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The Digital Turn? Technological transformations in the history of documentary cinema in India

Giulia Battaglia¹

Abstract

This article highlights the potential and the limitation of digital technology in Indian cultural industries, including the field of documentary cinema. While paying attention to the process of digitisation of state archival images (such as those of the Films Division in Mumbai and those of the Anthropological Survey of India in Kolkata) vis-à-vis more contemporary new forms of participatory and interactive archives such as those of Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive), this account investigates the complexities and possibilities of the moment of 'archivisation' of digital images. The goal here is not to celebrate the 'digital turn' for the creation and diffusion of documentary images in India – or, to see the 'digital turn' in a 'positivist' way. Rather, it is to contextualise and historicise the 'digital turn' by placing it in relation to the 'video turn', which occurred in India in the 1980s, and the 'telecommunication turn' (such as the arrival of portable telephones and the first emailing practices), which occurred in the subcontinent in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Through such historical reflections, this article shall finally underline the socio-technological complexities that exist today around the 'digital' in (as well as outside) the subcontinent and the possibilities that more contemporary interactive participatory archives bring to forms of representation and communication between different cultures and societies.

Keywords : *Indian documentary cinema industry, history of technologies and techniques, mobile and online telecommunication, digital archives, state institutions, participatory visual archives.*

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Résumé

Cet article vise à mettre en valeur le potentiel et la limite des technologies numériques dans les industries culturelles indiennes et, plus spécifiquement, dans l'industrie et les pratiques du cinéma documentaire. En mettant l'accent sur la numérisation des images d'archives d'état (de la Films Division de Mumbai et de l'Anthropological Survey of India de Kolkata) vis-à-vis des nouvelles archives participatives et interactives comme celle de Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive), cette étude pose des questions autour des nouveaux enjeux concernant les images numériques « archivées ». L'objectif ici ce n'est pas de mettre en valeur dans une manière « positiviste » le « tournant numérique » dans la création et la diffusion d'images documentaire en Inde. Plutôt, il s'agit de contextualiser et historiciser ce tournant en le mettant en relation avec le « tournant vidéo », déjà vécu en Inde pendant les années 1980, et le tournant des télécommunications (comme le téléphone portable et les premiers e-mails), déjà vécu vers la fin des années 1990-début 2000.

À travers ces réflexions historiques, cet article mettra finalement en valeur les enjeux socio-technologiques autour du numérique au service de la création d'images en Inde, comme ailleurs, et les possibilités que les archives participatives offrent aux formes de représentation et de communication entre plusieurs cultures et sociétés.

Mots-clés : industrie du cinéma documentaire indien, histoire de technologies et techniques de création, télécommunications, archives numériques, institutions d'état, archives visuelles participatives.

When we talk about the Indian subcontinent we can quite confidently state that today we can talk about the existence of a documentary 'cinema' – that is, a self-sufficient cultural industry highly invested in production and circulation of local documentary films. As for many other cultural industries, documentary cinema in India guarantees the production and circulation of its cultural artefacts at a widespread level, independently from its colleague fiction cinema and alternating state circuits with NGO, commercial and independent circuits. Although the question of distribution through recognised media channels (such as television, cinema-halls, and online paid platforms) remains today central for many documentary filmmakers from the subcontinent, from the 1980s until the present day, circulations of films have taken place beyond the centrality of state and commercial distribution outlets (Basu and Banerjee 2018). If on the one hand we can argue that this was due to a technological transformation of the documentary scene – that is, the advent of video technology (see Battaglia 2014); on the other hand, it is important to highlight that the 'mobility' and 'performativity' of documentary film screenings has always been a feature of the documentary cinema in India which strongly contributed to 'alternative' circulations of film and new 'geographies' beyond state and commercial control.

From the invention of the Lumieres' Cinematograph, India has been one of the first places in the world that created its own film-events (see Hughes 2010; Chatterjee 2011, 2012) and produced its own documentary films. As I argue elsewhere, the early existence and circulation of images of art, politics and social relevance 'made in India' should in fact make us question our ingrained Eurocentric 'geography' of the 'History of cinema' (Battaglia 2018). Moreover, they should assist us in re-centralising the contemporary (digital?) technological development of the 'global south' within a much richer history of media, culture and technology and its contribution to the development and transformation of various cultural industries, including the documentary cinema. Because often marginalised in the study and analyses of its siblings cultural industries (cf. Dagnaud and Feigelson 2012), documentary cinema in India becomes quite central to understand the socio-historical transformation of technology and cultural industries of the global south.

What has the digital turn brought to the documentary scene in India? This article will attempt to answer this question based on an already conducted research on the historical development of documentary film practices in India (see Battaglia 2018) combined with more recent fieldwork in state film institutions such as the Films Division and the Anthropological Survey of India and participatory open archives such as Pad.ma. My intent will not be here to analyse new digital platforms of production and distribution of documentary films. Rather, it will be to focus on the moments of transformation between one technology into another, the potential and limitation that this transformation brings along, and how, with the digital turn, the question of the 'archive' and 'archived-images' have increasingly become more central in multiple, often oppositional, image-making practices allowing a 'convergence' of visual practices². Thanks to this 'convergence', I would suggest that the documentary cinema in India has become an even more 'tangible' cultural industry, made not of a single practice but of a myriads of internal variations that concern questions about art, politics and society and hence a valuable field of study from an interdisciplinary perspectives.

2. With 'digital turn' I refer to the moment in which digital technology has taken over video technology in production and circulation of films. The article will not focused on current debates about the digital. Rather it will focus on the complexities of its application on the Indian documentary scene in the contemporary days. This article is a direct continuation of another article published in 2013 called 'The Video Turn' (Battaglia 2013).

I - The celluloid moment: from the cinematograph to 16mm syncro-sound cameras

By and large, there is a tendency to think of the digital turn as a revolutionary moment of the contemporary history. Yet, according to Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2002), when we talk about fast development of new media forms we should also start inquiring into the social history of media investigating the relationship between old and new technology. To them, history is central to understanding the development of technology and social change (see also Silverstone 1999; Poster 1999; Flichy 1999; Livingstone 1999; Briggs and Burke 2002; Shirky 2009; Morozov 2011).

Similarly, there is a tendency to look at the documentary cinema in India as a contemporary phenomenon, which started to develop in the period of the 1980s through one single pioneer of the genre, Anand Patwardhan. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere through a combination of an historical and anthropological research, we can question such belief and discover that the genre of documentary film has developed towards a truthful 'cinema' and hence an 'industry' since the very beginning of the xx century and thanks to multiple visual practices and practitioners. Several 'historical fragments' of Indian colonial history prove this.

In a reconstruction of the life and work of Robert Flaherty,³ for example (one of the pioneers of the 'global' history of documentary film), the anthropologist Jay Ruby (1983) includes a letter from Mrs Flaherty in India to her daughter. In this letter, Mrs Flaherty compares the experience of shooting *Elephant Boy* (1937) in India (*figure 1*), with that of shooting *Man of Aran* (1934) in Ireland, throughout the 1930s, and says:

I wish you could see us here; you who saw us in Aran! How you would open your eyes! It is so different that we hardly know what to do about it-so many people about, doing for us all the things we have usually had to do ourselves-a fleet of cars flying here and there, a lorry as full of people as a Sunday School picnic plying daily from town (two miles) to our 'bungalow'; *thousands of cameras; thousands of racks bristling with tripods; a stills department with two assistants and I don't know how many still cameras*; thousands of carpenters, electricians, tailors, bearers, coolies, sweepers, *mahouts*, animal-trainers, clerks, accountants, interpreters-you would think we were a b-y factory! (Mrs Flaherty in Ruby 1983: 167-168, first *emphasis* added).

3. Along with Robert Flaherty, also Dziga Vertov and John Grierson are considered 'pioneers' of the documentary film genre. To read more about such a linear 'global' history of the documentary, see Jacobs (1979), Barsam (1992), Barnouw (1993), Macdonald and Cousins (1996) and Aufderheide (2007).

Figure 1 - Original Poster of Elephant Boy (1937)

While telling us a story about the today well-known Indian overpopulation and extravaganza, through this excerpt Mrs Flaherty also shares elements of an already existent film industry of the 1930s with several individuals already working for such industry at various levels of involvement. This was a moment when the documentary was yet to be obscured by the fiction

commercial cinema and when it was achieving great success and recognition at a discursive and practice level as well as at a national and international level. Worldwide, the first three-four decades of the twentieth century were indeed for the documentary cinema moments of *both* propaganda and creativity – that is a mix of film for war purposes as well as visual experimentations – following, for the latter, the Griersonian definition of the documentary as a ‘creative treatment of reality’.

Despite the first attempts of developing a documentary cinema during the colonial period,⁴ however, it was with the attainment of the independence that the documentary genre started to play a central role in India⁵ – playing, as for many other ex-colonies from the global south, a central role for the development of the new formed nation (cf. Reeves 1993). Shortly after its 1947 Independence, the first government of India set up a branch of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting specialising in the production and distribution of documentary and short films. In 1948, this branch was called the ‘Films Division’ (henceforth FD). The FD quickly became ‘the single largest producer of documentary films in the world’ and, in India, ‘could claim an average audience strength of eight million viewers every week’ (Roy 2007: 34) thanks to compulsory screenings in cinema halls before the main feature film (cf. also Thapa 1985). While the majority of the FD productions and screenings were instructional films produced by people employed by the government, in different historical periods the FD also collaborated with several state-independent filmmakers, producing different typologies of films and experimenting with all possible technological changes (*photo 1*).

The first significant technological development worth to be mentioned for the development of the documentary cinema in India is the introduction of the 16mm camera with synchronised sound. This technological innovation radically transformed the documentary cinema at a worldwide level. Lighter and portable cameras could now be brought to the streets and follow movements and sounds in a much more dynamic way, cartographing the life of individuals in movement and in different places and spaces. The French ‘*cinéma vérité*’ and the US ‘Direct Cinema’ of the beginning of the 1960s were the result of such technological change.

4. As I discuss elsewhere (Battaglia 2018), there was a pre-wars project in India to create a central cinema department interested in ‘publicity’ (or propaganda) and ‘educational’ (or documentary) films. The ICC Report (an historical document written by a committee appointed by the government of India in September 1927 to examine, and make recommendations about, several matters related to censorship, production and the exhibition of films across the country) proves that the idea to create such a department was already in the air before the outbreak of WWII.

5. To read about classic debates on media and communication in India see Luthra (1986), Chatterji (1987), Singhal and Rogers (1989, 2001), Kishore (1994), Ninan (1995), Johnson (2001) and Das (2005).

Photo 1 - The Films Division

The half-Parsi and half-French Jean Bhowmagary is the person that received merit to have brought these new technologies and approaches to documentary cinema in India (Mohan 1990, Narwekar 1992). In 1955 he joined the FD for the first time for three years as a deputy chief producer on a loan from UNESCO; and in the mid 1960s he returned to the same film institution as a chief producer, strongly influenced by the French *cinéma vérité*. It is at this point that he made significant changes to the ways of making documentary films in India, allowing filmmakers to experiment more with the cinematic form.

I plunged into the task of trying to improve the quality of our productions by encouraging existing and new talents to probe deeper into their subjects, to make structured films instead of enumerations of our treasures and achievements as so often required by non-filmmakers in the Ministry. I wanted each director to find and create his individual style and stamp the film with his own personality (Bhowmagary in Narwekar 1992: 42).

It is thanks to the vibrant atmosphere that Bhowmagary brought to the FD in the mid-1960s that names such as K.S. Chari, S.N.S. Sastry, Pramod Pati, S. Sukhdev, started to acquire value in the Indian context for their new experimentation with the documentary film, bringing their camera to Indian people, recording their lives, emotions, opinions in an much more intimate level and hence contributing to the development of the documentary genre in its content and form. Yet, if 16mm synchronised sound cameras have

revolutionised the way of making documentary film in India, it is thanks to video that circulations of documentary films radically increased and many other film-related side activities began to emerge in multiple places.

II - The video moment

For many the year 1982 signalled the beginning of video technology in India. This was true for both the government and independent individuals. Indira Gandhi's government used the 1982 ASIAD Games in New Delhi as an opportunity to introduce colour and cable television. Because of this she needed to relax the import restrictions on video-cassettes, video recorders and television sets (Pendakur 1989; Raval 1986; Sengupta 1999; Singhal and Rogers 1989, 2001; Kohli 2005). Accordingly television enabled the expansion of video technology across the country. Yet, when video arrived it did not become a technology controlled by the state nor did it reproduce another state agenda and politics (following the already extant government owned and regulated channel Doordarshan). Rather, video technology opened up possibilities for independent individuals to create different media practices, and provided spaces for alternative production and distribution across India. From the beginning, indeed, the video industry was privately owned (Singhal and Rogers 1989).

According to Rele (1985), at the start of the 1980s video technology flooded India with an average of 20,000 Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs) entering the market every month (Singhal and Rogers 1989). The price was a third of what anyone would have asked in India before. People who visited Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai in the 1980s often returned to India with a VCR in their luggage (Rele 1985). In a few years, this new technology flourished in metropolitan India and, according to Pendakur (1989), brands associated with this technology soon became the new status symbol for the middle classes.

Video libraries mushroomed across the country. Their owners rented a VCR for about Rs. 10 a day and, watching a video in public spaces, such as tea stalls or restaurants, or in private air-conditioned intercity buses, soon became a common practice (Singhal and Rogers 1989). Above all, a new kind of showplace emerged and grew rapidly in India. By the end of the 1980s people came to know it as a 'video parlour' or 'video café'. In Pendakur's words, 'an entrepreneur would acquire a 20-inch colour television set and VCR, place it in a hall that could hold 50 to 100 chairs, and show feature films in various languages from 9:00 am until 2:00 the next morning' (1989: 71). The films in these places were mostly pirated copies of domestic or imported feature

films, and the audience was mainly men – for women avoided video parlours because they were not considered respectable places.

Marriage-video filmmaking is one of the most prominent small, and even domestic, media that emerged with the advent of video technology. Sengupta describes both the marriage-video film and the marriage-video filmmaker as ‘familiar presences in intimate contexts and domestic spaces’ (1999: 284). Photography, as a technology to crystallize memorable events and as an element of the social life of Indians, had a long-established history there (Pinney 1997); and marriage-video practices built upon this tradition. In addition to photography, the mobile video image could not only allow access to a depository-memory of past events but also construct new narratives of the same events (Sengupta 1999). Accordingly marriage-video soon became part of the ritual of Indian marriage and watching this video with friends became a new practice amongst the middle classes (*ibid.*).

Similarly, video technology entered the politics of the Hindu right wing, decentralizing their political rhetoric and practices. For the first time ordinary people could also contribute to packaging cultural nationalism. Brosius (1999, 2005) argues that from this moment the gaze of nationalism became the product of the performative space of participation around the audiovisual media.

Other than creating new professions around and about video practices, video technology also broke down an already state-controlled tradition of documentary productions and distributions and gave more possibilities to independent filmmakers to use the medium and create their own industry. In other words, the cheaper production and re-production of videocassettes made it possible, for the documentary cinema, to start existing beyond state control and regulations and fostering an alternative distribution circuit made of venues beyond the classic, controlled, cinema-halls. Thanks to the multiplication of video and television sets all over the country, documentary films could be easily shown in long-distance buses, universities, political gatherings as well as travel with filmmakers with a projector and a screen in hand and reach rural areas. Elsewhere I have called this video phenomenon an ‘expansive realisation’, that is, following Daniel Miller and Dan Slater (2000), a technology that allows individuals to recognize or realize themselves in more concrete terms through a practice (see Battaglia 2014). Yet, to what extent this was true just for video technology? Can we today, in the digital era, re-historicise the relationship between the development of a cultural industry, such as the documentary cinema, and its relationship with technology at large? If yes, is it possible to identify continuity between the video turn of the

1980s with a more contemporary digital turn in the industry of documentary cinema in India?

I have mentioned before that previous to video a flourishing 'field' of documentary practices already existed in the subcontinent and benefitted of others, pre-video, technological changes. Video, indeed, did not develop in a vacuum but was an innovative revolution on an already set-up base of documentary films production and circulation existent in India. Each new technology, Charles Acland (2007) argues, rests on existing media forms and practices and therefore creates 'residual media', these being something familiar coming from previous technology but dragged into the newer media contexts. In this respect, I have elsewhere argued (see Battaglia 2014), video technology also functioned as a 'residual media' for all those filmmakers who were already making films in celluloid in India and found it convenient, *only for* distribution reasons, to move to video. Unlike individuals that found new professions thanks to the arrival of the video industry, pre-video documentary filmmakers did not leave behind their 'celluloid practice'; rather they confined the old technology at a production level by welcoming the new technology at a distribution level (i.e. by converting their films shot in 16mm into video technology to make sure they could circulate widely).

The passage from one technology into another is in fact never immediate and straightforward; it rests on already existent technology and also, I would add, it builds on other side technologies and practices which always accompany and support any sort of transformation. To understand the passage from video technology to digital technology in documentary film practices in India, indeed, I believe we should also give importance to the 'telecommunication' moment, which occurred in India throughout the 1990s and whose impact on the creation of a community of documentary filmmakers and of new 'locations' for the circulation of films, should not be underestimated.

III - The telecommunication moment: mobile and online networks

Landline telephone sets, mobile phones, emails and listservs have been important technologies for the development of the documentary cinema in India. 'Before mobiles, you needed a house to have an address and a landline; otherwise, it would have been difficult to start working as an independent filmmaker', said once Chandita Mukherjee to me⁶.

6. Conversation with Chandita Mukherjee 18/02/09.

According to Sirpa Tenhunen, the introduction of mobile technology in India dates back to 1995 and since then the rate of mobile phone sales has been record-breaking (2008: 515). However, mobile telephony did not develop in India until the very late 1990s and early 2000s (cf. Jeffrey and Doron 2011, 2013), and from this moment it functioned as an important technology in the coordination of filmmakers' activities. As I argue elsewhere (Battaglia 2018), these years were crucial for the creation of a community of documentary filmmakers in India but also for the development of new venues where to screen documentary films and organise film festivals. The 2004 campaign-festival Vikalp - Films for Freedom (henceforth Vikalp) is without doubt the most exemplary case to look at. It emerged thanks to emails and listservs communications (cf. Bel 2005) which strengthened existing social ties while also facilitating the coordination of many activities (cf. Tenhunen 2008; Ling 2008; Jeffrey and Doron 2013), including alternative cultural-political actions coordinated, for the first time, at a national scale, enabling a 'community' of practitioners to come into place (*figure 2*).

Figure 2 - Vikalp

In February 2004 Vikalp mobilised filmmakers from all over the country. For the first time, 250 filmmakers came together to fight the arbitrary introduction of the censor certificate as a mandatory precondition for Indian documentary films entered into the Mumbai international film festival of documentary films (MIFF 2004). In July 2003, eight months prior to Vikalp, an online debate emerged made of emails-digests coordinated by a group of New Delhi film practitioners that by then were already a small 'Delhi-community'. Indeed, if Vikalp as a film festival occurred in March 2004, as a protest, a campaign, or a movement it began in July 2003 – that is, when Delhi filmmakers started to go beyond the perimeter of their own metropolis and thanks to emails and mobile phone communications started to contact filmmakers from all over the nation. It was in fact at this time that the new regulation for MIFF 2004 film entries came out. It asked filmmakers to have a censor certificate for their films if they wanted to submit a film to the festival.

Approximately ninety filmmakers from across the country immediately responded to the early e-messages, or 'digests' – as filmmakers at the time of my 2007-2009 fieldwork called the exchange of emails that occurred between July 2003 and March 2004. In a couple of months, this number tripled.

As the result of decisions taken by filmmakers over email and mobile phones, Vikalp took place in February 2004. With VHS film copies and a minimum contribution of 500 Rupees per film (at that time equivalent to approximately 10 Pounds Sterling) to cover festival expenses, in less than a month independent filmmakers were able to organise a parallel, alternative and 'small media' film festival. Fifty-eight films were screened at Vikalp, covering a wide range of issues including communal politics, caste, gender discrimination and the politics of development – all topics frequently repressed by the censor board. The event ran for a week and, according to what filmmakers wrote in one of the festival booklets, it was 'an unprecedented success' (Films for Freedom Festival Booklet 2004: 4).

Despite the collective energy that emerged in the early 2000s, however, this movement did not last for long. With the exception of Bangalore, Calcutta and Shillong (which soon after Vikalp organised a festival maintaining the same name), Vikalp did not travel further than its initial festival-protest and today its name refers to this particular moment of mobilisation of filmmakers and not to a sustained movement of anti-censorship in India. After the Vikalp experience indeed, MIFF stopped asking for a censor certificate as a prerequisite for submission, and over the time it became more opened to independent documentary practices increasingly including independent filmmakers as part of MIFF selection committee. At the same time, the use of digital technologies gradually widespread in the subcontinent allowing an easier organisation of film screenings and 'small media' festivals in private venues where the government could no longer intervene in disagreement with the subject screened and discussed. In other words, Vikalp functioned as the catalyst for the development of other forms of film screenings and practices across the country and in the history and memory of individuals has remained a stand-alone example of freedom of speech. 'Vikalp should be considered as the first and the last movement of documentary filmmakers in India', says the renowned filmmaker and editor Reena Mohan.⁷ Indeed, to date there has been no other wide-scale mobilisation of filmmakers (cf. also Waugh 2012).

In short, we can say that in a way Vikalp today functions as an historical legacy for contemporary documentary festivals scattered across the country (cf. also Waugh 2012). After Vikalp experience, documentary filmmakers have

7. Conversation with Reena Mohan 30/11/08.

created *new* festival sites across the country in which to engage with politics (cf. also Deprez 2015). Because no longer in opposition to the mainstream distribution outlets, these new sites have more explicitly become ‘small media’ sites (Spitulnik 2002) or ‘activist’ festivals (Iordanova and Torchin 2012) disconnected from state media power and therefore existing and proliferating outside the restrictions of official film festival circuits and state institutions in a complete autonomous way. This proliferation of independent festivals and screening activities has in the most recent years even pushed to a restructuring of the Films Division institution, which has decided to open its doors to such initiatives by transforming its activities, and MIFF itself has been compelled to become a much more open space of exchange between independent and state documentary practices. Moreover, this proliferation of festivals and documentary initiatives has also pushed filmmakers to continue playing with their visual medium and to think of further strategies of art and communication in line with the contemporary trend of ‘digital’ platforms for visual experimentation.

IV - The digital turn?

In order to talk about the digital turn for the documentary film industry in India, it is impossible to disconnect it from the previous technological ‘revolutions’, which have contributed to the development of a practice. If contemporary India is an explosion of small-scale documentary film festivals surely we should thank the digital turn, which with more portable and cheaper technologies has facilitated the proliferation of a practice. Yet, as I have tried to argue so far, the history of the documentary cinema in India is far more complex and articulated than the contemporary digital turn. Thus, to think of such turn as the ‘revolutionary’ moments of the history of this cultural industry would be a misconception. Accordingly, what has the digital turn brought to the documentary scene in India?

By taking in consideration the aforementioned history of ‘multiple technological turns’ that have affected the development of the documentary cinema in India, I find it more useful to reflect about the role that the digital turn in such industry has played in relation to the concept of ‘archive’ and ‘archived-images’ in both independent/visual art contexts and Indian state institutions to which I should now turn my attention.

1 - Digital Archives in State Institutions

The Films Division (FD) is without doubt the film institution that more than any other state institutions has received multiple critiques since the moment of its set up in 1948, just after the attainment of independence. Many have argued how the postcolonial state made use of the FD for its own political propaganda (Roy 2007; Sarkar 2009; Dutta 2002, 2007; Vohra 2011; Jain 2013). Yet, as I argue elsewhere (Battaglia 2018) postcolonial documentary filmmakers were certainly not the 'objects' of nationalist discourse (Vidal 2003a, 2003b), and indeed *contributed to* (rather than became victims of) national discourse on development in India. Moreover, as the technologies have changed for the documentary panorama, a change of the perception of such film institution has also occurred. Let me be more explicit.

While at the time of my 2007-2009 fieldwork in India, filmmakers' perception of the FD was without doubt quite negative – because associated to a replication of colonial institutions/practices into a postcolonial state (cf. Vohra 2011) – by the end of my fieldwork and the writing up of a monograph about documentary films in India (see Battaglia 2018), this perception radically changed. As I have explained in my latest work, this was due to the change of management of the FD, which made the FD more accessible to a larger public and which facilitated the collaboration with individuals working in the field of documentary film but outside the state-institution. Nevertheless, this was also possible thanks to the digital turn and more specifically to what the digital has brought to the FD's films collection.

Digital technology has allowed the re-activation of the FD's film archive. An example of this re-activation occurred through the creation of the 'The FD Zone' – that is, packages of archival films of the FD which started to be screened regularly at the main FD venue in Mumbai but also to travel to different places in India and abroad delineating new geographies for the FD's film archive. The other innovation was the creation of the 'Archival Research Centre' – that is a space set up for observation and research, based in the main old building of the FD in Mumbai, which at the end of my 2014 archival research, contained 3288 films divided into 4 main categories: 53 animation films, 312 biographies, 2203 documentaries, 720 news coverage/reels. In other words, thanks to the digitisation of historical films (some of them even dating the moment of transition between the colonial government and the first independent government) the FD has begun a new life with a new public perception. This re-activation of its film archive has opened-up possibilities for individuals not yet aware of the FD heritage (and for others aware but limited by the previously closed un-digitised archive), to have direct access

to the FD's historical images without any mediation. When this has occurred, new discourses about the institution have also emerged. And indeed, unlike the period of my 2007-2009 fieldwork in India, today independent filmmakers' perception of the FD has radically changed.

Without doubt the activation of a digital archive brings a new life to institutions, new lives to films never been screened before, new possibilities for researchers and filmmakers and yet it creates new problems. For the FD Zone, for example, the questions would be, who curates the packages of films? Whose choice is it? And thus, which part of the FD's archive becomes really accessible and what remains in the shadow? For the digital Archival Research Centre, instead, the questions that I faced while conducting research were: how are archival films categorised and thus presented to a public in a digital database? Who creates the categories? Are the chosen categories, useful categories for enhancing research and knowledge about a film institution? To be more specific, at the time of my research at the FD, in December 2014, each digitised film was compulsorily associated to only one of the four main groups (*photos 2 and 3*).

Photo 2 - Archival Research Centre Database

Photo 3 - Archival Research Centre Category: 'Documentary'

Yet, those labelled as 'documentary' could also be categorised in relation to 76 possible subcategories. Subcategories were exclusive for the 'documentary' category. Hence, if I wanted to search for a length-film, dealing with the subject of, for instance, 'community', yet told from the story of an important man – e.g. Gandhi – and made through the form of animation, the database would have not allowed me to access to all these categorisations. The film, in such fictional case, would have probably been categorised either as 'documentary – community', or as 'animation film', or even 'biography' but not as all of them – as if all these categories could have not coexisted together.

At the time of my research in 2014, the problem of categorisation of digitised archival films was also pertinent for another state institution, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI). This is a Kolkata-based state institution with a significant visual archive which, nevertheless is often underestimated, most likely because is yet to be opened to the public (*photo 4*). From December 1945 the AnSI has acted as a government institution in charge of documenting the multiple cultural practices existing in a vast country like India with many ethnic compositions, linguistic families, religions and cultural practices (Singh 1987, 1992; Bose 1967; Singh and DasGupta 1987). From its inception, the AnSI particularly specialised in representing tribal communities in the subcontinent – that is, studying what the institution calls 'their biological

composition' as well as documenting and disseminating their oral and material practices (Singh 1987, 1992). Interestingly, from the beginning, 'photography was considered an intrinsic part of documentation' (Singh 1987: 28). Indeed, already in 1946 the AnSI set up a 'Photographic Unit' (Das 1967) followed in 1949 by a 'Cine Unit'. The latter was originally run by 'photo-artists' and from 1953 by specialised 'cine-technicians' (Chattopadhyay 1967; Singh 1987). In other words, the activities of the AnSI developed in relation to the concept of image-making – regarded as a central practice to contributing to anthropological research and representation. An artist, a filmmaker and/or a photographer, indeed, always accompanied anthropological 'expeditions' set up by the AnSI. Ironically though, at a practical level, imaging practices undertaken by the AnSI never received their due importance. The government never invested in the AnSI technological equipment because has always perceived it as only a research institution. For a long period the AnSI was not provided with sound cameras and was only able to produce silent films. In addition, the government never employed a team of people for the Cine Unit. Since 1953, a single man, the cine-technician, had to run the whole unit. This person was in charge of filming, editing, writing commentary, subtitling and screening the film (Chattopadhyay 1967, 1987; Sahay 1993). Until very recently, the appointed cine-technician was Susanta Chattopadhyay, a man coming from the feature film industry until he was asked to 'tour (...) all over India to make documentary films of the various tribal communities ... (and) film those unique cultural aspects which are relevant to social anthropology' (Chattopadhyay 1987: 97). The advent of digital technology, however, and more specifically the environment and discourses that have been created around the 'digital possibilities' for archived images, has partially pushed this state institution to revalorise its visual archive and digitise part of the films shot in celluloid.

When I visited the institution, the anthropologist at that time in charge of the visual anthropology section at the AnSI made me discover this digitised patrimony. Yet, when I went through the films and compared what I watched with what I read in the documents that I discovered through archival research (cf. Battaglia 2019), I immediately found a discrepancy. That is, I found out that in the process of digitisation, some of the original films were modified with footage took in a more recent period. And yet, the name of the film, the author and the date of the film remained the same. In other words, I found myself in front of a 'false' visual document. Rather than been presented as a new visual document, made of old and new footage, the film was not re-categorised as presented as its original – creating a good deal of misunderstanding about the original archival piece.

Photo 4 - Susanta Chattopadhyay

In short, we can say that the digital turn in state institutions has on the one hand created possibilities to open their archives, which in the pre-digital moments have remained closed due to technological limitations and institutional constraints. On the other hand, the digitisation process has also opened up another series of often underestimated and yet to be analysed complexities, including that of ‘categorisation’, ‘organisation’ and thus ‘presentation’ of archival data. What has instead the digital brought to independent visual archival practices in the subcontinent?

Photo 5 - The AnSI

2 - Participatory Visual Archives

So far we can say that the digital turn has contributed in India with the development of a mushroomed phenomenon of small-scale independent documentary festivals and the opening, and hence re-activation, of state visual archives. By doing this, the digital turn has changed the geographical scenario of documentary film practices no longer circumscribed to specific, often state-controlled, places. As it occurred with the advent of video technology, we can then say that the digital turn has become another form of the ‘expansive realisation’ (Miller and Slater 2000) of a widespread practice. In this respect, we should emphasise again that the digital turn should not be analysed in isolation from other technological moment of the documentary film industry. Indeed, the changing documentary scene of the contemporary digital era developed thanks to an organic historical evolution of documentary practices, which by and large has always modified themselves in relation to different technological turns in different historical moments.

In this respect, if I had to identify a specificity of the digital turn for independent film practices, I would surely say that it has created new possibilities of experimentation and collaboration between *different* visual practices starting to change the landscape of cultural and creative industries in contemporary India. The Raqs Media Collective, an artist group associated

with the Sarai research centre in New Delhi, is probably the most well known name at a national and international level in the field of digital imaging practices that has moved toward this direction. The people involved in the collective started as documentary filmmakers in the mid-1990s and have gradually moved away from it, experimenting more with digital technology and art spaces. Nevertheless, they have continued to maintain close contact with documentary filmmakers in India, often providing them with new platforms for art and film exhibitions (cf. Battaglia and Favero 2014).

Raqs Media Collective is not alone in this activity. As I pointed out elsewhere (Battaglia 2014, 2018, 2019), other independent individuals, including Nilanjan Bhattacharya (a Kolkata-based filmmaker), Venkatnarayanan Soudhamini (a Chennai-based filmmaker), Rajula Shah (a Pune-based filmmaker), Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar (a Mumbai-based filmmakers and academic couple) and groups of artists such as CAMP (a Mumbai-based group), have also been following this direction. Stand-alone filmmaker and visual artist, Amar Kanwar, has arguably been the first single individual in India who has acquired tremendous popularity at a national and international level with the advent of digital technology and transforming his documentary work into art installations. Since the late 1990s, he has been screening his films to an international audience varying from art installations to classic documentary films yet visualised with multi-linear narratives.

The work of Kanwar along with Bhattacharya, Shah, Soudhamini, Monteiro and Jayasankar and the Raqs media collective (to mention a few), are examples of the way in which imaging practices in India have travelled from traditional documentary film forms to more experimental, digital, multi-linear practices within and outside film genres and thus combining different approaches. Within this scenario, what in the past ten years has perhaps been the most cutting-edge imaging experimentation in the Indian context is the combination of new digital visual experimentations with internet technology towards the creation of 'participatory digital imaging archives', as new 'dispositives' (cf. Agamben 2007; Jeanneret 2005; Fourmentraux 2010) of communication for multi-linear digital images of political, social and cultural value (Fourmentraux 2016 ; Bellour 2012 ; Caillet 2014). These new online platforms have enabled visual images not only to play with multiple new forms but also to travel far and wide and hence beyond more classic geographical boundaries dictated by physical places (i.e. cities and villages), or events (such as film festivals), or preconceived spaces (such as exhibitions).

The Public Access Digital Media Archive, better known as 'Pad.ma' (see PAD.MA), is in my opinion the most exemplary platforms for participatory visual practices, which follows these new directions. Created in 2007 by five

organisations (CAMP from Mumbai, Oil21 from Berlin, Majlis Culture from Mumbai, the Alternative Law Forum from Bangalore and Point of View from Mumbai), Pad.ma is a creative archive that through technological innovation combines research with visual art experimentation (*photo 6*).

Photo 6 - Pad.ma

Photo 7 - Ayisha Abraham's Padma project

The core idea developed by the initiators of Pad.ma is that the conventional use of video-making in India needs to be challenged through an open online digital, interactive and annotated platform which works as an archive of hard-to-access footage (such as unfinished films, found films, digitised films, outdated films and so forth). As such, Pad.ma aims to work as a sort of 'atlas' in Any Warburg's sense of unfinished map creation (cf. Forster 1976) or precisely what Agamben (2007) calls 'dispositive', understood as an articulation of possibilities that makes different practices, in this case, different visual practices, and approaches to dialogue with one another stimulating interactivity and exchange. Pad.ma offers a platform for documentary visual artists to go beyond conventional understanding of filmmaking practices and fellowships to younger generations of artists, researchers and activists interested in making engaged audio-visual work through multi-modal forms of representations and innovative technological experimentation. In other words, Pad.ma welcomes the (inter)active participation of researchers, filmmakers, artists and activists based in India towards the creation of novel ways to shape public debates on art, society, culture and politics.

As recently explained by Fourmentraux (2016), thanks to interactive digital images, we can today start understanding images as 'mixed formations' made of humans and techniques where the latter creates a structure of immediate feed-back with the public and hence becomes directly « *en puissance* » - that is, something that dialogues with the public in an immediate way. Interactive digital imaging archives, such as Pad.ma, hence 'act', 'do' things and by so doing they made others to 'do things' – stimulating new processes of communication, exchange, politics and interconnections.

The digital archive of Pad.ma should be considered for the Indian context as an example of a combination of digital technology with the telecommunication technology, such as the internet, to transform existing visual documentary practices into an image-making industry that can cross boundaries between local and global, and can be shared, modified and discussed without falling into the problematic of fixed 'categorisations' as it occurs for state institutions. As for any other innovations though, digital archives, such as Pad.ma, also push us towards a new set of questions which I would like to address here in closing and which I believe ought to be explored in further research.

If these new forms of participatory visual archives are crossing the boundaries between visual practices and between the global and the local, to what extent are they challenging classic Euro/American-centric paradigms of technological development and practices? Are these new platforms becoming models for the global south to re-center academic debates and open up more possibility of exchange? If these platforms function as creative spaces of

encounters for both artists and academics, do digital archives also generate novel ways of temporal and spatial encounters between art and research? And finally, with the re-activation of state visual archives, to what extent we can imagine participatory digital archive to begin new forms of 'interactions' with state archives in the global south? More research is without doubt needed to answer these questions.

Conclusion

With this article I wanted to reflect on the potential and limitation of innovative technologies, such as digital technology, on existing cultural industries, such as the documentary cinema, in a global south context, such as India. As I have tried to show, on the one hand the digital turn should not be considered a revolutionary moment for the development film industry because part of a much longer historical development of a practice – which in order to become a veritable industry has benefitted of many other technological turns. On the other hand, we can still find some 'specificities' of the digital turn and surely the one concerning the 'archive' and the digital impact on exiting archives, and the creative possibilities that the digital has brought to independent visual practices. Understood as a '*dispositif*' of presentation but also collaboration, sharing and participation of visual representations of a nation and its cultural heritage, the 'archive' and even more the 'participatory digital archive' is becoming the new space for creation and academic thinking as well as the novel way for seriously integrating the global south into more international debates concerning, art, technology, communication and innovation.

Participatory digital archives offer modes of mediated (inter)actions of the contemporary time that foster novel forms of representation and communication between cultures and societies at a national and transnational level. For the Indian subcontinent, they offer new possibilities for media intellectuals, activists and visual artists to travel across disciplinary boundaries and to open up their practice to all the possibilities that modern technologies offer. In doing this, they offer new possibilities for collaborations and cross-fertilisation between disciplines and practices. They should start, in my opinion, becoming models for re-innovation of interdisciplinary research that, in turn, may also challenge Euro/American-centric disciplinary modes of analyses – no longer solely adequate for the analyses of cultural-technological transformations of places, spaces, cultural industries and art and media practices.

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