Research Article

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New Screen Economies and Viewing Paradigms: The Ethics of Representation in *Delhi Crime*

Abstract: The new technologies of television viewership following the digital turn have introduced new anxieties and possibilities. While new screen cultures facilitate a transnational viewership, the importance of ethically and morally grounded representations cannot be overstated. In this context, *Delhi Crime*, the Emmy award-winning Indian series based on the Delhi gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi, will be instrumental in informing the ethico-political concerns that ought to be prioritized while representing the subaltern subject and the novel socialites fashioned through the new viewership patterns. This article attempts to understand the way in which the emerging screen economies provide new terrains for ethical representation and engendering digital publics. Thus, this article is interested in understanding the intersection of media ecologies and ethico-political concerns to introduce new dialectical possibilities.

Keywords: ethics, screen economies, transnational, subaltern, digital publics

The active presence of the media as a safety valve that calls attention to the omissions and commissions of the governing bodies is a necessary constituent of any democratic society.[1] While the significance of newspapers underwent sizeable shifts with the print revolution and Indian independence, its role in ensuring the freedom and unity of the country remained largely consistent throughout the years.[2] Similarly, the introduction of television in India in the year 1959 also served to ensure "community development and formal education."[3] Thus, media histories in India have always been intimately grounded in the struggle for forging a common ground in defining national identity. Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to reduce the historiographies of media evolution in India to its social function as a "watchdog of democracy,"[4] as it also gives critical insight into the technological and economic shifts that alter the modern Indian publics. In this context, the changing modes of viewership hint at the techno-social shifts, and the new discursive terrains initiated by these screen cultures.

This article argues that the virtual socialites inaugurated by the new technologies of media distribution renew the scope and relevance of ethically bound representations. The virtual socialites introduced by the new screen economies refer to a transnational viewing public and to the modern digital publics that cohere around shared ethico-moral concerns. With this aim in mind, the article will study *Delhi Crime* (2019), the

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1 Lichenberg, *Democracy and the Mass Media,* 3.
2 Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution*, 8.
3 Kumar, *Mass Communication in India*, 296.
4 Saeed, "Negotiating Power," 466.

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Emmy-winning Indian series based on the Nirbhaya gang rape and murder in 2012, in order to understand the way in which the series attempts to critique gender violence through its tone of moral panic. The series depicts the events following the gruesome rape. It sheds light on the diligent investigation headed by DCP Vartika Chaturvedi, the emotional investment of the officers in nabbing the culprits, the hurdles that the investigation team had to encounter in the process while also allowing glimpses into the personal life and aspirations of the officers involved in the investigation.

The choice of *Delhi Crime*[5] is informed by the possibilities that this selection would allow in teasing out multiple facets to the questions pertaining to the ethics of representation. With this aim in mind, the present article tries to situate television series, especially *Delhi Crime*, in an ethico-aesthetic paradigm in order to understand the ethical limits and excesses of television series. Here, the article does not assume that *Delhi Crime* adheres to all the ethico-political codes. Nor does this article assume that ethics alone could be the intention of any television representation. On the other hand, the article only tries to understand the ethical implications in narrating stories and molding audiences. By studying the way in which the selected series represented the actual events following the rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi, the article intends to shed light on the way in which media represents various socio-political events, constitutes a more informed class of citizens and questions the miscarriage of justice. The article will be divided into two sections. The first section tries to understand the relevance of ethical representation of the subaltern subject in television series by situating it within a transnational framework. The second section attempts to identify the ways in which *Delhi Crime* engenders new affective socialites and mediates the politico-discursive terrains for social change.

The massive influence of television in mediating the social, economic and political conditions in India has long been an area of serious study.[6] The evolution of television from a state-sponsored infotainment paradigm aimed at national development to an entertainment-oriented paradigm following the neo-liberal turn in India, and its subsequent co-existence with portable digital media platforms, hints at the way in which screen cultures, and viewing practices are contingent on various social, cultural, economic and political circumstances. While television is a domesticated medium, as it controls the viewing practices within the domestic space,[7] the changing screen cultures initiated by the digital turn and the proliferation of online platforms for the dissemination and consumption of media content, suggest the shifting spatial reconfiguration by these new technologies of viewing. In this context, it becomes imperative to think about the processes through which viewing spaces simultaneously straddle between the private and public territories through techno-mediated screen economies. Here, I employ the term screen economies to refer to the competing visual cultures and its embeddedness within larger political economies that determine the production, circulation and consumption of images/representations on the screen. In the following section, the article discusses the ways in which *Delhi Crime* navigates the transnational spaces of spectatorship by cautiously maintaining the ethical and aesthetic balance in the representation, and the modern publics that it mobilizes through new modalities of viewing.

1 *Delhi Crime* and transnational viewership

The new technologies of media distribution, such as digital streaming services, have given more visibility to hitherto unrepresented concerns and enabled greater accessibility to a global audience, albeit from an affluent socio-economic order. As a result, these paradigm shifts in television cultures and media ecologies that "privatized mobility,"[8] by inaugurating itinerant viewing cultures, cannot be extricated from culturally sensitive and socially grounded representations. The proliferation of digital media platforms and the

5 Mehta, *Delhi Crime*.
6 Jeffrey, *Media and Modernity*, 227.
7 Chakravarti, "State, Market and Freedom of Expression," 13.
8 Morley, *Media, Modernity and Technology*, 199.

staggering amount of entertainment programmes made available to the viewers also opens new counter-hegemonic possibilities in that it clears space for relatively new players who do not enjoy the support of big production houses.[9] This would also clear new terrains for experimenting with emergent screen cultures. As a result, the Indian digital mediascapes witnessed many interesting and female-centric television series such as, *She* streamed on Netflix, *Four More Shots Please* on Amazon Prime, *Leila* streamed on Netflix, etc., that might not have thrived in the commercial spaces of Bollywood. This is alluded by the comments to the YouTube videos of *Delhi Crime*, where viewers have praised Netflix for daring to provide a platform for a series on a sensitive yet important issue while the Indian Film Industries were apprehensive about it.[10] Moreover, the new genre not only allows new liberties with the themes but it also provides new screen spaces for relatively new actors to establish their prowess. Since the OTT streaming service is more cost-efficient than cable networks, digital media platforms have gained prominence in Indian households.[11] The paradigm shift in viewing patterns was also accentuated by the presence of Hotstar, which is a local streaming service in India, as it allows access to some television soap operas as well. The wide range of programmes available for viewing on streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, Hotstar, Sony Liv, etc., has the added advantage that it is readily accessible for a larger substrate of audience, including the diasporic Indian population. Moreover, this digital turn is also facilitated by the advanced digital infrastructure which provides affordable internet services and smartphones.[12] Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that this has inevitably led to the decentring of screen cultures in a way that would allow the coexistence of local media outlets on equal terms with the streaming giants. The subsuming of local players through digital streaming and viewing technologies also entails the translation of geo-political structures of power into the visual realms, to generate new "scopic regimes."[13] The interweaving of spatial and visual regimes has had a palpable effect in the visibility enjoyed by *Delhi Crime* as the series was released by Netflix a day before its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019.[14] Moreover, the series' transition from "an indie to an International Emmy winner,"[15] and the reception it received cannot be completely extricated from the role of a digital streaming platform like Netflix. Embedding the local within global scopic regimes and the ensuing anxiety regarding an unsorted audience, whose interpretative freedom could be exercised to unquestioningly absorb reductionist representations, has intermittently animated the discussions surrounding the reception of visual depictions (this will be discussed later through the examples of Bandit Queen and Slumdog Millionaire). In this context, it becomes significant to dwell not only on the ethical substrate that qualifies the relation between the representation and the audience, but also the ethical implications underlying the representation and the subject being represented.

While it remains that the intended viewer has to waddle through various socio-economic hegemonies to access the television series streamed via online streaming services, it cannot be overlooked that these television series have opened dialectic possibilities, not only within the virtual socialites constituted by them, but also between the viewer and the institutionalized structures of power. By basing the premise of *Delhi Crime* on an actual incident that shook the conscience of the national and international public, this television series is situated within the intimate intersection of politics and media ecologies. Consequently, this series has to navigate the difficult terrain of articulating the collective angst and moral panic that India and various civil bodies felt at that moment, without overlooking or rationalizing the structural inequalities that perpetuate gender violence.

The critical debates and the antipathies around the visual representation of life in the third world can be loosely pinned down to the question of who has the "right" to depict and the aesthetic priorities of this

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9 Cunningham and Silver, "On-line Film Distribution."
10 Comments section of *Delhi Crime* trailer; see https://youtu.be/jNuKwLKJx2E.
11 Reshma and Chaithra, "Proliferation of OTT Apps in India," 1.
12 Fitzgerald, "Over-the-Top Video in India," 96.
13 Grayson and Mawdsley, "Scopic Regimes and the Visual Turn in International Relations," 2.
14 Andreeva, "Netflix Picks Up Indian Drama Series…."
15 Ghosh, "What's Next for 'Delhi Crime'…."

depiction. Here, the right to depict third world life ought to be distinguished from the agency to depict just as the aesthetic excess is suspiciously viewed within an ethical chassis. In this context, the vicarious representation of the third world experience draws in concerns of authenticity, especially when there is an unsorted and transnational audience at the receiving end. Moreover, the concern over the ethics of representation becomes more pronounced in the present study as this section tries to understand the two possible, and interrelated, dimensions to the ethical dilemma; the anxiety of commodification and the depiction of suffering/violence. *Delhi Crime*, based on the gut-wrenching rape that occurred in the capital city of India, would serve as an interesting locus to place this present study as it would inform the moral and ethical pedestal that ought to be kept intact while translating violence-ridden sensitive reality, without melodramatically sensationalizing or naturalizing it, into a visual medium that reaches a global audience.

James Dawes, while discussing the intricacies of articulating inconceivable atrocities asks the question: "… what are the ethical risks and obligations in doing so?"[16] This question accumulates greater depth when trying to address the issue of the subaltern subject. Since the representation of the subaltern subject is a terrain fraught with the conflict between power and resistance,[17] it becomes imperative to ensure that any portrayal, visual or verbal, of the subaltern does not dwindle into a subject of power or object of power as such reductions might overlook the negotiations between these extremes. The task of giving such a balanced representation becomes more pronounced, in the Indian and global context, while discussing issues of gender discrimination as the discourses pertaining to gender violence get played out around the binary of the victim and the perpetrator. It is in such a context, when vital deliberations on the shared blame of a complacent civil society do not get articulated that the role of a television series such as *Delhi Crime* becomes significant in engendering an informed global public. While it cannot be assumed that the antithesis of ethical representation is stereotypical or reductionist representation, it becomes impossible to gloss over two instances where the homogenizing sweep implies through the stereotypically coloured representation of the postcolonial subaltern invites ire from some quarters of the viewing public. The dichotomy between gratifying a global audience and being faithful to the subject/context being represented becomes conspicuous in Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* and Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. As these visual depictions intercede, mediate and fashion public perceptions about the subaltern and his/her/their country, the risk of unethical representations that seek to reproduce transnational spatial hegemonies into the visual realm, by fetishizing and exoticizing the "other,"[18] ought to be evaded. The reduction of Phoolan Devi into an object of commercial exploitation in *Bandit Queen*,[19] and the melodramatic and often generalized violence in *Slumdog Millionaire*,[20] illustrates the techniques through which violence is essentialized and naturalized as the archetype of third world life.

By reducing the subaltern subject into a spectacle through the aestheticization of suffering and violence, these films tend to foreclose the polyphonic possibilities of the socio-cultural canvas by instead depicting violence and atrocity as already embedded within the moral landscape of the place. Such stereotypical conflation of acts/incidents with the socio-cultural fabric of a place, the reduction of subjective pluralities into a single-faceted exposition of a particular performative trait, and the obliteration of the subject's resistance and negotiations is an act of "epistemic violence."[21] The ethico-political commitment of *Delhi Crime* becomes evident through its refusal to construct a "spectacle of violence," by overtly sensationalizing the rape or by attempting to reproduce it on screen and normalizing it as ingrained within the moral landscape of the place, to create voyeuristic publics who are simultaneously fascinated and moved by the depiction of extreme violence.[22] *Delhi Crime* depicts the aftermath of the rape, the committed investigation that ensued, the mindscapes of the city that witnessed the incident, and the protest that

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16 Dawes, *That the World May Know*, 1.

17 Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," 39.

18 Huggan, The Post-Colonial Exotic, 14.

19 Fernandes, "Reading 'India's Bandit Queen'," 128.

20 Mellet, "Slumdog Millionaire's Aesthetic Controversy," 176.

21 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," 280.

22 Evans and Giroux, *Disposable Futures*, 19–20.

suggests the general shock with which the news was received. On the other hand, the series does not portray the act of rape, or provide an uncritical resolution of the issue through the investigation but instead urges viewers to contemplate the discursive limits of legal redress by addressing gendered violence as a systemic and pervasive crime, and not something that is embedded within the socio-cultural cartographies of the "not-so-civilized" postcolony.

The delineation of the structural inequalities that has naturalized and normalized certain acts/forms of discrimination might exceed the scope of a three-hour long film that can only aspire to make some peripheral commentaries. It is in such a context that television series gain relevance and importance. The series format allows considerable space to deal with the thought structures that have sedimented through the ages and the multiple manifestations of these thought structures. As a result, the format of the series allows a more ethical and extensive engagement with the topics that are of social relevance. Given this advantage, it is interesting to look at the way *Delhi Crime* tries to tackle gender violence by consciously abstaining from "cosmopolitan spectacularization."[23] In order to evince multiple manifestations of the structural conditions that perpetrate gender inequality and gendered violence, the series portrays the humiliation of the Police Inspector Bhupendra Singh as he negotiates the demeaning and elitist terms of the marriage market for his daughter, the helplessness of the young IPS Trainee Neeti Singh, as her family decides to sell off a television set to arrange for dowry, and the agonizing rage and insecurity of the young girl Chandini, as she expresses her desire to pursue higher education abroad as the city could not offer her the freedom that she deserves. These subtle hints about the gendered matrices around which the society is structured sheds light on the unstipulated gender mores ensconced within the social fabric of the society. Similarly, the series briefly touches upon the socio-economic background of the culprits and how it could have possibly constituted the brutality that they perpetrated.[24] As the seven episodes of the series offer considerable space and freedom to attempt a more generous engagement with the issue at hand, the series could afford to avoid relapsing into a linear causative trajectory that culminated in the fatal incident. While the predecessors of the series like *India's Daughter* (2015), a documentary on the incident by Leslee Udwin, and *Anatomy of Violence* (2016), a fictionalized dramatization of the incident by Deepa Mehta, have tried to capture the horror of the incident, *Delhi Crime* attempted to provide a more holistic representation that critiques the historically situated imbrications of gender and power.

Even though *Delhi Crime* is not the first attempt at narrativizing the Nirbhaya rape incident, the ethical stronghold of the series could also be attributed to the perspective that it chooses to espouse. While the series has attracted considerable censure for its predominantly uncritical portrayal of the Delhi Police, often accusing it of exhibiting institutionalized perspectives in adulating the police while obliterating their failure in preventing the crime in the first place,[25] the series' attempts to unfold its narrative through the investigation headed by DCP Varthika Chaturvedi, a character based on Chhaya Sharma, has a socially sensitive relevance that counterbalances the narrative of women's disempowerment. While critics have already spoken about the way in which the female detective in television series serves as a familiar trope that ensures "transnational legibility,"[26] the character of DCP Vartika Chaturvedi cannot be easily pegged down to a narrative ploy that ensures greater resonance and reception across an international audience as it also undermines the stereotype of the non-agential subaltern woman. This choice of the narrative surrounding rape that seeks to disrupt the generalizing assumptions about the moral cartographies of India also serves to inaugurate the new idiom – "the brown woman's burden." Recounting the event from a perspective that simultaneously critiques the rape while introducing counterhegemonic possibilities of resistance and empowerment through a female lead character, who easily challenges the familiar trope of masculine rationality, suggests the ways in which the ethico-political foundation of the series subverts

23 Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 16.
24 Ramnath, "'Delhi Crime' Review."
25 Naahar, "Delhi Crime Review."
26 Coulthard et al., "Broken Bodies/Inquiring Minds," 4.

the familiar stereotype of the hapless subaltern woman subject that could be easily validated and reiterated in the context of gender violence in the postcolony.

The ethical preoccupation of the series lies primarily in its ability to represent ulterior subjectivities and pose rhetorical questions, extending it beyond the limits afforded by the series. The disillusionment of Neeti Singh even when all the culprits are caught, points towards a larger human rights discourse that is at the heart of the series. By remaining committed to the ethical and moral concerns that initiated the series in the first place, the ethical terrain that it straddles ranges from subaltern ethics to narrative ethics. Thus, *Delhi Crime* does not temper the intensity of the crime by its refusal to engage with the aesthetics of violence. Instead, the series attempts to give some foreword into the intersection of multiple power structures and its varying combinations that constitute the subaltern subject. As a result, *Delhi Crime* insists on the need for an ethical spectrum that goes beyond the immediate and the evident by deliberately withholding a narrative closure that assumes justice is served when the culprits are penalized. By opening up a larger question about the limits of law and rightness, the series hints at a larger quandary – the ethics of the ordinary, where being right and wrong are not isolated facts, but an aggregate of structural and existential concerns that are revealed through constant slippages and breaches.[27]

2 *Delhi Crime* and digital publics

Following the Nirbhaya gang rape, Delhi gathered international attention owing to the public protests that occurred in various parts of the Union Territory. The series provides new terrains where anxious performance of dissent is staged and reprised. The vehement assertion of citizen rights, following the incident in Delhi, where collective social anxiety is displaced from the private domains to shared public spaces is replicated through associated media platforms as well. Thus, the "transmedia" format of the television series multiplies the possible sites where public opinion and discontent could be raised through "a range of media extensions."[28] Short YouTube videos, various sharing sites and online reviews are among the many avenues through which public sentiments around the incident can be assessed. As a result, the interactive circuits provided by new screen economies extend the scope and relevance of participatory democracy. Moreover, these digital media networks not only provide alternate terrains where rational critical debates could be organized and staged but also offer a site where the actions in the public sphere are shared, viewed and reviewed.

In the case of *Delhi Crime*, the modern publics constituted by the series are of two kinds – the concerned and protesting publics represented in the series, and the dispersed and virtual publics who cast their opinion through online forums like YouTube where snippets of the series are shared. Thus, on the one hand, the series represents a deliberative democracy, not only through the protesting citizen-subjects who decry the gendered and exclusionary sociality of the public sphere but also through the media, NGOs and other concerned actors who attempt to ensure transparency in civil bodies. On the other hand, it also facilitates teledemocracy as the explosion of digital media platforms and the easy access it enables, at least to some sections of the population, have constituted new virtual socialites. The modern publics constituted and represented by *Delhi Crime* suggest the way in which the digital turn facilitates the interweaving of ethical, political and legal concerns. While the public protests sparked by the Nirbhaya gang rape expressed shock and sought immediate legal redressal, the virtual publics who comment on the YouTube videos also express similar concerns. Here, the series also serves to mediate public opinion and political discourses pertaining to the Nirbhaya rape by providing not only a shared avenue where the citizen-subjects could express their social anxiety but by also acting as an enduring reminder of the violation around which public opinion would coalesce. However, it is interesting to note that these modern

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27 Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics*, 2.
28 Jenkins, "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," 34.

publics, formed directly and indirectly by the series, are the offshoot of a crisis sociality as they came into being to protest against the grave violation of the elementary rules of a healthy society. Hence, it becomes possible to argue that these publics are constituted through "affective and moral economies."[29]

While the series represents the protesters as a possible hindrance to the police investigation, it cannot be negated that the protesting public in the series stand in for the viewers as well. The angry mobs that throng the public spaces also represent the civic duties and the shared responsibility of the citizens in a healthy democracy. The "communal visceral responses,"[30] of this affectively angry mob, are constituted not only by their shared sociality but also by their civic and moral responsibilities. This public performance of resistance and collective mourning suggests the politico-ethical struggle of the masses to interrogate the lapses of the law-enforcing authorities in a poly-centric society. Similarly, the new viewing cultures inaugurated through the new screen economies are instrumental in constituting affectively reconfigured "networked publics" formed at the "intersection of people, technology and practice."[31] On perusing the comments section below the YouTube videos of the series, one would come across comments that suggest the visceral responses to the unpalatable details in the narrative.[32] Thus, the mob represented in the series and the virtual publics that cohered around the series suggests the politico-ethical duty of the citizen-subjects and the moral panic that ensue grave violation of civil rights. As a result, the crisis socialites, both the actual represented and the virtual, hint at the curious commingling of heterogeneous publics and common affective impulses to form new socialites bolstered on certain moral and ethical concerns.

3 Conclusion

With globalization and the digital revolution, there has been considerable anxiety whether the media has entered a post-responsibility age.[33] Though this article does not have the theoretical rigor to claim that media will not disentangle itself from social and ethical responsibility, it suggests that the techno-social shifts and new screen economies have inaugurated new terrains and possibilities for articulating socio-cultural concerns. As the digital turn has reconfigured the viewing patterns and viewing publics, the reach of the new media forms has also shown sizeable changes. In this context, it becomes imperative for television series, which enjoy a transnational audience, to ensure that it adheres to ethical standards to ensure fair representation and to bring hitherto ignored concerns for wider deliberations. As the example of *Delhi Crime* suggests, television series have the potential to mediate public opinion and engender affective publics, both of which could be used to reinstate fundamental human rights.

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29 Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 30.
30 Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 119.
31 Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 19.
32 Comments section of *Delhi Crime* trailer; see https://youtu.be/jNuKwLKJx2E.
33 Stepp, "Access in a Post-social Responsibility Age," 192–3.

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