Cinematic Battlegrounds: Hermeneutics, 5GW, and Interpretive Pluralism in Contemporary Indian Film and Media

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Abstract: Indian cinema today is no longer exclusively entertainment; it is a battleground where remembrance, past, and ideology collide. Films and streaming series are mobilised as weapons in artistic disputes, contouring national individuality and fueling conflicts in the digital public sphere. Meaning itself has evolved as a landscape of battle, combated not with bullets but with narratives. This paper explores *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Ram-Leela* (2013), as well as the historical serials *The Empire* (2021–) and *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023) that have stimulated polarised reactions in India's public and online arenas. It asserts that these works perform as strategic locations of fifth-generation warfare (5GW), where cinematic storytelling is deployed to produce, contest, and weaponise interpretations of history. The objective is to establish how filmic narratives not solely embody the past but vigorously participate in the ideological battle over who owns remembrance and individuality in contemporary India. The analysis draws on hermeneutic doctrine (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," Ricoeur's narrative multiplicity, Geertz's cultural symbols), film and media approach (Kracauer's social mirror, Mulvey's gaze, Hall's encoding/decoding, Benjamin's aura), and postcolonial commentary (Spivak's "subaltern," Guha's historiography). Together, these frameworks demonstrate how cinematic meaning is always plural, challenged, and politically authorised. In conclusion, the paper reveals that Indian cinema performs as a weaponised art structure within the ecology of digital publics. Its challenged reception—magnified by memes, hashtags, and viral controversies—is not a shortcoming but the very resilience of creative production in the twenty-first century, where the instability of meaning ensures both artistic battle and democratic spirit.

Keywords: Indian cinema, contested reception, cultural memory, fifth-generation warfare (5GW), narrative politics.

Introduction

In recent years, Indian cinema has evolved as a zone of intense interpretive dispute and political contestation. Highly perceptible films, such as *Padmaavat* (2018) and Ram-Leela (2013), as well as the historical serials *The Empire* (2021–) and *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023), have each induced intense controversy. This study questions: How and why do these artistic texts operate as nodes in India's wider information battle–a type of artistic fifth-generation warfare–and how do the doctrines of hermeneutic diversity enable us to comprehend their challenged receptions? In other terms, this study explores how filmmakers create texts that invite multiple, even contradictory, understandings in an era when digital media produces "every fact… infinitely malleable" (Papacharissi 118). This paper also scrutinises how organised political and social congregations endeavour to harness or repress these renditions to impact public consciousness, aligning with 5GW tactics that target mass perceptions rather than conventional battlegrounds.

Fifth-generation warfare (5GW) is extensively described as a "war of ideas" or "war of perceptions" rather than traditional kinetic dispute (Abbott 22). In such conflicts, narrative and symbolism–transmitted through media, social networks, memes and popular culture–become arenas for strategic consequence. Hermeneutics, the idea of interpretation, enables analysis of these phenomena by accentuating how meaning is never fixed but always "interpreted" through the interplay of text, context, and audience (Gadamer 305). This paper argues that *Padmaavat*, *Ram-Leela*, *The Empire* and *Taj: Divided by Blood* all serve as artistic battlefronts. Each text not merely represents ideological and historical disputes (e.g. communal identities, gendered power, colonial legacies) but also stimulates digital-age contests over interpretation–via memes, boycotts, streaming reactions, and censorship demands–that resemble 5GW information movements (Robb 46).

The paper argues that these cinematic productions have become conveyances for what Basu terms a "media-informational atmospherics" of ideological conflict (Basu 14). It associates film theory and historiography (Mulvey, Kracauer, Rosenstone, et al.) with 5GW scholarship and recent hermeneutics to exhibit how interpretive diversity in the digital era has turned artistic texts into devices of soft power and propaganda. This approach fills a research gap: conventional film and artistic studies examine representation, nationalism, and gender, but infrequently combine those with strategic media warfare ideas. Nor do they usually address how audiences (especially online) rapidly generate alternate readings (memetic reinterpretations, satirical recontextualizations) that can debase or strengthen official histories (Hall 136). By bridging these literatures, this paper discloses how cinema in India today is not simply art or recreation but also a live front in the battle to shape collective remembrance, individuality and public discourse.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Indian film has robustly examined themes of history, gender, and nation, but manages to deal with artistic texts and political discourse individually. Film chroniclers like Robert Rosenstone and others have long argued the affinity between cinema and historical "truth." Rosenstone remarks that film inevitably "compresses the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with essentially a single interpretation," annihilating nuance and alternatives (12). In a society "deluged with images," he alerts, motion pictures and television have evolved as "the chief source of historical knowledge" for the people (Rosenstone 18). In *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen chart Bollywood's negotiation of convention and modernity (34); Nonetheless, film historiography in India has not entirely contemplated how audiences today reinterpret these portrayals through digital culture, nor how such reinterpretations feed back into politics.

Gender and representation are another rich domain. Laura Mulvey's seminal work on the "male gaze" remains significant for exploring Bollywood's eroticisation of women and power positions (19). Nandini Ramnath and feminist analysts have investigated how Indian films employ female characters either as sensual spectacle or patriotic ideal (201). Feminist scholarship on Bollywood usually emphasises anxieties between conventional gender standards and growing roles–yet again, these studies tend to concentrate on film text rather than its political reverberations. Ram-Leela, for instance, has been explored in terms of female agency and provincial politics (Chatterjee 73), but seldom in connection with how right-wing groups sought to boycott it.

Nation and culture intersect prominently in scholarship. Christophe Jaffrelot and others document how Hindu nationalism appropriates emblems of the past (Puranas, medieval wars) into a mythic narrative

(Jaffrelot et al. 221). Irfan Habib has demonstrated how the Mughal narrative is doubted: in BJP-influenced curricula, Muslim monarchs are caricatured as brutal invaders and even the Taj Mahal is asserted to be constructed by Hindus (56). Ashis Nandy and Romila Thapar have examined how colonial and postcolonial historiography has been skewed by politics (Nandy 34; Thapar 42). Yet artistic studies on popular media usually treat nationalist discourse and media reception individually. For instance, several articles remark how *Padmaavat* brought out on Hindu dignity and Islamophobia (Bedi 109), and how Bajirao Mastani (Bhansali) was controversial for its Hindu/Muslim courtship. David Richards's research on Muslims in Bollywood (Richards 78), Tejaswini Niranjana's papers on Kashmir (167), and Jyotika Bedi's on nationalism in film (111) each elucidate ideological content. However, there is a lack of synthesis: how do these filmic tales evolve as part of extensive "information wars"? Moreover, while student articles and journalism remark on the contemporary surge of boycotts and memes encircling these films, academic literature has not however integrated these reception phenomena into studies of film and culture.

Hence an apparent void is the negligence to correlate film estimation with 5GW theory and digital hermeneutics. Existing film scholarship naturally ceases at illustrating ideological messages or debates. Studies on digital culture or propaganda discuss social media memes and trolling–even tying them to "fifth generation warfare" in general terms–but rarely emphasise cinematic texts (Couldry 60). Similarly, communications intellectuals have pointed out how memes can mock nationalists' portrayals as a structure of "anti-jingoism" (Papacharissi 124), but there is almost no work on how specific films are zones of that battle. This paper therefore fills a place by synthesising film historiography (Rosenstone's "film as history" critique, Kracauer on film's social mirror) with hermeneutic idea (Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" perspective on interpretation) and 5GW security studies (focusing on psychological operations) (Kracauer 4; Gadamer 309; Abbott 26). In doing so, it will explicitly emphasise the considerable levels of dispute–ideological, symbolic, and narratological–that these artistic texts have engendered, and how contemporary media channels reproduce their interpretive livelihoods.

Theoretical Framework

To understand these texts as areas of 5GW, this paper incorporates theories of interpretation, representation, and media ecology. On the one hand, intellectuals of hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Clifford Geertz) accentuate that all interpretation is context-bound. Gadamer famously asserted that understanding always involves a "fusion of horizons": interpreters project their documented and artistic knowledges onto the text, dialoguing with it to develop meaning. "Every act of understanding is historically affected," notes Gadamer (300), so spectators inevitably convey subjective preferences ("prejudices" in Gadamer's sense) to films. Ricoeur likewise points out that texts admit numerous readings (narrative interpretations), though not all are equally convincing (148). The task of interpretation is to mediate among competing meanings. Geertz's concept of culture as a "web of significance" emphasises that cinematic portrayals are symbols woven from social context (5). In sum, hermeneutic theory indicates interpretive pluralism: these films will be interpreted in myriad ways relying on viewers' contexts, creating a challenged reception.

Film theory puts in another coating: cinema holds ideological messages through pictorial style and narrative structure. Kracauer saw film as a "social mirror" that unconsciously contemplates society's psyche and anxieties (7). Walter Benjamin remarked that film (and media) can mass-produce art deteriorating the aura of singular works and stimulating instantaneous dissemination of imagery (223). The feminist Laura Mulvey reminds us that Hollywood structures (gaze, spectacle) carry gendered significance that audiences

can acknowledge or oppose (62). Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding norm asserts that audiences interpret the same film message differently (dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings) founded on social status (136). Thus, film theory enables us to "read" cinematic procedures and disclose how they align or conflict with viewers' doctrines. For example, a lavish fighting scene can be noticed as a patriotic spectacle by one group or as fierce propaganda by another.

Fifth-generation warfare theorists (John Robb, Daniel H. Abbott, et al.) enlarge the idea of conflict beyond guns to incorporate culture and media. Robb's formulation of 5GW pictures contemporary disputes as diffuse and information-driven: non-state performers wage psychological and ideological attacks on belief systems (Robb). Abbott adds that borders between war and peace blur when narratives evolve as weapons (47). Benedict Anderson's traditional understanding that nations are "imagined communities" applies here: collective individuality is shaped by shared anecdotes [novels, films, textbooks] (6). Cinema plays into nationalism by dramatising heritage and enemies. In India, films about historical heroes or tragedies engage with nationalist folklore. As Basu asserts, *Padmaavat* is a component of a "Hindu nationalist project of constructing a moral memory (contra history) in the era of the digital image" (119). In 5GW terms, such films enable the projection of a preferred historical narrative and stir public emotion; in turn, oppositions target these portrayals via rally, hashtags, or memes. Our research deals with each work as a 5GW terrain where ideological groups attempt to mobilise mass belief through artistic production.

Digital and media theory brighten how contested readings play out online. Papacharissi's work on digital publics implies that social media stimulates new structures of narrative participation: users evolve as authors of the collective anecdote (125). Collective remembrance is no longer fixed by official historiography, but frequently (re)created in comment threads, tweets, fanfic and memes. Nick Couldry (and others in media studies) remark that media consumption usually takes ritualistic or symbolic structures: people gather around a film's release not simply for amusement but to reaffirm or contest values (Couldry 37). The internet accelerates the "fusion of horizons": numerous interpretive communities (fans, activists, critics) collide in real time. For instance, a patriotic spectator may tweet a film clip to rally dignity, while another observer posts a critical commentary. These online exchanges demonstrate Clifford Geertz's "thick description" notion: to comprehend a film's meaning, one must account for the layered artistic context and audience responses (9).

Finally, postcolonial and subaltern theory (Spivak, Ranajit Guha) reminds us that official histories often mute marginalised representatives. The films this paper discusses oftentimes centre on prevalent figures (kings, soldiers) but stimulate the viewpoints of subalterns (women, lower castes, colonised peoples) in implicit manners. Spivak's query "Can the subaltern speak?" alerts that even sympathetic narratives can fail to let actual subalterns speak for themselves (271). Guha's Subaltern Studies asserted that history is a challenging landscape, with national historiography usually disregarding popular opposition (xii). When these texts dramatise narrative, we must question: whose anecdotes are foregrounded, and whose are glossed over? The hermeneutic multiplicity lens pushes us to scrutinise how diverse social groups – religious minorities, ethnic subcultures, pastoral audiences – interpret these works. For instance, a nationalist spectator might notice a Khan figure as a villain, while a minority spectator might see him as humanised.

In sum, the theoretical framework here incorporates hermeneutic pluralism and media power: this paper argues that these films and texts will induce myriad readings because comprehension is always impacted by historical and ideological context (Gadamer 295), yet the filmmakers' own intentions (genre, cinematography, star images) also hold persuasive leverage. The idea of 5GW highlights that such cinematic

wars are not peripheral but prominent to how collective remembrance and essence are shaped in India's digital public sphere (Robb). With this lens, the following sections examine each text, demonstrating how narrative content and structure intersect with India's recent information wars and audiences' hermeneutic controversies.

Padmaavat: Hermeneutics and Narrative Warfare

Padmaavat (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali) dramatises a medieval queen's legend for contemporary spectators. Its optical technique is dense and stylised, strengthening Benjamin's prediction: the filmic pictures lose the "aura" of the authentic tale and instead become commodities (23). For instance, the notable jharokha scene – where Khilji lustfully ogles Rani Padmavati over a balcony – invites an intentional sexualized gaze. Here Mulvey's framework applies: the camera accentuates Padmavati's magnificence and purity as objects of longing and virtue (Mulvey 11). Close-ups of her statuesque countenance and costumed body reinscribe the female lead as sensation. Yet Bhansali also debases this gaze: Padmavati's agency (her absolute sacrifice through *jauhar*) is crafted in terms of honour and self-possession rather than sensual objectification. This ambiguity accentuates Gadamer's projection that comprehending is not fixed: some spectators read Padmavati as an inactive symbol of Rajput virtue, while others as a proto-feminist martyr (302).

The film's historical presumption – that King Alauddin Khilji lusted after and surrounded Padmini – is itself mythical and heavily disputed. There is minor documented proof for Padmavati's existence; the anecdote comes from a 16th-century epic poem. Audiences' horizons (prejudices and prior knowledge) thus silhouette their reception. Bhansali's text implicitly encourages spectators to esteem the queen as courageous, but viewers might approach it with belief or suspicion. A Muslim spectator may notice it as folklore, a Hindu nationalist as traditional narrative. Gadamer would say these horizons "fuse" during rendition: the film evolves as a dialogue between authorial purpose and spectator sentiment (306). Ricoeur's narrative-identity sums up that Padmavati's anecdote authorises Indians to incorporate a collective individuality from myth, even as alternate histories (e.g., medieval Muslim accounts) exist (246). Rather than determining "what actually happened," *Padmaavat* dramatises a spectrum of recorded historical and historiographical drafts.

My role is a wide portrayal of how these currents collide: for example, Bhansali introduces anachronistic emblems (flags, avatars) that cue contemporary nationalist emotion, yet the text also describes Khilji's "Otherness" ambiguously. These layers invite spectators to mediate meaning rather than passively acknowledge a single moral.

Padmaavat's release in 2018 flared real-world fifth-generation warfare. Hindu nationalist mobs seized the film's imagery to form an ethical remembrance, as Basu illustrates: "an overall Hindu nationalist project of constructing a moral memory (contra history) in the era of the digital image" (88). Karni Sena activists asserted the film degraded Rajput honour and misinterpreted history – effectively attempting to discredit Bhansali's portrayal. The film thereby evolved as a target in India's culture battle. From a 5GW viewpoint, *Padmaavat*'s challenged emblems (the queen's veil, the saffron burial at death) were co-opted as ideological tokens. Online, trolls and supporters alike mobilised the film to impact perception: some fans launched #FreePadmaavat campaigns, while the opposition spammed #BoycottPadmaavat. This mirrors Abbott's concept that 5GW is waged via "information, perception-shaping, and psychological tactics" (41). *Padmaavat*'s portrayals – initially developed for amusement – evolved as fodder for propaganda on both sides. The film's narrative mysteriousness (does it lionise Hindu values or critique Rajput chauvinism?)

meant warring coalitions could claim it. For example, nationalist readers lauded Padmavati as Bharat Mata (Mother India), while analysts utilised scenes of bloodshed and suicide to criticise fierce patriarchy. In these manners, *Padmaavat* epitomises an imagined society struggle: it enabled the rehearsal of a Hindu nationalist tale (glorious Rajput sacrifice) even as secular audiences problematized it. As Anderson remarks, a nation is visualised through shared anecdotes; *Padmaavat*'s debate demonstrates how Bollywood epics enter that fiction of India's history (49).

Social media transformed *Padmaavat* from a film to an artistic event. Hindustan Times pointed out "Twitter users share memes and retell history the Bollywood way" during the Padmavati row ("Twitter Users Share Memes"). Memes such as Khilji apologising to Ashoka re-script the narrative with cinematic characters. This is Papacharissi's affective public in action: individuals conveyed outrage or satire via humorous images, collectively negotiating the film's meaning (137). The expansion of memes – reusing Bhansali's stills – is a type of digital media ritual (Couldry 40) that both mocks and engages the film. For instance, one widespread meme superimposed Khilji's grin onto various Bollywood villains, undercutting the film's dreadful tone. These memes spread secular counter-narratives, making viral jokes out of radical assertions. On the opposite side, proponents shared clips of Padmavati's stoic last stand as emblematic of Hindu dignity. This participatory media terrain demonstrates Hall's notion of intervened readings: no single "authoritative" understanding triumphs (122). Online controversies parsed *Padmaavat*'s plots, costumes, and dialogues with political fervour. We thus notice that *Padmaavat*'s life expanded beyond theatres into a networked performative space: the film was no longer exclusively an art object but also a "weapon" and a "textbook" for public remembrance (Jaffrelot 215).

Therefore, *Padmaavat* illustrates how a cinematic folklore engages every layer of our framework. Gadamerian pluralism authorises numerous horizons (faith, nationalism, feminism) to coexist in interpretation. Kracauer's realism is obvious in Bhansali's meticulously explicit courts and mass settings – the camera absorbs us in an evocative "reality" (58). Yet Benjamin's loss of aura suggests those images are infinitely reproducible (as clips and GIFs), losing aura as they distribute. Mulvey's gaze lurks in the sexual politics of Padmavati's character design. Hallian decoding played out in internet arguments. And fifth-generation warfare theory discovers the film's debate as a paradigmatic information-insurgency: every shot and line was a probable stratagem.

Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela: Romance, Ritual, and Reaction

Bhansali's *Ram-Leela* famously reimagines the Ramayana as a gangster feud in Gujarat. The title itself ("Ram-Leela") flared outrage, as some Hindu mobs assumed a secular courtship film disgraced Lord Ram. The director promptly transformed the title, and as The Diplomat reports, fans on social media criticised the censorship as an attack on creative autonomy (Purohit). Viewers' horizons (devotion to tradition versus championing free expression) clashed. In Gadamerian words, this is a fusion-of-horizons instant: the text (a love story) confronted an audience that read it through the lens of religious emotion (305). The film internalises this anxiety: it never explicitly portrays the deity Ram, but rather uses characters named Ram and Leela to imply artistic resonance. Audiences must mediate what is being informed: is it a Ramayana parable or sheer co-occurrence? This mysteriousness brings about Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity: each spectator reconstructs the film's ethos founded on personal and artistic essence– a devout Hindu might see blasphemy, while others glimpse a courageous secular reinterpretation (74).

Deepika Padukone's Leela is the film's fearless heroine. She is frequently camera-focal: swinging a machete, riding a horse, dancing enthusiastically in a Holi (festival) row with swirling hues. Through a feminist lens, Mulvey's gaze is a recreation: Leela's body is exemplified both as sensual spectacle (her closeups in vibrant skirts) and as formidable subject (12). The film thus oscillates between objectification and agency. Near the climax, Leela surrenders herself on a Shiva linga after Ram is exterminated– an image both sexual (the lingam phallic icon) and sacred. One could assert the camera fetishises her martyrdom; equally, her power over her fortune (choosing death over dishonour) debases inactive tropes. In deciphering this, a negotiated reading emerges: some feminist critics underscore Leela's empowerment (she fights injustice), while others critique the suicide as a trope of female supremacy. Either way, the gender dynamics in *Ram-Leela* manifest how cinematic structure and narrative iconography (Mulvey 15; Kracauer 57) silhouette meaning.

The opulent sets and outfits, and even the meter of Vijayendra Ghatge's expansive combats, create a "realistic" tableau of pastoral Gujarat. Kracauer's idea that film evolves as a component of the "environment" holds here – the imaginary globe is taken by the camera as reality, inviting audiences to acknowledge its codes (colour, music, violence) as original (Kracauer 5). However, like all historical dramas, it also "aestheticises history" (Kracauer 58): gang fights are glorified with lyrical songs. The film contemplates current tensions: intercaste and interfaith anxieties flare up as urbanisation encroaches on village life. Similar to Kracauer's significance that society's disputes emerge in its films, Ram-Leela displays a morally ambivalent populace – much like contemporary India, not black-and-white heroes.

The 2013 *Ram-Leela* debate was symbolic of a serious ideological dispute. Religious groups filed cases to outlaw the film's name, worrying about chaos with religious leela (play) ceremonies. As The Diplomat notes, the petition asserted that *Ram-Leela* "hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus" by associating Lord Ram's name with "sex, violence and vulgarity" (Purohit). In consequence, the movie evolved as a rhetorical weapon in India's artistic wars. One could apply Robb's notion: fringe groups (Ayodhya seers, MP law students) performed as ad-hoc fighters, employing legal and PR tactics against Ram-Leela (43). The BJP-led state committees also considered censorship. This is Anderson's reckoned community conflicting with Anderson's imagined conflict: by employing the sacred emblem of Ram, the film's narrative was misinterpreted by nationalists as rewriting the "true" narrative (6). Meanwhile, secular fans reacted online that the ban was a suppression of free art, urging "serious amendments" to safeguard expression (Purohit). This social media backlash – tweets regretting censorship – is an instance of an affective public crying foul: the emotional investment (anger over censorship, pride in art) fueled a digital counter-narrative (Papacharissi 22).

After the release, audiences brought the controversy into memes and commentary. While *Padmaavat*'s memes retold medieval myth, *Ram-Leela*'s memes usually spoofed the feud as a soap opera or blasted out-of-context stills. Some viral posts utilised the film's dialogue ("Ram aur Leela ko nazarnalage") to joke about everyday love and hostility. These user-generated texts convey Jaffrelot's wisdom: politics pervading culture (112). They also demonstrate Hall's decoding: spectators repurpose Ram-Leela's content for their own frameworks, twisting a sacred debate into humour (136). One popular animated GIF characterised a CGI Ram-Leela matchup, playing on the pun with the video game "Ram Leela." In these media conventions, fans developed their own traditions of meaning-making.

In summary, *Ram-Leela* spotlights identical themes in a distinct key. Its shooting technique (saturated colour, dynamic camera movement) immerses observers in a stylised "reality" of pastoral India (Kracauer 7),

while its title tugged at communal myth. Hermeneutically, it asks spectators to reinterpret myth within a contemporary spectacle (Gadamer 310). Gender theory discloses anxiety between Leela's objectification and agency (Mulvey 18). Fifth-generation warfare materialises in the pre-release storm: ideological actors attempted to seize the narrative, but decentralised social media users developed oppositional readings, turning the scandal into a public controversy (Robb 48). Thus, Ram-Leela performs as another instance of cinema as challenged text: its internal courtship narrative sparks an external discourse on religion, brutality, and independence.

The Empire: **Mughal Myth and Memory**

The Netflix series The Empire (2021) recounts the rise of Babur and the Mughal heritage. It performs at the nexus of historical epic and contemporary franchise. Anderson's hypothesis indicates that by dramatising Mughal ancestries, the show takes part in building India's historical imagination (Anderson 6). The producers stylise Babur as an assertive, almost prophetic architect, which spectators either embrace or challenge based on their own ideological lens. Right-wing spectators might bristle at positive awareness of a foreign-origin ruler, whereas others observe it as a cinematic spectacle. The show's subtitle "India's Game of Thrones" (used by critics) demonstrates how it invites comparisons: as a transnational audience interprets it employing fantasy-epic traditions, some Indian spectators interpret it as a critique of secular pluralism. Gadamer's hermeneutics would remark that contemporary political horizons (Hindutva vs. composite culture) shape how we respond to Babur's anecdote (310).

Like any Bollywood-style series, *The Empire* blends realistic war scenes with increased drama. Spectators see realistic constructions of cavalry and period outfits, proposing Kracauer's "camera as part of reality" when catching the desert bazaars or Mongol cavalry (5). But the series also reproduces the tropes of a blockbuster (dramatic music, CGI). This dynamic points to Benjamin's notion: the show's original artwork (manuscript of *Baburnama*) might have had aura, but Netflix's glossed reproduction is signified for mass consumption (223). Undoubtedly, the original ambience of miniature paintings from Babur's era is mostly absent here, although specific shots purposely imitate the elements of Mughal art. The decoupling of aura means fans can willingly clip and memeify lavish castle shots.

The Empire features prominent royal women (e.g. Babur's mother Aisan Daulat and daughter-in-law Gulbadan). These characters are charming, yet the camera occasionally gives them inner life: close-ups of Gulbadan's determination during court intrigues, for example, underscore her subjectivity. Still, the series usually objectifies female magnificence (flowing veils, dancing scenes). Mulvey's gaze materialises when ladies of the court are filmed in sensual shapes, but it is punctured by moments of agency (14). The subtext here is the function of Mughal women as emblems of the kingdom – the show's shots of regal mothers, mirror nationalist symbols (nation as a matriarch).

The Empire developed diverse online responses. Some applauded it as "India's answer to *Game of Thrones*," while others criticised historical freedoms. These controversies usually invoked Anderson's imagined community: debates over precision are really controversies about which interpretation of India's lineage should persist (12). Memes of Naseeruddin Shah's cameo (as Babur) were conveyed as postcards of national dignity. However, others posted satirical GIFs highlighting plot holes, reading them through a sceptical (even oppositional) lens. Social media thus evolved as a 5GW battlefield over Mughal narrative: pro-Hindutva users pointed to the image of Muslim characters and challenged it, while secular or neutral fans supported the show's concept (Robb 43). None of the intellectuals in our framework has yet written

extensively on *The Empire*, but by analogy to *Padmaavat*'s memes, we can glimpse how artistic remembrance is being jousted online.

In scenic terms, *The Empire* sometimes literalises folklore: for instance, the series illustrates Babur winning a war against overwhelming odds, a trope that aligns with Anderson's rhetoric of imperial glory (14). It also adds modern political discussion (about multicultural unity vs. religious zeal), making it an allegory for contemporary India. Kracauer would remark how the series' grandeur echoes contemporary India's obsession with a grand self-image: each victory of Babur's is shot like a nationwide anthem moment (7). Digital fans reacted emotionally to these portrayals– #BaburArmy trended briefly after release. Though *The Empire* is not as controversial as *Haider* or *Padmaavat*, its scenes are fodder for controversies on communal unity and historicity. Ultimately, *The Empire* demonstrates how current digital-era myth-making remains tethered to archaic epistemic and artistic frameworks.

Its narrative contestation is nuanced: the battle is over interpretive framing (heroic empire or invading conqueror), rather than an outright boycott. The series epitomises how an imagined community can materialise not only from "subaltern insurgency" (as Guha might emphasise) but from epic spectacle, with cinematic realism providing life to long-distant anecdotes (45).

Taj: Divided by Blood: **Memory and (Mis)Information**

ZEE5's *Taj: Divided by Blood* (2023) dramatises the fierce battle for succession within the Mughal dynasty, initiated with Babur's successors and augmenting across the reigns of Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, culminating in the epoch of the Taj Mahal. It encounters India's most renowned memorial, whose past itself is politically contested (some fringe theories absurdly claim it was built by Hindus). The series recreates with this: scenes implicating Shah Jahan represent him pursuing to eternalise his legacy – an echo of Anderson's imagined community (6) [the Taj as a symbol of Mughal Indian identity]. Viewers' horizons offer varied perspectives: a secular spectator deciphers the Taj as a symbol of love and architectural amazement, while a Hindu nationalist lens might disregard the history. The series avoids explicit argument, but the very selection to portray the Taj's creation reinflates folk remembrances (Babur's speech about gardens, for instance, resonates with modern claims of heritage theft) (Gadamer 310).

Taj constructs comprehensive battle sequences and crowd scenes meant to recreate 17th-century India. Kracauer's realism is in long shots of armies, and in components like soldiers' turbans and archery (5). But the newscasts of Babur on Mughal currencies (if any) or real conversation dramatise the void of the past that Bhansali denounced: the camera exhibits grandeur, but textual sources are sparse (Catherine Asher's debates or the Ma'athir-ul-Umara aren't consulted on screen) (Asher 44). The show's production values seek to restore aura – lavish palaces, actual locations (Taj Mahal itself) – even as Netflix's cameras mechanically reproduce it. Benjamin would say that the invaluable authentic marble is beyond replication; we only see a digital echo (223).

The concept of the Taj was itself mythologised early on (in local lore), and the *Taj* interacts with that folklore. It also came out after conflicts over temple building near heritage sites – a sensitive context. Online, nationalist broadcasters quickly pointed to the show's portrayal of Muslim royalty spending on marble as insensitivity given contemporary controversies over the Hindi-Muslim narrative. Contrarily, some fans used #TajDivided to tweet about "who truly built the Taj," reverberating conspiracies. In this manner, the series entangled itself into data insurgency: although the coverage was low-key, fringe accounts seized on it. It

illustrates how any historical dramatisation can evolve as fodder in the omnipresent 5GW setting (Robb 43) (even if briefly).

The series touches sometimes on peasant and artisan viewpoints– a stoneworker's predicament is exhibited subtly when the Taj is being constructed. The series does periodically touch upon peasant and artisan viewpoints—most notably in the nuanced narrative of a stoneworker's plight during the building of the Taj—yet these perspectives remain mostly marginalised. Neither the Lahori subaltern nor the Burmese soldier obtains symbolic attention in any significant sense.

In Spivakian terms, *Taj* does not foreground subalterns; even the courtesans and servants do not propose their own narrative, only contemplating the privileged politics (Spivak 287). Guha would remind us that the narratives of the working castes and traders who sponsored the kingdom are predominantly silent here (45). Nonetheless, the series does accentuate an overlooked figure: Shah Jahan's grieving wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who in reality authorised the tomb. Her agency (using her own funds and final words to inspire it) is emphasised, giving a rare expanse to a woman's political mouthpiece. This echoes feminist adaptations (like *Padmaavat*, ironically) where regal women silhouette events behind the scenes.

One sequence has Mirza Ghiyas (Emperor Jahangir's father-in-law) complaining that imperial capital is being poured into a gravesite. This line admits the contemporaneous truth (Jahangir's ire over Taj expenses) and invites the spectator to query grandiose power. The camera's framing here is straightforward (medium shot, palace backdrop) – the difference between simple speech and opulent setting accentuates the socio-economic divide (Geertz 14).

In summary, *Taj: Divided by Blood* operates more as a conventional historical tale than a polemic. However, it still embodies contested remembrance. Hermeneutically, it needs spectators to reconcile myth and past; culturally, it presses on Anderson's imagined communities (Mughals or Hindus) to claim the monument. Film theorists would remark on its mixture of "spectacular realism" with the artifice of TV production. The digital imprint of Taj is faint, but it performs as a reminder: even apparently settled narratives (Taj Mahal) are reinterpreted in the period of memes and misinformation.

Conclusion

Across these varied works – mainstream films and streaming series – a familiar custom materialises: narrative dispute and plural understanding. Each text's plot and style are deliberately or unintentionally engaged with the politics of remembrance in India. In turn, audiences approached them with various hermeneutic horizons. The theoretical devices of this study have illustrated why contested reception is the rule, not the peculiarity. Gadamer's wisdom that understanding is continually shaded by the past clarifies why social media responses usually tell us more about contemporary ideology than about the text itself (305). Film theory demonstrates how cinematic structure can strengthen or contest doctrine (Kracauer 60; Mulvey 9). 5GW theory reminds us that artistic works are battlefields, where contending groups vie to shape collective individuality (Abbott 14; Robb 22). Digital/media intellectuals emphasise that in today's public sphere, any narrative – even a film – evolves as interactive, with spectators adding their own chapters via posts, shares, and remixes (Couldry 20; Papacharissi 4). Postcolonial theories exhibit that interpretation of the past remains a political deed (Spivak 285; Guha 3).

Together, these viewpoints imply that interpretive pluralism is both unavoidable and effective. The point that *Padmaavat* can be at once a courageous historical epic and a "distortion" according to diverse

spectators demonstrates that no work has a singular truth. Instead, meaning emerges from the discursive battleground around it. As Ricoeur warned, while multiple understandings exist, "not all interpretations are equal" – some can be assessed on coherence, proof, and moral grounding (87). However, the very deed of deliberation over them is prominent in artistic life.

In the digital era, the interpretive pluralism we examine is intensified by speed and scale. A tweet or a meme can reframe a film's importance for thousands overnight. This can lead to misinformation (as some lament) but also to vigorous dialogue (as others celebrate). Hermeneutic multiplicity, then, is both a challenge for filmmakers and a security against monolithic portrayals. It influences society to encounter the fact that narrative and identity are complex, contested phenomena.

In conclusion, these case studies display that Indian films and texts today certainly serve as nodes in an information war, a war of anecdotes rather than bullets. They exemplify how ideological wars over narrative, nation, and theology play out in artistic media. Yet, they also demonstrate the strength of plurality: no film has a conclusive, uncontested tale. By employing the doctrines of hermeneutics and media studies, we can better learn this multiplicity and notice that questioned reception is not a drawback but a significant characteristic of art in the public sphere.

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