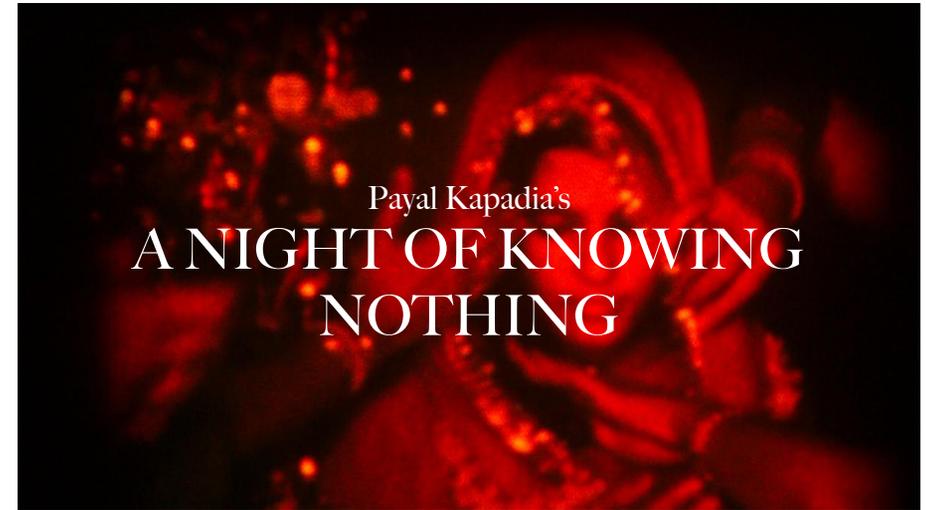


equally a paean to the poignant idealism of young adulthood, she incorporates an array of image textures, blending photochemical film with slide shows of stills, drawings, and multiple video formats, including CCTV and mobile phone footage. The motivations and means of image-making are ceaselessly foregrounded. Sound and picture fall in and out of synchronization, bringing different registers of sensation into collision; boisterous protest images, for instance, are frequently accompanied by nothing more than a whispering wind. More than simply underlining the artifice of construction, the film's form aesthetically manifests what is perhaps its central theme: the problem of cohesion, what binds people and what pulls them apart. *A Night of Knowing Nothing* dwells in the ecstasy and difficulty of sharing space and time with others, be it a romantic couple, a student cohort, or a national population; it gestures to how challenging it can be to link disparate scales and registers of experience into something that gels. It is appropriate, then, that Kapadia invents a form so heterogeneous and conflictual, riven to the core, held together in a precarious weave that is always threatening to unravel—but held together nonetheless. She skilfully choreographs multiple disjunctions, mining them for their energetic friction even as they summon a melancholic sense of disintegration and loss.

Although Kapadia offers some exposition of the political context, viewers seeking an in-depth explanation of the situation would be better off watching Anand Patwardhan's *Reason* (2018). This four-hour chronicle of roughly the same period and some of the same events circulated internationally at festivals but was also released without English subtitles as eight chapters on YouTube, functioning like a series of counter-information newsreels for Hindi-speaking audiences. *A Night of Knowing Nothing* takes a very different approach, prizing atmosphere and emotion over the conveyance of information, plunging into the tender uncertainty of being young, true to the state of incomprehension captured in its title. Some might find it vague or sentimental. But there is also a humility in Kapadia's prioritization of feeling: by embracing an unwieldy impressionism, she depicts a specific period in time at a grand scale without presuming that it is possible to map all its complications in rigorous detail or provide solutions to its strife.

In *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru asks: "The discovery of India—what have I discovered? It was presumptuous of me to imagine that I could unveil her and find out what she is today and what she was in the long past. Today she is four hundred million separate individual men and women, each differing from the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling." *A Night of Knowing Nothing* inhabits one such private universe, reaching outwards from within it to grasp at something larger, aware of the fact that the night is a little like the present. It inhabits: a terrifying yet seductive time when it can be hard to know what is in front of you. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Through fictional love letters found in a cupboard at the Film and Television Institute of India, we meet L, a film student writing to her estranged lover while he is away. Gradually we're immersed in the drastic changes taking place at the school and in the lives of young people across the country as they take to the streets to protest widespread discrimination.

In her debut film, Payal Kapadia deftly merges reality with fiction, weaving together archival footage with student protest videos to create a vital tapestry of the personal and the political. With its dreamlike editing rhythms and a revelatory use of sound, *A Night of Knowing Nothing*—which won the best documentary prize at last year's Cannes Film Festival—is both an essential document of contemporary India and a nostalgic look at youth fighting the injustice of their time.

97 min. | India/France | 2021

A Night of Knowing Nothing by Erika Balsom

The following article was originally published by Cinema Scope 89, Winter 2022

The sleep of reason produces monsters—or so said Francisco Goya, who used the phrase as the title of an aquatint published in 1799. The words appear as if etched into the side of a desk, atop of which a male figure slumps in slumber. From behind him, the menace comes: bats, owls, and cats emerge from the darkness with petrifying gazes, crowding around the man. Intended as the frontispiece to a satirical series devoted to “the multitude of follies and blunders common in every civil society,” the print takes nocturnal somnolence as a damning political allegory.

Is this night, full of threat and incomprehension, the night of Payal Kapadia's penumbral first feature? It might be. Set over five years, from 2015 to 2020, *A Night of Knowing Nothing* approaches real events through a fictional character identified only as L., a female student at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune, the school Kapadia herself attended. As this sombre film recounts, night is also when, in 2015, the police laid siege to the FTII campus, arresting striking students; it is when they stormed universities elsewhere in India in subsequent years, wielding truncheons and lobbing tear gas canisters at young people deemed “anti-national” for their opposition to Hindutva. More figuratively, it is the darkness enveloping a country that, like so many others, has seen a surge of far-right extremism in recent years, sanctioned by the rule of a leader who has eroded democratic freedoms and fuelled sectarian hatred.

And yet for Kapadia, night is also the enchanted hour when the film students dance

together with gorgeous abandon in front of an outdoor projection, when they dream and fall in love and work together, when the leafy campus they call home is serenely still. It is when crowds gathered in Delhi in March 2016 to listen to Kanhaiya Kumar, the Jawaharlal Nehru University student union president, just released on bail after his arrest for sedition one month before. The assembly cheers and chants in defiance of nationalist fundamentalism, agitating for a different, better future. How can the night hold so much violence and so much beauty at once? How can this film?

A Night of Knowing Nothing adopts a fictional conceit to historicize the reality of a tumultuous present. At the start, a text explains that a box was found inside a FTII dorm room containing newspaper cuttings, dried flowers, memory cards, and letters written by L. When this box was recovered and by whom is never revealed, subtly positioning the film as a retrospective dispatch from the future, as if someone is rummaging through an archive of a time that has ceased to be our own. This framing device is not unlike the one Brett Story uses in *The Hottest August* (2018). But whereas Story's narrator adopts the detachment of the researcher, citing statistics and quoting from literature as she looks back at the New York City of August 2017, Kapadia uses L.'s letters to anchor her film in the emotional life of an invented individual. Read in voiceover and appearing as handwritten text on screen, these missives initially unfold a story of heartbreak: they are addressed to a boyfriend whose parents have taken him out of school to put an end to his relationship with L. because she belongs to a lower caste than he. Details of this forbidden love unfold over disarmingly dreamy glimpses of the school and old home movies, cloaked in the grainy patina of pastness and bearing no obvious connection to the narration. Animated by the spirit of youthful camaraderie as glimpsed from a later, perhaps wistful moment, the film seems to float out of time and through the haze of bygone years—at least in between those instances when the appearance of a laptop or mobile phone pins it down firmly in the late 2010s.

Before long, the problems of the wider world puncture the idyll of the school, beginning with the students' strike against the government's appointment of Gajendra Chauhan, an actor and BJP party member, as chairman. “Eisenstein, Pudovkin, we will fight, we will win!” they cry. As L.'s narration continues, the film's scope cracks open, as if under pressure from the weight of actuality. L., and the film in turn, become less preoccupied with romance and more attentive to the protests taking place on Indian campuses and the horrors that fill the newspapers: honour killings, cow vigilantes, the Citizenship Amendment Act. The clipping that haunts her most concerns the suicide of 26-year-old Rohith Vemula, a PhD student suspended from Hyderabad Central University after complaints were lodged against him by a right-wing student group, owing to Vemula's advocacy for the rights of Dalits. Time passes; Diwali comes and goes without bringing the triumph of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, that the festival symbolizes; things only seem to get worse.

Kapadia is bold in striking a balance between intimate fabulation and the documentation of these expansive events, always retaining a hold on the former even as her film tilts increasingly towards the latter. To craft a portrait of a nation in crisis that is