

Expansión del cine de Prayoga: filosofía india, encarnación y cine experimental

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Palabras clave

“Cine”; “Estética”; “Filosofía cultural”; “Arte de vanguardia”; “Encarnación”; “Cine de Prayōga”

Sumario

1. Introducción. 2. Metodología. 3. Hacia una vanguardia transcultural. 4. Policentrismo y pluriversalidad. 5. Expansión de Prayōga como praxis encarnada. 5.1 El yōga en Prayōga. 6. Un enfoque Prayōgico de la estética cinematográfica experimental. 7. Conclusiones. 8. Bibliografía.

potencial de Cine de Prayōga como un enfoque encarnado para el cine experimental. Además, ilustra cómo este marco puede sostener la investigación comparativa sobre el cine experimental, a través de una relectura de la estética cinematográfica de la luz en la vanguardia estadounidense y el trabajo de Stan Brakhage y Marie Menken, a través de la lente del Prayōga. El artículo concluye destacando la importancia del Cine de Prayōga como un enfoque encarnado y decolonial para el estudio del cine experimental.

Resumen

Este artículo revisita el concepto de Cine de Prayōga, un marco teórico para el estudio de cine y video experimental propuesto por el crítico de cine indio Amrit Gangar en 2005. El artículo reevalúa el potencial y el alcance de este marco como un enfoque alternativo al cine experimental. Prayōga significa práctica o experimento en sánscrito. Este artículo argumenta que un enfoque más profundo en las raíces del término en la filosofía y la praxis del Yoga puede expandir aún más el

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Expanding on the Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Philosophy, Embodiment and Experimental Film

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Keywords

“Cinema”; “Aesthetics”; “Cultural philosophy”; “Avant-garde art”; “Embodiment”; “Cinema of Prayōga”

Summary

1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Towards a Transcultural Avant-garde. 4. Polycentrism and Pluriversality. 5. Expanding on Prayōga as Embodied Praxis. 5.1 The Yōga in Prayōga. 6. A Prayōgic Approach to American Avant-garde Film Aesthetics. 7. Conclusions. 8. Bibliography.

expand the potential of Cinema of Prayōga as an embodied approach to experimental film. Further, it illustrates how this framework can support comparative research on experimental cinema, through a re-reading of American avant-garde film aesthetics of light illustrated by the work of Stan Brakhage and Marie Menken. The paper concludes with highlighting how Cinema of Prayōga offers an embodied and alternative epistemological approach to the study of experimental film.

Abstract

This paper revisits the concept of Cinema of Prayōga, a theoretical framework for the study of experimental film and video proposed by Indian film critic Amrit Gangar in 2005. It re-evaluates the potential and scope of this framework as an alternative approach to notions of avant-garde cinema. *Prayōga* means practice or experiment in Sanskrit. This paper argues that a deeper focus on the roots of the term in yoga philosophy and praxis, can further

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1. Introduction

The dominant history of experimental cinema has primarily been constructed through a Euro-American centric lens. In a move to challenge this epistemological imbalance, Indian film scholar and critic Amrit Gangar presents an alternative framework called Cinema of Prayōga. Gangar builds his framework around the notion of *prayōga*, a Sanskrit term which he proposes in lieu of “Experimental Film and its synonyms” (2006: 10). In his words:

Cinema of Prayōga celebrates a cinematographic idiom that is deeply located in the polyphony of Indian philosophy and cultural imagination. It attempts to reconfigure the generally accepted notion of the experimental and the avant-garde in Indian cinema by conjuring the term ‘Prayōga’ from Indian philosophical thought. Etymologically, the term *prayōga* in Sanskrit refers to a theory of practice that emphasizes the potential of any form of contemplation – ritualistic, poetic, mystic, aesthetic, magical, mythical, physical or alchemical. In cinema, it is a practice of filmic interrogation that is devised as a quest toward a continuing process in time and space. This is a cinema that in contrast to mainstream formulations anywhere else in the world, employs Indian music, poetry, mythology and performance to examine the relationship between their status as filmic texts and the ‘fictions-in-progress’ of their subjects. (Gangar, A. 2012: 189)

As seen in Gangar’s description, term *prayōga* (प्रयोगः in Sanskrit) captures a culturally unique non-Western ethos of practice and experimentation. It represents for Gangar, an “ancient pre-modern tradition of innovation,” that offers a rich cultural and aesthetic basis for the study of cinematic arts (2012: 189). The term is found extensively in liturgical and philosophical texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism and is still used today in Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, and Assamese and other major Indian languages. A rendering of *prayōga* in Chinese is *jia-xing* or “加行,” which alludes to “the active practice or cultivation of the Buddha Way” (King, S. 1991: 41).

The essence of *prayōga* lies in contemplative modes of practice (Gangar, 2006: 24; 2012: 189). According to Gangar, the prefix “*pra*,” works like an “engine” that propels the word forward, carrying in its momentum, “the sense of vanguard” (2006: 24). Its root in Sanskrit is “*yōg*,” which in turn comes from “*yuj*,” meaning to yoke, combine or integrate. Thus, in his view *prayōga* thus serves as a potent, artistic, expansive, and unifying word that allows for a rich conceptualization of radical experimentation in cinema (Gangar, 2006: 9-10).

The term Cinema of Prayōga, was coined by Gangar in 2005 and presented in Mumbai as part of Experimenta, a film festival founded and directed by curator Shai Heredia.¹ The

1 Butler and Mirza acknowledge Heredia as “an international voice for Indian film and video” without whose contributions and the work being done through the Experimenta festival, the Cinema of Prayoga tour and publication would not have been possible (2006: 4, 6).

following year it was brought to UK by Experimenta and the artist run lab no.where in the form of a touring exhibit presented at Tate Modern (London) among other venues. This program included historical films such as Dhundiraj Govind Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) as well as eclectic works produced in the 1960s under the Indian government's Films Division such as *Trip* (1970) by Pramod Pati (Experimenta India, n.d.-a). Moving image works by contemporary artists such as Nalini Malani and Tejal Shah also featured in the program. Several films showcased in the program had originally been excavated from archives by Heredia and had been featured at Experimenta (Experimenta India, n.d.-a; Butler, B. & Mirza, K. 2006: 4-5).

This tour was accompanied by the publication of the edited volume *Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film and Video 1913-2006* which presented critical voices of scholars and practitioners in the field including Gangar, Heredia, Navjot Altaf, Ashish Avikunthak, Raqs Media Collective and others (Butler, B. & Mirza, K. eds. 2006). The concept of Cinema of Prayōga continued to articulate itself further and be developed and disseminated in this manner, through publications, lectures, and curated film programs.² While the relevance of the Cinema of Prayōga as a theoretical framework has been acknowledged by scholars internationally, there is room for greater exploration of the subject. Gangar himself defines it as “a theory under construction” which is in a continuously unfolding “process of becoming – evoking a temporality akin to cinematography” (2012: 189-190, 200). It continues to invite aesthetic intercultural dialogue and critical reflection on the notion of experimentation itself.

As an artist, scholar and practitioner of experimental film and media from India, I was drawn to this framework for its ability to expand notions of experimentation in cinema beyond the Euro-American canon. It is an important cross-cultural intervention in studies of media and offers a South Asian perspective. This paper revisits Cinema of Prayōga to re-evaluate its significance and potential for the study of experimental film today. It explores the ontology of yoga in *prayoga* to further articulate how the framework could be developed in relation to contemporary critical concerns in the field. It builds on Gangar's notions of *prayoga* as praxis to further articulate modes of embodiment in experimental cinema within the larger context of decolonizing media studies.

2. Methodology

This paper explores the concept of Cinema of Prayōga as a new approach to the avant-garde, drawing from writings by Geeta Kapur, Saloni Mathur, Micheal O'pray, and Gangar himself. It examines his concept in relation to “polycentric aesthetics” as defined by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1998), exploring its value as a decolonial methodology for cinema

² Venues where Cinema of Prayoga was showcased include the University of the Arts (London), Pompidou Centre (Paris), and the Lodz Film School (Poland) among others.

and media studies. A deeper etymological examination of the term *prayōga*, with a focus on *yōga* philosophy and practice builds on the embodied potential of the framework. This aspect is explicated through a comparison between the role of light in North American Avant-garde cinema as defined by William C. Wees (1996) and the role of breath in *yōga* practice to illustrate a possible application of a *prayōgic* approach in a comparative study. Drawing from the author's own practice of experimental film, this paper further articulates how the Cinema of Prayōga framework could serve as a pedagogical platform for arts-based research. In conclusion this study articulates its potential as an embodied and practice-based approach to experimental film, summarizing directions for its future expansion.

3. Towards a Transcultural Avant-garde

The proposition of Cinema of Prayōga surfaced at a time when a growing interest in the excavation, re-framing, and celebration of experimental moving image practices in India was beginning to gain new momentum (Experimenta India, n.d.-b). Increasing collaborations between art practitioners, scholars, and curators from India and abroad accelerated the need for a new vocabulary that could encapsulate the diversity of artistic practices beyond the categories and concerns of the so-called West. In his seminal text on Cinema of Prayōga, Gangar challenges the relevance of labels such as “experimental” and “avant-garde” cinema:

Since the first explorations into the so-called experimental/avant-garde/underground films started in Western Europe and North America, naturally the relevant theories also emerged from there. Why so? Isn't experimentation intrinsically universal – in one form or another? In the times when, the Euro-American establishment can only assimilate non-western art on manifestly ethnographic terms while keeping the option open, to reject it precisely on those terms, how do we recognize the avant-garde in India? (Gangar, A. 2006: 10)

Gangar's words critique the exploitative colonial foundations of film theory and point to the fundamental absence of non-Western thought in contemporary conceptions of the avant-garde. He responds to Indian art critic and scholar Geeta Kapur's call for a radical re-envisioning of 'Avant-garde,' that accounts for cultural difference, socio-economic realities, and transnational flows of capital in a post-colonial world.

...Asia/Africa/Australia, not to speak of Latin America, look for a new formalism, an extension of language based on cultural difference and political urgencies which, because of the shared history of the 20th century (via capitalism/imperialism), implicates the artists in global questions: of location and the appropriate forms of political redress from their vantage point. These artists, living in societies riven with contradictions, ask for synthesizing universals, for visionary and vanguard initiatives. (Kapur, G. 1998, as cited in Gangar, A. 2006: 19)

In her manifesto titled, “Proposition Avant-Garde: A View from the South,” Kapur (2018) emphasizes the need for an aesthetic conception of the avant-garde that challenges social injustices created by divisions in gender, race, class, ethnicity, and caste. Indeed, historically, the term ‘avant-garde’ is fraught in many ways; it has been perceived as unsteady, ailing, and has even been pronounced dead (Mann, P. 1991: 6-7; Savran, D. 2005). Saloni Mathur asks what value Kapur might find in a term that could be seen as a sign of “left melancholy” as described by Rosalyn Deutsche (2010 as cited in Mathur, S. 2019: 182). Even as the avant-garde has always been heavily contested as a concept, it also remains “open to dispute or redefinition” (Ian Christie as cited in O’pray, M. 2003: 1). For Kapur, the term is very much alive as it continually re-negotiates its internal paradoxes (Mathur 2019: 182).³

While the history of the avant-garde gives us a *template* for radical disruptions, it is important to keep alive questions of material practice: It follows that situational politics—the very site for avant-garde initiatives—should be rescued from subsumption in the global imaginary. There is need to focus on location (as an archeologist would) and simultaneously shift paradigms (as a philosopher would): a concept like *heterotopia* speaks of “other spaces”—spaces with several places of difference, real and metaphoric otherness, and rerouted allusions to “utopias.”⁴ (Kapur, G. 2018: para. 10).

Kapur’s endeavour to resurrect the avant-garde has been described as a playful, provocative, and political gesture (Mathur, S. 2019: 183). Gangar’s proposition of Cinema of Prayōga can be compared to her intervention. In situating the notion of cinematic experimentation within the socio-political and cultural context of India, Gangar effectively disrupts conceptions of the avant-garde. His conscious rejection of its terminology further delinks the discourse from a Western paradigm, creating space for an alternative notion of radicality as envisioned through the lens of a global South.

4. Polycentrism and Pluriversality

Film and media theory have certainly been slow to incorporate perspectives from outside of the Euro-American-centric paradigm. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note, “Eurocentrism bifurcates the world into ‘the West and the rest’ and organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe” (2000: 2). As a call to unthink Eurocentrism they posit that diverse systems of knowledge within a similar periphery may be connected (notwithstanding geographical divides), in a manner that could stimulate

³ See Mathur citing John Roberts, “Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde,” in “What Is an Avant-Garde?” special issue, *New Literary History* 41. no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 717.

⁴ Also see Michel Foucault, “Of other spaces”.

their “polycentric,” “non-essentialist,” and “multidirectional” affinities (1998: 30; 2000: 322, 367-368; 2003). For the dismantling of colonial epistemologies and systems, they call for a “polycentric media studies” equipped with “a more flexible set of disciplinary and cross-cultural lenses adequate to the complex politics of contemporary location, while maintaining openings for agency and resistance” (2003: 9, 17).

In their view, scholarship needs to engage in multicultural, transnational and contrapuntal ways with knowledge to frame media with an understating of “mutually co-implicated communities” (2003: 17). This necessarily calls for a “polycentric approach,” that constitutes for them, “a long-overdue gesture toward historical equity and lucidity, a way of re-envisioning the global politics of visual culture” (1998: 47). Their notion of polycentrism is not limited by fixed spatial centers, but an approach that emphasizes difference, inter-relatedness, and linkage (1998; 2000; 2003). Its overall aim is not focused on expanding accepted canons of art, but to investigate what motivations underlie the “production and reception of art at a global level” (1998: 46) with no culture having “epistemic privilege” (Mohanty, C. 2003: 511). Their idea of inter-relatedness is built on mutual “reciprocity” and “reversibility” as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, wherein “diverse cultures may come to perceive their own limitations” (1998: 46).

It can be argued that the spirit of Cinema of Prayōga aligns with the “polycentric, dialogical, relational” approach put forth by Shohat and Stam. Gangar notes, “I believe, we have reached a juncture that needs a fusion (to clear the historical confusion), a term that captures the flux in its inner self; the integrative *prayōga* would avoid dualistic paradigms of west versus east, traditional versus modern (or post-modern, or post-past-modern), etc.” (2006: 25).

The Cinema of Prayōga framework seeks to reclaim the space for the radical, from a trans-cultural perspective. While it arises from a culturally specific context, its potential is universal. This is not an “exclusive” construct that seeks to react to imagined binaries such as East and West (Gangar, A. 2012: 194), but an inclusive paradigm that invites transcultural explorations in cinema studies while challenging colonial constructs. In his exposition of the concept, he asks if it is “possible to harness the Indian sense of time and space for cinematography while making it oppositional, but inclusive of creative thinking across cultures and countries?” (Gangar, A. 2012: 191)

I was always uncomfortable with the concept of experimental film. It is a Euro-American-centric term, which I believe was not deeply rooted. It was too rational and too western, for me. I also found it exclusivist. Therefore, I wanted to develop an alternative thought. I personally find and believe that some English words are inadequate if you compare them with Sanskrit alternatives, so I thought why not explore that? In Sanskrit, there is prefix and suffix, and when they become a conjunction, you know that word. It becomes so beautiful. It can explore the beauty of the word; the abstraction of the word, literature has that privilege of abstraction. [...] Therefore,

we have to reinvent our own thought and its articulation (Gangar, A. in an interview with Raghunathan, R. 2014: para 9).

By rejecting the term “avant-garde,” and coining the term “Cinema of Prayōga,” Gangar actively delinks from Euro-American frameworks in theory and practice. He thereby unsettles a Western epistemological boundary by performing a *prayōgic* intervention that demonstrates his idea. This deterritorializes the discourse of the avant-garde, foregrounding a polycentric approach to the study of cinema. The framework facilitates a much-needed shift within cinema studies allowing for a non-Western approach.

At the time it was proposed, Gangar’s framework resonated for scholars and practitioners in the field of experimental cinema internationally. Butler and Mirza identify Cinema of Prayōga as a key starting point to begin this process “of challenging the dominant US and Euro-centric histories” (2006: 6). Catherine Elwes, in *Installation and the Moving Image*, cites Cinema of Prayōga as one of the “more expansive notions of the cinematic” to have emerged from “from outside of the Euro-American axis” (2015: 4). Ranjana Raghunathan frames it as “a bold alternative to understanding not only Indian but also Euro-American experimental filmmaking practice as an experience of thinking and feeling” (2015). She notes that Gangar’s concept dissolves “the boundaries between poetry, music, literature, art, cinema and life; emphasising the privilege of intuitive perception in our experience of the world” (2014: para 6).

Filmmaker and academic, Ashish Avikunthak considers the framework to be a “theory of practice” and a “practice of experiment.” He observes that it not only addresses aesthetics but also engages the “production aspect of cinema” (Avikunthak, A. cited in Gangar, A. 2006: 25). In his opinion, it allows for the study of the emergence of radical forms of filmmaking in Indian “not just as a mimetic form of Western derivatives, but, crucially as a part of a continuous tradition of innovation in Indian filmmaking practices (Avikunthak, A. cited in Gangar, A. 2012: 193).

Gangar’s framework can certainly be understood as a ‘pluriversal’ construct.⁵ It aligns with Walter Mignolo’s vision, stepping away from “cultural relativism” towards an appreciation of varied cosmologies that are “connected today in a power differential” (2018: x). Cinema of Prayōga has the potential to engage difference, through a pluriversal and polycentric approach, owing to its inherently integrative, relational, and dialogical roots that emerge from a non-Western paradigm.

5 The term “pluriversality” was coined by Walter Mignolo who advocates “de-linking” as a “method” and “orientation” towards de-westernization and decoloniality (Mignolo, W. 2012).

Significantly, it does not privilege visuality or theoretical discourse but instead engages with diverse ways of being, doing and knowing. The transcultural and inter-disciplinary value of a *prayōgic* approach can be a critical means to bridge connections between systems of knowledge that resonate with each other even if they are geopolitically or epistemologically differentiated. In summary, the Cinema of Prayōga framework challenges notions of the avant-garde and offers a rich alternative, thereby contributing towards the project of decolonizing cinema and media studies.

5. Expanding on Prayōga as Praxis

It is useful to further examine the notion of *prayōga* in Indian philosophy and the arts to understand how Gangar's framework can be further articulated in terms of theory and practice. In the Mīmāṃsā school of Indian philosophy, the word *prayōga*, signifies meaningful interpretation of formulated principles or injunctions (*vidhi*) through application. One kind of *prayōga* in this context, is "*vidhi-prayōga*." It identifies the "immediacy of performance" as a desirable quality in the interpretation of texts. The integration of thought, word, and action into a seamless flow renders *prayōga* as performance and act (Tilak, S. 2006: 63-64). 'Doing' in this context, is seen as a form of 'knowing' and 'learning' (Prasad, R. 2009: xxxiii; Char, P.D. 2009: 286-287). R. Brad Bannon likens Clooney's definition of *prayōga* to the act of listening to a melody (*śruti*) in a study on Indian classical music. This could be extended to other kinds of reflective performativity as well, including writing (Jacob, J. 2004).

Prayōga is intrinsically situated, embodied and processual. There is a certain specificity to the act of *prayōga*. Francis X. Clooney notes, "Prayōga is an event: a particular happening in a particular time and place, done by a particular person. It is where the many ritual connections are realized and actualized. There is no abstract *prayōga* because, by definition, it is an occurrence in time and space" (1990: 116-119). The Nāṭyashāstra, a much influential ancient Indian treatise on dance, music, and drama (believed to have been written by Bharata Muni between 200 BCE -200 CE), elucidates this aspect of *prayōga* extensively throughout its text, with a strong emphasis on practice. It categorizes *prayōga* into four dramatic styles, *bhārati* (the verbal), *sāttvati* (the grand), *arabhaṭi* (the energetic), and *kaiśiki* (the graceful) (Ghosh, M. 1961-67: Chapters 8.7 and 13; Rao, S. 2018).

So, how can *prayōga* be understood in relation to the idea of theory? Sheldon Pollock argues that the relationship between *śāstra* and *prayōga* has not been adequately examined (1985: 499). Jacob, in a study of the relationship between theory and practice in the Vāstushāstra (a traditional Indian treatise on architecture), critiques Pollock's claim and argues that *śāstras* embody "the dialectical nature of theory itself" are in dialogue with practice (2004: 247). He identifies different modes of practice, such as "seeing," "knowing," and "making" that occur in the theoretical text, inviting "reciprocity" between theory and practice (Merleau-Ponty: 1968). "Writing as making" and "Making as writing" as Jacob coins it, captures this dialectic between theory and practice (2004: 247). This view is shared by scholars such as Bettina Baumer who argues that Indian artistic traditions epitomize the integration of

theory and practice:

The Indian arts, both in theory (*sāstra*) and practice (*prayōga*), are branches of a single living tree of Indian culture. They cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of thought and science, myth and ritual, spiritual and secular traditions. The underlying worldview has crystallized in certain concepts, reflecting the understanding of cosmos and man, of space and time, of form and structure, of the part and the whole, of body senses and mind...a serious investigation into the interrelatedness of all these fields is still a desideratum. (Baumer, B. 2001: xi)

It can therefore be argued that a *prayōgic* approach to cinema studies, is rooted in material practices and explorations of the medium. In Gangar's definition, *prayōga* is also the "experimental portion (of a subject)" that is performative (2006: 24). Thus, Cinema of Prayōga's approach which is motivated by lived and felt experiences of cinema, aligns with arts-based research methods. It asserts the relevance of filmmakers' journals, process notes, and correspondences, in the construction of pedagogical frameworks and theories of cinema. These factors make it a valuable platform for embodied dialogue on the nature of experimentation in cinema, foregrounding an epistemological view from the global South.

5.1 The Yōga in Prayōga

To explore the potential of the Cinema of Prayōga framework further, it is useful to delve deeper into the etymology of *prayōga*. As Gangar notes the prefix: *pra*, serves as a propeller for the word, suggesting an onward movement or flow. The suffix, "*yōga*" is rooted in the Sanskrit word 'युग्' which has a range of meanings. These include, "uniting, combination, contact, touch, employment, application, use, charm, spell, incantation, magic, magical art, substance, deep and abstract meditation, concentration of mind, contemplation of the Supreme Spirit" (Gangar, A. 2006: 24). Gangar's evocation of the variously sensory, alluring, mystical, practical, and transcendent connotations of the *yōga* in prayoga, point to the potential of this framework as a mode of embodied and philosophical inquiry into cinema.

Prayōga serves as an integrative term that invites connection and dialogue with multiple streams of thought. It supports an "ecology of aesthetics" that is inclusive, fluid, and open to evolution (Gangar, A. 2006: 11; 2012: 200). The framework seeks to foster a mutuality through its harmonizing power. This aspect of the framework, it can be argued, is comparable to the creative process of cinema. As Brakhage's notes, "the integrity or the ecology of a work of art can override the intrinsic differences between each of us" (Brakhage cited in Ganguly, S. 1994: 29). Hence, the *yōgic* dimension of *prayōga* can be used to enhance its integrative potential as a transcultural approach to cinema. It allows for an exchange of diverse approaches and practices of cinema, thereby articulating new aesthetic modalities of the medium.

Yoga speaks directly to notions of materiality, body, and embodiment, which are critical areas in cinema and media studies today. Expanding on the philosophy and practice of 'yoga' within the framework of Cinema of Prayōga could highlight these aspects further, allowing for a reimagining of the cinematic body and consciousness from non-Western genealogical perspectives.

It has been well established in contemporary scholarship that Western philosophy and with its roots in Cartesian dualisms has historically been unable address questions of the body and embodiment in relation to lived experience and consciousness (Lefebvre, H., & Nicholson-Smith, D. 1991: 407). At the same time, alternative models of the body stemming from non-Western epistemologies have not been adequately investigated. In my view, the model of the body from yoga and its affiliated traditions offers a more integrated and embodied alternative to the default bio-medical body implicated in the embodiment discourse. The *prayōgic* framework invites dialogue with yogic models of the body, that are inherently opposed to divisions between body and mind, human and non-human as well as matter and spirit. The yogic body can facilitate a delinking the embodiment discourse from binaristic modes of knowledge production, foregrounding instead, more integrative cosmologies.

6. A Prayōgic Approach to Experimental Film Aesthetics

A notable feature of avant-garde cinematic tradition is its emphasis on the materiality of the medium. The radical turn to light as a foundational principle of cinema is a key feature of post-war North American experimental films and the subject of Wees' *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-garde Film* (1992). Wees' study inquires into the "dialectic of eye and the camera," addressing the similarities and differences in processes of cinematic and human vision (1996: 8). In his view, avant-garde filmmakers engage this relationship critically by pushing the limits of filmic language and technology to render a visuality that is much closer to human perception than what mainstream cinema offers. He analyzes the work of Brakhage, Ernie Gehr, Kenneth Anger, Jordan Belson, and Micheal Snow, noting, "Using light moving in time, they have translated the sense of sight into filmic art—not simply an art to be seen, but an art of seeing" (1996: 9).

Wees' study explores how radical experimentation with light, movement and time activates the potential of cinema as a "seeing" medium. His argument, which illuminates the role of light as a foundational material of cinema, is primarily concerned with questions of visuality and seeing based on models of human vision rooted in Western medical science. Brakhage's own writings however, often evoke the power of cinema beyond the "metaphors on vision" that he is famously known for (1963). The testimonies of American avant-garde filmmakers about their work often reveal phenomenological approaches and results that exceed visuality, reflecting multisensorial and affective qualities of light as a medium of cinema. The ocular-centric history of cinema studies has, in my view, limited our ability to appreciate cinema as a fully embodied praxis. As Rebecca Sheehan asserts, avant-garde film has not been sufficiently credited for its ability to "do philosophy" and make truth. (2020: 3)

I propose that a *prayōgic* approach to experimental film could allow for a deeper examination of how artists engage the interrelated principles of “light, movement, and time” that Wees frames as the basic principles of cinema. Employing a *prayōgic* approach, in my view, necessarily requires that we map questions of visibility in cinema within more critically embodied frameworks that account for lived experience, being and consciousness.

In a letter to Michael McLure, Brakhage notes that he sees the filmmaker, as “a collector of light, 24 hours a day” and a “conditioner of the light entering the magic box” that can be held in one’s hand while the speed at which light encounters the surface of the film can be regulated (Brakhage quoted in Luna, C. 2011: 242)⁶. His cinema attests to how light as an energetic medium inspires the filmmaker and is channeled through film form to audiences who are also then impacted by it.

Light undoubtedly continues to be both a medium and a muse for filmmakers in the lineage of the American avant-garde. Experimental filmmaker Jennifer Reeves notes, “Some quality of light in the work of one filmmaker will inspire and open a door permitting another to continue to push forward with their own work. This was the gift [Brakhage’s] films gave to me” (Reeves quoted in Kennedy: 2018). Nathaniel Dorsky, an experimental filmmaker who was also influenced by Brakhage, describes cinema as a “light sculpture in time.” (2003: 42, 18). The idea of visual renewal in a film, also central to Brakhage’s work, is expressed in terms of absolute oneness by Dorsky whose philosophy of film goes beyond formal aesthetics of light and sight, touching upon cinema’s “devotional” potential.

But film at its transformative best is not primarily a literary medium. The screen or the field of light on the wall must be alive as sculpture, while at the same time expressing the iconography within the frame. Beyond everything else, film is a screen, film is a rectangle of light, film is light sculpture in time. How does a filmmaker sculpt light in harmony with its subject matter? How can light be deeply in union with evocation? How do you construct a temporal form that continues to express oneness to the audience? (Dorsky, N. 2003: 42)

Dorsky’s words capture light as an energetic force which renders cinema with powers of transformation. He points to a “concordance” between “film and human metabolism.” He sees the moving image, as a “metaphor for our being” and evokes its “transformative power” as well as its “relationship to (our) well-being” (2003: 17).

Experimental film studies could certainly benefit by drawing from epistemological approaches that center the practice of filmmaking. Explorations with light by filmmakers in the avant-garde tradition could be further articulated if one were to use a *prayōgic* approach. The

⁶ Luna quotes from Brakhage’s personal communication, November 1965.

focus on filmmaking as a performance and an event, in the Cinema of Prayōga framework, and its roots in the radical materiality of yoga. offers a platform for greater appreciation of the cinema as an embodied medium, The application of a *prayōgic* approach also serves to expand Wees' concept of 'light moving in time.'

As a practitioner of both experimental film and yoga, I find that both embodied practices radically engage the materiality of the medium. In particular, the materiality of light in experimental cinema can be compared to that of breath in yoga. The primal place that light occupies in the North American lineage of experimental cinema could be seen as analogous to the role of breath in yoga practice. In most yoga traditions, breath (as *prāṇa* of vita life-force) is the foundational principle of existence.⁷ Through techniques of '*prāṇāyama*' or breath regulation, breath is harnessed to clear blockages for the smooth flow of energy in the body, focus the mind and experience the body multidimensionally, activating subtle layers of perception. The channeling of *prāṇa* allows the practitioner to experience altered and heightened states of consciousness. Ultimately this is intended to enable the transformation of matter to spirit.

Comparing the material and embodied poetics of experimental filmmaking and yoga, I hereby propose a point of resonance between light in cinema and breath in yoga. Light is shaped in time and through movement to produce cinema just as breath is mediated through the living body in yoga. In other words, breath and light are collected, mediated, manipulated, and transformed through the mechanisms in cinema and the human body respectively.

The above statement encapsulates a *prayōgic* approach to experiment film in a comparative context. Articulating the yoga and *prayōga* of cinema can help advance an embodied appreciation of the medium tapping into its energetic and affective qualities. This aligns with the need to rewrite cinema's occularcentric and liberate it from colonial frameworks through more embodied and non-Western approaches. Gangar's manifesto, has the potential to be further expanded to support such forms of inquiry into experimental film, through a comparative media philosophical lens.

The *prayōgic* framework aligns with my own artistic practice and study of film and media. My experience of learning yoga brought about a personal awareness and curiosity about breath as an energetic force. The Upanishads (a body of philosophical texts from India dated roughly between 700-500 B.C.E.) credit breath as superior to all the senses, indestructible and the same *Brahman*, which signifies the universal eternal soul and absolute reality (Jacobs, A. 2007). Concepts of breath as vital energy and life-force across various spiritual traditions, serve to expand notions of embodiment beyond the five senses to more affective registers. (Škof, L., & Berndtson, P. 2018). Breath in cinema is an emerging area of scholarship, that aligns with this approach (Quinlivan, D. 2014; Greene, L. 2017; Rose,

7 Classical/ in the lineage of Patanjali

A. 2017). Foregrounding breath studies is a *prayōgic* intervention that also serves to advance feminist media studies, cross-cultural media philosophy and practice-based research into cinema. The yogic body can also be conceptualized as a cinema of universal consciousness. With breath at the root of yogic cosmologies, could the Cinema of Prayōga framework help further imagine the possibility of a breathing cinema? My own research takes this strand of investigation forward, through the conceptualization of a Cinema of Breath (Subramanian, K. 2022).

Wees credits Brakhage more than any other filmmaker as having the ability to translate sensuous knowledge into cinematic form or “Giving Sight to the Medium” as he puts it. (1992: 77). While Brakhage’s cinema can be framed as a “metaphor” on “vision” (1963), his cinema and writings allude to more than vision. He notes, “my display of visions [...] came to the film window [...] directly from my physical self, the rhythms and tones of my biological response, my very breath and organic breadth of being (2001: 39).

Film history had until recently ignored the contributions of women filmmakers like Marie Menken whose work deserves more critical attention. Menken’s gestural, free-form camerawork and fluidity, in particular her film *Visual Variations of Noguchi* (1945) greatly influenced Brakhage’s style of filmmaking. Melissa Ragona notes that Menken’s engagement with film as a perceptual medium was like “cinematographic writing with light.” The production of dynamic, and multidimensional imagery in this film, seems to invert the “plasticity of sculpture and the sculptural aspects of the film.” According to Ragona, Menken told Brakhage that her film “was an attempt to capture ‘the flying spirit of movement within these solid objects’” (Ragona, M. 2007: 23, 31) It can be argued that both Brakhage and Menken produced more than a “seeing” cinema; their work exemplifies a cinema that is embodied, and that breathes. It can be explored through their cinematographic and editing style as well as the formal aesthetics of the work and the aesthetic experience it generates. The Cinema of Prayōga framework allows for deeper readings of artists such as Menken and Brakhage for whom filmmaking was a kind of yoga that integrated all the elements of the body, space, time, and the senses.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how Cinema of Prayōga can contribute to the discourse of experimental film by addressing contemporary concerns in the field. The framework clearly provides a decolonial methodology that pioneers non-Western approaches towards conceptualizing the avant-garde. It contributes to the growth of polycentric ecologies of aesthetics in media studies and brings into dialogue epistemologies from the global South. The framework emphasizes questions of materiality, foregrounding art and practice-based research pedagogies. It allows for greater engagement with diverse cosmologies, generating new transcultural modes of inquiry into the medium. The roots of the framework in embodied and contemplative modes of practice help advance questions of being and consciousness in cinema, highlighting alternative genealogies of media and embodiment. Some

suggestions for the expansion and development of the framework of Cinema of Prayōga are summarized below.

There is infinite potential to productively engage with the cosmologies of diverse cinemas through these alternative modes of *prayōgic* inquiry. The emergence of newer interdisciplinary, transcultural approaches to film and media, theories of new materialities, affect and non-representation also provide fertile ground for forging new connections with the Cinema of Prayōga framework. A deeper inquiry into the philosophy and practice of *yoga* (which forms the etymological roots of *prayōga*) could potentially enhance the discourse of embodiment and radical cinema. Mark Singleton describes yoga as a “floating technology between various religious systems” that stems from Tibetan Buddhism, Tantric Sufism, and several other faithscapes (Mallinson, J. & Singleton, M. 2017; Hatley, 2007).

In my view, a key step for the development of the Cinema of Prayōga framework could be a critical expansion of its roots, as recommended by Gangar, beyond constructs of nation and culture. Intensifying the anti-casteist and decolonial potential of the framework could help to expand notions of *prayōga* beyond classical and canonical Sanskrit texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas to an appreciation of Dalit, Sufi and interfaith yogic perspectives on embodiment. Finally, an active exploration of vernacular, folk, and underrepresented traditions of embodiment and *prayōga* would help expand the philosophical breadth of the framework, allowing it to achieve a greater pluriversality through its recognition of several heterotopias.

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