The Sensible and the Administered: Cinematic Representation, Factual Distortion, and the Conditioning of Social Consciousness in Contemporary Indian Media

Rudraksha Singh, Om Dubey

Abstract

Cinema, particularly in Bollywood and contemporary Indian media, functions not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for ideological proselytization. Read through Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible," Bollywood cinema can be seen as not simply reflecting existing social values but actively redrawing who and what is rendered visible and legitimate within them — privileging particular religious and nationalist identities as natural and universal — a process Adorno's critique of the culture industry frames as conditioning rather than expression. While it appears to be culturally unifying, it raises serious ethical concerns when such consciousness is built upon selective representation of facts and circumstances. Unlike organically evolving belief systems shaped through lived experience and plural discourse, cinema more often than not constructs social beliefs through curated truths and factual distortions under the semblance of artistic liberty— frequently legitimized through labels such as "inspired by true events." This paper contends that such aesthetic representations transform persuasion into subtle conditioning, where audiences internalize partial truths as universal truth, questioning whether artificially manufactured virtue can claim legitimacy as authentic social consciousness.

Keywords: *Bollywood, proselytization, distribution of the sensible, culture industry, ideology, aesthetics*

I. Introduction

The label "inspired by true events" has become one of the most productive fictions in contemporary Indian cinema. It

gestures toward the authority of fact while exercising the full liberty of narrative — selecting which truths to curate, which to omit, and which to dramatize into something more emotionally potent than the historical record itself could ever be. It is, in miniature, an emblem of how Bollywood and Indian OTT content have come to function: not as neutral storytelling, but as a site where ideology is packaged as experience, and persuasion is delivered as entertainment.

This paper argues that cinema in India — particularly Bollywood and the rapidly expanding OTT landscape — operates as a vehicle of ideological proselytization. The term "proselytization" is used here deliberately and precisely, and the same precision is demanded of "propaganda" — a word that in Indian public discourse is routinely reduced to a synonym for content one already disagrees with, content that serves the other side. This reductive usage obscures propaganda's more substantive character: the strategic curation of facts, omissions, emotional framing, and narrative architecture designed to shape belief — regardless of whether that belief aligns with the observer's own commitments. Content that feels natural, unifying, or aesthetically sophisticated is no less propagandistic than content that feels crude or adversarial; the sophistication is, in many cases, precisely what makes it effective.

It is this understanding of ideological conditioning that the present paper brings to bear on Indian visual media. Two theoretical frameworks anchor the analysis. Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" — his account of how aesthetic regimes determine what is visible, audible, and thinkable within a given social order — provides the tools to examine how cinematic representation actively redraws the boundaries of who counts as a legitimate subject. In the Indian context, this redistribution consistently operates along religious and nationalist lines: particular Hindu and majoritarian identities are rendered natural, universal, and heroic, while minority — particularly Muslim — identities are constructed as deviant, threatening, or peripheral. Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the culture industry complements this by interrogating the structural conditions under which mass-produced art operates how the commercial grammar of popular cinema standardizes experience, manufactures conformity, and forecloses the kind of genuine aesthetic autonomy that might otherwise challenge dominant ideology. Together, these frameworks allow the paper to ask not merely

what Indian cinema says, but *how* it conditions — through the apparently neutral operations of genre, emotional affect, heroization, and historical dramatization — the terms within which audiences understand virtue, identity, and belonging.

The paper proceeds in five parts. Section II develops the theoretical framework in full, including a bridging discussion of how Rancière and Adorno's accounts speak to each other in the specific context of Indian popular cinema. Section III examines the mechanisms through which cinema performs its ideological function — the devices by which curated truths become common sense and persuasion becomes conditioning. Section IV adopts a doctrinal and analytical methodology, drawing on secondary sources to critically examine select Bollywood films and OTT content against the theoretical grid established in the preceding sections. Section V addresses the ethical and epistemic stakes: what it means for a society's moral and cultural consciousness to be manufactured through aesthetic mediation rather than through lived experience and plural discourse. The conclusion returns to the opening question — whether virtue produced through cinema can claim legitimacy as authentic social consciousness — and considers its implications for how we think about aesthetics, democracy, and the politics of representation in contemporary India.

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Jacques Rancière and the Distribution of the Sensible

At the foundation of this paper's analytical approach is Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*), developed most systematically in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004). For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible denotes the system of self-evident perceptual facts that simultaneously establishes what is held in common within a community and determines the delimitations — the parts and positions — that divide individuals and groups within it. It is, in other words, the underlying framework that determines who can be seen and heard, what can be said, whose voice counts as speech rather than mere noise, and whose identity is registered as legitimate rather than marginal or threatening. Politics, for Rancière, is not primarily about governance or institutional power in the conventional sense; it revolves fundamentally around this perceptual field — around what is rendered visible and what can be said about it, around who possesses the capacity to see and the recognized standing to speak.

The political force of Rancière's framework lies in its insistence that aesthetics and politics are not separate domains that occasionally intersect. Rather, there is, as he puts it, an "aesthetics at the core of politics" — a prior distribution of the sensible that determines what is perceptible and thinkable before any explicitly political act takes place. Artistic practices are not decorative supplements to political life; they are themselves modes of intervention in this distribution. They can reinforce it, naturalize it, and render invisible the exclusions that sustain it — or they can disrupt it, introduce new figures into the perceptual field, and redistribute what counts as visible, audible, and legitimate. Rancière calls this disruptive potential *dissensus*: the moment at which aesthetic practice contests the existing distribution rather than confirming it.

For the purposes of this paper, Rancière's framework provides the conceptual tools to ask of any Bollywood film or OTT production not what it *says* at the level of explicit message, but what it *does* to the perceptual order. Who is rendered heroic, virtuous, and universally relatable? Who is constructed as deviant, threatening, or confined to a particular and suspect particularity? These are not merely content questions; they are questions about the distribution of the sensible — about which identities are admitted to the common field of representation as natural and legitimate, and which are excluded or marginalized. In the Indian context, this redistribution operates consistently along religious and nationalist lines, with Hindu and majoritarian identities naturalised as the universal ground of virtue and national belonging, while minority identities — and most systematically, Muslim identity — are rendered visible primarily through the grammar of suspicion, threat, or otherness.

The principal critique levelled at Rancière's framework is one of abstraction and political indeterminacy. Slavoj Žižek, in his afterword to the very edition of *The Politics of Aesthetics* under consideration here, raises the concern that Rancière's notion of dissensus risks aestheticizing politics — dissolving genuine political antagonism into a general account of perceptual disruption that cannot adequately discriminate between emancipatory and reactionary disruptions. A related materialist critique holds that Rancière lacks a sufficiently developed account of the economic and institutional conditions under which particular distributions of the sensible are produced and reproduced. These are substantive

objections. However, for this paper's purposes, this gap in Rancière's account is precisely where Adorno's framework becomes indispensable — providing the structural and economic analysis that Rancière's perceptual ontology leaves underdeveloped.

B. Theodor W. Adorno and the Culture Industry

Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the culture industry, developed alongside Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and elaborated across the essays collected in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (1991), proceeds from a fundamentally different but complementary set of concerns. Where Rancière asks what the aesthetic regime renders visible and sayable, Adorno asks what structural conditions govern the production of cultural objects and what those conditions do to the relationship between art and genuine human experience.

For Adorno, the culture industry names a historically specific formation in which cultural production has been absorbed into the logic of capitalist commodity exchange. Works are produced not for expression or for the genuine satisfaction of human needs but for reproduction, mass consumption, and profit. The consequence is not merely that cultural products are commercially motivated; it is that the very form of cultural production changes under these conditions. Standardization becomes the governing principle: the culture industry produces the appearance of variety and individuality — different stars, different genres, different settings — while the underlying formula remains constant. Adorno calls this pseudo-individualization: the small variations that give each product the illusion of uniqueness serve only to mask the deeper sameness of the underlying ideological template.

The effect on audiences is what Adorno identifies as regression — not in a merely pejorative sense, but as a structural outcome of repeated exposure to culturally pre-digested material. Because the industry produces work that anticipates the audience's response and conditions that response in advance, the effort of active, critical interpretation is gradually replaced by automatized reaction. As J.M. Bernstein's introduction to the collected essays observes, the culture industry organizes even leisure time — ostensibly the domain of freedom — in accordance with the same principles of exchange and mechanical reproduction that govern the sphere of production. The famous formulation from *Dialectic*

of Enlightenment captures this precisely: amusement under late capitalism becomes an extension of labour rather than relief from it, reproducing in the audience the very passivity that the work process requires.

Adorno's essay "How to Look at Television" is of relevance here. Writing about the multilayered structure of televised material, Adorno distinguishes between the overt message of a cultural product — its explicit narrative or moral — and the hidden message that operates beneath it, escaping the controls of conscious reception and sinking more deeply into the spectator's mind. It is this hidden layer that constitutes the conditioning function of mass culture. The overt message may be entertainment, emotional catharsis, or historical inspiration; the hidden message is invariably a lesson in what to identify with, who to fear, and what arrangement of social reality to accept as natural and inevitable. What the culture industry achieves, in Adorno's account, is conditioning that does not present itself as conditioning — ideology that operates under the guise of entertainment, pleasure, and even artistic sophistication.

The most persistent critique of Adorno's position comes from the tradition of cultural studies associated with Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, whose encoding/decoding model insists that audiences are not the passive recipients of ideological messages that Adorno's framework seems to imply. Audiences actively negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the dominant readings encoded in cultural texts. Michel de Certeau similarly argues that everyday acts of cultural consumption involve subtle "tactics" of resistance that a totalizing account of the culture industry fails to register. These are important correctives to the most sweeping versions of Adorno's thesis, and this paper does not adopt an unqualified Adornian pessimism. However, the correction must not be overcorrected: the fact that individual audience members occasionally resist dominant readings does not invalidate the structural analysis of how dominant readings are produced, encoded, and systematically reinforced across a commercially integrated cultural landscape. The question for this paper is not whether every member of every Indian audience passively absorbs the ideological message of every Bollywood film, but whether the structural conditions of Indian popular cinema — its commercial grammar, its emotional apparatus, its reliance on standardized genre conventions and recognizable ideological templates —

systematically favour certain distributions of the sensible over others. Adorno's framework, properly qualified, remains indispensable for answering that question.

C. Connecting the Frameworks: What Each Gives the Other

Rancière and Adorno are not typically read together, and there are genuine tensions between their positions. Rancière is broadly optimistic about the disruptive potential of aesthetic practice: dissensus is always possible, and aesthetic form can always, in principle, redistribute the sensible in ways that challenge dominant political configurations. Adorno is structurally pessimistic: within the culture industry, the conditions for genuine aesthetic autonomy are systematically foreclosed, and what appears as disruption is typically absorbed and neutralized by the industry's own logic. This tension is productive rather than paralysing for the present paper. It allows the analysis to acknowledge what Rancière's framework rightly insists upon — that not all Indian cinema operates uniformly as ideological reproduction, and that the aesthetic field is genuinely contested — while also maintaining what Adorno's structural analysis establishes: that the dominant commercial conditions of Bollywood and mainstream OTT production heavily weight that contested field in the direction of particular ideological outcomes.

Together, the two frameworks provide a complete analytical picture. Rancière tells us *what* is being distributed: which identities are rendered visible as natural and universal, which religious and nationalist narratives are admitted to the common space of representation as legitimate, and which are relegated to the margins of the perceptual field. Adorno tells us *how* this distribution is achieved and reproduced: through the commercial grammar of standardized cultural production, through the emotional apparatus of stars, music, and spectacle, and through the structural separation between overt entertainment and covert ideological conditioning that operates beneath the audience's critical defences. The device of "inspired by true events" sits precisely at the junction of these two frameworks: it performs a Rancièrian operation — borrowing the authority of factual reality to legitimize a particular distribution of identity and virtue — through an Adornian mechanism — the seamless substitution of curated narrative for genuine historical complexity, under the cover of artistic realism.

Applied to the Indian context, this double framework generates the core analytical claim of the paper: that Bollywood and OTT cinema do not merely reflect or entertain, but actively participate in the redistribution of who and what is rendered visible, legitimate, and virtuous in Indian public life — and that this redistribution is achieved not through explicit propaganda in the colloquial sense, but through the structural conditioning of mass cultural production operating under the guise of popular entertainment.

To understand how this synthesis of perceptual redistribution (Rancière) and commercial conditioning (Adorno) takes root in society, this paper incorporates Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci explains how the curated distortions produced by the culture industry are ultimately normalized by the audience not as imposed propaganda, but as 'common sense'—the self-evident reality of the world.

III. Cinema as Ideological Proselytization

The following section establishes a link between the theoretical background presented above and the specific cinematic instances that will be studied afterwards by defining precisely what are the techniques of ideological manipulation. These first four techniques will be examined one after another as follows: first, the epistemological justification brought about by the phrase "based on true events"; then, the curatorial technique of framing, which, in this case, can be interpreted through the communication theory of Entman and the aesthetics of the "distribution of the sensible" proposed by Rancière; third, the technique of using affect instead of arguments; and finally, the placement of this contemporary practice into the historical context of propaganda movies started with the movie "Triumph of the Will" by Leni Riefenstahl (1935).

A. The "Inspired by True Events" Label as an Epistemic Alibi

The mechanics of proselytising through film involve a distortion of the audience's relationship to truth. An assertion that a movie is "inspired by true events" is far from a neutral statement; rather, it is an act of legitimization, which reframes how the text should be read. Roland Barthes offers the terminology needed to understand the process, when describing his concept of the "reality effect". According to Barthes, realist narration includes details that are irrelevant to

the plot and seem to be "useless": dates, proper names, objects, all serve one purpose only to suggest at the level of connotation that "we are the real". This theory explains how the use of archives, dates, and real political events works in a contemporary Hindi docudrama, the presence of verified facts gives its "truth value", which passes by contagion to the fictional material and makes the distinction impossible.

Two more scholarly approaches will clarify the situation even further. First, Eric Schaefer demonstrates how the rhetoric of "true" or "authentic" content used as part of the marketing campaign of the American exploitation cinema historically made it possible for the audience to disregard their moral misgivings about the film. Second, Linda Hutcheon explains her concept of "historiographic metafiction": all the narrative organizing historical fact into some coherent form interprets and selects historical data in a particular way. So, the "inspired by true events" claim plays the intermediate role, borrowing the evidentiary status usually attributed to documentaries but keeping at the same time the right to interpretation reserved for fiction.

B. Strategic Curation: Framing Theory and the Distribution of the Sensible

Having created a sense of authenticity through the reality effect, the next step for the ideology is to organise that sense of authenticity around an ideological project. Entman's theory of framing provides the first layer of analysis here: to frame is "to emphasize some aspects of the perceived reality while neglecting others, and, in so doing, to promote a particular interpretation of that reality," or rather, in Entman's words, "selectively presenting attributes or aspects of an issue or situation in order to promote a particular definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." In the case of the contemporary Hindi docudrama, all four of Entman's functions come into play, systematically: the problem is identified, the cause is determined, the moral judgment is made, and a solution prescribed. But what Entman's theory fails to account for is the process by which certain identities are treated as the natural, background of the narrative, while others become marked in certain ways as special or threatening identities. And this is where Jacques Rancière comes in.

The central notion of Rancière's work, the le partage du sensible, or the "distribution of the sensible," refers to that set of prior assumptions regarding what is visible or audible as

speech or noise in any given community. For Rancière, that distribution is not ancillary to politics; on the contrary, politics, at the most basic level, is that act which opposes the given distribution. The police order is precisely this system of implicit rules governing the assignation of a place and a way of being in perception to each body; "politics," on the other hand, is the act whereby the part that does not have its assigned place forces itself into visibility and disrupts that order. The ideological workings of contemporary Hindi cinema, in Rancière's terms, can be said to amount to a police operation at the level of the image: it re-naturalises a majoritarian identity as the invisible backdrop of the nation, simply the self-evident texture of national reality against which the plot unfolds, while assigning minority identity a marked, particularised, and often threatening place. Historical counter-narratives, state complicity, and the actual experience of minority communities are not just left out of the picture in order to make room for the narrative action; rather, in Rancière's precise terms, they are rendered insensible, outside the frame of what the film allows to be seen or spoken. The film thus performs the work of "police," not "politics": it forecloses dissensus by presenting one distribution of the sensible as the only rational, natural one available.

C. Affective Nationalism and the Cultural Politics of Emotion

In the case of framing theory, we are talking about the cognitive structuring of the text; it fails to explain why audiences accept these frames without challenging them. The explanation can be found in affect. In her discussion of the "cultural politics of emotion," Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions are not a private phenomenon of individual interiority but a cultural practice which circulates and attaches to particular bodies, creating collective affiliation based on the shared affective intensity rather than rational debate. The contemporary Hindi war and terrorism films serve, from this perspective, as affective archives meant to provoke outrage, shame and vengeful pride in the audience. In his discussion of the movie Uri: The Surgical Strike (2019), Nihar Sreepada demonstrates the logic of affective manipulation: the movie is the construction of "revenge" nationalism where the Indian state becomes the avenger of historic wrongdoings, and the spectacular character of the film decides whose death is grievable and whose is not worth grief at all. In Ajay Gehlawat's recent book, we find an analysis of the interaction

between Hindi commercial cinema and Hindutva politics where he claims that the alignment between leading figures of the film industry and the political program of the ruling party is not an exceptional but an ongoing trend. In such a context, affect works not as an addition to cognition but as its alternative, transforming the geopolitical controversy into a melodrama of victimhood and revenge leaving little room for dissensus associated with politics in Rancière's view.

D. The Aestheticisation of Politics: From *Triumph of the Will* to the Contemporary Docudrama

All these techniques did not emerge in the context of contemporary Indian cinema; they have much earlier roots going back to at least Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film Triumph of the Will. In this film, commissioned by the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) for the purpose of documenting the Nuremberg Rally held in September of that year. The reason why this film is relevant to the argument at hand is not so much because of its content but rather because of its form. In this particular instance, the Nuremberg rally was carefully orchestrated for the filming process, using multiple cameras and raised platforms to create a spectacle of mass choreography in front of the camera. As Siegfried Kracauer points out in his essay on Nazi propaganda films, written from his research findings in exile, which was subsequently published in "From Caligari to Hitler": a film in which the ornamental use of the mass rally aims to dissolve the individual in favour of spectacular collective unity around the leader figure. Susan Sontag, in her later essay on "Fascinating Fascism," further develops this idea of the aesthetics of fascism in terms of the choreography of mastery and submission, eroticism of mass discipline and leadership as demiurgy.

This brings us to the theoretical question posed by Walter Benjamin, who famously stated that one of the most important accomplishments of fascism was that it was the aestheticization of politics. That is, the transformation of political problems into the matter of spectacle and ritual rather than confrontation and decision-making. Something which was opposed to what Benjamin called "the politicization of art." As it turns out, Rancière complicates this dichotomy by pointing out that politics necessarily involves some sort of aestheticization due to the fact that any political order presupposes some sort of division of the sensible.

E. Messaging versus Persuasion

This needs to be clearly expressed since it is what dictates which of the film's strategies will actually perform the ideological labour. Messaging is the overt communication of a political position, a slogan, an explicit endorsement and one that audiences are usually well aware of as such, and therefore ready to resist as propaganda. Persuasion, on the other hand, happens without reaching the level of critical consciousness; it is not done through any sort of statement of positions but through the construction of the pleasure-producing grammar of the thriller, the war movie, or the romance so that a certain sensible order becomes nothing but the way things obviously are. It is the latter strategy, not messaging, that explains the persistence and power of ideological labour discussed above.

IV. Case Studies: Cinematic Architectures of Polarisation

The utilization of cinema as an ideological apparatus entails an intensive exploration of the way in which mass media produces, curates, and commoditizes political narratives. This section uses a four-pronged theoretical matrix in analyzing current Indian cinema: Jacques Rancière's idea of the "distribution of the sensible" (what is shown and unseen in the frame of a movie); Theodor Adorno's critique of the "culture industry" (the conditioning rather than expression of history through commercial grammar); Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony (the normalizing of a partisan ideology into common sense); and the epistemological exploration of each movie's "curated truth," that is, its specific factual lie upon which the ideology rests. This section applies this theoretical matrix across four distinct categories of contemporary cinematic propaganda: Majoritarian Victimhood (The Kashmir Files), Political/State Narratives (Dhurandhar), Historical Mythologization (Padmaavat and Chhaava), and Religious Polarization (The Kerala Story franchise).

4.1 The Kashmir Files (2022): The Melodrama of Majoritarian Victimhood

Directed by Vivek Agnihotri, The Kashmir Files depicts the mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir Valley that took place in the year 1990. This film got its approval from Prime Minister Narendra Modi who encouraged his colleagues to watch it, and it turned out to be one of the highest-grossing Hindi movies of 2022.

Rancière: visibility and invisibility: The film organizes the

distribution of the sensible around one single, extremely visible object - the victimized body of the Kashmiri Pandit. With the help of the close-up cinematographic style, it focuses on particular moments of violence, in particular, the 1990 assassination of Bhushan Lal (reimagined in the film under the name of "BK Ganjoo"), thus making the experience of Hindu people as sensible as possible. At the same time, the film fails to take into account the wider context – the long-term military presence in the valley, killings of pro-Indian Kashmiri Muslims by the militants, and numerous Pandit families that stayed in Kashmir in the course of events shown in the film. These facts are not contradicted but made insensible, thus falling out of the range of things that can be seen or evaluated by the film.

Adorno: commercial grammar: The film does not employ a historically serious tone but rather works melodramatically. Violence that is frequently repeated and artistically constructed is more an instrument to produce anger in the viewer than a document of the historical events, an effect Adorno and Horkheimer describe as the replacement by the culture industry of the real experience with history by a fabricated reaction to it. The commercial logic of the cinema release in terms of high tension, villain who is clearly defined, and climax is more significant than the historiographic claim of the film about the past.

Gramsci: normalisation as common sense: The film rehashes the "Urban Naxal" stereotype, a term that has been increasingly used within Indian right-wing political discourse, including in Agnihotri's previous works, to demonize secular intellectuals, human rights activists, and university professors as collaborators of or sympathizers to insurgent violence. By employing this framework not merely as one of many ways of interpreting the event but also as the explicit moral framework within which the events depicted in the film take place, the film embodies, in Gramsci's terms, the common sense of hegemony: an ideology that no longer needs any kind of defense because it is taken as the way things are. Indeed, the reception of the film has confirmed this pattern: hate speech against Muslims in the movie theaters showing the film followed its release; moreover, its selection for the competitive part of the 2022 International Film Festival of India resulted in a criticism from the festival's president of the jury, Nadav Lapid, who called the film "vulgar propaganda" not suitable for competition.

Curated truth: In the epistemic approach used in the film, the film is positioned in the light of being an instance of historical reconstruction; Agnihotri has explained that the making of the film was done after conducting hundreds of interviews with survivors. At the same time, the film includes a disclaimer which denies any accountability for its factual accuracy. With this approach, the film can use its documentary authenticity while at the same time using its fictional immunity. According to independent sources, the officially confirmed number of deaths of Kashmiri Pandits who fled from the area is up to 219. However, the film uses the narrative technique of grouping killings over the long period into one series.

4.2 *Dhurandhar* (2025): State Propaganda and the Epistemic Shield

Directed by Aditya Dhar, the 2025 blockbuster *Dhurandhar* is perhaps the most potent example of government-backed political proselytization in recent Indian cinematic history. Setting its narrative against real geopolitical crises, it embeds a fictional intelligence operative, Jaskirat Singh Rangi, into a highly curated account of national security.

Rancière: visibility and invisibility: The film actively redistributes the sensible field of Indian geopolitical history by inserting a hyper-capable, fictional state agent into verifiable events. It makes visible a fantasy of state infallibility, righteous revenge, and dominance, while rendering invisible any institutional failures or historical complexities. As director Aditya Dhar explicitly boasted in response to criticism, "History is being rewritten in Indian cinema"—a perfect articulation of Rancière's concept, acknowledging that the film is actively redrawing what the public perceives as the historical landscape.

Adorno: commercial grammar: *Dhurandhar* weaponizes the commercial grammar of the high-octane spy thriller to deliver Adorno's "hidden message." Beneath the overt entertainment of action and suspense lies the covert conditioning of the audience to accept extrajudicial violence and state narratives without question. Furthermore, the film's surrounding ecosystem perfectly illustrates the culture industry's resistance to aesthetic autonomy: critical reception is structurally suppressed, as evidenced by the Film Critics Guild's statement condemning organized harassment against reviewers like Anupama Chopra, whose dissenting critique

was ultimately removed.

Gramsci: normalisation as common sense: The ideological conditioning of the film moved from the screen to the street with unusual visibility. The film's hyper-nationalist framing of India's security apparatus was normalized so effectively that audiences began quoting the fictional actions of Jaskirat Singh Rangi while debating actual, real-world events. Through this hegemonic success, the state's preferred narrative ceases to be seen as propaganda and is internalized by the public as "common sense" political reality.

Curated truth: The film's defining epistemic violation is its exploitation of the "inspired by true events" disclaimer. *Dhurandhar* anchors its fiction using real archival footage, audio recordings, and actual historical tragedies. However, its protagonist remains a complete fabrication. When public speculation arose that Ranveer Singh's character was based on the real-life undercover operative Major Mohit Sharma, director Aditya Dhar had to explicitly clarify that the character was not based on any real individual. By claiming documentary authority while utilizing the exculpatory shield of "artistic liberty," the film absolves itself of factual accountability while cementing a completely curated state myth.

4.3 Padmaavat (2018): Fascist Aesthetics and the Mythologisation of History

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat* dramatises the 1303 siege of Chittorgarh, adapting Malik Muhammad Jayasi's 1540 Sufi epic poem *Padmavat*, a work of literary fiction whose central figure, Rani Padmavati, has no independent historical attestation.

Rancière: visibility and invisibility: There is a definite split in the perception of the perceptible realm. The Rajput court of Mewar is portrayed in vibrant colors, with bright sunlight illuminating opulence, creating an image of a society that looks like an ideal place free from any problems of the caste-based hierarchy in which it existed. In contrast, the Sultanate controlled by Alauddin Khilji is shown primarily through the dark, appetitive, and predatory images: Khilji is shown biting flesh off the bone, wearing only a shirt and having eyes lined with kohl, thus evoking the description of the character from reviewers who were generally positive about the film as being almost demonic. The Persianate culture of the Delhi Sultanate, the same environment that gave birth to the poet-courtier

Amir Khusrau, is completely left out of this image.

Adorno: commercial grammar: In this movie, the act of jauhar, whereby Rajput women commit mass suicide upon being faced with the threat of being captured, is made into a very deliberate and spectacular performance which marks the climax of the movie. The market need for an impressive conclusion turns this historical horror into a spectacle that is more triumphant than tragic, thus exemplifying Adorno's assertion about how the culture industry turns mass death into awe through its aesthetic of greatness.

Gramsci: normalisation as common sense: The portrayal of Khilji as a deceitful, ruthless, meat-ripping barbarian and of historically complex characters like Khusrau as mere decorative additions has enabled the film to legitimize a certain historically incorrect dichotomy, the predatory Muslim invader and the civilizationally pristine Hindu kingdom as a commonsense understanding of history as opposed to an ideological discourse. The relationship between the film and the larger Hindutva politics is described in detail by recent scholarship, which suggests that the role of Khilji in the film is not only that of a villain but that of a politically motivated message that emphasizes the monolithic Hindu identity against the Muslim "other."

Curated truth: The most significant distortion in the Padmaavat film, however, is categorical rather than accidental, namely the transformation of an allegorical poem of the sixteenth century, which was perceived by its author as a spiritual allegory, not history, into an historical account. The history of the Delhi Sultanate generally explains the military campaign of Khilji in the Deccan and Rajputana as acts of territorial expansion and revenue collection, as well as the need to strengthen the defenses of the Sultanate from periodic invasions of the Mongols from the northwest, rather than the pursuit of a queen whose existence in the historical sense has never been proven.

4.4 Chhaava (2025): Martial Masculinity and the Flattening of the Deccan

Chhaava (2025) dramatises the final campaign and execution of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the second Maratha ruler, following his capture by Mughal forces in 1689.

Rancière: visibility and invisibility: The film focuses on the physical resilience of Sambhaji under torture to an unprecedented extent, rendering his martyrdom a

civilizational sacrifice witnessed through continuous and unflinching close-up shots. On the other hand, the complicated politics of the seventeenth-century Deccan is hardly visible in the film, which reveals how Marathas, Mughals, and even Deccan Sultanates entered into temporary alliances and fought against each other based on shifting interests rather than religious affiliations, an aspect that is well-recorded in the standard academic accounts of the Maratha state.

Adorno: commercial grammar: The reliance of the film on a noisy musical score and dramatic combat sequences turns an elaborate and protracted struggle from the seventeenth century into the genre of a modern-day revenge drama. This is a good example of the tendency of the culture industry, as described by Adorno, to reduce experience to a standardized form: complex historical facts are pre-digested into the simple-to-understand "good vs. evil" plot, thus diverting people's attention from history to entertainment.

Gramsci: normalisation as common sense: In making a Maratha fight a part of a larger and unified Hindu struggle against a unified "foreign" occupation by Muslims, the movie practices a hegemonic reduction in that a specific conflict between two dynasties and territories is re-categorized into a present-day communal dichotomy, thus validating the use of modern majoritarian classifications for an era where the terms were not used in the same sense.

Curated truth: From the historical sources, it is evident that Sambhaji was killed after he had been captured in the context of a Mughal operation that was being conducted against the Maratha opposition in the Deccan region. The Mughal operation, as explained in Jadunath Sarkar's classic history of the Aurangzeb rule, belongs to several decades of changing contestation between military and administrative spheres rather than a religious war. In reducing this complex struggle to a single dimension of religious martyrdom despite the established religious orthodoxy of Aurangzeb, Chhaava ignores the significant economic and administrative factors behind the Mughal-Maratha wars.

4.5 *The Kerala Story* Franchise (2023–2026): Religious Polarization and the Architecture of the Binary

The Kerala Story (2023) and its sequel *The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond* (2026) operate as a unified ideological system. Together, they constitute the most sustained example of

religious proselytization in contemporary Indian cinema, elevating severe communal anxiety to the status of mainstream moral consensus.

Rancière: visibility and invisibility: The franchise distributes the sensible through a literal aesthetic architecture of binaries. As established in the sequel, scenes within Hindu domestic spaces are bathed in light, warmth, and familial affection (visible as virtuous), while Muslim social life is shot in dark, claustrophobic cinematography (visible only as a threat). Every Muslim male is rendered exclusively as a predator or conspirator, and every Hindu female exclusively as a victim. Moderate or everyday forms of the Islamic faith are rendered entirely invisible—a deliberate erasure noted even by the British Board of Film Classification.

Adorno: commercial grammar: The films represent Adorno's concept of "standardization" operating at its absolute peak. The culture industry here pre-digests social reality into emotionally manageable, morally unambiguous horror/thriller formulas. There are no grey area and no demand for active interpretation; the audience is simply handed their moral conclusion in advance through a narrative of betrayed innocence. The film's commercial architecture relies on rousing "feelings of suspicion, hatred and direct action," substituting rational debate with standardized affective outrage.

Gramsci: normalisation as common sense: Across both instalments, the franchise manufactures Islamophobia as a universal morality. It moves the thesis of "Love Jihad" and minority conspiracy from the paranoid fringes of political discourse directly into the center of hegemonic common sense. Viewers are installed within an Islamophobic perceptual world and invited to experience it not as a partisan ideology, but as unassailable moral clarity.

Curated truth: The foundation of the franchise's ideology is one of the most consequential acts of statistical fabrication in Indian cinematic history: the claim that 32,000 women from Kerala were forcibly converted and recruited by ISIS. Although a Right to Information (RTI) request debunked the data, and the Supreme Court forced the filmmakers to add a disclaimer (eventually walking the number back to "three"), the initial figure functioned perfectly as a "curated truth." It provided the mathematical shock value necessary to anchor an emotional conviction that subsequent, quiet legal corrections

could never dislodge.

V. Ethical and Epistemic Concerns

The intersection of aesthetics and politics in contemporary Indian cinema poses certain ethical and epistemological questions separate from those described. This part will be dedicated to three such questions: the question of when the exercise of artistry turns into epistemological manipulation; the issue of inequality between film dissemination and viewers' critical thinking; and the epistemological problem of the creation of morality through distortion.

A. The Ethics of Aesthetic Liberty and Epistemic Manipulation

Any representation of the historical world made by a filmmaker will inevitably be mediated, and such mediation will always be selective, interpretative, and creative to some extent, no matter how conscientious the documentary practice. Already John Grierson's foundational definition of a documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality" acknowledges as much. The problem is that such an acknowledgment has been repeatedly used, ever since Grierson's day, as a license for the opposite of conscientiousness, namely, substantial manipulation of facts on behalf of some higher, or "sociological," truth.

It is precisely for this reason that documentary practitioners themselves have felt the need to set certain informal ethical boundaries for such license. According to a major study of American documentary filmmakers, whatever the disagreements among them regarding their methods, they agreed that their duty was to "honour" their audiences that is, to make sure that the viewers would not see any lies if all the facts about the film production process were known to them. The fact that the practitioners themselves acknowledge such a duty, albeit informally, and without an established code of conduct, shows that the compact of trust between a filmmaker and the audience is not just a scholarly notion but something that the industry takes seriously as well. The genre in question, docudrama, is precisely such a genre.

The next critical threshold occurs when such a license is employed not in interpreting the historical event but rather in turning it into an aesthetic object that serves the pre-arranged majoritarian conclusion. In her work examining the cinema of atrocity, Shohini Chaudhuri explains how images of sanctioned state violence can serve both as the means to

disrupt the assumptions and views of the viewership and as the means to cement these views firmly into place depending on how they are framed. In case the undeniable technical and artistic quality of a film serves to hide an intentional distortion of a contested political reality, i.e. the genealogy discussed in Section III, from Triumph of the Will to contemporary films, becomes fully applicable, the film is not an interpretation anymore, but an epistemic manipulation instead. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky describe how the media serves as an institution that produces consent for elite or state agendas, as opposed to reporting that consent; and commercial cinema is fully capable of that role. Similarly to that conclusion drawn in regard to the media industry, the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has identified this power of propaganda to affect the perception of public opinion as a threat to the media freedom and developed corresponding policy responses to it.

B. The Asymmetry Between Cinematic Reach and Critical Literacy

This difficulty of identifying fact and fiction is compounded by an asymmetry of power: the ability of cinema to reach audiences is far greater than the normal interpretive capacities of such audiences to defamiliarize what is presented to them. Viewers unfamiliar with historiographical or cinematic theory lack the interpretive tools necessary to distinguish between verified fact and the narrative gloss that has been imposed upon the fact, in the manner discussed in Section III(A). The consequence is a kind of epistemic injustice, specifically, in Miranda Fricker's formulation of the concept. Fricker distinguishes between two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, in which a prejudiced hearer assigns the speaker's testimony an artificially low weight of credibility; and hermeneutical injustice, in which a community is deprived of the interpretive framework necessary to understand its own social experiences. Ideological films can perpetrate both types of epistemic injustice against the communities portrayed negatively in the film: they preclude counter-narrative through pre-judging them in the eyes of the audience (testimonial injustice), while depriving the larger audience of the interpretive frameworks necessary to understand those communities' experiences at all (hermeneutical injustice).

Gaile Pohlhaus's development of the category of epistemic injustice helps to clarify this argument. Pohlhaus asserts that,

contrary to Fricker's original definition of hermeneutical injustice, the ignorance involved in hermeneutical injustice need not be innocent but can be an act of willful hermeneutical ignorance, in which a dominant group refuses to adopt interpretive resources that have already been provided usually, by the same group whose experience has been effaced. This clarification is important for the current discussion precisely because the audience in question is almost never operating without any existing interpretive tools at all. Counter-narratives, at least, exist, and are available to the audience. What the film accomplishes, then, is less the creation of ignorance than the reinforcement of an already-existing willfulness.

Further, it is important to note that this approach has precedent in the academic literature on Hindi films, although it is deployed differently than what is proposed herein. In a recent paper, Payel Pal and Goutam Karmakar employ Fricker's terminology to analyze the ways in which the testimony of an acid attack victim is discredited or accredited in the internal diegesis of the 2020 film Chhapaak, as well as the way in which the film may be used to both reinforce and disrupt the hermeneutic gap in the experience of survivors. The point of comparison lies in the fact that this argument proceeds in an opposite direction to the one proposed herein: while Chhapaak is understood by Pal and Karmakar as a film that sheds light on epistemic injustice, the ideological documentary considered herein creates one, depriving its audience of the same interpretative tools that a historically honest treatment would have provided them with.

C. The Question of Manufactured Virtue

Both of these problems connect to a real philosophical problem: how can a moral or civic consciousness formed through distortion have the same legitimacy as a moral or civic consciousness formed in the ordinary way through the process of forming reasoned beliefs? Using the affective techniques described in Section III(C), modern docudramas dictate from the outset whose deaths viewers are allowed to mourn and whose deaths viewers will be indifferent to.

How this works on individual people is partly explained by Kate Abramson's description of gaslighting as a technique through which one party attempts to delegitimise the other party as being able to independently judge their own perceptions and experiences of something not merely

challenging what the other party says, but attempting to convince the other party that they lack the ability to perceive anything in a reasonable, independent way. When applied to a group of people, a movie which sets up the account of events by a minority group as inherently unreliable, whereas the majority's view of events is presented as just an objective truth, does a structurally similar thing to its audience: any individual who would be sceptical about the movie's framing is provided, ahead of time, an explanation as to why their scepticism is misplaced bias, disloyalty, naivety. Patriotism created primarily by selective framing and emotional resonance rather than by individual consideration of the facts creates, in effect, a self-justifying position with respect to state actions glorified in the film as long as those state actions are positioned as being in line with the "national interest" created by the movie itself. A political virtue created in this way, based not on an honest account of events but on selected grievances and villainy, cannot claim legitimacy of the virtue obtained independently; it is compliance artificially created under the guise of conviction.

VI. Conclusion

The label "inspired by true events" can no longer be read merely as a cinematic disclaimer or a marketing hook; as this paper has demonstrated, it operates as a highly sophisticated epistemic weapon. It is the precise mechanism through which the Indian culture industry bridges the gap between entertainment and ideological conditioning. By borrowing the authoritative weight of the historical archive while retaining the plausible deniability of fiction, contemporary cinema successfully bypasses the critical faculties of its audience, installing curated distortions as historical common sense.

Through the synthesis of Rancière's distribution of the sensible and Adorno's culture industry critique, it becomes evident that films like *The Kashmir Files*, *Dhurandhar*, and *The Kerala Story* do not simply reflect a pre-existing political reality—they actively manufacture it. They dictate the perceptual coordinates of citizenship: who is rendered visible as a universal victim or national hero, and who is systematically relegated to the shadows as a fundamental threat. This redistribution is achieved not through overt political messaging, which might invite rational debate, but through the standardized, affective grammar of commercial cinema. The resulting social consciousness is a form of manufactured virtue: a counterfeit civic morality built upon

wilful hermeneutical ignorance and epistemic manipulation, rather than organically evolving pluralistic discourse.

The broader implications of this aestheticization of politics are profound for the future of Indian democracy. If the boundaries of civic belonging are actively policed within the dark space of the cinema hall, traditional remedies like statutory regulation or basic media literacy appear increasingly inadequate. Standard media literacy focuses on distinguishing documented fact from dramatic fiction, yet it remains blind to how an audience absorbs an affective atmosphere, a strategically deployed musical score, or a discriminatory lighting choice. Statutory regulation is similarly ill-equipped to adjudicate "hidden messages" and structural omissions without collapsing into state censorship. The true democratic crisis lies in this immense asymmetry of power: the culture industry’s ideological reach has effectively colonized the public’s interpretive autonomy.

Ultimately, this systematic aesthetic conditioning has profoundly compromised the masses' very capacity to engage in genuine political conversation. When the distribution of the sensible is almost entirely dictated by the commercial and ideological demands of the culture industry, the space for authentic political dissensus shrinks. By replacing pluralistic debate with pre-packaged emotional outrage and installing curated myths as history, contemporary Indian cinema does not merely misrepresent reality—it actively disables the critical, democratic faculties required to perceive and respect the marginalized "other" as a legitimate civic subject.

Bibliography

1. Abramson, Kate. "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting." *Philosophical Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.
2. Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by J.M. Bernstein.

London: Routledge, 2001.

3. Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. London: Verso, 1997.
4. Agnihotri, Vivek, dir. *The Kashmir Files*. Zee Studios, 2022. Film.
5. Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
6. Apoorvanand. "In Protecting 'Kerala Story,' the Law Has Protected Hate Speech." *The Wire*, May 20, 2023. https://thewire.in/communalism/in-protecting-kerala-story-the-law-has-protected-hate-speech.
7. Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, 141–148. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
8. Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 217–251. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
9. Bhansali, Sanjay Leela, dir. *Padmaavat*. Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2018. Film.
10. Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
11. Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
12. Dhar, Aditya, dir. *Dhurandhar*. Jio Studios / B62 Studios, 2025. Film.
13. Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.
14. "Film Critics Guild Condemns Attacks And Harassment Faced By Film Critics For Dhurandhar Review." *Outlook India*, December 11, 2025. https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/film-critics-guild-condemns-attacks-and-harassment-faced-by-film-critics-for-dhurandhar-review.
15. Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the*

Ethics of Knowing. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

16. Gehlawat, Ajay. *Twenty-First Century Bollywood*. London: Routledge, 2015. *(Note: Adjust to his newest book title if you were referencing a specific 202X release).*

17. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

18. Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, 128–138. London: Hutchinson, 1980.

19. Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

20. *The Hindu*. "Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind Moves Supreme Court to Stop Release of The Kerala Story." May 3, 2023. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jamiat-ulama-i-hind-moves-sc-to-stop-release-of-the-kerala-story/article66804874.ece.

21. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988.

22. *The Independent*. "Dhurandhar 2 Revenge Release Box Office Ranveer Singh." March 2026. https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/dhurandhar-2-revenge-release-box-office-ranveer-singh-b2941618.html.

23. Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947.

24. *NDTV*. "Supreme Court Pauses Bengal Ban On 'The Kerala Story', Orders Disclaimer." May 18, 2023. https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/supreme-court-pauses-west-bengal-government-order-banning-the-kerala-story-4045112.

25. Pal, Payel, and Goutam Karmakar. "Looking at the 'Acid-Attacked' Through the Lens of Epistemic Injustice: A Study of Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak*." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 10 (2021): 88–

101.

26. Pohlhaus Jr., Gaile. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Paradigm of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance." *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 715–735.

27. Rajvanshi, Astha. "How a Low-Budget Hindi Film Ignited Deadly Religious Tension." *TIME*, May 18, 2023. https://time.com/6280955/kerala-story-movie-india/.

28. Ramnath, Nandini. "'The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond' Review: A Film That Targets Muslims and Inter-Faith Ties." *Scroll.in*, February 28, 2026. https://scroll.in/reel/1091055/the-kerala-story-2-goes-beyond-review-a-film-that-brings-the-war-on-muslims-home.

29. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2004.

30. Riefenstahl, Leni, dir. *Triumph of the Will*. Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935. Film.

31. Schaefer, Eric. *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

32. Sen, Sudipto, dir. *The Kerala Story*. Sunshine Pictures, 2023. Film.

33. Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." In *Under the Sign of Saturn*, 73–105. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.

34. Sreepada, Nihar. "Nationalism, Spectacle, and the Indian State: A Study of *Uri: The Surgical Strike*." *(Note: Replace with the exact journal title/volume for Sreepada's specific paper on Uri, as academic publication details for this specific paper vary by database).*

35. Utekar, Laxman, dir. *Chhaava*. Maddock Films, 2025. Film.

36. Žižek, Slavoj. "The Lesson of Rancière." In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, by Jacques Rancière, translated by Gabriel Rockhill, 69–79. London: Continuum, 2004.