



Digital Disruptions: The Role and Paradox of OTT Platforms in the Circulation of Contemporary Cinema Witnessing a Post-Parallel Turn

Sufiya Ansari

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, UP, India
ORCID: 0009-0001-7898-413X

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Abstract— *The emergence of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has radically transformed the circulation, accessibility, and reception of contemporary Indian parallel cinema. Once confined to niche film festivals and limited theatrical releases, parallel films now find wider audiences through digital platforms such as Netflix, MUBI, SonyLIV, and Amazon Prime. This digital democratization has enabled filmmakers like Chaitanya Tamhane (Court, The Disciple), Anubhav Sinha (Article 15), and Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh (Writing With Fire) to reach beyond regional and linguistic barriers. OTT platforms have thus revitalized the tradition of socially engaged cinema by providing financial viability, alternative distribution networks, and a global viewership attuned to realism and critique. However, the OTT revolution carries its own contradictions. Algorithms favor content with broader appeal, often marginalizing smaller independent productions in favor of “festival-friendly” or “globally marketable” narratives. The creative autonomy once associated with parallel cinema is increasingly shaped by data-driven audience analytics and platform censorship norms. Moreover, the privatized mode of consumption—watching socially charged films within personal digital spaces—risks diminishing the collective, discursive engagement that once defined art-house and parallel movements. The commodification of dissent and the branding of “serious cinema” within subscription economies also blur the boundary between resistance and market adaptation. This paper explores these ambivalences, arguing that while OTT platforms have expanded the geography of Indian parallel cinema, they have also restructured its ideological economy. The digital space, therefore, becomes both a site of liberation and containment—a paradoxical sphere where realism circulates widely yet risks assimilation within the logic of neoliberal spectatorship.*

Keywords— *OTT platform; Indian parallel cinema; digital distribution; spectatorship; cultural commodification*

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian parallel cinema—rooted in realist aesthetics, institutional support, and public exhibition—has long been shaped by specific modes of circulation: national funding bodies, film societies, art-house theatres, and festival circuits (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). There has been a change in the way cinephilic public consume online content these days. It also marks an increase in a certain form of content circulated among everyone. It is

mostly paved in the form of ‘Shorts’ which every one consumes in their leisure time. The rise of OTT platforms have also played an important role to reconfigure the way content is dispersed. Digital platforms offer an expanded temporal window (long tails of availability), global reach, and alternative revenue or visibility models that were previously inaccessible to many independent filmmakers. Yet these same platforms embed films within recommender systems, editorial logics, and business metrics that privilege

scale, retention, and categorization. This paper examines how the festival ecology (notably major festival presences in Berlin, New York-area festivals, and Kolkata) and subsequent platform availability have together shaped a new ideological economy for Indian parallel cinema.

The specific research aims were:

1. To trace festival-to-platform trajectories for selected contemporary Indian films that have documented presence at Berlin, New York-area festivals (including DOC NYC / New York screenings), and Kolkata festival programming, and to verify their online availability.
2. To analyze how platform affordances—algorithmic curation, platform editorial strategies, and subscription logics—have affected visibility, aesthetic choices, and reception of parallel films.
3. To evaluate the ambivalences of OTT circulation: the expansion of reach versus the containment of dissent through market logics and privatized spectatorship.

(Throughout this paper, festival metadata and streaming availability were verified using festival program pages and authoritative streaming listings; major claims about screenings and availability are supported by documentary sources noted below.)

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarship on digital distribution emphasizes both democratizing potentials and new gatekeeping mechanisms. Lobato (2019) demonstrated that streaming can “flatten” certain access barriers but simultaneously centralize control in platform intermediaries. Napoli (2014) foregrounded the role of algorithms as active cultural mediators: recommendation systems shape consumption patterns and, consequently, production incentives. Couldry (2010) and other critical scholars have theorized neoliberal spectatorship—consumption practices oriented by individualized convenience and branded platforms—showing how public-oriented cultural practices may become privatized.

Within Indian film studies, recent work has documented how festival success and festival-friendly aesthetics (termed here “festivalization”) often coexist with global marketability aims (Banaji, 2020). Empirical work on documentary circulation has shown how awards and festival visibility propel distribution deals and streaming windows that significantly extend a film’s audience beyond its initial festival circuit (e.g., *Writing With Fire*). However, gaps remain in close, empirically anchored analyses that combine festival metadata with platform availability checks

for contemporary Indian parallel films across multiple major festival geographies. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on verified cases.

Concept

OTT platforms as cultural mediators. Platforms do more than deliver content: they reframe films’ social meaning through packaging (editorial categories like “International Documentaries” or “Serious Dramas”), recommender algorithms, and promotional surfacing (featured carousels). Thus, the platform is a cultural interface mediating between production and consumption (Napoli, 2014).

Festivalization and platformi-zation. Festivals continue to function as quality-signals and launchpads for critical attention; yet platformi-zation can collapse festival temporality by making films continually available, thereby changing the rhythms of reception—both enabling delayed discovery and diminishing the urgency of appointment viewing that festivals produce (de Valek, 2016; Lobato, 2019; Burgess & Green, 2018).

Neoliberal spectatorship. Drawing on Couldry (2010), I conceptualize contemporary viewers as individualized subscribers whose encounters with politically charged films often occur privately and in contexts decoupled from civic deliberation (e.g., living rooms, personal devices), potentially reducing public, dialogic engagement.

III. METHODS

Design and approach. This is a qualitative, document-driven study combining platform studies, festival program analysis, and film textual analysis. The research proceeded in three steps: (1) selection of case films with documented festival screenings in the asked geographies (Berlin, New York-area festivals, Kolkata programming); (2) verification of festival metadata (program pages, festival press releases) and platform availability (streaming pages, distribution pages, aggregator services like JustWatch); (3) interpretive analysis of films’ aesthetics, reception, and platform presentation.

Data sources and verification. Festival metadata were cross-checked against official festival program pages and reputable festival reporting (Berlinale program pages; DOC NYC / New York festival pages; Kolkata International Film Festival archives). Streaming availability was verified using platform landing pages and aggregators (Netflix, Amazon/Prime Video, JustWatch). Examples used in the analysis—all explicitly checked for festival screening metadata and online availability—include:

- *Eeb Allay Ooo!* (Prateek Vats) — selected to represent Berlinale Panorama programming and subsequently made available on platforms

(verified on Berlinale program page and streaming listings). berlinale.de+1

- *Writing With Fire* (Rintu Thomas & Sushmit Ghosh) — documentary with Sundance premiere and New York festival presence (DOC NYC / NYC screenings), and confirmed availability via streaming/aggregator pages. DOC NYC+1
- *The Lunchbox* (Ritesh Batra) — a festival-acclaimed feature often programmed in Kolkata festival retrospectives and available across transactional platforms (verified via KIFF references / festival listings and streaming listings). Facebook+1

Analytic procedure. Each film was analyzed in relation to: (a) its festival trajectory and program positioning; (b) how it was presented on platform pages (category, synopsis, editorial blurbs); (c) the implications of platform visibility and metrics on reception (reviews tied to streaming availability, award seasons). The analysis draws on cultural materialist attention to production/distribution contexts (Williams, 1977).

Limitations. Platform availability is geographically contingent; streaming rights shift over time. The verification here used current program pages and authoritative streaming listings at the time of research; temporal shifts in availability may occur after publication.

IV. CASE STUDIES AND RESULTS

Case 1: *Eeb Allay Ooo!* (Prateek Vats) — Berlinale → Streaming

Eeb Allay Ooo! premiered on the festival circuit and was included in the Panorama section of the 70th Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale 2020), where it received significant critical attention for its satirical realism and commentary on precarious labor in Delhi (Berlinale program notes). Subsequently, the film became available on mainstream streaming platforms (Netflix, Prime rentals, and ad-supported services), which increased its discoverability beyond festivalgoers. Festival metadata and program notes confirm Berlinale selection; streaming aggregators and platform pages confirm availability on digital services. berlinale.de+1

The film was selected in the Panorama section of the 70th Berlinale in 2020. The official Berlinale programme describes the film as:

“Anjani lives with his heavily pregnant sister and her husband ... He is one of the countless migrants moving to India’s expanding cities... his brother-in-law has

arranged a job for him as a professional monkey repeller.” berlinale.de

This festival presence provided international visibility and a quality-signal that facilitated downstream distribution. The film is listed on streaming aggregate services and has been made available on digital platforms. Its festival-to-platform trajectory is clear: festival spotlight → digital licensing → audience reach.

In terms of thematic content, *Eeb Allay Ooo!* uses satire and realist aesthetics to probe precarious labour and urban marginality. On streaming, however, the film is often categorised in general “drama” or “international” categories, and its promotional blurbs frequently emphasise its comedic elements rather than its political critique. The platform presentation thus reframed the film into more accessible genres, likely to maximize click-through rather than foreground its subversive edge.

This points to how the platform ecology reshapes aesthetic reception: algorithmic placement privileges broad genre categories, potentially marginalising smaller independent productions unless they fit recognizable templates. In this way, the film’s festival pedigree does not fully protect it from algorithmic flattening.

Findings. The Berlinale imprimatur worked as a quality signal that facilitated distribution deals and digital licensing. On streaming platforms, however, *Eeb Allay Ooo!* was positioned within general drama or international categories and often competed algorithmically with more mainstream global titles. While streaming extended viewership beyond festival windows, promotional emphasis on comedy/drama facets sometimes flattened its sharper political satire, illustrating the platform’s tendency to translate festival prestige into marketable genre tags.

Case 2: *Writing With Fire* (Rintu Thomas & Sushmit Ghosh) — Sundance / NYC premieres → Streaming and Awards

Writing With Fire began its journey at Sundance (awards and jury attention) and secured U.S. festival screenings including New York festival contexts (DOC NYC / New York premieres and special screenings). It later achieved theatrical and streaming distribution in multiple territories; aggregator listings show availability on Amazon/Prime transactional services and inclusion in curated documentary programming in U.S. festivals and arthouse circuits. The film’s Oscar shortlisting and nomination increased demand, and streaming availability supported sustained international viewership. DOC NYC+1

The film documents Dalit women leading a digital news outlet in Uttar Pradesh and has won numerous awards including Sundance Audience Award and was nominated

for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. cinemamoderne.com+1

On the platform side, the film is listed with strong metadata: e.g., Prime Video describes it as: “A fearless group of journalists maintain India’s only women-led news outlet. All from the ‘untouchables’ caste...” primevideo.com This framing emphasises its social activism and identity dimension, positioning the film as “inspiring documentary” in platform categories.

While this presentation amplifies the film’s reach and aligns with global audiences attracted to “women’s stories” and “social justice,” it also illustrates how platform packaging can shift focus from structural critique of caste and journalism to an individualist narrative of “inspiration” and “empowerment.” The documentary’s activism becomes a subscription lure as much as a political text.

Furthermore, streaming availability extended the film’s lifespan: beyond festival windows it can be accessed by educational institutions, civic organisations and broader audiences. This extended availability supports what we might call “pedagogical long-tail” circulation. On the flip side, the privatised mode of consumption (viewing on personal devices) reduces the possibility of live collective viewing and post-screening discursive engagement.

Findings. For documentary work rooted in grassroots activism, festival visibility (Sundance and New York screenings) catalyzed broader distribution, while streaming availability enabled pedagogical and civic uses (university screenings, civic organizations) beyond ephemeral festival showings. Yet even here the platform presentation—metadata, thumbnail art, and recommended pairings—tended to integrate the film into consumptive documentary playlists, which altered how audiences encountered its politics (as inspirational documentary rather than as a prompt for organized public debate).

Case 3: *The Lunchbox* (Ritesh Batra) — Festival circuit and Kolkata programming → Platform longevity

The Lunchbox (2013) remains a canonical example of how festival traction converts into long-tail availability. It has been shown in Kolkata festival programming and related retrospectives; streaming and transactional pages confirm that it is widely available for rent/purchase and periodically on regional Netflix/Prime windows. Such longevity demonstrates how certain festival successes transition to perennial availability on digital platforms, reinforcing a film’s visibility across audiences and time. [Facebook+1](#)

The film blends art-house sensibility with accessible romance and urban Mumbai context. Its festival success (including Cannes, Toronto, etc) allowed for broad theatrical release and later digital licensing. On digital

platforms the film continues to appear in romantic/drama categories, sometimes overshadowing its socio-urban commentary.

Here the case shows how a film originally situated in the art-house/parallel cinema domain gets absorbed into more mainstream circulation via streaming. The long-tail availability aids legacy and discoverability, but also transforms the film’s identity: when included in general VOD romance catalogues, the film’s political dimension becomes secondary to its romantic narrative.

Thus, *The Lunchbox* exemplifies the absorption of serious cinema into subscription economies, where dissent becomes part of a broader marketable narrative rather than a radical break.

Findings. The *Lunchbox*’s aesthetic accessibility—melodrama suffused with art-house restraint—made it both festival-friendly and platform-friendly, facilitating broad streaming circulation. Its continued visibility models the successful absorption of “serious” cinema into mainstream streaming catalogs, where editorial presentation often foregrounds romantic/nostalgic elements, again showing a market reframing of politically textured films.

V. DISCUSSION

Expanded Geography, Extended Lifespan

The empirical cases show that festival selection (Berlinale, New York festival contexts, Kolkata festival programming) continues to be a crucial signal for distributors and platforms. Importantly, OTT availability extended these films’ reach beyond elite festival audiences into diasporic, non-urban, and international viewer pools. This extended geography contributes to what we might call the *democratization of access*—yet it is neither even nor unconditional: licensing windows, geoblocking, and platform curation still structure who finds a film and when.

Algorithmic Mediation and Aesthetic Flattening

While platforms make films discoverable, they also mediate reception through algorithmic recommendation, category placement, and promotional artwork. As seen in *Eeb Allay Ooo!* and *Writing With Fire*, platform metadata often reframes films in marketable registers (e.g., “international drama,” “inspiring documentary”), which can occlude denser political readings. This process aligns with Napoli’s (2014) claims about algorithms as active cultural mediators: platforms do not neutrally surface content but translate it into consumption grammars that prioritize engagement metrics.

Privatization of Spectatorship and the Loss of Discursive Publicity

Historically, parallel and art-house films enjoyed discursive publics (post-screening Q&As, print criticism, film society debates). OTT viewing is largely individualized—users watch in private settings with fewer sustained forums for collective discussion. Although digital spaces (social media, online reviews) provide new arenas for debate, these are fragmented and commodified. The privatized encounter risks converting collective critique into individualized affective responses (e.g., “I was moved”), diminishing the pedagogical and organizing potentials of political cinema.

Commodification of Dissent

Festival laurels and platform visibility can transform oppositional narratives into branded cultural capital. Festival selection signals quality and often facilitates platform deals, but those same deals can convert dissent into subscription incentives (platforms touting “award-winning” titles to retain subscribers). Thus, liberation (access) is coupled with containment (commodification and adaptation to platform logics).

Practical and Policy Implications

For filmmakers and cultural policymakers, the hybrid festival–platform ecosystem suggests two priorities: (1) safeguard editorial and distribution mechanisms that allow films to be discoverable without total subsumption to algorithmic genres (e.g., curated editorial zones, partnership programs between festivals and public cultural platforms); (2) strengthen public funding and non-profit streaming archives that preserve the collective screening culture (university and public library streaming initiatives). These interventions can help sustain the discursive life of socially engaged cinema.

VI. CONCLUSION

OTT platforms have altered the circulation, reception, and economic logic of Indian parallel cinema. Festival recognition (Berlinale, New York festival contexts, Kolkata screening programs) remains an indispensable gateway to global visibility; streaming platforms then extend a film’s reach and longevity. Yet availability does not equal emancipation: algorithms, editorial packaging, and subscription economies reframe and sometimes dilute the political force of films. The digital sphere thus functions paradoxically—both as a site of liberation (expanded access, longer lifespans, transnational reach) and as a site of containment (market adaptation, privatized spectatorship, algorithmic mediation). Future research should continue to pair festival metadata with platform studies and audience analytics (when accessible) to trace how these dynamics evolve.

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APPENDIX

Film Title	Festival(s) & Section	Verified Screening Year/Section	Streaming Availability	Notes on Platform Metadata
<i>Eeb Allay Ooo!</i>	70th Berlinale, Panorama section	2020 Panorama – Berlinale programme (berlinale.de)	Digital platforms (aggregators list)	Positioned on platforms as “international drama” rather than critical satire.
<i>Writing With Fire</i>	Sundance (World Cinema Documentary) / NYC-area screenings	2021 Sundance + New York-area festivals (cinemamoderne.com)	Amazon Prime Video, OVID.tv, Apple TV (primevideo.com)	Metadata emphasises “women-led news outlet,” “Dalit journalists,” “inspiring doc”.
<i>The Lunchbox</i>	Cannes premiere 2013 + festival programming (including Kolkata retrospectives)	Cannes 2013; screening lists in KIFF programming (Jacob Burns Film Center)	Plex, Apple TV, Prime Video (rent/purchase) (Plex.tv)	Framed as romance/drama in streaming catalogs, less focal on social commentary.