

Deeper into the black mirror

Vikramaditya Motwane and Ananya Panday discuss their upcoming film CTRL, which explores the increasingly probable perils of a tech takeover

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HE'S one of my favourite filmmakers," insists Ananya Panday, alluding to director Vikramaditya Motwane when we ask her about what drew her to CTRL, their new film that will premiere on Netflix on October 4. Panday counts Jubilee, Motwane's tribute to the Hindi film industry of the 1940s and 1950s, the self-reflexive AK vs AK and Udaan among her favourites. "Udaan is my mom's [Bhavana Pandey's] favourite film and we used to watch it a lot when I was growing up. I must have seen it close to 20 times with her."

The other reason for being part of CTRL was Screenlife, a form of visual storytelling in which events are shown entirely on a computer, tablet or smartphone screen. "Eighty-ninety per cent of the story [of CTRL] takes place on a computer screen and all the storytelling is through mediums that we use on our computers, like searches, video calls or Instagram—things we spend a lot of our time on," Motwane shares.

Though films such as Her and Terminator have explored human dependency on and relinquishing of control to technology and influenced science fiction culture, the Screenlife format influenced Motwane specifically as it is "essentially [about] peeping into somebody's life". The offer, he says, came from Timur Bekmambetov, the Russian-Kazakh director, producer, screenwriter



There was also a necessity once upon a time to go to a movie theatre to catch something and that necessity is gone, which is not always good. I think it has affected indie films more than it's affected mainstream movies because the urgency of going to watch a movie in the theatre is gone. Streaming services are convenient, but is it really the best thing for the movies?

Vikramaditya Motwane

and tech entrepreneur who pioneered Screenlife films such as Unfriended (2015), Searching (2018), Profile (2018) and Missing (2023).

"Everyone on set was discovering how to shoot this film because we didn't really have a template to follow. Everyone was making mistakes together and learning together," Panday says, recalling a fluid and immersive experience where Motwane would let the takes run on for long. "I also felt very responsible because there were parts where the camera was in my hand and I was shooting. There were many things I had to figure out, but it was a nice, happy and safe environment."

Panday plays Nella Awasthi, a social media influencer from Delhi who runs the channel NJOY with her boyfriend Joe. Reluctant to pursue the path her parents laid out for her, Nella moves to Mumbai and forms a professional and personal relationship with Joe, both of which crumble with adultery. "It was interesting to see how a person would deal with a situation differently as a result of being in the spotlight [as an influencer] with different factors addressing them," Panday observes.

The actor may be a part of the social media generation but is not an influencer, and hence, had to immerse herself into the life of a vlogger and influencer to understand the implications of the job, its stakes and demands. "As

an actor, the content I put out on my Instagram is related to movies, personal life or brands. I don't know what it's like if that were my job and if that was the way I was making money. Then the stakes would be [higher]. Understanding that part of it was prep," she shares.

Panday's character lives a life, specifically a romantic life, in front of millions of people. Kho Gaye Hum Kahan (2023) too saw her as part of a group of characters grappling with the ironies of the digital age where private lives are lived very publicly. "I think my opinion on [the private-public paradox] is constantly evolving," says the 25-year-old. "I don't have any hard and fast rule. Sometimes I feel like protecting things and keeping things private because I feel so much of my life is any way out there. If there's something that I can keep for myself, then I would love to do that, but I'm also not ashamed of any-

Motwane's interest lay in exploring the workings of AI and social media through the life of someone brought up on the internet, from the perspective of "what I think is a love story". He believes that diversification of content has primed the audience for high concept films, content that is more cerebral, and yet fun and accessible

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Ananya Panday

For both filmmaker Vikramaditya Motwane and actress Ananya Panday, one of the most exciting things about their film CTRL was its Screenlife format, a form of visual storytelling in which events are shown entirely on a computer, tablet or smartphone screen. PIC/SHADAB KHAN

thing or trying to hide anything. I understand that it's a part and parcel of our job. There will be interest from people because we are public figures and I'm also interested in knowing about my favourite actors, what they do, what's in their bag, what their house looks like, etc. So I don't blame other people [for being interested], but if I can protect things, I do try to."

Motwane's interest lay in exploring the workings of AI and social media through the life of someone brought up on the internet, from the perspective of "what I think is a love story". He believes that diversification of content on streaming platforms has primed the audience for high concept films, content that is more cerebral and challenging, and yet fun and accessible. "When you go to any service now, there's everything on offer—comedy, drama, crime, true crime, and that's what's also made the audience more open, learned and experienced about things to watch."

For creators, streaming services mean that one doesn't have to stick to a one-size-fits-all projects. "Ten or 15 years ago, cinema meant you had to make a movie of a certain length for an audience that's going to be a kind of mass-y. Old, young, rich, poor—all were going to come and watch your film together... [But] there was also a necessity, once upon a time, to go to a movie theatre to catch something [niche] and that necessity is gone, which is not always good. It's affected indie films more than it's affected mainstream movies because the urgency of going to watch a movie in the theatre is gone. Streaming services are convenient, but is it really the best thing for the movies?"



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