Hindi Cinema as a Challenge to Film Theory and Criticism

It is commonplace to remark that India has the largest film industry anywhere, producing “unquestionably the most-seen movies in the world” (Kabir 2001: 1). Of the many languages in which Indian movies are made, films in Hindi (or Urdu) are the most prominent globally, and they comprise the most obviously “national” cinema (Ganti 2004: 12). Indian films in general, and Hindi films in particular, have had international success for decades (Desai 2004: 40). They constitute perhaps the only national cinema that can come close to rivaling the U.S. film industry. This parallel with Hollywood has led to the popular name for the Hindi film industry, “Bollywood.” The name refers particularly to the entertainment-oriented films from the 1960s on, and of these especially the films produced since the early 1990s in the period of economic neoliberalism and globalization.

The size and international presence of Hindi cinema make it an obvious topic for research by film scholars. Yet it has only recently begun to attract extensive theoretical and critical attention. Most of this attention has drawn on psychoanalytic and culturalist models but some has taken up newer, cognitive approaches. For writers of both orientations, one recurring theme has been the degree to which Hindi film is (or is not) compatible with ideas and practices first formulated on the basis of Western, particularly American cinema. In this way, as Hans Robert Jauss ([1970] 1982) might have put it, Hindi cinema constitutes a challenge to mainstream film theory and criticism.

The purpose of this special issue of Projections is to represent the current state of the field in Hindi cinema study and to extend the discussion in ways that contribute to our understanding of film in general and Hindi cinema—including individual films—in particular.

The first article, by Sara Dickey, presents an overview of important trends in criticism of popular Hindi cinema. Dickey summarizes work that derives largely from the perspective of dominant post-structuralist versions of cul-
tural studies. This work stresses the active appropriation of films by audiences and argues that films are always open to “resistant” readings that pit them against patriarchy, racism, and other forms of oppression. Dickey rightly stresses this idea as it has become almost a commonplace in literary and film theory. It is less often remarked that openness to active appropriation cuts in both directions. If every film is available for a progressive (e.g., anti-racist) appropriation, then every film is open to a reactionary (e.g., racist) appropriation as well. Moreover, this leaves aside the question of whether some appropriations are more likely than others (e.g., in a patriarchal society, will audience members tend to interpret ambiguities in ways consistent with patriarchal ideology?). It also ignores the issue of whether some interpretations are better supported than others.

One common, dismissive claim about Hindi cinema is that it is too imbued with fantasy, lacking realism. Dickey argues that the terms of this binary opposition are unstable and that fantasy is always bound up with realism. Dickey also takes up a number of common themes in treatments of Hindi cinema—prominently, the opposition between tradition and modernity and the place of enjoyment or pleasure.

The next article, by Richard Allen and Ira Bhaskar, discusses Kamal Amrohi’s 1971 *Pakeezah*. Through detailed examination of the story and technique of this film, Allen and Bhaskar explore several of the topics addressed by Dickey. Specifically, they reconsider the tradition/modernity theme under the more precise categories of feudalism and modernity. They also address how fantasy is portrayed within the film and how it is explicitly thematized, ultimately relating the film to a “dreamscape of desire.”

While Allen and Bhaskar take up a largely psychoanalytic and cultural studies model, Hannah Birr turns to cognitive science in her discussion of Farah Khan’s 2007 *Om Shanti Om*. The author is specifically interested in how a film can be accepted and enjoyed when transplanted to a different culture. Like Dickey, Birr treats the issue of realism, but in her analysis, some putative “faults” of Hindi cinema are just what give it cross-cultural appeal. Moreover, Birr stresses the activity of the audience, extending it from merely cerebral construction or resistant interpretation to bodily engagement—through, for example, rhythmic movement. Birr’s emphasis is on a particular segment of audience—fans. For a fan group, the apparent idiosyncrasies of a body of films are the markers of its distinctiveness and, as such, what makes it an object of fascination.

Alexandra Schneider’s article focuses on Sooraj Barjatya’s 1994 *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . .!* Specifically, Schneider considers how common conceptions of “realism” may simply derive from conventions of American cinema. Schneider lists some conventions that she takes to characterize American versus popular Hindi narrative. (Her list could give rise to productive debate about whether
these traditions do in fact differ in all these ways.) She then considers Ed Tan’s (1996) influential cognitive account of narrative and emotional structure in cinema. She argues that this account is only partially adequate for treating Hindi films. She suggests that one possible response is to draw on classical Indian rasa theory, which treats empathic, aesthetic emotion. One of Schneider’s aims is to explore the possibility of integrating cognitive and cultural accounts of narrative and emotion.

In the next article, Patrick Hogan takes up the relation between cognition and culture in greater detail. Specifically, Hogan considers Bimal Roy’s 1959 *Sujata*. The film is clearly designed to cultivate an opposition to practices of Untouchability. Hogan argues that it achieves this end in part by appealing to emotional and perceptual capacities and propensities that are universal. But, at the same time, it draws on philosophical principles of Vedāntism to suggest a critique of caste that is internal to the traditions of Hindu ethical and religious thought.

In his analysis, Hogan points toward some of the diversity within Indian cultural traditions. This suggests the problems with insisting on oppositions between “national” traditions, for the Indian tradition includes egalitarian as well as hierarchal strands, parallel to those found in the West. Such an analysis also questions the usefulness of the modernity/tradition division, given the degree to which both are highly internally diverse. Many people’s unreflective inclination is to view caste practices as “traditional” and anti-caste practices as “modern.” But anti-caste ideas and practices are “traditional” too, as Jainism and Buddhism testify. Moreover, the modern period has clearly involved a wide range of legal procedures segregating and disprivileging large groups of people in a manner parallel with that of caste. It seems that “tradition” and “modernity” do not rigorously differentiate sets of practices and attitudes. Rather, they serve to make rhetorical appeals to different audiences.

Roy made socially conscious films before Indian cinema developed a sharp split between popular and alternative or “parallel” cinema. So far all the articles in this issue focus on popular cinema. The last two articles turn to alternative works, films with social and/or philosophical agendas that arguably supersede the goal of entertainment.

Frederick Aldama considers Mira Nair’s 1988 *Salaam Bombay!* Aldama is concerned with the reality that gives meaning to the advocacy of realism—in this case, the reality of actual slum conditions in a capitalist system. Debates over realism often seem to ignore the question of whether a film impacts common audience beliefs about consequential matters in the real world. To take an example not discussed by Aldama, one might wonder whether the treatment of torture in many Hindi (as well as US) films has not contributed to false beliefs about torture and thus the acceptance of torture. Though there are exceptions (such as Negesh Kukunoor’s 2003 *3 Deewarein*), many
films seem to suggest that torture produces life-saving, true testimony or, at least, that its purpose is to produce such testimony. (In fact, the purpose of torture is commonly a matter “not [of] obtaining information but producing propaganda” [Schell 2009: 17].) Perhaps it makes sense to criticize both Hollywood and Bollywood for a lack of realism in these respects. In other words, perhaps a concern for realism is not always a matter of ethnocentric prejudice.

Aldama’s main focus, however, is not the topic of realism. It is, rather, emotion and the activity of the audience. Recalling Birr’s treatment of bodily mirroring, Aldama first examines the subtle ways Nair uses facial expression and bodily posture. He is particularly interested in the stylistic means by which she draws our attention to expression and posture through framing and other devices. Aldama’s wide-ranging international film literacy leads him to recognize that the properties he is exploring are not peculiar to Hindi cinema, but are rather widespread. Aldama indicates that one important aspect of Nair’s film is that it keeps the viewer “at arm’s length” from the events of the film, thereby preventing sentimentality.

In the final article, Lalita Pandit Hogan takes up a similar idea in discussing M.F. Husain’s 2004 *Meenaxi*, Ketan Mehta’s 1985 *Mirch Masala*, and an Iranian film, Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s 1996 *Gabbeh*. Hogan examines how these films provoke emotions, particularly in relation to social, political, and philosophical concerns. But she stresses that, at the same time, these films engage in a Brechtian “alienation” of the viewer. Thus, rather than fostering sentimentality about the poor and the deprived, these films provoke thought, in part through emotion. The most striking instance of this is the conclusion of *Mirch Masala*. In a freeze frame, the young heroine, representing the workers at a spice factory, holds up a sickle—a tool, a weapon, and a symbol. She is poised to strike a representative of the owning classes, a man who has just tried, unsuccessfully, to rape her.

Needless to say, these articles represent only a small fraction of the ways one may approach Hindi cinema. However, they are diverse in the psychological theories they adopt, their views of cultural difference, their political commitments, their ideas about tradition and modernity, and even in their opinion of whether that division is meaningful. We hope this diversity enhances our understanding of individual films, fosters an increased appreciation of the richness of Hindi cinema, and suggests some potentially consequential implications of Hindi cinema for the further development of film theory and criticism.

Patrick Colm Hogan
Notes

1 From a linguistic perspective, Hindi and Urdu are the same language. Their spoken forms are mutually comprehensible, differing in some vocabulary preferences and in script.

2 Vedāntism is a body of philosophical thought derived from the Upaniṣads, ancient Hindu sacred texts.

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References


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