

Reel Culture and Literary Consciousness: The Impact of Short-Form Digital Media on Reading Habits in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Since the early days of print, deep reading has been a literary practice that has always sustained imagination, reflective thought and critical awareness. However, the digital revolution of the twenty-first century has had a dramatic impact on the way people read and the way that they consume culture. The proliferation of smartphones, low-cost internet, and algorithmic social media has led to a new media landscape in India over the last few years, which has created a new type of digital content: short-form digital videos such as Instagram reels, YouTube shorts, and AI-generated visual stories. This paper aims to explore the change in attitude of today's Indian readers and to examine the changes in their reading habits, reading attention, interpretive approach to reading and literary engagement particularly of the youth. The focus of the study is on the shift from the deep reading to fragmented digital reading in India's changing media landscape, and on the theories of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Jean Baudrillard, Maryanne Wolf, Nicholas Carr, Sven Birkerts and Walter Benjamin. Speed, or instant gratification, as well as emotional provocation and visual overload, are said to be the defining features of Reel culture, which don't lend themselves to ongoing contact with literature or to opportunities for reflective interpretation. The paper argues that this is a significant shift that India today is undergoing, from print-based literary sensibility to digitally-mediated cultural experience; literary experience is now in competition with algorithmic entertainment for public attention.

Keywords: reel culture; literary consciousness; digital media; reading habits; attention economy; instagram reels; youtube shorts; media ecology; digital humanities; contemporary indian culture.

1. Introduction

The most basic level of written culture is “literacy” and this is the most common form in the Digital world. During the Middle Ages, a scribe would create a scroll, whereas in the 21st

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Published: 19 October 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i5.301373>

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century a user scrolls through an Instagram feed. They show evidence of early development of patience, physical exertion and a linear link to one text, and these are maintained well. The second is like a movement without pause, easy speeding up, one scene of sight slipping over another, forever. This is not a coincidence, but rather an etymological parallel between the words. It predicts one of the most radical cultural changes of our time, namely the reorganization of human attention and imaginative capacities in line with the logic of the short-form digital media structures. It is one of the fastest in the world and this change in India is 'civilisational' because of the availability of cheap smart phones and high speed Internet. But it's not just about the volume of reading that is being done, it's about which mental and sensory skills are being developed or damaged in a media landscape subject to the logic of the reel.

One has to understand the importance of what is at stake to appreciate the importance of print culture and development of literary awareness in the modern world. The dissemination of literacy along with the new print capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was rapid and created new means of what Anderson calls collective consciousness – ways in which large groups can imagine themselves as members of communities, by reading and participating in a shared cultural conversation (44-45). This is even more applicable in India. Colonial and post-colonial world was accompanied by vernacular newspaper, literary journals, serialised fiction and publishing houses and a sense of nationhood arose. Together with other writings (Tagore's essays in Sabuj Patra, and progressive Urdu and Hindi literature of the 1930s/1940s as well as serialised fiction by Premchand), these writings suggest a picture of how serialised reading, politics, and morality shaped Indian education and intellectual life. However, the decline of such situations to such practice is not to be taken lightly.

Against this background, the present paper reads the rise of reel culture in India through a series of interrelated theoretical lenses. The literature review that follows takes up, in turn, the media-ecological and hyperreal logic of the medium, the cognitive reorganisation of attention, the phenomenological and aesthetic losses involved, and the commercial and social economy that drives the platforms; the discussion then turns to the specific stakes for Indian literary culture and education, before the conclusion.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Media Ecology, Entertainment Culture and Hyperreality

All aspects of digital media culture are based on the extensions of man concept of Marshall McLuhan. The significance of McLuhan's thesis is that it helps to make us realize that media technologies are not simply a means of conveying messages, but that they can also change the perceptual, cognitive and social patterns of man. In his book, one of the most cited in media theory during the 20th century, McLuhan writes:

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale, pace, or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. (Understanding Media 8)

It has vital importance as part of the current research efforts. But, to understand the cultural implications of short-form digital media, one must look beyond the content of the individual reels, as many are boring and have no educational value. It is the structure of the media that counts: the compression of time from 15 seconds to 90 seconds, the image over the word, the algorithmic processes that make it an apparatus to work on the demand for the new rather than the depth, the way in which multiple objects call attention to the user in a successive way. Additionally, electronic media extended human senses and changed the mix of human senses in what McLuhan calls the 'global village' where there is plenty of 'connection' but not a lot of 'engagement' (20). The newest expression of that logic is the digital reel—the latest variant of the book—and it's the least conducive to the inward, private, contemplative focus needed for serious literary reading.

McLuhan's ideas were expanded upon by Neil Postman, who, a generation ahead of social media, and with uncanny foresight, considered the epistemological impact of media for entertainment. The change from print culture to television culture is not just a technological change, but a change in the "rubric" or "grid" by which a society thinks and lives its public life, Postman wrote. It is worth quoting in full, as his argument still holds true and is equally disturbing in the current 'media' environment:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a real possibility. I am talking about the magician's trick of making it appear that thinking is not an important or difficult activity. (Amusing Ourselves to Death 155-56)

In the realm of algorithmic Social Media, the same diagnostic force Postman offers is multiplied to n when it moves from television to algorithmic social media. Instagram Reels are addictive and TV is passive. There's a lack of time and space to be distracting like TV can be, with half-hour shows. In the digital world of the present day, the control of the digital is slightly more complicated: Postman's 'magician's trick' becomes "a constant dazzle of aestheticized quotation, summarised philosophy, and a performative act of literary reading. . . . It represents the illusion of cultural engagement and, at the same time, the closing off of the conditions needed for genuine engagement with literature."

But a onlooker of a reel, in which a reading—an agreeably performed reading—of Keats is presented, feels, and not unreasonably, that he has undergone a literary experience, if not the experience of reading 'Ode to Autumn' with the fullest attention and patience of interpretation which the poem calls for. A theory that has a direct impact on the literary implications of Reel culture is that of another thinker, Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation* provides a matrix of simulation and hyperreality. The difference between sign and thing, between sign and reality, is no longer relevant, says Baudrillard: what is relevant is the "order of experience" of the present day, what is relevant is the "mediapolis":

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1)

This is where Baudrillard's model can gain insight, that of the replacement of literary works by their simulations, and is clearly noticeable in the digital culture of India today. There is a reel that offers a five-minute summary of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, with illustrations from the novel, and, in most (and perhaps in all) cases the soundtrack is deeply moving, and the images, though the words, are more or less completely displacing the original. This quasi-moral dilemma, such as Raskolnikov's, is commonplace in the Indian digital sphere, if not in India generally, which is where few people in India come across the novel. But the most disconcerting of all are the reel quotations from “Rumi” or “Kafka” or “Bhagavad Gita” that are tossed about and handed out which have nothing to do with what the authors actually wrote. This hyperreal quotation is decontextualised, aestheticised and fine-tuned for emotional impact making it more culturally real than the original text. Baudrillard is correct in claiming that the map is superior to the territory: in this new medium the map (in this instance, the digital map) is more significant than the territory (the literary text) for many readers of Indian literature today.

2.2 The Reading Brain and the Architecture of Attention

It seems that the cognitive and neurological angle to the debate on digital culture and digital literacy is the most scientifically investigated element of the debate. Reading is not simply the automatic cognitive act that Wolf describes in his *Come Home, Reading in a Digital World*, but is instead a neurological achievement that can be developed, honed and even damaged over time with the right kind of literary engagement. Deep reading is not just literary power, but rather the power on which all intellectual and emotional life of man is based:

I want to describe what is at stake in the reading brain's circuitry when it is threatened by the habits of attention that digital formats can encourage. The very automaticity of our decoding processes allows us the cognitive luxury of thinking thoughts beyond the text: the ability to make inferences and analogies, to think critically and form our own perspectives, to go beyond the immediately given to make connections that are not apparent in the text itself. (Reader, *Come Home* 7)

The point here is that Wolf acknowledges that deep reading necessitates the neurological involvement of the skills that underlie literacy culture, but also inferences and analogies, critical thinking and seeing what's missing from the text. Such abilities can never be created by a cultural policy that is based on the logic of the reel. Wolf also tells us that digital reading is bad for the brain; that the impact can be measured, and that it can be molded and molded in direct proportion to the amount of digital reading. One of the problems she faces is over screen time: ‘I had to recruit my concentration, in a way that I have not had to do before,’ It's not small; it's not unimportant; it's a breakthrough in the study of the brain—with ramifications for educational and cultural policy.

Wolf's warning about change of the reading brain is related to the brain that reads in print and reads in the digital media, which Wolf calls the ‘biliterate brain’. But it is not digital reading per se that comes under attack, rather the lack of the deep reading that can be achieved when reading is done digitally, as she writes: ‘The biliterate reading brain is being trained to skim for information as expeditiously as possible, while discarding slower, more time-consuming

processes of comprehension, interpretation, inference, and empathy' (Reader, Come Home 82). This is particularly so in the Indian context where the competitive examination system and the push for digital learning in the NEP 2020 further emphasises such a caution in the education sector. The thing to point out is the absence of sensitivity to biliterate brain and the challenge of digital fluency and deep reading of the literature in Indian educational institutions.

The question Nicholas Carr poses in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, is not as much a neurological one as a cultural one, and more germane to the condition of the literary reading in the digital age. As people come to rely on the Internet over time and with constant use, he says, the Internet "slowly but surely transforms the architecture of human attention and in the process fragments, interrupts, and becomes superficial. It is an image that now ranks as one of the most commonly quoted in media studies today:

I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. (*The Shallows* 5-6)

This is the phenomena—and anyone who has read a book or article and noticed a change in their own reading as a result of merely a sustained digital experience knows what he is talking about. Carr is not only suggesting that this is a different way of reading, but that it is a different way of attending, a different way of experiencing attention, a way that slowly undermines the ability to read in sustained, immersive, linear fashion, as literary reading works. The internet by design is distractible and interruptible as Carr puts it: 'The interactivity of the Net gives us powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others, but it also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get the tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment that the Net dispenses' (*The Shallows* 117). In fact, the 'lever press' on the reel platform is now a thumb motion upwards (actually better!); and the 'pellets' are now compacted to fit into 15-30 seconds!

2.3 Vertical Depth and the Loss of Aura

In *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Sven Birkerts offers a phenomenological description of the difference between the culture of the book and the culture of electronic media that both complements and enriches the neuroscientific analyses of Wolf and Carr. Birkerts says literary reading provides what he calls 'vertical' depth in cultural experience, while the electronic media promote 'horizontal' breadth.

Reading, because it is controlled, adapted to the pace of intellectual apprehension, is fundamentally different from the more passive forms of perception associated with electronic media. It requires a different kind of concentration; it demands that we surrender our will temporarily to the structures of meaning in the text. (*The Gutenberg Elegies* 146)

Birkerts' discussion of the relationship between vertical depth and horizontal breadth is applicable to the loss of what is gained in a culture of engagement dominated by reel culture.

Vertical engagement is the capacity to focus and hold one's attention on a single object of study for a long enough period to make its content and complexity known: to read a novel through a couple hundred pages; to reread a poem a few times to make its condensed meaning known; to see the implications of a philosophical argument for one's own thinking. Horizontal engagement is a type of engagement that involves many things that a person can be engaged with, but for which the person has no real investment. The logic of the reel platform is clearly horizontal: it's designed to provide the user with enough time to view a piece of content, but not so much that they lose interest in the product that's always been the foundation of the platform, the generation of engagement metrics. But Birkerts also suggests that this flattening of cultural experience vertically is related to a crisis of individual identity and memory: 'We are losing our sense of the contexts of historical time and the formation of the self through sustained narrative involvement' (The Gutenberg Elegies 72). In India this is directly relevant to this literary culture where civilisational memory, ethics and linguistic diversity have always been one of the main locations.

One step towards understanding of the cultural implications of reel culture might be taken by treating the conceptual framework given in Walter Benjamin's essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', as a description of the change in aesthetic experience in the era of mechanical reproduction. In the case of the 'aura', as Benjamin imagines it, this quality of presence and the singularity of the original in its time and place can be directly transferred to the question of what is lost when engagement with the object of the encounter is not direct with the text but rather a literary work mediated through a digital system. Benjamin contends that:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardised by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. (Illuminations 221)

The question of "how can Benjamin's argument be used in the digital literary culture today" is an intriguing one to consider. If a good voice man recites a poem of Harivansh Rai Bachchan for 60 seconds and then plays the songs from cinema with pictures along with rhetorical performance of the poem, it is not just a poem in a new form; it is something else. The 'aura' of the original text, the dialogue of the text with a literary tradition, the demand for the reader to be engaged and to work, the possibility of other possible meanings being produced with successive reads, are all wiped out by a surface to be aestheticised and thus consumed emotionally in a moment. Perhaps most aptly, mechanical reproduction allows for the 'reception of a work of art in a state of distraction' (Illuminations 239) which Benjamin names again, and which is today the case with literature in reel culture, for instance when one reads one's poetry while listening to other messages, cooking, riding the bus or subway.

2.4 The Attention Economy and Cultural Capital

Understanding this transformation requires a prior exploration of the Attention Economy Theory, and the economic model upon which the cultural economy of digital media is based. This was put into words by Herbert Simon in 1971: 'A wealth of information creates a poverty

of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it' (Simon 40-41). In *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*, Tim Wu demonstrates how today the logic of the Attention Economy has infiltrated an increasing number of aspects of human experience, and how attention itself is now product that is harvested, quantified and studied by advertisers. The platforms hosting the reels are commercial and not neutral means of communicating but instead are depending on the amount of users' attention to them and the extent of it in order to make money. "prospective buyers who have been promised much before" are jaded, "the attention merchant must always give some novelty or sensation" to catch their attention, says Wu. Hence this algorithmic optimisation of the reel platform for engagement, virality and emotional response isn't a side-benefit to the technology, but a part of the business model.

What this economy of ideas means for literary culture is sadly all too clear. The medium of things that aren't necessarily about immediate gratification, of complexity, is systematically disenfranchised in the Attention Economy – at least literature is, and literature is patient and simple. If you invite people to read a complex novel, you will get virtually no views, shares and comments from people, while a reel that summarizes the novel in 90 seconds and does it in an "aestheticized" manner will get more views, shares and comments. The algorithm of this platform also values engagement over education and literature, so it encourages engagement rather than education and literature. This is an example of the encoding/decoding model: the encoded is the literary culture, the other commercial and algorithmic logics coded are incorporated in the process and change its meaning and value, the decoded is the kind of content produced in a space of consumption and entertainment, and not of literary engagement (Hall 130-31).

Another way of understanding the change in the social role of the literary engagement in reel culture is by the theory of cultural capital and distinction of Pierre Bourdieu. The symbolic confirmation of cultural inequalities in status, as suggested by Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, can be produced by cultural practices such as reading, which is a form of capital. This theory can be used to explain the changes of reading world from the perspective of cultural capital (in this case, not culture but the image of culture) that is no longer in relation to reading, but is rather manifested on social media platforms. "A Bookstagrammer who takes a beautiful picture of a pile of literary classics, or makes a reel about 'the top ten books that changed my life,' is accumulating and presenting cultural capital as Bourdieu would and not necessarily reading the kind of long, deep way that historically produced cultural capital. In this way, reading is not an imagination and thought transformation by the reader, but an action that is the signifying of its action in the network of tastes and distinctions.

This phenomenological account needs to confront itself with the type of reading that is closed, and thereby, understand what is lost in the transition to reading on the reel for cultural consumption. In his prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels, Henry James stated 'the proper experience of fiction required what James termed "the perfect dependence of the moral sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it"' (James, *The Art of the Novel* 45). What James achieves is the 'felt life' (as he, following George Eliot, would say)

that literature can make possible for the reader, and which can't be separated from the slow, careful, long-drawn out process of reception that makes it possible. As far as the nature of the reel goes, what is involved is not 'felt life' in James' sense but stimulation and reaction as opposed to immersion and reflection. The one minute vignette that summarizes the literary text is the very thing that the literary text lacks: "The narrative summary of the literary text is the one thing that the literary text lacks."

3. Discussion: Reel Culture and the Indian Literary Context

This change has further particular relevance in the Indian context with regard to the special role of literature in preserving and sustaining language diversity, philosophy and civilisational diversity. The literary tradition in India is one of the world's most linguistically and culturally complex and diverse, which includes the Vedic oral tradition, the Sanskrit literary tradition, the Bhakti poetry of Kabir and Mirabai, the Urdu ghazal tradition, the modern Indian novel in English and regional languages, the great and vast literatures of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, etc. This tradition should be carried on, and should be transmitted to readers who are able to read books thoroughly and with comprehension, in more than one language. Deep readership is gradually being replaced by deep reeling and deep readership is not only in danger of a steady decline, but less and less received, less and less interpreted, less and less handed down to the next generations, as Indian literary inheritance permits.

This concern is further highlighted in the Indian education system as per the National Education Policy 2020. The NEP's emphasis on the digital learning space, on screen based pedagogies and technology assisted learning at all levels is a new form of learning that is structurally the same as reel-learning, also referred to as "distracted consumption." The three produced lectures (lecture, learning YouTube, summarised digital textbook) share the characteristic that they do not make any particular claims for information engagement that is demanded by literacy education, that is, questioning and thinking about information. Meanwhile, concerns have also been raised by institutions, including various libraries in India that physical visits of young people have been falling despite a rapidly expanding range of online resources. As much as anything else, it's a cultural phenomenon that can have implications for the future of literary culture: hard intellectual work connected to pounding on the screen.

But it would be an intellectual mistake to talk of decay and of disaffirmation of the ties of "reel culture" and "literary consciousness." There are also enabling aspects of the cultural landscape of literature in India which should not be ignored due to digitalisation of literary culture. Digital media has always played a positive role on the spread of literary culture in a country where social, economic and geographical disparities have restricted it to a small number of people. The digital introduces the potential for new reading spaces, new circuits of circulation for regional literature, Dalit poetry and feminist fiction and other literature from marginalised communities that is produced within the dominant publishing world. Despite being aspirational, Bookstagram culture has been an attraction to millions of young Indians to go into book genres they could not have gone if they had not been inspired by the culture. Poems by Gulzar, Rahat Indori, Harivansh Rai Bachchan and the present day spoken word poets have provided a jolt of excitement to the literary forms to which the University system or the

conventional publishers had not been able to provide. Literary podcast, online reading communities and the digital literary magazine are innovations that deserve to be taken seriously – not lightly – and understood.

4. Conclusion

Thus, the reel and the literary consciousness are more complex, and more ambiguous than either the pessimist or optimist can account for. The theoretical synthesis put forward in this paper leads to a shared diagnosis: reel culture is a systematic reorganisation of human attention, based on the structural logic of the “Attention Economy” and the epistemological logic of the “Baudrillardian hyperreality” which take attention away from the conditions of deep literary reading. But they don't result in a counsel of despair. Though it may be a deterministic theory in McLuhan's words, "Understanding the restructuring first was important before the critical use of it. The most scientifically sound account of the cognitive impact of digital reading is from Wolf, and he too is the most adamant in his belief that a biliterate brain – one proficient in both ways of engagement – can be achieved. What is at stake for literary culture in today's India, however, is not being against the “digital modernity” but being able to maintain those intellectual and cultural conditions within the ever expanding structure of the “digital” which make it possible to take literature seriously.

An attack on education, institutions and politics. Delves into problems of universities and schools teaching reading as a cognitive and cultural activity and not as giving texts. It's about developing and maintaining spaces for wide literary involvement in the digital world, spaces for publishers, literary organisations and cultural institutions. This is the future that is taking place in many countries around the world; a digital platform and reading software that can support, promote and sustain attention. It is a question of Indian society's overall culture that they want to build, maintain and pass through – of the consciousness, of the imagination, of a ability to reflect and empathize. Algorithmic culture is an intellect that is threatening to make the value of literature—dwelling in and with language and imagination in the fullness of another human life—obsolete. One of the most important cultural issues at the moment, and one that isn't respected and sought after in the age of the reel: does that still exist?

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