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Beauty and truth. The aesthetic practice of news and the media prosumer

Belleza y verdad. La práctica estética de las noticias y el prosumidor de medios

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Abstract

The rationality of modern aesthetics is not limited to art but extends to news. However, an ideological approach to news aesthetics remains, at best, unfulfilled. By applying a global South approach, this paper offers an alternative understanding of how television platforms employ aesthetic value. It first offers an ideological description of news aesthetics—that is, the conversion of an incident into a media event by the creation of popular appeal, and its mythification in society. By situating the media prosumer in this ecosystem, it exposes the bond between presented beauty and absented truth, arguing that this conflicted relationship marks the essence of news aesthetics. This theory-building paper explores the relationship between aesthetics and the production of news. Based on this premise, four features of news aesthetics are propounded. Using a case study, it illustrates how these features operate in tandem to suture a media prosumer's truth that may be quite different from reality.

Keywords: media aesthetics, presentation and absentation in media, invisibilization, ideological process of television news, media prosumerism, aesthetic features of news.

Resumen

La racionalidad de la estética moderna no se limita al arte, sino que se extiende a las noticias. Sin embargo, un enfoque ideológico de la estética informativa sigue siendo, en el mejor de los casos, algo inconcluso. Al aplicar una perspectiva del Sur global, este artículo ofrece una comprensión alternativa de cómo las plataformas televisivas emplean el valor estético. En primer lugar, presenta una descripción ideológica de la estética de las noticias, es decir, la conversión de un incidente en un evento mediático mediante la creación de un atractivo popular y su mitificación en la sociedad. Al situar al prosumidor de medios dentro de este ecosistema, expone el vínculo entre la belleza que se presenta y la verdad que se omite, argumentando que esta relación conflictiva marca la esencia de la estética informativa. Este artículo teórico explora la relación entre la estética y la producción de noticias. A partir de esta premisa, se proponen cuatro características de la estética informativa. Mediante un estudio de caso, se ilustra cómo estas características operan en conjunto para suturar una "verdad" del prosumidor de medios que puede ser bastante diferente de la realidad.

Palabras clave: estética de los medios, presentación y alejamiento en los medios, invisibilización, proceso ideológico de las noticias televisivas, prosumidor de medios, características estéticas de las noticias.

Summary

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1. Introduction

The ideological production and effects of modern aesthetics are not limited to art but extend to mediated information. Scholarship on aesthetics has immersed itself in the formats of art, and the scope to discover their application to the presentation of life—that is, its mediated offering via news platforms—becomes a fertile ground for exploration. However, in the pursuit of its ideological underpinnings, we may view a news platform as a lighting director on a film set, selectively presenting to us our world of realities and stitching together those disparate stories into what appears to be a comprehensive and connected overview. In essence, we will evaluate what constitutes narrative suture in news—*all ye need to know,* as the poet John Keats, referring to the perceived equivalence of beauty and truth, pointed out in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

This article draws the ideological linkages that exist between aesthetics and the production of television news in the age of the media prosumer and outline four features of media aesthetics. In this frame, routinization, invisibilization, and mythification are interlinked, and the ensuing absence is linked to the trusted news production processes. The position taken here is that the media prosumer might negotiate and dwell in a liminal space that is somewhat illogical, as the prosumer must at once disrupt narrated reality and maintain its continuous flow. If a community is the focus of a news story, the community and the media prosumer may be seen as the object and the subject. Clearly, the community may also be co-opted as the prosumer. However, a marginalized community must negotiate its experiential existence if it is usually invisible, absented, and hence unappreciated by the prosumer. It is affected by this unavailability but neither may realize it. A conflict between subjecthood and objecthood ensues as one prosumer gazes at another they cannot *recognize*. While the prosumer's understanding is disrupted by new knowledge, the prosumer also contributes to continuity by narrating a story forward. A conflict arises when the media draw the prosumer's attention *away* from stories of the continuous conditions of a marginalized community by presenting a different story that seems desirable. Thus, as mediated narration *presents* our realities, it also renders absentation and replacement, bundled in a package of apparent completeness. Such is the paradox of our media literacy.

A brief justification of this paper's approach. It takes a theory-driven approach to news aesthetics while illustrating the arguments with an analytical study. This approach is warranted because of what it offers—an explanation of how aesthetics create an ideological veneer of visibility in which media prosumers dwell. This, the paper argues, is not media literacy. A probe into the workings of aesthetics reveals how aesthetics should be seen as an underpinning factor of not merely the knowledge, but the ignorance, of the media prosumer. Hence, this approach unpacks, foundationally, how this ideological process is wrapped inside the performance of truth-telling. The paper navigates foundational concepts of aesthetics in order to arrive at this argument, introduces media prosumerism as a confluence of the routinized myth-making that is the outcome of the practices and production of news. However, this paper does not purport to be complete in any way; rather, it hopes to be a point of take-off and departure for empirical studies involving critique of the aesthetics of news that are embedded into its processes. This formulation ends with a brief analysis of a contemporary application of this news-aesthetic nexus.

2. The practice of news narration

The legitimacy, prescriptive role, inscrutable processes, and technological capability enable the news media to narrate incidents as stories. Glasser (1980) notes that these are 'instrumental' and 'consummatory' processes. Borrowing from previous scholars Robert Park and George Herbert Mead, he rightly points out that 'we are experiencing the *aesthetic* appeal of news' (p. 242). This is the point at which we must part ways: Glasser's justification of this aesthetic appeal is its rationale by which information becomes a story, the cultural relatability of the story to a community, and the demand, which is consummation and pleasure. It is the derivation of this experience, in Glasser's view, that makes news aesthetic: 'As an aesthetic experience—aesthetic in the sense of being contemplative rather than creative—news is an end in itself' (p. 242-243). In this sense, news is something a consumer is detached and yet attaches a cultural means of belonging to it. The approach to consensus-building this project adopts is somewhat different. Rather, the process of the production and dissemination of news must be seen as deeply ideological. Furthermore, today's technology such as social media has unlocked the potential for people to express themselves and helped expose those ideological

underpinnings of a sophisticated and well-meaning set of steps in which our agendas are set and the gates of information are guarded. These steps may be captured in the sequence:

[*Incident – Event – Spectacle – Myth*]

Media events may be viewed as 'world rituals' that interrupt routine media programs, argue Dayan and Katz (1992). One interpretation of this definition can be of this definition is that media events and media spectacles must be similar. However, it does not adequately factor in the pattern, the form, the formula, the very sequence in a news bulletin that problematizes this definition, beginning with national politics and ending with sports and weather: For example, an urbane, well-dressed, impressive-looking television anchor tells us that the world is encapsulated for us in a bulletin and 'that's the way it is'[1]. Thus, the approach to an incident as a media event—in order to convert into a narratable story—is fundamentally a *journalistic practice*.

If we recognize the production of a media event as a spectacle as an *aesthetic practice*, it is marked by the institutional recognition of an event. Recognition distinguishes invisibility from visibility, absence from presence: In that first step of the construction of our realities, an incident must become an event because it is so recognized[2]. Spectacle is the method that provides awe and leads to the confidence to a prosumer of its salience. This aesthetic process of the production of a continuous spectacle also leaves behind the incidents that did not make it—the non-stories left behind by the dazzle of spectacle. This is a stage of disruption—the winner in a marketplace of incidents that nudges the media prosumer to consume and (re)produce it. Its salience seeks to provide certainty and surprise to the prosumer. It is the input stage of media production.

The output stage is defined by the *presentation* of spectacle, aggregated for us on screens and paper. Douglas Kellner (2010) describes media spectacle as a media event enabled by media technologies that process events—'more defuse *(sic)*, variable, unpredictable, and contestable' (pp. 5-6). The plumes of display are all included for best effect, including language, speech, visuals, graphics, and authorship. The institution (including the television anchor, who is propped up as a personification of the institution and a fair representative of the viewer) takes over from the individual and hands it back to the individual prosumer to amplify it further.

Notwithstanding its dramatic projection, a news event is also a ritual: It is a fleeting element in a continuous and routinized process—a river rather than a cycle. This routinization is an *ideological practice* of mythification, the longest-drawn and the most invisible of the processes. This step of mythification is defined by continuity and routinization rather than by disruption. In our digital interactive social media environment, the role of consuming, owning, and sharing the story converges into the continual act that we may call *prosumption*. This media prosumer is located and described in a later section. Owning refers to the prosumer's input, by which process a story's future content and distribution lies in their hands. This re-presented and shared story is a new story, similar to the manner in which a digitally reproduced image is also a new image[3]. The disruptive value of spectacle removes our attention from that which is absent, and a desirable, recognizable, and seemingly experiential storytelling format lends authenticity to news.

Thus, through a process of journalistic, aesthetic, and ideological practices, a news platform embeds an incident in societies as myth. The routinized sequencing of spectacles embeds the news form as a myth. Mythification may be viewed as a combination of aesthetics and affectation in a continued format whose consequence is rationalization and social acceptance. Furthermore, a story is presented as a disruptive moment although in fact it forms an element in a continuous flow of news. Using that media logic, news narration suggests what the myth is. A news story sutures a spectacle into a routine and embeds it in myth.

3. Routinization and myth

The routinization and mythification of aesthetics in societies is well-documented in literature, which has explored a variety of themes from a positive relationship of influencer images on Instagram with body dissatisfaction among men (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) and women (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021; Milmo & Skopeliti, 2021) to stereotypically gendered narratives of eating (Fuller *et al*., 2013). The news media

[1] The famous sign-off by Walter Cronkite, one of America's most recognized news anchors (1962-1981) on CBS News.
[2] See Honneth and Margalit (2001) to access Axel Honneth's full and complex treatment of recognition.
[3] Also see Lev Manovich (2001), who notes that a new technological 'layer' and *variability* are the products of interactivity. Thus, hyperlinked copies have no real original (pp. 36-45).

has ably aided in embedding these aesthetic norms in social myth, using rhetorical advantage of visibility and influence: For example, news media represent and invoke gender stereotypes while promoting women's exercise, bearing implications for self and subjectivity (McGannon & Spence, 2012). Oliver's (2005) much-cited example unearths the equivocation fallacy in the term overweight.

In its representation of truth, news sutures our world using a narrative format. 'Suture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse' (Miller, 1966/1977, p. 2). One of the most relevant features of a suture is that after stitching together pieces of a tapestry or a ruptured surface, it disappears from view. Jean-Pierre Oudart (1970/1990) explained the process of stitching together a film so that the story conceals its production. The presentation is also 'absentation', in which the process of production and revealing only a well-woven story. Only by thus deconstructing the presentation of beauty and truth can we explore what it automatically absents.

Absence and invisibility are products of science—in their physical sense—and of institutional, human, and ideological processes. The media prosumer—consumer-processer-(re)producer of ideological texts—must operate in spaces that are governed by the contours of presented and experienced realities. A community—say, in a village in the heart of India in all the inescapable discrimination of the caste system—negotiates its experiential existence, invisible and denied—*absented*—to the media prosumer. In a continuity of narrated existence, the media prosumer—not merely the consumer and the producer, but also the practitioner of the world—must operate in spaces between the presented and experienced realities.

News is equally well-presented to us. It beautifies reality. Television news starkly represents this, but we may commonly observe its application to other media. Let us take the example of the well-heeled news anchor. Through the process of scheduling night after night, the anchor's charisma is anticipated, awaited, and cherished. Personal charisma is both a part of the spectacle and the method by which to achieve a credible and continuous string of stories. After all, it is the institutional narration that is to be believed—the persona is merely the catalyzing factor. Like suture, they must remain the factor that holds together the narration in cognition. Like a hovering ghost, the anchor must hold the semblance of continuous illumination long after the lights are switched off in the studios.

A fundamental feature of the creation of this continuity is the aesthetic value the media consumer attributes to the visible, removing the value of the invisible. The texture, form, and style of the stories act as sutures that do not take away the salience of charisma, but in fact help in the perpetual motion—a routinization—of the visible. In Max Weber's (1978) usage of the term *routinization,* charismatic authority is inherently unstable because it is rooted in the personality of a leader and their exhortations. To guarantee that followership of the presented reality is perpetual, an organized method may be warranted. Modern institutions have hedged the risk of the inheritance of charisma into rational-legal structures.

A compelling example of this routinized rationality lies in our news media system's continuous cycle of presentation and representation. Live visuals lend authenticity, the trait that best distinguishes news from art. If a reporter wishes to show sparse crowds in a political rally, they can do so simply by positioning themselves against a sparse crowd, perhaps at a distance from the rally, and decontextualizing the narration. On the other hand, the reporter must be careful in the age of independent videos—they could be contradicted and discredited for disinformation. Within the sphere of believability, a narrator must cleverly weave in subjective interpretations and take advantage of the institutional privilege. The best media platforms understand how to play authentic.

The Indian National Congress (INC) is the main opposition party in India, discredited by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as dynastic and ineffective. For nearly five months from late 2022 through early 2023, INC's best-recognized leader Rahul Gandhi—Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's great-grandson, Indira Gandhi's grandson, and Rajiv Gandhi's son—took out a 'Unite India Tour', a 2,250-mile walking marathon through villages from the southern tip of the peninsula to the northernmost state of Kashmir. Much of the institutionalized news media all but looked the other way but could not afford to ignore it after it mobilized massive crowds, and yet, the scorn was palpable as Rahul Gandhi and hundreds of party workers traversed the geography to evidence what his great-grandfather had termed *unity in diversity,* and interacted with local people directly, in an 'unmediated' way.

In October, India Today TV, the English-language channel of the India Today Group, sent its anchor-reporter Nabila Jama to cover the march from Bellary, a dusty town in the southern state of Karnataka. The fact that Jamal speaks the local language, Kannada, helps. As Jamal stood amidst a massive crowd in anticipation of Rahul Gandhi's arrival, she conducted a vox populi, in which a reporter walks through public squares to gather

popular opinion, often asking the same questions to different groups of walkers-by impromptu. Jamal asked a group of women:

> 'Why are you here? Have you come here to see Rahul Gandhi? Do you like Rahul Gandhi?'

Being placed under media spotlight can be unnerving, but especially so when faced with scrutiny from families and social circles. Aware their every word may be available publicly, many common rural women in India may become cautious and even evasive. Furthermore, linguistic nuances could play a role in hesitancy. Kannada-speaking communities often creolize at will, using words from English or Hindi and integrate them syntactically to produce culturally contextualized meanings—often to offer euphemisms. The word 'like' is one such. Among conservative communities in that region, the word 'like' between genders is often construed in a romantic or (especially) sexual way—therefore, posing a potential social threat to a respondent.

Even though Jamal speaks Kannada, her questions must be in English to deliver to her audiences at large. To a native English-speaker, *Do you like Rahul Gandhi?* is a fair question, contextualized in political terms as *Do you support Rahul Gandhi?* However, the women along the dusty Bellary road seemed ill at ease with it. A few said somewhat vaguely that they had gathered to catch a glimpse of the political leader; some were more specific in stating that they supported him. In general, the question did not evince a simple *yes* or *no*. Jamal persisted: '[I know] you are here to *see* Rahul Gandhi but do you *like* Rahul Gandhi?' One woman persisted back: 'I am here to see Rahul Gandhi.'

Jamal took the microphone away, and in the background of the noisy crowd, she delivered a piece-to-camera with a chuckle: 'Ah, 'I am just here to see him but I don't know if I *like* him,'' interpreting the response to mean that the crowds had gathered out of curiosity and not necessarily to support Rahul Gandhi. When Jamal withdrew the microphone to interrupt a respondent to *explain* the response, it was as though she was drawing an interpretive bridge between a presumably unintelligible speaker and the largely urban media prosumer. During that withdrawal as the respondent was still speaking, we must wonder whether the unheard words were: *Of course I have come here to see Rahul Gandhi … but I also support him.*

The presentation was packaged to perfection. The channel checked the right boxes by ensuring that it covered the largest mass rally of the year. Yet, the presentation's manner might allude to the average viewer that the opposition's rally is merely a spectacle without meaning. The visual must be bifurcated from the theme, the aesthetic from the moral. The stamp of authority of institutional news media comes in the *form.* It is packaged with the expertise of the news anchor: *It is all ye need to know*.

While spectacle embellishes, myth de-embellishes. Where spectacle makes even an ordinary event extraordinary, the cycle of routinization evolves into myth. In myth, routine is reasonable. In the formulation of myth in *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes (1957/1991) explains:

> Myth does not deny thing, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperiality without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured (p. 143).

Barthes was troubled by the ''naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality, which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history … in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*' (p. 10). Moreover, 'everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse' (p. 107). A myth, *today,* is speech, but ferments over time—today's event is tomorrow's woodwork. On social media, experience/involvement and observation/gaze merge—it is the ideological side of the familiar term, convergence. They may mimic each other as engagement. One is the spatial, the other, temporal: spectacle is a hyped event, marked by urgency, and bears immediate results. Engagement of the media consumer with individual spectacles in interactive mediated environments is discrete, random, and sporadic.

In *Empire of Signs,* Barthes (1970/1989) recognizes the myriad ways in which a sign can be interpreted. Interpretation would determine a Frenchman's understanding if he were to read Japanese literature with no prior knowledge of the myths that the signs embed. That is why *gloss* irritates Barthes because it seems gloss, the cultural varnish to text, creates unnecessary *meaning*. The *intelligible* conflates with the *real* (p. 69). Hence, impression collides with experience, gloss over truth, the visible over the invisible.

Barthes's point, of course, is that text cements history in intelligibility. Experience without interpretable intelligibility is devoid of the very ideological underpinnings that bring about change in history. Examples

are human rights violations and other such modern conceptualizations that remain bracketed in contexts that are Western, and the phenomena by which—for example—caste hierarchies in gang-rapes by upper-caste men are themselves cemented but the mediated discourse of incidents routinely glosses over and ignores intersectional complexities of the conditions in which those incidents happen. News media offer an aesthetic bridging of the experience and interpretation.

One example of mythification using aesthetic value is nationalism. Timothy Brennan (1990) points to 'myths of the nation' as 'a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief' (pp. 44-45)[4], Myth takes various forms: As distortion or lie; as mythology, legend, or oral tradition; as literature per se; and as shibboleth (p. 44). Unless these concepts are fused, the myth of 'nation' as a unified concept would be fruitless. The addition of myth as 'distortion or lie' is particularly important to this unified provision, because without distortion of a historical belief, a myth cannot change at specific moments. The role of Muslim rulers in the development of Indian culture is well-documented in history, but it is taking more than a decade for the Modi government to either erase or change it. Such a longitudinal change must naturally be accompanied by distrust of the original authors and perceived agendas. That is, the perception that they had vested interests must be injected. Forced and instantaneous change is followed by a series of both organic and aftershock-like waves, first destabilizing the perceived objectivity of previous truth and then planting the alternatives to bring new education to new generations and changing beliefs over long periods of time. New history is thus documented, and new myths are built.

To answer the question, *why do news media use aesthetics?* we may need to view stories are not merely constructed text but also as material commodities that consumers aspire for and fetishize. While Adorno (1970/1997) debates the autonomy of beauty and critiques its tampering by rationality, Georgy Lukács's (1922/1971) argument is that the subject of action must be 'seen to be the maker of reality' (p. 138)

> … only if it can be shown that such a subjectivity can be found in the consciousness and that there can be a principle of form which is not affected by the problem of indifference vis-a-vis content and the resulting difficulties concerning the thing-in-itself, 'intelligible contingency', etc., only then … will it be possible to posit the world as conceived by thought as a perfected, concrete, meaningful system 'created' by us and attaining in us the stage of self-awareness (p. 138).

This useful methodology by which media attract their consumers comes with a caveat. Media consumers must be *conscious* of each spectacle, not relegating it into a routinized affair. Otherwise, their consumption would merely become a zombie-like process from which the full utility of the presentation becomes impossible. 'Formal rationalism' (Lukács's term) must be retained (p. 138). However, it should not suppress creation within the set framework: As the consumer is co-opted into the continuity of creation, the multiplier effect of effective storytelling snowballs; without generating aesthetic value, this simulation of reality becomes impossible.

This means that a media platform must put aesthetic value into a formalized processual loop. For the success of this ideological maneuver of aesthetics, the value a media consumer derives from stories must attach itself to cultural, historical, and political values to be seen as rationally explicable—what Lukács calls value-related historical objectivity (p. 151). If 'the world must be aestheticised', it makes the subject 'purely contemplative' and 'annihilates action' (p. 140). Intuitive understanding that leads to 'objective reality' is also the rejection of a creation. It is necessarily the acceptance of the 'ready-made'.

> As long as a man adopts a stance of intuition and contemplation he can only relate to his own thought and to the objects of the empirical world in an immediate way. He accepts both as ready-made—produced by historical reality (Lukács, 1922/1971, p. 202).

Thus, the simulation of autonomy—the seeming uncontrollability of the narrated truths—lies at the heart of the plan of mythification. This means that the notion of the value of a mediated artifact prevails upon a media consumer through processes. In our interactive media environment, this value percolates across social media to other media consumers through other set processes such as public sharing. In sharing publicly, a media consumer has intent, implying either to endorse or to discuss the story further publicly.

However, the idea of visibility as a control mechanism does not find a prominent place in Lukács. Although mediated visibility pervasively prevails over invisibility, how does the media consumer interrelate selected

[4] Brennan is referring to Malinowski's words (as quoted in Worsley [1964]).

visibility with selected experience? How does the production-controlled mechanisms of visibility build completeness and consent?

We may derive from myth literature that what is visible as a *continuous* spectacle eventually becomes intuitive and mythified. In that case, the viewer may intuitively invisibilize an object right under their nose while deriving aesthetic value using artifacts, sequences, and spectacle. The media consumer's understanding of mediated and experienced reality lies at the cusp of this consciousness-unconsciousness and invisibility-visibility.

In delineating this intervening space, we may adopt three perspectives. First is Jacques Derrida's (1994) famous notion of hauntology. In his discussion of the representations of invisibility in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida uses the term *trace* to represent invisibility and silence as a tool of power—the absence of presence—not only the disappearance of origin but the constitution of an origin is by its reciprocal, a *non*-origin. '[T]he medium of the media … is neither living nor dead, present nor absent' (p. 63). Yet, as Derrida would argue, absence and presence are not binaries—there is a field in between. In the chapter 'Injunctions of Marx', he writes:

> If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general (p. 48).

Drawing from his somewhat incomplete interpretation of Marx's 'visibility of the invisible' (p. 6) and of 'invisible visibility' (p. 157), we may extend a connection—a natural one—of absence to invisibilization, invisibilization to *de*-articulation (or silenc*ing*). There is institutional rationality attached to the sutured invisibility of mediated stories such as news.

Second, Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak (1988), whose investigation into subaltern agency is well-documented, illustrates the trappings of what representation hides, a 'first-world masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves' (p. 87, emphasis added). As an example of how such false glossing-over occurs, she cites the British-era ban on the practice of *sati*, where a Hindu woman immolates herself on the pyre of her husband:

> The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of 'White men saving brown women from brown men. White women … have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'The women actually wanted to die' (p. 93).

The missing voice of the absent woman haunts Spivak. For her absent presence is a misarticulation, a misrepresentation of silence where 'what the work *cannot* say becomes important' (pp. 80-81).

Third, in *The Alchemy of Race and Right,* Patricia Williams (1992), whose great-great grandmother had been a slave to well-known Tennessee lawyer and jurist Austin Miller, says she sees ghosts, not knowing if she's crazy:

> I am engaged in a long-term project of tracking his [Austin Miller's] words—through his letters and opinions—and those of his sons also lawyers and judges, of *finding the shape described by her absence* … I see her shape and his hand in the vast networking of our society (p. 19, emphasis added).

As beholders of these shapes and objects, we attach value to them: These structures and their contextual backgrounds construct our understanding of beauty and economics. Williams's *finding the shape described by her absence* captures 'the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time', as Avery Gordon notes in *Ghostly Matters* (Gordon 1997, p. 6). Mythification is thus marked by the uncertain presence of the objects and subjects.

These perspectives will ground our ongoing discussion on news narration's function in mythification. Nick Couldry (2008) has pointed us to the myth-making functions of a mediated spectacle in which the form is a powerful enabler, filling our world with a 'continuous spectacle' (p. 162). Not only do the media produce this continuity, but our access, retrieval, and sharing of the spectacle as prosumer are also continuous. We perpetuate the process of mythification as a continuous process of creation and crystallization.

Hence, a spectacle and a myth are co-created by the media and their new audience—the prosumers—and help myth gain a mnemonical form. Media events have a bearing on the media consumer's inevitable

acceptance of the 'universalising panoramas' of mediated realities (Couldry, 2008, p. 174). Thus, mythification flourishes on form and formulas. A story is created as spectacle and perpetuated as myth.

4. The media prosumer

The portmanteau term *prosumer* (producer + consumer) may be traced back at least to Alvin Toffler's (1980/2022) *The Third Wave,* in which he proposes that people who produce their own goods and services are a phenomenon of the post-Industrial Age. Predictably, the world of business has found much use for the term. In Toffler's prosumerism, the incentive for this form of production-consumption can be monetary or other. Prosumerism has prominently found application in smart-grid technology in power and water transmission and distribution systems in which the grid, cabling, and metering technologies offer a two-way transmission. A consumer may generate power through rooftop solar and transmit it back to the grid.

Referring to our contemporary ecosystem of interactive mediated communication, another portmanteau word, *produser,* was introduced by Axel Bruns (2008), who did not find Toffler's description fully descriptive of the media ecosystem in which the produser is an *individual* who is 'active, content-creating, self-directed' (Bruns, 2010, p. 8). Spanish scholars Berrocal *et al.* (2014) interpreted media prosumerism in our interactive environment. Still, the term in their work is parenthesized within a discussion of its application to political infotainment. In it, they argue that as a new environment has enabled the mobilization of 'immaterial work' of prosumers, the prosumer has become a 'hegemonic element within the communication setting' (p. 66). The interactive media environment also finds apt application in the term, but the purpose here is not to extract more neoliberal or political economy critique from the term or its use.

Here, this paper takes a path that is somewhat related to but not completely aligned with this line of argument. The term prosumer, rather than produser, is mainstreamed. There is a certain neoliberal inevitability to consumption, bracketed within the confines of what is made available. A user, on the other hand, would seem to pick, choose, and adopt at will. The term seems to afford too much agency and ignore structural frameworks altogether. Usage does not imply the same inevitability although, arguably, the two practices might largely coincide. Furthermore, the term media prosumer refers to the consumer-producer who is also a narrator. Thus, the emergence of the media prosumer might also herald a world in which they seek to construct a discursively world. In framing the objects of study in a context of the ubiquitous social media, the prosumer's role may be viewed as not only the interpreter of meanings but the expresser of those meanings forward. Thus, the prosumer's text traverses across space and time. In the continuous production-consumption cycle of modern narration across media-space, the consumer is also the producer of mediated texts, as much as the producer also their consumer.

The media prosumer's function lies in an increasingly indistinguishable duality of subject and object. Here, we will move forward on the logical assumption that a media prosumer consumes and re-produces all available and accessible mediated forms. The dissemination of a prosumer, however, is mostly limited to interactive media platforms such as the social media applications—in this, we limit the definition of the role to tangible production. Thus, the participation of a media prosumer is somewhat removed from that of legitimized institutions and yet tied to them through sharing and re-production. The formation of this structure is a matrix that resembles what we may term an 'omnopticon', in which the prosumer becomes a conscious or unconscious influencer of other prosumers' articulation.

Central to these normative functions of the prosumer is their location because a prosumer whose position coincides with that of a narrated story has a different function from that whose position is removed from the scene. The prosumer is thus located at the center of a field that is at once enabling and disabling. In other words, the prosumer finds themselves in a liminal space, constantly morphing. It is in this locus that they must conduct the illogical and dichotomous disruption while also maintaining continuity. As narrative components of aesthetics and literacy, distance and location must function in tandem.

This point may become clearer if we imagine the effect of distance of an object from a camera. Placed close to a face, the camera reveals the face in a different perspective from a more different distance; it may hide scars or reveal them, depending on distance. Television news audiences in New Delhi or New York may experience and appreciate local issues differently from those in a village in the Lakhimpur Kheri district in Uttar Pradesh state or the tiny town of Murphysboro in Illinois. An aspect of the salience of location when applied to mediated stories is that the narration of modernity and that of urbanity are often coincidental.

Urban centers, with their assigned function to preserve art and architecture, are often the first locations for nation-branding—the self-announcement of the modernization of a nation. Urban spaces are also well-ordered spaces. Yet, the prosumer is torn between this presentation and their life-experience.

If location was a crucial definer of 'presence' among pre-modern societies impaired by the lack of modern communication systems, distance marks modern societies. Anthony Giddens (1990) relates locationality and distance with the creation of social order: 'The problem of order is here seen as one of time-space distanciation—the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence' (p. 14). In our new societies that characterize and lie at the very fulcrum of our life, the news media are bound by a certain arbitrariness, based on factors of news salience including distance, and aesthetic value.

This is a good juncture to introduce Michel de Certeau's (1984) chapter 'Walking in the City' from his famed book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The chapter is useful in three ways: Its reading of Manhattan as a text; as a broader interpretation of literacy as reading and writing; and the locational relationships of the subject and the object. de Certeau's chapter unpacks a strategic conflict between a semantic disruption in a pre-ordered surface: 'The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order' (p. 107). The acts of walking in the city create their own narration—imaginative and open-ended:

> [T]hey are walkers, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms (p. 93).

In colonial nations, a rural surface is overwritten by more modern features, and yet the erasure seems to be incomplete. We may wonder how de Certeau might view Mumbai, Manila, or Mombasa, where urban buildings and roads between the erstwhile villages make up the cities. Moreover, these are not Manhattan's World Trade Centre (WTC). If we reverse the vantage point of the pre-9/11 WTC, and instead, assume a worm's-eye view, our reality becomes similar to a prosumer's—experiencing, consuming, producing. It is the space where myths are made—a 'stylistic metamorphosis' as de Certeau terms it. When intermeshed in the order of presented reality and the chaos of lived reality, the prosumer's role settles down to become constant and mechanical while also discovering new realities each day.

Locational distance creates a blind spot. For a media platform, a village, removed from production centers, may only become relevant when it is also viable in its assigned modern role. Over 65 percent of India's population lives in villages. Yet, a large proportion of media audiences is urban[5]. When a story from a village does appear, the rural folk become a mythical trope for the audience—the majority is the exotic, perhaps only linked by migrant workers such as domestic help, the taxi driver, and the vegetable seller. They do not form the core of audience interests—no wonder proximity remains a factor of newsworthiness. Unsurprisingly, villages remain almost off-radar, un-covered and un-presented.

These normally constructed processes create blind spots—dark spaces that lurk even in the urban palimpsest—the present, invisible spaces, near, yet far. The consumer of well-narrated images of exotic villages may see a mythic dreamland, not pain points of suffering, discrimination, and voicelessness. They keep cities together in the process of mythification.

5. Four aesthetic features of news

In the aesthetic construction, presentation and absentation generate our reality and our illusion—our aesthetic values. Aesthetic constructions *present the visible*. Essentially, this process triggers the *visibilization of the present*. By corollary, the process underlying the *invisibilization of the absent* also means *absenting the invisible*. Four features of news in terms of aesthetic values are proposed.

The *first* feature is the presentation of the visible, or display. Display renders visibility and invisibility to objects, stories, and communities. Let us take the example of the 'lead image' in digital news. Many content management systems mandate the use of the lead image before a story can be successfully uploaded—perhaps a technocratic prediction that the new audience increasingly demands visual representations. Artists' illustrative representations frequently substitute for the real artifact. Representative images, or file photos,

[5] See The World Bank (2020).

are routinely used to either dramatize or even misinform. The close-up image of a hand, grey, genderless, pretending to be lifeless, is displayed as the image to represent the victim when the media platform does not have the murdered person's photograph. Day after day, the same image is used for different crime stories involving murder. 'File photos' routinely create deconextualized mnemonics.

The *second* is embellishment—the Keats-esque aesthetic, which describes the magnificent screen that the urn's surface displays. The beauty is the truth; worse, it's *all* we need to know; the hyper-decorated outer surface of the urn will suffice. Those immortal lines from *Ode on a Grecian Urn* appropriately describe the dependence of our knowledge on mediated methods of creating visibility—those that gather, process, and disseminate stories to us. They also illustrate a narrative challenge for media literacy: A larger-than-life presentation of a populist political leader is a familiar more. The repeated of stock footage or photographs of swanky—or squalid—districts to represent a whole city is a familiar example of the sweeping generalization that goes with a single hypervisible shot and moment. Governor Grigory Potemkin of Russia under Catherine the Great dressed up a whole village in 1787 to hide the dire poverty and corruption. As Catherine rode through the impressive and colorful village, people cheered and smiled at her. When President Donald Trump visited Ahmedabad, India, in February 2020, the strategically chosen road was lined with well-attired citizens waved little American flags at his convoy, cheering and hiding the new segregation and gory religious violence of 2002 that killed hundreds of Muslims.

The *third* feature, invisibilization, is the process of creating absence by generating the *presence* of the alternative. Thus, the presentation both presents and absents. The inside contents of the Grecian urn must remain hidden from the eye. This is accomplished both through an absence of narration and the narration of a different reality—or, *absentation*[6]. Leading up to the 2004 general election in India, the co-called India Shining campaign by the party in power, the BJP, unsuccessfully showcased the feel-good factor, illustrated by smiles and lush and prosperous-looking backdrops. The voter rejected that claim, and the government yielded power by exercising a silent articulation (Nanjundaiah, 2005). The near-absence of the realities of Indian villages in the audiovisual news media is another, all but invisibilizing over 600,000 villages where two-thirds of its population lives. In these villages, oppression, exploitation, and local pleasures are routinized. Moreover, the rationale of such invisibilization lies not only in the process but also in the political economy of the media: The media prosumer feels detached and distant from those far-flung realities.

A *fourth* feature is the rendering of reality in a combination of visibilization-invisibilization and presentation-absentation, the suturing of truths in aesthetic terms, the final step in rendering aesthetic value, the packaging of stories. Writing about the emancipated spectator, Rancière (2009) relates aesthetics to ideology: The viewer may emerge more knowledgeable from a theatre, ready for action. In doing so, it is not merely the knowledge they derive, but the *form* of news and the frame of reality presented to them that prepares them thus. Our literacy lies in our understanding of the routinized and mythified rationality of news presentation, the very instrument by which the prosumer learns, in which both life and art operate, generating a sense of emotional consistency[7].

One way to understand others' experience would be to 'know how to draw—behind the back of the spectator, so to speak—a second screen on which the osmotic exchange between the so-called spectator and the events on the primary screen becomes visible' (Pollmann & Hediger 2011, p. 139). In film, such a projection makes the spectator a surrogate body, thus completing the two-way projection between the viewer and the illusory goings-on on screen and deftly poking at the spectator's tacit knowledge. Similarly, field footage and live reportage—including shaky visuals—make the news screen or page look authentic and hence construct the aesthetic value of news. However, the film viewer's suspension of disbelief in a film resonates with the news media prosumer's belief, the innate sense of credibility and certainty in the field of visibility/invisibility and presence/absence that is created for them.

One of the commonly recognizable patterns of this field is in television news. The news anchor is a carefully groomed, visible, and trustworthy bearer of carefully selected tidings, opinions, and aspirations The history of the emergence of the celebrated anchor is intertwined with the evolution of brand representation of news credibility. The legendary Edward R. Murrow of CBS News was not merely the reader of the evening news bulletins, but was the analyst often reporting from the field. Today, fiery, opinionated, authoritative anchors populate that landscape with little field presence.

[6] The concept of absentation is more fully considered in Nanjundaiah (2024).
[7] While the spectator is the on-ground witness of an incident, the viewer sees the world through mediated stories.

Many English-language news reporters and anchors in India are trained by British institutes. A postcolonial society mimics its colonizers: Behind Republic TV's owner and popular nightly news-analysis anchor Arnab Goswami is a most impressive urban montage—the Howrah Bridge in Kolkata, built in British times by English architecture and Indian hands, a fleeting shot of night traffic without the traffic jams in well-lit downtown surroundings, intercut with other visuals that convey the fast urban life of a modern city-dweller. On India Today TV, another English-language channel, primetime anchor Rahul Kanwal stands on an inner balcony of a massive building, delivering his headlines as we take in the awe-inspiring visuals of the building's interiors before he is seen to enter his news studio, clad in an impressive suit, backgrounded by the glitter and glamor of the spectacular interiors of the news hub. The artifice and the real converge, as on a film set, as the anchor, characterized by urbane mores, delivers news that is most relevant to their audiences.

In anchor-driven news screens that communicate an agreed formula, a stamp of authority is palpable, even overacted-out. In India, night after night, anchors present themselves with an appearance of authority in their ability to moderate debates, routinely discrediting political leaders and often mocking spokespersons of opposition parties. The news anchor, over the current century, before which the government-funded broadcaster Doordarshan employed news readers whose sole and usually part-time task was to read the news and stitch together news stories. In private television, a creation of the 1990s media industry liberalization, Prannoy Roy may be regarded as India's first news anchor in today's definition. In it, the anchor is the carrier of credibility as a factor of knowledge creation and general agreement. Some of the best-known names are Arnab Goswami, Rajdeep Sardesai, Rahul Kanwal, Anjana Om Kashyap, Rubika Liyaqat, Aman Verma, Amish Devgan, and Sudhir Chaudhary. They are also some of the most trolled. As their channels' breadwinners, they embody the heady polarity of popularity and disagreement that they display night after night. What is credible to some may be unacceptable to some others, but in a majoritarian environment, the former must merely win in numbers.

Let us consider another illustration that includes the features of news aesthetics—the screen that constitutes the physical membrane that connects the producer and the consumer. Horton and Wohl (1956) called this a para-social interaction. In it, the technological, the visual, the audio, the haptic, and the cognitive senses work in tandem to fulfill a moral purpose in which the right to know our world is encouraged. Modern-day news television affords us the luxury of discomfort, a critical faculty by which to process eclectic views along with information along with the affordance of prosumption. However, the channel also contends with competition and must achieve inequality in the marketplace by emerging on top in ratings. A channel surfer must deal with a confusing array of channels with fleeting content. Therefore, a news screen must draw instant attention, achieved by using an array of colorful visual elements on the screen. These elements include not only engaging visuals but also provocative text graphics. Disproportionately large and controversial headlines, often in the form of rhetorical questions, fulfil the objective. Such text on a busy screen, moving around and rapidly changing, may generate a sense of urgency and sensation, compelling a surfer to stop and read. All these elements bear value, inviting the viewer to interact, speak up via the digital and social media channels available to them. To that end, the elements of production converge, carving out a smooth, convenient, and pleasurable path. The look, the voice, the background, and the overall set are conveyors of meaning and knowledge.

Hence, news must create our realities in aesthetic ways to serve purposes that are neoliberal and yet in a process that showcases its commitment to the socially contracted principles of our modern world. Through an overt display of various representations, they tell us what is desirable—enabling text to lure the prosumer towards consumption and re-presentation. The montage of elements, mounted not too differently from that of the set of a film, must display beauty. Ugliness must be presented in sense-making ways that tug at our aesthetic values by integrating the sensory with the moral.

6. The suturing of Lakhimpur Kheri

Suture, a term borrowed here from film studies and am using it in the context of news here, is a prominent process that ties the news process with the features of news aesthetics. The premise in this paper is that news sutures our world through stories to appear rational and natural: Aesthetically appealing storytelling form must find a reasonable explanation. One way is the use of performative discourse, which connects the journalistic text with the context in the way it is represented through language, among other elements of

performance such as thematic style (van Dijk, 1988). In doing so, a news anchor may seek to reaffirm their authority over the world. The reliance of news performance on form and style is evident (e.g., see Schudson, 1995). Specific illustrations are available, especially the 'performance of ideology' in Fox News (Jones, 2012). The presentation takes on a *sutured* form, stitching together incidents into events, events into spectacles, and spectacles into myths. This is a tango between highlighting and airbrushing, the disruptive narrations that suture the continuity of our mediated existence. A montage of elements is mounted for a compelling performance of verisimilitude, including visual, audio, haptic, and body-language tools; re-presentation and interpretation of available facts. The following case illustrates and contextualizes some well-documented and some fresh approaches in the performance of news anchors.

An illustration of the four features of news aesthetics should help with grasping how they work in tandem to produce truth. On October 3, 2021, a convoy of cars and SUVs reportedly plowed through a group of protesting farmers who were marching on a low-traffic rural road in Lakhimpur Kheri district of India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh. At least eight people were killed. The incident remained hidden until independent videos surfaced a day later. It became a political slugfest after the Congress party released a video that seemed to reveal that Ashish Mishra, the son of Ajay Mishra Teni, the Union Minister of State for Home (internal security), was involved.

A Special Investigating Team (SIT) arrested (Ashish) Mishra and nine other people including three farmers. (Ajay) Teni senior denied that his son was even present at the scene. When the SIT questioned him, Mishra showed them more than 10 videos that seemed to provide visual evidence that he was at a different location at the time of the incident. However, forensic evidence from the SUV showed a cartridge that belonged to his gun. Mishra was arrested but is out on bail. Four people from the group of farmers have been arrested for the murder of Mishra's driver and others. While allowing bail to Mishra, the Supreme Court asked the High Court to release the farmers on bail.

Republic TV is one of the most popular English-language news channels in India. In the 2023 Reuters Institute survey, 58 percent of the survey's young, English-speaking urban respondents said they trusted the Republic brand (Newman *et al.,* 2022, pp. 134-135; Newman *et al*., 2023, pp. 130-131). The channel ran panel discussions on the Lakhimpur Kheri incident on two primetime nights immediately after the incident (and one as a follow-up in December that year). The two immediate episodes on October 4 and October 6, 2021, appear on the show called 'Arnab Goswami on the Debate', a panel discussion hosted and moderated by the network's majority-owner Arnab Goswami, who starts each show with a monologue-style commentary and then invites experts to participate in a debate. In his performance of outrage, Goswami's favorite shock-jock style of anchoring on primetime news shows, now a much-imitated anchoring form across channels in India, has routinely amplified an extreme recasting of individuals and parties that are critical of the government, calling them 'urban Naxals' (Maoists) and 'anti-nationals'. Two episodes of Goswami's popular nightly show The Debate are examined. In particular, the discourse in the two episodes' initial monologue, in which the anchor lays the agenda for discussion, are evaluated. Furthermore, the more literal aesthetic manifestations—the screen arrangement and the moving video and graphic elements on screen—are analyzed. The first night's monologue, from October 4, is seven minutes long. The second, from October 6, is about five minutes long. During the intervening period, Republic TV added its own videos to an existing mix of independent videos that emerged after the incident, claiming to have unearthed new evidence between the two days. At the time of both the shows, initial videos had already surfaced. However, the videos had not been authenticated by October 4[8].

6.1. Performing appeal

The episodes open with a one-minute-long title sequence—an unusually long montage. The visuals in this intro piece are a jumble of rapidly changing graphics with occasional views of a city's main streets showing vibrant traffic, lights, and life in fast mode. There is nary a contrasting visual of, say, slums or villages. Annoyances that jar the smooth flow must perhaps remain invisible and absent. The accompanying music resembles the allegro section of a concerto, mostly in the upper part of the octaves but also with rapid ups and downs. The

[8]See Goswami (2021); Republic TV (2021a): Republic TV (2021b). The channel ran a related show in December, in which Goswami, to his credit, questioned the ruling BJP on a central minister who had been captured on camera punching a reporter in the face when questioned about the Lakhimpur Kheri incident.

music mimics Goswami's effervescent style. For the most part, Goswami speaks in a high pitch. Mid-tones and trebles mark the music—and the voice. The alternation between Goswami's pauses in his monologue with a stoic stare into the camera and his sudden and dramatic outbursts of seeming outrage finds a worthy parallel in the fast-paced crescendos and cadences in the music.

Goswami is attired in an immaculate suit and tie, and his glasses and the 'convent English' style of speaking lend him a solemn look—credible and *modern*. During the session, where the show's guests participate in the 'debate', the screen is split. The show includes many invitees, sometimes more than 10. On the October 4 show, there are nine—political spokespersons and politically affiliated analysts. Goswami is at the center of the screen. The debate is rather perfunctory: Goswami often shuts down any guest who dares to contradict him—an accurate representation of contemporary India.

The screen demands the viewer's engagement. The screen sets the larger agenda while its elements, such as provocative text graphics, outline specific agendas. The audio and the visuals indicate a busy screen, attracting attention and fulfilling an economic imperative, but also implying an urgency of the attention. As Goswami entreats with the viewer in his monologue, the viewer cannot sit and do nothing. They must act.

The screen has three forms of text: A headline, a crawler at the bottom, and text in the middle. The screen is sometimes filled with these text graphics. These text graphics move around rapidly, employing an aesthetic route to infuse a sense of social urgency. It is difficult to read. On-screen text graphics are supplements. They are also a news director's rhetorical device: They inform viewers of the issues at hand, imply editorial slant, and provoke the viewer into the debate. Text graphics on Goswami's show act as textual aides to his narration. An example of provocation is the use of question marks—a rhetorical question mark may appear at the end of what seems to be a sentence. Hashtags are a popular form of mobilizing the viewer. The first text that appears as Goswami's initial commentary begins is 'What happened in Lakhimpur terrible'.

The episode of October 4 uses the hashtag #LakhimpurPolitics. Although it is only the first story after the incident, the urgency to jump to the juicy political debate is evident. The headline reads: 'Violence in Lakhimpur: An attempt to create chaos ahead of UP polls?' The question is devoid of the subject, but is followed soon by a sub-headline that contains one: 'Opposition stoking fire amid Lakhimpur Kheri violence to make political gains in UP Polls?'. Later, in another insinuated attribution in the headline 'Who is promoting lawlessness?', the accompanying picture shows Navjot Sidhu, a member of the main opposition Congress party—in faraway Punjab, a hotbed of farmer activism. In the October 6 show, the showcasing of political divide has matured—the hashtag is #LakhimpurFaultlines, indexing the headline 'Attempt To Turn Lakhimpur Tragedy Into A Simmering Political Cauldron?' Accusations continue to appear in the form of questions, but more incisively: 'Using tragedy to conspire?'

If verbs were inserted into these text headlines, the questions might read: *Is there* an attempt to create chaos ahead of UP polls? *Is the* opposition stoking fire amid Lakhimpur Kheri violence to make political gains in UP Polls? and *Is There an* Attempt To Turn Lakhimpur Tragedy Into A Simmering Political Cauldron? Question marks take on the role of euphemistic substitution where equivocation is technical, and the claim is silent but present. Devoid of the mask of the somewhat rhetorical question marks, the claims would appear stark. The salvaging punctuation conforms to the agreed formula: *We just ask the questions.* In a tacit agreement between the performance and the prosumer, the question mark might as well be redundant.

6.2. Performing outrage

Goswami employs outrage in his behavior, acting out the passion he seeks to transfer to his audiences. In the segments, divisiveness takes on two tactical strands: Farmers and the political opposition belong to the same side. To make a case, Goswami constructs a combination of discursive elements, including linguistic strategies such as equivocation and obfuscation, combined with nonverbal devices including the pitch, volume, and voice modulation to display outrage, discredit the political opposition, convey politically affiliated rhetoric, 'other' the farmers, and position the viewer at the center of his monologues.

By October 4, news channels used independent videos that surfaced showing the cars driving over the farmers from behind and Ashish Mishra to be present on the scene. Many sections of the media used the videos. The first visuals that were made available on Goswami's show were sequenced in an interesting way. Rather than following a chronological sequence as we would expect from a news show, visual clips were edited into a preview-like assembly.

The first is a quick four-second shot, in which we see a shaky visual of an ambulance, a close-up shot of two men placing an injured man inside an ambulance.

The next shot runs for 11 seconds. A roadside slope where people (the farmers) are beating up some other people (the SUV's driver and other occupants) with sticks or batons. The designer has placed a red circle around a man who is being beaten.

The third is the longest—it runs for 14 seconds, showing first a mid-shot and then the camera's lens is zoomed out slightly into a longer mid-shot. In this shot, a vehicle—presumably one of the vehicles in the BJP convoy—is in flames.

Goswami's first words, a mix of active and passive voice, of attribution and un-attribution, set the stage for the outrage to follow:

> Ladies and gentlemen, what has happened in Lakhimpur in Uttar Pradesh is terrible. Eight people have died—four *by cars* of a BJP convoy running over protesters, and four *when the protesters turned into a lynchmob* and pulled out people from the cars and lynched them, killed them, beat them to pulp, after first brutally injuring them (emphasis added).

Thus, Goswami's narration uses several performative elements at once to create the aesthetics of outrage. The attribution of agency in the primary incident is to a *car*. In the retaliatory attack that followed, the attribution is to *protesters*. We also find a clever use of nouns that are equivocal: the repeated use of the word 'protesters' as against 'farmers' is an example of how the narration brackets a group. In the entire transcript of the two monologues, the term 'farmers' is used only once—in a headline—while the term 'protesters' is used three times to refer to the same group of people. The word *protesters* may connote that protesting, not farming, is the primary function of the people who were killed. Once that equivalence is narrated, the next inference in the syllogistic alignment is simpler—protesters are roadblocks to modernization, and furthermore, protests are akin to riots.

6.3. The value

In Goswami's narration of the incident, there are four main actors: a) the perpetrators, b) conspirators, c) victims, and d) *we*, 'whatever our politics'. Ordinarily, as the incident unfolded, the news media would frame them as a) the occupants of the political vehicle convoy, b) the political party to which they belong, c) the protesting farmers, and d) the audience. But in Goswami's framing, we may derive the reverse, obfuscated, 'othered' meanings: a) the protesting farmers and the individual driver of the vehicle that ran over them, b) the political opposition parties and sections of the media, c) the occupants of the vehicles, and d) the audience. If Goswami's descriptors were strung together in an interpretive sequence, they could make the following meaning:

> The marching farmers are protesters, who have indulged in the past in violence and riots, turned into a lynchmob, beat the occupants of the vehicles to a pulp, brutally injuring them and ultimately killing the occupants of those vehicles under whose wheels some farmers unfortunately died.
>
> The driver of the vehicle that ran over farmers ran amok and killed so many people in a horrendous and condemnable act.
>
> The occupants of convoy vehicles caused an accident and were killed by a lynchmob.
>
> Opposition is the vulturistic, hungry opportunistic lobby that wants to fan the fires quickly to gain mileage through polarization, making it a riot agenda by encouraging lynchmobs, conspiring to play flashpoint politics that is dangerous for the country.
>
> The Congi media, who would have got away with half truths, but now totally cornered as their carefully crafted narrative to exploit Lakhimpur faultlines falls apart.
>
> The viewer of the show is a passive participant, but must become an active agent—a catalyst in the process of amplifying the narrative construction—and not stand aside and watch this as an unaffected observer, because nobody will stand unaffected if [they] don't act now.

In this re-presentation of an 'accident' that was followed by a criminal act, the farmers and the car are the real perpetrators, the occupants of the vehicles are the victims, sections of the news media and the political parties opposed to the BJP are conspirators who are operating against the nation's interests. We must agree to be convinced that the sequence of actions narrated to us is indeed a well-hatched, global conspiracy.

7. Conclusion

The rendering of aesthetic values creates hypervisible, partly visible, and other variants of visibility and presentation. In this field of aesthetic forces of visibility and presentation, the location of the media prosumer is such that they are made to sense an uncertain and liminal field around them. The prosumer thus finds themselves in an ideological field that is created by aesthetics. They consume and re-present the reality they are presented with to them, a position that lies between experience and presentation, illusion and reality at an intersection of formats, genres, and devices. In this seemingly transformative field, the prosumer is activated to avidly perform mediated roles, deriving the cherished gratifications intended in the mediated triggers. The prosumer's power to create content that may simulate news evolves to understand such features as selectivity and invisibility.

Although these sequences, visible fulfillments, and invisible evacuations might appear to be most suitable to the way television platforms practice news, might we argue that they apply to other platforms—print, digital, social media, and other emerging forms? The process we engaged with earlier—the approach of a news platform from incident with the purpose of convert it into a media event, a media spectacle, and a myth—appears to apply to other platforms; yet, it needs to be tested. Hence, the scope for engagement with the ideology of platforms' aesthetic features and their practices would appear fecund and diverse. This is especially so if a researcher were to gather these norms around specific empirical cases. Examples of such common objectives are all around us, but let us specifically take the treatment of democracy as a case in point. Perhaps a contemporary theme in what critics are touting as the decline of democracy around the world would serve as a handy theme. We may commonly observe that news media across platforms, in their dissemination of modernity, use nationalism as a metaphor, a synecdoche, or an emblem. A national news channel employs stories that appeal to a nationwide audience by drawing common intersections of mores, but by using specific locations to set these themes in. Still, the agenda of nationalism, a unified narration of a diverse nation, continues.

Yet, as we recognize today, the outcomes might differ on such parameters as platform ownership. One of the longest public protest rallies in India's history occurred in 2020-21, lasting more than a year, when farmers protested reform laws that would make their incomes less protected and more market-driven. As the farmers marched toward the capital city of New Delhi, the alarmed Modi government tried its best to curtail the intensity of this protest by barb-wiring the city. The news media, on their part, carried all sorts of narrative stories including ones that placed the farmers as rich and privileged, as replete with anti-national elements that had infiltrated the crowds, and in general detrimental to a national agenda of modernity. Rather than going to the hinterlands to obtain deeper insights, the media was contented in covering the protesting farmers from an easily reachable distance from their studios in Noida, adjacent to New Delhi. In early 2024, the farmers have been resumed their protest. This time, the police has been even more brutal, landing tear gas from drones. The farmers allege police brutality resulted in deaths. However, in the absence of mediated evidence, the farmers resort to independent videos and connecting with independent YouTubers to tell their truth. In contrast, in February 2020, US President Donald Trump's visit to Ahmedabad was one of the most prolifically covered media events that year. The coverage showcased the grandeur of the largest sports stadium in the world, happy crowds, prosperity. If, oddly, Trump had visited an Indian village, perhaps the decked-up location would be even closer to the original Potemkin village of Catherine's Russia.

Finally, let us turn to media literacy as an outcome. Regardless of platforms, the ideological formulations in this article might persuade us to recast media literacy differently from current understandings—as a norm in the mediated design of the montage that is laid out for us. In turn, that approach might coax us to look beyond the intended meanings and deriving extraneously researched interpretations. Such a literate media prosumer punctures and ruptures the palimpsest upon which beautiful reality is constructed using the agreed function of the media. Even so, such a prosumer, countered by eclectic interpretations and unable to leave the field, remains transfixed like Derrida's ghost. There is immobilization even in action.

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Conflict of interests

The author confirms having declared no conflict of interests.