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***Is this just a story? Friendships and fictions for speculative alliances.***

**The Yugantar film collective (1980-83)**

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ABSTRACT

*Idhi Katha Matramena /Is this just a story?* (1983) is one of three short films made by the feminist film collective, Yugantar (1980-83). Through a collaborative process with members of the activist and research collective Stree Shakhti Sanghatana, the film developed into an improvised fiction. The collective's self-reflective debates, or activist 'study' (Harney and Moten 2013) on the manifold layers and subtlety of physical and emotional violence within the family, including their own hitherto unspoken experiences, brought forth novel aesthetic vocabularies affording new female subjectivities on-screen. Those in turn offered a new political language that entered the autonomous women's movement in India, off-screen. I argue for the political as constituted in the interstices between activism, research and the creative collective process of film-making, rather than political film as either advocacy for a set political agenda or a position of autonomous creative/artistic practice and thought. I particularly stress legacies of feminist fiction's 'passionate constructions' (Haraway

1988: 585), i.e. experimental film practice that is specifically cultivated out of collective study and the complexities of feminist friendship, forging a process of collective imagination as speculative politics. Thinking from Yugantar's contextually situated practice as an expansion of the possible, I join arguments for fiction and speculation as modes of feminist intervention in South Asian film, activism and discourse. Rather than stressing an *authentically Indian* legacy of feminist film, however, this exploration of *Idhi Katha Matramena* highlights collective aesthetic practices that build solidarities within the context of India, and through speculative cinematic friendships across space/time localities of radical change. The text thus probes *Yugantar's* past practice as a pertinent spectre for our present future.

#### KEYWORDS

feminist documentary

women's movement in India

domestic violence

fiction

living archives

cinematic friendships

#### **A flashback to start**

Lalita (played by Lalita K.) a young woman and the main character of *Idhi Katha Matramena/Is This Just a Story?* (Yugantar collective, 1983) walks fast and firm. She passes a stretch of wall covered with facial cream advertisements showing women

smiling while applying beauty products. Then she passes walls in various states of decay bearing political slogans, in Telugu and English: ‘*Chalo Vijayawada*/a call for a state conference’; ‘*Kudu gudda ivvaleni desam oka desama?*/A nation that does not provide food and clothing, can it really be called a nation?’; ‘We want ...’ and ‘Feed the mouths without bombs...’<sup>1</sup> We hear Lalita’s inner voice:

When I would return from the office my head used to spin. What are the jobs I had to do today? Buy milk formula for my daughter. Finish the four letters tomorrow I couldn’t do today. I forgot to buy the coconut for my mother-in-law again. Often I would feel I was going mad. (Deepa Dhanraj [trans.])<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of the film, after having survived a suicide attempt, Lalita walks again. She is out on a busy road, navigating the traffic and the rain with confidence to reach a bus stop. ‘But I have decided one thing Rama, this will never happen with me again’, Lalita’s voice tells her friend.

Steady walking, contemplation and articulation of one’s own ways of being, exhaustion and depression, radical politics as backdrop and horizon, the possibility of, and in, friendship and an open speculative end, are potent features of the half-hour improvised fiction, *Idhi Katha Matramena*, as well as of the social-political context and the creative, activist practices that engendered it.

The feminist film collective Yugantar/Change,<sup>3</sup> was established in Hyderabad in 1980 by Deepa Dhanraj, Abha Baiya, Navroze Contractor and Meera Rao, and the feminist

activist and research collective *Stree Shakti Sangathana/Women's Power Organisation*, hereafter SSS) was founded in 1978 in Hyderabad.<sup>4</sup> Both collectives developed a collaborative film-making practice, which provided me with a situated and material starting point to engage with legacies of feminist activist practice, and expanded a documentary repertoire in India by questioning available political vocabularies.

In the end there is this possibility of a friendship. (Dhanraj 2009)<sup>5</sup>

I first encountered *Idhi Katha Matramena* in 2002, through Dhanraj's vivid and passionate recounting to me of memories of making and showing the film. What has stayed with me since (without seeing the film until 2011) is a strong evocation of *possibility*, stimulated by a historical moment of radical transformation. This possibility arose through the energy released by building political friendships embedded in the crafting of an improvised fiction out of activist research. Friendship and fiction are what I 'look back' at here in order to project forward speculative alliances. Looking back to project forward is my conceptual approach and political ethos as an hauntology for our present future (Fisher 2012:18f). Dhanraj and I are also collaborating on converting fragile 16mm prints into digital formats and locating them on an online platform that can situate Yugantar's films through varied past and present conjunctions, for future encounters with new publics.<sup>6</sup> Friendship is crucial to our collaboration too, but it does not eliminate our different geopolitical situated-ness, or the structural and institutional conditions that support and restrain us in dissimilar ways.

While exploring legacies of feminist film and activist practice, I draw upon rich debates on friendship as feminist politics, and speculative fiction as ‘passionate construction’ (Haraway 1988: 585), for other possible worlds. Here I am thinking with different trajectories of friendship: as a chosen a-filiation, and as Leela Gandhi suggests, as a ‘signifier for all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation’ to ‘seek expression [...]’ for an ‘improvisational politics’ (2006: 10-19).<sup>7</sup> I see sustained activism as vital for friendship-based affiliations (e.g. in radical queer contexts) and Haraway’s (2016) call to ‘make kin’ to foster wider and new solidarities. This approach requires us to address the empirical, social, political, and discursive differences between people, in order to problematise assumptions of automatic bonding or a pre-given sisterhood.<sup>8</sup> The different lived experiences influenced by privileges, or the lack thereof, through class, caste, religion, region, race, age or sexuality have extensively shaped the histories of the autonomous women’s movement in India and its processes of splitting and affiliating. (I will discuss the dynamics of this movement in the course of this article). These differences continue to impact possibilities and difficulties arising for common struggles, common languages or shared spaces (Kumar 1993; Ray 2000). As expressed by Dhanraj, members of Yugantar and SSS are highly aware of their class or caste privileges and how these inform their activism, research and film-making:

How do you *create* a collaborative practice, not only for hearing the experience, but how do you *generate theory and analyses together*. [...]

That for me has been a personal legacy. *You really struggle together*, to come up not only with the form, but with an understanding, with an insight, something that really goes against the grain that disturbs what you

are presenting. There is a role in *how that intervention is fashioned*.

(Dhanraj in Chhachhi, Dhanraj and Dutta, 2014; emphasis added)

In the sections that follow, I highlight the possibilities enabled by building friendships, on and off screen, through the evolving concerted practices of two collectives that developed a new filmic language out of their simultaneous (and at times competing) practices as activists, researchers, film-makers, organisers, or teachers, alongside being wives, mothers and single women.<sup>9</sup> The collectives' self-reflective debates on the manifold layers of physical – and the often hidden or unspoken emotional – violence within the family, brought forth a fictional or, I argue, a speculative documentary format. The making of a generative fiction emerges from hard-won negotiations during cathartic night-long debates, affective gatherings, life changing bonds, collective courage as well as battles with difference, privilege, disappointment and painful separations.

### **Feminist fictions: a flashback to political friendship**

*Idhi Katha Matramena?* is told as a flashback, the narrative structure divided across four scenes that, through close-ups, focus on the intimate and conversational space between two women in a hospital, after the attempted suicide. The film is framed by scenes of female friendship, moments of pause and reflection, survival and possibility. After her friend and colleague Rama offers her a place to stay for a few days, we see Lalita confidently crossing a busy road to reach a bus stop.

Within the open edges of the film, the story line develops through short sketches that

are not fully elaborated, but that create the atmosphere of a domestic space in which Lalita is progressively 'suffocating'. The camera often stays focused on Lalita's facial expression or body postures while we hear the commands from her husband or in-laws off screen, or while they pass her by quickly, not giving her much attention: 'Hurry up, you haven't even made the tea yet!'; 'The vegetable is burning, are you going to look at it or not?'; 'Lalita, the baby is crying, go and take a look. Hai Ram, she won't even let me do my puja in peace'. Comments are made about her without addressing her: 'What's this, son? Daughter-in-law is always studying for her B.A, how will the house run like this?' Her male colleague says: 'All these women want jobs. But when they come to the office, they will be late'. Attention and affection towards Lalita only comes from her female colleague, Rama, who notices that she does not take a lunch break at work, visits her at home for tea and later goes to the hospital, after Lalita's suicide attempt.

Much of the film takes place inside the domestic space that increasingly closes in on Lalita. We witness her resigned body and dejected facial expression, we see the household deteriorating, and we hear her inner voice (as voice-over):

In the beginning things were fine, the two of us [her husband and Lalita] used to go to the cinema occasionally. How did he leave this morning without saying a word? Before my first baby was born I was very afraid. But how could I talk to him about it, where was the intimacy between us? I put up with everything, maybe it was entirely my fault. I thought if I do my B.A. I would feel peaceful in my mind. I had no more strength left. I had thought, if I had a son, everything would be all right between us. I had

prayed so hard for a son. But a daughter was born again.

Throughout the 25-minute film, Lalita reflects on her situation; her emotions, fears and desires. She feels crushed by the demands of the everyday, by loneliness, the burden of silence and lack of intimacy and affection, her lack of courage and strength to speak out (although she does once, when her husband leaves their baby crying), her loss of sense of self and feelings of guilt and responsibility for her own situation.

Violence in *Idhi Katha Matramena?* is constructed through speech acts, through scenes emphasising loneliness and through indications of unwanted sex and an atmosphere of sexually abusive subjectification. Songs suggestive of sex, such as *Mirchi lagi to mushkil hogi/ If the heat of chillies touches you it will be difficult* play from the husband's radio before he goes to bed; while Lalita's friends visit her for tea he plays cards with his colleagues. The men then decide to watch *Uski Raatein/ Her Nights* (1978), a soft porn film.

*Idhi Katha Matramena?* builds a narrative of subjection and simultaneously of a female subject becoming aware of the reasons for her suffocation. It is improvised by members of the two collectives and their friends, shot in one member's house, over the course of one week, with little film stock and only one camera, operated by Navroze Contractor. The participants had agreed that spoken testimonies or documentary images used as evidence of the women affected would not reflect the nuanced understanding of emotional domestic violence that emerged through the collectives' discussions, a process of transformation that continued in the making of the film as an improvised fiction. Their own becoming aware of structures of

subjection, the power of quotidian violence and of what Scott called the politics of the constructions of experience (Scott 1992: 37) provoked speculative possibilities as to how they might resist these forms of subjection. The collective's film imagines improvised fiction as an alternative means of expressing women's experiences, a process that evokes a multi-layered understanding of female subjectivity. Furthermore, the space of the possible through political feminist friendship and affiliation that the two collectives had created, found its way into the film-making endeavour and onto the screen through the framing of the film's narrative through hope embodied in an open, speculative end.

There is a beautiful moment in the end where there is a glimmer of hope, which is in female friendship. This woman is going through a terrible time; she has girls; it's a classic thing; and when she gets the second daughter she drinks some poison and then she's in the hospital and her friend [...] comes to visit her. It's a flashback, because it's about 'why did you do it'? [This ending] was new at the time. Look at all those guys [the film-makers], [Satyajit] Ray and [Ritwik] Ghatak; women die, they all die [in their films]. They either commit suicide or they want to live but they can't live because they have tuberculosis, or they drown. (Dhanraj 2009, interview)

*Idhi Katha Matramena?* creates a 'new dramaturgy of the intelligible' and 'frame[s] a new fabric of common experience' (Rancière 2010: 141) by claiming the fictional on screen for a feminist politics and a new female subjectivity. More specifically, the 'new fabric of common experience' comes into being in the spaces between intensive

collective study of the experiences of violence that in turn generate the filmic form.

Looking at *Idhi Katha Matramena?* after more than thirty years, several members of the collective recounted the intense reactions of diverse female audiences across the country during multiple screenings that took place in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Calling it their ‘hit’ film amongst the three Yugantar films, Dhanraj and Lalita K. described how women would cry during the screenings, how there would be collective silence afterwards before lively discussions would start, drawing together women from very different backgrounds. The film spoke across class, caste, age and region and struck a chord that surpassed (in its affective response) the political events and organising that Yugantar initiated through their first two films (see below). Other than the empathy evoked through a documentary image of violence, the imaginary space of female subjectivity, new at that time, seemed to have conjured an openness that allowed a different relation between screen and a mainly female audience. A more expansive analysis of audience reactions might usefully address a sense of a commonality through shared vulnerabilities across class, caste and religion, which nevertheless culminates in hope through female friendship.<sup>11</sup>

In hindsight, Yugantar and SSS members critiqued their creation of ‘cardboard characters’ in their films, however, I would argue that the husband and in-law family become a mere backdrop allowing the female characters to develop in considerable depth. The men speak briefly, often in incomplete sentences, whereas Lalita is evoked as a complex transforming character; a clear antidote to most fiction films available at the time.<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière observed that ‘the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought’ (2004: 38), and, one might add, shared; an epithet that seems to hold true

in the case of *Idhi Katha Matramena*? Rather than the ‘mainstream fiction of the police order’ that creates and confirms consensus (Rancière 2010: 148), the fiction in *Idhi Katha Matramena*? frames a dissensus:

[...] a way of changing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms, and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and collective. (Rancière 2010: 141)

Affective political relations led to fiction as inter-subjective space on and around the screen conceiving new possibilities for filmic political articulation in the making of *Idhi Katha Matramena*?. While moving beyond the then available political or theoretical frames of reference, the film also expands what was intelligible as female subjectivity on screen in the context described, creating a new viewing experience through a feminist fiction with open, speculative ends.

While this essay prioritises a discussion of *Idhi Katha Matramena*, I also locate aspects of the fictional attained through collaboration in Yugantar’s first two films: *Molkarin /Maid Servant* (1981), and *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali /Tobacco Ember* (1982). For *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali*, the tobacco factory workers restaged scenes that narrate their daily work routines as well as their strike actions while the voice-over was edited from diverse conversations and post rough-cut screening debates, thereby becoming a collective (political) voice rather than an individual testimony (Wolf 2013a). Yugantar’s films therefore become an important legacy for discursive, aesthetic and activist expansions of the real within the context of feminist

documentary practice. Moreover, I speculatively align the evocative question of *Idhi Katha Matramena?* with Donna Haraway's plea that '[it] matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with' (2013: 138). It matters to write histories of new documentary film languages from the practices of a feminist film collective. It matters to write histories of feminist fictions from the collaborative process of two collectives working in Hyderabad, India, during the early 1980s. It matters to align myself as a white European scholar to feminist scholars from diverse backgrounds – following the speculative politics of friendships outlined in the sections that follow – to create (thinking) spaces where imagining change and a future is possible, and, in fact, a collective responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

#### **'It created intense political hopes and passions': Sketching a context**

It's difficult now, in this new century, to recapture or imagine the enormous optimism of those early years of what is called the Second Wave of the women's movement in India. For close to two decades from the mid 1970s to the 1990s, it was buoyant, energetic and hugely innovative, drawing from and contributing to other social movements of the time; part of the struggles for civil liberties and democratic rights in the country. Inheritor too, of radical youth and student movements in India and across the world; of anti-war, pro-peace politics; of regional and international campaigns on the environment and against cultures of war and violence. [...] *It created intense political hopes and passions.* (Menon 2011: xii , emphasis added)

My conversations with members of Yugantar and SSS were charged by evocative accounts of the energy and activities described above, in the context of post-Emergency India,<sup>14</sup> a period when new social and political collectives were formed and the autonomous women's movement – India's Second Wave feminism – emerged.<sup>15</sup>

Vasanth Kannabiran, one of the founding members of SSS stresses the important albeit ambivalent link SSS had with the powerful Marxist-Leninist parties and armed struggles during the Emergency in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>16</sup> SSS's research and activism ranges from working with women farmers and vegetable sellers to opposing import policies, advocating for women's health and women's safety by setting up women's shelters and hostels. Their extensive interviews with up to seventy women who had participated in the Telangana uprising led to the significant publication *We were making History* (SSS 1989: 275).<sup>17</sup> The group also supported those affected by the leakage of methyl-isocyanate from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal and was essential to the collective Hyderabad Ekta's resistance against communalism.<sup>18</sup> Members of SSS and Hyderabad Ekta collaborated with Dhanraj and Contractor on what was to become the first documentary film to record the politically engineered Hindu-Muslim violence in *Kya Hua is Shaher ko? /What has happened to this city?* (1985), filmed during the 1984 curfew following Hyderabad's communal riots.<sup>19</sup> While SSS's main focus was clearly on the many forms of social, economic and physical violence against women, their interventions also stretched the discourse of what were seen as gender and women's concerns. At the same time, they offered feminist perspectives to the wider political constituencies they worked with, thereby critiquing and expanding the radical left ideologies they themselves were formed by.

SSS changed the character of political discourse in Andhra Pradesh by being very visible through protests and campaigns, through demonstrations, revolutionary posters, case work support, agitations in public spaces, poetry, songs and street theatre (Kannabiran in Menon 2011: 125). Yugantar and SSS stressed that their practice was lead by the urgency of questions posed through the political movements to which they belonged, rather than being tied to a specific medium of expression or funding agendas.<sup>20</sup>

For example, the infamous Mathura and Rameeza Bi rape cases and their disputed court procedures in the late 1970s are repeatedly cited as having ignited much anger as well as intense campaigning, resulting in the police's criminalisation of custodial rape. They are now acknowledged as significant triggers that intensified agitations, which became the autonomous women's movement (Menon 2011: xv). Custodial rape cases, as well as the increasing visibility of dowry deaths, were matters of serious concern for SSS, addressed through research, writing, campaigning and the staging of street plays, practices that were well-established before working with Yugantar. Similarly, the Delhi-based group *Stree Sangharsh* devised a street play on dowry deaths called *Om Swaha* (performed throughout the early 1980s), which Menon, stressing the 'replenishing' and 'inclusive' creativity of the movement, described as 'iconic' and 'many an activist was galvanized into action after seeing' it (Menon 2011: xix).

Dhanraj and Baiya identify the revolutionary energy on university campuses, the civil liberty movement, the land right struggles as well as second wave feminism as the fertile ground that nurtured the creation of Yugantar in 1979-80. The impetus to

contribute to movement-building brought them to film-making even though, apart from Contractor (a trained cameraperson from The Film and Television Institute of India) and Dhanraj's apprenticeships with fiction film-makers, none had any formal film training.<sup>21</sup> After a period of extreme curtailment of civic rights, the anger, grief as well as a sense of possibility that emerged nurtured diverse creative practices and fostered an individual and collective political and artistic coming of age.<sup>22</sup>

The mid 1970s to 1980s also saw the birth of independent documentary film-making in India.<sup>23</sup> Anand Patwardhan's *Waves of Revolution* (1974) and *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) were crucial for this moment. Both films document the energy of widespread protest against state violence that was designed to crush resistance. Patwardhan filmed in the midst of the demonstrations, and captured public speeches while recording testimonies from those who had survived torture in prison. Both films are invaluable documents of their time, and were often referred to by Dhanraj as decisive reference points even though her own practice with Yugantar developed in different ways. While Yugantar arguably marks a feminist beginning of similarly independent film-making in India, I accentuate its creative and filmic contribution not merely as 'replenishing' the autonomous women's movement (Menon 2011: xix), but as constitutive of it or 'interanimated' by it (Sangari 2013: 115).

### **'It was our own political education': Study 'against the grain' for other imaginations**

All the choices were determined by how you could intervene. Was the intervention expanding the debate, was it changing the discourse? And

then looking backwards and thinking about what would be the appropriate medium that worked for us, politically and also ethically in this context. It was organic. It was our own political education. I think the only thing I can say is that at least we were conscious that we had to grow, that it wasn't enough. (Dhanraj 2009, interview)

All of the three short films Yugantar produced between 1980 and 1983 were developed with an existing or emerging political constituency. The collective thus came into conversation with ongoing discourses about maidservants in Pune when developing *Molkarin /Maid servant* (1981),<sup>24</sup> with female tobacco factory workers in Nipani for *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali /Tobacco Embers* (1982), a film that sketches the history of the all-women trade union representing 3000 female workers,<sup>25</sup> and with members of the SSS for *Idhi katha matramena* (1983). Both Dhanraj and Baiya emphasised the continuous learning that took place while developing their film language from the needs of the collectives they engaged with. Their intention was to create 'political trust' based on the urge to 'intervene' in forging solidarity across disparate class and caste backgrounds (Dhanraj 2009, interview). They acknowledged that the means of production were still in the hands of the film collective, but stressed, as we have heard, the 'struggle[ing] together, to come up with not only the form but also an understanding, an insight, something that really goes against the grain eventually, that disturbs what you are presenting' (Dhanraj 2014).

In the spirit of a collective becoming of one's politics 'always insufficient and future' (Derrida quoted in Gandhi 2006: 19), Lalita K. stressed how each SSS public action was immediately followed by self-reflective debate within the group. What was the

effect and purpose of their activist work? Was the right medium used? How had the action itself altered their understanding of the cause of concern, how had it raised new questions, and how were they to move on from those moments of learning, both in terms of theory as well as through activism? (Lalita K. 29 March 2013, interview).

All members of SSS I talked to, emphasised how research and activism nurtured and challenged each other, a position highlighted by Dhanraj herself when encountering SSS's work.

You have to study *and* take up issues. [...] These were heady times; we read a lot. [...] We read Engels several times, we read about the Chinese struggle, the Speak Bitterness campaign, we read Betty Friedan, while we organised in bastis and took up issues of water. [...] Some people were uncomfortable with us. (Lalita K. 29 March 2013, interview)

Amidst intense debates in the autonomous women's movement on the subject of murder and rape, SSS embarked on a research process to explore the reasons behind the very high rates of suicides amongst women in their early twenties. At that time, attention focused on women from the lowest income groups, so SSS expanded their research to what they called middle-class and professional women. Members of SSS visited hospitals and wards talking to women about their reasons for attempting suicide before collaborating with Yugantar. SSS had played an active part in creating public spaces in Telangana where dowry murder and rape were now openly discussed using travelling street theatre, role play and songs as a vehicle. Their research into suicide shone a light on the institutions through which discrimination operated,

ultimately leading to include in their analysis the interrogation of the family as a prominent site of oppression. However, the 1980s political climate and its affiliations with Marxist-Leninist politics did not accept the family as a legitimate subject for investigation, as it lay outside the hierarchy of issues in political and academic realms, where labour and the political economy were stressed, and dowry was discussed mainly through a Marxist lens focused on the commodification of marriage bonds.

In an environment where feminist debates on domestic violence concentrated mainly on rape and dowry death, SSS took the radical step of broadening the spectrum to include emotional violence. Furthermore, SSS and Yugantar's self-critical reflections on their own practices, materials and terminologies involved an intense period of approximately ten days during which both collectives came together to explore violence through their own experiences. Lalita K. and Melkote recount that many of them had full-time jobs and were running families and so could only meet after all their other, domestic tasks were completed, evoking the familial structures that delimited their lives. Tharu and Lalita K.'s (1991: 29f) problematising experience as political knowledge, resonates with Joan W. Scott's famous critique that 'the project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces the terms' (Scott 1992: 25).

The following helps us focus on dimensions of consciousness-raising that are often blurred over as the immediacy, intimacy, and consciousness-raising was as carefully structured a political exercise as the 'speaking bitterness' campaigns of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. [...] less a spontaneous outburst and more a reading against the grain, which was

often so risky – socially and psychically – for the individual that they needed the combined resources of a group to make the ‘reading’ possible.

(Tharu and Lalita K. 1991: 29f)

Here, I would like to speculatively create an affiliation with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s discussion of study and common intellectual practice.

When I think about the way we use the term ‘study’, I think we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of rehearsal – being in a workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting in a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. [...] To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice. What’s important is to recognize that that has been the case – because that recognition allows you to access a whole, varied, alternative history of thought. (Moten in Harney and Moten 2013: 110)

For Harney and Moten, ‘study’ becomes a critique and parasitic use of the neoliberal university that continuously shrinks space and time for study while the administrative and marketing apparatus expands; a familiar condition for many scholars today and certainly a condition that heightens the value and ‘cathartic effect’ of night long debates with ‘dams bursting’ and stories that ‘needed to come out’ (Dhanraj 2009).

My projecting onto ‘time to study and debate’ is not, however, to romanticise a radical past. Members of both Yugantar and SSS spoke of the intensity involved in overcoming the anxiety that they felt when talking about themselves. Kannabiran addressed, in a celebratory as well as self-critical manner, the excitement and strength that came from these collective practices. She ‘realised the meaning of friendship, the bonding that shared hopes and beliefs make for, the pleasure of exploring new truths and ideas’ (Kannabiran in Menon 2011: 125) while recognising the strain women experienced working simultaneously on different causes and with different means, added to each woman’s productive and reproductive tasks. In a wider discussion of the women’s movement, Kannabiran observed symptoms of burn out and a lack of recreational activities in the group (quoted in Menon 2011: 132f); an unease also addressed in my conversation with Baiya and Lalita K (both 2013). Disparities in background and expectations of the group would also lead to some women feeling excluded and created dynamics that were difficult to respond to from within the group (Kannabiran & Kannabiran 1997). As many today face exhaustion from political engagement and collective work, undertaken in conjunction with salaried work, the above reflections on fatigue (burn out), conflicts and ‘break-ups’ need to be part of the conversations across generations.

Given my own geographically and temporally removed location, I see my task here as expanding on the possibilities of political friendship precisely in the face of differences and complications. It is worth emphasising that for almost ten years, members of SSS refused to join larger groups to acquire more visibility, or to become an institution with prescribed membership. They came together to resist being bound by affiliations with political parties or development and research institutions. During

this time, they ‘refuse[d] alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression’ (Gandhi 2006: 10). The later founding of NGOs and research departments in universities that provided a salary to women who needed to earn their living, however, changed the dynamic of the group and led to their eventual dispersal. Nevertheless, the possibility of friendship crystallised from those affective self-reflective debates amongst SSS and Yugantar members whilst researching beyond their own situated-ness.

### **Is this just a history?**

Dhanraj and Lalita K. asked me if one could speak of a feminist film history within the context of India, given that the discourse of European feminist film theory was not influential at the time of Yugantar. I am hesitant to claim that the creation of fiction as a feminist documentary methodology has had a decisive and critical role within the context of the autonomous women’s movement in India (and in the politics, arts and cultures that it generated). By augmenting the interstice between activism, research and the creative process of film-making, however, I hope to have thrown light on a trajectory of ‘documentary practice through fiction’ creating an expansion of existing political and aesthetic vocabularies. The use of fiction does not arise from the lack of a critical understanding of European and North American feminist film theory contexts, ones in which mainstream fiction (‘the police’ in Rancière’s term) was rejected. In these contexts, fiction had a reputation of luring its audiences with set plots, transmitting underlying ideologies that served the patriarchal order (Johnston 1979). By contrast, the Yugantar collective’s use of fiction is here proposed as a

legacy and spectre for an expansion of the documentary mode, away from a mimetic realist form (Wolf 2007 and 2014).

Like Yungantar, the artist, Sheba Chhachhi's performative still photography series, *Seven Lives and a Dream* (1980-91) also works through fiction collectively and inter-subjectively as a feminist critique of the camera in its role as a documenting and capturing device. Chhachhi moved from documenting the women's movement as an active member to the point where she developed a strong discomfort with the fact that her images of women protesting in public space had become iconic and were being appropriated by the media as fixed images of the protesting woman. Chhachhi was also troubled by the power relations between photographer and subject that she saw inevitably reiterated through the process of photography. Chhachhi responded to this discomfort by inviting women into a collaborative process through which they would stage themselves, choosing places and objects that would reflect their own subjectivity. What was important for Chhachhi was firstly the creation of portraits of empowerment, but equally she valued the process of image-making itself, as one that stresses the inter-subjective and unhinges a subject-object division (Chhachhi in Chhachhi, Dhanraj, Dutta 2014).<sup>26</sup>

In *Memories of Fear* (1995), the film-maker/activist, Madhusree Dutta similarly inserted fictionalised episodes of girls and young women growing up with the fear of sexualised intimidation in public spaces. These sequences featured between talking head testimonies of domestic abuse. They were intended to address the stark limitations that she and Flavia Agnes found in the law's discourse of evidence and witness accounts in cases of domestic violence. The film-maker, Paromita Vohra's

creation of a fictional semi-autobiographical director found in her film *Unlimited Girls* (2003) expands understandings of who might be counted as a feminist while sketching a history of the Indian women's movement as a history of conversations and reflections (Wolf 2007). None of these fictions are 'just stories'.

The history of Yugantar and SSS's collective learning through political friendship, of deriving fiction from an activist documentary ethos and research, are spectres of a speculative trajectory that fostered a new, feminist film aesthetic in the context of India, expanding into frames to live by. Without assuming sameness, equality and a conflict-less arrival at a common language in film or activist struggle, the complexities of feminist friendship are valued for their ability to forge a process of collective imagination, as speculative politics.

Situating the films in this way is not an exercise in historicisation or authentication, for there are many possible interpretations of the memories they evoke, nor do I argue for a singular and separate account of feminist film in India. Rather I offer this text to participate in current debates on mutually productive relations between past and present political movements and art/film practices and forms. I approach the possibility of aligning myself with the potential of past feminist forms of radicality and their explorations of pioneering aesthetic and political articulations. I subscribe to Walter Benjamin's call to actively link to the unfinished possibles of struggles of the past,<sup>27</sup> to create what he calls 'now' times that interrupt the 'empty' and 'homogenous' time of linear progress (quoted in Wolf 2013a). I do not approach the films discussed here as the remains of scratched analogue 16mm film material, rescued from the private cellars and forgotten stores of sound studios and film labs

merely in order to fill a gap in film archives or histories. Instead, I speculate with their spectral and hauntological qualities to intervene in understandings of a progressive temporality towards heterogeneous time and anachronisms (Fisher 2012: 18f). For they are not just histories.

I propose to ‘think with’ Yugantar’s explorations of ‘how intervention is fashioned’ (Dhanraj 2014) not to propose a formula for feminist fiction nor a set reading of the film, but rather to call for a reflection on how we collectively understand the forms of violence to which we are subject, so that we may fiction our lives otherwise. Thinking with Yugantar and *SSS* is no dwelling in nostalgias of radical pasts, no denial of the ruptures that occur in each collective process, no assuming an easy alliance from my own historical and geographical distance. Instead, it is relevant to us today as an act of labouring towards feminist and cinematic solidarities and friendships, friendships that lead towards another form of world-forming. Since Yugantar’s films have found a temporary home in the Arsenal film archive in Berlin, I believe new friendships have been built across the shelves:

Sara Gomez’s *De Cierta Manera* (1974) is a love story where melodramatic tension repeatedly breaks out into documentary modes in order to address the complexity of a revolution’s gains and the remaining questions of class and machismo. The film’s eclectic mix of fiction and documentary creates complex male and female characters and a critical view on the Cuban revolution while clearly being embedded in it. Sarah Maldoror’s *Sambizanga* (France/Angola, 1972) confronts colonial violence as well as the Angolan liberation movement through fiction based on a novel by José Luandino Viera, and an experimental use of sound. Working closely with the Popular

Movement for the Liberation of Angola, *Sambizanga* creates a cinematic space for women's experiences in the Angolan liberation movement. *Scènes de Grèves en Vendée* (1968), a short film made by female workers at the Cousseaut factory in Cerisay (France) uses animation. The women in the film are employed to sew shirts. They go on strike, start their own production process and sell their shirts on the streets. They return to the factory, but reflect on their change of consciousness, their different relationship to work after their action. The German feminist, Helke Sander plays the female freelance photographer in her film, *The all-around reduced personality* (1978), highlighting leftist machismo as well as conflicts within her feminist art collective. The main character reflects on her precarious and gendered work context through a third-person voice-over.

What I propose is an open end through a re-visiting of seemingly dispersed and unrelated feminist elaborations of political fiction. I propose this to unfold the possibilities of cinematic friendship towards speculative feminist ciné-geographies of the past that might fuel spaces to think new political affiliations in the now.

‘It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with [...]’ (Haraway, 2013: 138)

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Nicole Wolf is Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research and curatorial projects concentrate on political cinemas and experimentations with documentary modalities as relational practice. Her engagement with South Asian art, activist practices and feminisms informs her inquiry into international cinematic/political alliances for global publics of conflict and dissonance. Her more recent interests include the poetics of artistic and interventionist evidence narratives in the context of critical ecologies, indigenous cosmologies and permaculture practices and their ethos. Amongst other publications she is editor, with Bhaskar Sarkar of 'Indian Documentary Studies: Contours of a Field', *Bioscope. South Asian Screen Studies* (2012). She participated in the interdisciplinary arts project 'Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice' (2011-2013) through her research, writing and editing of a DVD with a restored version of Deepa Dhanraj's *Kya Hua is Shaheer Ko* (1985). The restoration

and research of the feminist collective *Yugantar*'s (1980-83) works is part of the current project 'Archive ausser sich', both projects by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art (Berlin).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These slogans of the All India Students Federation, the student wing of the Communist Party of India (AISF) are not all fully legible.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Hindi by Deepa Dhanraj and sent to the author by e-mail, May 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Sanskrit word for a transition period between two historical ages.

<sup>4</sup> SSS started as a group of fifteen women in 1978. Founding members were: Lalita K., Vasantha Kannabiran, Rama Melkote, Uma Maheshwari, Susie Tharu, Veena Shatrugna.

<sup>5</sup> Deepa Dhanraj interviewed by the author, 19 December 2009, in Bangalore.

<sup>6</sup> I began the restoration of *Yugantar*'s films as participant of 'Living Archive - Archive work as a contemporary artistic and curatorial practice' 2011-2013. This process will be finalized as part of the current 'Archive ausser sich' (2017-2020). Both projects of *Arsenal - Institute for Film and Video Art* (Berlin) (Wolf 2013a and 2013b).

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi here makes use of an ethos of Derridean hospitality (Derrida 1997). For Gandhi, 'friendship' is a 'lost trope in anticolonial thought' that she uncovers in re-reading a-filiations across the colonial divide, against the structural violence of colonialism (Gandhi 2006:14).

<sup>8</sup> Writings on the problematic assumption of equality and sisterhood are abundant regarding international feminist friendships and in the Indian context. See Kannabiran

and Kannabiran (1997), Kannabiran (2010), Kumar, (1993) and Ray (2000). For a filmic reference, see Paromita Vohra's *Unlimited Girls* (2002) that proposes the online chat room as a place of engaged debate for political friendships.

<sup>9</sup> The importance of friendship in the autonomous women's movement in India is highlighted by feminist groups' names, such as *Saheli* (female friend).

<sup>10</sup> Part of the digitising and continuous research process is to interview those who screened Yugantar's films during the early 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> This could be further developed in relation to Judith Butler's exploration of the possibility of resistance that lies in shared vulnerability (Butler, 2015: 123ff).

<sup>12</sup> *Idhi Katha Matramena?* can be linked to art house fiction films by female directors of the same decade, such as Aparna Sen, Aruna Raje, Sai Paranjpye, Vijaya Mehta, Prema Karanth.

<sup>13</sup> For a history of the feminist speculative, see Åsberg; Thiele; Van der Tuin, (2015). And for feminist scholars in India aligned to the speculative: Menon (2011), Tharu and Lalita (1991) and Sangari (2002, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Indira Gandhi called the Emergency on 25 June 1975, ending on 23 March 1977.

<sup>15</sup> See Kumar (1993) and Menon (2011) for accounts of the development of the 'autonomous women's movement' in India. This was distinct from the wider women's movement comprising of women's groups within political parties, religious groups or other organisations.

<sup>16</sup> See the *Progressive Organisation for Women* (POW), specific to Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>17</sup> The Telangana uprising was a farmer's rebellion against the feudal lords of the Telangana region and the princely state of Hyderabad between 1946 and 1951.

<sup>18</sup> In the Indian context, communalism refers to antagonisms and (violent) conflict between religious communities, here Hindus and Muslims.

<sup>19</sup> I explore SSS's influence on EKTA's work in the booklet accompanying the new DVD release of Dhanraj's *Kya Hua is Shaher ko* (Wolf 2013c).

<sup>20</sup> The development of social/political activism into 'issue-based, salaried NGO work' (1990s) was often raised in debates regarding its impact on documentary film. Swati Bandi (2015) explores the impact of institutionalised human rights on feminist film-makers.

<sup>21</sup> Researcher/activist, Abha Baiya co-founded Jagori and Saheli (both in Delhi) and is a crucial figure in NGO contexts working on women's rights. Meera Rao worked in advertising, and is now based in the United States.

<sup>22</sup> Adajania historicises the battle between culture and politics in her discussion of Navjot Altaf's artistic trajectory with Pragatisheel Yuva Morcha/ Progressive Youth Movement (PROYOM) and explores the spectrum of political art, from the employment of artists for propaganda to the support of cultural practice as a singular independent endeavour emerging from political debates (Adajania 2016).

<sup>23</sup> I refer here to productions that are not funded, commissioned or linked to any governmental or corporate body (Wolf 2013d).

<sup>24</sup> *Molkarin* 'exposes the oppressive working conditions of hundreds of maidservants in Pune and reveals how women came together to form an organisation to fight for their rights' (from Yugantar documentation).

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed exploration of *Tobacco Embers*, see Wolf (2013a).

<sup>26</sup> Chhachhi extended this inter-subjective space further into the viewing space through her installation *Record/Resist* (2013), where she revisits her own archive and creates an exhibition space where an expanded temporality is almost literally experienced by the viewer herself.

<sup>27</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History* (1940).