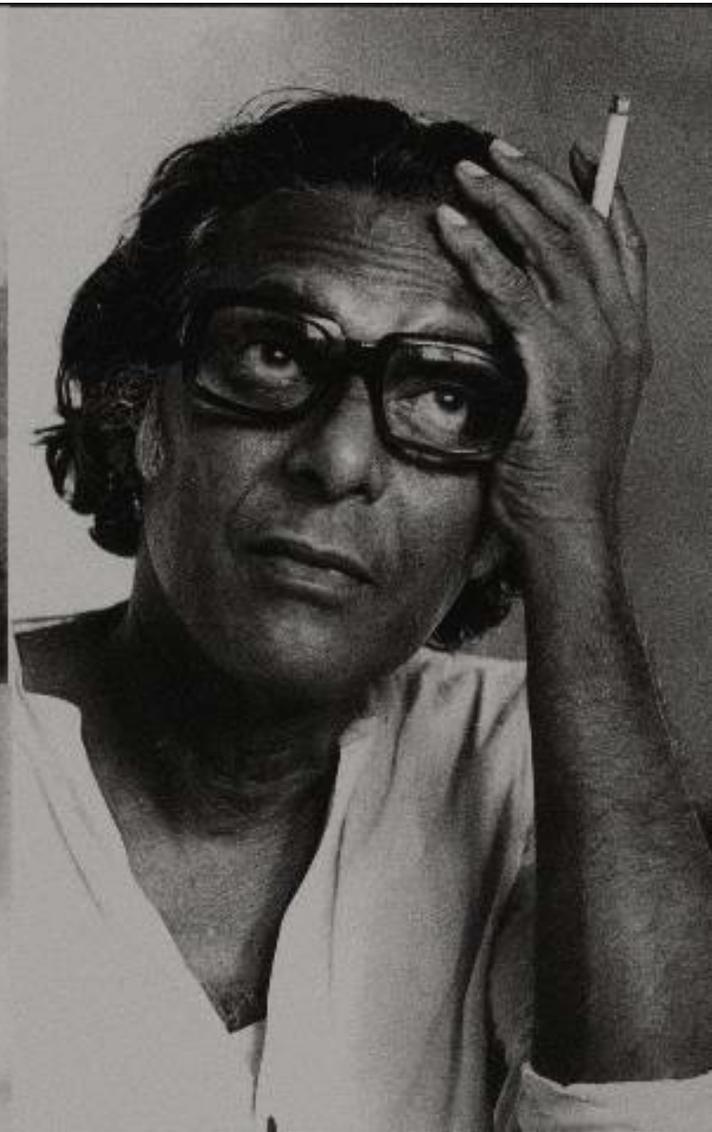


# MONOGRAPH

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মৃণালের  
সন্ধানে

*An exclusive interview with  
Maarten Visser*

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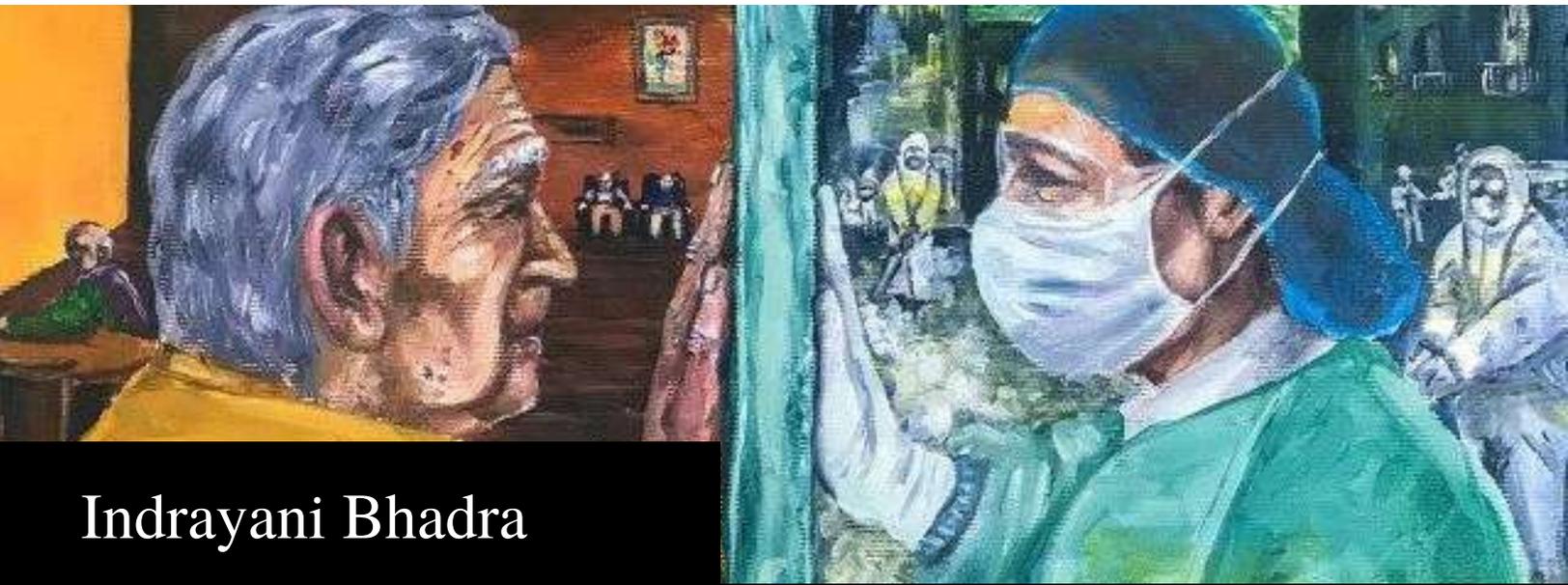
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Indrayani Bhadra

## Editor's Note: Of The Pandemic, Speed Post and Love.

The last two years have been rough. It feels so incredibly unnatural to say two, instead of one. As if it still has not hit us, that hugs and kisses are a thing of the recent past, that college and university will have to wait for the dead bodies to stop making their way to the crematorium. It has been a slow spiral, an endless tsunami into hopelessness. And perhaps from the midst of it all has risen an unusual hero, a never talked about, never appreciated friendly giant – the Speed post.

I was never much of a delivery appreciating person. I am the biggest hugger in my friend groups, the most emotional gifter, and the perhaps the most unseen lover. The pandemic stole all of this away from me. Until last year, when one of my dearest friends sent me a book – via Amazon delivery. It was meant to be a token of love, something to tide me over till my entrance exams were done, something for me to hold on to because I found it so hard to reach out, even in the tightest knit friend circles. For me, it portrayed confusion at first. The concept of Amazon delivery was not something I was familiar with – it felt distant and almost too much for someone like me, still stuck in the 2010s (yes, that was 10 years back). But as I found myself getting lost in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, I realized the magic in the act. It was so small, but so, so personal, like reaching out with outstretched hands from a thousand miles away – ever so close, and yet ever so far.



And so, I found myself in express deliveries, and speed post, and the ever so ubiquitous “ground express, or air mail?”. I found myself in yellow packing tape and neatly written little address slips, and sometimes a handwritten letter or two. It was a feeling of oneness, in a time when everyone felt so distant. I gave my friend a custom made pendant, and in her tears of emotion, I found my own little happy place. As some of my favourite novels made their way across a locked down city to the heart of Delhi, and into the home of a loved one, I felt unbridled joy at the thought that someone might feel the same things I had felt when I read those books. It went on and on, from ordering trinkets for my mother, to DTDC succeeding in getting my first ever, and sadly last gift across to my grandfather. The pandemic has taken so, so much away, leaving me a shell of a person. But in these deliveries, I have sent pieces of my heart across the country, and across the world, and have felt a sense of belonging when someone picked it up and held it close.

As I laughed with my closest friend in college today, on the thought of how many times we have delivered things to each other in the last six months, I jokingly expressed a notion that impacted me deeply thereafter.

“What if we could pack our whole lives up in boxes, and speed post it across to each other?”

What if we could? What if in these dire times, we could finally feel each other again, from across mountains and oceans, and in hastily wrapped little cardboard boxes? What would it be, if not love?



Anuraag Das Sarma

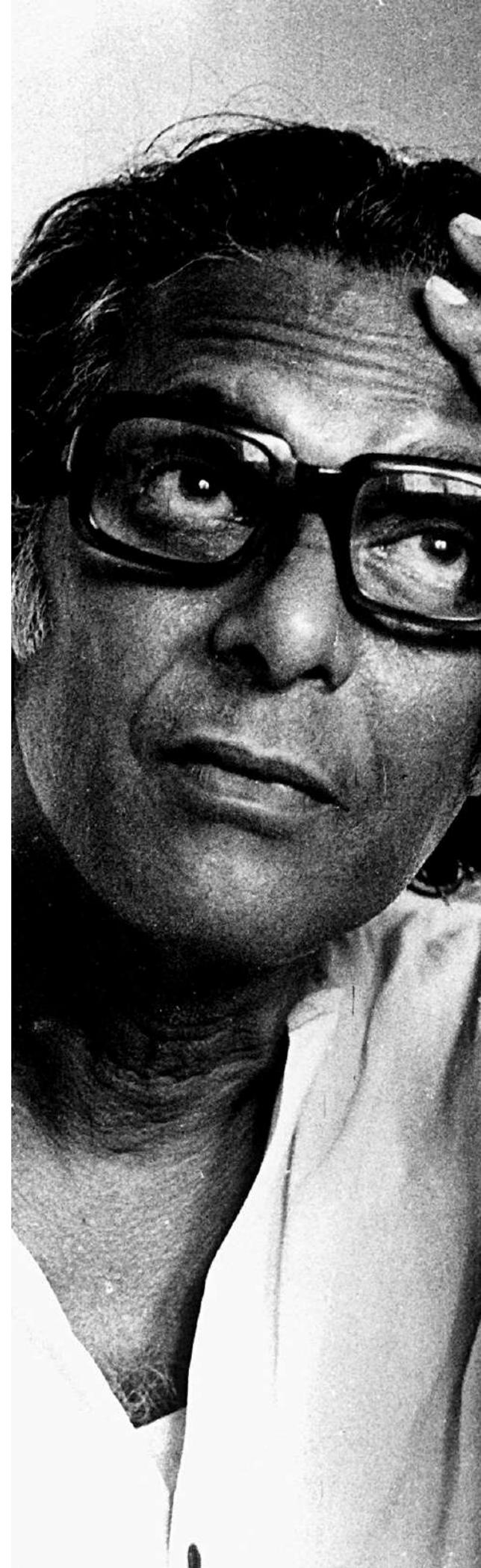
## Mrinaler Sandhane

This city houses in it a million little artists. Writers, poets, auteurs, musicians, painters - a million of them all together. And if there ever was a Lovecraftian twist that would sentence all us “creative-types” to ghoulish nightmares, perhaps we’d see the Calcutta Mrinal Sen often portrayed in his films. And much like “The Call Of Cthulhu”, this nightmare we’d see would be based in truth, for the problems Sen highlighted in his films still heavily dominate society. He wasn’t exactly the romantic type and even though he fit into the same new-wave art-style that defined the Bengali Cinema scene at the time, he was vastly different from his contemporaries. He was a political artist through and through - an ardent marxist and a staunch critic of the class difference still visible in India.

His films weren’t as polished as the ones Ray directed, nor was he as poetic as Ghatak. He was coarse, and raw, and true to his beliefs, and his convictions drove his films. They weren’t aesthetic pieces of art, they were never meant to be housed in a gallery and shown to film students. His films were meant to be consumed, or rather devoured. They were meant to start a dialogue between people. They were what a lighter would be to gasoline. A single spark and off went the masses.

A personal favorite of mine, and one that I believe captures Sen best is his 1982 film *Aakaler Sandhane* (In search of the Famine). It was, by all means, a critical darling, winning 4 National Film Awards and a Silver Bear at the 31st Berlin International Film Festival. The movie, in an increasingly-meta move, is about a film crew who comes to a rural village in Bengal to shoot a film about the 1943 famine.

Now, as you all may know, the horrific 1943 Bengal Famine was an orchestrated (and I do not use this term lightly) genocide brought on by the British Government (then under the helm of the horribly racist Winston Churchill). To finance the British-Indian Army (this was after all during the Second World War), India was looted further, resulting in war time inflation. Land was appropriated and the farmers were denied access to their own harvest. As the war waged on and the British Treasury struggled, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, composed mostly of British Firms, were put in charge of the distribution of goods. To prevent the Indian soldiers from leaving their positions in the army, they devised the Foodstuff Scheme that provided preferential distribution of food to men engaged in the war effort. This resulted in a food shortage that led to the death of nearly 3 million Bengalis.





This was, by all means a man-made famine and while there were other contributing factors, British Imperialisation remained the number one constituent of the famine.

Aakaler Sandhane came a little late in Sen's career- his 19th feature film out of the 27 odd films he made. It is also quite different from his other late-era political films. If we take into consideration Chaalchitra or Interview, or even Oka Oori Katha - the protagonists (if you can call them that) are lower-middle class individuals who struggle to fit into a world that isn't designed with them in mind.

This is highlighted in Chaalchitra when Utpal Dutt asks Anjan Dutt to write on stove-smoke as a pollutant. Dipu (played by Anjan Dutt) however sees the smoke as a necessary evil, simply because millions upon millions of people cannot afford gas. This brings up, what is till date, a very topical question. In our quest to be righteous, are we doing what is right?

How many ovens are there in Calcutta? How many ovens will you ban? How many men and women will you sentence to starvation?



How many people can afford to buy masks, face shields, and sanitizers regularly? How many men and women can afford to work from home? How many people can self-isolate at home?

Coming back to Aakaler Sandhane, the reason it is different is because it reads less like a Mrinal Sen script and more like a Manik Bandopadhyay story - the only difference being the village headmaster pointing out the wrongdoings of the city-dwelling film folk.

The movie starts out non-maliciously, with the film crew moving into a decadent rajbari in a little village called Hatui. The chaos that often ensues when a crew decides to shoot on location is portrayed wonderfully by the original film crew and Dhritiman's portrayal of an idealistic director with a constant thirst for nicotine is one that deserves all the accolades one can bestow upon the film.

However, as the film progresses, Sen one by one introduces the plight of the village folk. Many would consider Haren to be the first such story, but I'll argue that Haren was more a part of the film crew than of the village. His was our first introduction into the psyche of the village folk before things took a more Maniquesque (Bandopadhyay, not Ray) turn.

No, our first introduction to the economic plight of the villagers, is the owner of the now-decadent rajbari. Now confined to just a few rooms and left all alone to care for her bedridden husband, it doesn't take an economist to figure out just how bad things have gotten.





Mrinal Sen, in the film, also highlights two very important aspects of the small bengali village - the economic aspect of the village and the psyche of the village folk. And this holds true for nearly each and every important character.

Similarly, the now-matriarch of the zamindar family shows hopefulness when she talks about Prabir, who is now a "big officer in Calcutta" or her daughter who stays in a nearby village. These might be considered throw-away lines by the writer, included to fill up screen time, but they hold more importance than one would be inclined to think. Her statement subtly shows her belief that life outside the village is better, especially in Calcutta. Prabir might just be an officer of middling-rank but the fact that he resides in Calcutta is impressive enough to the erstwhile landlady.

This is a theme that rings out throughout the film. The village v/s the city - Calcutta is the place where fortunes are made, but to the orthodox villagers (with just the right touch of hypocrisy) the liberal lifestyle of the city-folk seems to be more hedonistic than enviable.

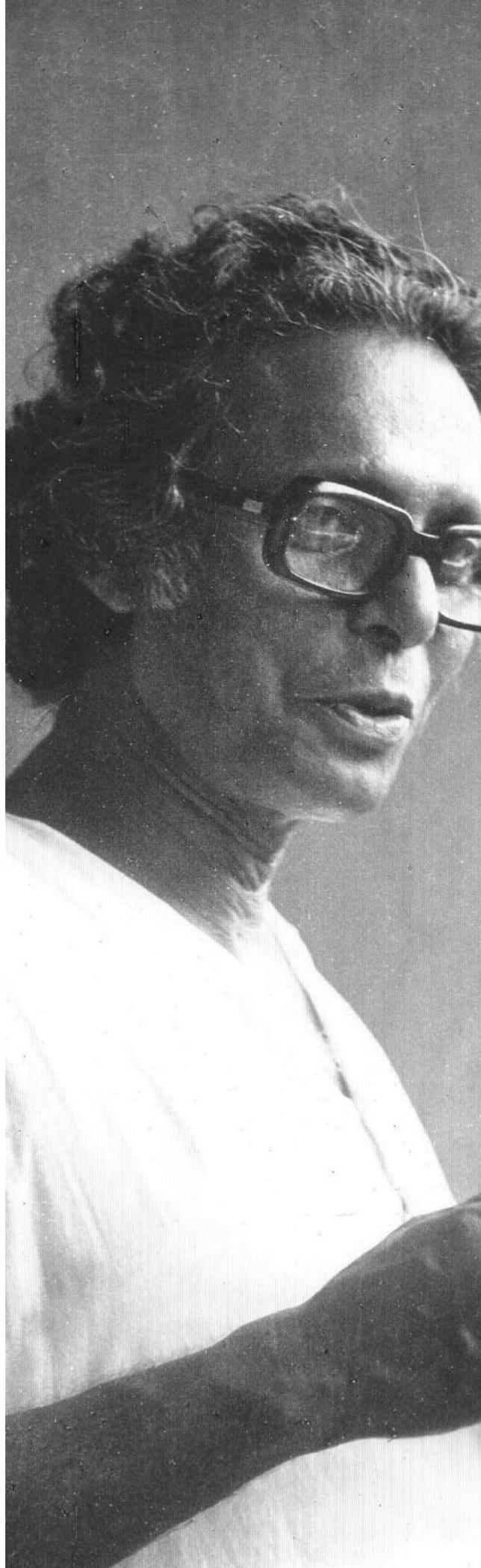
And this is where the story becomes comparable to a Manik Bandopadhyay novella. When an actress stomps out of the set and threatens to tear up the contract over a trivial issue, Dhritiman, claiming that no one is indispensable, lets her go without a fight. With less than a month left to shoot the rest of the scenes, he finds himself in a quandary and Haren, to help out the director, convinces a villager, Chatterjee (Chatujje-moshai), to let his daughter try out for the role.

The role however is that of a prostitute - a fallen woman who turns to prostitution during the famine to feed herself. When Dhritiman explains the role to Chatterjee, he fails to understand the make-believe aspect of the film and instead treats it as an attack on his values.

He is quick to get a few of his friends on board with him and then proceeds to chide a man who let his daughter audition for the role. He spreads rumors throughout the village, even influencing Haren's own family and turning them against him.

When Chatterjee approaches the village headmaster however, he is met with a foe. The educated headmaster who has seen the famine with his own two eyes understands the situation well. He knows of women who had to go through that very ordeal just to keep their family fed and quickly points out the hypocrisy of the village men who all profited off of the famine by buying land dirt cheap.

This however is just the psychological arc of the story. The economic aspect of the film remains and the protagonist here is Durga. She is introduced pretty late into the film - around the 30 minute mark, but her role is arguably the most important one.





Her husband, originally the breadwinner of the household, lost his arm in an accident at the factory. With his job gone, and the compensation nothing more than a pittance, Durga had to resort to working odd jobs in several households, including the zamindar bari. And here we first meet her as she is introduced by the matriarch of the now-rundown palace. Durga soon starts working on the set and here we are first introduced to her.

The film-within-the-film portrays a couple who refuse to sell their land during the famine (“If a farmer loses his land what does he have left?”). With conditions worsening and an infant child to feed, Savitri (the protagonist of the film-within-the-film) resorts to prostitution. When she returns home with oil and rice, her husband, realising what she has done, breaks the pot of rice and in rage, kills the infant (“I won’t keep this child born of sin”).

When this scene is being shot by the crew, Durga lets out an audible scream. Dhritiman, shocked, keeps staring at her while she walks away embarrassed. And here we are shown Durga’s family - her disabled husband and her two month old son. And here she poses the question:

“Have you seen the famine?”

The fact remains that they are going through a similar situation - famine or not. They are starving too and there is no one to help them and no one to turn to.

And soon she has to face a similar situation to Savitri - just instead of prostitution, it is acting. Dhritiman offers her a role in the film - that of the prostitute Malati. However, this role has been demonised throughout the village by Chatterjee and while the role would pay well, taking it up would mean losing all her honour in the village.



Her husband walks up to her, thinking that she's planning to sneak out of the house, but he finds her looking at the set from far away. And here she asks the most pertinent question in the film.

“The villagers never cared for us and never will. Then why do they come now and ask us to follow their orders?”

And here the story is tied in - the psychological orthodoxy of the villagers prevents Durga from lifting her family out of poverty.

Durga doesn't show up and with the increasing antagonistic behavior of the village folk, the crew decides to shoot the rest of the film at a studio and leave. The film ends with a still of Durga's face moving further and further away from the camera as a voice speaks:

“A few days later Durga's son passes away. Her husband has now been missing for three days. Durga is now all alone.”

Much like Savitri in the film-within-the-film.

And here lies the genius of Sen. His ability to mix the past and the present. To call back to the 1943 famine, the 1959 food riot and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and tie it together with 1980 Bengal was not an easy task then, and it isn't easy now as the pandemic pushes 250 million people below the poverty line. The film still remains relevant and Sen, with his fantastic vision, lives on through his art.



# Expressionism & The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

Sushen Mitra

In 1919, two young men named Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer wrote a screenplay about the insanity of authority. It was a simple story about a strange man calling himself Dr. Caligari who arrives at a fair in a German town with a somnambulist named Cesare in his thrall. Soon, a series of savage murders torments the local populace and when it is discovered that these are Cesare's actions at his master's bidding, Caligari is caught and incarcerated in a lunatic asylum. When this was released a year later (with somewhat noteworthy changes), what fascinated audiences and made *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* an international sensation, if not the idea and the story, were its brooding, disquieting atmospherics.





What is distinctive about *Caligari* is its visual style that joined Expressionist art into the grammar of film. It is emblematic of the German Expressionist movement and is, indeed, perhaps its purest and foremost example. The sets, painted by Expressionist artists Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig and Walter Reimann on canvas, are meant to be an externalisation of the haunting subject matter and become symbolic of emotional states, aggravating feelings of disorder and disarray. Scenes of the interiors of houses or offices, alleys and lanes or views of the city outside are presented in exaggerated dimensions, deformed spaces and mangled patterns of light. Doors, windows, streets, staircases and furniture are painted in irregular vertiginous arrangements as straight lines clash in corners or melt into fluid, geometric patterns. As tortuous tangles of lines spiral and snake through the canvas, the dissonance of actors walking through seemingly two-dimensional paintings is unsettling to the viewer.

Painted backdrops were common in early cinema and continued to be used well into the '50s and '60s in Hollywood.



However while these were generally rendered in the classical style and meant to mimic real-life in the studio, Caligari's sets are deliberately distorted in perspective, shape, form and colour, deepening feelings of neuroticism and dread. The Expressionist movement was marked by a disdain for the ideology of realism and objective interpretation, celebrating, instead, the subjectivity of emotional responses. In the many rhythms of lines and curves, in their shallow, faceted spaces and their strokes of bold black and grey, it is this subjectivity that Caligari revels in.

The culture of the Weimar period and its explosion of intellectual productivity has been called a Periclean Age by Ernst Bloch. The distrust of Wilhelmine values by a fractious social and political order in the wake of the Empire's fall, the defeat in the Great War between 1914 and 1918 and the economic devastation of the Treaty of Versailles shaped the sensibility of an embittered people. It was this stifled rage of an emasculated nation—demeaned by the drain of its finances as reparation, humiliated by the occupation of its territories by foreign armies as other parts were nibbled away and divided among conquering Allied nations, ruined by post-war hyperinflation— that shaped the overarching theme of Caligari as that of brutal, inhumane authority. Cesare is a pathetic visualisation of powerlessness, read by critics as the helplessness of ordinary citizens ravaged by figures of authority who make no sense to them while Caligari has been seen to represent the tradition of tyranny and unitarian power that had, for long, plagued the German consciousness. “. . . And everywhere chaos reigns, authority is discredited, power is mad and uncontrollable, wealth inseparable from crime”, wrote Bruce Thompson about Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse the Gambler, but much of the same can be said about The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.





In this, the film seems to be a bitter comment on the contradictory, contrary reactions to authority. On the one hand, written by Janowitz and Mayer, both pacifists and both disillusioned by their experiences with the military in the First World War, it is an allegory denouncing arbitrary expressions of power tempered with a revolutionary flavour. The character of Caligari is portrayed as driven to insanity by his lust for absolute control and the film seems to be a warning against such disingenuity and manipulation. It is well-documented that both writers were enraged by the revision of the original narrative as a frame story where much of the film is turned into a deluded hallucination, since this robbed it of their original intention of celebrating the potency of rebellion. In the original, the story closes with Caligari being institutionalised, but such political reverberations are absent in the final film. Instead, there is a different image of authority that is inferred from Caligari as it exists today – an image of subservience and servility, where coercion and oppression prevails and existing hierarchies of power are enforced. In ‘From Caligari to Hitler’, Kracauer reads Caligari as symptomatic of the subconscious desire of German society for a tyrant, arguing that he foreshadows the emergence of Adolf Hitler and the dreamy spell he casts on an irresolute, pusillanimous society.



The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari is an exploration of the cerebral and of the human mind with its cunning passages and contrived corridors, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot. Scholarship during the Weimar Period, concentrated at the famed Frankfurt School, was concerned with the creation of the discipline of Critical Theory that integrated Freudian psychoanalysis with political and cultural theory. Such Freudian trappings can be located in the film. Man is not, after all, the master of himself but an abundance of preconditioned reflexes cobbled together by neurotic experiences. The character of Caligari embodies a pure, pestilential evil with no remorse or pity that eventually triumphs. “I know now a way to cure him”, he says in the final shot of the film, staring ominously into the distance as Francis, now a confused, delirious lunatic is hounded into submission.

Seeing as the film is presented in the form of a frame narrative, one expects the curves and contortions of the flashback to fade away with the twist in the end and the return to the present and the ‘real’. When this does not happen, all narrative logic is rendered deceptive and the viewer is left disturbed. The Expressionist sentiment is that of an aesthetic duplication of reality. To look at the work of a Munch or a Schwitters is to regress into a world of dreams and delusions encroaching irrationality. Watching Caligari is a similar journey into a world cloaked in madness and mystery, where the lines between sanity and insanity, reality and unreality are blurred beyond distinction.



Light and shadow play an important part in the expression of emotion. Painted directly onto sets in sharp conflicting tones, they heighten the surreal mood of the film and appear especially incongruous with the natural shadows cast by movement of the actors. These bold, patterned contrasts among darkness, shadow and light, adopted from the artistic technique of chiaroscuro, travelled overseas in the 40s and influenced the stylistic successor of Expressionist film in Hollywood, film noir.

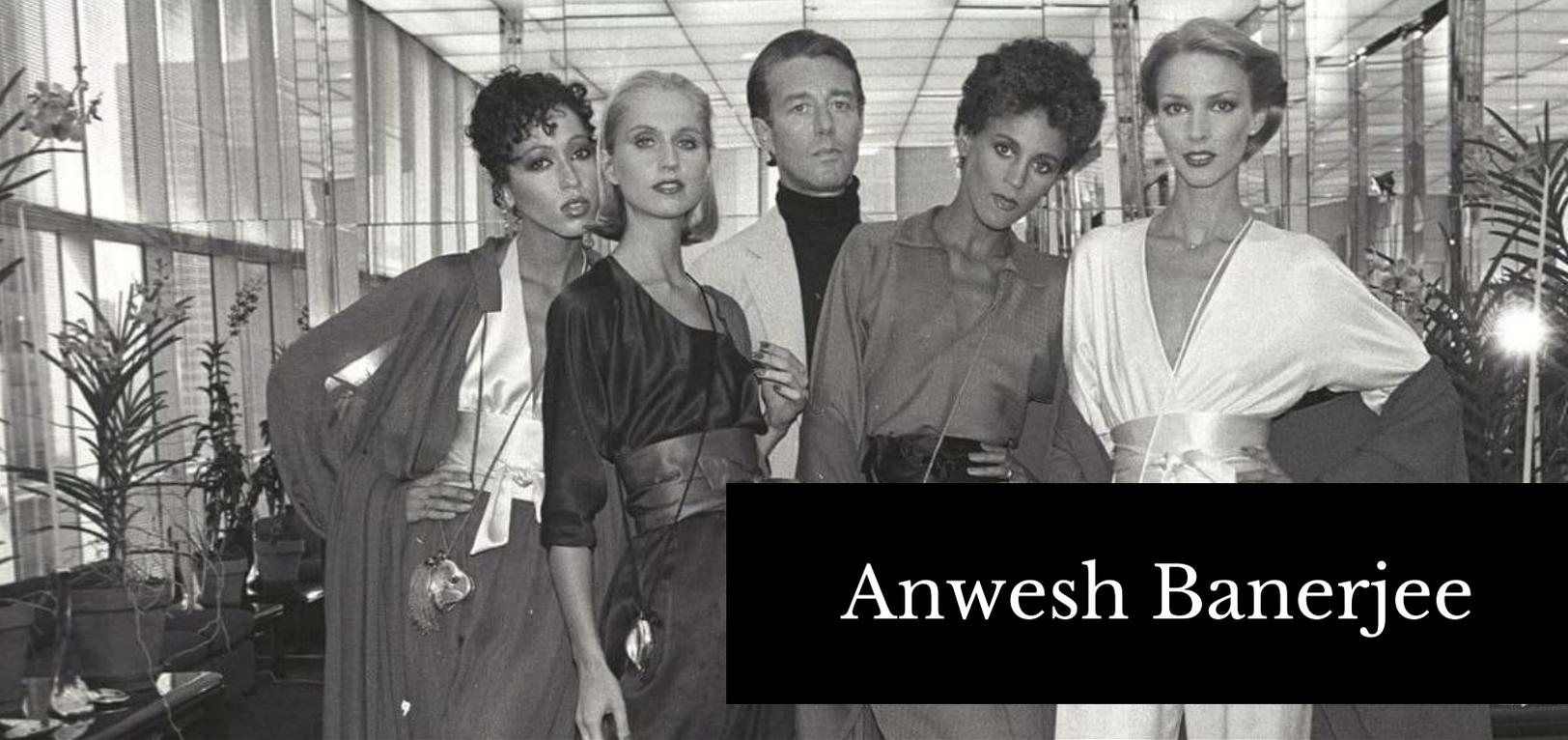
It is not merely painted urban locales, however, that define the paranoia and claustrophobia of *Caligari*. The silhouettes of the characters in their elaborate costumery—the flowing white robe that follows Jane like a shadow or Cesare’s own in pitch black, stark against the vignettted paths running in and out of roofs and chimneys; the affected acting, in all of its theatrical movements and mannered expressions; the exaggerated makeup with powdered skin and darkened lipstick, intense but lurid and unnerving; such elements fit flawlessly into an Expressionist painting and deepen the grotesque quality of the narrative. “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari is about the unreality of reality in tumultuous times”, writes Vincent LoBrutto and in this resolute disconnection from naturalism, the viewer finds a profound representation of the nightmarish cocktail of terror, ignominy and malice that had overwhelmed a defeated German nation in the years after the war.





Moving past the visual and atmospheric spectacle of watching it, however, critics have sometimes wondered what sets *Caligari* apart as Expressionist film from, say, Expressionist theatre. The camera is frontal and movement remains minimal, the dynamics of time and space are delineated through set design, the acting is melodramatic, the setting self-consciously unrealistic—it could as easily and as effectively have been mounted on the contemporary German stage. This, perhaps—and quite paradoxically—is the greatest testament to director Robert Weine’s mastery: that he adapted the established forms of art in painting and drama into the still-unfamiliar landscape of cinema. It was a unique experiment in eccentricity, never to be repeated again, but one that brought Expressionism into the fold of film and determined the rules of filmic expressionism for years to come.





Anwesh Banerjee

## Harold: Potrait of an Artiste

Before anything else, let us know what Ryan Murphy has done, in the past few years with the narration of queer stories and voices in cinema and television. A queer television mogul, he invested his money behind critically acclaimed shows like Pose featuring a spectacular cast comprising trans and queer men and women of colour alongside rebooting the film adaptation of popular Broadway show Boys in the Band, led by a largely queer cast facing off against each other in a chamber drama that explored with authenticity and feeling the dynamics of what went behind the construction of queer relations in our society. His deeply queer aesthetic of bright and dazzling colours, as evident from his earlier ventures such as the popular Glee and the more recent The Prom do not undermine his capacity to dig up the darkness of queer psyche in yet again critically lauded The Assassination of Gianni Versace. One of his latest ventures, a fantastical reimagining of Hollywood in the wake of the ravages of the WW2 were laid with noble intentions, spearheaded by a powerful ensemble - was heavily let down by a broad-stroked screenplay lacking narrative depth.



On the back of this, his latest Netflix produced, five-part web series on famous American fashion designer Halston (played by an eclectic Ewan McGregor) was something that was highly anticipated. Halston has always been one of the most controversial figures in American fashion and although his is one of the standing legacies in the American scene, his life has never really been utilised for dramatisation. After all the story has the makings of everything that Murphy loves so much - the dazzling fabrics and colours of New York couture in the late 1900s, the trauma of childhood, the heat of lusty relationships, the navigations of art and commerce and above all drugs and rock and roll. And I say with great pleasure that Murphy delivers in what is one of the most ridiculously watchable and impeccably pulpy Netflix originals I have seen in a long, long while.

The story begins not with the childhood of Halston. Instead it gives us glimpses of the same. His unwavering bond with his mother, his initial inspirations growing up in a suburban American county far removed the dizzying world of glamorous New York, an abusive family - trauma that he carries on with himself for the rest of his life. All these cornerstones in his character are given tidy little arcs over the course of the series, and end up serving as pivotal and in one case life altering moments in his life. He lands us instead, in the middle of the scene where Halston, under the name of Bergdorf Goodman has already made a name for himself as the creator of the Kennedy pillbox hat, and is yearning day and night to make a separate identity for himself as a designer of clothes.

The first hour and a half underlines the beginning of his relationship with Liza Minetti, a woman who will eventually go on to become not just his greatest muse but also the bearer of the most meaningful relationship in his life. His equations with fellow colleagues, his desire to outshine Balenciaga, his ingenious invention of the plastic waterproof suede jacket and his mad genius which would come and disappear in spurts are all outlined here. The most deliciously watchable show is of course the 1973 Battle of Versailles. Running a little shy of one entire hour it is an entire film in itself with its soaring ego clashes, last moment mishaps and a final roaring climactic stretch that reaffirms the fundamental rags to riches template of the overall narrative. This is also important in the way it views past trauma as an important determinant in driving present decisions. The moment in which Halston decides to go commercial with his art is a moment that is a culmination of past trauma and insecurity that had left him feeling vulnerable in a world that is primarily hostile to all living within it. And this very deal, signed in a moment of absolute panic is what ruins Halston eventually.



The trajectory of the series is predictable of course. We know that the artiste shall see the face of success and descend into a vortex of unprecedented drugs and sex and at the same time as the genius gets diluted in the face of this scene of excess friends turn into foes and ultimately ruin is awaits till redemption is tasted sweetly on the lips in a moment of small albeit pyrrhic triumph. But even when the screenplay seems to drag, what keeps us invested in the story is the performance of the figure at the centre of this mayhem.

Which brings me to my next point. Although McGregor offers a career best performance in his interpretation of the Halston persona one cannot shake off the feeling that it is still a heterosexual A-list star essaying the role of a gay man. The story of the tortured gay man, as mentioned by Rahul Desai, has been seen before in films like *The Imitation Games*, *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Rocketman*, and although Haslton as a series does not shy away from explicit scenes of convincingly simulated sex and exploration of queer politics, the template of the tortured gay artiste, desperately needs to be revamped by an authentic queer interpretation by a wholly queer actor.





The writing by Murphy ensures the authenticity, but in an age where representation is a pivotal concern for most this issue needs to be addressed as fast as possible. We need more films like *Boys in the Band* and *Pose* where queer appropriation will be a thing of the past. But this in no way is to undermine the brilliance of the craft that McGregor brings to the fore. His performance adds more nuance to the character than the screenplay, be it in the scene where he asks his lawyer to pay off his blackmailing lover, or where he asserts his need to be alone to another lover. His lack of rootedness in light of a tormented childhood and a demanding work-space are true queer mainstream experiences and McGregor brings great panache and empathy to these strains of his character. The full range of his acting chops come forth in the scenes involving the secretion of the Halston perfume and the final episode where his estranged but long term colleague played by an excellent and ever reliable David Putta reads out reviews of his swansong. As Halston stares out of his town-house his steely exterior shows his indifference towards the critics who never understood him but his eyes and their hardly concealed tears show the triumph he feels at his vision being finally understood by a world that has been more than just cruel to him and his art.



I wish this depth of performance had extended to the writing too, digging deeper into concerns such as the process of the creation of the brilliant plastic suede and the hetero-romantic relationship he shared with Liza Minatelli, who essayed by a Krista Rodryguez is hugely watchable (especially in the recreation of the Cabaret scene). I only wish the writers had made the choice to spend as much time on the peripheral characters in the Halston universe in a web series, that is an excellent return to form by creator Ryan Murphy and a definite must watch this coming Pride Month. When the pulp of the sex and the drugs and colourful fabrics fade, the nuances do remain and settle like dust.

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Anwesh Banerjee

# Movie Recommendations for Pride Month

Here are five lesser known films from the canon of queer cinema to watch and appreciate this Pride month. The list is not exclusive and has been curated on the basis of personal interests and likings.



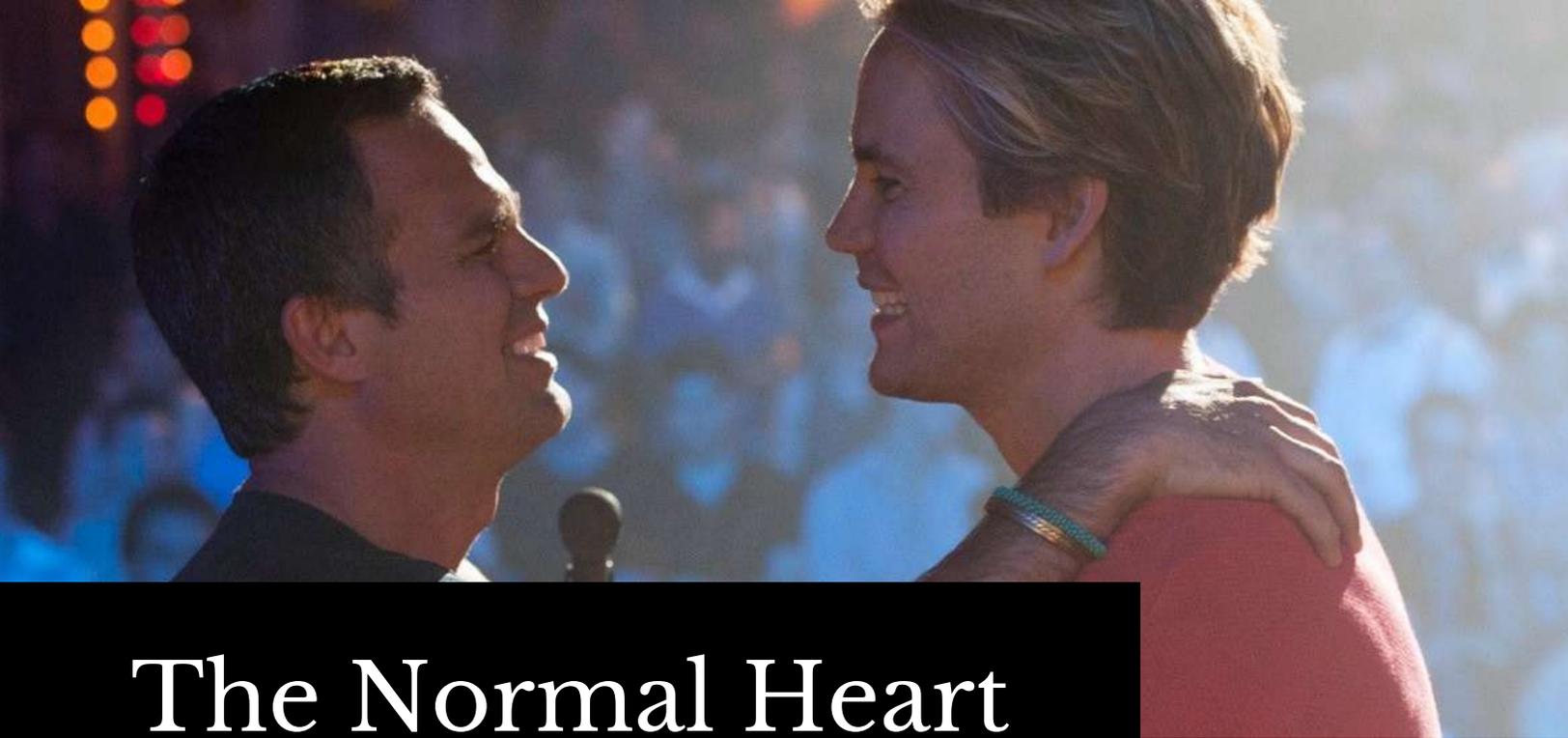
# A Single Man

Directed by one of the biggest names in American fashion, Tom Ford, this largely sepia drenched ode to beauty and mortality seems like a fashion commercial stretched to 90 minutes. If there is any film which has explored the gaze of a man and its yearning for beauty, then it is this. Based on the eponymous novel by Christopher Isherwood, this movie follows a day in the life of Professor Falconer, who decides to kill himself being unable to cope with the loneliness following the death of his 16 year long lover, here played by Matthew Goode. The novel never really makes an issue out of the sexuality of the characters. It is just as commonplace a thing as the cigarettes they smoke and the cars they drive in. Early on the film it is even laid bare that Falconer had slept with his now best-friend Charley while they were kids in London. Colin Firth as Falconer gives the performance of a lifetime. This is a film that explores grief, not in its loud outpouring but in its infinite, yet measured silences and Firth makes every beat clear through effective use of his eyes and body language. His interactions with his student, played by a brilliant Nicholas Hoult, exhibits no lust but a yearning for the youth and love that he has now lost forever. This film, in its deeply Mrs. Dalloway-esque style of narrative is one of the best navigations of the mundanity that governs the queer experience, defined mostly in languages of heartbreak. Watch out for an electric performance by Julianne Moore, who in a brief supporting act, almost threatens to steal the film.



# The Handmaiden

Directed by Korean auteur Park-Chan Wook, this erotic thriller is a crazy mix of beauty, violence and sex - all trademarks of some of the best works of Wook. In this adaptation of *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters, he transports a scintillating lesbian love story of deception and violence from high-brow Victorian England to Korea under Japanese invasion. The period setting allows him to imbue this dark thriller with a sense of visual beauty that is so hard to dismiss that one is almost forced to look the violence, psychological and physical, directly in the eye. The film follows the story of a con-man, known as Count Fujiwara, employing the help of a rookie thief called Soo-ke to entrap and steal the inheritance of a wealthy noblewoman Lady Hideko. Soo-ke is made to pose as the lady's handmaiden while Count Fujiwara tries to court her and win her affection. Trouble arises when Soo-kee falls in love with Lady Hideko, complicating the execution of the operation - but very soon we learn that all is not at all what it seems. The queerness of the character is hardly an issue in the film. It is something that just is. Their love story blooms with the commonplace nature of any heterosexual nature and that is one of the standing achievements of the film. By normalising the romance between its leading women the film goes ahead with its complex plot of family trauma, violence, double-deception and sex, giving rise to one of the finest queer romantic-thrillers of the last decade.



# The Normal Heart

An often overlooked film about the ravages of the AIDS epidemic in America and how it affected the queer community this film stars an eviable ensemble cast of actors including the likes of Julia Roberts, Mark Ruffalo, Matt Bomer and Jim Parsons. Although the couple at the center of the film is Felix and Ned, the film instead of focussing just on their personal travails takes a larger aerial look at the problems of the queer community that furthered the spread of the epidemic. The film has a feel-good sense to it and the screenplay though fast paced and unwavering in its focus does tug at our heartstrings just at the right moments. The moments are designed to play out as melodrama but the pitch of the performances never becomes operatic, lending a sense of stability and sophistication to the film. But this popularly termed divisive nature of a film like this does not really interfere with character development or narrative progression because of the genuine feeling with which every character is written. We understand the anxieties of Ned, Dr. Brooks one sided fight against the system and finally, in a few seconds watch Jim Parsons, whose ability to play “serious” characters is criminally underrated go from sadness to dejection to heart breaking acceptance in the final scene of the film.



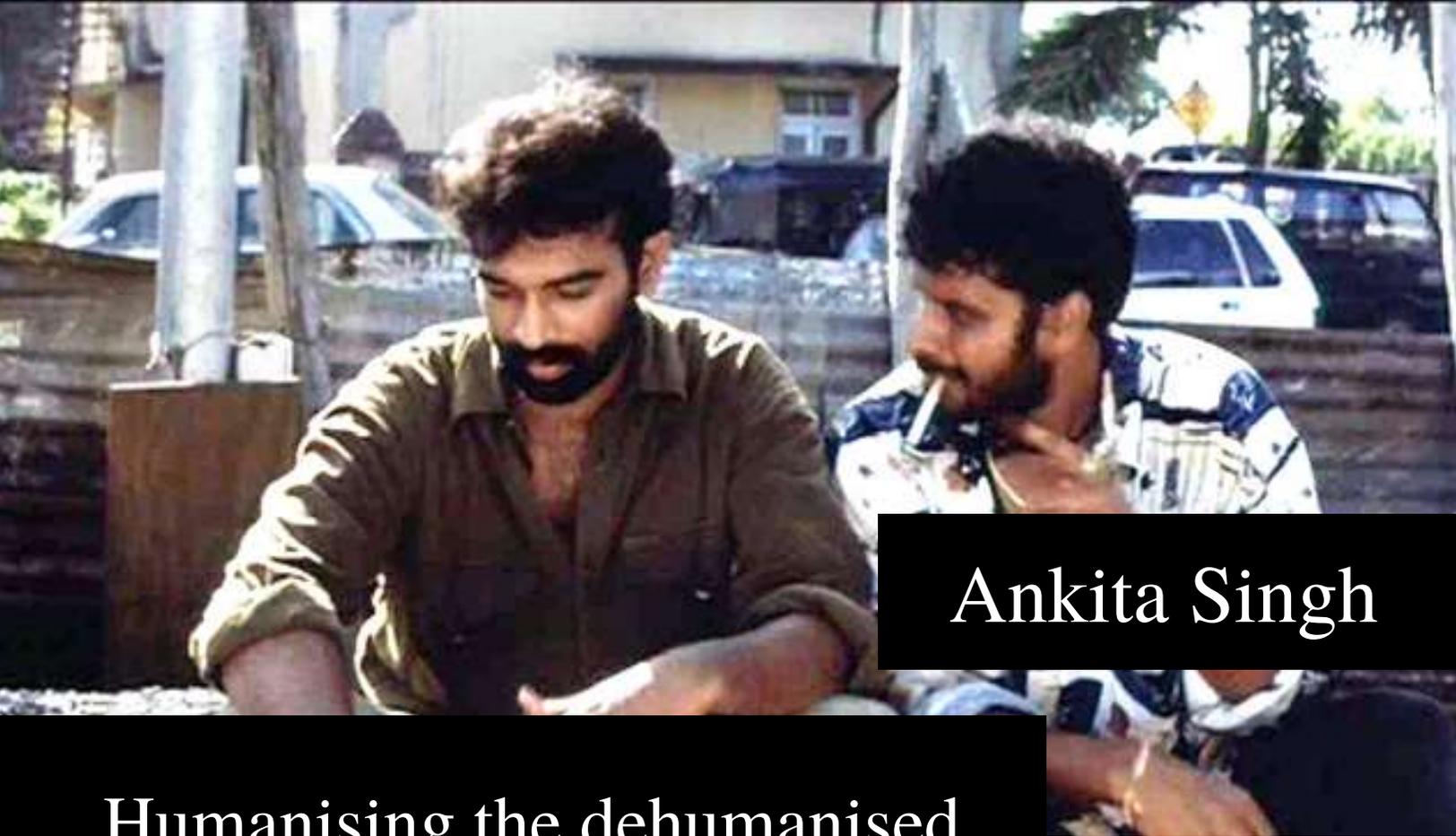
## Memories in March

The second installment of the queer trilogy helmed by bengali auteur and queer icon Rituparno Ghosh, this chamber drama starring Deepti Naval, Raima Sen and Ghosh himself is a masterclass in writing and performance. Directed by Sanjoy Nag, this is the only film on this list where the sexuality of a character becomes a cause of conflict. A mother comes to her son's work city following his death and realises that there is more to his life as an executive in an advertising agency than she was ever privy to. In one of the most moving sequences of the film, Ghosh playing the lover of the deceased man, asks the grieving mother played by Naval, that what was a greater concern for her, the death of her own son or the knowledge that he was gay. This forms the emotional crux of the film making it a riveting watch as one keeps guessing if the two strangers, who had been brought together in ways unknown long before destiny brought them together, choose to be united by their shared grief or part ways by their vastly divided memories.



# The Favourite

There are many reasons to watch what is arguably one of the best films of Greek master Yorgos Lanthimos, the foremost being the performance of Olivia Colman. Shattering in her portrayal of Queen Anne, this film is a delicious lesbian love triangle set against the excess and intrigue of the early 18th Century English court. It follows the rivalry between Lady Sarah Marlborough played by a wicked Rachel Weisz and Lady Abigail played by the stone-cold Emma Stone as they vie for the affections of the Queen. What begins as petty rivalry eventually turns into an acerbic cat and mouse chase as the two women go to extreme lengths to win the favour of the ailing queen. Lanthimos has always had an eye for the macabre and his ability to elicit comedy from the most upsetting of scenarios is a testament to the sheer genius of the man. But even as the film follows a constant power struggle, against the backdrop of court politics, the narrative causes us to reflect deeply on pertinent questions like the true nature of love and who is a better lover - one who chooses to lie and say with genuine comfort that the beloved looks like an angel fallen from heaven or another whose loyalty, despite being fierce, is also cruel enough to comment that the beloved looks nothing short of an ugly badger.



Ankita Singh

Humanising the dehumanised  
world: The Underworld and  
it's reflections in Ram Gopal  
Varma's Satya.

*"[...] Then it suddenly struck me that we always hear about these gangsters only when they either kill or when they die. But what do they do in between?"*



Thus recalls the director Ram Gopal Varma of his film *Satya* and the idea behind making a movie on the Underworld. The film, a 1998 crime- gangster genre piece starring the almost unknown actors, is a realistic life, gritty portrayal of what lies behind the mystique world of the mafia, in this case that of the Bombay one.

What is interesting to note is that the film is an amalgamating point of the story of these not so big ones of this gangster world, rather, the small time “bhais” working for the main bosses struggling to survive in the not so shiny blitzes of Bombay, a city that has an equally stark side of its being. Thus, begins a new era of a telling that takes into being the gory lives of these small time thugs and the dark alleys and tattered houses and buildings of Bombay.

This essay is an attempt to underline how the film is a move away from the earlier understanding of a crime cum gangster genre and is a chef d’oeuvre that challenges the limitations of this particular genre.



Furthermore, it explores to elucidate a simultaneous new glimpse of the world and the growth of a city marked by such a movie that not only brings forth a panorama of this not so beautiful and yet humanised characters from this world of crime. In doing so, I argue that the film establishes a multilayered understanding and intertwining of lives, politics, the social space of existence and a cumulative symbiotic relationship between these three entities.

Phil Hardy clearly points out the established elements of the earlier crime and gangster genre: from nightclubs and bars to gangs to the lawyer to the gang rivalries: all seem to chalk out the characteristics essential to be qualified to the genre. Furthermore a narrative that is fore grounded in the underworld and depicts the usual rise and fall of the gangsters in the world with their own rules of surviving that go against the laws of the state. *Satya*, fulfills all the above requisites and yet makes a further departure away to a minute picture of the lives of these working on the lower edges of the underworld. The plot unfolds the protagonist Satya (played by JD Chakravarthy) coming to Bombay as an unknown migrant in search of work and due to circumstances unforeseen, gets involved and starts working with Bhiku Mhatre (played by Manoj Bajpayee) and his gang.

He very soon becomes his right hand and what ensues is a series of disputes and interwar rivalries related to the politician “*Bhau*” for whom they work. The end is known to us: there would be deaths and bloodshed, for in the war against crime and law, it is what ensues: in this case on one side is Satya, who tries to escape the current life to start afresh but fails and on the other hand Bhiku, who falls victim to jealousy of his own boss. Similar is the situation of all the gang members. So what is it that distinguishes this film from the others?

To begin with, *Satya* brings to life the identities of these small time gangsters: it establishes and names them, each of them existing in their own distinctive and particular character graph and unique identities, for example we have Bhiku Mhatre, the hyperactive leader, Chander, the continuously talkative and joke guy, Kallu Mama, the strict and funny elderly member, Vitthal and Bappu, the '*supari*' guys in the opening sequences and Pakya to name a few. All these characters are brought to their proper personas reflecting their behaviours, their idiosyncrasies. And hence is created an existence that is remarkable, believable and even if mythic is no way sensational.



The choice of actors on screen plays an important contributor to a realist portrayal for as Travis Crawford notes:

*“But Varma elevates the material by minimizing melodrama and foregrounding the brutality and poverty that motivates his characters' amoral life choices. And by casting an anonymous everyman like J.D. Chakravarthy as Satya (rather than a star like Dutt or Bachchan), Varma denies his audience an easy anti-hero identification figure, forcing the viewer to confront the inhumanity inherent in the material.”*

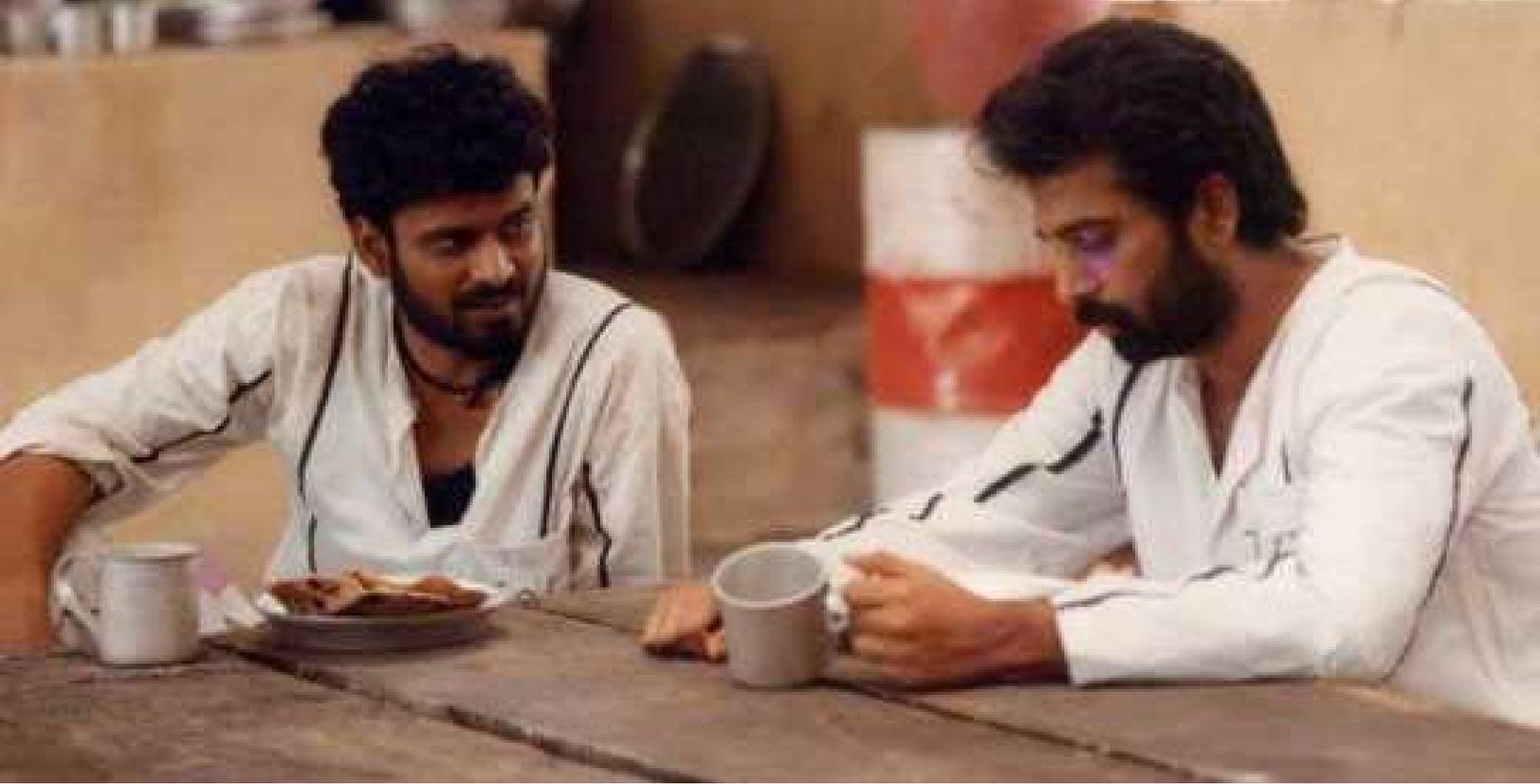
This single antihero identification figure is what the film doesn't achieve to. There is no single figure that the audiences remark, rather it's these bunch of characters that outshine and etch their presence among the audiences. And this factor in turn, for the audience alleviates the general curiosity of the underworld to a more sympathetic and confronting one. Moreover, unlike the old genre features that complied the identification of a single identity in a gangster film, here it transforms and gets diversified in all the characters. Added to this the crude, crass everyday “*bambaiya*” style conversations and dialogues take the concreteness of the plot to certain recognisability for the masses.





The glimpses that the movie portrays throughout, the violence and crime, the struggle and rivalries to thrive in the Underworld are complemented with the small moments of emotions, reactions and dealing with the situations that define the narrative. There indeed exists the masculinity and patriarchal guns and pistol carrying violent men. But there too exist those moments of vulnerability that criss-crosses their paths and humanly crises that pokes them. For example, Bhiku is as impetuous, rash and cunning in his dealings to survive in the city. At the same time he has that humorous and caring side to him, that often gets reflected in the fear instilled moments of his life. This is a move away from the killing and getting killed picture of the lives of these gangsters.

There are these moments of everyday struggles, whims that surround them. For example, one sees developing a fraternal bonding that is beyond the usual ascribing to gang's members. For example, be it the point when Bhiku worries for Satya when he isn't to be found and the rival gang Jagga bhai's men are on the search for them. The conversation that starts in the form of a verbal dispute of sorts emerges from this fear and caring mix of emotions that aggrieve the characters at the time.



What follows is the sudden change of humorous banter for buying a gift for Vidya (the love interest of Satya) and Bhiku remarks that he doesn't really have the sense of buying one, and that he had bought a "*kanghi*" for Kallu Mama, when asked for one. Another example is when Chander gets killed by the police on the hunt and lookout for these gangsters and Bhiku unable to process his emotional multitude reacts to the situation. Or be it the happy times of the wedding celebration of Chander's sister, the gang can be seen enjoying and projecting a life that is beyond the grapples of the usual murderous undertones. The film is replete with such incidents and weaves a narrative that is representative of more than the old connotations of the gangster archetype and the city of Bombay and its character itself helps outdraw this world of collusions.

The very opening scene of the film takes us through a narrator recounting in a very Dickensque wordings similar to the opening lines of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*: getting us acquainted of the binaries that exist in the urban Bombay city. What follow are visuals of the extremities of the city and what it offers: from high rise buildings, the sky scrapers, the lavish luxuries, the charm of the cinematic world to the greasy, dingy and dirty life of the *chawls*, *kholis* and the streets of the city.

The camera decides to follow this latter part of the life of Bombay that often gets camouflaged in the bright lights of the former world. And in this space of dirt and degrade, outlives the world of the mafia and the Underworld that guard, build and forges links with the brightened half of the city. The stylistic technicalities of the film carry forward these distinctive closed space realities here by continuously following it through, the broiled up drunk men who thrive on *haftas* and *wasoolis* and dance to the rhythm of Altaf Raza's "*Tum to thehre pardesi*" in the local dance bars and night clubs. These not so agreeable places have seen and heard it all: they have been witnesses to the many riots and ruckus, of the bad and unworthy that dwell in this urban Bombay and safely guards and hides them away so as not be seen.

Ranjani Mazumdar terms this recognition of the lives as shown through the cinematic world as "*the urban delirium of the Underworld*". She goes on to draw the portraits of the city of Bombay as and when they have evolved through the times and have been depicted in the Bollywood verse. She draws attention to this 1990s city when the Underworld and its workings developed and roped in the city and its life and affected and influenced the very structural, political and social spheres of these many forms of this urban landscape.





She argues how the city itself, with these key components of gangs and crime marked with the general and claustrophobic spaces becomes an important factor in the psychological world of the crime and its members. One sees an exact picture in the film *Satya*, wherein we witness the psyche of the criminals and their world. The city allocates the functioning of these essential entities and in turn becomes a confidante of sort for them.

All throughout the sequences of the film we get to see the various worlds within the lives of these gangsters and the clashes of these worlds and their meeting points. For example, from the clumsily adjusting small spaces of the *kholis* to the open spaces in the song sequences (that reflect the narrative of Satya's love life) are huge contrasts. From the sea line to the greenery of *Khandala*, from the railway tracks to the pens of buffaloes to water down spaces of the meagre dwellings, the thriving that initiates a juxtaposition of the worlds and pits them against each other. This in fact, is the everyday lived reality of these characters and Bombay. The iconic scene of the shootout of *Bhau's* during the festivities of '*Ganesh Chaturthi*' clarifies the murkiness of not only the rains that mark the city but also the banal, risky and dark lives of these people and Bombay.



In fact the city gets personified as an identity that forms the symbiotic, almost parasitic existence. These people from the underworld would continue to exhibit the darkness of the city and would one day perish. It's the city that carries forward the remembrances of these figures. It is the ears to their momentary desires: Bhiku shouting "*Mumbai ka king kaun?*" to the open sea and so shall remain the last witness to their existence as well.

Interestingly as recounts Varma in his memoir that the success of the film was the word of mouth recognition and sharing of information about it that jotted down its success is an attestation to the level of familiarity and sort of connection that generated among the masses and drew them to it. Not to mention the details that it highlights of this underworld and its linkages to the cinema world and the politics surrounding these.

To conclude we can say that owing to the claims that the film *Satya* is characterised by and projects, it not only challenges the prior strict boundaries of the crime genre film types and also transitions into a much more realistic portrayal wherein it merges and integrates not only the lives of its characters but also gives life to the very space that it accounts into. It wouldn't be far-fetched to remark that it in fact forms the basis of a memorial outlining of the underworld and its complicated outlaws that thrive in it.





Aindrila Ray

# The Godfathers of Florentine Renaissance

The art and architecture of the Italian renaissance speak volumes of the era's wealth and power structures, and to be a patron of art in that time was a position that came with massive societal respect and standing, and a solid hold in the era's politics. The act of commissioning an artist to design or paint or sculpt was a direct reflection of the patron's taste and ambitions. The Medici family, also known as the House of Medici was one such patron whose funds provided for masterpieces like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Donatello's *David* and Michelangelo's *Lorenzo de Medici, Duke of Urbino*. In this article, we look into the birth, the rise and the ultimate decline of the Medici family and their commitment to transitioning Florence into a cultural and intellectual hotspot, and eventually the art capital of the western world.



*Procession of the Magi, Benozzo Gozzoli*

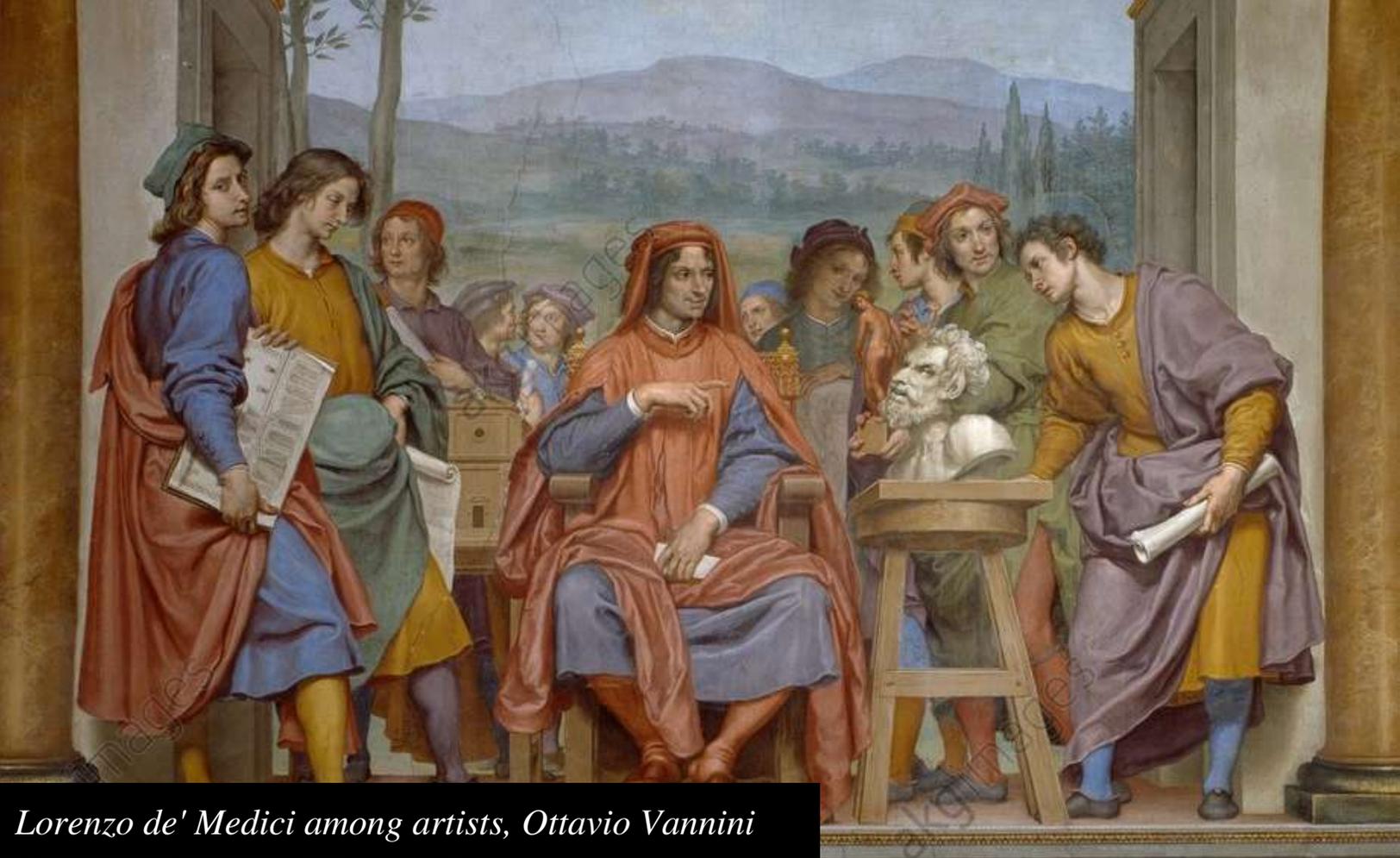
The Medici family first came into prominence in the 12th century through their contributions in banking and commerce. However, this was only a short spurt of glory because in the 14th century, Salvestro de' Medici was forced into exile. The Medici dynasty was actually established by a distant cousin of Salvestro, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and reached its peak under his son, Cosimo de' Medici who is popularly known among historians as '**Cosimo The Elder**'. The financial growth of the Medicis came around the 15th century by revolutionizing the European banking system, especially with the introduction of a double entry book-keeping system and the 'Letter of Credit' concept. Cosimo was one of the richest men in Italy by 1434 and also the uncrowned monarch of Florence. Cosimo, a huge lover of the arts, chose patronage of art and humanities as a way to establish the authority and affluence of the Medici family, a tactic also deployed by the successors of Cosimo who were some of the largest private patrons in the history of Renaissance.

At a time when Cosimo came into power, Florence was also very politically unstable and constantly under the threat of being captured by the neighbouring Italian states of Milan, Naples and Rome. Apparently, the Medici family were also commendable diplomats and Cosimo secured a mutual territory agreement among the states. Cosimo's rule ensured two things: one, an atmosphere where artists like Donatello could create artistic masterpieces, and two, a wealthy state where art was not just created for Bible study or to justify the glory of the monarch, but simply to be cherished by the state's loaded elite class just for the sake of it.

Donatello's most famous work, the bronze *David*, which is also the first freestanding bronze cast statue of the Renaissance era was commissioned by Cosimo the Elder, who wanted to place it in the Palazzo Medici courtyard in Florence. Donatello also created *Judith and Holofernes* for the garden-fountain of Palazzo Medici. Both David and Judith are Biblical characters whose stories are symbolic of a weaker opponent overthrowing tyranny. Considering Florence as the underdog who stood tall in its opposition of the tyrannical neighbouring states under the rule of the Medicis, Donatello successfully captured the essence of Florence and the Medici family through his works.

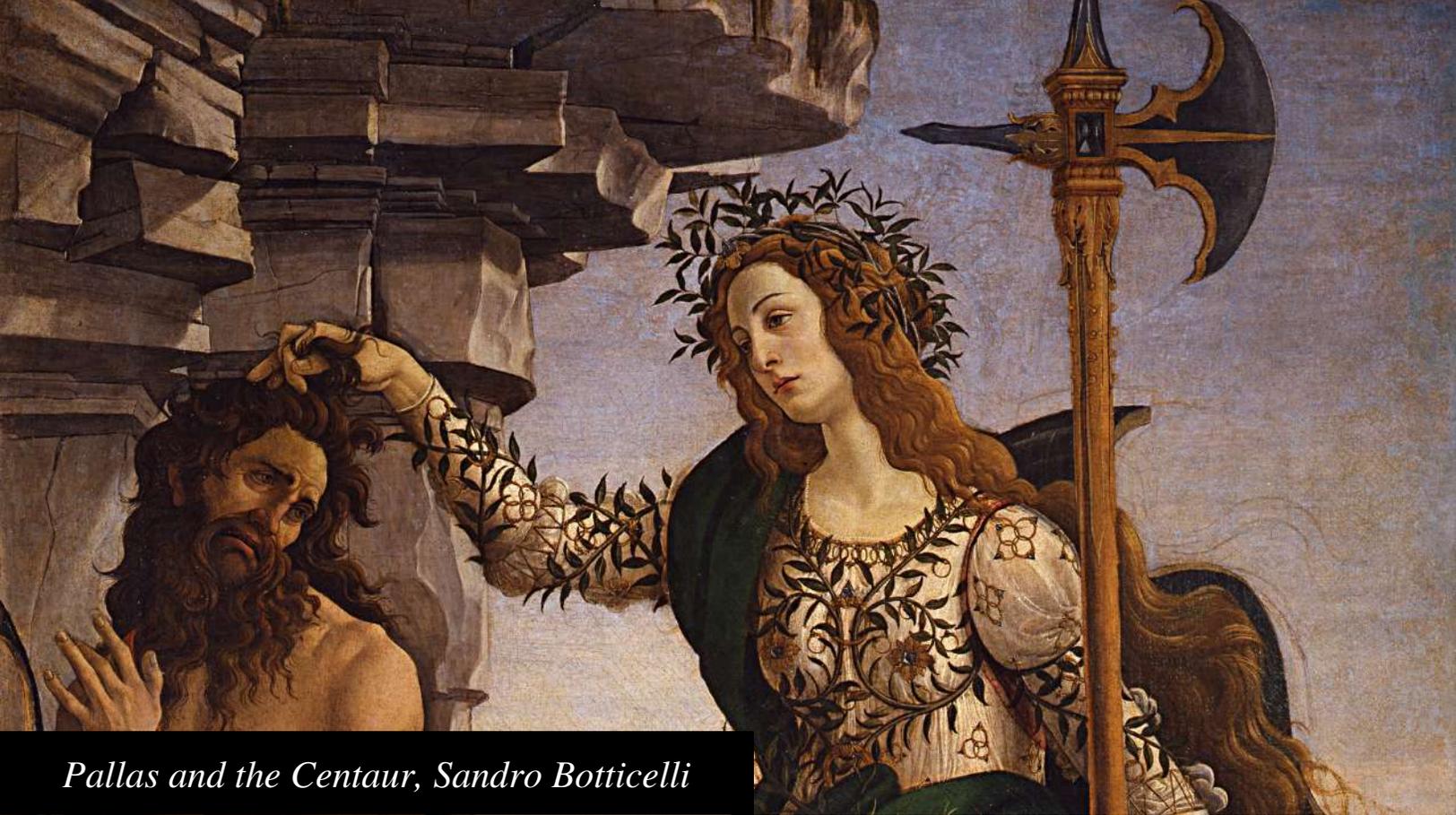


*Judith beheading Holofernes, Orazio Gentileschi*



*Lorenzo de' Medici among artists, Ottavio Vannini*

Lorenzo de' Medici who succeeded Cosimo, kept the legacy of his father alive and continued to honour the treaty of Lodi that enforced peace among Florence and the neighbouring states and hence peace reigned under his rule and art boomed, to levels that could not have been imagined before. It was under Lorenzo, a poet himself, that the works of Renaissance masters like Botticelli, Michelangelo and da Vinci found support and patronage. The Medicis hosted several artists, poets and intellectuals, but it was Michelangelo who was personally attached to the family. As a teenager, Michelangelo actually lived with the Medicis almost like a son, studied under Donatello during his stay of two years (1490-1492) and was later commissioned to complete the Medici family tombs in Florence. An article also mentioned that da Vinci actually played the lute at the Medici's parties and Botticelli studied the classic sculptures seen in their gardens.



*Pallas and the Centaur, Sandro Botticelli*

It is often said that Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur* was a tribute to Lorenzo de' Medici, where Pallas Athena is the goddess of Wisdom and Knowledge and the centaur, a symbolic representation of mankind's ferality. Naples, a state that was far ahead of Florence in terms of military strength, never once attacked Florence, and Florence owed it to Lorenzo's diplomatic skills. Hence a popular interpretation suggests that Athena represented Lorenzo, and the centaur represented the state of Naples.

Leonardo da Vinci however, did not receive as much patronage from the Medici family as the other artists. In his teenage years, he was an apprentice of Andrea del Verrocchio, who created tombs for Cosimo, Lorenzo and Piero de' Medici (Lorenzo' son). He learned and developed his knowledge and style under Verrocchio but his name was still omitted from Lorenzo de Medici's list of painters to work under the Pope. In fact, in a diary entry from 1515, it is found that da Vinci once wrote "*LI MEDICI MI CREARONO E DISTRUSSONO.*", which translates to "*The Medici created me and destroyed me.*"

However, da Vinci worked as an engineer for the Borgia and the Sforza families, who presided over the Papal states and Milan respectively and contributed to the time's huge cultural output. He designed complex weapons for Cesare Borgia and created '*The Last Supper*' for Ludovico Sforza.

After Lorenzo's premature death, Piero de' Medici succeeded the throne and after two years of utter failure, the Medici family was exiled from 1494 to 1512 in Rome, only to return to power in 1513 where his younger brother, Giovanni, better known as **Pope Leo X**, presided over Florence and brought back the old Medici glory. The government that succeeded the Medicis for the short term was vastly anti-Medici. In 1501, Michelangelo was commissioned to create the statue of *David*, to be placed in the Cathedral of Florence. Some believe that Michelangelo's David was an act of rebellion against the Medici family, but some are completely against this theory given the contribution of the family in Michelangelo's career.

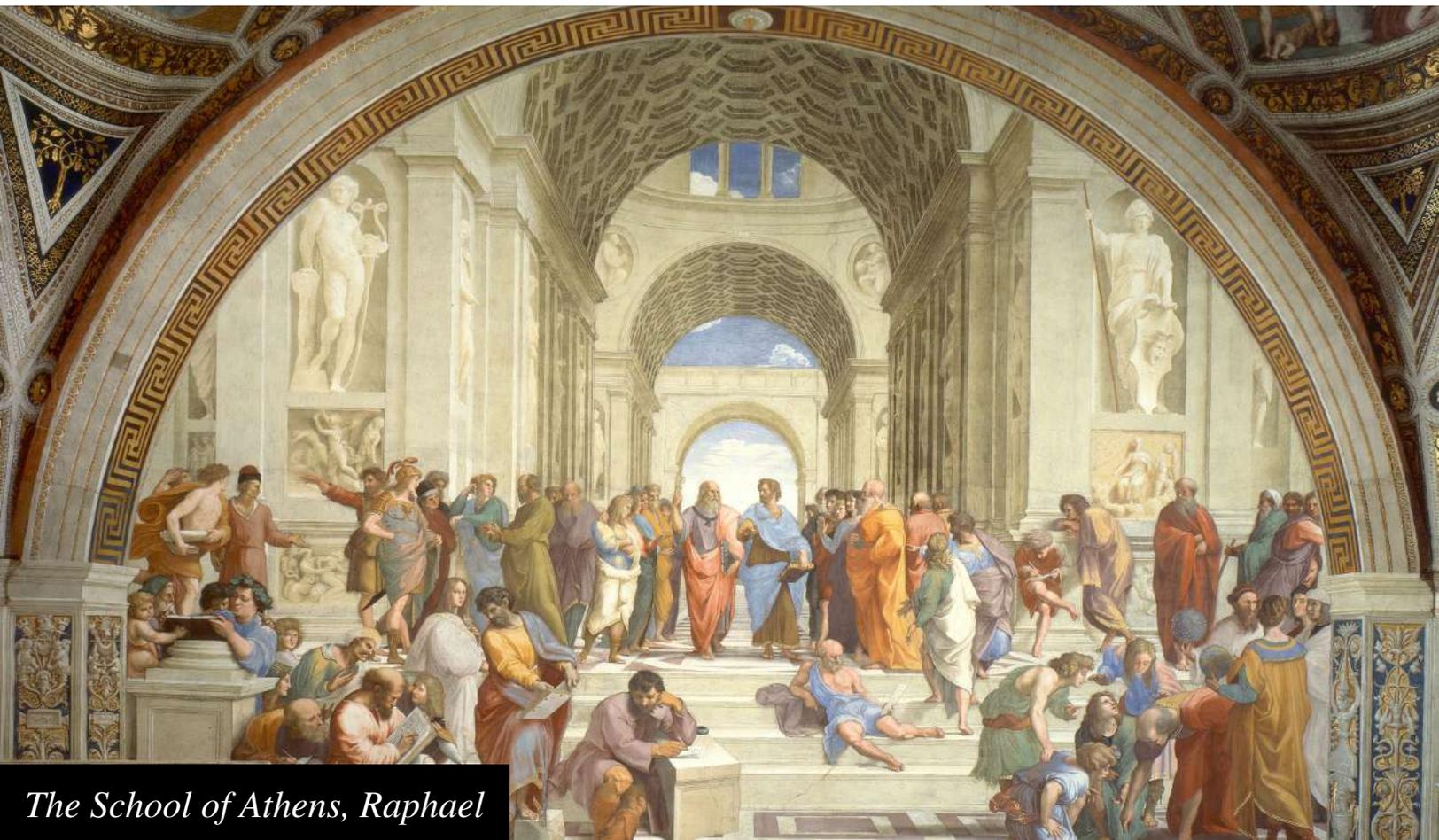
Giovanni de' Medici continued with the humanistic approach of his father and continued the legacy of artistic patronage of the Medici family. Pope Leo X was the greatest commissioner of Raphael who was hired to do ten tapestries for the lower walls of the Sistine Chapel.



*The Last Supper, Leonardo da Vinci*

These illustrations of scenes from the *'Acts of the Apostles'* are now stored in Pinacoteca Vaticana in Rome. Before Leo X, Julius II had asked Raphael to paint some of his most famous frescoes including *The School of Athens* and *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*, which after Julius II's death were funded by Pope Leo X.

After Giovanni, the Medici glory was eventually on the downfall when the line of Cosimo de' Medici started to fade and after almost quite a bit of unrest among the Medici direct and distant relatives claiming to be rightful heirs of Florence, Lorenzo's great-great-grandson, Cosimo I, presided over Florence as grand duke of Tuscany, and was then succeeded by his younger son Ferdinand, who led Florence back to prosperity. Ferdinand founded Villa Medici in Rome to preserve priceless works of art from Florence. The later Medici rulers denounced their forefathers' humanitarian ways of artistic patronage which eventually led to the decline in Florence's position as a cultural hub, and gradually led to the end of the Medici dynasty, and by mutual agreement Florence was passed on to Francis of Lorraine.



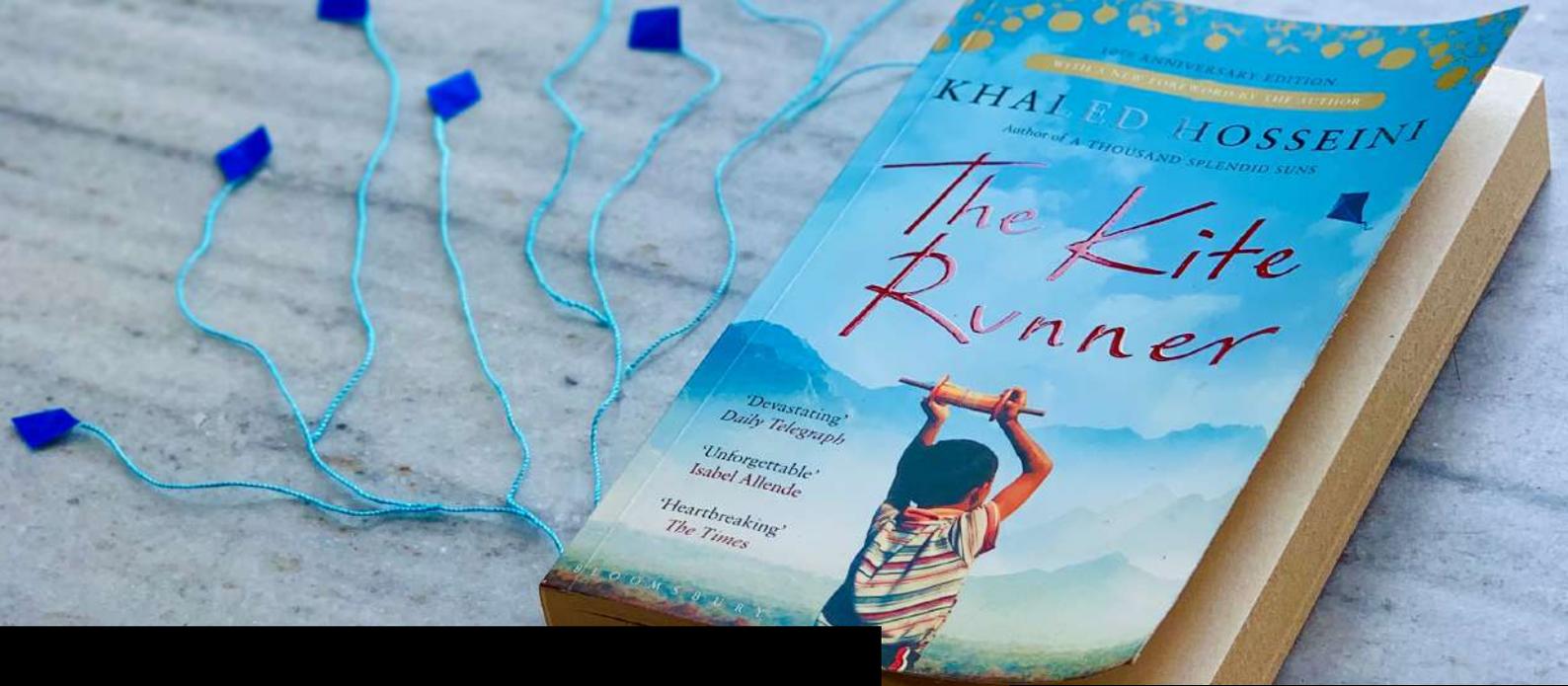
*The School of Athens, Raphael*

The Medici family's patronage extended not only to art, but also to science, architecture, music and fashion. Galileo Galilei who tutored Cosimo I, discovered the several moons of Jupiter and proceeded to name them "*Medicean stars*". The Medici also funded several opera theatres during the rise of opera in the 1500s, and Cristofori invented the piano while working in the court of Fernando de' Medici. In architecture, the Medici family funded the Uffizi Gallery, St. Peter's Basilica (which was greatly criticized by Martin Luther King) and also the Florence Cathedral. Catherine de' Medici popularized 'high-heel shoes' among aristocratic women, and the use of extravagant colours in women's clothing and intricate hair pieces were popularized under the Medici rule.

With the contributions of the Medici family, the status of artists and architects rose massively in society. Earlier, artists were seen as mere craftsmen, no different than manual labourers. Early texts from the Renaissance era reveal that people were initially of the opinion that good material made for good art, but under the Medici family, artists were perceived as gifted individuals with a deeper understanding of the world and earned respect for their innovative styles and techniques.

Today, the legacy of the Medici remains in their plush palaces. The frescoes on their family chapel stands testament to the flourishing city of Florence in the 13th century and its elite, aristocratic class of intellectuals and patrons.





# The Kite Runner

Kinjal Chandra

I took a good ten days to retract myself from the long-abiding and deep-rooted grief that *The Kite Runner* had retched up in me. In several moments throughout the book, I had my head buried in a pillow, sobbing with fury, as if I had been a cotermporal witness to those heart-wrenching situations. *The Kite Runner* is a resolute tear-jerker, which is undeniably going down as one of my best reads of all-time.

This book is an out-and-out bildungsroman, mapping out the maturation of an upper-class Pashtun Muslim named Amir, venturing into his highs and lows, sorrows and joys, actions and decisions. However, the cynosure here is Hassan, the servant's son in Amir's house – a lowborn Hazara, the clan of Mongoloid Afghans. There is a teetering discomfort in their friendship, alongside mutual love and belonging owing to their positions in the social hierarchy – especially in a country torn apart by crime, terror, and anarchy which imparts realism to the book.

Words are secret doorways, and Hosseini holds the keys to all of them. The descriptions are arresting and have the ability to wring out emotions. His emotive writing style along with delicate nuances forms the bulk of the book. There have been few instances when I have been this entranced by the characters, milieu, and the circumstances of the narrative.

My engrossment in the book is completely attributable to the twists and turns in the book, which are frequent and have the capacity to make one stop dead in their tracks. When the locale shifts to America in the second half, a contrast musters emphasis. On one hand is a nation incognizant of ethnic cleansing and terrorist groups, and on the other hand is a nation possessed by unrestrained horror and bloodshed.

However, the book is not for the faint-hearted. In parts, the book is excruciatingly gory and has elements of casteism, class discrimination, terrorism, rape, and genocide. Make sure you are comfortable with these triggers before you decide to pick it up.

“For you, a thousand times over” says Hassan to Amir, and *The Kite Runner* has touched me in a thousand perplexing ways. All praise for this book will fall short, hence I will bring this review to a close, with the belief and satisfaction that I have allured you into reading and experiencing this beauty of a book!





# The Insignificant Death

Absar Zamani

“Mr. Alfonso was a man known for his kindness, generosity and his liberal nature. Yet, it was not always mandatory that such a man would only have good things coming his way - Mr. Alfonso’s life is a testimony of that”, the priest paused for a while in grave silence, and gave a brief glance towards the congregation.

Naina, the twelve-year-old daughter and the only surviving member of Mr. Alfonso’s family was seated in the first row of the pew with her eyes fixed on the cross. The eulogy continued, “I had the privilege to be an acquaintance of this man of virtue...”, and Naina gradually got immersed into her thoughts, vividly recalling the incident that led to her father's demise. She recalled sitting next to her dad and watching the news every day.

“The Capital is witnessing an outbreak of unsettling communal violence... HC tells police to ensure safe passage for the injured... Death toll rises to 18...” news headlines flashed through her mind. How such news would always upset her father!



The year was 2020. The coronavirus was slowly beginning to take its toll all over the world, and in addition to that, communal riots were rife in India.

The riots had originated in Delhi after the Citizenship Amendment Act had been passed in the Indian Parliament. Every day there were numerous reports of people missing or murdered in broad daylight. Hatred and anguish saturated the air all around.

The officials couldn't have cared less about these incidents; they must have been busy polishing their shoes and tying their ties for the arrival of the President of the United States, whilst people cried out for answers in the streets and squares.

Mr. Alfonso had always been caring. He had helped numerous people from all nooks and crannies of the country, irrespective of their religion, caste, creed, or gender. Back then, Naina never understood why her father always helped so many people even though he received nothing in return.

Having been born and brought up in a Christian household, he had been taught to take charity and 'Help Thy Neighbour' quite seriously. He wanted to impart that quality to his only daughter, Naina, by setting precedence in such desperate times as well.

. . .

On one sunny day, a boy of fourteen came knocking on his door asking for help. Mr. Alfonso immediately recognised him to be a Muslim as he was wearing a kurta-pajama, a skullcap, which was torn here and there just like his clothes, and a locket that read 'الله' (Allah).





"Help me ... please... A mob ...after me..." The boy was heavily gasping for breath, "they killed everyone. Please ...help me." Mr. Alfonso quickly took the boy inside, gave him a glass of water and soothed him.

The boy broke into tears, "Please let me stay here till they pass by. I won't stay long. I need to go back. I have to give my family members a proper burial. My mother... She always said that those who are not buried after death, do not get a chance to meet Allah".

"It's ok. But you need to rest for a while, eat something and then you may go".

"Thank you, chacha jaan".

Mr. Alfonso then went to the kitchen to rustle something up for the child as he rested. Naina entered the kitchen and said, "Papa, why have you let that Muslim boy in?"

The father replied, "Because he is in need of help". "But he is a Muslim, then why are we helping him?". "Beta, what do you mean by that?"

"In school I heard children saying that Muslims are responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic and this communal unrest".

“It isn't so, beta. No religion or community can be held responsible for any atrocity. It is Mother Nature who has unleashed her wrath on us in the form of a pandemic to restore balance. And it is just some fanatics who are tweaking things in the name of religion. Are we clear on that? You shouldn't always believe what people say. Some spread these sorts of rumours to incite hatred towards a particular community or religion and you are not like those people, right?”.

Naina's face hung. “Yes, papa. I'm sorry for saying that”. “It's ok beta. Now, go and finish your homework”.

Mr. Alfonso went back to his cooking, but he couldn't help thinking about the condition our country was in. All of a sudden, he heard raised voices, simultaneously someone was knocking at his door persistently. When he opened the door, he was taken aback by the sight he saw.

There stood an angry mob with red eyes at his doorstep carrying sticks and swords. He managed to catch a glimpse of a few of them carrying guns.

A man in his twenties wearing a kurta and jeans, holding a sword grinned- showcasing his gutka-stained teeth- and enquired way too politely, “Uncleji, have you seen any Muslim boy wearing a skullcap and kurta-pyjama pass through here?”.





Despite his surroundings Mr. Alfonso replied with conviction, “I’m afraid not, mister. Can I ask why?”.

“It’s none of your business”, came the curt reply.

Mr. Alfonso apologized and went inside to check on the boy. The boy had fallen asleep, so he went back to his cooking.

The rest was quite simple: the mob checked the CCTV footage of the store adjacent to Mr. Alfonso’s house, and no one dared to stop them. They found the Muslim boy entering Mr. Alfonso’s house. They ran to the house, kicked open the door and brutally butchered the Muslim boy along with Mr. Alfonso. Nobody knows why but, instead of assaulting Naina physically, they made her watch Mr. Alfonso bleed to his death, and left her to her own fate and scurried. Once the mob left, neighbours came running to check on Mr. Alfonso and instead found Naina covered in blood, wailing, clutching her father’s body. They could not get her to leave her father’s corpse.

With a shiver Naina came back to reality. The priest continued, “Since these are exceptional times, without much ado, let all of us stand up together and pray for Mr. Alfonso’s departure to his heavenly abode. May his soul rest in peace. Amen”.

Naina stood up, not to bury what the mob wanted to cull – her father’s compassion – but to carry his deeds forward.

# Ways to Lose Someone You Live With

Pragya Roy Barman

- You remember that the last time she voluntarily showed physical affection to you was when you were a child, barely eight or nine, and she had to wake up early to go to work. So, she would pick up that little arm you had wrapped tightly around her, that couldn't even envelop her completely, and she would kiss it as a farewell and a see you again, both at once. She would kiss it like she loved you.
- You realise you no longer feel like you can go to her room to unwind and talk. Talk like the days you came back from school crying and she laughed so hard that you just had to join in. Talk like the times when your brother nabbed your favourite stationary, and you still hadn't learnt to share properly. Talk like the moments where you spent hours on the sofa with her,





...still in your school uniform, just blurting out every stupid thing that happened. For now, you're 19, and now you can see her judging even as she tries to tease you, you can see her being disappointed because you did the things that young people do. For now, you're 19 and you know very well that soon she will cut you off for the things you want to do, like getting a tattoo of your city's skyline, or temporarily dyeing your hair, or falling in love with a girl.

- You understand that you were scared, more than you were safe. You were happy and warm because you liked all the things she did and worshipped her like a deity. But now you can pick apart her sentences like the frayed hemp on an old frock and see how wrong some of it is. She was your best friend because you did not know the things you do now, like therapy and freedom and privacy. She was your best friend because your mind would rather tell you your entire being was wrong, than dare question her. But now you do, and that is how it started to fall apart.



- And now it is over a week since you have reached out to her, called out “ma” like it was instinct. Now the word is somehow stuck; it hesitates to come out of you the way you hesitate to enter their room, like you might not be welcome. Like you’re a stranger or a paying guest, and you need to leave soon, very soon. So, you go back to the Amazon cart and empty it of all the things you thought you would like to have because it feels wrong to ask someone to pay for your living when you feel too uncomfortable to even live with them. It is the same reason that your phone is on its third day of not being recharged, and you no longer feel the clammy heat that made you switch on your AC, and your hair is sort of feeling weird because you refuse to order your own shampoo and even the air feels more theirs than it does yours.
- You think you are just another teenager stuck in quarantine being dramatic, but what if that is the justification you were taught to give, just like you were taught to not be friends with that girl, or taught to teach yourself the things that define you so others would have less trouble singling you out? What if the generation gap is not an overhyped teenage angst, but an excuse for parents to breathe into their child’s lives and mould them out of their individuality in fear that they would be homeless and unloved at 13? Because that is how I, and not you, made all my decisions. With the fear that my mother’s love could abandon me - because how else is love supposed to be if not unconditionally conditional?





## What is Perfect Blue?

Ayush Chakraborty

Director Satoshi Kon was obsessed with the meaning of living on two separate states of existence. He did not hesitate to bend the laws of physics to create symbolism, nor did he abstain from blurring the line between what is real and what's not. He drew no inspiration from the standard anime aesthetic of the time as is apparent in his works. He never wished to make his characters, or his world look pretty. In fact, he went out of his way to make them feel more real, making it harder for us to distance ourselves from the very real threats his characters face. Using surreal imagery in his works, Satoshi Kon brought out the duality that exists within a person and this duality is conveyed to his audience masterfully in his debut film about a woman and the ideal version of herself – *Perfect Blue*.

Mima Kirigoe, a member of a Japanese pop idol group “CHAM!” leaves music to pursue a career in acting. She wishes to shed the “perfect” image of herself, to leave behind the avatar that she had created and seek out who she truly is. We all spend countless hours creating and perfecting our avatars, the version of ourselves that solely exists online. These avatars are responsible for telling everyone who we are and what ideas and aesthetic we represent.

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We spend a lot of time grooming these avatars to make sure that only the perfect versions of ourselves are put out for the world to see. But what happens when we lose grip on our avatars, and it is they who begin control us? This is what *Perfect Blue* seeks to answer. Some amongst Mima's diehard fanbase do not exactly get along well with her decision to leave singing, but neither does a part of Mima herself; her decision sets off a struggle with a darker part of herself who refuses to let her move on. This figurative struggle takes a literal form as Mima's pop-idol avatar begins to haunt her in her daily life and she begins to lose her grip on reality. As scenes blend into one another, Mima begins to lose her grasp on who she really is, all while being under the threat of a dangerous stalker.

So, what does perfect blue mean?

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Amongst the many other questions that seem to come up as the film unravels around itself, “what did Satoshi Kon mean by Perfect Blue?” is the recurring one. Let us look at the words individually.

As Mima leaves her pop group and embraces her new acting career, a ghostly doppelganger starts haunting Mima. She appears in Mima’s reflection, dressed in her old pop idol clothes and almost like a fleeting emotion, she jumps and floats around effortlessly. One could perceive this doppelganger as the “ghost” of the pop-idol that Mima left behind. However, if she did leave that part of herself behind, it would not be haunting her in the first place.

The ghost of Mimirin is the result of Mima rethinking her decision, her fans begging her to come back to “CHAM!” and of course, Mr. Me-Mania.

. . .

The film does a great job of establishing Mima as a character, as a human being. The duality of Mima as both a pop idol and as a regular person is shown masterfully in the opening sequence as the film pans back and forth from her performing on stage with the two other members of her group, to plain shots of her doing some grocery shopping.

When she is a pop idol, she gets continually bombarded by the press and her fans; when she is nothing more than Mima, she immerses herself in mundane day-to-day tasks such as taking care of her fishes, washing her clothes and cleaning her room.

These are the scenes where we get to know more about who Mima is, completely stripped off of her avatar – perfect pop idol Mimirin. She is a real person, living a life not too far off from the one we live. So, when the film begins to twist her very identity, it feels all the more unsettling. For what is a person without the very identity that governs their existence?





Perfect Mima never existed, except in the hearts and minds of her fans, her stalker and to an extent, herself. This is the primary fear that Satoshi Kon wishes to instill in his audience. People perceiving us in ways we do not wish to be perceived in. People hanging onto the ghosts of our past selves, deeming them perfect, deeming us unworthy of being who we are.

Mima is constantly under fire for not being the “perfect Mimirin” her fans want her to be, resulting in her not being able to give up her past and move on. She falls into a conflict with a part of her which regards her pop idol self as the perfect version of herself.

As scenes blend into one another, Mima’s life begins to spin out of control. Incidents that seem to occur in her real life are revealed to be a part of the T.V. show she stars in called “Double Bind”. Mima gets trapped in an endless cycle of waking up to complete disillusionment as she struggles to find out what’s real and what isn’t, and as the tension keeps ramping up, the cuts and transitions keep getting more and more jarring, leaving all of us in the audience in bewilderment as to which part of Mima’s reality we are in.

As the line between reality and imagination bleeds out of existence, a very real danger keeps showing itself as the infamous Mr. Me-Mania.

Mr. Me-Mania is the prototypical stalker we are introduced to in the opening sequence of the film. With only a few words of dialogue throughout the movie, there has never been a more intensely frightening character in cinema. He starts his appearances in the film as a technician helping out in Mima's last CHAM! concert and here we are treated to one of the most iconic shots in cinema: Mr. Me-Mania literally holding the image of Mima in his hand. In this scene, Kon establishes all that we need to know about who this character is and how he sees Mima. Not as a person, but as her avatar – Perfect pop idol Mimirin.

When the concept of Mimirin was taken away from him by her shifting careers, he reacted violently, stalking Mima and brutally attacking everyone around her. He could not bear the fact that the Mimirin he had built up in his head was in no way similar to Mima herself. Satoshi Kon raises the idea that the only time our avatars can take control over us is when other people believe in them and lose track of where the person ends and where the avatar begins.



Satoshi Kon was a mastermind when it came to using colours as themes to guide his narrative through, and *Perfect Blue* is a brilliant example of this. In the beginning of the film, the colours surrounding Mima seem plain and faded out, providing us with scenes which are comfortable to look at. But as Mima's story progresses, as she loses her grasp on reality, the colours guiding her environment become harsher and more saturated.

Kon's use of red is not the typical symbolism of danger. He uses the colour to signify progression, both character and story, and to indicate foreshadowing.

With the masterful use of red, *Perfect Blue* hints us about the ensuing scene which would cause a severe twist in the narrative. The opening sequence is designed to keep the audience at ease (not including Mr. Me-Mania) as the environment is covered in plain, easy-to-look-at hues. The first real event in the film occurs during Mima's first day on the set of *Double Bind*, an exploding fan mail is handed to Mima's manager by a man in a red jacket.





Later when Mima's agent Rumi sets up the internet at her house, we see a bunch of prominently lit up red areas in the bedroom. Especially in the shot where we can see Mima with her back turned towards a mirror – this is where we witness the birth of Mima's alter-ego, the part of her wanting to keep being pop idol Mimarín. As this unfolds, the film cuts to another shot with Mima's face almost engulfed in red and then, with a curtain swaying into the "camera", transitions into Mima's first scene in *Double Bind*. Here forward, the colour red guides us through Mima's downwards spiral into madness.

Especially in the fake rape scene which she had to shoot as part of *Double Bind*; here Mima and the character she portrays in the T.V. show, both become disconnected from who they once were. As she is reading the script for this scene, Mima is shown holding a bright red book in front of her face which takes up three-quarters of the frame, hinting at the scene and the imminent change in the narrative that Kon is about to throw us into. The rape scene itself was shot in a strip club where Mima would perform on a prominently lit stage with a dark red background.

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The colours in this scene are harsh, the cuts are jarring, and we literally view Mima in a new light as she metaphorically severs her ties to her pop idol career.

However, red isn't the only hue at play. As the name of the film gives it all away, blue often comes into play as a story-telling mechanic.

After Mima's curtain call at the beginning of the film, she returns to her apartment which is shown in shades of blue while the city outside is shown in red, indicating the sense of safety and privacy Mima feels at home from the piercing eyes of the outside world.

Blue is Mima's colour. It signifies her happiness, safety, and sanity.

Mima's perfect blue meant the perfect version of herself.

Here lies the main dilemma of Perfect Blue. Mima's happiness lies in her embracing who she wants to be, who she truly is. She is not the perfect pop idol avatar that many of her fans wanted her to be.



Perfect blue is something impossible, for you can either be perfect or you can be happy. That said, the perfect version of Mima is one where she chooses her imperfect self and identity over perfect pop idol Mimirin.

However, solving the question of what Satoshi Kon meant by perfect blue is meaningless. Perfect Blue is not something to be solved, but to be experienced, and the film allows us to do just that by placing us in Mima's shoes and letting us experience the twists and turns in her story as they unfold around her.

In essence, you may argue that whatever I wrote and analysed (very much like the quintessential English professor who loves to read too much into everything) serves absolutely no purpose and was entirely in vain. I would say that you are correct in your judgement for this article is essentially the ramblings of an individual obsessed with Perfect Blue, although that does make for a fabulous title if I say so myself.

But the point I'm trying to make is that, as the film itself suggests – obsession compels us to do crazy things.



# Whole

We're all little poems.  
Of Carbon and water.  
Of Iron and Sulphur.  
We are tiny magnets  
Burning away our batteries.  
Some might be the flames  
But we all are burnt moths.  
We limp around on our stilts of  
calcium  
We don't know where to get to.  
We're planes in the wind  
Boats in the sea.  
We aren't the ones flying,  
We aren't the ones floating,  
Mother makes us do.  
If we are mother manifested  
And she is a being of poetry.  
Then we're all little poems.  
A part of she.

Advait Unnithan



# Breakfast

Saundarya Jain

I eat grief for breakfast  
every morning  
wrapped in a tasteless leaf --

a simmering morsel of grief  
a burning bundle of grief.

I eat it every morning  
for breakfast.

It churns in my stomach  
unvanquished by bile,  
rolls and rumbles.

The tremors shake my  
chest. I split asunder,  
while grief carves a  
vortex in me.

I consume grief

endlessly  
for breakfast every morning  
wrapped in a tasteless leaf.





# Maarten Visser

*1. One would describe your style of playing as "John Coltrane if he was in a French noir film". How do you see your music?*

Hahaha funny... I'm interested in sound first and foremost. Always been though. As many others, I was for quite some time lost in technicalities, possibilities and perhaps a kind of intellectualism, fashionable, interesting but not mine. After conservatory I knew I wasn't a jazz musician and was looking for alternatives. I found Carnatic music, didn't understand it, had nothing better to do, came to India, figured out that that was not what I was looking for.

It drove me to a point where I consciously stripped music bare - no melody, harmony, rhythm - only sound. Started to organise it, finding principles of combining sounds, make them clash. For saxophone this was when I became especially interested in extended techniques - multi-phonics, microtonality, etc etc. Over the next 20 years I slowly put pulse (more than rhythm), melody and lastly harmony (how complicated) back into sound in a way that I feel I own it. What would music sound like if I was put on an island and had to figure it out.. - but then with all the (over-)exposure, travel and experiences of this life.



**2. *Considering the fact that you have collaborated with Bollywood musicians and DJs, how important is it to you personally as an artist to experiment with musicians from different genres?***

My work has been divided between a commercial strand (crudely: that what feeds my family), and an artistic strand (that what feeds me). The twines rarely meet and I don't need them to.

Every project, composition assignment, gig, concert has its own requirement technically, stylistically but also of me - as a performer - am I an entertainer, what is entertaining in what situation, am I an artist - who do I transport, where? There are fluid situations where requirements change of course.

I see it as my job to fulfil the requirement at hand on as many levels as I can.

Sometimes the requirement is to provide sonic wallpaper, sometimes play very fast, very loud, very high, sometimes balladeer, sometimes something else completely.

**3. *Who or what was your inspiration growing up? What got you into jazz?***

Archie Shepp and Clarence Clemons were my childhood saxophone heroes.

Archie Shepp's Yasmina, a Black Woman got me into jazz. Of a particular kind. After a long 5-7 min percussion intro Archie Shepp blasted open all possible head-doors never to be closed again.



*4. How does it feel to look back on yourself when you were starting out?*

I was so very right then. And had to be so resourceful, angry, horrible, selfish to stay with that. And got so mauled by an educational system that is set up to make excellent music workers - which I was just not. So many roundabout ways, so much time lost with valuable distractions.

It took years to recover from all that, and a long time in isolation to just be able to take a good look at what music is, what it can be and what it is for me. And to be able to see myself beyond the damaged goods that I - and everyone else - obviously am. But I was right then. Sound, organised sound - in all its glory, is what it is about.





5. *What was it like playing in Skinny Mos in Calcutta, considering the city's past with jazz?*

I love playing at Skinny Mo's! I'm not sure whether I consider the city's past with jazz when playing or preparing - although I'm aware of the many clubs and musicians that have been there. And still are. To me what is important is that I feel in Kolkata that there is a group of people for whom the arts - and music in particular - is a little bit important. It means something. It warrants discussion, it stirs. I think considering the times we live in, that is an achievement, one that Skinny Mo's helps to preserve, continue, cherish.

6. *COVID-19 has certainly been harsh on all of us, how has it affected musicians like you and how have you been dealing with it?*

Most musicians have become online educators. I do as little of that as possible, because I know that I only hear and see half of what every student does uniquely wrong. I do teach online courses - contemporary music, improvisation, and perhaps jazz history soon.

I am currently very busy with a composition assignment for contemporary dance, I have recorded 78 little solos for saxophone, a video installation is coming up..

I have this iron-structured day that includes, work, practice, work-out, hangout, administration to make sure I keep afloat.





7. *As one of the co-founders of Basement 21, could you tell us a bit about it?*

Basement 21 is a collective of artists from different disciplines interested in artistic process and inter-disciplinary interaction. The artists involved all have their individual careers and are mostly busy with that, but we get together at regular intervals. In the last decade we have organised ‘encounters’ - artistic event where process is discussed, work analysed, shows viewed. Improvisation series - interdisciplinary improvisation. March|dance a contemporary dance festival. Interruption (pause/play) - multidisciplinary happening.

I can't be complete here, of course, but we try to create reference and context to artistic expression.



8. *Lastly, could you give a piece of advice to musicians aspiring to get into the jazz scene?*

I would never call myself a jazz musician. Perhaps experimental musician, improviser sure, saxophonist definitely,

To be able to call yourself a jazz musician you have to own the music called jazz, know the tradition in depth, and lastly find your voice within that. All this on a level much deeper than I ever was willing and able to go.

This has nothing to do with your question, I now see.

What I find with young musicians is that they can play. They don't necessarily know how to play with people, communicate within a band on different levels, express and develop musical ideas together, so it reaches an audience as one. It is old-fashioned but that's just what I like to listen to, even if it fails gloriously.



*Artists  
In  
Focus:*



*Soham Roychowdhury*



*Madhurima Maiti*

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