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TOWARDS THE VISUAL

NEW GENRES AND FORMS OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA

ABSTRACT This paper examines the new forms and genres of storytelling in India with an emphasis on the visual aspect of the literary narration. It begins with a remark on the literary and performing tradition of India, where stories were told with an accompaniment of visuals: single or sequential images, scroll paintings, acting etc. With time, storytellers and poets started including modern-day, contemporary themes and problems into their narratives, which not only brought changes in the repertoire of stories, but also, quite naturally, caused development in terms of genres and ways of expression. The present study is based on graphic novels by Sarnath Banerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh, with reference to contemporary Hindi literature and some examples from visual art. The author seeks to answer the following questions: 1) what is the "new language" of a literary work in relation to the visual, 2) how – and by which means – does the literature reflect the reality of the new generations, 3) how is a story narrated through images. In conclusion, some observations are made on mutual influences between literature and audio-visual arts.

Key words: Hindi literature, Indian literature, visual culture, storytelling, graphic novel

Indian culture has always been linked with storytelling. For thousands of years, stories and tales about gods and demons, kings and villains were being told (or rather retold) in various literary and performing traditions. In the modern era, many new topics had been introduced to literature — themes connected with every-day life, individual experiences, social and political issues appeared in the new stories.

My aim here is to examine the new ways of storytelling — I am particularly interested in experiments in form and genre as well as in the new "language" of a literary work: how it reflects ideas (and problems) of the new generation, how a story is narrated through images. As I shall argue, a story may be told through pictures, involving many techniques of expression, thus creating a multi-layered structure of a story – which may be "read", "watched", "gazed", "experienced" in many ways. I chose to base my paper on visual examples i.e. graphic narratives with reference to paintings and other pop-cultural artefacts (such as film posters etc.), and analyze them from the point of view of both a reader and literary researcher interested in contemporary Indian culture.

1. TRADITION OF STORYTELLING IN INDIA

Indian literary tradition has been present since times immemorial in an oral tradition. Literature has been preserved and kept in memory, and "we find actually not written works, but only texts which were handed down by word of mouth"[1]. Traces of stories – of various gods and demons, allegoric and metaphoric, didactic and entertaining – may be found in the earliest texts, like Rigveda or Brahmanas, and since the earliest times they have been recited on various occasions (both religious and secular)[2]. The succeeding tradition of epic stories – not only the great Indian epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, but all other forms like *itihāsa, ākhyāna, purāna, kathā*–formed the canon of narrations which were not only recited, but also sang, chanted, and performed. These stories were adapted in various forms and genres – ranging from the highly refined in form Sanskrit poetry to folk traditions in Prakrits, and later in modern languages. Telling and/or presenting of those stories corresponded with the categorization of Sanskrit literature into *drishya* [dṛśya] (visual) or *shrayva* [śravya] (audial). The storyteller – depending on their own invention and imagination or tradition they represented/preserved – could employ other "media" into their storytelling, reaching far beyond verbal expression.

2. VISUAL FORMS OF STORYTELLING

If we look at the various audio-visual traditions in India – they are all about telling a story. In many forms of dance we may see ("read") accounts of life and legends

[1] M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Sv. I. Delhi 1996, p. 26.

[2] K. Mylius, *Geschichte der altindischen Literatur*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 71.

ascribed to a particular god or some other celestial being. In dance and classical theatre performances, those stories are presented with a complicated language of signs, a code of hand gestures and facial expressions. Any other visual aspects are of not lesser meaning – colors of clothing, make-up, hair etc. The rich symbolism tells a parallel story – it adds to the significance of the performance and to its experiencing by the audience. Such performing acts are often accompanied by music and songs, and thus combine verbal expression with the visual.

A story can also be told without words – with gestures and colors, as mentioned above, but also with pure images. It demands an audience who knows how to "read" the codes of culture, needs a reader who is familiar with various signs and symbols. The religious paintings on the walls of temples are iconic representations of gods, but they also relate to some particular moment in their history, allude to a particular event through attributes used, or any other feature, thus constitute a story – in single or multiple images.

In general, the repertoire of stories consists of events and actions of heroes and heroines, who involve themselves (or are being involved) in various situations, resulting in more or less moralistic outcome, sometimes amusing, sometimes with serious consequences. The stories are believed to be well known to the Indian auditorium – the originality lies in the w a y a story is being told. Every storyteller may add some innovation to the story, as long as it stays in its traditional contours. In this way, every re-telling of a story is at the same time conventional and innovative. The question is not w h a t to tell, but h o w to do it[3].

With time, the collection of possible stories and types of heroes/heroines expanded: firstly, by including accounts of the every-day lives, stories of common men, but also of sages and saints who were gaining and using supernatural powers, of courtly love-stories, and other non-religious narrations. Secondly, the advent of the modern era introduced the Indian readership to an entire new range of problems, motifs, themes, and topics. Translating both shifts into the literary genres, one may speak of *kathā*/*dastān*/*qissā* and novel (*upanyās*)/short story (*kahānī)* respectively.

Generally speaking, modern Indian literature(s) mirrored the modern Indian reality in many ways. In the first half of the 20th century, literature released itself from the corset of traditional poetics: it became a field of formal experiments. In modern prose (and I mainly refer to prose in the Hindi language as it is the main field of my expertise), we may notice a major shift from descriptive narration towards one based on image (Hindi "bimb"), from linear story towards a fractal, memory-like time structure. "New" stories portrayed the everyday life of common people, spoke of individual thoughts and emotions, social and political problems, and thus described contemporary reality using the modern-day (colloquial) language. All these features were new to literature, as was the writer's creative search for one's own style of expression. Beginning from the late 1960s, Hindi literature became influenced by other media – or rather by

[3] K. Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teachning*, Philadelphia 1998, p. 37.

new techniques made available through film and photography. In fiction written by writers like: Nirmal Verma [Nirmal Varmā], Krishna Baldev Vaid [Krsn Baldev Vaid], Jyotsna Milan [Jyotsnā Milan], or Udayan Vajpeyi [Udayan Vājpeyī], we find almost photographic descriptions of people and their features (of character, but also of appearance) – as if we saw them in a detailed close-up. Such images appearing one after another constitute (or at least dominate) the narration, giving an impression of non-moving cinema. An image becomes a text that remains an image.

The literary text becomes an interdisciplinary object of art: it belongs to linguistic and literary discourse, but also to the visual – not only in the sense of wakening the reader's imagination, but also as a graphic artifact: made out of letters. After years of predominantly oral tradition (in the sense of treating written text as a secondary, not primary source), poetry and prose are no longer only part of the *shravya* tradition (meaning literature to be listened to/recited/told), but also belong to the *drishya* as a visible, black-and-white structure in which not only the black letters but also the blank spaces convey meaning[4]. Consequently, the *drishya* element in literature does not only suggest the visual methods of telling the story (performance) – but also applies to the other aspects of its visibility: its textual existence. Such an approach towards literature may be found in prose as well in poetry, as for example[5] in the strong modern visual statement by Suryakanth Tripathi 'Nirala' [Sūryakānt Tripathī ‚Nirālā'[]. His poem *Vah tortī patthar* (1935) operates not only on the lyrical, aesthetical, and socio-political level, it also conveys a powerful image of a young girl in the prime of her youth working hard on a road contrasted with peaceful elite-life beyond the fence. We "see" the drops of sweat on her forehead, we "see" the hammer she uses to crush the stones (and "hear" the rhythmic sound of it). Let us read another example:

Mother's fingers knotted one with another. I try to detangle them. She is lying. She doesn't know but they already told us. Brother shows her an image of Ram. At noon mother reads from Puran to her old friend. Her glasses stay on the tip of her nose. I sit on the hospital's veranda, reading a book. Brother's car broke down on the way. Mother glares towards the window. Beyond is an empty street. Brother peeps through the green curtains.

His face stiffens meeting his mother's motionless face.

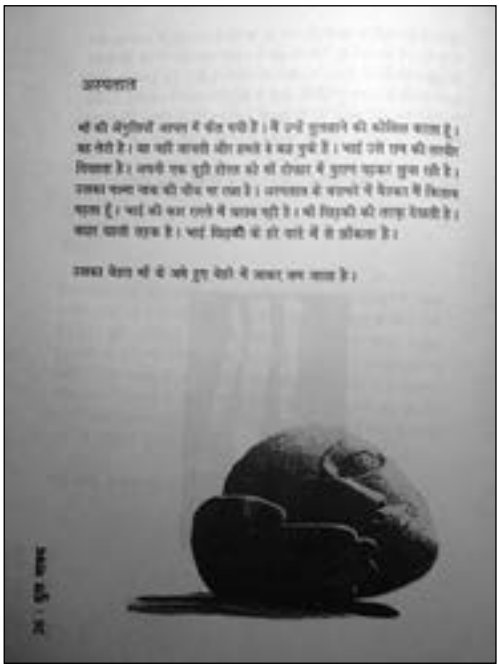
Udayan Vajpeyi's poem *Aspat*āl[6] is being built out of images and could be visualized by a series of stills – photographs or drawings. We actually "watch" it while reading. The "story" could be interpreted in many ways – it describes a situation (real, fictional,

[4] In his essay on Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés*, Jacques Derrida dwelled on the spatiality of a text – or of writing, stressing that meaning can be conveyed not only by the word (or language in a broader sense), but also by the formal organisation of words, including blank spaces between them. See J. Derrida, "Mallarmé", transl. by Ch. Roulston, in J. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, D. Attridge (ed.), New York–London 1992, pp. 110-126.

[5] I have made some observations on the correspondence of S. Mallarme's and M. Blanchot's concept of the spatiality and visuality of a text/writing with contemporary Hindi literature. See K. Junik-Łuniewska, *Literatura jako proces pisania. Analiza* Błękitu *Tedźi Grower w świetle przemian we współczesnej prozie hindi*, Kraków 2015, pp. 223-225.

[6] U. Vājpeyī, *Kuch vāky*, Naī Dillī 1995, p. 26; own translation from Hindi.

imaginative) with at least 3 actors involved. The written word is accompanied by a picture – as all the poems from the *Kuch v*āky collection. Those pictures may function as a commentary, visual representation, depiction, or a simple impression evoking emotions similar to the text itself. The spacing line, dividing the text into two visible unequal parts, separates two distinct thoughts, two main captures – giving a sense of sequencing.



The poem *Aspat*āl and the image accompanying it.
U. Vājpeyī, *Kuch vāky*, Naī Dillī 1995, p. 26 (Photo: K. J.-Ł.)

3. PICTORIAL NARRATIVES AND SEQUENTIAL ART

Graphic novels appeared as a new genre in Indian literature only few years ago, generating a lot of discussion. Many questions arise: concerning their origin and cultural belonging, language and ways of narration, their formal existence (are they comics? novels?). It is not enough to say, that graphic novels are "comics in the form of a book" dealing with "serious problems." In my opinion, they should definitely be regarded as a new form of literature, which allows the writer to experiment with the form of the story in various ways – going further beyond the text and existing methods of storytelling. Being something "novel" in the realm of literature, they correspond at the same time with the whole visual tradition of storytelling in India.

As I already mentioned, there have been examples of graphic (pictorial) narratives in Indian culture. Assuming that every picture tells a story, the very first "illustrations"

may be found in the ancient caves of Bhimbetka or Ajanta. These paintings are comprised of many small images, which tell a story of an individual (in micro perspective) or – in a bigger picture – of the entire community. It's a story without words and without any divisions between images, but still it uses a sequential perspective. As we all know, in our perception the image is primary – and seeing precedes naming (i.e. verbal designation).

In Indian folk culture there are traditions, which may be seen as heralds of today's comics and graphic narratives. One of them is known as *kāvad bācānā* – a storytelling tradition based on pictures painted on panels of a portable shrine. It is said to have existed 400 years in the region of Rajasthan, where it is still cultivated. The multi-paneled shrine consists of pictures of gods, patrons, saints, and even local heroes – it combines the sacral space with the secular and contemporary. The storyteller brings the colorful *kaavad* [kāvad] (shrine) to the patron and the audience and, while opening it and indicating on the particular image, narrates the story. The images are placed in boxes, there are no written words, so the story cannot happen without the pictures, but also the pictures do not speak their story without the storyteller. The tradition is based on a combination of words and images, but, as every oral tradition, it changes the story each time it is narrated. The main plot and actors remain the same, but the story is active, its verbal shape is subjected to individual adaptation. The story also pays an important role for the communities – on the one hand, it conserves the genealogy of the patron, on the other – draws attention to the makers of the tradition: the craftsmen, the storytellers[7]. In other words, it urges "the groups to preserve a remembered past, conserve community integrity and identity and behold a vision of the future"[8].

In the context of the present essay it seems necessary to mention various forms of storytelling based on scroll paintings[9]. In different parts of India we may speak of *pat or phad* (Rajasthan), *patta-chitra* [pattacitr] (Orissa), *pothi* [pothī] (Maharashtra, Goa) and more[10] – a piece of cloth painted with vivid colors, depicting various mythological stories. They may contain detailed tales of local heroes, kings, and warriors which all become alive during the narration, but also religious stories recalling the main events from the life of a particular god (e.g. Krishna) – such religious cloths are often hung in temples during festivals. Hearing stories based on *pat* paintings plays an important part in village life – on some evenings the entire community gathers, and the storyteller hangs the painting (in a large format) in an accessible and visible place, giving them a backdrop for his story. While narrating the story, he highlights the relevant parts (captures) of the painting.

7 N. Sabnani, "The Kaavad storytelling tradition in Rajasthan", *Design Thoughts* (2009), pp. 28-33.

8 Sh. Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Delhi 1997, p. 31.

9 A. SenGupta, *Scroll Paintings of Bengal. Art in the Village*, Bloomington 2012, pp. 32-36.

10 Cf. U. A. Athvankar, D. Udaya Kumar, G.V. Sreekumar, "Traditional writing system in Southern India — Palm leaf manuscripts", *Design Thoughts* (2009), pp. 2-7.

4. GRAPHIC STORIES AND CULTURAL CLICHÉS

While researching the *kaavad* tradition in today's India, Nina Sabnani created a new artwork – a graphic book/comic on quarrels between storytellers she witnessed (those disputes concerned the shape/form of the story, although at the end everyone admitted that it was the same story). Her book is an inventive response to the old tradition – conveying information about the indigenous tradition to a broader audience, but also allowing it to be revived in form of a new story beyond the storyteller's community. While looking for material for my classes on visual culture of India and Pakistan, I came across a pop cultural, cinematic and very contemporary adaptation of *patta-chitra*, made by Senthil Kumar[11]. In his short animation about Arjuna the Archer[12] the author pays homage to the dying tradition of hand painting by reviving the mythical hero and bringing him into the year 2008. Arjuna drives a bicycle and a motorbike, gets caught in a traffic jam, and talks through a mobile phone – all this because he lives a modern life in a big city. I shall quote from Nina Sabnani here: *Story is perhaps the oldest form of communication known to humankind. It has a way of mesmerizing the listeners into silence and the tellers into expressing the deepest desires and anxieties of their society, directly or through subversive means. Storytelling brings people together, whether it is a street corner or a darkened cinema hall. While the essence of story remains the same, the way of telling stories has been influenced by the kind of tools and technology of the times.*[13]

In the contemporary era, and with the use of new media, the old, traditional motives and stories are being reproduced and acquire fresh meaning – in this way a new space for artistic negotiations is being created. Simultaneously, with time, the repertoire of universal stories of good and evil, heroes and villains has been enriched with accounts of modern men and their problems. Today's literature seeks to explore (rather on an individual than communal level) all kinds of contemporary problems and issues, such as: identity, globalization, gender, sexuality, terrorism, political activism etc.

The new era is especially characterized by intensive urbanization – construction and the expansion of modern cities. The process of urban development influenced people's lives in all possible aspects: it changed (and still changes) the way of life of not only those living in the cities but also those living outside them, who often migrate in search of a better life and opportunities. The city walls (real or illusory) create a sort of demarcation line, separating the rural from the municipal, the traditional and local from the modern and global. As noted by Roobina Karode and Shukla Sawant, *the city – as dwelling place and workshop of many, as urban centre, as an initiating and controlling centre of economics, political, and cultural life – has drawn into its orbit even communities from the most remote regions. It evokes multifarious responses – as hostile*

[11] For "Arjuna the Archer" Senthil Kumar has won a bronze Design Lion at the International Festival of Creativity „Cannes Lions Festival" in 2009.

[12] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwEvmeOi42U, 15 December 2018.

[13] N. Sabnani, "The Kaavad...", p. 28.

machine, social theatre, hegemonic structure, utopian dream, symbol of progress, spectacle of pleasure or of paranoia.[14]

The landscapes changed also visually – and the visual artists searched for adequate ways in portraying them. Around the 1980s, many artists created socially and politically engaged statements as a reaction to the current political situation (Emergency, communal violence, lack of freedom of expression). Painters like Gulammohammed Sheikh and Nalini Malani included such topics into their art, drawing formal inspiration from the theory of narrativity. To be able to convey the multilayered reality of city life, Sheikh studied miniature paintings – mainly to understand the rules of spatial organization. On that basis he produced his large-formatted paintings, such as *City for Sale*: a huge canvass presenting several events simultaneously. The painting's center demonstrates an empty cinema hall, at the same time we see the cinema's surroundings – people in groups, with faces twisted, painted in vivid yet dark colors (with domination of red hues); narrow lanes filled with citizens; men on bicycles, cows, women gossiping; in a small corner the royal palace – untouched by this unrest. The story narrated by the painting could be organized in a sequence of various small images, depicting single scenes. And yet, the author exposed us to all this at once – creating a sense of process, of movement, putting together non-moving, static images into one big picture. The reality of communal violence in Baroda, which is the backdrop of the painting, "is articulated pictorially by spatial ruptures, variations of scale, interspersed close and distant views of victims and villains".[15]

Vishwajyoti Ghosh made the events of the 1970s that led to political activism among artists the subject of a graphic narrative[16]. Ghosh fictionalizes every single detail from historical incidents, beginning with the names of political figures and the names of cities. His graphic novel was published in 2010 and tells a story of a three young boys who get caught in the ideological play of political leaders, feeling the urge to do something meaningful in their lives. The most interesting feature of the text is that it mixes the means of expression: it is an original attempt of combining "graphic" with "novel." The story is being partially told by images: on some pages there are only images, while on other – the image functions as an illustration of the text or adds a commentary to the text which couldn't be expressed verbally with equal strength (for example Moon's [Indira Gandhi's] double thoughts on page 53[17]). The images are drawn in two different color-ranges: sepia images indicate the actual story of 1975, while the black and white images drawn in light lines generate separate stories about various political leaders (Moon, Prophet). This method may be borrowed from cinematic art, where a retrospective story appears in negative or in black and white colors. Sepia also suggests memories and the old times. The book meets the criteria of a novel, offering a multilayered

[14] R. Karode, S. Sawant, "City Lights, City Limits: Multiple Metaphors in Everyday Urbanism", in G. Sinha (ed.), *Art and Visual Culture in India 1857-2007*, Mumbai 2009, p. 190.

[15] Ibid., p. 200.

[16] V. Ghosh, *Delhi Calm*, Noida 2010.

[17] Ibid., p. 53.

story told by some narrator (whose commentaries are in square balloons or outside the images), but also narrated by one of the protagonists. It uses text – and comparing to other graphic novels there are quite a few descriptive passages – as well as pictorial storytelling. Thus its language is quite original: it employs verbal and non-verbal expression, plus all the cross-media expressions arising from juxtaposing images with images, text with images, and images with text.

Living in a visual era[18], we are exposed to hundreds of images every day, we are literally surrounded by images, which constitute our culture on local and global level. The collation of images – with or without verbal commentary – creates narration, but also creates intertextual and symbolic/iconic meanings. The real image of Delhi's traffic is being translated in Ghosh's book into a photographic duplicate[19], showing the back window of a bus with lots of people squeezed inside. Below, a line of text – typical for larger vehicles in India – "Keep distance", a piece of information for the cars that follow, reminding the drivers to drive carefully. But there is also another line: "Keep quiet". So the picture here says more: in the rear window we see faces wearing masks, symbolically preventing them to speak[20]. Both phrases together enhance the atmosphere of suspicion and terror, where talking/commenting on temporary events is (officially) prohibited. This image corresponds intertextually with a painting by Anupam Sud titled *Rear Window* (1992). In his painting we also observe typical urban scenery – a bus with too many people inside. A reflection on everyday reality in an Indian city. However, this bus is filled with naked bodies, their eyes gazing beyond the two frames, in search of space beyond the dense atmosphere. The signs on the bus – "Dūrī rakhē / Keep distance" add a commentary to this image. The crowded people in Sud's painting lack space on the individual level – not only on the bus, but in general: in the overcrowded city itself. They try to look beyond the situation they are in, gazing behind/beyond each other through the window[21]. People in Ghosh's image are deprived not only of individual space, but also of their own voice.

The cultural clichés appearing in graphic narratives are not only borrowed from other texts and paintings, but also from all kinds of visual media. The two-pages image, using a map as its background, where soldiers are visualized as huge military boots with heads aiming at citizens coming from heaven on angel's wings, features an iconic Gandhi statue in this wandering pose, right next to an image of an armed woman from the poster of Bollywood classic *Mother India*[22]. The youth manipulated by ideology and thus supporting the regime's decisions – called "The Smiling Saviors" – are wearing masks similar to those introduced in *V as Vendetta*, obviously alluding to the already classical comic by Alan Moore and David Lloyd.

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18 Cf. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994.

19 V. Ghosh, *Delhi...*, p. 5.

20 Such masks also commonly used against pollution, which could be another way of reading the image's symbolism.

21 Assuming that the destination – Supreme Court – is not coincidental, we may also see them as bodies/souls waiting for a (final?) judgement.

22 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

V. Ghosh, Delhi..., p. 5 (Photo: K. J.-Ł.)

Anupam Sud, *Rear Window* (Photo: K.J.-Ł.)

In Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor*[23] there are more cultural clichés to be found. The story, on its visual level, is an iconic journey through the labyrinths of Delhi's Connaught Place – the captures and landscapes are almost photographic, and show very typical and symbolic images from inner and outer circles. The story is in fact a collage of short stories about a few people roaming around the city central parts, a fragmented narration of fragmented urban reality. Apart from the choice of scenery in the novel, there are several intertextual allusions to other images, which produce a new implication for the reader. While touching upon the problem of impotency of one of the protagonists, the author not only describes what may happen to a unsatisfied wife, but also illustrates it with image of a psycho-killer from a Hollywood movie, wearing typical orange overall (resembling the protagonist from the movie *Ring*), juxtaposing her with an image of goddess Kali, and a drawing of an Indian woman in a sari with a sword in her hand, who's head has been cut out from a real photo. In the same story – which is the only one almost entirely in color (the rest of the book is drawn in black line) – the protagonist is being forced to rethink his attitude and habits, in order to fight his

[23] S. Banerjee, *Corridor. A Graphic Novel*, Gurgaon 2004.

impotency. His dilemmas – how to live a healthier life, how to restrain emotions, needs, and instincts – are being illustrated by a collage of images familiar to every Indian child, taken from posters instructing boys how to be perfect. The fragments from stories of "good habits" (known even from Hindi school books), and how to be "an ideal boy" are again being contrasted with images of Raj Kapoor and Rajinikanth, the role models for Indian boys.

5. CONCLUSION

In the rapidly changing landscapes of human life, the use of up-to-date media allows new techniques of storytelling to be developed. The development happens not only in the repertoire of themes and motifs appearing as the subject of a story, but also in the form of narration. In the modern era, all audio-visual arts have been mutually influenced, borrowing from each other's methods such as: collage, montage, sequential art, miniature painting, intertextuality and quotation etc. Reading a literary text is therefore as complicated and intriguing as "reading" a figurative image – and it demands an erudite reader to be able to find all the intertextual (and interpictorial) connections. By referring to the rich tradition of storytelling in India, I aimed at showing that the stories, since the ancient times, were accompanied by visuals – single or sequential images, paintings and all other possible illustrations. Hence the graphic narrative – a story with/in images – does not necessarily represent a new form of art without a tradition, but may be treated as a contemporary innovation of not such a new cultural phenomenon.

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