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## All That Breathes

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## All That Breathes

### Abstract

This is a film review of *All That Breathes* (2022), directed by Shaunak Sen.

### Keywords

Pollution, New Delhi, India, Conservation, Birds

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### Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



**All That Breathes (2022), dir. Shaunak Sen**

Environmental upheaval is certainly one of the independent-film themes du jour, and for very good reason. When the air of a city like New Delhi can reach the equivalent of smoking 40-50 cigarettes a day, anxiety is warranted—and so, too, activism. Shaunak Sen’s documentary *All that Breathes* engages both but with a poetic lyricism that prevents the film from ever bordering on screed.

At its center are Saud and Nadeem, two Muslim brothers who, aided by their cousin Salik, tend to the city’s injured kites. These are medium-sized raptors that are falling—quite literally—out of the sky because of the clotted toxicity of Delhi’s air. While nursing birds of prey may harken back to the Muslim tradition of *sawab* (religious credit through feeding kites), the brothers go about their business in a manner far more scientifically and ecologically minded. If the city is the stomach, as one of them imparts, these kites are the microbiome of its gut.

Indeed, the notion of urban ecology as *not* exclusive to humans is imparted from the very opening shot of the film. A long take pans across the smallest organisms (those fending in the puddles and mud of the city—insects, plants, rodents). Only then does Sen widen out to the vaster ecology promulgated by city living (high rises, motor traffic, and human waste—sometimes mounds of it that can rise and undulate like sordid sand dunes). *All that Breathes* will never let up on that posthuman metaphor either. All of Delhi's species have had to adapt to humankind's altering of the habitat, after all. So, kites now glide above Delhi's landfill searching out edible waste and use cigarette butts as a parasite repellent. Songbirds sing at a higher pitch now to outrange the human traffic; and humans, too, have had to reconfigure their labors, such as by pausing to breathe in steam from boiling water to mitigate the effect of the pollutants on their throats.

As for our introduction to the injured birds that are brought to the clinic: that comes by way of boxes (on top of boxes) that Salik carries into the clinic's cramped basement quarters—with one box startlingly oscillating on its own and then falling to the floor. The tenderness and “kite's eye” with which Sen captures the goings-on in that claustrophobic space are fully matched by the manner in which the family members tend to their avian patients. Delicately they prod the birds for injuries, all the while discussing the news of the day. What will happen to the birds if there's a nuclear war, they wonder, for instance—as a speakerphone from the street pleads for everyone to remain orderly and not destroy others' property.

Such is the way that the healing of birds is shadowed by the civic antagonism currently unfurling in Delhi. Appeals from the street that India's Constitution be saved alert us to the fears in this Muslim neighborhood, ones born of the BJP government's recently

introduced policies regarding persecuted refugees from neighboring states (all but Muslims are allowed). Muslims in India, meanwhile, are being told that they may now have to prove their citizenship to their homeland.

By the end of the film, Delhi *will* ideologically combust, with the brothers fearful for what their future holds. “Religious riots aren’t a new thing,” Saud will gloomily reveal, but this time feels different, streaked as it is with a “widespread disgust,” including accusations of Muslims lacking hygiene—with the film’s visuals giving us a tense series of close-ups of one kite’s beaked face, another’s sharp claw. The complexity of the situation is only underscored in our learning how the brothers got into the profession in the first place. Bird hospitals in India are conventionally the purview of Jains, so when the brothers, as children, took their first injured kite to a clinic, the bird was refused—for being *non-vegetarian*.

Perhaps it’s for this reason that Sen shoots his natural world with a reverence often superseded by a deception: A caterpillar’s emergence from what we think is a pond turns out to be a city puddle—which we only realize when a jumbo jet reflectively passes overhead. A magical nighttime scene of natural preserve-like surroundings (stream, mossy hues, croaking toad) shows itself in daytime to comprise discarded bags, including one advertising Twitter. And what might initially turn some viewers’ stomachs—the grinding of meat to feed the kites—is suddenly differently invested when the machine dies and the buzz of flies precipitously grows. And what is there to say about a waterfowl floating down a stream—in a chemically induced bubble bath? But the ugly exoticism of such sights is mitigated by quotidian concerns of, say, raising funding for the clinic, or dealing with the rains that continuously wash out the street.

If the brothers are doing their small part to address Delhi's "gaping wound," their dedication to the birds does not always go unchallenged. When one of their wives complains about the poor quality of the air that day and is told that that is why so many kites are falling out of the sky, she responds that her concern isn't apropos the birds but their *son*. Yes, these scientifically and philosophically minded brothers may aver that "One shouldn't differentiate between all that breathes"; but it takes a very special mindset (and set of claws, so to speak) to see such an axiom turned into practice. Which is why, in the end, we cannot but applaud them for their quiet, disciplined efforts and for staying the course despite the unceasing challenges they face.