



Cultural Calculus of Netflix Phenomenon: Investigating Relational Matrix of Serialised Narratives, Algorithmic Operations, and Late Capitalism

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Abstract: The emergence and popularity of streaming media is leaving a deep enough impact on the terrain of popular culture and entertainment. A considerable body of scholarship is steadily coming together addressing questions of technology, aesthetics, social and psychological behaviour, and legalities involved, to name a few. In my proposed article, I will argue that the specificity of streaming media as a cultural phenomenon entails two significant points; firstly, a new mode of narrative distribution which has resulted in a consumption habit commonly known as binge watching, wherein entire seasons of serialised narratives are being released and often consumed at once, and secondly, an intricate and advanced system of recommendation which has been employed by the streaming platforms to present a user with an already curated choice of relevant titles to watch. Taking off from these two points, this article will attempt a theoretical explanation of the streaming media phenomenon by taking into account the narrative mode and format, the centrality of an algorithmic recommendation system, and how these connections open up to broader questions about possible shifts within late capitalism.

Keywords: Streaming media, binge watching, seriality, algorithm, capitalism

Netflix and Chill: Introducing the discursive terrain for a new era in entertainment

The debate about the rapidly changing landscape of media and entertainment seemingly remains unsettled in the foreseeable future, especially in terms of locating the exact moment of shift. A dominant argument points to the emergence of digital technology and software-generated media content as a radical departure. More technologically driven proponents tend to steer the argument specifically toward the advent of portable devices which has left an indelible mark on both cognitive and cultural consequences of media consumption. Then there are more discursive attempts, taking



into account different shifts taking place on different fronts such as economy, technology, culture, and politics, bringing them together into a comprehensive theoretical explanation.¹

Despite the multiplicity of these arguments, which are already forming the core of a richly endowed scholarship on production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture in the advent of new media technologies, everyone involved seems to agree upon the undeniable fact that the first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a remarkable shift in media and cultural practices. For the purpose of this article, I would like to draw attention to another moment which is not entirely unrelated to what has been briefly mentioned above.

In February 2013, streaming media giant Netflix released the entire first season of their first original production *House of Cards* on their platform, a total of thirteen episodes at once. This event may seem less decisive as a paradigm shift, but within the specificities of circulation and consumption of audio-visual content in the span of the last decade, the consequence has been remarkable. With this series, Netflix completed its final stage of transformation from being a video-on-demand service or a content delivery service, into a producer of original content. Thereby, not only did Netflix become a media giant akin to Hollywood studios or television networks, but also opened the floodgates for the era of streaming platforms and streaming media. One can argue that Netflix producing and releasing an entire season of an original series can be considered a watershed moment, defining the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture ever since.

In this article, I intend to focus on the technological and cultural shifts with the advent of streaming media platforms and examine the new narrative consumption habits growing out of it. I seek to pursue these ideas in terms of rethinking certain existing questions about narrative modes and temporality. Furthermore, the article will argue that algorithms as statistical and cultural processes play a central role within the overall experience of narrative consumption in streaming platforms. I intend to conclude by bringing together these diverse strands, and argue for a correlation between such readings, and the possible mutations taking place within capitalism as a socio-economic matrix and cultural determinant.

¹ *Internet Television* (2004) edited by Eli Noam, Jo Groebel and Darcy Gerbarg focuses on a host of issues concerning the arrival of the internet and its ramifications in the context of entertainment media. *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovations in Digital Domains* (2004) edited by Gunnar Liestol, Andrew Morrison and Terje Rasmussen, and *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006) edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan are collections of essays which address the emergence and ramifications of digital media content and computer-generated images, especially in the domains of entertainment and gaming, from a multidisciplinary perspective. *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (2009) by Chuck Tyron casts a penetrating gaze into the question of new technologies and devices, exploring the questions of participatory culture, interactive and transmedia storytelling, and possible new distribution and consumption practices. For a more conceptual and discursive approach, the best entry point is perhaps Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) wherein he provides a systematic, historical, and philosophical explanation of the entire phenomenon. For a more specific approach towards 21st century media culture which accounts for software innovations, technological changes, advent of mobile devices, and broader socio-economic shifts, please look up *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2008) by Henry Jenkins.



Netflix has emerged as the forerunner in this new media-entertainment ecology, and consequently much of the early scholarship is also devoted to it.¹ Thus, the majority of my observations, references, and arguments also revolve around this particular platform. Besides, the other streaming platforms are all following the formal, organisational, and aesthetic principles similar to that of Netflix. Hence, the observations and arguments presented here can be extended beyond Netflix without the possibility of any misconception or methodological pitfall.

Binge watching: New consumption model, reorganised time, and rethinking seriality

Director David Fincher was quoted as saying, “The world of 7:30 on Tuesday nights, that's dead. A stake has been driven through its heart, its head has been cut off, and its mouth has been stuffed with garlic. The captive audience is gone” (Abele). Despite the hyperbolic purple prose, Fincher’s claim seems to be resolute as it suggests a clear break from all the previous practices of distributing and consuming serialised narratives. Such ideas and opinions are abundant in many of the works on streaming media mentioned earlier. There seems to be a consensus about streaming media completely transforming entertainment in the 21st century.

However, it needs to be pointed out that the idea of a clear break or complete transformation is a rather myopic way of evaluating such changes. Particularly talking about the so-called new aesthetics of the contemporary series format, the notion of 'Quality TV' serves as a direct antecedent as it played a determining role in shaping the taste and culture of consuming televised fiction, initially in the USA and then in other parts of the world. Owing to certain changes in broadcasting policies which liberated the networks from their dependence on sponsors and advertisers, they had greater creative freedom and flexibility to produce and distribute serialised fiction, a tendency which was first witnessed on HBO.² Therefore, claims of so-called complete transformation in the hands of Netflix and other streaming platforms need to be appropriately contextualised to isolate the definite points of interventions.

One of the definitive shifts that seems to have taken place is the dominant practice of releasing entire seasons of multiple episodes all at once which has effectively resulted in a new form of consumption habit, referred to as binge watching. Unlike the traditional practice where individual episodes are broadcasted on a weekly basis for as long as the season continues to run, the streaming platforms release entire seasons at once in most of the cases. Therefore, the entire narrative is immediately made

¹ For further reading on the advent of Netflix and its impact, one can look at anthologies like *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century* (Eds. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey) and *The Age of Netflix: Critical Essays on Streaming Media, Digital Delivery and Instant Access* (Eds. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski). These works provide a comprehensive account of the early scholarship on the subject.

² HBO focused on producing content that catered to niche audiences and pursued artistic excellence. In the absence of advertising pressures, it invested more heavily in production values, attracting top talent, and taking creative risks. The result was a host of groundbreaking shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Six Feet Under* among others bearing the hallmark of high production values, complexity of narratives, and high artistic merit. To read further on HBO and the era of Quality TV, one can read *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era* (Eds. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley)



available for uninterrupted viewing, resulting in a more rich, complex, and immersive experience. This particular practice of narrative consumption merits serious deliberation and questions.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of binge watching as a cultural practice is the fact that it allows a viewer to organise one's own schedule, resulting in unique individual temporalities as opposed to the traditional practice of viewing which had to be in accordance with the network schedule and fixed temporal coordinates. Contrary to the social ritual of viewing television where networks follow a common nationwide timetable, streaming platforms offer a personalised schedule for every individual. Coinciding with the practice of streaming directly on portable, individual devices, it has engendered a highly atomized experience of consuming audio-visual content.

Besides the personalization of schedule and the atomization of viewing experience, the binge model of distribution and reception also poses interesting questions pertaining to narrative mode itself. It should be noted that serialised narrative or series has been the dominant narrative format in the era of streaming media. Theories of seriality as a mode of narrative organisation and as a cultural phenomenon are usually built around a correlation between industrial capitalism and consequent mechanisms of narrative delivery and reception.^{1,2} Frank Kelleter, a noted scholar on seriality, provides a useful distinction between a series as opposed to a complete work or oeuvre. He observes, "...an important difference between such works and popular series is that the reception of serial forms, in its initial manifestation, does not distinctly "follow" the production and publication of a finished text. Rather, serial reception first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself." (Kelleter 12).

Kelleter goes on to describe this quality of seriality as evolving narratives where production and consumption of narratives are closely entangled. In this entanglement, the readers/viewers essentially function as agents who drive the narrative forward in an invisible system of feedback loop. In other words, a serialised narrative can monitor its own impact and therefore mutate accordingly (13). This characteristic of seriality yields an interesting methodological advantage to extend this idea into the broader domain of popular culture itself in a movement from specific to universal.

However, in the binge model, reception inevitably tends to *follow* narrative production, which problematizes the entire idea of seriality as evolving narratives. Despite being structurally episodic, a Netflix (or any other streaming platform) series fundamentally delivers the experience of watching an 8–12 hours long film, thereby functioning like a complete work or oeuvre. It effectively reinstates the temporal gap between production and consumption of serialised narrative, breaking away from the simultaneity of the weekly episode paradigm. This raises significant questions about the relational network encompassing narrative circulation and consumption, narrative modes, and operations of

¹ For a basic idea of the scholarship which exists on seriality and serialized narrative, one can go through the works of Shane Danson. All his works are either listed or curated on <https://shanedenson.com/>

² I am consciously using the word apparatus in this article, in the same vein as the Apparatus Theory which became a significant conceptual strand in Film Studies during the 1970s. Culled mainly from the writings of Jean-Louis Baudry, the idea of an apparatus not only includes the technology and infrastructure of narrative production and consumption, but also the ideological operations involved therein.



popular culture itself. On the one hand, we have the rhetoric of free choice and control as the viewer enjoys the freedom to organise a personal schedule. However, by creating a chasm between the time of production and time of reception, the agentive function of viewers is carefully removed. Culture seems to be produced by insulated machinery beyond popular participation, and finally distributed as a finished and finite commodity for personalised (as opposed to social/popular) consumption.

For further contemplation on this question, we need to investigate the veneer of personalization which is not simply a matter of temporality and scheduling of narrative consumption, but a defining quality of narrative producing apparatus¹ itself; or as they are known in this context, streaming platforms.

Recommended for you: Personalised service by impersonal algorithms

If the binge model of distribution and consumption can be considered as a defining facet of streaming platforms, the customised service of specifically curated entertainment for individual users is certainly the key procedure behind their operations. Every streaming platform seems to run on a system of user-oriented recommendations uniquely arranged for an individual. A user makes a choice from an already configured stack of recommendations based on that particular user's taste and preferences, rather than picking up something from a general assemblage of goods and commodities sold in the open market (such as a show on a television network, or a film in a theatre). Therefore, the idea of personalization is not only restricted to how one would organise the schedule of watching a show, but it seems to be the driving principle behind the business and the aesthetic model of the platform itself.

As Netflix emerged as a streaming platform, it adopted a newly designed statistical system for ratings and analysing data, to increase their business efficiency by specifically targeting the prospective customers. Put another way, the platform devised a way to retain the customer/viewer/user by gathering information about the user's likes, dislikes, preferences, reservations, etc. and create specifically designed entertainment experience based on that available data which would ensure that the user is locked in a permanent engagement with the platform. The system in question which enabled streaming platforms to accomplish this has now become more or less a part of popular discourse and online vernacular – the Netflix algorithm.

An algorithm can be essentially understood as an abstract system, developed from large quantities of actual data, capable of efficiently delivering reliable solutions to problems on a repeated basis. In other words, algorithms provide universal computational results to problems of particular and specific nature. Conceptually, the idea of algorithms can be traced back and theorised in terms of the shift from the deterministic world and the quest for universal knowledge of enlightenment, to the late 19th century epistemology marked by chance, chaos, and probability.² However in the context of

¹ *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* by Ian Hacking is one of the definitive works on the subject. Besides tracing a genealogy of statistical theories and concepts, the book also provides important philosophical insights on the consequences of such thinking.

² Nirvana was an American rock band formed in the late 1980s which found mainstream success with their 1991 album *Nevermind*. With an aggressive musical style and intense and powerful lyrical themes dealing with the alienated mind



our present task, the idea of algorithm is predicated on tracking data about user behaviour to quantify complex cultural notions of choices, aversions, habits, etc. to assemble an abstract, digital user model, and then build a stream of media aimed at the user and present them as recommended selection of entertainment.

This idea of streaming platforms running on algorithmic calculus has manifold ramifications which need to be carefully unpacked one by one. Firstly, the rhetoric here is once again that of freedom and choice bringing back echoes of proclamations around the ideas of globalisation and a liberalised free market economy. Apparently, the viewer is free to choose his or her selection of entertainment; the platform is merely assisting by curating beforehand a customised list based on his or her preferences. In fact, the platform even allows the user a privileged glimpse of their backend mechanism and operational logic, as every recommendation is accompanied by explanatory phrases such as 'because you watched so and so' or 'X and five other friends liked this'. However, it should be noted that a platform employs the algorithm to precisely abstract away the actual complicated steps and details involved in the act of decision making, to present a streamlined aesthetic. In the process, the algorithms make a subtle move from assisting to effectively controlling the decision making. As Ed Finn observes, "The rhetoric of the recommendation system is so successful because it black boxes the task of judgement, asking us to trust the efficacy of personalization embedded in the algorithm." (Finn 96).

Finn's elaborate work about algorithmic culture provides a number of critical insights on the subject which brings us to the second ramification. For effective calculability and efficient response, algorithms are required to access data, and this relationship is directly proportional in both quantitative and qualitative senses. That is, the more the data or 'better' the data, the algorithm becomes more effective. The streaming platform as a cultural apparatus not only gives access to a large volume of data, but also significantly newer and more precise forms of data. As these platforms operate across a network of apps and devices, they are capable of tracking live behavioural patterns of users. It goes beyond a mere count of films or series watched and includes a host of digital footprints such as ratings, social media hashtags, timestamps on pauses, stops, or any operations, all of which are processed to approximate the user behaviour as accurately as possible. Clearly, the more time spent by the viewer-user on a platform, the more beneficial and profitable it is for the platform as it allows the algorithm to become more efficient. Seen in this light, neither the series format, nor the binge model of circulation and consumption, seems like arbitrary aesthetic choices. Rather they seem to be the most predictable outcome of an algorithmic engine looking to keep the user engaged for as long as possible. Pursuing this line of thought, one is then required to question the very cultural significance or function of narrative within this data matrix; is it any longer a cognitive, evolutionary, or affective tool to process information and make sense of the world, or is it an instrument which is programmed to access human information aimed at the improvement of an abstract apparatus? What

and abject, Nirvana became the quintessential icon for the Gen-X angst and rebellion. The myth of Nirvana intensified following the suicide of their charismatic frontman Kurt Cobain at the age of 27. Their final album titled *Unplugged in New York*, featuring acoustic versions of their popular songs, was released after Cobain's death. It went on to become their highest selling album, winning their only Grammy Award.



is the collateral when instead of reader or viewer, the word 'user' gains more currency when discussing narrative experience or narrative operations? How are questions of control, agency, and subjectivity located within this process?

While all of this might begin to sound as if algorithm is an alien and cryptic element attempting to establish a tyrannical hold over culture, we need to clarify the relation between algorithm and culture, as we approach our final point stemming out of this discussion. Raymond Williams notes that culture has a mechanical character to it when it comes to the question of industrial modernity and modern societies (89). The industrial mode of production reproduces its structure in every social situation, characterising every social relation. Consequently, the modern way of life itself acquires a syntax of its own involving carefully determined steps to be routinely followed in accordance with one's position in the larger social hierarchy. Several scholars have pointed out how the schedules of factories, trains, public offices, etc. have directly determined the routine and rhythm of modern life. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno notably pointed towards this precise quality when they stated that "its element is repetition" in their distinguished work on culture industry (108). Looking at it this way, culture is an unforced routine, an invisible sequence of decisions and actions, carried out by a silent consenting majority to ensure a smooth and seamless functioning of modern society, without any ruptures or glitches. Or, if we recall the definition of algorithm as an abstract system which relies on large quantities of information to solve complex problems repeatedly, we can see that every aspect of culture be it religion, art, economy, or politics undoubtedly has an algorithmic character. As we understand and make sense of the world through a logical lens imposing a framework of causality, sequence, and rationale on reality, reality is thus constructed through algorithms of varying intents and purposes. Therefore, when we are talking of culture and algorithm, we must keep in mind that they have a complex, complementary relationship, and to an extent they constitute one another.

The relation between algorithm and culture is pushed to its extreme in Finn's work, resulting in claims which might be speculative and polemical but nonetheless thought-provoking in terms of exploring the possibilities. Finn provides a detailed textual reading of the Netflix series *House of Cards*, examining narrative tropes, plot points, character arcs, and mise-en-scene, arguing for an algorithmic authorship of a cultural text. In the process, he strips down the myth of personalization propagated by streaming platforms to reveal the underlying intentions. He makes a significantly valid point about the artifice of democracy and empowerment hiding deeper structures of profit generation, market expansion, and labour relations. As the platforms enthusiastically parade their algorithmic recommendation system as a cultural paradigm shift and a technological marvel which gives power back to the people (viewer/user), they also carefully conceal the human elements functioning unceasingly within this data matrix – the enormous volumes of written codes, the labour of detailed tagging process being carried out, or even the questions of data safety or privacy of the users (Finn 103-112). In order to have a comprehensive account of the overall cultural experience of streaming media, we need to address these questions in the broader context of operations and possible mutations within capitalism.



Subscribe to a new plan: Fragmented subjects, horizontality, and advance signals of data capitalism

It is clear from the discussion so far that streaming a series on a platform is quite different from watching a film or a television show. Perhaps the main factor of distinction is the fact that streaming platforms cannot be considered as an isolated narrative apparatus; the narrative is delivered and consumed through an interconnected network of technologies, applications, and devices which have multifaceted and mobile characteristics of communication and computability. This leads to two significant points; firstly, it clearly suggests that cultural production has been successfully integrated into commodity production. Secondly, it hints toward a fragmentation of the narrative experience.

Narrative consumption on a streaming platform is seldom a unified experience. Platforms supplement the main narrative text with behind-the-scenes features, interview clips with artistes, and teasers and trailers to boost the experience aimed at positing the ideal viewer/fan/consumer subject. Often the popular scenes or moments are circulated across the social media terrain in the form of Facebook videos, Instagram reels, or YouTube shorts which are navigated through carefully constructed hashtags. Then there are videos, both official and fan-made, which engage with the text in detail either by commenting on cliffhangers or pointing out easter eggs. Hence, it is not just the eight or ten hours spent on watching a series, but the overall engagement across the horizon of such multiple para texts which contribute to the meaning making process. There is a horizontal quality witnessed in this experience as opposed to the vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition of either films produced by studios or shows produced by networks.

The fragmentation of narrative experience brings to mind Fredric Jameson's thesis on postmodernism wherein he lays out an elaborate framework involving global expansion and flow of capital, dislocating the process of production from its physical parameters into a more fragmentary and ephemeral system. According to Jameson, late capitalist culture is marked by a fragmentation of social experience, spelling out decisive rifts among social hierarchies leading to a sense of perceptual and historical sense of disorientation, amid a frenzy of commodity culture.

Echoes of such ideas are also encountered in the works of Gilles Deleuze as he examines the shift from disciplinary societies to what he calls societies of control. He emphasises how traditional disciplinary societies, characterised by institutions such as prisons, factories, and schools, have given way to new forms of social control. In the former, individuals were subjected to rigid structures, hierarchies, and physical confinement whereas in the latter, power operates through more flexible and diffused mechanisms that are based on continuous surveillance and modulation of behaviour. The question of flexibility is further underlined as Deleuze highlights the deterritorialising effects of control societies. In disciplinary societies, individuals were assigned specific roles and confined to fixed spaces. However, control societies blur boundaries and encourage constant mobility, connectivity, and flexibility as individuals become detached from fixed identities and spatial constraints, creating a sense of fluidity and perpetual movement.

The streaming platforms are distinctly characterised by their horizontality as they pride themselves on the lateral diversification of their content in terms of period, genre, style, etc. resulting in an eclectic



combination devoid of any historical sense of unity. The arrangement of cultural texts (films or series) encountered on a platform does not necessarily seem to follow any historical or aesthetic logic, but instead often two dissimilar texts can find adjacent positions as long as they fulfil some abstract criteria of algorithmic profiling. For the user who regularly engages with this apparatus, it certainly raises interesting questions about the possibilities of what Jameson describes as conditions of historical disorientation, or as a schizophrenic subject. Streaming platform's reliance on data lead to incessant, temporary, and often absurd assemblage of virtual selves who are addressed in absolute specificities of the contexts. Perhaps, because of watching a film like *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers, 2019) multiple times, the same person can be a prospective customer of graphic novels because of apparent interest in Marvel Comics, or can be recommended to watch a season of popular sitcom *Friends* (NBC, 1994 - 2004) starring Paul Rudd who also appears as Ant Man in the Avengers film, or can even start receiving posts and messages on social media from particular political parties due to the apparent interest shown in the necessity of militarisation and weaponisation!

Understandably any notion of a fixed identity of an individual subject begins to sound absurd and counter intuitive under such circumstances. Every time we 'use' an algorithm, each time we satisfactorily make use of the solution provided by it, the algorithm includes that information as usable data to improve its efficiency. Therefore, as we are using algorithms for our convenience, the algorithm is also using our data (this is a rhetoric, and by no means a suggestion that an algorithm is a sentient being *a la* AI) for its own purposes. Consequently, the recommendations, suggestions, prompts made by the algorithm keep on getting more and more accurate, and every time we accept any of those, we as users are constructed as a subject. For that instant in time, for the duration of the search result or a click on a recommendation, the algorithm leads and we as users comply; the user is indeed a subject position which is fluid, virtual, and ephemeral.

Furthermore, streaming platforms are clearly a dislocated and deterritorialised system of cultural production as they are also designed as elaborate and sophisticated tools of surveillance operating on mobile and smart devices. With streaming platforms, one is simultaneously liberated from the spatial moorings of the equipment machinery, or the geographical/temporal boundaries of a region/nation. In the apparent ubiquity of this cultural machine, it is the fluid movement of data/information in the form of pulses of light that has gained a centrality in this entire experience.

Ian Hacking has drawn attention to the correlation between systematic gathering of information and construction of subjectivity, tracing it back to the end of the Napoleonic era. The newfound technology of printing as well as novel ideas of bureaucracy enabled and facilitated a torrential output of numbers resulting in vigorous attempts to count, classify, and tabulate the population, wealth, and resources to ensure a smooth running of administration. As information gathering becomes a significant bureaucratic initiative, Hacking observes that "Categories had to be invented into which people could conveniently fall in order to be counted. The systematic collection of data about people has affected not only the ways in which we conceive of a society, but also the ways in which we describe our neighbour" (3). Possible subject positions were formed because of data collection, analysis, and optimization which were pure abstractions insofar that no flesh and blood individual actually fit the category. In other words, these demographic categories precede and anticipate the actual occupant.



This idea of anticipation seems to be wired into the DNA of algorithms. As it provides a solution to the immediate problem at hand, it also uses the information of the search or query to better anticipate our future requirements with relevance and accuracy. When it comes to a streaming platform, the algorithms aim to tailor as much of the content as possible into a user's recommendation list. Doing so involves cross referencing and optimising a huge volume of data regarding the user behaviour. Consequently, the resulting categorizations are far from what we understand as generic, periodic, or stylistic classification of texts such as romance, gothic, western, musical, sci-fi, Victorian, modern, etc. Rather, the algorithm creates categories out of a user's history which might sound like 'monster film in a dystopian setting with a female lead' or 'mind bending steampunk involving time travel'. That is, in the process of gathering, tabulating, and analysing the user information, algorithms are creating 'genres' without texts, and thus without subjects. It is a preemptive attempt to structure and mould our desire.

Such a practice of anticipation of possible actions, decision, and desire beforehand and providing an immediate plan to mitigate them is considered by Mark Fisher as a cultural condition which he describes as capitalist realism. According to Fisher, it is a politically and culturally sterile condition as capitalism has established itself not only as dominant or popular, but as the only possible socioeconomic system or alternative to anything else. While the trajectory of capitalism has always involved attempts to incorporate anything with resistant or subversive possibilities, capitalist realism is marked by a practice of successful anticipation, or which he describes as "the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher 9). Anything that might reside beyond the reach of giant corporate machinery, such as debates over alternative or independent spaces of culture, are being conveniently settled, all within the mainstream, with their political sting taken out and being reduced merely into a style. Hence, the angsty rebellion of Nirvana¹ in the wake of aggressive liberalisation of global markets, now seems to be securely anticipated as the space was provided on MTV, sponsored by sports goods giant FILA, later distributed as an album by Universal Music Group. By successfully preempting our desire, capitalism succeeds in performing anti-capitalism on our behalf.

Therefore, when the algorithm is curating a pre-configured set of entertainment for us in the form of recommendations, it is doing more than merely helping us with our viewing choice. Rather it is presenting to us an arrangement which is already chosen for us and thereby shaping us as ideal

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consumers. Thus, going back to our earlier question, subjectivity is bound to be split, fragmented, and temporary as they are being constantly assembled and dismantled on an ad-hoc basis of culture/commodity production.

It becomes evident that the cultural experience/practice of streaming media with the technological and cultural shifts in distribution, consumption habits, their lateral arrangement driven by algorithmic system of recommendation, and construction of fragmented subjectivities, is clearly suggestive of mutations within capitalism. We again turn back to Deleuze as he already foresaw that capitalism “no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells the finished products: it buys the finished products or assembled parts. What it wants to sell is services and what it wants to buy is stocks.” (6). Although published more than three decades ago, there is a definite indication here about diffusion of the concrete nature of capital into something incorporeal and intangible, something that curiously resonates with observations by Marx and Engels about the bourgeois epoch wherein social relations gradually undergo remarkable transformations with ideas becoming ossified, sacred being profaned, and “all that is solid melts into the air” (12).

Not to suggest any pre-given telos, but capitalism’s basic philosophy of market expansion seems to entail a steady decentralisation, fragmentation, and dissipation of capital and the production process; landed property changed into cash, and then further into equities, stocks, and digital currency. Thus, the question we need to raise at this juncture is whether we are in a position to identify and confirm a decisive shift within the trajectory of capitalism. More significantly, can we recognize data as the fundamental organising principle of contemporary capitalism? Have we already emerged into what can be called data capitalism?

Data capitalism refers to a system where data functions as a valuable resource and a key driver of economic growth and profit making; a mode of production in which the generation, collection, analysis, and monetization of data play a central role. One of earliest accounts can be found in the work of Sarah Myers West where she defines data capitalism as “a system in which the commoditization of our data enables a redistribution of power in the information age” (23). West clarifies the newer paradigm by highlighting the change witnessed from the earlier e-commerce of online commodity sales to the selling of social-behaviour profiles constructed from user data.

The two ideas which tend to form the very foundation of data capitalism are platform and of course, algorithm. A platform in the context of today’s digital economy refers to a digital infrastructure that enables two or more individuals or groups to interact, thereby positioning themselves as intermediaries among service providers and users. As a corporate entity, it basically runs a business without owning any tangible assets. One can think of several examples such as Amazon, Uber, Swiggy, Urban Company, etc. who, owing to their positioning, gain a privileged access to a vast amount of data which is analysed and optimised, and in the process accumulates value and performs the function of a commodity.

We are now living through a rapidly changing economic and socio-cultural climate which is certainly exciting in terms of the horizon of possibilities, but at the same time it is also too early to commit to any idea with a degree of certainty. Nonetheless, it is evident that the advent and proliferation of



streaming media have spelled a major change in production, distribution, and reception of audio-visual content. On one hand, it has triggered a specificity question – how truly and exactly is streaming media different, or what are the precise changes caused by the entire phenomenon? In this article, I have attempted to engage with this question by isolating certain tendencies such as binge watching or the binge model of distribution, and the practice of distributing personalised entertainment. discussing them in their historical and cultural contexts. On the other hand, and perhaps more interestingly, it is possible to consider this apparent shift as a symptom of a larger change. The prolonged and engaged narrative consumption, the domination of algorithmic culture, and the discreet expansion of the framework of platform with the centrality of data, allow us to reorient ourselves and rethink the trajectory and stages of cultural/commodity production. With each passing day, the space of technological possibility is getting significantly transformed affecting social and political configurations. We need to keep an eye out for all such changes. But at the same time, we must keep in mind that as we are looking at the screen, the screen is also looking back at us.

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