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## Androgagy

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## Androgagy

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Androgagy* (2023) directed by Wregas Bhanuteja.

### Keywords

Social Media, Cancellation

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### Author Notes

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***Androgagy* (2023), dir. Wregas Bhanuteja**

Recalling Foucault's insights about the rise of the surveillance state, *Androgagy* is a cautionary tale about the modern panopticon. In an age of smartphones and social media, we are subject to constant surveillance: our public appearances and private moments are never truly safe from scrutiny, as there is always the threat that someone could be recording us. However carefully we may curate our public persona and our online presence, we too are one viral video away from becoming the internet's character of the day. Social media amplifies our offhand remarks and our social faux pas; it decontextualizes our disputes and broadcasts them as entertainment for an audience of anonymous strangers. Recalling many recent cancellations in the West, *Androgagy* explores the human cost of internet infamy and raises important questions about the importance of truth in a postmodern world.

The film follows Prani, a popular teacher, who is well respected within her local community. Her pedagogy centers around creative but unorthodox punishments that encourage her students to reflect on the consequences of their actions. Her teaching has seen great results and

many of her former students credit her ‘reflections’ as a turning point in their lives. Prani is now up for a well-deserved promotion to vice principal and seems to be a shoo-in for the position. The promotion could not come fast enough, as Prani’s family has fallen on financial hard times. Her hopes will soon be dashed, however, when Prani unwittingly becomes the subject of a viral video.

While waiting in line at a local vendor’s food stall, Prani becomes incensed by the number of customers trying to jump the queue. Driven by her strong moral convictions, Prani speaks out against another customer and scolds him for his lack of patience. The confrontation becomes heated and attracts spectators who begin to film Prani on their smartphones. Frustrated and defeated, Prani shouts at the customer and storms off before completing her purchase. By all accounts, it is an unremarkable conflict between ordinary people. Unfortunately for Prani, this incident will take on a life of its own, become a cultural touchstone, and ultimately call into question her suitability as an educator.

When someone uploads a misleading video of the incident to social media which seems to depict Prani cursing the elderly food vendor, she feels the need to set the record straight. While her identity has not yet been released to the netizens, people who know Prani personally have recognized her in the video. Her internet savvy son advises her to lay low: if she can be patient and wait it out, interest in the video will eventually peter out and the internet will move on to the next big thing. Fearing that the video will hurt her chances for promotion, Prani ignores his advice and tries to get ahead of the scandal. Trying to model moral responsibility for her students, Prani identifies herself as the woman in the video and attempts to explain her actions. Her plan backfires terribly. As if pouring fuel on the fire, Prani’s admission only stimulates new interest in the video. Prani is now the subject of a viral video, and she soon becomes a meme. At one point, Prani arrives

at her jump rope practice, only to find that her teammates have created a routine to a remix of the video. No matter how hard she tries, Prani cannot escape her newfound virality.

At times it is painful to watch, as Prani's repeated attempts to clear her name only serve to further entrench her guilt for the netizens. Initially, many people from Prani's local community came forward to support her. Former students issue personal statements that vouched for Prani's character and pedagogy, but these in turn only provided the netizens with further information about Prani that they could weaponize against her. The "truth," at least in an absolute sense, matters little in a social media ecosystem governed by clicks and traffic. Her quest to set the record straight was doomed from the start, for there is no master narrative on the internet, only relative truths and subjective impressions. Influencers and media publications release take after take demonizing Prani, casting suspicion on those who support her. Gradually, Prani's supporters abandon her, fearing that their reputations will suffer from association with her. Their fears are not totally misplaced. Like a social contagion, Prani's cancellation threatens a loss of social and economic capital for her family and friends. Both of Prani's children lose their livelihood as a direct result of the controversy, while her most steadfast student supporter is subjected to intense scrutiny.

Everyone in the school system acknowledges that Prani is a valued educator, yet she cannot be promoted so long as the video looms over her head. The public image of the school depends on the resolution of this conflict, but by now Prani realizes that the conflict cannot be resolved by traditional means. Rather than sacrifice her former student's reputation and continue the cycle of scrutiny and disinformation, she withdraws. It's a great loss for the school and for the students who would be positively impacted by Prani's influence.

In many ways, this is a film about fear. It taps into our fears of surveillance and loss of privacy, fears that are exacerbated by both the ubiquity of recording devices and the unprecedented

permanency of the internet archive. Anything we say or do, online or offline, may eventually be used against us. Even things we didn't do might come back to haunt us, if we are unlucky enough to attract the attention of the netizens. In 2023, we live in a panopticon of our design, constantly policing each other's social transgressions, real or perceived, with little concern for real people behind the screen. All too often, we blithely dismiss the human suffering of internet cancellation. *Androgagy* should give us pause. Why should we allow the narratives of strangers to overwrite our own experiences of our friends and mentors? Why should we allow anonymous users to arbitrate local conflicts and inflict offline consequences on ordinary people? What hope is there for people like Prani in the internet age? The conclusion of the film suggests that the best we can do is to log off and unplug. As we become increasingly dependent on the internet in our everyday lives, we would do well to heed the film's caution and reconsider the weight we give to online interactions and our online presence.