



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

NEUBAUER COLLEGIUM
FOR CULTURE & SOCIETY

**RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE
CAVALCADE**

**Opening Reception
Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society
May 8, 2025**

Tara Zahra: Hi, everybody. Good afternoon. My name is Tara Zahra. I'm the faculty director here at the Neubauer Collegium, and it's my huge pleasure to welcome all of you here for this incredibly exciting event. It's the culmination of a three-year research project here at the Neubauer Collegium on "reimagining cosmopolitanism," the beginning of the conference that is the capstone to that project, and at the same time the opening of our exhibition by Raqs Media Collective from Delhi, which is responding directly to the prompts of the research project. So, one of our goals here at the Collegium is to integrate arts and research. I think this is a shining example of what can come of that, and I'm really excited about the conversations tonight and in the days to come.

I wanted to first congratulate the artists and also the conference organizers, Dipesh and Lisa here at the University of Chicago, thank 3CT for their partnership in this event, and of course thank all of the team at the Collegium for all of the work that they've done over many years to bring this all together.

I'm going to turn things over to Lisa Wedeen, who's going to open the conversation by talking about the research project. And then we'll have a discussion with the artists moderated by our curator, Dieter Roelstraete. Thanks everybody for coming. Welcome.

Lisa Wedeen: Thank you very much. I'll say more about the research project tomorrow, but on behalf of 3CT, it's my honor to welcome you to the opening event of the conference, Reimagining Cosmopolitanism. It's especially wonderful to be here at the Neubauer Collegium and to thank the Neubauer for its generous support of the project, without which these events, and the edited volume to be published by Oxford University Press, would not be possible.

Spearheaded by my dear colleague Dipesh Chakrabarty, the editors of the volume also include Prathama Banerjee, Sanjay Seth, and me. It's been a

privilege and a pleasure to come to know Prathama and Sanjay during these years. Thank you, cherished colleagues, for your intellectual generosity and spirit of collaboration. We began envisaging this project right before Covid-19 disrupted the world, and we're grateful to all of the participants in the volume who joined us on the journey, long and circuitous to be sure. To imagine a creative otherwise-ness to contemporary circumstances, we try to animate this project not simply by reinvigorating the concept of cosmopolitanism, but by repurposing it for the present. In other words, by taking some of the salutary aspects of the term and bringing them into bold relief while attempting to shirk off some of the concept's problematic historical baggage. That effort required a genealogical approach to cosmopolitanism's evolution through time. It also called for analyses that showcased cosmopolitanism practices in places that had been neglected by previous theorization, foregrounding the multiplicity of cosmopolitan world-making activities in the Global South. For some in the volume, and there were generative disagreements about emphases here, reimagining cosmopolitanism also entailed decentering the human. That aspect of the project is featured in today's exhibition and in the Multiple Earths panel tomorrow.

To be sure, a call to reimagine cosmopolitanism also has to deal with the formidable challenges to its realization in present conditions. In fact, it seems odd, even quaint, to conjure up this term in the context in which authoritarianism is on the ascendancy, powered by familiar and new-seeming forces of racism, populism, and nationalism, in which a genocide bolstered by U.S. weaponry and disinformation campaigns rages on in Palestine, and in which innovative technologies initially hailed as democracy-enhancing and solidarity-inducing forms have also been a means for novel modes of surveillance, policing, toxicity, and, let's face it, isolation.

It's my hope that you'll join us for tomorrow's panels, where some of these themes will be brought into bold relief. For now, it's my privilege to thank the staff and colleagues who have contributed to planning this event, and whose presence has made its organization delightful. From the Neubauer Collegium, 3CT is grateful to Keelin Burke, Rachel Johnson, and Mark Sorkin for their help in realizing and publicizing this event. Keelin, Rachel, and Mark are generally the ones who ensure that the day-to-day running of and messaging around the Neubauer's events go off without a hitch. I would also like to thank Tara Zahra, the remarkable academic director of the Neubauer. And finally, from the Neubauer, a special thanks are owed to Elspeth Carruthers and Dieter Roelstraete. Their visionary leadership and aesthetic erudition have invigorated our intellectual world at the University of Chicago. Thank you Elspeth and Dieter in particular.

I'm also grateful to the staff of 3CT. We are beyond fortunate to have such dedicated and creative people working at our center. In particular, I would like to thank student assistants Lucy DaSilva and Delaney Wallace, our Program Coordinator, Ryan Eykholt, and the exceptionally talented and cherished Associate Director, Anna Searle Jones.

Please join me in thanking everyone mentioned. And now I turn over the program to Dieter Roelstraete, who will introduce our panelists and who will be moderating today's opening event, where we are so fortunate to welcome members of the critically acclaimed, thought-provoking Raqs Media Collective. Thank you very much.

Dieter
Roelstraete:

Thank you, Lisa, for these generous, welcoming words. I'll be brief. I will invite the panelists to ascend the stage. Prathama Banerjee, historian at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi; Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Lawrence A. Kimpton Distinguished Service Professor of History and South Asian Languages and Civilizations here at the University of Chicago; And Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, two-thirds of Raqs Media Collective.

Please take your seats—whichever way you deem fit. Perhaps the most aesthetically inclined scholar next to the most scholarly inclined artist. Or mix it up. Before we start the conversation, which I hope to intervene in as little as possible, and just assuming that our panelists will primarily converse among each other, I do want to say that the film made in response to the invitation to contribute to the question of reimagining cosmopolitanism is currently switched off and will be started at 5:00 after the conclusion of the panel.

So, I'll have the panelists talk to each other about the research project and the making of the film. There will be some time for questions from the audience, but I do want to, of course, invite everyone after the conclusion of this panel to make your way to the gallery, which will not accommodate this particular critical mass of viewers, so we'll have to take turns. But anyway, at 5:00, we will start the film, *Cavalcade*, and we will also be pouring the first of a number of drinks. Anyway, so it is, of course, a little odd to—well, not odd; it's actually a fairly standard operating procedure—but we will be talking about a work, of course, that most of you haven't seen yet, and that the researchers, in fact, also only got to see quite recently. I should say that also includes myself. I saw *Cavalcade* for the first time, in its entirety, just about a week ago. So, I will perhaps start with directing one question towards the artists and ask them, what their film *Cavalcade* has to do with the challenge of reimagining cosmopolitanism, which is a question that was at one point asked during the preparatory conversations about a year ago. Shuddha, Monica?

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: Well, thank you very much, Dieter. And it's a real pleasure to be with people whose work we really admire and learn from with all of you. The question of what does *Cavalcade* have to do with cosmopolitanism and its reimagination has to do with a profound shift in the understanding of cosmopolitanism that I think we are all living through. It's not just a question of accommodating people from proximate cultures already established in dialogue, but also a relationship that is being sought to be in process with. I think Dipesh Chakrabarty has actually pointed out a way for us to think about the difference of moving from the global to the planetary. And since the word "cosmos" is implicated in "cosmopolitanism," how do you create relationships that produce conversations not just between different cultures and histories, but between different species, different forms of intelligences that are emergent and yet to come, and also between different formations of time, coming back to, for instance, something that you're interested in. And time, both in its ephemeral, contingent sense, but also deep time, the time that it took for tectonic forces to realign the world in different ways, the time that it takes for continents to form, for rivers to flow. We're living right now at a moment where two countries threaten to go to war and one of them wants to stop a river, a river that's actually taken 50 million years to flow.

And I think the challenge of reimaging cosmopolitanism is to try and find a sensible way to initiate conversations that make it difficult for rivers to be stopped by ephemeral nation-states. And that is one of the reasons why we thought of the cavalcade, which is a kind of procession, a grand procession, that takes different forms of life and intelligence into account as it travels to some destinations that are quite unknown to all of us.

And what does it mean to be on this ride together with different forms of life, with different understandings of time? I think that is what I would say.

Monica Narula: You know, I think we are all intermittently cosmopolitan, and we always have been in the sense that looking up and knowing that there's something which is incomprehensible, the cosmic around you has always been a point of arrest. It's a web you can see above you, and it stops you from being entangled only in what you are surrounded by. And I think this business of looking again and again and again, to me itself is a cosmopolitan gesture, right? It's not satisfied by the sort of formations on the ground, whether they are an ephemeral power or not.

That is to say, what is it that makes this web valuable, meaningful? What is my connection with the other? Ideas of freedom are not ideas of the singular, right? Ideas of freedom, ideas need the non-one. You know you are one, but you need the non-one to even think that. And I think the cosmopolitan impulse is to see that relationship between that which stops you from being in

time in a way. We live in time, but the cosmic is a time that we cannot comprehend. While we have that infinitude, the challenge, I think, is, how do you try to find infinity within the self? Even if it's not infinity, at least it feels like that. But how does one expand?

I think we are all, sometimes, cosmopolitan. The question is how aware are we of it and how intentionally.

Dieter
Roelstraete: Thanks. One more question for the artists. When we first started the conversation that led not just to tomorrow's conference and the publication of the reader, but also the exhibition—this is about two years ago—it was actually Dipesh who suggested to us that we perhaps involve Raqs Media Collective as practicing artists in this conversation. And I, who'd known their work for some time and had known the artist personally for some time, was very excited to be able to extend an invitation to work on this project together. And at an early stage, we were told by the artists that one triggering mechanism of this new film, *Cavalcade*, would be the filming of a religious procession, a festival, in Jharkhand, in Deoghar.

And that's somewhat how the film starts. And of course, it has gone on to become something much more expansive, much more speculative, much more elusive and evasive. But still, the wedding procession was in many ways the only starting point I had to try to imagine what this film would amount to. And I just wanted you to talk perhaps a little bit about why the wedding procession in particular became the kernel from which the entire project grew.

Monica
Narula: So, the wedding procession that Dieter is referencing is the wedding procession of the Indic deity Shiva, who is much more than a deity for many. I mean, he's kind of a force of both the erotic and ascetic, both creation and destruction. Actually, I'm thinking back and I'm remembering that when we were curating the Shanghai Biennial ten years ago, we had already talked about this Shiva Ki Barat, or the wedding procession of Shiva.

And what is really interesting about it is when he himself is going for his own wedding—and you go in a procession, you take friends, family, there's music, there's dance—and then you go in a procession, in a kind of cavalcade, to the bride's house. When he turns up with this procession, the house of the bride says, "But we can't let you in. Have you seen whom you are coming with?" These figurations he is coming with are demons and ghouls and animals and creatures that, you know, are wild and covered in cemetery ash and have no normativity. And this creates a kind of crisis at that moment. And to us, this is a very interesting narrative because it talks about those figures that cannot be read into history, that cannot be narrated in the terms that we narrate how things should be.

So, if you escape the should-ness of things, if you no longer fit into how it is apportioned, then what emerges from that? And I think this is a question of linear replication and convulsion. Linear replication is what we live in. That is what we consider—it might be sort of expanding, but it is still a kind of...you know, you replicate, you go further. That is what the telos of time also kind of promises, the way it's narrated at least.

But we as artists—but also in art, right—we all are attracted to the convulsive moment, whether it's in the cinematic moment, in a text, in a novel, in a painting, it doesn't matter. The moment of convulsion, the break, is something that we are attracted to because we know that this is a fiction. And within that crack, there are other worlds. And I think that is what we are looking at as a kind of starting point. What are the worlds within the cracks where you can't fit into what you're supposed to fit into. And so...well, I don't want to take the film away from you by telling you the film. So we just call these illogical figurations that have leaked out of time and place into our narrative and are becoming a cavalcade. And I like that word "cavalcade" because we're all kind of joining it as makers and watchers. I mean, watching the cavalcade, you are also becoming part of that cavalcade of those who are not perhaps fit-able.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: Well, I mean, just to take things forward from what Monica is saying, this procession comes to a halt at a checkpoint where the bride's family says, "So who the hell are you guys?" There's one figure amongst them who has three legs and his name is Bhringi. And for us he becomes three-legged time. So, the past, the present, and the future appear simultaneously and ask to be let into the present. And that's a problem at the border checkpoint of the contemporary moment where this kind of unruliness of temporal habitation is difficult to think with. This afternoon we were at the former Oriental Institute, the ISAC, and it was amazing to see figurations from 6,000, 7,000 years ago that seem to resonate with some of the characters and the figures that we present in the cavalcade.

And they are not just from the remote past, but they also seem to beckon in a way, as cyborgs or as chimeras from the future. And in the time that we're in, the regimes that rule us want to police us into very straightforward populations but can't seem to cope with the unpredictability of the life forms that we are becoming. And that's what Shiva's Baraat is, the unpredictability of all those forms of life that we are currently becoming, joyously and with some amount of bacchanalian celebration, entering with force into the present and finding not a space of welcome, but of negotiation.

Dieter Roelstraete: Shuddha, I notice that you are wearing a well-chosen shirt. It says love, right?

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: It says love.

Dieter Roelstraete: And of course, I mean, it's fitting that the starting off point for the film is a wedding procession and not a funeral procession, right? So, there's an amorous, you know, erotic charge to the work that kind of points to the cosmopolitan project or the cosmopolitan-izing project, as one of union and unification and harmonizing and harmony.

I just wanted to see if Prathama or Dipesh have any kind of responses to what's been said thus far.

Prathama Banerjee: So, yeah, I mean, I saw the film twice over, actually, because it's so thick and so dense. My first response is that what we have here is not exactly a kind of cinematic representation of the scholarly acknowledgment of multiple species, because it is a kind of challenge to the empirical, right?

It is about unthinkable—as you rightly said—lifeforms not even well described as hybrid, not even well described as cyborgs, but kinds of, you know, figures which totally take you by surprise. And the idea that cosmopolitanism can be embodied in these singular instances was what struck me as really powerful about the film. In my reading, the real power of the film is the way that it weaves the spatial and geological imagination of the cosmos into the temporal.

So, and I do not want to preempt what will be seen, but we have all sorts of geological, landscape, infrastructural, spatial stuff. But we also have the kind of voiceover which almost persistently talks of time. It does not describe the space, but it persistently talks of time and figures it as the instance, with its double entendre. Instance as the example of this unique life form, but also the instant as time. So that combination is what was really, really powerful for me in the film, and very, very beautiful.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: Thank you. So, first of all, it's been wonderful to work with these people and see the film evolve from earlier experimentations. It's been wonderful to work with Dieter and the Neubauer Collegium staff. And so, irony takes me back to what Monica was saying about being intermittently cosmopolitan. So, the irony of actually sitting on a cosmopolitanism panel where three of the four people are Bengali speakers reminds me how intermittently cosmopolitan we are, even as we are sitting here. Right? And the interesting complication is I'm in the minority. Two of them are kind of Delhi-inflected Bengali speakers. I'm a Calcutta-inflected Bengali speaker, but I think it sort of goes back to what Monica said about being intermittently cosmopolitan. It's a place you find yourself in. It's not something you plan to be.

You become intermittently cosmopolitan because sometimes you're more aware of the differences and sometimes you are less aware of the differences. But being more aware and being less aware is not a voluntary, programmatic action. Things in the world remind you. But overall, I think the wonderful challenge of working with artists takes me back to a problem that I've been thinking about for a while, actually from the time I was working on *Provincializing Europe*, which is that any concept that becomes globally acceptable—like the idea of equality, for instance, or the idea of rights or the idea of being cosmopolitan—any concept, it seems to me, has two sides to it. One is the discursive side, the conceptual side, or how you speak of it in abstraction. And the other is the figurative side, which is what it looks like in practice. So, the idea of equality before the law was a concept that traveled from Europe to India. We didn't have that. We had the idea of equality in the eyes of God, but not of the law. But then you can ask, "What does it look like in practice?" And then when you go to Indian courts, you'll find that it doesn't look exactly the way that it might look somewhere else, or the very idea of equality itself. So, when you visualize any concept that seems like one, what you get is the not one, right?

So, what does cosmopolitanism look like? The reason why even this visual portrayal of it cannot ever be exhaustive is because some other group might have seen other things in it. Right? And that is your experience. That is your history rushing into the space opened up by the discursive, but changing it with the force of the figurative.

So, in that sense, this was a very interesting experience for me. The other question I want to briefly respond to is—as Lisa was saying in her introduction—when Oxford University Press approached us to think of an *Oxford Handbook on Cosmopolitanism*, out of which this project came, the question of border migrants was, of course, there. But it was also, in a way, there in earlier iterations of cosmopolitan thinking: that is, the question of difference between humans. But we felt we were in a point in human history where the question of difference between humans and other humans is being discussed in relationship to the question of difference between humans and non-humans. And at a point where the very human being himself or herself is being imagined as containing that human environment within you.

So, in the last 20 years, with a lot of discussion going on about the microbiome in our bodies, something that has been displaced is the old idea that an organism has its environment outside. Now we know that our environment is inside. And sometimes instead of saying human beings, people use the word holobiont, which is this multiply-assembled creature that thinks it's a human being but is actually being produced by the assemblage of work that your

viruses are doing, your bacteria are doing. And sometimes, they are instrumental even in producing the chemicals that allow you to feel the feelings you have. You might think you're falling in love, but it might be your viruses falling in love, you know, or your bacteria. Or you think you're craving chocolate, but it could be your microbiome that wants chocolate. So that question immediately brought up the question of time, deep time, that also features in the film.

Sometimes in my classroom, I ask my students, "What is your most personal relationship to the planet?" And sometimes they remember to say, "I breathe." And the oxygen you breathe, 60 percent of it is produced by phytoplankton. We are just purely beneficiaries. We don't play any role in producing the oxygen on which we depend. And the other thing of which we often speak in terms of sovereignty is your weight, which is your relationship to the gravitational field of the planet.

But we often talk about, "Oh, I'm gaining too much weight. I have to lose weight." So there's this kind of constant flitting between the "I" that is almost part of human phenomenology—you know, I feel myself to be Dipesh, you feel yourself to be you, which is inescapable—but at the same time, we're at a time where this "I" is not being dissolved or exploded by Lacanian psychoanalysis. It's actually being dissolved by the sciences: the biological sciences, the medical sciences. You realize that stress doesn't produce ulcers, but certain bacteria do, you know, and when the doctor treats you, they don't treat you as the human being you are, they basically fight the bacteria. I thought what was wonderful about the film was that it was actually trying to visualize all these questions.

So—without giving away the secret of the film—that a piece of volcanic rock from the Gondwana period could turn up somewhere as a rock, you don't think about. We don't think about how the most beautiful places on the planet, that tour guides talk about, are products of cataclysmic changes, geological changes.

So, we are all very lucky that we weren't around when these places were created. We just simply enjoy the beauty long after they've been created. And places where people go to experience stillness, experience spirituality, have sometimes been produced by catastrophic changes, violent catastrophic changes. So, in many ways, I think whether you're looking at the planetary or the global, the fact that we are becoming more aware of deep time in this kind of way—of the non-human and the non-humanness of humans—when humans have become a gravitational force or a geological force, you are talking to the non-humanness of humans.

I think these are very exciting, intellectual challenges, and it's also a challenge to visualize the world. And I actually don't think any of our discursive arguments about cosmopolitanism, borderlessness, about even all the theories of cosmopolitanism, practices of cosmopolitanism, these pose visual challenges. Like, what would it look like to be cosmopolitan in this age?

And I think people who think with words, beyond a point can't travel without help from people who think with images, with performances, because you're trying to visualize the figurative side while you're also working on the discursive side of this concept.

Dieter
Roelstraete:

I mean, it's brilliant, but we can't stop there yet. What you said, Dipesh, you know, posing the question of whether it may be a bacteria that's falling in love or a virus that wants me to do this or that, reminds me of the fact that we are obviously in the presence of a collective. Raqs Media Collective was founded in Delhi in 1992 by three artists—including Jeebesh Bagchi, who's not here. And obviously, the very idea of a collective is a very forceful challenge to the dominion of individualistic thinking that is so central to our conception of artmaking. Also, I like your introduction of the cliffhanger: the rock. Now I know everyone's dying to see the rock, the volcanic rock. Great, we're building momentum.

So, *Cavalcade* is an exhibition that also encompasses three printed works, which are mounted in the lobby in the reception area. And this is also something that I would like the artists to talk about. Shuddha, a couple of days ago you mentioned that you're thinking of *Cavalcade*, the film, as a pivot in what you've been doing, and knowing that you've been at it for 33 years makes me feel honored, in fact, to have been able to help build a platform on which this pivot was possible. I'm curious to hear you talk about this pivot, how this work has been transformative, and how there's a before and after *Cavalcade* in the history of Raqs Media Collective. And I'm also curious to hear you talk a little bit about the works that are hung in the reception area, which were made with the use of artificial intelligence. And perhaps you could expand on that somewhat, Monica.

Monica
Narula:

Part of the process of making the film has been the sort of conversations we've had and things we've been thinking about in different ways for so long. But the question of what is intelligence, right? And how does one engage with it? And like you pointed out, being a collective intelligence is already its own dynamic. Especially a collective intelligence—I'm claiming intelligence—over 33 years is... it's not the same thing as, "Well, let's work on a project together." It's not like that. When you work together in this way, it's a way of trusting, the fact, for example, that you are differently unequal on different days.

It's not about saying we're all the same all the time. You're not. Some days, someone's word will carry more, and you have to trust in that more than you trust necessarily in the claim of what you're doing, you know? So, it's not about making things manifest. It's about accepting what is latent and taking that as a starting point.

And I think some of the things that we've been doing in this film could be part of an awareness question, and that's a kind of a pivot in which you're saying, OK, how does one think of questions of intelligence? And how does one have conversations with it? Can one do that? What is the order of give and take? How equal are you in that conversation? How unequal are you in that conversation that you're trying to have? One of the iterations of an attempt to act in that direction is these three prints outside where we were sort of engaging with more than one instantiation of emergent intelligence by offering prompts of how to write a new history. There's a skeleton of Lucy, and Shuddha and Jeebesh have been fortunate enough to see the skeleton in Addis Ababa. We have the picture and it was like I was there, like me and Lucy, Shuddha and Lucy, and Jeebesh, and it's wonderful. So we start from this female ancestor of us all, and then we sort of try and write a new history. So then the artificial intelligence responds and then you work with that.

We're filmmaking artists originally, but I like the idea of seeing what is drawing towards, because you can draw *from*, and you can draw *towards*. And it's not necessarily a final thing. It's a drawing. These sketches are kind of conversations, of intelligences, of collective intelligences, of different kinds.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: Yeah, I mean, it's nice that Monica brought up our *Australopithecus afarensis* ancestor, because she's probably the first hominid who stood up as a biped. And therefore, what was available to her was a horizon, was an expanse, and the idea that there's something beyond the horizon that you can move towards. And if we think from that thought down to now, there is an accumulation of intelligences which provoke us to move beyond some horizons outwards, and some horizons inwards into the microbiome, let's say. Then the picture that we get of the shaping consciousness of the world becomes quite different from this, the one in which human beings and their 5,000-year-old history and their, perhaps, I don't know, 296,000-year-old pre-history, collide in some kind of idea of what it means to be human.

It's interesting that you brought up gravity and gravitation because the film itself is a little bit of a dance between two languages, between Bangla and English. And there is a figure whose questions sort of impale it. There are two questions that I think are interesting: How do you learn patience from a forest? And what is the difference between gravity and gravitas? And they're spoken through the invocation of a character who all Bengalis know: a man

called Professor Shonku, who is this kind of maverick scientist who lives in the eastern edge of Gondwanaland in a place called Giridih, invented by Satyajit Ray. And his first adventure, which is called “Byomjatrir Diary,” or “Diary of a Space Traveler,” is a kind of cavalcade because there are four beings who are on a space trip to Mars and to another planet which is beset by its own sectarian problems. And they retreat, thinking of themselves as much more cosmopolitan than these stupid other planetary creatures. But the four creatures are a cat called Newton, Professor Shonku’s assistant, Professor Shonku, and a form of artificial intelligence.

Monica
Narula: This is 1965.

Shuddhabrata
Sengupta: 1965. The robot, called Bidhushekhar, which is a wonderful name—he doesn’t speak a word until they are almost on Mars, and he says in pure Sanskrit, “Open the windows and look outside and see what the cosmos is.” So I think that that character’s pre-history is what we pull on, an imagined pre-history, so we’re having some fun with him. And we use that to navigate this post-Antarctic volcanic eruption that creates the South Asian subcontinent of which we are the beleaguered citizens today. But what is it, then, to think about the difference between gravity and gravitation? What does it mean to live and try and learn other forms of attitudes to time, from forests? That’s your work in some ways, isn’t it?

Prathama
Banerjee: One of the differences from the earlier iterations of Rethinking Cosmopolitanism to today is that earlier we imagined a kind of face-to-face-ness of strangers when they meet in uncharted lands, perhaps. By now it is very clear that there is nothing called face-to-face-ness. It’s always already mediated. Cosmopolitan togetherness is essentially mediated, and today primarily technologically. And that, to my mind, is a kind of running thread. It is a cinematic, highly technical art form. It’s not just art. It’s a play with new and old techniques, new and old media forms.

I wanted some kind of more explicit responses from you guys on the technology. For instance, it’s very, very clear that much of the film, unlike an ordinary film that we watch, is actually shot as if from the orbital location. Why is that the default position from which we can imagine multiple earths? Or a cosmopolis? Or, for instance, a distinction that you made, Dipesh, between the discursive and the figural? It’s tough to make the distinction in the context of artificial intelligence. It is, above all, a kind of processing of discursive, textual materials, which we are prompting.

So much of the kind of AI art that we have seen has been poetry, collaboration between AI and a poet producing a kind of joint poetry. It’s interesting how

you guys use AI, which is a large language model system, as an image generator via prompts. And the mediation between language and image that your film plays with because the tongue is a very central metaphor. So, just bring it out a little bit—

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: Yeah, let me just respond by saying that the term “artificial intelligence” is probably also a bit of a misnomer. One of the best ways of describing whatever we call “artificial intelligence” was termed by a computer scientist who works on it. He said it actually should be called “applied statistics,” which is what a large language model essentially is. It creates aggregates, which become responses. And it’s not very different from the way the human mind also creates aggregate responses.

I think that we, in our ordinary usage of artificial intelligence, get completely shellshocked by the speed with which the question generates a detailed response. But if you try and ask the same question about 20 times, what is talking to you—with a sense of the thousands and millions of instances of human beings actually producing information, knowledge, thoughts and dreams—begins to get tired. It begins to stumble and stammer, and it begins to produce what, in the technical literature of artificial intelligence, is called hallucinations.

This work plays a lot with the hallucinogenic properties of the new technologies. At the same time, there are also differences. Depending on how these technologies have been offered and by whom, there are, for reasonably good reasons, strict limitations. So, one of the figures that we’ve been talking with in this film is the figure of Chhinnamasta, which is a form of the maternal deity who also decapitates herself, and it’s seen as a gesture of incredible generosity because she’s feeding the world by the sprouts of blood that emanate from her.

You try and enter a prompt on auto-decapitation in an artificial intelligence agent, it will come back to you saying, “I’m not allowed to go forward with this.” And these are situations where you begin to realize that there is a kind of faltering proto-human, crypto-human—I hesitate to say intelligence—but there is a negotiation between us and the human species right now, all the fractions which have been fed into databases. There was a time in the early history of artificial intelligence when if you asked for the portrait of a normal middle-aged male, it would inevitably turn up looking a lot like George Bush the Second, because his picture was the one that was most available online. So, the human average was sort of tending towards George Bush the Second. That’s changing now. It looks a lot more like Mao Tse Tung, for some strange reason.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: Interestingly, though, it reminds me that when in the film you have this image of the female head with the tongue, and it's a blood-red tongue sticking out, there's a reference to Kali, of course. And that is also a reference to the temporal. So, the question of time actually runs through the film. But Kali itself is that power that can destroy time.

Dieter Roelstraete: Speaking of which, we are running short on time. I would like to—if there's any questions simmering in the audience—I'd like to invite people to ask them.

Q: Thank you all for the conversation. It is quite actually enlightening. My question is—obviously I haven't seen the film, so it's not really about the film—but it's about cosmopolitanism and AI. As you're talking, I'm thinking about all the different market forces that are driving that intelligence, and I guess the question is, in a deep-time sense, was there something similar, or could you speculate something similar, to our understanding of intelligence previous to this moment? Which is to say, were market forces—were capital—driving our understanding of what intelligence was? It's an abstract thing, but the way you guys are talking about it made me wonder about—especially when you were talking about Lucy—our understanding of what the human is, relative to AI. There's just all these other forces. It's not a natural intelligence, I guess.

Dipesh Chakrabarty: One example sometimes given of intelligence in nature—so, making intelligence into a more than human capability and category—is that of the termites' nest. The big termites' nest has to solve all the gravitational problems that you would need to solve, in principle, to build a skyscraper. And they do it through habit, through, you know, their genetic propensity. So that's one of the examples given to make a distinction between what we call consciousness and internal time consciousness and intelligence, and to see intelligence as actually on a continuum that comes from what we normally think of as nature and is now, thanks to us, taking kind of this form that we call wrongly, I think, artificial. Because I think we position our intelligence against that intelligence and say it's artificial, but you can see it on a continuum.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta: I mean, I think Adam Smith's invisible hand is an early imagination of a disembodied intelligence. So, as far as I'm concerned, is the general idea of the *volonté générale*, general will. What is the will of the people? These are disembodied and distributed, but also very interior, right?

Dieter Roelstraete: Just one more.

Q: Hello. Again, my question is also not going to be about the film, obviously because I haven't seen it. But I've been reading lots of biological texts recently,

and in those texts I'm noticing a distinction between the term "cosmopolitan species" and an "endemic species." And so I'm thinking about your film, and the specificities of the locations in the film, and what you're thinking about those things that might be endemic to the places that that you filmed in. How are you using that to talk about cosmopolitanism and how do you think about that relationship between what's endemic and what's cosmopolitan, whether that's a false distinction that emerges from a particular separation of the planet from its places?

Monica
Narula:

I think you've kind of hinted at an answer already. To me this kind of distinction is a necessary and categorical one because it helps make sense. But I think when one is thinking of the very idea of like, you know, the fact that we are kind of a water bag within which there is a world, and without which there is a world, then it may be a question of how porous are the distinctions between the endemic and the cosmopolitan. And I'm also thinking about the systems that we are part of: say, capitalism. We talk about the fact that we have dead labor and living labor. But we were thinking, when we were making the film, can one also look at what is being considered artificial intelligence or other forms of intelligence, at least in terms of the machinic, as a kind of life-lieness, you know? A continuity of life in dead labor that is not dead and living in the same ways anymore. So, this would be actually talking about searching for life-lieness, right? Not liveliness, but like life in that which is not alive.

So, for me, the horizon has shifted, at least I think conceptually. It always was, you know, and these categories are constructs of time itself, constructs and measurements that help us understand. We make it; we make time. It doesn't exist. So, I think these are constructs which help.

Shuddhabrata
Sengupta:

When you see the film, I would urge everyone to pay particular attention to the credits. They're like the indexes and the notes in the books that you write and they give a map of space and time, so the locations in the film stretch from the lunar surface to desert to forests to snowstorms across the world and across time.

This transcript has been slightly edited for length and clarity.