



Research article

## *Kothanodi*: Visual Storytelling through World-building in Regional Literature

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### Abstract

Visual storytelling is an ancient art. Television, radio, movies, and books fulfill a basic need of the human psyche- to make sense of the world around them. The sensorial experience of sight, which is also epistemologically significant to meaning-making finds newer modes of presentation with the turn of the twentieth century with the availability of newer technological modes of consumption. The pronounced shift within Media Studies towards a "world," rather than the concerns of plot or character, reflects the increasing rise of trans-medial narratives as a norm. The upshot of an unprecedented rise of trans medial narrative has also made its presence felt in the Third World and within smaller regional cultures. These cultures, which have a rich panache of stories, mostly in their folktales, have exponential potential to utilise the same in creating successful trans-medial- narratives. One such significant production is the 2015 award-winning Assamese film, *Kothanodi*, which has, as its backdrop, four intertwining stories selected meticulously from the pantheon of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's stock literature of folk tales retold. This paper studies the aspects of worldbuilding in the film vis-à-vis the literature that makes it. It entails that the movie is seen in juxtaposition to the stories. To this end, the paper demonstrates how the classic worldbuilding elements of setting, fantasy, visuals, and sounds are explored in both film and literature. In accessing the nuances, the study tries to see how regional languages can also produce successful story worlds from regional literature.

**Keywords:** Visual Storytelling, World-building, Folktales, Film.

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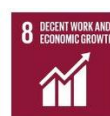
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## Introduction

Visual storytelling is an ancient art. The olden cave paintings, the primitive Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Chinese cultural ideograms are proof that people communicated and entertained themselves with images (McIver, 2016, p.17). As Roland Barthes claims, stories have existed since humanity's first dawn and so has visual arts (McIver, 2016, p.17). The first stories were told with visual means and later turned into oral traditions (Mendoza, 2015, para 01). These tellings have been allies to human lives throughout history and continue to be essential, unavoidable components of humanity. Even though the medium through which such stories are projected and preserved have significantly changed, their intentions have barely altered. Today, more than ever, storytelling has become a significant enterprise. Television, radio, movies, and books fulfil a rudimentary need of the human psyche- to make sense of the world around them. The sensorial experience of sight, which is also epistemologically significant to meaning-making finds newer modes of presentation with the turn of the twentieth century. Through dynamic and moving images, these visual modes of storytelling feed the recipient's mind with an imaginative ideation through which they can interpret the story world according to their experiences, feelings, and thoughts. (Pimenta&Poovaiah, 2010, p. 25-46).

One of the key components of visual storytelling is the world the characters in the story inhabit. This world can be any world and is largely determined by authorial intent. In non-fantastical stories, the recipient and the character often exhibit the same world, grapple with similar realities, and share relativity as a given. However, in works of fantasy, this reality is tested by the creation of a world with its own inherent logic and reason. World-building, therefore, allows the change in the medium. A book can turn into a movie or the contrary. In fact, within the field of visual storytelling, there has been a rise in the study of worldbuilding, primarily because sub-creation studies as an academic discourse have gained momentum over the past few years, particularly due to scholars like Mark Woolf, Jeff Vandermeer, and Marta Boni. These imaginary worlds, which are a component of the process of 'sub-creation,' provide new models of inquiry into the complex processes of production and consumption of visual narratives.

The pronounced shift within Media Studies towards "world," rather than the concerns of plot or character, reflects the increasing rise of trans-medial narratives as a norm. With the growing popularity of technology and renewed interest in vast imaginary worlds that can be produced through technology, narratives "unfold across multiple media platforms" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 334). The upshot of an unprecedented rise of trans medial narrative has also made its presence felt in the Third World and within smaller regional cultures. These cultures, which have a rich panache of stories, mostly in their folktales, have exponential potential to utilise the same in creating successful trans-medial- narratives. One such significant production is the 2015 award-winning Assamese film *Kothanodi*, which has, as its backdrop, four intertwining stories selected meticulously from the pantheon of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's stock literature of folk tales retold.

Assamese folktales are called *xadhu-katha*, which, according to Bezbaruah, are "moral tales or teaching of saints or virtuous people" (Nath, 2011, p 216). The stories were told to excite young minds with a certain imagination and teach them moral lessons. In a way, therefore, these folktales were set within a specific cultural milieu, codified, and limited in space and time. However, as cultures change and time expands, the moral underpinnings of folklore also see similar shifts

despite retaining their didacticism. Over the years, Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *xadhu-kathas* have become indispensable to understanding Assamese cultural ethos at large using different and often novel modes of criticism. In outliving the period where these stories were first created and read, they have grown beyond the needs of the time they were created first. Such a process of 'growth' has happened in the cinematic adaptation of *Kothanodi*. The movie is more than a mere adaptation.

Bhaskar Hazarika, the celebrated filmmaker, utilised four *xadhu-kathas* and recreated them into a movie, which he curated to accommodate the four independent stories seamlessly as part of a whole. This Gestalten pursuit of building a world consistent enough to tell four distinct stories as one composite whole has only been possible with the trans-medial nature of worldbuilding. Thus, what the director did was utilise another medium to add to the canonical material of the stories, expanding the world and what the audience knows about it. *Kothanodi* is a binding of four independent stories, lived disconnectedly. In Bhaskar Hazarika's world, the growth of the stories is both textual and metaphorical. It is, however, worth noting that the critical scholarship in understanding this film and the literature that makes it is scanty.

This paper studies the aspects of worldbuilding in the film and the literature. It entails that the movie is seen in juxtaposition to the stories. Drawing on Darko Suvin's theory of 'Cognitive Estrangement' and Tolkien's theory of 'Secondary Belief,' the paper comments on how the modalities of visualisation and auralisation in the trans-medial narrative is imaginatively explored. By accessing the nuances, the study tries to see how marginal languages can also produce successful story worlds from regional literature. The understanding that such sub-creational worldbuilding comes from a story world that is timely accentuates how, aided by the elements of creation, folk literature can transcend time and act as conduits of cultural ingenuity for years to come.

### **Sub-creation and Theories of 'Belief'**

The worldbuilding process is innately associated with the idea of sub-creation, that is, creating a substitute or secondary world involving new combinations of existing concepts. However, elements from the real world are altered to make the secondary world distinct and definite. The sub-created world becomes an inclusive space where various disparate elements come together to enable the audience to participate in meaning-making because the major factor determining this world's success is the audience's response.

In his monumental work, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the phrase "suspension of disbelief" to refer to the reader's willingness to suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of a narrative provided the author successfully infuses elements of human interest bearing the semblance of truth. It meant a voluntary avoidance of logic in comprehending something that surpassed reality as known and felt for the sake of enjoying it. Tolkien argues against this and states that instead of disbelief, worldbuilding creates a new form of belief that the mind can enter. The 'truths' inside it accords with the laws of that world, and the audience believes in the 'truth' of what they experience. The moment "disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside" (Tolkien, 1983, p. 132). Tolkien calls the belief in the sub-created world, the "Secondary Belief," which, rather than being merely a suspension of

the knowledge as to how that secondary world exists in the real world, imagines what the world would be like if it really existed, thereby correlating with Darko Suvin's theory of "Cognitive Estrangement."

Even though Darko Suvin espoused the "Cognitive Estrangement" theory to explain the disbelief that arose in science fiction, it could be extended to works of other speculative fiction, such as fantasy. In his own words, "Cognitive Estrangement" is the "factual reporting of fictions." The end effect is to show how the readers are estranged from their assumptions about reality and are forced to question them. The story world created for this estrangement to happen is called a "novum" in Suvin's lexicon. This world must have the persuasive possibility of existence and is defined by the real world's inherent logic of existence. Thus, it could be an extension of the real world but must be irrevocably connected to it. The novum of *Kothanodi* is created at the intersection of four fantastical stories. The revealing moment thus created lies in how the moral questions of infanticide, greed, envy, and violence collate using elements of horror and magic and, in doing so, expose man's latent sinister intentions and actions. The suffering characters are distant from the reality of the audience, which is why they can 'estrangle' themselves. But this spell of estrangement lasts only during the movie. Once catharsis occurs, the audience is confronted with their own twisted world of afflictions, a refracted mirror image of what they saw on screen.

### **Visualisation: Setting and Space**

The completeness of a secondary world is determined by the setting of the narrative. In both textual and trans-medial production, the setting provides the framework within which the narrative plays out and drives the plot. The setting of the sub-created world accentuates the presence of a story outside the storyline, which is necessary to make the fictional world distinct. Depending on the demands of the narrative or medium, an imaginary world is not bound by liminality. The world can expand, morph, and transform according to the shift in the narrative. This characteristic of worldbuilding allows both Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Bhaskar Hazarika to recreate the folktales. While the latter benefits from the former, it goes without saying that the settings each creator chose to augment their causes are dissimilar. For Bezbaruah, the story world is limited to the plots of his stories and is a grandmother's tale for her grandchildren. It does not echo the macabre setting the director places the stories into, stripping them of their innocence to drive home rather radical societal causes. As such, while the characters exhibit the same world, they live in different realities. In fact, the trans-medial nature of film allows it to become immersive, unlike folktales, which are expository in nature and therefore informative. *Kothanodi* employs the immersive mode of diegetic and non-diegetic worldbuilding which is explored through the environment and the motivations of the characters, backed by medial cues of auditory and sensory stimulations. This develops the narrative organically.

Worldbuilding, as an activity that propels the narrative, happens in the background. It is the stories that take centre stage in stimulating the audience's experience. While the stories have the autonomy of either being co-dependent or staying independent of one another, each is linked intrinsically to the world built for them to live in. In *Kothanodi*, the interconnectedness of the four tales happens just as the river that tells the tale connects the two sides and the hamlets where these stories take place. In binding the characters through a shared locale, the river witnesses every crisis encountered by the characters. It is neither static nor quiet. The organic ebb and flow

of the river renders its ability to tell a tale believable. What otherwise would be incomplete and inconsistent is made complete and coherent because the sub-created world where the river flows allow the stories to exist. In Bhaskar Hazarika's worldbuilding, the non-human entity becomes the metaphorical narrator as against the standalone stories of Lakshminath Bezbaruah's world.

While the secondary world can never be as complete as the primary world, the illusion of a conclusive sub-created world is desirable. For a world to become complete, it must exist beyond the narrative, with proper infrastructure, ecological systems, societies, and cultures not shown in the story. Similarly, there should be a sense that the world has a history and exists before the narrative unfolds. In *Kothanodi*, the audience is not shown Champawati's wedding with the God disguised as a python, nor do they witness Tejimola reincarnated. Similarly, in the Tawoi's tale, the infanticide of the first two newborns is kept hidden from the audience. These details, which remain out of the narrative frame, make the world plausible, feasible and non-contradictory. "Lacking consistency, a world may begin to appear sloppily constructed, or even random and disconnected" (Wolf, 2012, p. 43).

The issue of consistency is wound up with the question of space the characters exhibit. It is interesting that while the setting of the narrative provides the broader framework and the plausibility of a world with its own simulacra, characters occupying particular spaces have specific lives. They enact according to the space they are part of and respond to the power dynamics accorded to such spaces accordingly. In doing so, they create their own realities in the narrative. Both the film and the folk stories do this exceptionally well. The sub-created world of *Kothanodi* offers the characters a space that is predominantly turbulent, vulnerable, and patriarchal. In the narrative of *Kothanodi* as with the stories that make it, home becomes the most turbulent space. All the characters suffer in their homes because of the presence of powers beyond their control. In the visuals displayed to enhance the liminality that the space at home offers, each story projects how the objects sharing similar space act with one another within the courtyard. Thus, we see Tejimola's cruel and undefeatable stepmother drinking rice beer as a tortured Tejimola mopes the yard. Similarly, in Champawati's story, we see Champawati's stepmother ordering the servants to place her cot outside her newlywed daughter's room, showing how her authority can never be revoked. Again, in Tawoi's tale, Puna snatches away his newborn from his wife's embrace despite her numerous protests, and in Ow-Kuwori's lore, a berated Keteki is thrown out of her house by her husband. In all the scenes, we see the victims succumbing to the authority they share space with. The dynamics of power, operational in the spaces the characters live, is 'shown' rather than 'told,' making the sub-created world of the movie believable with befitting visuals.

Another important element that adds to the consistency of the world is the genealogy of the characters. The setting of a world must establish in clear terms how characters are related to one another, which is not necessarily biological kinship. The characters in *Kothanodi* are significantly co-dependent. The protagonist in each story appears as a minor character in the other stories. Thus, Tejimola is a friend to Champawati's half-sister. Tejimola's father features as the saviour in the *Ou Kuwori's* story and the father who commits infanticide in Tawoi's tale becomes the fisherman whose fish is bought by Champawati's father for his second daughter's wedding. Such co-dependency is absent in Bezbaruah's retellings. Thus, it is the trans-medial nature of worldbuilding and storytelling that bestows the director a creative liberty to make the characters co-dependent.

Despite being true to the Secondary Belief thus created, worldbuilding is essentially imaginative and inventive. As such, the sub-created world must be made easily differentiable from the primary world through fictional rendering of either or all its geography, history, language, custom, culture, and so on. While the river morphs into an omniscient narrator, it is the locales of *Kothanodi* which build the base for the story world. In his search for a geography "untouched by modern lifestyle," Bhaskar Hazarika chose the river island of Majuli. True to his search, elements of the movie are out and out rustic. The idyllic atmosphere is accentuated by the lack of engineering. There are no concrete roads, no electricity or even a motor car. The interplay of human and non-human entities is made believable through a setting like this. "The deepest level is the ontological realm itself, which determines the parameters of a world's existence, that is, the materiality and laws of physics, space, time, and so forth that constitute the world" (Wolf, 2012, p. 36). According to Lubomír Doležel, incompleteness of a secondary world is "a necessary and universal feature," completeness, then "refers to the degree to which the world contains explanations and details covering all the various aspects of its characters' experiences, as well as background details which together suggest a feasible, practical world" (Doležel, 1998, p. 169).

Allied with the elements of geography and history is the element of nature which is "not only the flora and fauna of a world, but also all of its materiality down to even its laws of physics" (Wolf, 2012, p. 155). Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *xadhu-kathas* represent the cultural heritage of Assam. They show Assam as "a land where such stories have existed for centuries; where man, nature and the paranormal are in a relationship and not always of the holy kind" (Ghosh, 2020, para 8). *Kothanodi* exploits this primordality by twisting the relationship shared by man and nature. Nature is not the passive backdrop in the sub-created world, but an active agent. The agency acquired by flora and fauna of the story world make up for the fantasy of the narrative. Fantasy relies on the centrality of the impossible in the setting and is driven by the desire to explore this impossibility by encountering magic, gods, or mythical creatures. The element of fantasy enhances the setting and encourages the audience to immerse themselves in the medium. The fantastic elements of the movie as of the stories are the imageries picked up from the non-human world. There is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation, there is only the simulacra, "set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (Cheyne, 2019, p.109).

In the movie, we have a snake for a groom, an elephant plant for a progeny, and a seedling for a reincarnated daughter. In one instance, the '*xodagor*' or trader informs the miserable outcast, Keteki that he has been to places where he had met people afflicted by peculiar problems. He tells her about a woman who birthed a cat, another who was raised by a falcon and still another who hatched from an egg. Such incidents as natural and seamless parts of the narrative are unbelievable for the audience who know the impossibility of it. But, within a world where all sense of time is primitive, and spirits dwell alongside living beings, they become believable to people whose lives are closely intertwined with the supernatural. The clairvoyance people feel is a part of the pre-modern lifestyle.

Culture is built atop nature by a world's inhabitants and is partly determined by what nature provides, as well as the culture's own history in the world. The cultural realm in a sub-created world consists of all things made by humans but where new objects, artefacts, technologies, customs, institutions, ideas, and so forth appear. In *Kothanodi*, the cultural realm of Assamese

society presented is a stark reminder of several social ills that have plagued humans forever. The movie, by subverting several elements of the stories, toys with the very notion of what is considered sanctimonious. Peopled by lonely women who are either outcasted, tormented, or greedy, the director tries to unsettle the audience, exposing the corruption that any society is a part of. In doing so, the movie no longer remains the awe-inspiring story where fantasy becomes the main element that holds a child's curiosity. Instead, the fantasy becomes very common for the characters, a kind of daily occurrence whether it is infanticide due to a foreboding, marrying a python for riches or birthing an eggplant. They become yardsticks with which society is gauged, unlike Lakshminath Bezbaruah's folktales, the intent of which was merely to lull children to sleep.

Usually, the audience's experiences of secondary worlds are always mediated experiences. "To create their mediated experiences, every medium makes use of one or more basic elements: words, images, sounds, and interactions. As windows on the world, we could also add objects, which tell us something about the world from which they come, through their design, appearance, and behaviour, and even through their mere existence as well" (Wolf, 2012, p 248). As the narrative medium changes, forms of mediation may be lost or gained which can change the material of a sub-created world.

The move from a textual to a visual window means giving a concrete and tangible form to things which are conceived in word imagery. "Images can do many things that mere words cannot; they are sensually richer and more immersive, they can present a great deal of detail or information simultaneously and use complex compositions, and they have a more immediate effect on the audience's emotions, from foregrounded dramatic action to subtle effects involving atmosphere and mood." Visual media is often criticised for stripping the imagination of a reader's mind; however, it merely makes a different use of the mind, especially since the revelation of worlds is concerned. "While the written word may require the reader to imagine how things look and sound, imagery can present scenes of rich detail, visuals which suggest much and present many more gaps where information and explanation need to be filled in, encouraging extrapolation and speculation" (Wolf, 2012, p 253).

Visualisation gives events a certain vantage point which is usually not found in the text, that of a certain situational point of view which can be used to "further comment on the scene, enhance aspects of it, and suggest a certain attitude towards what is portrayed" (Wolf, 2012, p. 253). In a sub-created world that is consistent within itself, multiple viewpoints are necessary to provide the world dimensions which are fully realisable.

### **Auralisation: Sound and Music**

The process of auralisation comes next to visualisation and is one of the most inexpensive elements to work with because of its flexibility and ease of manipulation. Sounds are immersive in nature and can provide an atmosphere where the listener finds themselves emotionally alert. Within a cinematically sub-created world, the presence of sounds can suggest the undertones of large spaces and create an ambience within which to sustain the world. Therefore, in sub-created worlds, "the invented languages, new creatures, vehicles, weaponry, and fantastic locations are often strongly associated with the sounds devised for them" (Wolf, 2012, p 258) and these sounds can be used to bind an imaginary world together.

While it is the viewer's responsibility to reconstruct the visuals into a coherent mental, unified whole, it also depends on how the visuals are presented. As stated earlier, one way to suggest the presence of a world outside the sub-created world is to use images and sounds. According to Noël Burch there are, in fact, two distinct types of cinematic space; the "concrete space" which is visible and inside the frame and the "imaginary" which is outside and felt. In *Kothanodi*, however, this imaginary world is felt only through sounds, as most of the spaces shown are concrete, and the narrative unfolds within these spaces. In this regard, Chion's assessment becomes crucial. He refers to the interior scenes in *The Sacrifice* (Tarkovsky, 1986), where the sound of birds outside are continuously heard despite them never being visualized or otherwise discussed by the characters. These territory sounds "suggest unrepresented exterior spaces while they 'fill in' or enrich the image with hints of a fully realized world" (Chion, 1994, p124).

As an active element of worldbuilding, auralisation in transmedia involves turning words or imagery into sounds, translating story material into voices, sound effects, music, and ambience. The absence of sound in the textual narratives suggest that the ideas are incomplete for the readers. They fail to imagine the characters as real. Instead, they become caricatures of their moralities or lack thereof. The mood, atmosphere, feel, and emotion can vary depending upon the type, quality, and perspective of the sounds utilised and thereby aid orientation and navigation in the sub-created world. Sound can introduce things at a distance before they are seen, lure a character to move in or warn them to move against a particular direction.

The movie *Kothanodi* has assailed in employing forebodings by exploiting the aural qualities of uncanny narratives. These intersecting stories, which are standalone in Lakshminath Bezbaruah's oeuvre, come together to build one framework of narrative and are, quite naturally, part of a tale told by the river. The diegetic sound that is overheard every time the shot cuts back to the river is a ubiquitous presence. Furthermore, the various "disembodied voices" allied with the long shot are often utilised in a fantastical setting to align with the "supernatural or otherworldly, from the voice of god to ghostly hauntings" (Chion, 1999, p. 23-26). In the movie, these are overheard in the fragmented, quite uncanny sounds of the *dheki* and the *khul taal*. The first shot, where the river is shown flowing quietly, has, as its background score, a handful of ominous vocals. Doors creaking and the constant thumping of the *dheki* remind of the foreboding that happens later, especially in the two stories that end tragically.

In most of these scenes, the visuals are not duty-bound to show what the soundtrack says, and vice versa. These are often nondiegetic sounds which emerge from an uncertain place, often beyond the film world that exists alongside it. Nondiegetic sounds, then, are not merely "off" (that is, not visualized) but "over," at a distance from the film's world, yet seemingly encompass it. In many cases, nondiegetic sound bears no "existential" relation to the story world, belonging instead to the film's "discourse." Yet, in others, it suggests a realm, a time, or a place that is affiliated with but distinct from the world onscreen. Sound maintains a privileged connection to these indeterminate spaces, often moving subtly into and out of the diegesis, passing between realms. "It gets disconcertingly haunting with the filming of a chain of signifiers evoking mystery, disbelief, and fear" (Ramnath, 2015, p. *Trending*). Apart from the *dheki* and doors creaking, another instance of nondiegetic sound in the film comes whenever Puna, following his Tawoi's advice buries his newborn babies. "The visuals on screen are matched by eerie music and wailing sounds" (Hussain, 2022, p. 4). It is indeed the credit of the music director Amarnath Hazarika, who



“has successfully woven the folk music from the collection of songs by Padma Shri Birendranath Datta and Ramen Choudhury into the fabric of *Kothanodi*, and the result is a horror folk narrative that grows more intense with sound effects” (Hussain, 2022, p. 6).

## Conclusion

With the world moving incessantly towards trans-medial ways of storytelling where technologies change overnight, world-building is a crucial way to understand pop culture and the broad prospects of storytelling as it serves the premises on which narratives are compellingly built. Well-developed worlds draw audiences into the story, allowing them to immerse themselves in a rich and vivid fictional realm. As Chatman (1978) describes, narratives, whether in a book or in a film, are all organic entities. It makes them adaptable to different media. Each format can be transcreated in the receiver’s mind in different ways. How an audience first enters an imaginary world and the sequence in which the various works making it up are experienced can greatly shape the audience’s experience of the world. While in the past, worlds began in one medium and, if they found success there, made their way into other media, worlds have recently become more trans-medial from their very inception. Regional literature, therefore, has much to offer in world-building, mostly with their folk tales and mythical stories, which largely subvert and question dominant narratives. *Kothanodi* or Bezbaruah’s stories are two mere instances. The repertoire of regional literature can utilise all elements of world-building to create anything like a Tolkienian universe. It is, however, dependent on the audience’s familiarity with the stories in their initial form and acceptability of these very stories’ trans-mediality that would be decisive in sub-creating story worlds over time and platforms.

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