



## Om Shanti Omnibus: A Makers' Dozen

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Produced by the twelve members of the International Video Essay Research Network (IVERN), "Om Shanti Omnibus" uses prompts and parametric procedures to make a collective video essay on the Hindi film *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007). *Om Shanti Om* was chosen because it is an allusive, cinephile text, and because of the relative absence of attention to Indian cinema in videographic criticism. Our method was to divide the film into twelve equal segments of just under 14 minutes and then to randomly assign one segment to each of our twelve participants. Each maker was tasked with producing a two-minute video essay related to their segment using a randomly assigned prompt or parameter. Collaborative and parametric approaches like that explored in the *Om Shanti Omnibus* project have the potential to forward the field of audiovisual criticism by imagining and realizing a collective mode of creative making in both pedagogical and exploratory research contexts.

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### Creators' Statement

“*Om Shanti Omnibus*” is an experiment in audiovisual criticism that deploys collaborative and parametric authorship practices. The video essay was produced by the twelve members of IVERN (International Video Essay Research Network), all alumni of the 2018 Scholarship in Sound and Image workshop at Middlebury College.

*Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007) was chosen because it is a highly allusive, cinephile text, but also because of the relative absence of attention paid to Indian cinema in videographic criticism. Our method was to divide the film into twelve equal segments of just under 14 minutes and then to randomly assign one segment to each of our twelve participants. Each maker was tasked with producing a two-minute video essay related to their segment using a randomly assigned prompt or parameter. The parameters were compiled from a list of suggestions made by the group and are set out in the table below along with the running order of the individual segments.

Segment	Maker	Parameters	Time Range
<b>Titles</b>	Andrea Comiskey		
<b>1</b>	Matthew Payne	Voiceover	0–13:59
<b>2</b>	Kathleen Looock	Text on Screen	14–27:59
<b>3</b>	Nguyen Tan Hoang	Epigraph	28–41:59
<b>4</b>	Neepe Majumdar	Multiscreen	42–55:59
<b>5</b>	Alan O’Leary	Superimposition	56–69:59
<b>6</b>	Nathaniel Deyo	Music/sound only from film	70–83:59
<b>7</b>	Maria Pramaggiore	Music/sound from external source	84–97:59
<b>8</b>	Susan Harewood	Self-filmed footage (including desktop)	98–111:59
<b>9</b>	Andrea Comiskey	Footage from another source	112–125:59
<b>10</b>	Elizabeth Alsop	Repetition	126–139:59
<b>11</b>	Juan Llamas Rodriguez	Unusual transitions	140–153:59
<b>12</b>	Maria Hofmann	Speed	154–167:59

We made the explicit decision not to research the film, partly to make the collaboration feasible for all and partly to encourage fresh responses to the film, which was not familiar to most participants. The choice to collaborate on a non-Western text was informed by Lalitha Gopalan's 2010 edited volume *The Cinema of India* in which a mix of experts and non-experts wrote on different Indian films, producing fresh insights into otherwise canonical films.<sup>1</sup> Our method responds to the ways in which new audiences engage with unfamiliar films in the era of streaming, but our hypothesis is that the approach, whether applied to a familiar Hollywood film or to a less well-known text, has the potential to generate surprising connections and insights.

Initial inspiration for the project came from experimental works of criticism and scholarship such as *93 Minutentexte: The Night of the Hunter*, which collects ninety-three prose essays, one for each of the ninety-three minutes of Charles Laughton's 1955 film.<sup>2</sup> Work like this, which juxtaposes and combines individual contributions without imposing the requirement of integrative coherence, has a long tradition in visual culture, which spans early twentieth century surrealist procedures such as the Exquisite Corpse/Le cadavre exquis and later developments such as the generative games of the Oulipo.<sup>3</sup> More immediately, "*Om Shanti Omnibus*" draws on the parametric exercises and ethos of the training at the Middlebury "Scholarship in Sound and Image" workshops.<sup>4</sup> It has affinities with collaborative videographic projects like Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer's *Once Upon a Screen Vol. 2*,<sup>5</sup> Ian Garwood's "Indy Vinyl for the Masses,"<sup>6</sup> and the collective video essays made by subscribers to The Essay Library Discord channel, generated according to a prompt voted on by potential contributors.<sup>7</sup> What differentiates our approach, however, is the focus on a single, shared film text.

The two-minute video essays of "*Om Shanti Omnibus*" were made independently, then screened and discussed during group Zoom sessions in which we identified convergences and divergences in theme and approach. We were also able to explore collectively what such an arbitrary process might reveal about the source text and its contexts. Some makers revised their essays after the work-in-progress screenings, but these changes were motivated by individual makers' ambitions for their segment rather than directives from others. While we discussed themes related to form, content, and textuality that emerged from the interactions and sequencing of our "makers' dozen," we prefer to leave the assessment and interpretation of the completed work to viewers and reviewers.

Still, we want to suggest that the project opens several questions. The first relates to the legibility and suitability of specific films for an experiment like this one. How does the experience of our omnibus video essay differ, we wonder, for those who know *Om Shanti Om* and those who don't? Are certain films better suited to an exercise like the one we have performed here? Key debates in audiovisual criticism around questions

of cinephilia are relevant to “*Om Shanti Omnibus*” as well: does the character of *Om Shanti Om*—as mentioned, an allusive and self-consciously cinephilic text—mean that it lends itself to playful elaboration in ways that other films might not? With this collective video essay, we hope to suggest the potential for playful and collaborative videographic inquiry, but we also wonder how the model might be employed and adapted for teaching videographic criticism and/or film analysis. To what extent can it be used for the analysis of other films or modified for the study of multiple films?

Videographic criticism is a critical and creative media practice of remixing in which maker-scholars transform original source texts through interventions in editing, sound, and image. The potentially reified status of the scholar as auteur and the ethics and aesthetics of appropriation have emerged as important concerns in audiovisual criticism. Collaborative and parametric approaches like those explored in the “*Om Shanti Omnibus*” project have the potential to forward the field of audiovisual criticism by imagining and realizing a collective mode of creative making in both pedagogical and exploratory research contexts.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lalitha Gopalan (ed.), *The Cinema of India* (Wallflower, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Baute and Volker Pantenburg (eds.), *93 Minutentexte: ‘The Night of the Hunter’* (Brinkmann and Bose, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Exquisite Corpse is a game in which each participant writes or draws on a sheet of paper before folding the paper to conceal their contribution and then passing it to the next participant, the idea being to generate unexpected juxtapositions and strange compositions. For introductions to the generative games and constraints developed by the Oulipo, see Warren F. Motte Jr. (ed.), *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), and Philip Terry (ed.), *The Penguin Book of OuLiPo* (Penguin, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, “[Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Pedagogical Essay](#),” in C. Keathley, J. Mittell, and C. Grant (eds.), *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound & Image* (Scalar, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The curators of *Once Upon A Screen Vol. 2* invited makers to elaborate videographically on anonymised prose texts describing a formative screen memory. The resulting sixteen videos are collected <https://intransition.openlibhums.org/article/id/11265/> (part 1) and <https://intransition.openlibhums.org/article/id/11376/> (part 2).

<sup>6</sup> Garwood describes this as “an open-ended collaborative video essay project, exploring ... the relationship between moving images and popular music.” See project website at <https://indyvinyl.gla.ac.uk/indy-vinyl-for-the-masses/>.

<sup>7</sup> These are collected on *The Essay Library* YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@theessaylibrary>.

## Biography

The twelve members of the International Video Essay Research Network (IVERN) are alumni of the 2018 Scholarship in Sound and Image workshop at Middlebury College and have been meeting online since 2021 to share work and debate questions related to videographic criticism.

List of members:

Elizabeth Alsop, Assistant Professor of Communication and Media, City University of New York (CUNY) School of Professional Studies

Andrea Comiskey, Lecturer of Writing & Communication, Carnegie Mellon University

Nathaniel Deyo, Lecturer of Writing Studies, University of Miami

Susan Harewood, Associate Professor, School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences, University of Washington–Bothell

Maria Hofmann, Associate Director of Graduate Student Career and DEI Initiatives, University of Minnesota

Kathleen Loock, Professor of American Studies and Media Studies, Leibniz University Hannover

Juan Llamas–Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Neepta Majumdar, Associate Professor, Film & Media Studies in the Department of English, University of Pittsburgh

Nguyen Tan Hoang, Associate Professor of Literature, University of California, San Diego

Alan O’Leary, Associate Professor of Film and Media in Digital Contexts, Aarhus University

Matthew Payne, Associate Professor, Department of Film, Television, and Theatre, University of Notre Dame

Maria Pramaggiore, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Appalachian State University

## Review by Nilanjana Bhattacharjya, Arizona State University

*Om Shanti Om* as a film delights both Bollywood neophytes and cinephiles who recognize its citations. The essays in this collective work clarify the terms of its broad appeal. Several essays explore how *OSO* reconfigures nostalgia, stardom, fandom, and

memory to enable its audiences to “become part of the stories,” while other essays I discuss here focus on less conventional themes.

The eighth essay’s juxtapositions of idealized and monstrous images of Black and Indian hair provide a visceral commentary on how the marketing of “Indian hair” perpetuates Black women’s pain and suffering. The ninth essay includes some of the film’s reflexive dialogue before demonstrating the Bordwellian “hook”—in which a visual or audio element from one scene re-emerges in the next scene as a transition.

In the fifth essay, different parts of the film are superimposed and dissolve into each other, evoking Catherine Grant’s canonical essay, “Dissolves of Passion” and connecting the characters’ narratives across time in a way the film never can. The fourth essay juxtaposes scenes *OSO* and *Singin’ in the Rain* to connect *OSO* to the backstage film musical, and another uses split screens to show how *OSO* and *Vertigo* coincide in their use of green and framing of its characters. Another “TikTok” teaches us “how to edit Bollywood for TikTok,” namely that the cropped format requires shifting the frame on medium shots to track the moving figure.

Following arbitrary parameters in our essays often motivates us to consider our material in ways that we would not otherwise, but designating the multiple parameters and division of the film’s sections here required considerable planning to have succeeded on this impressive scale. The experimental approaches and depth of engagement generated by the scholars’ adherence to their respective parameters define IVERN’s collective work as an exemplary model for future projects.

### **Review by Ian Garwood, University of Glasgow**

The second half of the movie *Om Shanti Om*, on which this collective audiovisual essay is based, features a series of reenactments of scenes from the first part of the film, staged by a reincarnated actor in order to flush out the killer of a Bollywood star. By the end of the movie, the murderer is exposed but not, it turns out, as a result of the orchestrated process of reenactment. Instead, supernatural forces descend to achieve resolution. This stands as an apt metaphor for videographic criticism that revolves around parametric exercises or prompts, like those that drive “*Om Shanti Omnibus*.” On the one hand, these encourage the makers to creatively remix elements of the source material according to a particular brief, just as the reincarnated actor remixes earlier events with specific intentions in mind. On the other, the results of this activity are often discussed as being out of the control of the creators: they become the beneficiaries of a process that takes on a life of its own.

This audiovisual essay features a host of intriguing prompt-driven responses to *Om Shanti Om*, that, through their collective presentation, doubles down on the notion that the intention of the individual author is only one factor in producing meaning. Here, meaning is co-created through the material thinking of individual creators, steered by the guide rails of the parametric process, and the response of a viewer for whom the twelve separately conceived exercises are offered as a singular experience. As the written statement suggests, what the viewer gets out of the omnibus is likely to depend on their familiarity with the source text and in their interest in the possibilities of creative remixing. The exercises lean towards these poles in different ways. For example, exercise eleven features a highly entertaining account of the framing of movies within TikTok film criticism—something that is illuminating in relation to thinking about creative remixing on different platforms, but seems less interested in exploring *Om Shanti Om* specifically. Exercise four uses multiscreen effectively to highlight an intertextuality that is peculiar to the film but that is evident from the exercise, whether the viewer has seen the movie or not. Exercise seven uses external sounds (and a burst of external imagery) to provide a suggestive commentary on the film that will likely be more thought-provoking if you have seen it in its entirety. The written statement proclaims that the omnibus foregoes “integrative coherence.” This allows a variety of approaches to flourish, which are dictated not only by the differences in the prompts for each exercise, but also by the creators’ choices in balancing an interest between an investigation of the film and an exploration of videographic methods.

## Licensing

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