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INTRODUCTION

Editor’s Introduction: an orgasm by any other name

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Memory is dangerous, and so is remembering. Or so the response to Shailaja Padindala’s (2016a) Memories of a Machine would have us believe. The short Malayalam film, 9 minutes and 47 seconds in length, has polarized viewer responses since it was released in late 2016. To be sure, Memories of a Machine is not pornographic, at least not in the strictest sense. Part *mise en scène*, part retelling, a recalling (or even a conjuring – is not ‘all’ representation, cinematic or otherwise, a sort of conjuring of desire?) as such, and, to recall Freud himself here for a moment, part a remembrance, a repetition, and a working through, Memories of a Machine, as the name suggests, is precisely just about that: a memory, now of a long departed past, and what it might mean – accounting for ‘its’ many meanings and implications, of course – to remember it in the present conjecture. Here, put simply, the memory is that of a sexual awakening, of one’s first orgasm, or the memory of the first orgasm one might remember having, the remembrance of an inaugural experience of one’s own sexuality and of one’s coming-to-awareness of one’s own body as a technology – an affective apparatus, a thinking, feeling machine, even – of sex.

The premise – if the film can be considered to have one – appears to be simple enough. Set in what appears to be a bedroom, a young woman, unnamed for the duration of the film, is roused from playfully pretending to sleep – pretending, itself, as a kind of erotic play, or a play of Eros – by an unknown man behind a camera, also unnamed for the duration of the film. The man, here, is always a disembodied voice. Non-existent, never seen, invisible, seemingly privileged, as the case may be, to be invisible. Much can be, and has been, said about such a heteronormative and heteropatriarchal dyad. Laura Mulvey in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, for instance, immediately comes to mind:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed … Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle … ([1975] 2012, 584)

Still further, speaking from an art historical register regarding such a dyad, John Berger has suggested:

One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1972, 47)
Approaching such a coupling still – the appearing woman, the non-appearing man – from a literary angle, one might hear in the scene described echoes of the poetic Anne Michaels: ‘How much of a woman’s body belongs to her, how much the clay of man’s gaze’ (2009, 115). All of these discursively critical approaches may be quite effortlessly applied, even adequately and necessarily so, in reading the scene. However, the woman in front of the camera is not ‘merely’ a passive sight (Figure 1).

The audience is not made sure of the nature of the relationship between the woman and the man until much later; that they are a young married couple is only disclosed to us through their dialogue towards the end of the narrative. Up until this point, we may very well assume, or may be led by Padindala to believe, that they may be a pair of unmarried lovers. Even in the context of the otherwise progressive, leftist landscape of Kerala, pre-marital sex, as is the case elsewhere in the subcontinent, is a taboo matter; so to believe that they may be lovers is enticing, even perhaps scandalously exciting for the audience. This, however, is not the ‘scandal’ at the heart of the film; its traumatic kernel, so to speak, that has had audience members up in arms. As the film begins, after the woman is roused from pretending to sleep, she is asked by the man beyond the frame to confess to something. It is alluded to that, earlier, before the camera started rolling, the woman had subjected the man to a playful interrogation; a series of ‘quirky questions’ to which, he states, he willingly provided answers. Now, it is her turn to be subjected to a similar line of questioning. He wants to know about the same thing he claims she asked him prior to the start of the film’s narrative; he asks her: ‘Tell me about the first time you felt sexual and wondered …’ – indicating a desire to know of her earliest memory of experiencing being sexually aroused, her earliest memory of an orgasm.

The figure of the woman – skilfully executed as coy, unassuming, yet brilliantly in charge of her own narrative by the gifted actress Kani Kusruti – goes on to describe a scene she remembers from her childhood. It is this childhood memory, the act of remembering this scene from her childhood, that has led to the deeply polemical response to the film and its presumed intentions. According to how she remembers it, she was eight years of age when the incident took place. She describes how there was a ‘peon’ – the word

![Figure 1 Film still from Memories of a Machine (2016), directed by Shailaja Padindala.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnZwPY7uJul, 26 February 2016.)
used in certain contexts in India to refer to custodial and janitorial staff – at school, a young man she describes as ‘tall and handsome’, and who she claims was her ‘first crush’. After the end of the final examinations on the last day of the school year, after all her friends had left, she found herself alone in the school grounds waiting for her father, who was running late from work, to pick her up. After the peon had checked all of the classrooms and shuttered all of the classroom doors, he arrived at the steps to the school, saw her waiting, and sat down on the steps. He ‘called [out to her] and gestured [her] to sit on his lap’. She remembers acceding to his request. She then recalls:

When I sat, I felt something hard under my thighs. I did not know what it was. I was curious and scared, so I touched him. I wondered if it was flesh or bone. I was confused, did not know what it was … I was extremely curious! And then he softly tried touching the place I pee from. He was very gentle … very gently, like he knew how I would like it or rather knew how to do it. I felt wet and confused as to why I was feeling wet without urinating. It scared me. He figured out that and asked me if I was scared. I didn’t say anything. He stopped, put me down, and went away.

After recounting this incident, she becomes shy and playful again, and admits that this is the first time she has ever told anyone what happened to her that day in the grounds of her school. Her off-screen male counterpart and interrogator, clearly alarmed by what he has just learned, then asks her questions reverberating with nothing short of seemingly genuine concern: ‘Did he threaten you to keep it a secret?’ She responds with a resounding ‘No! He asked me if I got scared. He did not threaten me … Perhaps, I wanted it to happen again hence I kept it as a secret.’ He pushes further: ‘So do you feel anger toward him now?’ ‘No’, she says in a demeanour that is so matter of fact, to which he responds, almost in a sense of being defeated by the casualness of her response and her repose: ‘Fuck.’ He continues to insist with his line of inquiry: ‘Do you think whatever happened was wrong?’ She continues with an air suggestive of confidence:

I don’t know if it was right or wrong. At the time, it was just a moment of sexual exploration for me. I liked the way he touched me and he stopped when I did not want it. I’m not concluding that it’s right or wrong for that matter. I didn’t think it was wrong then or now. That’s all.

He responds cheekily: ‘Don’t tell this to a paedophile.’ The mood of the exchange shifts for a very brief, perhaps all too brief, moment. All along, she was lying on the bed, peeling a fruit and eating it, as she responded to his questions. When he made the aforementioned indignant remark, she was inserting a piece of fruit into her mouth; she stopped mid bite and looked squarely at the camera, which is also to say at him, and in a look that almost predicts the negative responses to this film, she also looks in order to break the fourth wall, she looks at us the audience. This brief moment is heavy; Kusruiti masterfully holds her look and holds the silence between her and the man behind the camera that envelops this look. These – the look, the silence, the moment – clearly make her male counterpart uncomfortable and so as to rupture all of these, he asks: ‘And then, what happened?’

She goes on to recount that, that very summer, her father got transferred to a new job, and, as a result, she had to move away and to a new school. She never saw the peon after that day. To his query about whether she ever wished to see the peon ever again, she says ‘No. But that day after going back home from school. I went to pee in the toilet and began
touching myself the way he touched me. I went on in a rhythm and then something happened! (Figure 2). He asks ‘… what happened?’ She responds almost in a knowing manner: ‘Orgasm! … by the way, what is orgasm called in Malayalam?’ She recounts how she did not know, at the time, what had happened to her was an orgasm; that ‘[she] thought [she had] invented this thing nobody else knew about in the world’. The man laughs and responds: ‘I thought the same the first time I did it too … !!’ She says ‘You too?! … after that day, I started doing it every day … ’ When asked whether she had any boyfriends growing up, she recounts that she had one for a brief period of four months when she was in Grade 10. The first time they kissed, she describes getting wet, and when she asked him whether he would touch her ‘down there’ (as she is describing all this she is lying in bed, she unclips her bra and removes it from underneath the top she is wearing; she sighs, ‘Ahh!! What a relief!’), he ‘got shocked and acted weird, called [her] shameless and slapped [her]. [She] pelted a stone at him and left … the asshole!’ She says that ‘he was the last. [She] did not feel the need for a boyfriend after [her] “invention”’.

The dialogue goes on for a few more moments, at which point she asks whether he will now answer a question for her, and grabs his phone from his hands. She uses it to search for something online. When asked as to what she is searching for, she states: ‘I’m googling the Malayalam word for orgasm.’ She discovers that there are two words: ‘rathimoorcha’ (രതിമൂർച്ച) and what she reads as ‘rathimoorCHA’ (രതിമൂർച) – she jokingly infers that ‘cha’ possibly indicates just one orgasm whilst ‘CHA’ means multiple orgasms. Laughter ensues between the two and the film ends.

Charged with accusations of supporting paedophilia, childhood sexual assault, and abuse, the film has been read through a regressive lens by some quarters of the viewing public. Both Kusruti and Padindala have come out and countered these readings of the film. In a video statement released by Padindala on YouTube on 7 February 2017, a few months after the release of the film, she states:

As a teenager, when I discussed sexuality with my peers, almost every girl was touched as a child by an adult … almost every girl was guilty, she felt miserable about that, but there was one girl who was open about it and she thought that it was a pleasurable act. I started understanding how she looked at sexuality, and as a collective, how we look at sexuality and how the basic for everything in this world is the way we address sexuality. So that was the inception for making this film. (Padindala 2016b)
In a similar vein, in an interview she did with The News Minute, Kusruti (2016) observes:

I feel very certain that the film doesn’t normalize or defend abuse of any kind, whatsoever. So I don’t think it’s a fair assessment at all. The fallacy arises from conflating the domain of child sexual experiences with the rubric of child sexual abuse. This makes it very challenging to speak about various encounters that many people may have had which don’t fall within a victim/trauma narrative, and as the film shows, can be accounted from the domain of curiosity and desire. The actions of the peon would constitute an offence under the law, but the scene is not a legal or moral deconstruction of his actions – the scene is about the girl, her sexuality, her power dynamics, and her memories, which are neither juridical nor prescriptive.

Yet a memory feels dangerous here. Also remembering, too. I decided to introduce this issue of Porn Studies on the potential furtive ground that exists for research into the interplay between pornography and psychoanalysis through a description of this film, a film that has stirred up some bit of controversy, precisely because I wanted to underscore how psychoanalysis, understood as the study of the relationship between memory and the unconscious – both in its applied academic and in its clinical registers – can be, in itself, a dangerous but necessary endeavour. I use the word ‘danger’ here not as an alarm to signal something nefarious, but to highlight the structure of risk upon which it is founded. Memory work is risky business – it has the potential to unfurl how the subject experiences and determines desire for themselves. It is still particularly risky because it has the potential to take us to difficult-to-fathom terrains such as the nuanced landscape of childhood sexuality and sexual experience. To think desire, alongside childhood sexuality, is a difficult conversation to have, still more difficult might be to incorporate the pornographic into these debates. How might we develop an understanding of how desire determines what we choose to consume and how we go about the work of choosing the object(s) of our consumption? How do judgement, taste, form, and desire relate to the pornographic and subsequently to how we come to underscore and understand our sexualities? What kinds of personal historical and subjective memorial contexts are evoked in how and what we consume as far as the pornographic is concerned? What kind of legal, juridical, moral, and philosophical registers – all of which may be ideologically and politically charged valences – are energized when we think of the interplay between sex, desire, pornography, and the screens, both in culture and memory, that we use to either occlude or release forms of pleasure that may be important to us? These are but some of the very few concerns that I was hoping would be interrogated in this issue, which, in the final analysis, might be a gesture towards conjoining sex and a longing for the image, or images in the plural; images, either as represented vis-à-vis the pornographic or in the form of a memory culled from childhood experience, that allow us to make sense of our desires and of ourselves as desiring subjects.

This longing, for instance, might already be found in a linguistic deconstruction of the word that the unnamed woman in Memories of a Machine goes searching for, the Malayalam word for orgasm. An example of how a history of colonization may have impacted and determined what words remain or become forgotten or left out of colloquial discourse, the Malayalam word for orgasm – a classical Malayalam word, at that – is clunky in a way, feels heavy-handed in another register, and is perhaps too beautiful-sounding and even operatic to mean the ‘mere’ expenditure of sexual energy. Most Kerallites or Malayalees may not even know the word because it has long gone out of
fashion and usage and has been replaced by the English ‘orgasm’, and yet something about ‘rathimoorchha’ captures the essential meaning of what our character’s recounting of her memory meant to her and for her understanding a part, a fragment to be sure, of the history of her desire and her sexuality. Rathimoorchha is a portmanteau of two other words: ‘rathi’ which stands for the Hindu goddess Rathi (or ‘Rati’ depending on how you transliterate the word from Malayalam to English), the goddess of sex, lust, and desire, the consort of the god Kama (the same ‘Kama’ as in the Kama Sutra, the ancient Hindu text dealing with matters concerning human sexual behaviour) who is the god of love, and the word ‘moorcha’ which can refer to the ‘unconscious’ or a fall (to be sure, not the lapsarian fall of man in the Abrahamic traditions) or slip into unconsciousness. That sex and love are uncannily gendered in the names of the divine in most Indian languages is in and of itself deserving of a full linguistic exploration. However, I want to return to the second word that makes the portmanteau complete – ‘moorcha’ in Malayalam also means ‘to cut’, ‘to gash’, or ‘to wound’. One might hear in this word a tremolo of Freud’s description of melancholia as an ‘open wound’, what philosopher Rebecca Comay, in her turn, has succinctly described as ‘the unappeasable attachment to an ungrievable loss’ (2005, 88). Perhaps, the orgasm, or the memory of that first orgasm and the psychical implications of this memory (whether it happened in ‘exactly’ the manner by which it is recalled or not) for our young character, and, perhaps, for all of us to an extent, is always already melancholic, an open wound that cannot be sutured up too easily or that cannot heal quickly enough. My wager is that the story of the memory of this, which is at its core a memory of loss, can tell us so much about ourselves.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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