

**“Disaster [...] followed every step”:
Images of Gendered Technologies and Power Relations in *Transmission***

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“*Disaster [...] followed every step*’: *Images of Gendered Technologies and Power Relations in Transmission*” Julia Elena Thiel.

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In his second novel, Hari Kunzru takes the notion of global interconnectedness to extremes. Written in a postmodern, biting satirical style, *Transmission* (2004) imagines a fictional universe in which a powerful computer virus hurls the world into chaos. The reader is introduced to four central characters: Arjun Mehta, an Indian computer nerd; his favourite Bollywood star Leela Zahir; the English businessman Guy Swift; and his trophy girlfriend Gabriella Caro. Even though these four figures form the cast of characters, the momentous computer virus unquestionably constitutes the linchpin of the story and connects the sub-plots in unexpected ways, culminating in “Greyday,” the “moment of maximal uncertainty” (Kunzru 272):

Greyday was an informational disaster, a holocaust of bits. A number of major networks went down simultaneously, dealing with such things as mobile telephony, airline reservations, transatlantic email traffic and automated teller-machines. [...] Home computers? Individuals? Do you know anyone whom Leela did not touch in some way?

Leela’s noise passed effortlessly out of the networks into the world of things. Objects got lost: a van carrying armaments from a depot in Belgrade; a newly authenticated Rembrandt. Money in all sorts of physical forms dropped out of sight, but also money in its essence, which is to say that on Greyday a certain amount of money simply *ceased to exist*. (ibid. 271 f.)

As this passage illustrates, the Leela virus transcends the boundary between virtual and physical reality without the slightest difficulty, thereby causing all sorts of disturbances and disappearances – not only of things and money, but also of people. In *Transmission’s* reality, clear-cut boundaries between different spaces and media do simply not exist – everything seems to be connected and in a state of transition. The novel consists of two sections whose captions, *Signal* and *Noise*, highlight the important role information and communication technology and its influence on people’s lives play in the plot, something that can be linked to the concept of “transmediality” which in recent years has become popular in German Cultural Studies. The term suggests similarities with “intermediality”; however, in contrast to ‘inter’ the prefix ‘trans’ emphasizes the transfer/transition between different media rather than an already existing connection between otherwise separate, fixed entities (Meyer, Simanowski, Zeller 8). Therefore, the dynamic moment of the crossing between supposed borders is underscored – hence, the term “transmediality” focuses on the participating media in the process of transition (ibid.). In Kunzru’s novel, such processes are certainly in focus; Alan Robinson even states that the text queries “whether we now inhabit a world of simulation, beyond which there is no regress to an underlying, unmediated reality” (78).

In *Transmission*, the Leela computer virus functions as a catalyst that demonstrates the dynamic link between supposedly separate spheres of the fictional world. Moreover, as the name ‘Leela’ suggests, the disastrous computer virus has a female ‘body’: infected computers screen a five-second video clip of the dancing film star Leela Zahir, calling attention to her performance while the actual virus is “at work under her skin” (Kunzru 4). Notably, in descriptions such as “[f]or a few weeks she danced her way around the world, and disaster, like an overweight suburbanite in front of a workout video, followed every step” (ibid. 4), the virus

itself is referred to as 'she' – this conspicuous detail strongly suggests that a gendered reading is also in order.

In this paper, I focus on the representation of the virus and carve out its gender and power related dimensions. Referring rather freely to the understanding of transmediality mentioned above, I point out how the dynamic relationship between different 'mediated' spaces intersects with dynamic power structures and gender relations revealed in the contrast between the computer virus Leela and Leela Zahir, the "real" Bollywood star. Here, gender and space are regarded as co-constitutive: "If space is socially constructed, always in the process of being made, then it is so through social relations that have their own gender inflections" (Massey 7). Vice versa, social spaces themselves impact on the construction of gender relations (ibid.). Taking these considerations into account, I show how the virus and its link to Leela Zahir open up several critical perspectives on gendered power structures in different spaces such as cyberspace/ the internet, the film industry and media-constructed discourses.

"Transmedial" connections and their impact on the individual are of significance in Kunzru's second novel. As Robinson points out in his discussion of simulation and self-fashioning in, *Transmission*, the work depicts "the social construction of the self through the media networks of the worldwide web, Bollywood, and the brand marketing of consumer lifestyles" (ibid. 82). Arjun Mehta is exemplary in this regard. The computer nerd from New Delhi prefers daydreaming to the threatening unpredictability of reality. Computing and a slightly autistic rationalism ominously combined with a preference for Bollywood romance build up his rather "transmedial," modified approach to reality:

Over the years Arjun had given a lot of thought to Silicon Valley. As a prime daydream-location, it had gradually been elaborated into a lost world [...] where surfer girls accompanied you to films viewable on day of international release and the number of available flavours N was always $n+1$, where n was the total when you last looked at the menu. The Valley: so exciting that, like Lara Croft, you had to rappel down a cliff-face to get in. One up. Player Mehta, proceed. (Kunzru 23)

Lured into believing in media-promoted images of America as the land of milk and honey, Arjun signs a contract with the employment agency Databodies and migrates to the US to work as an IT consultant. Confronted with the bitter taste of reality, he ends up in a spiral of downward mobility. Databodies hires him out to firms, paying him only a fraction of what the Indian agency earns making his skills available to American companies. Hence, *Transmission* portrays the exploitative global structures which determine Arjun's fate as a transnational labour migrant. Finally, he finds an acceptable job with Virugenix, a computer software company which specialises in antivirus software. However, Arjun's luck is short-lived. When he gets fired due to a decline in profit, the IT specialist takes desperate measures to try and prevent the inevitable: he unleashes the force of his creation, the Leela variant virus.

The personification of the destructive code is represented in a clearly gendered manner. Passages like the following evoke all sorts of associations with femininity and female sexuality:

It's not as if you had asked for Leela to come and break your heart. There you were, doing whatever you normally do online: filling in form fields, downloading porn, *interacting*, when suddenly up she flounced and everything went to pieces. For a moment, even in the midst of your panic, you probably felt special. Which was Leela's talent. Making you believe it was all *just for you*. (Kunzru 3)

Descriptions like these create the impression that we are dealing with a woman who ruthlessly plays with her lovers' feelings rather than with a computer virus that infects people's hard drives. Beautiful, smiling "Leela Zahir, dancing in jerky quicktime in a pop-up window" (ibid.), suggestively "widening her eyes and making a flirtatious ticking-off gesture at the viewer" (ibid. 128), diverts attention from the "malicious, corrupted things" (ibid.) operating behind her innocent smile. Initially infatuated thanks to her ability to make you feel special while she is simultaneously "infecting" countless other future sufferers, Leela's unwitting computer-using victims are eventually left utterly heart-broken. In this regard, it is important to note that the dance Leela presents in the video clip dressed in a "clinging sari" (ibid. 4) evokes parallels to the famous performances by historical figures such as Mata Hari and Maude Allan, whose dance routines were regarded as thrillingly erotic in early twentieth-century Europe. Especially in the case of Mata Hari, her supposedly "oriental" look added to her appeal; Leela's Asian background underscores the parallels to Hari and her fictitious claims to being a Java princess who has been instructed in the secret Indian art of dancing (cf. Waagenar).

Notably, both Allan and Hari were at the same time associated with a potentially dangerous female sexuality (cf. Walkowitz; Wagenaar). In *Transmission*, the style of language used to describe the effects of the global spread of the virus highlights the sexually alluring and manipulative behaviour of the virtual Leela: "In London, Leela had taken away the power. She *corrupted* data at the New Cross and Littlebrook substations, *seducing* the control software, *whispering* you are overloaded, trip the circuit-breakers, shut down the lines" (Kunzru 199, my emphasis). Here, the virus is strongly associated with female cunning, secretly seizing power over the systems she has infiltrated, like a spy on a deathly mission – in that regard, Leela's computer espionage is redolent of Mata Hari's activities as a spy during the First World War. Read in this manner, the dancing Bollywood star's virtual counterpart appears to be a pixelated *femme fatale* who slyly plays evil tricks on ones and zeros during her "brief period of misrule" (ibid. 4).

However, the question of power is more complex and ambivalent. It is striking that in passages like the ones quoted above, Leela is associated with a strange kind of agency. Even though Arjun is the "creator" (ibid. 153) who writes the commands which put her into action, he is definitely not in control of the disastrous aftermath. In a process reminiscent of the evolution of viruses such as HIV (cf. Brock) and other organisms, she develops into variants like *Leelao1*, *Leelao6* (*RingtoneLeela*) or the calamitous "Variant Eight Leela, the so-called transpositional worm" (Kunzru 283), effectively forming "a swarm, a horde" (ibid. 113) made up of "[s]o many girls with the same face" (ibid.). The virtual Leela seems to develop her own agenda as soon as she is released into "the wild" (ibid. 114). The virus is accredited with the ability to "take on new forms *at will*" (Kunzru 113, my emphasis) – in a sense, it appears to achieve much more agency and freewill than any of the characters in the novel who are trapped

in the mechanisms of self-fashioning through media-related discourses and consumerism (cf. Robinson) and the social structures from which they cannot escape. After all, “[t]he Leela virusscape is not subordinate to other global-scapes; rather, it controls them” (Brock 384). This almost unlimited power stands in stark contrast to Leela’s extremely restricted self-determination which will be discussed in more detail below. “[N]ormality [is] completely overturned” (Kunzru 4) during Leela’s virtual reign of terror.

Both Leela’s and Arjun’s ethnicity. As Brock points out, the fact that the novel attributes both characters with a “destructive agency” (385) through their connection to the virus also makes it possible to satirically comment on “two important aspects of the West’s neo-colonial consumption of the non-West” (ibid.). On the one hand, *Transmission* imagines a rather hysterical public reaction to the virus when its release is immediately regarded as an act of international terrorism. Liam Connell explores this element further in his analysis of the language of terror in *Transmission* and connects it to post-9/11 discourses. More importantly for the thematic focus of this paper however, Brock convincingly shows that Leela’s ethnicity opens up an interesting perspective on contemporary media representations of female sexuality:

Her Indian nationality [...] places Leela in an intriguing position in relation to the disjunctive global mediascape of commodified female sexuality. In choosing a Bollywood star as the “face” of Arjun’s virus, Kunzru foregrounds an unusually perspectival aspect of this mediascape, accentuating a divide between western and non-western male responses to mediated female sexuality. (Brock 385)

Here, the difference in male reactions to Leela is linked to historically constructed discourses on femininity. It is certainly true that her Bollywood career has made the actress “a household name” (Kunzru 234) in Asia while she is hardly known in Western countries; her male fans see her as “a screen idol, a figure both of innocence and sexual mystique” (Brock 385). In contrast, her being relatively unknown in Western countries due to the very restricted marketing possibilities for Bollywood movies outside of Asia makes her subject to a very different male gaze, one heavily indebted to the old colonial perception of non-white women as exotic and sexually inhibited “sexual other” (ibid.). This is illustrated when Clay, one of Arjun’s colleagues at Virugenix, comments on Leela: “She’s hot. To me a lot of Indian chicks are hot” (Kunzru 146). In Brock’s reading of the virus in *Transmission* as a partially displaced allegory of HIV/AIDS, this sexual otherness of non-white women is also strongly associated with a dangerous potential for contamination (Brock 385).

While the dancing Leela might be the one whom frustrated computer-users blame for their technological infection, the real actress does not have a choice. It is made clear that the Bollywood star “found herself bewitched – the girl with the red shoes, cursed to dance on until her feet bled or the screen froze in messy blooms of ASCII text” (Kunzru 4). A clear-cut demarcation between the virtual Leela and the starlet does not seem to exist. By choosing his beloved actress as the embodiment of his desperate signal to his employer, Arjun initiates “the march of technology into her [...] career plan” (ibid.). After all, Arjun is not only the mastermind who writes the commands the virus has to follow; more precariously, he is the one

who makes a virtual version of her dance for other men. As the following passage illustrates, this case of misappropriation of a woman's body and identity for cybercrime is represented as being far from unique:

The virus was the second lead story [on CNN]. According to one of the talking heads, it was a new variety. According to another, it was thought to originate in India. They alternated video of various upsets and commotions with clips of Leela Zahir singing and dancing, commenting that after a tennis player and a stripper the actress had become the latest in a line of women to be associated with this type of computer crime. (ibid. 168)

This remark points to the fact that, even though this is hardly ever considered the case in "malestream discourse" (Hearn 945), information and communication technologies create gendered spaces with the potential to establish highly unequal power structures (ibid.). Jeff Hearn argues that even though the internet as a space of communication could be regarded as neutral, "in current patriarchal socio-political conditions it is not" (ibid. 956). Despite the fact that information and communication technologies also have great potential to create spaces in which marginalised groups can affirm their sexualities and hence, their sexual citizenship, sexualised exploitation looms large online (ibid. 950f.). This takes shape in the promotion of "prostitution, bride and sex trafficking, sex tours and tourism, pornography, information services and exchange of information on prostitution, and live sex shows through videoconferencing" (ibid., 954). Kunzru's novel evokes the link between the internet and sexualities on the very first page when "downloading porn" (Kunzru 3) is nonchalantly mentioned as one of three things people are normally concerned with online, underscoring the fact that the commodification of women is in many cases facilitated through information and communication technologies.

It is doubtless true that Arjun's actions eventually lead to Leela's successful escape from her unhappy life (cf. Robinson 91). However, the appropriation of Leela's virtual body for his own purposes puts Arjun in an ambivalent position. His attempt to exert power over his own career brings about the reproduction of the gendered power structures inherent in the space he acts from. Moreover, this (admittedly unintended) abuse mirrors Leela's degrading experiences "shinnying up the greasy lingam of the Mumbai film world like the child in the conjurer's rope trick" (Kunzru 4). This colourful imagery clearly indicates that the film industry of Bollywood is anything but the idyllic world of romance created in the movies which are brilliantly satirized in the novel.

In fact, *Transmission* paints a grim picture of Leela's stardom. Managed by her mother Faiza, the actress is forced to wear "such tight blouses, such filmy saris" (ibid. 235). Even though rumours about Leela being seen with much older, influential men like "elderly film mogul K. P. Gupta" (ibid. 143) are dismissed in the beginning as other people's dirty-mindedness, it soon becomes evident that her mother makes the actress do sexual favours to producers in order to fuel her career (ibid. 236). As Gabriella Caro, the fourth central character in the novel, phrases it: "[Leela] had nothing. It was a kind of prostitution" (ibid., 295). Through the comical inclusion of this rather "melodramatic tale of the machinations which

underlie the fairytale world of Bollywood” (Robinson 91), the film industry is associated with structures of sexual exploitation in Kunzru’s text.

The sharp, witty representation of Faiza and Leela Zahir’s mother-daughter relationship offers much room for interpretation. Staged as the picture-perfect relationship between a “doting parent” (Kunzru 235) and a thankful, adoring child in magazines and interviews, the view behind the scenes appears bleak indeed, revealing a jealous Faiza who thinks of her daughter as “the little bitch” (ibid. 234) and a potentially suicidal Leela. Consequently, it is far from surprising that, confronted with the unpleasant news about the link between her daughter and the computer virus, Mrs Zahir’s main concern is not her daughter’s involuntary complicity in the creation of world-wide computer-related chaos but rather the imminent loss of royalties for the “fully copyrighted holi dance in *Naughty Naughty, Lovely Lovely*” (ibid. 143). However, in spite of this negative initial reaction, she soon comes to realise that the “dissemination of [Leela’s] image around the globe” (ibid. 201) could be the perfect opportunity to start her daughter on an international career. Keeping in mind that outside of Asia, the (male) reaction to Leela’s dance is very strongly informed by ideas of exotic sexuality, it seems likely that the marketing strategy of choice to promote Leela to a Western audience would take the same line.

There is, however, another facet to the motherly exploitation. Mrs Zahir is shown to be exploiting Leela in order to achieve financial independence from her husband: “She was, after all, the key to everything. Only when Leela started to work seriously was Faiza able to sever ties with Zahir. The ape knew his only hold on them was his money” (234 f.). Hence, the mother’s subordinate positioning in her marriage to a man she obviously despises is revealed to be the ultimate reason for Faiza’s instrumentalisation of Leela; her own subordination is paradoxically overcome by deliberately pushing her daughter into abusive dependency. Like Arjun, Faiza is represented as unable to escape the power structures inherent in the social space she is situated in. The only way to achieve some kind of agency inevitably reproduces the (gendered) power structures she has long been subjected to. In both cases, images of female sexuality promoted in the media cater to the purpose.

The link between the film industry, sexual exploitation and subordination of women is further highlighted in minor episodes which pervade the parts of *Transmission* concerned with the film production of Leela’s latest movie, *Tender Tough*, in Scotland. In this context, the reader makes the acquaintance of the lecherous and patriarchal film producer Naveed Iqbal and a potentially homicidal Mumbai mafia boss, Baby Aziz, who functions to highlight “the gangland brutality behind Bollywood” (King 140). The latter pulls strings in the background and seems to have a certain tendency to provide his business partners with easy access to sexually available women (Kunzru 204). Moreover, the actor Rajiv Rana is represented as a macho with the habit of driving cars that throb “like an engorged metal penis” (ibid. 170) to impress female fans and underscore his masculinity. In addition to the comical effect this characterisation achieves, the actor can be read as functioning to highlight the power mechanisms at work. It is interesting that Rana, represented as “accustomed to giving orders” (ibid. 208), happens to owe more than one big favour to Aziz, a dependency which is cynically likened to the status of women in this social environment: “Aziz’s people were renting him out to the highest bidder like any other asset, a car or a woman” (ibid.). Even more

strikingly, the filmstar deals with his own powerlessness in the face of Baby Aziz's demands by having angry sex verging on physical abuse (ibid. 201) and bestowing facial bruises on pretty women he is dating (ibid. 208). Hence, it does not come as a surprise that for women like Gabriella, working in this environment is portrayed as latently threatening (ibid. 166; 200). Keeping this in mind, Faiza's treatment of her daughter seems to be consistent with the rules which already exist with regard to the gendered power structures in the male-dominated space that is Bollywood. In sum, all of these textual hints and comments together form a strong criticism of the exploitative structures underlying the film business.

Given the inhuman existence the Bollywood star is depicted as forced to lead, the question arises: who is the real Leela? As Robinson points out, *Transmission* does not seem to provide any easy answers to this problem:

Psychological complexity is precluded by Leela's satirical function as a commodified celebrity: [...] she exists only as a construction of film and news media or as a blank face onto which filmgoers project their desires [...]. Her somewhat clichéd characterisation gains what little depth it has from its implicit analogy with the emotionally neglected upbringing of Gaby. [...] However, Leela's portrayal is still notably shallow. (Robinson 91)

It is certainly true that, psychologically, Leela Zahir remains a mystery to the reader. We learn only a few things about Leela, and even that person is a construct whose very name has been changed from Leila to Leela for marketing purposes (Kunzru 143). Admittedly, the representation of her as an exploited, lonely superstar whom the Asian public loves but no one really knows, is quite clichéd and stereotypical. In that regard, she does not differ from the other characters in the novel who "appear depthless and derive their sense of identity from discourses which they have internalised or the social roles which they perform" (Robinson 78). Tellingly, on the rare occasions in which Leela is represented, the descriptions convey Gabriella's impressions of her to the reader, which are quite obviously influenced by her own experiences. Leela is described as having a small, "[s]oft and girlish" (Kunzru 173) voice; she appears uncertain about her own identity and generally seems to want to vanish. Hence, even here the actress serves as a space of projection for another person's imagination; she is mediated through Gabriella's lens. Moreover, after her physical escape from the prison of her media-constructed identity, the actress "continues [...] to serve as a projection screen for all kinds of popular fantasies" (Robinson 95) – predominantly male fantasies, one might add.

However, the rather flat characterisation of Leela by no means takes away from the criticism of rigid gendered power structures consistently woven into the episodes concerned with the actress and her virtual counterpart. At the end of *Transmission*, Leela is allowed to escape into an unknown future while her "brothel-keeping mother" (Kunzru 295) gets what she deserves when her house is torched down by an angry mob in a campaign reminiscent of a witch hunt (ibid.). This development joins in nicely with the well-earned, extremely bizarre fates Kunzru has in store for his other protagonists. Above all, the novel's ending seems to provide a hopeful but utopian outlook insofar as the space into which Leela disappears for good could potentially be one in which she can live free from the constraints of the gendered power

structures which had previously determined her.

As this reading has shown, the stark contrast between the agency of the virus and the restricted self-determination of the actress Leela helps to identify the contradictory dynamics of gender relations with regard to cyberspace and the film industry. Even though these aspects do admittedly not constitute the main focus in Kunzru's novel, they add an interesting critical layer to the text which could otherwise escape our notice.

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