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In God's Land: Cinematic Affect, Animation and the Perceptual Dilemmas of Slow Violence

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Indian independent filmmaker Pankaj Rishi Kumar's documentary *In God's Land* (2012) blends animation and live-action to illuminate the destructive nuances of postcolonial literary scholar, Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence. In turning to cinema, I also suggest that *In God's Land's* "aesthetic strategies" further eco-film scholarship's recent interests in animation, which have tended to highlight the mode's "feel good affect." I draw attention to *In God's Land's* hybrid of dark, discordant animation spectacle interspersed in the documentary live-action to articulate the potential of eco-animation outside of this affect. Ultimately, the film not only draws attention to animation's non-playful affect—its potentials and dilemmas, but I also suggest that reading such a film adds postcolonial understandings of cinema beyond the Western/Japanese center on which eco-animation scholars have so far focused.

Keywords

Animation, Postcolonial Studies, Affect, Emotion, Indian documentary, Ecocinema

Disciplines

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In God's Land: Cinematic Affect, Animation, and the Perceptual Dilemmas of Slow Violence.

Salma Monani

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.

--Rob Nixon (Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, 2)

When combined with live-action, animation offers a contrast to the rules of live action that stuns as it entertains.

--Robin Murray and Joseph Huemann ('That's All Folks? Ecocritical Readings of American Animated Features, 92)

For his 2009 documentary *Seeds of Dissent*, Pankaj Rishi Kumar accompanied the Indian environmentalist Dr. Anil Joshi and his team on a bicycle journey in winter 2008. The "Agri-cycle yatra," intended to raise awareness about India's farmers, ran 3800 kms from India's southern tip in Kanyakumari, Kerala to its northern regions in the Himalayans. In the trip's early stages, the crew stopped in the Tirunelveli district of southern Tamil Nadu. Though its southern border flanks the Bay of Bengal, most of Tirunelveli's geography resembles the barren, rocky dry lands of the Deccan region.

As Kumar put his documentarian eye to work, he noticed a large sign in the semi-arid, rural landscape announcing that a tract of land equivalent to 2500 acres (approximately 10 km², or the area of a small township) had been set aside as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Designed to encourage economic development, SEZs are controversial entities. Forwarded by a neoliberal government agenda, SEZs across the country are lauded for their corporate friendliness in a country where bureaucracy stifles economic progress, even as they are faulted for social and environmental injustices (Levien; Anwar; Kannan).

Kumar's gut reaction to the SEZ was curiosity. Why here, in this "god-forsaken landscape?" (personal communication).¹ Kumar decided to leave the cycle team for a few days and investigate. One of the first things Kumar learned was that the local Vanamamalai temple (which worships a version of the Hindu god, Lord Vishnu) had sold the 2500 acres to the federal government for the SEZ allotment. Following up on this lead, Kumar interviewed a local priest who explained that the temple was pleased to help benefit the government as well as the people of the area.

As Kumar describes, he was personally amazed at the quiet re-allocation of so much land—"wow, 2500 acres in India, and no conflict?" (personal communication). At the same time, he was fascinated by what the development of this land would mean for the primarily rural, semi-arid region and its inhabitants. Kumar decided to document the

changes to the area as the SEZ developed. It was only on a later visit that Kumar learned that the “SEZ wasn’t as clean as it first appeared” (personal communication).

The resulting documentary production, *In God’s Land* aka *Kadavulin Nilathil* (2012) has screened at various venues, from the Indian cable television station, NDTV to independent film festivals such as tiNai, to academic screenings in India’s universities as well as in classrooms in the U.S. At 72 minutes, it captures a sense of the simmering conflict that surrounds the SEZ and delves into a long history of tenuous existence for Tirunelveli’s poorest inhabitants—its subsistent farmers and goat herders.

In describing the film, Kumar is categorical in stating that it isn’t “anti-SEZ.” Instead, Kumar wished to take up a bigger cinematic challenge. In my interview with him, he explains:

It is very easy to land in a conflict zone, like an anti-dam or an anti-nuclear event. There are two parties; somebody doing something and it is a power game so the conflict is apparent. In this situation, on the face of it, nothing is happening. What happens on a day-to-day basis for the villagers is not visible. For me, that is much more challenging: how can I capture this scene of violence and this madness? (personal communication).

In effect, Kumar’s challenge falls within the realm of representing what postcolonial literary scholar Rob Nixon calls “slow violence.” As quoted in the epigraph, Nixon writes that such violence is out of sight and attritional; it also does not lend itself to easy representation, “never materializing in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene” (14). Instead, as Nixon suggests, slow violence is much like Johan Galtung’s concept of structural violence, which draws attention to complex, deep-seated systemic forms of violence. What distinguishes slow violence is its particular attention to the “temporalities of place” (18). It is interested in how time generates a distinct socio-ecological disadvantage for the economically poor and disenfranchised: “What does it mean for people declared disposable by some ‘new’ economy to find themselves existing out of place in place, as, against the odds, they seek to slow the ecological assaults on inhabitable possibility?” (19). Violence towards the poor is thus not simply of one moment—like the development of the SEZ—but of long, attritional injustices that exacerbate such moments, and leave communities living with long-term ecological aftermaths.

In this paper, I am interested in how a documentary venture like *In God’s Land* can capture such long-term and seemingly invisible violence. How does it “plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed over space and time” (Nixon, 10)? Thus, below, I extend Nixon’s analysis of literary texts to cinema. Whereas Nixon’s primary preoccupations are with postcolonial writing (such as by Arundhati Roy, V.S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid and Ken Saro-Wiwo), here I am interested in how the “aesthetic strategy” (32) of a postcolonial filmmaker might mediate socio-environmental injustices that are not spectacular but instead accumulate over long periods of time. Specifically, I suggest that *In God’s Land’s* blend of animation and live-action illuminates what Banu Subramanian has called “archaic modernity”—the pervasive way religion and science and technology meld in modern India (Subramanian), thus, the destructive nuances of slow violence in India.



[**Insert Figure 1 here:** Artist Aditi Chitre’s animation generates a spectacle of violence that threatens the lives of the villagers. In her animation, she incorporates the red arches of the Special Economic Zone’s gate to also recall the religious markings of the Hindu tilak. This image is not in the final cut of *In God’s Land*, but is used in the film’s promotional materials. Source: Courtesy of Pankaj Rishi Kumar.]

In turning to cinema, I also suggest that *In God’s Land’s* “aesthetic strategies” further eco-film scholarship’s recent interests in animation. Despite the growing interest in animation by ecocritics, two characteristics do mark most of the studies so far. First, the predominant focus has been on either Western or Japanese animation (see, for example, Heise; Murphy; Murray and Huemann; Brereton; Pike; Starosielski, and Whitely). Second, animation’s eco-potential is usually chalked to what Heise describes as its “combination of serious engagement with a playful style” (Heise para 1). “Play”, or what I will call animation’s ‘feel good affect’ is a common theme in current eco-animation studies.

By paying attention to affect—the bodily response a film invites—and emotion, the cognitive awareness of this response (Weik von Mossner, 1), in *IGL*, I argue for animation’s potential outside of this feel good affect. Specifically, I show that in illuminating slow violence, a non-playful affect can be equally worth our ecocritical consideration. I draw attention to *IGL’s* hybrid of dark, discordant animation spectacle intersplined in the documentary live-action to articulate my argument. Ultimately, *IGL* not only draws attention to animation’s non-playful affect—its potentials and dilemmas, but I also suggest that reading such a film adds postcolonial understandings of cinema beyond the Western/Japanese center on with eco-animation scholars have so far focused.

“Nothing is Happening”: Live-Action and Slow Violence’s Unspectacular Affect

The initial minutes of *In God’s Land* herald Kumar’s embedding the story of the SEZ in its bigger spatio-temporal context. The opening title credit of *In God’s Land* is

superimposed over a charcoal-toned black-and-white landscape drawing. All light and shadows, the drawing's composition cuts the frame horizontally in half. Objects that appear to be tree trunks stripe the upper half, as their shadows reach vertically along the ground in the lower half of the frame. Behind them, in the upper half of the frame, are what appear to be distant hills and a hazy sky through which the sun penetrates. With a crack of muffled thunder the credit transitions to a close-up of green stalks in muddy water. To the diegetic sound of falling rain, the camera lingers before cutting to three more equally lingering close ups. On the last close-up, subtitles appear, "A devout farmer spreads out his paddy to dry in the sun." The following sequence of four shots, each pulling out further and infused with the sound and presence of falling rain, reveals a verdant, rice-paddy landscape. The final shot of the sequence is of a lone coconut tree foregrounded in the rich green of the paddy fields and backgrounded by the sweep of an imposing hill, recalling the black-and-white landscape drawing of the title credit shot. The subtitles locate this landscape in myth by recounting the story that resulted in the naming of the region as Tirunelveli, the "sacred hedge paddy" of a devout farmer. However, by immediately transitioning to an aerial view of a Google-maps satellite image, *In God's Land* transitions us to the technological present. The subtitle "Imam Alungulam is a small village in the Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu" accompanies the image of a small green section in the satellite image's lower left being outlined in black. Then, as a red-hatched boundary appears on the map, encircling a large brown section of the map and the green area of the village, Kumar's voice-over explains, "The Nanguneri Special Economic Zone was one of the earliest SEZs to be planned. It's been ten years now..."

Kumar's voice-over further explains that as he filmed, "Truth became stranger as days passed. The government, the Vanamamalai temple, and villagers of Imam Alungulam narrated what the SEZ meant to them. Yet, one question remained, why are the gods lying?" As Kumar speaks, the buzz of a helicopter intrudes onto the soundscape, growing louder until it is all that remains to accompany the flashing red boundary on the satellite shot, which then cuts away to a moving car's street view of the SEZ's barbed boundary, and its entrance, imposing red, curved double arches.

These first few minutes of the film, with their extreme close-ups progressively zooming out to the panoptic scale of a satellite shot and Kumar's juxtaposition of mythological time with the technologically present clearly herald the film's pre-occupation with embedding the contemporary moment into broader sweeps of space and time. At the heart of the SEZ land acquisition is an old tension between the upper-caste Brahmanic Vanamamalai temple and the lower-caste farmers and goat herders of the Imam Alungulam village. Though denied by the temple swami in his on-screen interview, this tension is amply clear in many testimonies by the local villagers who are angry and worried that the land from which they earn their livelihood has been claimed by the temple and sold as part of the SEZ.

In multiple onscreen interviews, elderly villagers recount temple authorities' insistence that the villagers are tenant farmers who must pay rent for the land, or describe how villagers are restricted from entering the Vanamamalai temple, and humiliated by Brahmins who demand obsequiousness. Villagers anxiety is revealed in one dramatic live-action moment of a local festival, a temple representative, body painted with turmeric, ash, and vermilion to signify his divinely possessed state, dances with his entourage of drum beaters and devotees through the village streets. Meant to be out blessing the village

folk, he is instead accosted by a village woman who berates him and vehemently yells, “How can you show your face here? How can you be so merciless? Aren’t you God?”

With these moments, Kumar highlights the Hindu caste system as a key component of Tirunelveli’s landscape. While the scholarship on alliances between politics and religion in India is rich (see for example, Bhatt; Hansen; Jaffrelot; Van der Veer), scholars such as Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandran Guha, as well as Emma Mawdsley have also pointed to the intersections between politics, religion, and the environment. In the case of Tirunelveli, historian David Ludden’s *Peasant History of South India*, a work that Kumar accessed doing research for his film, offers the most comprehensive look at how religion is deeply embedded in the socio-environmental lives of the region’s inhabitants. Tracing Tirunelveli’s history back to medieval, 10th century Hindu nations, Ludden writes that “four types of social network shape the peasant’s world: kinship, religion, state, and market interactions” (9). While each can be considered discrete the “four networks are woven together so tightly that change in one necessarily involves the others;” for example, “worship [religion] involves loyalty [kinship] and authority [state]”² (10). Ludden’s thesis helps trace the roots of contemporary land rights issues. The political tensions between the region’s stratified communities are intrinsically eco-social entanglements, where ecological rights and privileges are woven into the social fabric of the caste system.

Following Ludden’s insights, Kumar highlights four key constituents in Tirunelveli’s contemporary landscape: the temple representatives, local political campaigners, the SEZ entrepreneurs, and the villagers. Each group deliberately corresponds to a caste in the Hindu hierarchy: from Brahmins (religious caste) who are the temple representatives, to Kshatriyas (ruler/political caste) who are the local politicians, Vaishyas (merchant caste) who are the SEZ entrepreneurs, and Shudras (servant/peasant caste) who are the villagers. Their contemporary linkages illustrate Banu Subramaniam’s concept of India’s “archaic modernity,” in which traditional Hindu power structures continue to influence a modern scientific, technological, and capitalist state.

Specifically, *In God’s Land* presents the temple swami insisting that economic development is important in the local community despite contradictory testimonies from lower-caste villagers who will be displaced. It captures live footage from local political campaigns where politicians are bedecked with garlands of flowers, which to an Indian audience makes easily apparent the allusion to gods (and religious hierarchy). Similarly, to many in Indian audiences, the sense of corruption in such politics is also evident in the scenes Kumar provides of such politicians wooing voters with television sets, free eggs, and promises of gold. Not only do politicians don godly vestiges³ but they also use economic goods as favors to maintain power.

While such moments suggest the complicity of temple authorities and politicians who use economic logic to justify maintaining long-held positions of power, *In God’s Land* also captures the voices of SEZ entrepreneurs. During a fortuitous invitation Kumar received to accompany a group of visiting entrepreneurs to an on-site meeting in the SEZ, he captures the businessmen chatty and friendly with each other. Honestly discussing the challenges of setting up business here, they share their various concerns, including those of labor costs, where they dismiss the local farmers as unsuitable. “You cannot employ them. We will have to depend on outsiders,” a businessman explains,

suggesting that the villagers receive “Rs.200 per day” from a new government scheme where “they don’t have to do anything. Just sit for three hours, sign, and go back.” Pitted against the villagers’ own voiced concerns of hardship and dispossession such words seem callous. Yet Kumar admits that, like his entrepreneur interviewees, many in his Indian audiences, steeped in age-old legacies of India’s hierarchical social structures and couched in contemporary capitalist agendas, do not see the film’s implied critique. As Subramanian writes, India’s modernity covers “the old and familiar terrain” of “hierarchies of caste and class, and religion” (83) generating its characteristic brand of systemic privilege and right for the already haves.

Though *IGL* exposes the binaries of privilege and want in the contemporary moment, Kumar was dissatisfied at being unable to represent slow violence in the rough cut: “The entire history of this place, which is for me the backbone of this project, in the rough cut was represented by people talking on the screen—this happened and that happened—which was dull and boring” (personal communication). Indeed, most of Kumar’s live action footage consists of interviews with various stakeholders. There are no instances of cinematic violence, such as beatings, or shootings, or large-scale protests. The interviewees can only describe such violence. Often presented during static “talking head” shots, their words are embedded in images of the unremarkable everyday, which may not prompt viewers to feel strongly, to be affected. As much recent work in film philosophy reminds us, this lack of affect may limit the film’s ability to effect change. For example, recognizing that eco-documentary films often wish to forward “consequential” messages of systemic awareness, Alexa Weik von Mossner draws on research in cognitive psychology to point out that affect and emotion are “often quicker, easier and more efficient” (46 quoting Paul Slovic, xxxi) ways to get viewers to “change their rational thinking about the ecological issues they present and encourage them to become active” (45).

Kumar does not see his documentary as an explicit eco-activist film, yet as a filmmaker he is aware that cinema’s power lies in its affective and emotional resonance. To heighten such resonances he is strategic in how he frames some of the live-action interviews shots. He positions a villager by a railroad track with a train rumbling by as the man describes his impending displacement and migration as labor to a large city. He follows goat-herders on grazing routes across the SEZ’s recently fenced boundaries as well as newly developed traffic-filled roads, and silhouettes them against a darkening sky so that their forms appear faceless. He often lingers on the interviewees even when they fall silent, as if to let their words sink in.

Such visual moves attempt to build emotional sympathy for the villagers. Their voiced concerns are contextualized in the hardships of daily life. But, to further emotively articulate the strength of archaic modernity in Tiruvelneli’s present, Kumar worked with animator and friend, Aditi Chitre to compress into cinematic time, the long histories of oppression and caste/class conflict. As The Sunday Guardian critic Tanushree Bhasin writes, “It is in these animation sequences that Kumar’s stand on the issue comes through most clearly, in the way he satirizes temple authorities or in his critique of exploitation sanctioned by religion.”

“Scratches in the Land”: Animating and Sounding Slow Violence as Spectacle

Chitre's animation sequences, like that of the title credit shot, are deliberately stark, charcoal-toned with deep shadows criss-crossing the landscape, and with the figures of the villagers simplistically drawn. In many shots the villagers are dwarfed by their surroundings. In contrast, the temple and the SEZ are framed to tower over their surroundings. These symbols of power are often imbued with a harsh slash of color. For example, the red curved arches associated with the SEZ's boundary and entrance is often re-conceptualized in these animated representations as a tilak, the marking of vermilion smeared on the forehead of Hindu deities and the devout. The conjoined symbolism of religion and economic progress is an explicit marker of archaic modernity.

The first and longest animated sequence, which begins approximately 10 minutes into the film, is signaled by a live-action shot of a train edited to travel backwards on a railroad track out of the frame, leaving only the empty track and an accompanying electric pole in the image. As the animation begins, the shot switches to black and white. The subsequent animation tips the electric pole out of the ground and literally erases it from the scene (as one might with a pencil eraser). On the empty landscape, tree trunks appear, dwarfing small ant-like figures in the distance. A medium shot shows that the figures are human beings, drawn with ant-like bodies and travelling with a few similarly, simplistically drawn goats. Subtitles alert us that "a few centuries ago, this area was under Nizam's rule" when "about six families came to live here." We are clearly in the past. This past continues to be visually presented to show the families' settlement of the land and their title to a pond, which is bestowed by the Nizam, a feudal ruler. In articulating the villagers' settlement of the land, *IGL* draws attention to a series of close-ups of hands dragging across the frame; fingers scoring black gashes across the earth. Both Kumar and Chitre note that the hands represent the villagers' statements in their life-action interviews. Kumar explains, "time and again when you talk to the villagers, their constant argument is that 'my forefathers scratched this dry piece of land and made it wet land. How dare you take it away from me?'" (personal communication). Chitre further notes the sense of toil she wanted to convey, referring to her choice of drawing the villagers as ant-like:

The farmer folk were drawn in the shape and scale of ants because of the extreme hard work that both do, and also because it is so easy to carelessly destroy what an ant has created with its toil, without even knowing what repercussions it has to face--much like the farmers facing the giant nexus of the temple, politicians, and corporations (personal communication).

[Insert Figure 2 here: Still from *In God's Land's* animated sequence, revealing artist Aditi Chitre's "giant nexus of temple, politicians and corporations" morphing out of Tiruvelneli's hills. Source: Courtesy of Pankaj Rishi Kumar.]



This “giant nexus of temple, politicians, and corporations” figures in the animation sequences as a monstrous behemoth morphing out of the hills in the landscape. Part rock, part machine (with satellite-disk shaped head, marked with the red curved arches), part giant cockroach-legged beast with a cavernous furnace for its belly, this nexus’ thick, muscular tongue gluttonously eats up evidence of the villagers’ ownership of the land (a copper plate provided by the Nizam) as well as the land’s resources—its rice fields and coconut trees. The villagers feed the monster sacks of harvested grain, only to find themselves denied access to it. At the end of the sequence, with temple chants on the soundtrack, *In God’s Land* provides us a shot from within the creature’s belly; the villagers peer in at us from outside, even as crosshatch bars descend to keep them out. The next shot is from outside; in long shot we see the monster, the villagers barricaded outside its barred belly, and the landscape barren and smoking. This shot dissolves to a live-action one of the Vanamamalai temple’s colorful façade, with the chants continuing on the soundtrack. The resemblance to the animated monster is unmistakable. The subsequent live-action shots of the temple, villagers loading sacks of grain and heading towards its entrance, as well as the voice-over of an interviewee recalling that “India got independence in 1947. But our village was bonded to the temple” reiterate the longer, older legacy of unequal power relationships introduced in the animated sequence.

In effect, via animation, the film attempts to spectacularly show the wreckage caused by Tirunelveli’s juggernaut of archaic modernity. While Kumar is insistent that his film is not an activist film, the condensing of centuries of unequal power relations into a few cinematic minutes where villagers are visually overwhelmed by the “devilish” (Kumar’s term) monster serves to “plot and give figurative shape to formless threats” of slow violence (Nixon, 10).

As cognitive film philosophers reminds us, plotting such tensions is a familiar cinematic trope to engage audience allegiance for specific characters (Smith, Smith). In addition, the lack of voice-of-God or interviewee narrators during the animation sequences demands viewers to actively process what they see, hear, and feel into cognitive sense. Kumar explains, “From the beginning we were clear, the animation had to be

emotionally driven” (personal communication). Thus, while *In God’s Land*’s live-action sequences introduce the tension of socio-environmental injustices, the animations careful choreography of stark black-and-white design with gashes of color, and scaled contrasts between villagers and the “nexus of temple, corporate, and political” power heighten the sensory affect of imbalance. We are in eco-film scholar, Adrian Ivakhiv’s words, “struck” by “the thick immediacy of cinematic spectacle, the shimmering texture of image and sound” (ix).

While the dynamic, scaled, and stark imagery is spectacular, its affect is enhanced and complicated by *In God’s Land*’s discordant non-diagetic soundscape. For example, as we watch hands scratching the land, the repetitive, sawing sound that accompanies these close-ups generates a scraping dissonance. Though the visual narrative prompts us to root for the villagers working to “quench” their land, the sound of their toil is unpleasant; its discordance seems to even signify violence to the land. The volume and presence of such “unnatural” mechanical sounds gets louder and more insistent in sequences that feature the monstrous nexus, pushing us to emotionally associate the temple, the SEZ, and its related turbocapitalism with sensations that are affectively unpleasant. Kumar confirms, “We wanted the track to be very problematic; a track that can disturb the serene landscape” (personal communication). In choosing a “jarring” sonic score, Kumar and Chitre deliberately heighten a sense of violence that is hard to characterize if the film depended only on its live-action diagetic imagery and sound.



[Insert Figure 3 here: Still from *In God’s Land*’s animated sequence, close-ups of villagers’ hands scratching the land. Source: Courtesy of Pankaj Rishi Kumar.]

Through these affectively intense animated sequences, one might argue that *In God’s Land* fits well with eco-film scholars Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann’s assertion that “the genre of animated film gains power because it challenges expectations of art, film, and narrative” (2). Specifically, as the epigraph suggests, the animations “offer a contrast to the rules of live-action” (Murray and Huemann, 92); rules, which in the case

of realist documentary live-action would suppress the film's ability to adequately capture a sense of violence.

Aware of the "wild possibilities that animation as a medium opens up" (Chitre, personal communication), *In God's Land* uses its presence to enhance what viewers are familiar with in their everyday, "real" worlds. Kumar points to how Chitre "saw hours and hours of my video footage. She said, 'I want to understand the texture of this place; the landscape of this place, how people look'" (personal communication). Such immersion in live-action environments is a common practice amongst animators as it gives them a feel for the settings that inspire the affective potential of their own creations (Whitley, a; Brereton). For example, Graham Walters, producer of the Disney animation classic, *Finding Nemo* explains, "what you have to do in animation—any kind of filmmaking, really, is direct the audience's eyes to where you want them to go, to not just soak in the environment, but feel it" (qtd. in Cotta Vaz, 23, and re-qtd. in Whitley, a; 155). Thomas Newman, the musical director of *Finding Nemo* and other animations like Pixar's *Wall-e*, similarly explains the importance of choreographing feeling when scoring animation—it's "a lot of what animation is about. It's feeling followed by transition, followed by more feeling, and typically in, like, little five-second bursts" (Siegel).

Through such audio-visual layering, one might argue, as eco-film critic Pat Brereton does when describing Pixar's *Up* (2009), that such mainstream Hollywood animations generate "a rollercoaster ride of emotions" (191). However, as Brereton further suggests, through promise of positive endings and "a reflexive array of musical registers that speak to 'childhood innocence'" (193), such popular films generally forward an overall upbeat vibe—a feel good affect with the potential to inspire positive ecological sensibilities. Like Brereton, David Whitley (a and b) highlights the ecological promise of Disneyesque animations, commenting on how the brightly colored and vibrant saturation of their hyper-real settings often enhance our sense and appreciation of the natural world. Though Ursula Heise looks at Japanese anime and French stop-motion animation instead of Disney or Pixar, she too argues for the positive, feel good affect of eco-animation. Drawing attention to filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's notion of "plasmaticness"—animation's film-world of flexible beings and environments that can mutate against the rules of reality, she suggests that the genre "playfully explores ecological adaptation, resilience..." (305). One of the few ecocritics to look at animation as not necessarily playful is Sean Cubitt, who considers Canadian animator, Chris Landreth's 2004 *Ryan*, a deeply dark portrait of the Canadian animator Ryan Larkin, who at the time the film was made was living as a hobo on the streets of Montreal. Cubitt is interested in *Ryan*'s self-referentiality, which in turn he argues is important to draw our attention to the material resources that construct cinema (104).

While the savvy renditions of hyper-real environments we see in Hollywood's animations often wow viewers with their "natural look" and technological slickness, *In God's Land*'s dark charcoal illustrations appear to subvert any such lionizing of cinema or nature. Instead, like with the literal, pockmarked, gaping holes in the animated *Ryan*'s screen presence that Cubitt discusses, in the scratches, shadows, and unevenness of Chitre's drawings, we are presented with a sense of imperfection and systemic socio-environmental violence. Thus, as a point of ecological entry, while the mainstream Disney animations and Japanese anime discussed by most ecocritics often use the cinematic-technological marvel of animation to present a nature that is often threatened

(and threatening) yet also ultimately regenerative and regenerating, *In God's Land* resists such reassurances.

In its foreboding representations of human-nature relationships, it forecloses any feel good messages that might lull viewers into ecological complacency. Such a take is not only rare in mainstream Western/Japanese animation explored by most ecocritics but also somewhat unique in India's expanding animation landscape, which is heavily influenced by Disney's conventions. While such influences reach back to the industry's roots (and the government-funded propaganda shorts of the 1950s), American studio outsourcing to a cheap Indian labor force in the 1990s fueled the country's domestic animation market and strengthened Western animation conventions (Lent, Pandyan). The lion's share of India's contemporary animation targets the country's vast children's audience, and much like Disney and Pixar encode an overall feel good affect. Such an affect becomes especially pertinent to our discussion when we also acknowledge that much of mainstream Indian animation highlights India's Hindu myths (Lent, Pandyan). Many see the mainstream meld of Disneyesque aesthetics and Hindu mythology as an expression of glocalization—the local indigenization of global forces—and thus, a force of positive cultural sovereignty. For example, Lent writes: “Indian parents like these ‘mytho-cartoons’ because they introduce ancient tales to a generation they feel is losing touch with its 5,000 year heritage” (110). However, given such mytho-cartoons' strong cultural themes of Hindu tradition (including those of patriarchy and implied caste and class designations) and their heavily commercialized presence (on television and through brand marketing),⁴ one can also fault them as complicit expressions of archaic modernity and its insidious slow violence. Despite the paucity of existing scholarly attention about Indian animation, such a critique is not unreasonable, particularly when viewed in the context of a number of media studies that implicate other types of mainstream Indian television and film as expressions of contemporary religious nationalism (see, for example, Rajagopal; Kaur Dhillon and Gwynne; Guneratne).

By foregoing any sense of feel good affect in favor of the jarring imagery and sound that portray the progressive razing of Tirunelveli's land and its ant-like inhabitants, *In God's Land* adopts a distinct aesthetic strategy that defiantly denies ecological complacency and resists complicity with the neoliberal project of archaic modernity.

“Disturbing the Serene Landscape” and the Perceptual Dilemmas of Slow Violence

So what does *In God's Land* ultimately leave viewers with? If, as Weik von Mossner writes, emotion and affect are “central to the perception of risk, rational thinking, and decision-making in our everyday lives” (46), then viewers can take the “emotional force” of *In God's Land's* animations to see and feel a “submerged story of injustice” (Nixon, 280). Both sonically and visually intense, the animations add a level of narrative plot and character tension that generate a cinematic spectacle out of the seeming quiescence of the current SEZ controversy. They “disturb the serene landscape” that marks the live-action sequences of everyday, ordinary experiences such as, of villagers working in their lush fields, herding goats across barbed fences erected to designate the SEZ lands, or discussing politics under the leafy spread of banyan trees. While the live-action also captures other slightly more dramatic moments, of the temple swami, of festivals, political campaigns, and survey trips by businessmen to the SEZ, to heighten the affective

resonance of these live-action moments *In God's Land* animations portray Tirunelveli's slow violence as spectacularly accumulated and dangerous. These sequences visually bleed into and out of the "real world" (e.g., the live-action shot of the railroad tracks transitioning to its animated replica, or the animated monster of archaic modernity morphing into the entrance of the Vanamamalai temple). The discordant sonicscape also serves as an uninterrupted aural, affective bridge between the two modes of representation helping viewers recognize the temporal relevance of violent pasts and futures (as animations also show the SEZ developed) to the present.

To further demonstrate how time is continuous with deep impacts, Kumar also experiments with his live footage. Specifically, a repeated motif throughout the live-action sequences is the presentation of shots in rewind-mode. Here Kumar's intentions are two-fold. First, there is a direct critique of traditional caste practices, where the untouchable caste are required to walk backwards when in the presence of upper caste Hindus. Second and related, Kumar's critique is of India's current development trajectory: "I wanted a sense right then and there—we keep talking about progress, but what does it actually mean?" (personal communication).

By pairing this rewind motif with the animations, the answer seems clear—progress is dangerous and disruptive; it is regressive. However, by coupling these rewind live-action shots with another repeated live-action editing motif—that of spinning camera shots, *In God's Land* provides a more nuanced response to the question. The answer isn't easy to grasp. Slow violence is dizzyingly complex in its long temporalities. We can't tackle it by simply being "anti-SEZ":

It's quite possible that the SEZ will be thrown out in a couple of years and on that piece of land, they'll then come up with another concept, but the basic tenet of that concept will also be displacement. How does it matter to them [sic] if it is a SEZ or a formula 1 track? What was more important to me was the displacement part of it, the power equation (Kumar, personal communication).

Though suspicious of progress, *In God's Land* also argues against simplistic environmental messaging by refusing to sentimentalize the past (even in the villagers' relations with their land). It thus escapes Emma Mawdsley's label of "neo-traditional environmentalism," which projects "a historically inaccurate past environmental harmony and an equally inaccurate past social harmony, both of which have been contaminated and degraded by a foreign cultural domination" (384). By acknowledging that recent Western capitalist forces are not the only culprits of Tirunelveli's inequities, *In God's Land* resists standardizing Indian environmentalism as a nationalistic project. Instead, its insistence on giving the farmers and goat herders of Imam Alungulam the ability to speak alongside other stakeholders, *In God's Land* often presents environmental protest through polyvocal and often contradictory expressions. For example, Kumar captures a group of villagers arguing over who they will vote for in the upcoming elections, with obvious differences being expressed. Such presentation forces an "unevenness in the delivery of such activism," complicating what Jyotirmaya Tripathy (building on Gadgil and Guha's work) suggests are "uncritical and unproblematic theorizations of such activism that often reduces environmentalism to questions of life and livelihood" (72). As the animations suggest, the villagers' ability to maintain control over their lands is central to their life and livelihoods, however, as the live-action testimonies and sequences help us recognize, this is not simply a story of homogenously helpless

victims. In the complex arena of India's development, individuals react differently—from the woman vehemently berating the temple representative, to villagers enlisting lawyers in their case, to those more resigned to migrate to the cities. Recognizing these heterogeneous responses and understanding the multi-layered dimensions that inform Tirunelveli's contemporary moment are powerful first steps for viewers if they wish to tackle the realities of India's complex environmental issues. However, even as *In God's Land* forwards this message of complexity, there is a caveat in its cinematic delivery.

In God's Land's aesthetics—from its charcoal-toned animations, to its disharmonious soundscape, its rewind and spinning shots, its attention to Tirunelveli's complex religious hierarchy and its overlapping eco-social intermeshes—are affectively “jarring.” While one might argue that such intended cinematic dissonance is part of Kumar's intent, after all, the situation is frustratingly layered, it can confuse viewers (as they did some of my own students). Not only is the immediate visual and aural affect discombobulating but to make sense of the multiple parts, viewers have to work especially hard. As scholars such as Dan Flory write, when viewers are confronted with a cinematic world with which they are uncomfortable, viscerally and cognitively, it is easy for them to “pop-out” of the experience and resist its messages (again, as it did with some of my own students).⁵ Perhaps equally important to the dynamics of “popping out” of *In God's Land* is the film's unrelenting seriousness, its overall affect of doom-and-gloom, which as eco-film scholars such as Nicole Seymour and David Ingram suggest often discourage viewers from wanting to watch ecocinema. Describing most ecocinema as “serious business,” (61) Seymour suggests that many view it as “too much like taking medicine” (63), and thus shy away from it.

In all, *In God's Land* is not an easy film to watch. There are no easy feel good moments to fall back on. Yet, despite the perceptual dilemmas presented by Kumar's aesthetic choices, even my students who “popped out” of the experience found themselves drawn back in by the film's spectacular animations, which “moved” them “most immediately and directly” (Ivakhiv, xi). Ultimately, when we dig deep to analyze its aesthetic strategies, *In God's Land's* representation of slow violence is well worth our ecocritical attention. In its postcolonial dimensions, *IGL* helps us look beyond the Western/Japanese center to extend our current eco-readings of affect and emotion in animation. As such, it makes a call for more eco-attention to both animation that is not necessarily “feel good” and to animations that gives voice to those outside the mainstream, global cinema market. It also takes up the challenge of scholars such as Nixon, Mawdsley, Gadgil and Guha, and Tripathy to complicate our understanding of Indian environmentalism as simplistic stories of subaltern victims confronting Western imported capitalist violence. In India's contemporary politics of archaic modernity, we recognize instead long histories of socio-environmental injustices meted out through the caste system and actively resisted in heterogeneous and complex ways.

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¹The SEZ's designation is specifically for non-extractive industry, something like a food processing center,

² I have provided the bracketed terms to help clarify Ludden's links.

³ Indian democratic politics while well known for its alliances with more fundamental religious groups has an additional, peculiar religious element. Specifically, politicians such as Jayalalitha, a contender in the elections at the time of Kumar's shooting, are well known movie actors who have played roles as Hindu deities in India's popular film industry. Jayalalitha is famous because of her career start in Tollywood, the Tamilian version of Hollywood.

⁴ For example, as seen in Ram Mohan's popular *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama* (1992); or the popular animated feature *Hanuman* (2005).

⁵ Flory is specifically concerned with how the film medium affects viewer's moral perceptions and generates Humean or "imaginative resistance," which in turn fuels a "popping out." In this case, because, *In God's Land* does not present a Humean "alternative morality" from one its environmentally attuned viewers might have, but instead complicates its one main morality lesson, that of destructive development, with many competing perspectives. Here, I am less interested in his focus on imaginative resistance even as I draw on the importance of his discussions regarding viewer's resistance to a film based on its affect.