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BEYOND INDIAN CINEMA'S CENTENARY

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Size Zero Begums and *Dirty Pictures*: The Contemporary Female Star in Bollywood

by Tupur Chatterjee

The privatization of the Indian economy in 1991 and the introduction of the multiplex to India in 1997 resulted in unprecedented changes in the structure and content of Bombay cinema in both its national imagination and its transnational travels (Ganti 2012, Mitra, 2012, Gopal 2011, Rai, 2009). Stars have occupied a crucial role in shaping this cinema from its inception, serving as markers of identity, anxiety, pleasure, and fantasy for audiences both at home and in the diaspora. However, studies on stardom in Bombay cinema[1] have suffered from a surprising paucity of analysis. The female star has especially been a subject of immense contention.

This paper analyzes contemporary female stardom in India through a close discursive analysis of the public personas of Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan, and the politics surrounding their bodies. The dialogue around the body of the female star and her place in the national (male) imagination has dominated notions of their persona. Female stars have also served as important lenses to gain insights into the discourses surrounding the 'ownership' of and 'accessibility' to their bodies in the public imagination. Placing these discourses within the altered fabric of the Indian media landscape after globalization, this paper studies how these changes have affected female stardom in India as articulated in the star studies of these two actresses. In what ways have they negotiated their respective star personas to align with the image of the 'modern Indian

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[1] I use the term 'Bombay cinema' to denote the Hindi film industry located in Mumbai, India. India has several other film industries that operate out of other cities like Hyderabad, Chennai, and Calcutta.

woman'?[2] How far does this persona speak to that of the idealistic 'moral', 'cultured', 'self-sacrificing' 'Indian woman' who has dominated commercial Hindi filmic imagination since the 1950s? To what extent have Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan redefined or confused norms of female sexuality? What distinguishes their star texts from those of their predecessors? I argue for a new and reformed articulation of the Bollywood[3] female star that effectively balances her media-constructed images of 'private' and 'public' selves with more autonomy than we have seen feasible so far.

Neepa Majumdar (2001) suggests that traditionally the Indian woman conceived as the repository of convention, home, and 'authentic values' of the pure nation was not welcome in the public domain of cinema, because "the actual enunciation of a discourse on female stardom was dictated by the needs of a nationalist conception of the moral space occupied by performing women" (2001: 57). She draws on Partha Chatterjee's model of anticolonial nationalism placing the discourses around Indian female stardom in the context of a nationalist identity that maintained a distinction between moral and material domains of public culture. Historically any kind of female public performance, especially early theatre and singing, were associated with prostitution, primarily because the Western educated middle class disproved of such styles (Banerjee, 153). Majumdar

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[2] Sathya Saran, former editor of *Femina* (1979-2005), India's foremost English language women's magazine, describes this image of the 'New Indian Woman' as a woman who "wants to do everything. She wants to take holidays, she wants to be a mother, she wants to work, she wants great sex, she wants everything…(her) lifestyle is very aspirational…there is an upwardly mobile philosophy at work…and it's not just economic or financial. It's emotional" (Dewey 2008: 2011, in Mitra 2012: 170).

[3] I use the term 'Bollywood' when referring to the global reach of the Mumbai film industry. In the last two decades it has managed to eclipse all the others as the forerunner of Indian national cinema, constituted under the all-inclusive global signifier 'Bollywood'. This immensely popular form of cinema has been associated with spectacle, melodrama, excess, and an overwhelming emphasis on romantic and familial love and song and dance sequences. It is often seen as an eclectic commercial 'masala' genre; with elements of romance, tragedy, action, comedy and musicals—all rolled in to one package for unapologetically unrealistic entertainment. National allegories and stock characterizations of the male-female, families and social norms have defined this cinema. Ashish Rajadhyaksha says that there is a distinction between the film industry based in Bombay and the hype surrounding 'Bollywood', and traces its growth as simultaneous to global capitalism and diasporic nationalism. He calls it "at once a fad, taste, an Indian exotica, and a global phenomenon growing out of the cultural and political economy of a film industry based primarily in Mumbai" (2003: 3).

draws a link between such pre-existing forms of celebrity and the early discourses on female stardom—already arising from 'tainted' spaces strife with rumors, gossip and scandals—characterizing 'low' art forms. Therefore the discourse on early female stardom (1930s-50s) saw attempts to bridge this gap between private and public, with heightened emphasis on the "cultured" values of upper class Hindu actresses entering the cinematic domain. This was a significant way in which early Hindi cinema sought to rid itself of its reputation of being a degraded and immoral form of entertainment that did not fall in line with other 'pure' forms of Indian art like painting and novels.

Though successful in effecting a change in this outlook, the female star remained thoroughly encased within hegemonic notions of "ideal femininity", which conformed to the nationalist conception of women as the guardians of "Indian morality" or the inner/spiritual domain where the colonial state should have little influence (Chatterjee, 1993). In other words, the entry of upper-class Hindu women in the cinema industry would lift it from its place of 'degraded' art and without such 'improvements' the nation was considered unworthy of independence (Majumdar, 2001). The image of the woman on screen and information about the private life of female stars were carefully structured to keep within such confines, as public circulation of gossip[4] about their lives (like done in Hollywood tabloid magazines) was frowned upon. The Hindi film actress has therefore always occupied an ambiguous space, promising the fantasy of an inherently 'Indian'—'ideal womanhood' to their male audience while walking the tightrope between the masculine/material domain of the outside world and the feminine/spiritual kernel of the private sphere (Majumdar 2001, Mitra 2012). This duality might also help explain the erstwhile automatic 'retirement' of an actress from playing the leading lady soon after marriage. Her entry into the marital sphere automatically signified that she now 'belonged' to another man, and therefore, her body was no longer considered 'pure'/ 'virginal' enough to fuel male audience fantasies pointing to the unspoken discourses around the accessibility to the body of the female star.

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[4] Majumdar notes the role of gossip in early Indian stardom and writes about "its simultaneous presence and absence: because the very 'being' of film stars was one of ill repute, one did not need to read, though one may have heard, unsavory details about a specific star" (2001:78).

Attempts to completely translocate Hollywood models of star studies and discourses in the context of Bombay cinema have usually proved inadequate given the different cultural contexts of the differing nations. However there are several studies that do add considerable value to this reading of the contemporary female star in Bombay cinema, notably several helpful concepts from Richard Dyer's 1998 seminal study on stardom. Especially important is his concept of the star as 'structured polysemy', whereby the star not only encompasses a series of divergent meanings and values but also structures them such that certain inferences are upheld at the cost of the ones that are masked or displaced. His reading of stars across platforms—from the image on screen to publicity material, gossip, rumors, criticisms, commentaries and press discourse is the dominant framework of this study. Dyer also suggests that the predominant discourse around a star happens on the 'site of the audience'; the consumers of the text, rather than that of the media producers. Using this framework, primary material for this study has been drawn from several different areas: print and television interviews, films, press commentary, as well as tabloid media. A collective analysis of these will help delineate the dominant frameworks that surround the lives of female stars in India.

Jackie Stacey has worked on British women and their memories of film stars from the 1940s and 50s. She found that identification with stars developed across several different layers: worship, admiration, and aspiration, which she terms 'cinematic identificatory practices', where the star is imagined as the ideal other. My reading of the two contemporary female stars looks at how they have used their intra-filmic and inter-filmic narratives (or Dyer's notion of 'structured polysemy') to construct ideals of aspiration for the 'New Indian Woman'. For example, in the case of Kareena Kapoor, as detailed below, we find a significant aspect of her stardom dedicated to her size-zero figure and the subsequent positioning of this as a desirous goal for young females in the

country,[5] while Balan seeks to subvert this by championing a more curvaceous body type; which is often positioned as "authentically Indian".

Dyer acknowledges that reception studies has been conspicuously absent in his work and a crucial way forward for the future of star studies would be to understand the proliferation of star images among moviegoers. Given the unique god-like demeanor of film stars across the subcontinent, the site of the audience becomes particularly relevant in understanding the cultural context of stardom in India. Studies by scholars like M.S.S Pandian (1992), S.N Srinivas (2009) and M. Madhava Prasad (1999) have looked at the intersections between cinema and political culture of South India in understanding the appeal of several male stars among subaltern classes as spectators. In Bombay cinema, megastar Amitabh Bachchan has been a subject of analysis for scholars (Prasad 1998, Mishra 2001, Dasgupta 2007, Mazumdar 2007, Vitali 2008). Also notable in this regard is Steve Derne's (2000) work on movie-going practices among lower middle class men in North India and their perceptions of the female actor, which again upholds the body as the central site of pleasure and fantasy. His study is also pertinent because traditionally in Bombay cinema the 'masses' that have constituted the audience have been imagined to be lower middle class males (Derne, 2000). These perceptions, however, have been changing over the last decade or so with the influx of the multiplexes that have managed to segment the audiences by economic class (Ganti, 2012). This makes the role of the audience as consumer and spectator a crucial point of entry in my study of female stardom in contemporary India as the two actors I study here appeal to both the 'masses' and the 'classes', that is to say, they have dabbled in both 'commercial' and 'critically acclaimed' cinema.

A considerable amount of scholarly work on the impact and influence of Bombay cinema have looked at the centrality of the nation (Chakravarty 1993, Mazumdar 2000) in cinema as central to identity formation and as a major site for the expression of national melodramas, desires and anxieties. The male star has traditionally embodied these

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[5] While Kapoor was a popular commercial star from the inception of her career in 2001, I argue that the direction this discourse took was determined by the changes that she made in her physical appearance.

perceptions, for example, Sumita Chakravarty describes an erasure of Western threat to the nation by contrasting "the deglamorized heroism of Raj Kapoor's Indianized Chaplin to the more cosmopolitan rambunctious personality of the sixties hero" (1993: 205). Similarly Ranjani Mazumdar (2000) studies the shift from Ambitabh Bachchan's 'Angry Young Man' disgruntled with the corrupt state and system of the 1970s to Shahrukh Khan's psychotic hero of the 1990s, signaling a change in national identity from collective to individual. The late nineties and new millennium saw the hero as upper class, sophisticated and urbane, often portrayed as an NRI (Non-Resident Indian) living in London or New York, speaking to the aspirations of a rapidly globalizing consumerist nation. The nation's urban citizens with spending power shifted allegiance from single screens to multiplex theatres, and a trip to the movies became synonymous with visits to a mall, trips to coffee shops, and international fast food chains. As mentioned before, now divided along class lines, the movie going experience was rapidly redefined by cushioned sofa seats, plush surroundings, air conditioning, and sales of Cola-Cola and popcorn at five times their retail price.

The female star, on the other hand, as the ever-gentle guardian of the morality of the nation, embodying the 'core of national identity' (Majumdar 2009:53) has always remained an embattled space (Mitra 2012). Some scholars (Gandhy and Thomas 1991, Majumdar 2001 and Ramamurthy 2006) have written about the restoration of the female star within the moral universe of domesticity through marriage. Her reallocating as a wife and mother always centrally underlined her position as an 'Indian woman' and salvaged her from the taint of being an actress/body in the public sphere. In her study of Aishwarya Rai's star text, Shreya Mitra (2012) argues for a reorientation of her public/private divide in the face of global India and states that the 'New Indian woman' emerges out of this discourse as a figure comfortably straddling the 'realms of the (outer) world and the (inner) home, combining in her persona an unproblematic communion of the traditional with the modern' (2012: 150). Mitra locates Rai's stardom within the complex contradictions and tensions that arise out of negotiating this space, analyzing her early career as Miss World and a successful Bollywood actress, becoming India's face on the world map, channeling several high profile endorsements, but never

straying from her identity as a 'Indian woman', dignified and cultured. She refused to star in A-list Hollywood projects with explicit sex scenes[6] and was recently touted by her father-in-law Amitabh Bachchan as a "simple and domesticated" girl, a dutiful daughter-in-law.[7] Interestingly, Rai drew immense negative press for her post-partum weight gain. Several commentators highlighted her role as an Indian ambassador (she is a regular at Cannes and other international film festivals), which underlines once again, the pressures on the 'performative body' of the female actor, which cannot stray from its 'ideal'. As I discuss below, this is a complex mix borrowed from Hollywood ideals of beauty meshed with ideas about Indian 'authenticity'.

Female Stardom in the 1990s: The Madhuri Phenomena

In order to better understand the star texts of Kapoor and Balan, I provide a brief detour into the stardom and filmic image of Madhuri Dixit, a prominent female superstar in the nineties. This is particularly relevant because her stardom rose just before the contemporary area under analysis here and will help us delineate the ways in which Kapoor and Balan conform to and deviate from their most recent predecessor.

The female star in Bombay cinema has been fixated within a few 'types': the most prominent among which are the default Hindu figure of the simple girl next door who eventually moves on to be a wife and mother, the Muslim courtesan,[8] and the

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[6] The Frost Interview- Aishwarya Rai: The Return of the Queen?
 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_brceGrUFk

[7] "Aishwarya 'domesticated', says Big B" (http://ibnlive.in.com/news/aishwarya-domesticated-says-big-b/32205-8.html)

[8] Meena Kumari (1932-1972), born Mahajabeen Bano, known as the 'Tragedy Queen', was famous for playing the role of the courtesan in *Pakeezah* (The Pure Heart) in the film of the same name (Kamal Amrohi, 1972). *Pakeezah* took 13 years to complete amid a troubled and tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce between the director Kamal Amrohi and Meena Kumari. It has since gone on to achieve both classic and cult status. Despite taking on a Hindu screen name, Meena Kumari as 'Pakeezah' embodied several traits of the courtesan figure in popular Indian cinema. Positioned as the 'other' of the ideal Hindu wife, the courtesan was an archaic, otherworldly symbol seeped in the dying embers of a decaying past. Her sexuality was constructed as a threat to the carefully controlled and disciplined sexuality of the Hindu wife and mother. The purpose of the Hindu woman's sexuality was procreation and not pleasure or eroticism like that of the Muslim courtesan. In many ways the Hindu wife/Muslim courtesan opposition spoke to the anxieties about women as actresses in the public/private spheres of 'national' life. Meena Kumari was able to destabilize this narrative by portraying both the

ambiguously 'Western' vamp.[9] The actresses often portrayed singular 'type' across several films with occasional forays into a more 'character-driven' role. Rosie Thomas and Beheroze Gandhy (1991) were the first scholars to write about female stardom in India. They employed the concept of 'potent femininity' to understand the screen persona of three stars—Fearless Nadia, Nargis Dutt and Smita Patil, and argue for co-existing contradictory elements around these stars that diffuse the resistance to traditional notions of Indian femininity (in Mazumdar 2012). As pointed out earlier, most star texts of female actors in Bombay cinema articulate anxieties about 'national culture' and recall debates about the preservation of morality through its women as seen in Dixit's example.

Madhuri Dixit emerged as a major female superstar in the 1990s and sparked debates about national culture, morality and anxiety (Ghosh, 1998). She is known and recognized by millions specifically for her dancing skills and faced legal charges for 'vulgarity' and 'obscenity' for her infamous song-and-dance sequence *Choli ke Peechey Kya Hai* (What's behind your blouse?). Madhuri Dixit's star persona was also defined by her appropriation of several roles in spaces traditionally reserved for the leading male actor. The film *Raja* (*King*, Indra Kumar, 1995) exemplified the extent of Dixit's fandom in the country. As a pre-multiplex film without a significant male lead, it went on to become a blockbuster with several reviews claiming that the film should have been

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traditional wife and the prostitute (as have other actresses like Nargis and Rekha) and ultimately structured a star text that interweaves Glehill's (1991) 'melodramatic mode' both on and offscreen.

[9] Helen (1938-) portrayed the quintessential vamp—a more vicious, sassy, and 'western' other of the ideal chaste Hindu heroine. She wore 'westernized' clothing, danced at cabaret bars and discotheques and often looked 'foreign' (had blonde hair, light eyes, wore short skirts). She smoked, drank alcohol, and usually concluded the narrative with a song sequence or a tragic death. Helen was the most famous vamp/dancing girl of the 60s and 70s. She was of Anglo-Burmese descent and her 'un-Indian' looks proved a huge hindrance for her becoming a leading lady. But her song-and-dance sequences were hugely popular and she has starred in over five hundred films. It is interesting to note that in recent years the 'item girl' has replaced the stereotypical vamp, with several leading actresses participating in a titillating, raunchy song-and-dance sequence, with little connection to the main plot or narrative of a film. These sequences often closely adhere to Laura Mulvey's (1976) argument of the woman as spectacle and also Dyer's description of the pin-up "as a social model, the pin-up promotes surface appearance and depersonalization, woman as sexual spectacle and sex-object" (50).

called 'Rani' (Queen) instead. A recent feature in *Prestige* magazine says about the actress,

> Dixit is a fine example of the empowered Indian woman. She spent nearly two decades in Hindi films, rising through the ranks from supporting actress to queen of the marquee. She started out in largely forgettable flicks, but her prowess for song and dance—an essential ingredient in currying Indian cinematic flavour—ignited her career. Step by step, she caught the eye of directors and choreographers, who shone a spotlight on this remarkable danseuse. For the thousands who attended the 14th International Indian Film Academy Awards in Macau earlier this year, or the millions who saw the show telecast around the globe, Dixit's closing number brought the house down.

Madhuri Dixit's superstardom came at a time just before the privatization of Indian television, the granting of industry status to 'Bollywood' and the proliferation of Internet and mobile phones, which subsequently enabled the circulation of star images across several platforms in the country. She very much remained the queen of the single screens and a quiet and non-controversial public demeanour marked her adulation. She took a hiatus from the film world for an arranged marriage and domesticity and went into semi-retirement with her NRI husband in Denver, Colorado. There were often features about the idyllic and quiet 'home-life' of this erstwhile superstar and in several of these dialogues, Dixit, much like several other actresses, reiterated the joys of domesticity, she said in an interview to Verve Magazine in 2004,

> I have carried my dance cassettes with me for practice, but otherwise, my day is filled with looking after the house, taking care of Arin (son) and waiting for Ram (husband) to get back…just as they show in the movies! I do all my house-work. There isn't too much dust, so you don't have to mop or swab every day. I manage fine with a household help who comes in once or twice a week. I do all the cooking; we don't go out all the time. My *dosas* turn out real perfect and I make them from scratch.

Her attempt at a comeback was with *Aja Nachle* (*Come on Dance*, Anil Mehta, 2007), but it did not fare very well at the box office. It also lacked a male lead. She is now seen more prominently on both on the big and small screens as the judge of a reality television show modeled on the lines of *Dancing with the Stars* and is awaiting the release of two feature films, *Gulaab Gang* (Soumik Sen, forthcoming) and *Dedh Ishqiya*

(Abhishek Chaubey, 2014) which the actress feels are strong women-centric scripts with filmmakers who know what to do with a female actor above 40.[10]

Thus we see that Dixit's career trajectory followed the usual path outlined by Gandhy and Thomas (2001), a narrative that ultimately reinforces the return of the 'Indian woman' from the public domain of cinema to the private sphere of marriage, motherhood and housekeeping. Keeping the trajectories of their predecessors in mind, in my analysis of Kareena Kapoor and Vidya Balan, I suggest a possible realignment of several personas borne traditionally by the female star/star body in Bollywood, by situating them in the context of the multiplex cine-era in India. My study locates itself within the new spaces of production and consumption unleashed by globalization, in an atmosphere saturated by excessive media consumption across several old and new media technologies coupled with ideological changes regarding the position of women in Indian society. In the following two sections, I map the terrain of star persona construction for these two actors through a close analysis of their image/body circulation in the public discourse via interviews, criticisms, and commentaries in the English language press. The tensions that surround and dominate these discourses ultimately help us delineate that which constitutes the notion of the 'Indian' woman of the present times as she continues to reorient herself within grand narratives of the 'Indian nation', a concept that has been in constant flux in the face of globalization and neoliberalism.

Kareena Kapoor: 'My genre is bad films!'

Kareena Kapoor,[11] granddaughter of Hindi cinema's legendary thespian Raj Kapoor, comes from a family often heralded as the 'first family of Indian cinema'. From the

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[10] See http://prestigehongkong.com/2013/09/certain-age

[11] Her great grandfather Prithviraj Kapoor, grandfather Raj Kapoor, father Randhir Kapoor, uncles Rishi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, aunt Neetu Singh, mother Babita Kapoor, elder sister Karishma Kapoor were all successful actors ruling the roost in different decades of Hindi cinema, especially from the 40s to the 70s. Her cousin Ranbir Kapoor is one of the most

inception of her career, she stayed steadfastly in the public eye for her initial brashness and her Kapoor lineage, touted as the 'quintessential superstar',[12] synonymous with Hindi film royalty, glamour and arrogance. In the twelve years that she has spent in the industry, she established herself as the highest paid actress eventually creating widespread frenzy by displaying a size zero body (where she lost a significant amount of weight), which subsequently also led to her dietician Rujuta Diwekar becoming a minor celebrity. It also brought the term 'size zero' into the popular discourse in India.[13] Kapoor often openly spoke of her relationships with fellow actors Shahid Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan,[14] with her marriage to the latter in late 2012 being described by Wall Street Journal as the 'social event of the year' in India.[15] After the wedding, she was known as a *Begum,*[16] a term denoting royalty. After delivering a string of twelve flops, she called herself the only actress whose 'brand value increases with every flop' and told Bollywood A-List director Karan Johar on his talk show that her genre was bad films. [17] Five years after this interview, Kareena Kapoor broke up with then boyfriend Shahid

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successful young actors in the industry today, having garnered immense media attention both critically and commercially in only five years. Despite this long lineage, women in the Kapoor family were traditionally discouraged from being actresses, and both her mother and aunt quit the industry at very early stages of their careers after marriage to Kapoor brothers Randhir and Rishi (Chatterjee, Deenvi and Nihalani 2003). A failed marriage led their mother Babita Kapoor, to encourage her elder daughter Karishma Kapoor to act in films, followed by Kareena who debuted in 2000 staring with Amitabh Bachchan's son Abhishek Bachchan.

[12] "Koffee with Karan: Season 1 Kareena Kapoor and Rani Mukherjee," www.youtube.com, video file, 45:22, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZiL8h5nzco.

[13] 'What's Eating Bollywood: The Size-Zero Trend' http://bffc.ca/community/3031-what%E2%80%99s-eating-bollywood-the-size-zero-trend.html, 'I Am Proud of Be India's Size Zero: Kareena Kapoor' http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/i-am-proud-to-be-indias-size-zero-kareena-kapoor/536676/

[14] Saif Ali Khan is popularly known in the industry as '*Chote Nawab'* (The Young King). He is the son of former Indian cricketer Mansoon Ali Khan Pataudi, also the last titular ruler of the Pataudi, in Haryana, India. His mother is Sharmila Tagore, grandniece of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and a popular 70s Hindi and Bengali film actress. Following the demise of his father, Saif Ali Khan was crowned 10th *Nawab of Pataudi*, as per the aspirations of the villagers, although the title holds no political significance from the Indian state (royal and princely titles were abolished in 1971). Saif therefore comes from a lineage of cricket, movies and royalty.

[15] Rupa Subramanya, "Economics Journal: 'Saifeena' Wedding Follows a Trend," *India Realtime* (blog), entry posted October 17, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2012/10/17/economics-journal-saifeena-wedding-follows-an-indian-trend/.

[16] The Urdu word for the wife of a *Nawab*.

[17] "Koffee with Karan: Season 1."

Kapoor after being paired opposite him in what has been called her career's best performance in the massively successful *Jab We Met* (*When We Met,* Imitaz Ali, 2008). This coincided with the unveiling of her new size zero body in a bikini in *Taashan* (*Style,* Vijay Krishna Acharya, 2008*).* This was considered an especially 'bold' move for a Kapoor girl, as was her relationship with fellow actor Saif Ali Khan, ten years older, divorced and a father of two. Their very public live-in relationship attracted almost unprecedented media attention, primarily because this was the first instance of an actress publicly admitting to an otherwise taboo social norm in India. They have been called India's own Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and the couple has been popularly known by the moniker 'Saifeena'.

Since then, her body, her diet and exercise regimen, and her relationship have heavily defined Kareena's star persona. This was a significant departure from her early image, where she was mostly labeled an arrogant and brash star kid, repeatedly touting her lineage and taking digs at contemporary actresses (in an interview, her father, Randhir Kapoor, warned her not to talk like she was Shahrukh Khan).[18] After her debut she had proclaimed that she wanted to be 'simple and Indian' in all of her films, but soon branched out into more glamorous diva roles and said, "I realize I can't be paid what I am for being draped from head to toe I've to be glamorous and seductive. That's what being a saleable heroine of today is all about".[19] Her film roles often saw her starring in inconsequential bits with the Khans (Shahrukh, Salman, and Aamir), all three ringing the cash registers at the box office with their immense popularity among different fragments of the Indian audience. Despite this, a close analysis of Kareena Kapoor's several interviews over the decade reveals a persona caught between the paradoxes of being an actress and/or a star in a patriarchal industry. In the television talk show, *Koffee with Karan's* second season, filmed a couple of years after her famous comments about bad film genres being her forte, after three 'off-beat' films *Chameli* (Sudhir Mishra, 2003), *Dev* (Govind Nihalani, 2004) and *Omkara* (Vishal Bharadwaj, 2006) (playing a

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[18]http://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainmenttags/kareena-kapoor/kareena-kapoor-im-going-be-huge-staryou-wait-and-watch

[19]   http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news-interviews/The-importance-of-being-Kareena-Kapoor/articleshow/16277870.cms

streetwalker, a Muslim riot victim, and Shakespeare's Desdemona in Othello's Hindi remake), that brought her critical acclaim as a performer, she said, "the easiest thing is to look pretty next to a big actor…that's not what I want to do". [20] In another interview, she proclaimed that she's "more interested in acting than being a star".[21] However, in her conversation with Rajeev Masand, a film journalist with the news channel CNN-IBN, on being asked about her superfluous roles in several films she replied, "How many people are talking about an actresses' talent? I mean let's be honest"[22]. And finally to *Filmfare* magazine a few months before the release of her film *Heroine* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2012) (a self-claimed voyeuristic look inside the 'real' life of a fading Bollywood actress) she proclaimed

> Let's face it. It's a male-dominated industry. Look at the *Ek Tha Tiger (Once there was a Tiger,* Kabir Khan, 2012*)* collections. We shouldn't try to compete with the actors and claim that actresses can carry a movie without them. Vidya Balan has done *Kahaani* and *The Dirty Picture*. Her films were a commercial success and they were good films. Hopefully, *Heroine* will be in the same league or maybe better. I've always maintained that box-office success is what counts. People don't care for your performance. If the men manage to get a larger number of people to see your film, I don't see why we should have a problem.[23]

In all these interviews, Kapoor reveals the fundamental tensions surrounding the trajectory of the female star in India. While her film *Heroine* tried to portray the limited shelf life of an actress in a patriarchal industry, it ended up being a stereotypical caricature of Bollywood that met mostly with negative press and performed poorly at the

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[20] "Koffee with Karan: Season 2- Kareena Kapoor and Shahid Kapoor," www.youtube.com, video file, 44:51, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-AZM8bByAE

[21] "Kareena Kapoor on Koel's Couch," www.youtube.com, video file, posted by FilmiEntertainment, October 31, 2010, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRrq_R8cpPk.

[22] "Rajeev Masand Interviews Kareena Kapoor on Turning 30 and Her New Priorities," www.youtube.com, video file, posted by Rajeev Masand, October 31, 2010, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5AOpceuCog.

[23] Vivek Bhatia, "Kapoor: 'I've Given It My All,'" Filmfare.com, last modified September 20, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/kareena-kapoor-ive-given-it-my-all-1273.html.

box office.[24] While Kapoor has been able to garner acclaim for her beauty, her performances, and her dancing abilities, the overwhelming importance of the male star in commercial cinema remains paramount.

Kareena Kapoor, before and after her weight loss.
Photo courtesy- www.pinkvilla.com

Neepa Majumdar (2001) contends that when a star persona has been fixed in the public imagination, authenticated by specific screen roles, it becomes free of being anchored in specific film texts. "Stars then become public personae with little or no reference to cinema as an institution. In this way, a 'star' with only one successful film can remain in the public eye for years, even without any subsequent roles" (2001: 193). Christine Geraghty (2007) suggests that stars should be read both extratexually (across different platforms) and intertexually, (across different texts). Kareena Kapoor channeled what she calls the 'national preoccupation' with her figure and style in a book released in 2013, called *The Style Diary of a Bollywood Diva.* Here she exhibits herself as a fashion icon for young girls and women from ages fourteen to thirty five. The book is replete with photographs and revelations displaying her personal style when on vacation, photographs from her childhood and tips on how to eat well and stay thin. In her own words, it has "the right amount of information, a guide to every woman, whatever they

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[24]   http://www.rediff.com/movies/review/review-heroine-is-unbelievably-trashy/20120921.htm, http://www.firstpost.com/bollywood/movie-review-heroine-falls-flat-on-its-big-bad-bollywood-face-464635.html

are looking out for, what they should wear to a movie, what to wear to a date, what to sleep in….".[25] In this book she also tackles the 'size zero phenomena' and says, "It's not possible to have a model figure forever. At the end of the day, I'm an Indian Punjabi girl, I enjoy eating. I am happy being more curvaceous. I'm a happy girl".[26] This new discourse on her stardom is reminiscent of the ways in which Linda Mizejewski (1999) discusses the impact of the Ziegfeld Girl in defining the ideal American womanhood, as a powerful symbol of sexuality, class, and consumerist desires. Kareena Kapoor's book, heavily centered on her physical body, therefore addresses and advises this 'New Indian Woman' or the fantasy of functioning in an atmosphere of a post-liberalization global nation, where dates, movies, gowns, and a diet and exercise regimen is available to the 'every girl' who aspires to be like her.
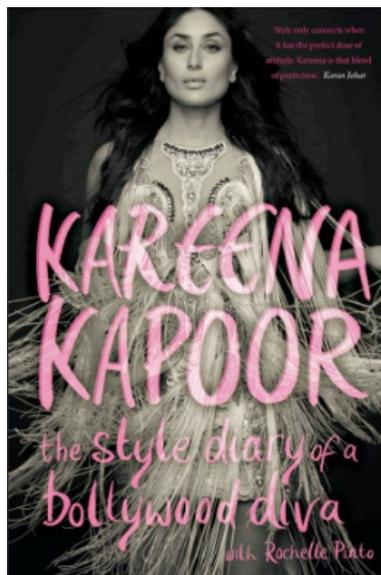
Cover image of Kapoor's book *The Style Dairy of a Bollywood Diva*

Mitra (2012) in her reading of the star texts of Aishwarya Rai and Shilpa Shetty[27] has pointed to the sacred space attributed to marriage, domesticity, and motherhood,

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[25] "Kareena Kapoor at the Launch of 'The Style Diary of a Bollywood Diva,'" www.bollywoodhungama.com, video file, posted by Bollywood Hungama, February 7, 2013, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sd8gciefu1s.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Shilpa Shetty is a moderately successful Bollywood actress. She drew a lot of media attention after participating in Celebrity Big Brother in the UK, where her fellow housemates made racist remarks about her. Subsequently, she quit her film career and became an entrepreneur.

homologous with ideal 'Indianness' in both their public discourses. According to Majumdar (2001), Raj Kapoor's famous comments on his very public extramarital relationship with Muslim actress Nargis[28] in the 1930s-40s, sums up the dominant ideology (the public/private dichotomy) of female star discourses in Indian cinema since its inception. He said, his wife was not his actress and his actress was not his wife and that "one woman was the heroine of his films while the other was the mother of his children".[29] Kareena Kapoor's own live-in relationship and stand vis-à-vis motherhood reveals a rupture in this ideology. When asked about her rapport with her boyfriend Saif Ali Khan's children, she replied, 'They already have a mother. They don't need a mother. They need a friend".[30] On the immense speculation of her impending wedding date, and whether she was already secretly married, her response was, "Rubbish! If I'm already married then has it affected my box-office status? Obviously not. I've given *Golmaal 3*, *3 Idiots*, *Bodyguard, RA.One*. I'm doing *Heroine* and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's next. It's been a dream run. Whether I'm married or not, how does it even matter? Marriage can wait".[31] As several scholars (Majumdar 2001; Thomas 1991) have pointed out, the dominant strand in the discourse of a female star text is her personal life. Kapoor's

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[28] Nargis, born Fatima Rashid, was a major star from 1948-1958, and is a fascinating example of the several dichotomies within which female stars have functioned in Bombay cinema. Nargis starred in seventeen romantic films with Raj Kapoor and spent several years in the public eye as the 'other woman' in Kapoor's life. Their affair was well known in popular discourse and their on-screen pair brought legendary success to RK Films, Kapoor's production house. In 1957, Nargis opted out of his company and starred in Mehmood Khan's epic *Mother India*. In this film she portrayed a staunchly moral, virtuous, self-sacrificing 'ideal woman' in different phases of a lifetime from marriage to motherhood and domesticity eventually culminating in her becoming the 'mother' figure for the village and killing her own delinquent son. Her star discourse after this film saw a nullification of her early persona and designated it entirely into a comfortable national narrative of a suffering, universal, passionate, sacrificing mother. Parama Roy writes that *Mother India* 'fixes and monumentalizes a notoriously unstable star text' (1998:154), thereby making the figure of the national Hindu mother so literal that acting itself became impossible after this role. Her death in 1981 was mourned nationwide and it was indeed hard to tell that Nargis was indeed a Muslim woman not from a very 'respectable family' (her mother was a courtesan-dancer) and had conducted a very public affair with a much married man before she became Mother India/Mrs.

[29] Raj Kapoor made this statement to a journalist in 1973 (in Majumdar 2001).
[30] "Koffee with Karan: Season 3- Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan," www.youtube.com, video file, 40:19, posted by StarWorld India, May 30, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIqNQ9iK9F0.
[31] Vivek Bhatia, "Heroine Addiction," *Filmfare.com*, last modified April 23, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.filmfare.com/interviews/heroine-addiction-366.html.

comment therefore reveals a fairly radical departure from contemporaries Rai and Shetty, whose star texts read as attempts to constantly mold the 'global' and 'modern' Indian woman with several reaffirmations to matrimony and motherhood (Mitra 2012).

The current Bollywood star formula is a transmedia celebrity, a brand entity, and in essence encompasses tensions that spill far out of their cinematic image (Mitra 2012). Though Kareena Kapoor is absent on Twitter and other social networking sites, her book, several brand endorsements, and the launching of a clothing line with the global garment chain Globus, firmly situates her in Geharty's intertexual map. While her stardom still primarily draws from the cinematic idiom—more than being defined by entrepreneurial ventures like that of Shilpa Shetty's[32] —it encompasses several changes in the discourse of female stardom. Factors like the overt display of the body, and being a 'showpiece' in several male dominated blockbusters, coupled with the little difference between her personas portrayed on and off screen, all conform to Laura Mulvey's (1975) contentions of the woman as a spectacle, pandering to the desires of the heterosexual male audience. In her extra-filmic ventures there is also the continuous celebration of hegemonic femininity for women, couched in rhetoric of empowerment, consumer citizenship, flexibility, and success with fashion and beauty being sanctified as the new authoritative regime, confirming to postfeminist ideas. Post-feminism is defined as this kind of female individualism that finds acceptance in mainstream society, replacing collective feminist politics, because it is non-threatening to a neoliberal economic system (McRobbie 2009). There is also an element of naturalization and authenticity given to this idealized femininity that erases or makes invisible the labour (like diet, exercise, makeup etc) involved in such performances (Weber 2009, Allen 2011, in Keller 2013). In Kareena's case however, there is emphasis on the labour of stardom and the maintenance of a perfect body. In fact, her book *The Style Diary…* details her yearlong process of diet, her exercise and skincare regime, and the number of specialists

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[32] Shilpa Shetty is a Bollywood actress who featured in a number of films from 1993-2007. She was not a major A-list actor, but her fame mostly came from her participation in UK's *Celebrity Big Brother*, where fellow participant Jane Goody made racist comments against her. She became very popular in the United Kingdom following her appearance on this reality show that she then went on to win. She partially owns a cricket team, Rajasthan Royals, that plays in the IPL (Indian Premier League) and she is married to entrepreneur Raj Kundra.

involved in her achieving a size zero body. She also states that despite the 'perfect body shape', she had to sit through several hours of make-up and other rigorous labour to do the now famous bikini scene where she unveiled her new body.

Kareena Kapoor in a print ad for Sony Viao 'size zero' laptops.

In the case of Kareena Kapoor, one sees her actively remaining within the contours of a hegemonic discourse, fuelled by hardcore commercialism, but retaining an independence in managing a public persona devoid of aspirations of motherhood, or any hints of a post nuptial ending of her career, unlike her predecessors. She asserted, "I don't think he [Saif Ali Khan] wants me to change, put on a heavy sari or something. Because that's not what he loves me for. I am known as an actor first, and then a *Begum"*.[33] Her decision to make public her live-in relationship was also an incongruous decision for a leading female actor, and her unabashed proclaiming of herself as 'Heroine No.1',[34] feeling no threat from any of her contemporaries helps in confusing the discourse of the 'ideal feminine' propagated by the female star in Bollywood.

Vidya Balan: 'Let the Khans add Balan to their names'

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[33] "Kareena Kapoor at the Launch."
[34] "Koffee with Karan: Season 3"

Vidya Balan, thirty-five, is widely considered to be an anomaly among her peers in Bollywood.[35] She has been variously labeled the 'leading lady with balls', 'female hero', and the 'fourth Khan' in Bollywood.[36] After debuting in a critically acclaimed period film *Parineeta* (Pradeep Sarkar, 2005), Balan struggled to find a foothold in an industry where she evidently did not conform to the stereotypical body type of the new millennium. After a string of unsuccessful films at the box office, she was heavily criticized in the press for her weight and clothing style, with screaming headlines, such as "Look! It Does Matter!", "The Worst Dressed Actor of 2007", and "What was Vidya Balan Thinking?" [37] From 2009 to 2012, her fortunes changed completely when she starred in five consecutive critically and commercially successful films, four of them without any significant male leads. Stars are often seen in similar roles and are thus often typecast for genre identification. While several stars have tried to resist the pitfalls associated with this, it is especially hard for the female stars to find a host of different roles to portray in predominantly male-driven narratives of commercial Hindi cinema. Vidya Balan's star persona presents an incongruity in this regard.

Balan won the industry's popular awards for best actress, the *Filmfare* and *Screen* awards, four times successively and the country's highest cinematic honour, the National Award for her performance in *The Dirty Picture* (Milan Luthria, 2011). She simultaneously transformed her public look and style by only appearing in designer saris, garnering praises for displaying the 'true persona of an Indian woman' making it to several best-dressed lists in fashion magazines.[38] In *The Dirty Picture*, she played an overweight sex siren from 80s B-grade South Indian films, Silk Smitha, a choice that was met with enormous positive press for her courage to accept such a role and for

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[35] Aastha Banan, "The Leading Lady with Balls," *www.openthemagazine.com*, last modified August 18, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/art-culture/the-leading-lady-with-balls.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Aakash Wadhwa, "Look, It Does Matter!," *www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com*, last modified September 14, 2008, accessed April 9, 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-09-14/news-interviews/27891870_1_vidya-balan-parineeta-kismat-konnection. ; Rediff, "The Year That Was 2007: The Worst Dressed Actresses," www.rediff.com, last modified December 4, 2007, accessed April 9, 2013, http://specials.rediff.com/yearend/2007/dec/04yractress1.htm.

[38] Nona Walia, "Is Vidya Balan Trapped in a Sari?," *www.timesofindia.com*, last modified April 26, 2012.

displaying a body type that defied norms of conventional beauty. *Kahaani (Story,* Sujoy Ghosh, 2012*)*, a crime thriller, followed this film where she played a heavily pregnant woman in search of her missing husband. The commercial success of these two films in particular brought laurels for her acting skills and willingness to take on 'women-centric' roles, and managed to steer Balan's star discourse in directions markedly different from those that have traditionally dominated the image of the female star in India.

Marian Keane (1993), in her criticism of Richard Dyer, argues that stars must be understood in relation to the wider set of beliefs about personal identity that exist for the culture in which the star image circulates. Therefore, her focus on cultural conditions as an important entry into star studies is significant, and is addressed by Dyer (1986) in his study of Marilyn Monroe in the 1950s. Dyer discusses the preeminent place of sexuality in American culture of that era, already circulating in public discourse through a number of channels, and sees Monroe as a star that both embodied and capitalized upon this dominant preoccupation by naturalizing sexuality. Similarly in his reading of Jane Fonda (1998) he argues that her stardom was defined by a radical femininity that overlapped with ordinary *Americanness*, and helped to simultaneously redefine norms of female sexuality and reaffirm heterosexuality. These dialogues between cultural star readings are helpful in understanding the popularity of a particular female star in a specific time period. Like Monroe's overt sexuality and childish demeanour often overlapped, I argue that in the case of Vidya Balan, her 'unconventional' on-screen persona coincides with her off-screen domesticity, thereby blurring lines between moral/immoral, public/domestic in a timeframe that is constantly grappling with redefinitions of such concepts. In some ways then, Balan's public image helps to manage the age-old anxiety that has plagued Indian modernity—of becoming 'too western' at the cost of tradition.

Most of this star discourse has centered on Balan representing what is 'real' and 'authentic' in Indian women and redefining the Hindi film heroine. In an article titled, "Why Vidya Balan Rules*"* that appeared late in 2011, two months after the release of the *The Dirty Picture*, journalist Vir Sanghvi wrote:

In an industry full of size zero figures, dancing bimbettes, and self-consciously trendy bejeaned muppets, Vidya comes off as a breath of fresh air. Basically, it's this simple: she is a real person. Everything about her is real: the curves, the little roll of fat that she makes no attempt to hide, the clothes that she chooses herself, the roles that she agonizes over before finally selecting one that suits her, the hard work she puts into each performance and then into the promotion, and most of all, the guts she demonstrates in finding her own path against the advice of nearly everybody in Bollywood.[39]

The article then goes on to stress her middle class upbringing, her education, her long struggle to be an actress and her utmost dedication to her profession. "…We respect her risks. We admire her resilience".[40] In 2012, *Verve Magazine* named Balan one of India's most powerful young women and wrote, "In a reel world peopled by size zero-toned bodies and pretty-as-a-picture heroines, Balan comes across as completely real and natural–a woman who has followed her own instincts and dared to live her destiny by being her own person and not morphing herself to fit into any conventional slot".[41]

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[39] Vir Sanghvi, "Why Vidya Balan Rules," *www.hindustantimes.com*, last modified December 17, 2011, accessed April 9, 2013. http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/Why-Vidya-Balan-rules/Article1-783531.aspx
[40] Ibid
[41] Shirin Mehta and Nasrin Modak, "Young Power Women," *www.verveonline.com*, last modified June 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.verveonline.com/109/people/power-women.shtml.

Vidya Balan at Cannes 2013, in her signature 'Indian look'.
Photo courtesy- www.idiva.com

Balan's contemporaries and leading actresses Kareena Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra both have credited her with having changed the face of the Hindi film heroine. When asked in an interview how she feels about being given this mantle, Balan emphasized the changing social climate of the country. She said,

> I think that's a huge compliment. But I will say that it is the times we are in. The time when Indian cinema, Hindi cinema began to veer towards bolder choices and the time when I decided to follow my heart and do exactly what I wanted to do, they coincided. There are lots of things happening, the woman, the Indian woman, is coming into her own more and more now. Even with what's been happening with all the rapes, the kind of outrage we are seeing now, we've never seen before. I think there is this goddess power rising. It's our time.[42]

After the tremendous success of *The Dirty Picture*, the producer of the film Ekta Kapoor suggested in a press conference that Vidya Balan should change her name to Vidya Balan Khan, as only the three top male actors (Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir Khan) are

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[42] "Rajeev Masand Interviews Vidya Balan," www.youtube.com, video file, posted by Rajeev Masand, January 26, 2013, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TJA_brL8Ms.

able to garner such financial turnovers from their films. To this remark, Vidya replied, "Let the Khans add Balan to their names".[43]

Promotional poster for Balan's film *The Dirty Picture.*

For female celebrities, the body becomes a crucial site for performing femininity. This is usually articulated through postfeminist hegemonic markers, characterized by a slim and hairless body, long hair, clear skin, dressed in fashionable, expensive, and trendy clothing (Mc.Robbie, 2009; Keller 2013). In Vidya Balan's star discourse, authenticity has mostly been articulated as inherently 'Indian' despite the seeming rupture between her on and off screen personas. This is also because her choice of roles has veered more towards characters that require her to present herself in ethnic Indian clothing as opposed to Kapoor. She has played a sexually manipulative woman on two occasions (*Ishqiya,* Abhishek Chaubey, 2010; *The Dirty Picture*), touted again as a first for a mainstream Hindi film heroine. "I cannot think of a single other heroine who would play a role in which her character to get ahead slept with a man!"[44] In fact, Balan herself stated:

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[43] Aakansha Swarup and Surya Singh, "Vidya Suggests Khans Add Balan to Their Names," *www.indiatoday.in*, last modified December 8, 2012, accessed April 9, 2013, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/vidya-suggests-khans-to-add-balan-to-their-names/1/163346.html.

[44] Sanghvi, "Why Vidya Balan Rules," *www.hindustantimes.com*.

> I think films are finally humanizing women. They are not being made into holier-than-thou images or being portrayed as Goddesses to be put on a pedestal. It's just that it's only now that filmmakers are showcasing the other shades of women and not labeling them vamps just because they are assertive of their desires or not afraid to flaunt their sexuality.[45]

However, the predominant dialogue on her personal life sees a constant emphasis on her 'middle class roots', her 'humble beginnings', the fact she lived with her parents till her recent marriage, and her frequent public appearances in saris, replete with ethnic jewellery over dresses or gowns all collating to create an 'authentic Indian woman' persona. The actress says, "I discovered the sari again; I hadn't worn one for so long. I was born a woman who was trying to be a girl. I could only be a woman. And that changed things. Now heroines can be women. I am at a stage where I am free of any kind of pressure".[46] This speaks to Richard Dyer's contentions about the importance of stars in understanding social history and their role in the complex relationship between reality and representation. He writes, "[s]tardom is an image of the way stars live. For the most part, this generalized lifestyle is the assumed backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of her/his life. As it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary…love, marriage and sex are constants of the image" (35). Her 'authenticity' therefore is decisively eastern and 'Indian', associated with the 'real woman' as opposed to western Hollywood imports like anorexic bodies and Barbie doll faces. Thus the construction of Balan's 'private' public life presents a breach from the kind of roles she plays on screen.

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[45] Akanksha Naval, "I'm Happy Being Called a Heroine: Vidya Balan," *www.dnaindia.com*, last modified December 9, 2011, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/1623410/report-im-happy-being-called-a-heroine-vidya-balan.

[46] Banan, "The Leading Lady with Balls," *www.openthemagazine.com*; Walia, "Is Vidya Balan Trapped," *www.timesofindia.com*.

Vidya Balan and Siddharth Roy Kapur, soon after their wedding.
Photo Courtesy- www.ndtv.com

Therefore in Balan's case, we see the combination of a critically and commercially acclaimed female star in the sphere of performance, tied to an image of 'authentic Indianness', cemented by her recent 'traditional and simple' marriage to head of UTV Productions, Siddharth Roy Kapur. This stands in stark contrast to her recent choice of roles and decision to push the envelope for what is considered to be 'acceptable' for an Indian woman to do on screen (portray an overweight B-grade soft porn actress for instance, unafraid of flaunting her sexual appetite). What is also significant here is the covert distinction made between what is deemed acceptable for a typical 'authentic Indian body type' as opposed to a more 'global body' which someone like Aishwarya Rai is constantly expected to display. This duality in the discourses surrounding Balan's weight (celebrated as authentic) and Rai's post-partum weight gain (criticized as unwelcome for a global face) speaks directly to national anxieties being written on the bodies of female stars. In the case of Kareena Kapoor, we see the juxtaposition of inconsequential roles with a hyper visible personal life, in which several of her choices like a live-in relationship and openness about boyfriends seems 'un-Indian'.[47] As one of

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[47] Traditionally female actors in India did not speak publicly about relationships or affairs. They also denied living-in with their partners outside of marriage, drinking alcohol or smoking.

the leading actresses in Hindi and Bengali films of the 1970s and her real-life mother-in-law Sharmila Tagore[48] said:

> In my time, although there were a few progressive films, most were stereotypical. Acting wasn't considered a good profession for women. Also, women were considered to be homemakers and if married, couldn't find work. Today, an actress has much to do. Look at Vidya Balan in *Kahaani* or *The Dirty Picture* and Kareena (Kapoor) in *Jab We Met* and *Heroine.* Nobody can force them to do something against their will. Actresses smoke, drink, have live-in relationships and do not conform to societal norms. The scenario for them has become pleasantly democratic.[49]

In one of her films, *We are Family* (Siddharth Malholtra, 2011) an official remake of Hollywood hit *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998) we see Kapoor stepping into Julia Robert's shoes, for a role that is similar to the constructions of her own star image and her relationship with Saif Ali Khan and his children. Yet, what defines Kapoor's star persona is this apparent 'honesty' (traditionally not seen in very many female actors before): willingness to talk to the press about her relationships, announcing herself as the best, and often even refusing films with A-list directors because she was dissatisfied with her salary.[50] What remains constant however, is the emphasis on her body. There have been speculations that Kapoor has surgically enhanced her jaw line and this,

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[48] Interestingly, Sharmila Tagore was the first Indian actress to pose for a magazine cover in a bikini in 1966. Recalling the experience the actress said, "Oh! God, how conservative our society was back then! I've no idea why I did that shoot. It was just before I got married. I remember when I showed the two-piece bikini to photographer, Dhiraj Chawda, he asked me, "Are you sure about this?" In some of the shots, he even asked me to cover my body. He was more worried than I was but I had no qualms doing that shoot. Only when people started reacting strongly to the cover, was I taken aback. I was puzzled as to why they didn't like the picture. I thought I looked nice. Some called it a deliberate move to grab eyeballs; others termed me as 'astutely uncanny'. I hated that. Maybe, there was an exhibitionist in me, as I was young and excited to do something different. But people perceived me to be this awful person. I didn't want such a reputation. So I began to choose my films carefully. Within a few years, people began to take me seriously".

[49] http://idiva.com/news-entertainment/sharmila-tagore-actresses-today-can-drink-smoke-and-live-in/20034

[50] She famously refused Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2008) opposite Shahrukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan, because she claimed she was being paid 'peanuts'. The film went on to be a massive success both at home and among the diaspora, with Kapoor regretting her decision and apologizing to the director on his chat show for refusing the film.

coupled with the labour involved in maintaining a zero size body, makes her body denaturalized.

In conclusion, I suggest that such a visible personal biography that obsessively records the changes of a female star's physicality influences public perception and ownership regarding her 'body' in the audience imagination. Kapoor and Balan represent the two dichotomous faces of contemporary 'Indian modernity', a desire to hold on to purist traditions and celebrate 'realness' with Balan and at the same time be able to offer a more globally consistent/westernized image in the form of Kapoor. In different ways then, these actresses speak to and negotiate the several tensions in post-liberalized India. They encompass a multitude of ways in which visual excess and cultural anxiety about 'morality' and 'modernity' can be negotiated and articulated in contradictory discourses on female stardom.

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Recycle Industry: The Visual Economy of Remakes in Contemporary Bombay Film Culture

by Ramna Walia

> "Audiences now want new stories. The problem is Bollywood has no tradition of producing original screenplays"
> —Chander Lall, lawyer
>
> "The brain is a recycling bin, not a creative bin. What goes in comes out in different ways"
> —Mahesh Bhatt, filmmaker and producer

Thus spoke filmmaker and producer Mahesh Bhatt when Mr. Chander Lall, the legal representative of two of Hollywood's major studios issued "warning letters" to film producers in Bombay who were poised to "indianize" a series of Hollywood films.[1] While Lall referred to Bollywood's widespread practice of making uncredited remakes of Hollywood films as "tradition," Bhatt defiantly saw these remakes as a symptom of a larger mechanism of recycling material. In fact, the influence of other cinemas on Bombay films was reflected narratively and in other aspects of filmmaking such as fashion, poster art etc. Thus, at the center of this debate was the issue of Bombay cinema's identity as a bastardized clone of Hollywood and the counter argument that noted the distinctiveness of Bombay film culture by highlighting the "difference" in the manner of production.

In view of these unacknowledged networks of exchange, the term "remake" was often used within popular discourse as an underhanded accusation of plagiarism against Bombay films. Moreover, because most of Bombay cinema's remakes of Hollywood films were un-credited, they never secured the legitimacy attained in Hollywood and world cinemas wherein this process was seen as a reinterpretation of an earlier work or an updated modus operandi. For the most part, Bombay films were at best seen as a cinema of hybrid genres characterised by the centrality of a love story, high use of melodrama, stock characters, the insertion of song-and-dance routines and a happy ending. It is within the context of this larger narrative of what a

"Bollywood film" is, and what a remake entails, that the entire history of Bombay films got subsumed in an account of cut-and-paste credentials.

Globalization and the multifarious networks activated by an economy of global exchange have redirected the dispersed signage assigned to the past into a fresh network of production, distribution and circulation. Cinema's refusal to be posited as a fixed entity in the wake of the digital boom and the virtual transformation of the film object from a fixed entity to a dispersed one has given way to a collection of fragmented traces of the past—in digital art, retro-fashion, hand-painted posters, guest appearances by veteran film stars in self-referencing roles, song parodies, YouTube videos, fan pages, retail stores of vintage film products. In this paper, I mobilise these debates to study Bombay cinema's new and dominant method of remaking its old blockbuster films. In the last decade, film remakes have become a popular genre of filmmaking within India's dominant film producing industry in Bombay. Remakes of old blockbuster hits like *Devdas* (2002; 2009), *Don* (2006; 2012), J.P Dutta's *Umrao Jaan* (2007), *Ram Gopal Varma ki Aag* (2007), *Agneepath* (2012) and *Zanjeer* (2013), amongst many others, have led to a resurgence of old classics. Many popular films like *Satte Pe Satta* (1982), *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam* (1962)*, Qurbani* (1980) and *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) have further been announced[2].

In this paper I map the journey of a film industry that has long been marginalized as a cottage industry of cut-and-paste credentials and as a derivative genre of filmmaking: the remake. The Bombay film remake marks a crucial intervention in defining the changing contours of the term "remake" within the history of Bombay cinema and how it reflects on the journey of the Bombay film industry, from the marginalized quarters of a cottage industry to its global profile as a song-and-dance industry. This paper situates the resurgence of popular blockbuster films by studying three recent remakes —Farhan Akhtar's *Don* (2006, 2012), Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) and Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D* (2009)— and studies them as testimonials to the enduring power of blockbuster films and their performative charge within Bombay film culture discourse. While the revival of Akhtar's *Don* uses the parochial structure of the Bombay film industry and the centrality of the star, Bhansali's operatic scale of filmmaking recasts Devdas, Indian cinema's most

enduring tragic hero and *Dev D*, Kashyap's remake of *Devdas* uses the dystopic urbanscape of modern day Delhi. What is critical in these case studies is the contrary impulse of the two remakes of Devdas: the former exalts the tradition and partakes in it through Bhansali's interpretation as an auteur and the latter encapsulates and challenges any monolithic narration of Bombay film history. The three films thus offer to map the complexities of the shifting socio-cultural ethos of Bombay films through the reconfiguration of an archival memory of old films into new patterns of representation. By choosing to remake films that have a great cultural currency and that continue to circulate within popular culture, these remakes have a character of cross-fertilisation that doesn't simply reproduce its classics; they also establish an archive of cinematic legacy and rescue Bombay film history from the monolithic narrative of plagiarism. Moreover, this resurgence not only draws on the after-life of the old classics within popular culture but also reflects on the changing modes of production, circulation and exhibition of films in the contemporary Bombay film industry.

Cottage Industry of "masala" filmmaking: Bollywoodization of Bombay films

Most recently, commercial Bombay films have acquired an international profile as representatives of "Indian" cinema within global circuits of circulation as "Bollywood." Until the advent of neo-liberal policies in the early 1990s and a more global outreach of Indian cinema, commercial Bombay cinema was consigned a marginal cultural legitimacy within popular film discourse, both in India and abroad. In the post-Independence period there was a voice of growing suspicion on the "values" represented by cinema itself, which was vociferously articulated by Mahatma Gandhi. Others, like former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru saw cinema as a powerful medium in service of nation building for newly independent India. With the arrival of color film in mid-twentieth century, Bombay cinema expanded its horizons by staging a desire for leisure, locations, consumption and global tourism. This phenomenon was best captured in the foreign travel films of the 1960s like *An Evening in Paris* (Shakti Samanth, 1967), *Love in Tokyo* (Pramod Chakravorty, 1966) and *Sangam* (Raj Kapoor, 1964).[3] By the 1970s, commercial cinema had made inroads into dominant markets and honed its use of multiple genres and song-and-dance sequences, establishing itself as a mass entertainment form. Within film scholarship, however, these films rarely warranted any serious attention. In a rare

defense of this mass cultural form, the National Film Development Corporation's (NFDC) Indian Cinema Yearbook 82/83 lauded commercial Bombay cinema's phenomenal sweep over the nation. In an article titled 'Moviemania', Monojit Lahiri referred to the "great escape" provided by mainstream cinema as a "mental holiday without trespass" (Lahiri, 1982: 12).

The rise of the Indian New Wave in the early 1980s was identified with a new breed of Film Institute trained filmmakers who made films on "serious" issues. It was also during this period that the rise of television and video made the future of commercial cinema an unstable proposition. Writing about the future of Indian cinema, the Indian Film Directorate Association published *Indian Cinema: The Next Decade* in which filmmaker journalist Khwaja Ahmad Abbas contrasted "serious" cinema with the crowd-pleasing "*mirch masala-khatta-meetha* miscellanies" (1984: 8). Working within these restricted categories of art and commercial, serious and frivolous cinema, commercial films during this period began to be seen as a kind of "assembly line production tailored to the tastes of mass audiences" (Masood 1986: 23).[4] By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the explosion of cable and satellite television, the invasion of VHS, and ever-expanding pirate markets issued a serious threat to Bombay films. Due to the ease of access, cross-cultural exchanges became more frequent. For the most part, these films were adapted to the tastes of the audience and openly flouted copyright laws. In the coming years, commercial Bombay films were not only seen as frivolous but also as a bastardised form that borrowed and stole plots, music and scenes from Hollywood films. Thus, the term 'remake' emerged in this context as a lowly commercial enterprise.

In an article titled "Is Bollywood a Hollywood Clone?...", journalist Bootie Cosgrove-Mather stated the perfect "recipe" of a "Bollywood" film: "Take a Hollywood plot, sprinkle in cheesy song-and-dance numbers and pour in a gallon of melodrama. Shake well, and you've got a Bollywood movie" (Cosgrove-Mather 2003). What is underlined by such compartmentalized allegations is the marginalised status of a certain brand of cinema, reduced to being defined purely through its parent "mirror image": Hollywood. Rosie Thomas's engagement with popular Indian cinema is one of the earliest critiques of this widespread assumption inherent in a certain kind of film journalism and scholarship that has dubbed Bombay cinema a "not yet cinema",

a mere collage of "song-and-dance sequences", rich in "masala", a vulgar imitation of Hollywood trash (Thomas 1985). She argues that certain theoretical frameworks present in Euro-American film studies may fail to grasp the complexity of Indian cinematic forms, constantly inventing it as the lowly "other" of Hollywood cinema. For a long time, commercial Bombay films remained at the periphery of any serious academic engagement within film studies. Indian films that recorded their presence within international discourses on cinema (particularly the film festival circuits) were the ones that emerged from the less commercially viable but socially relevant and "realistic" films made by critically acclaimed filmmakers such as Shyam Benegal, Girish Karnad, Mani Kaul, etc. However it was the "masala" filmmaking that helped Bombay films expand its markets.

As Indian cinema's diasporic market expanded considerably in the 1990s, especially in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and South Africa, the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) emerged as a protagonist in cinema. The term "Bollywood" gained more currency and seemed to encapsulate and celebrate what was once considered disreputable—song-and-dance sequences, melodrama, "over-the-top" plot lines, garish sets and costumes. In his important intervention on this recovery of a discarded cinema, Indian film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha locates popular Bombay cinema as a global cultural industry that capitalises on a nostalgic desire for traditional roots. He refers to this as the 'Bollywoodization' of Indian cinema[5] (Rajadhyaksha 2008). Rajadhyaksha contends that at a time when Hollywood was expanding its overseas market, the term "Bollywood" became the newly coined term that helped Bombay films to establish and expand its market. While this new-found confidence was reflected in the revival of big production houses like Yash Raj Films, the circulation of these films as representative of Indian cinema now operated on a larger scale.

Navigating this new cultural currency in the global economy, the conventions and rhetorical features of popular Indian cinema were foregrounded; thus making them reflexive commodities that according to film scholar Madhav Prasad maintains "a formal continuity with the past" while displaying an anxious desire to "surpass these models" (Prasad 2009: 41). The blockbuster film is primarily defined by the high production values and stupendous box office returns. Their target is the "mass

public, with few artistic-expressive expectations. The narrative construction is usually simple, not highly innovative or revolutionary in content. The second important characteristic of the blockbuster, besides its size, is the promise of spectacularity" (King qtd. in Stringer, 2003). These are the films that were once dismissed for their lack of aesthetic values. Remakes of these films thus become a tool through which Bombay film culture is mapped. In reclaiming the past and recasting it through contemporary modes of production, distribution and circulation, remakes marked the industry's active participation in excavating its history from abrasive accounts of "formulaic" filmmaking and unabashed plagiarism. Thus the remake as a material object becomes a sign of its own mediation with the past and the present. Central to this narration is the transitory status of Bombay film culture and the politics of remembering the past as a cultural relic.

While there has been a radical shift both in the aesthetics of representation and the nature of exhibition, the digital explosion has unleashed a peculiar revival of the past. The digital explosion has led to scattered screen cultures that have shaped new patterns of consumption. The past now doesn't simply travel within institutional space of the archives or domestic mediums of television and radio; the Internet has unleashed a new cinema archive. In his book *Film Remakes,* Constantine Verevis mobilises theories of genre and intertextuality to situate the remake as the "post-modern circulation and re-circulation of images and texts" (Verevis 2009: 8). Verevis's account draws on industry, text and critical receptions and explores issues related to copyright, authorship, canon formation and film re-viewing. Similarly, in *Film Remakes as Ritual and Disguise: From Carmen to Ripley* (2006) Anat Zanger suggests that the repetitive techniques of the remake operate as the "hidden streams"[6] of an imaginary archive of cinema that illuminates the "preferences and politics involved in filmmaking practices" (Zanger 2006: 9). While these writings constitute an important body of work about the Hollywood remake, in Bombay Cinema the remake is linked directly to the persistence of cinematic idioms in popular memory. Contemporary audiences have expectations based on the memory of particular scenes, dialogues, stars, music, and fashion.[7] The film text itself becomes secondary to the circulation of the aura of the past; the memory of popular reminiscence of its stars, fashion, dialogues and songs that continue to circulate within popular culture. Therefore, I look at the remake as a cultural artefact that

draws on the heritage status of films from the past to become an active part of contemporary film culture that develops along the nodes of debates on globalisation, digital technology, stardom and popular memory.

The remake mobilizes these sites within Bombay films to trace an alternative narration of the history of Bombay film culture. This ostensible investment in nostalgia associated with cultural pasts influences the various decisions regarding the remake: the set, location, set design, publicity as well as the formulaic expectations of the audience. What are the choices that guide the selection of what constitutes "memory"? What version of our past do we reserve for our nostalgic meanderings? It is crucial to note how memory and nostalgia are constructed and mobilised to build a homogenous history of cinema and film culture in a selective fashion—not how one remembers but how "the remembered film" is mobilized to construct a narrative of cultural history of Bombay cinema. In the next three sections I focus on the selective mutation of the script in three remakes–Farhan Akhtar's *Don* (2006; 2011), Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002), and Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D* (2009)–that mobilize popular memories of the original film (songs, music, dialogue etc.) and its after-life within the narrative and visual iconography of the remake. Central to this mutation is the way in which the figure of the star becomes a means through which the shifting coordinates of Bombay film culture can be traced.

Rebranding the star: The International Profile of Farhan Akhtar's *Don*

Kamini (Helen) seduces Don (Amitabh Bachchan), the eponymous gangster in Chandra Barot's 1978 crime thriller with the blockbuster song, 'Yeh mera dil...'. Influenced by the iconography of the femme fatale in Hollywood films, Helen with her blue eyes and blond hair mobilized the image with films such as *Howrah Bridge* (Shakti Samanta, 1958), *Gumnaan* (Raja Nawathe, 1965), and *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), which came to define her star persona within popular Bombay films. Her cabaret numbers became the highlight of the films she acted in. It is not surprising then, that three decades later when film director Farhan Akhtar announced his new directorial venture *Don* (2006)—a remake of Barot's successful film—critics were quick to point out that recasting for Helen could prove a bigger "cardinal sin than substituting the leading man himself" (Sen 2005)[8]. It wasn't a surprise then that Akhtar cast leading Bombay film actor, Kareena Kapoor to play the role of Kamini,

played by Helen in the original. Kapoor's star appeal was thus mobilized in the choreography of the song (see fig. 1). Akhtar, while playing with the story line, used similar setting as the original and re-employed the popular reminiscence of the original song in his remake.

The announcement of Farhan Akhtar's *Don*, a remake of Chandra Barot's 1978 crime thriller by the same name triggered a frenzy of debates within popular media. One such tabloid said, "These [*Sholay* and *Don*] are films that *can't* be remade, that *musn't*. Write in subtle asides into your films, name your characters Vijay, Roma and Jasjit, and chuckle to yourself. Don't look at the icon and try to top it" (Sen 2005).
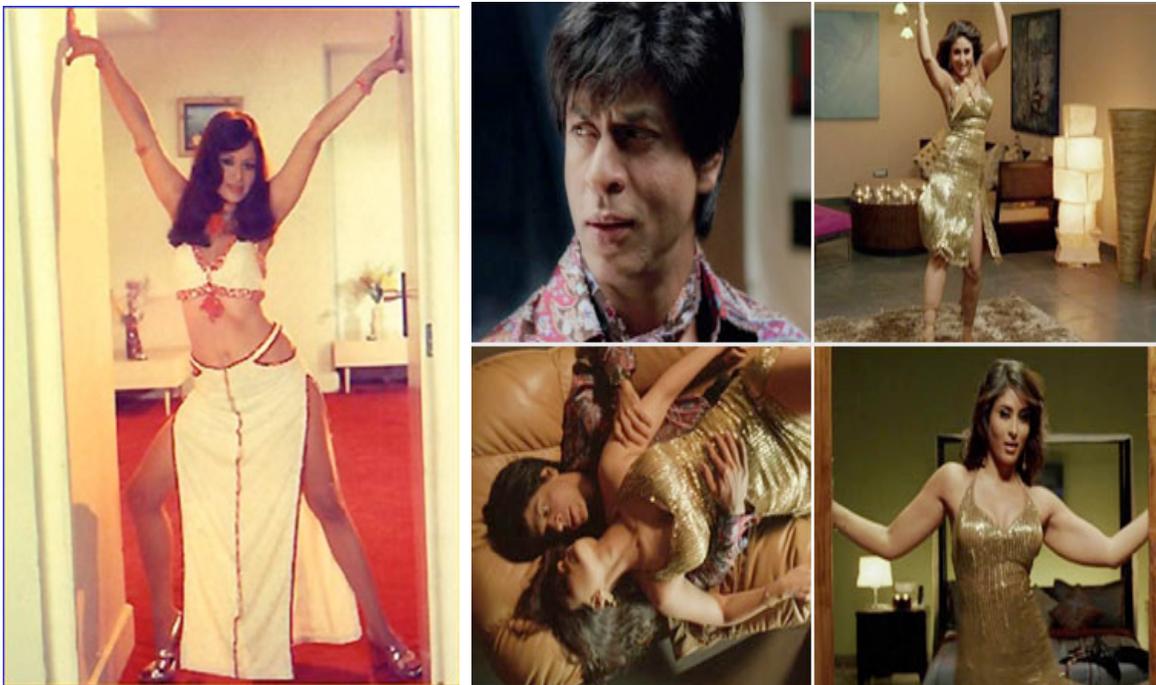
Fig. 1: Helen in *Don* (1978) and Kareena Kapoor in *Don: The chase Begins* (2006)

However, looking at old Bombay films as icons had become the new norm and the desire to equate it was a challenge for filmmakers like Akhtar. The first theatrical trailer of *Don* (2006) assumes audience knowledge of the original *Don* by opening with an aerial shot of Kuala Lumpur's cityscape and playing the original film's theme music as the actor Shah Rukh Khan is revealed as the new Don.[9] Following this introduction, a series of shots from the film emphasising action through fights, car chases, gadgets and thrill fill the screen. Finally, an array of stars is introduced with the same names given to characters in the original film. Using the leading stars of

the Hindi film industry, Akhtar creates a multi-star cast ensemble with Priyanka Chopra, Arjun Rampal, Kareena Kapoor and Om Puri. In this regard, Akhtar invites his audience to refer to the memory of each 'character' from the original by using contemporary leading stars. *Don* draws on the star's centrality to stage its entertainment value and markets its star cast as an "advertisable" element. In addition, the remake draws on audience memories of the original film's dialogue, songs, and characters by retaining and reworking them.

Infused with the vision of kinetic perception linked to the "song-and-dance routine" along with knowledge of widely circulating Hollywood genres, popular Bombay films have for a long time mixed generic conventions to deliver a mass entertainment form. While exploring this ever-evolving entertainment cinema and its domination in the world of film production, distribution and consumption, Rosie Thomas sees popular Indian cinema's distinctiveness in its formal continuities with traditional theatrical traditions as well as in what the filmmakers saw as "blending the (right) *masalas*"—a collage of formulas with a mix of drama, comedy, song and dance (Thomas 1985: 124, 120). It is in reference to this distinctiveness that Thomas asserts the need for an understanding and analysis of the films and their successes. The dedicated film broadcast time slots and channels on television granted the popular blockbuster films an after-life within the domestic screen culture. Fan clubs, video libraries, and regular telecasts further assured audience familiarity with dialogue, stars, and the songs of the films. The remake confronts this familiar terrain of knowledge by foregrounding questions related to culture, consumption, and entertainment. It is not surprising that most of the remakes' originals were released in the 1970s—an era of multi-starrers that epitomised the "masala" blockbuster and saw the rise of superstar Amitabh Bachchan.[10]

The 1970s saw a shift in the impetus of Bombay cinema from what Madhav Prasad (1998) calls the "feudal family romance" of the 1960s to a pronounced social dislocation. The Nehruvian dream of social equality and economic stability for the newly independent nation had waned in the face of political turmoil and gave rise to cinematic narratives of loss that featured figures like the orphan, the illegitimate son, the widowed mother and the urban dweller. The war with the neighbouring state of Pakistan, the rise of the Left in politics, spiralling price rise and the displacement of

the urban poor (as a result of government policies), and the declaration of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's election code violation during the 1971 central Elections further instigated the tense economic and social situation of the early 1970s. Following a surge of protests against the government, state emergency was declared on June 26, 1975, civil rights were suspended, and reports of gross violence against citizens were reported. It was in this tense socio-political environment that the figure of the 'angry young man' as "an agent of national reconciliation" (Prasad 1998: 141) emerged and connected with the Hindi film audience. It was in Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer* (1973) that this persona first took shape. Amitabh Bachchan was a talented actor who made his debut with *Saat Hindustani* (K.A. Abbas, 1969). Initially unsuccessful as an actor in terms of box-office success, a few important roles followed including Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anand* (1971) and *Guddi* (1971). However it was Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer* that raised Bachchan to stardom. In the film, Bachchan played an upright and brooding police officer who is haunted by the personal childhood trauma of his parents' murder. His reinvention of the Bombay film hero through his performance of anger and vengeance acquired a "quasi-revolutionary fervour" (Mishra 2002: 134) that proved cathartic during this period of political turmoil. The depiction of anger in films like *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1975), *Trishul* (Yash Chopra, 1978) and *Muqadar ka Sikander* (Prakash Mehra, 1978) recast the overwhelming focus on domestic life. However, it was with films like *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Sholay,* that Bachchan consolidated his position. These multi-star cast films went on to become major hits riding high on Bachchan's stardom. When Farhan Akhtar announced the remake of *Don*, there was a flurry of speculation on online portals and newspapers; everyone was curious about the cast of the film. Besides the sundry of popular characters, who would be the right "inheritor" for Amitabh Bachchan's legacy? Thirty years after Barot created the suave underworld gangster, Akhtar resurrected the legacy of *Don.*

Barot's *Don* narrates the story of a police hunt for the elusive gangster Don (Amitabh Bachchan) and his partners. In the course of the film, Don dies and is replaced by his *double*, a paan-chewing street performer named Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan). Vijay comes from a working class background and agrees to be part of the plan to help the two uprooted children of a petty criminal, Jasjit (Pran). His identity as a police informer, however, is jeopardised with the death of his mentor, Inspector D'Silva

(Iftekhar). The second half of the film traces Vijay's struggle to establish his innocence. The double visual economy of the star (Bachchan as Don and Vijay) within the film was used primarily in the metaphorical bifurcation of the bipolar moral universe of the film.[11] Through the character of Vijay, the moral compass of the film shifts to his struggle in the world of deceit, revenge and double crossing. The film has sub-plots of revenge, conspiracy and hidden identities, and lacked what its writer Javed Akhtar calls the "Hindi picture requirements" of family sentiments and traditional melodrama.[12]

With no budget left for publicity, *Don* (fig. 2) was released with one hundred and twenty prints on May 12, 1978 and was declared a flop.[13] Within a week, though, word-of-mouth publicity and a last minute addition to the film in the form of the song '*Khaike paan Banaras wala*...' became a rage and the film collection picked up. The film ran for fifty weeks in all centers and for seventy-five weeks in Hyderabad.[14] *Don* became an accidental success that rode high on its style, dialogues, songs and, most of all, on Bachchan's stardom. In the original film's dramatic and action-centric poster, Amitabh Bachchan occupies the central position against a labyrinthine backdrop painted yellow and orange. The poster splits halfway in four ensnarling circles marked by a bullet clipboard. Bachchan is captured in the image in action. On the extreme right corner and mid-right angle of the poster are Roma (Zeenat Aman) and Jasjit (Pran) respectively holding guns. The central theme of the poster underlines the packaging of thrill as the main selling point of the film[15].

Fig. 2: The official poster of Barot's *Don* (1978)

The film was remade in a number of regional cinemas including – K.S.R Doss's *Yugandhar* (1979), a Tamil remake titled *Billa* (R. Krishnamurthy, 1980) and Sasikumar's Malayalam film, *Sobhraj* (1986). *Billa* marked the beginning of Rajnikanth's career, a superstar who is revered as a deity in most regions of south India.[16] *Don* was a film that seemed to "reserve" its iconic lead role for superstars. In a film industry where family empires rule, the remake usually works through a logic of inheritance. It was this very logic that made writer-lyricist Javed Akhtar's son Farhan Akhtar decide to take on the task of adapting a film originally scripted by his father. In an interview, Farhan Akhtar said the film was a tribute, "not just to that film, but to that time, to the films Pa and Salim uncle (*Salim Khan,* who co-wrote *Don* with Javed Akhtar) and Mr. Bachchan made" (Akhtar 2005). The strong parochial association within the family thus became a determining factor in the casting of the film.

On April 24, 2006, the popular movie website Rediff.com released the first look of Farhan Akhtar's *Don* (2006). Set against high-rise buildings, at the centre of the poster was the half-illuminated front profile of India's leading superstar Shah Rukh Khan. Bathed in an electric mix of green and black, the new 'Don' appeared with the tagline "The chase begins again" (fig. 3). Shah Rukh Khan became the star that

inherited the brand that Bachchan created. Even before the release of the film, new hierarchies developed beyond the customary circuits of box office returns; thus shaping star power. Reports of rivalry between Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan further intensified the latter's image as the heir apparent to the superstardom of Bachchan. Thus Shah Rukh Khan's popularity became another way that transference of the famous anti-hero's title was transferred from Hindi cinema's *Shehenshah,* Amitabh Bachchan to its *Baadshah*, Shah Rukh Khan[17].

Fig. 3: First official poster of Farhan Akhtar's
Don: The Chase begins Again (2006)

A struggling actor who came to Bombay with the dream to rule the film industry, Shah Rukh Khan found a place for himself in the industry after a successful foray in the world of theatre and television. In director duo Abbas Mustan's *Baazigar* (1993), Yash Chopra's *Darr* (1993), and Rahul Rawail's *Anjaam* (1994), Khan became popular in the early 1990s through his portrayal of the "psychotic hero". In these films, he portrayed a sort of clinical detachment from the social world. He played the stalker and a killer with obsessive and psychotic tendencies. With Khan, the face of the Hindi film hero changed (Mazumdar 2000, Ganti 2004: 124), and this new anti-hero of Bombay cinema could now "die in the film and lose the girl" (Chopra 2007: 128). It took less than half a decade for this new hero to reign the film industry, But his position as a superstar got consolidated with films like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (Yash Chopra, 1997) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998). These films mobilised a global appeal and the

figure of the NRI became a significant presence. Shah Rukh Khan became an embodiment of the aspirational dreams of the nation. In an interview to *Filmfare*, Khan asserted this shift in the perception of heroism and triumphantly declared, "In the 1970s, the hero was anti-establishment but I promise a better world...The yuppie doesn't bash a truck-full of *goondas*. He kills in the stock market." (Chopra 2007: 161).[18] In this statement, we see the historical shift ushered in by globalization. Shah Rukh Khan, the star built on his career through this yuppie figure and carries forward the suave image as the figure of Don becomes the embodiment of this transformation- from a politically charged performance of anger of Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen persona as an angry young man to an urban consumerist iconography heralded by Khan's yuppie avatar.[199]

The original film had created a flurry of fashion trends upon its release. Aware of this overwhelming identification of the film with "style", Akhtar's *Don* was promoted through various collaborations such as the release of the "Don line of clothing" by fashion men's fashion brand, Louis Philippe. Other stars like Kareena Kapoor, playing Kamini, also collaborated with the hair endorsement brand, Garnier that used the song picturised on the actor as part of its promotion. The film channels the stars and the long-term contracts with a number of fashion products to promote the film, the primary aim for which was to reinvent the stylish villain of the 70s into an aspirational lifestyle embodied and endorsed by Akhtar's Don. Moreover, the tie-ups with various brands also draw attention to the array of popular stars lined up by Akhtar. The consumer endorsements promoted by these stars directly corresponds to Akhtar's re-packaging of Don's antics and the consumerist streak espoused by the film – in its characterization of Don as well as it's hyper-stylistic mise-en-scène.

Within minutes into Akhtar's *Don*, Khan bathes in a chic white bathtub while watching the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon series. The phone rings and he is informed that his former employee, Ramesh (Diwakar Pundir), has broken away from the "business" and married his girlfriend, Kamini (Kareena Kapoor). In the next scene, Don brutally murders Ramesh. In the contemporary re-invention of Don, Shah Rukh Khan re-styled the character in tandem with the screen legacy associated with the 1990s psychotic hero fused along with the promise of luxury and style associated with the quintessential NRI figure of the yuppie. It is through this play of star persona(s) and

through the film's ability to harness the power of technology that Akhtar gave an "international profile" to his film.

In his contemporary version, Akhtar places Don in Malaysia and sets the narrative against the backdrop of mafia wars. Don is a drug smuggler and an international arms supplier. In Barot's *Don*, the opening credits roll over a tinted red screen and a montage of fights and chases from the film. Placed against a hue of green and white, the opening credits of Akhtar's *Don* set the pace of the narration against a hyper-stylised panorama of the cityscape; the roads, trains, elevators, highways and columns of high-rise buildings (fig. 4). This change from the composite field of action in the original to a play with global urbanism in the remake sets the stage for a comparative story-telling through its visual design.

Fig. 4: Urban landscape in Akhtar's *Don* (2006)

For instance, unlike his predecessor who occupied the space of the private in the form of obscure hotel rooms, barren landscapes (opening sequence of counterfeit deal) and his secured den, the new Don is mobile and occupies both public and private space. He inhabits nightclubs, polo grounds and five star hotels with equal ease. While the original's opening sequence stages the counterfeit deal in an isolated rugged landscape, Akhtar introduces his protagonist in a coffee house aided by a remixed version of the title song '*Main hoon Don*...' as the background score. Such contrasting and yet self-conscious visual and aural details evoke the phantom presence of the original in the fast-paced, technological and modern *Don.* The choice of the city of Kuala Lumpur not only helps to eroticise the appeal of the film,

but also locates the narrative within a world that emblematises a global urbanity, a touristic journey of through the modern architecture (high-rise buildings), cafes, nightclubs and shopping malls. In her essay, "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe" (2000) Susan Buck-Morss responds to the entry of new visual regimes in everyday life by highlighting the polarities embedded in the city and engaging with an on-going debate regarding the urban space as a "consumer playground". Akhtar creates a hyper-stylized and sanitized global urbanity in *Don*. It is this combination of architectural extravaganza, urbanity and speed that makes the new *Don* instrumental in articulating a globalized consumerist experience—an experience that gets anchored in the construction of the suave villain, Don, and gets promoted through its star Shah Rukh Khan.

Akhtar expands on Barot's influences for the original by referencing figures from James Bond to the contemporary action series *Mission Impossible* (1996-11) and *Bourne* franchise (2002-12). What changes in the new *Don* is a paradoxical marriage between a *desi* James bond, accessorized with designer clothes, cars, gadgets and girls and the impulse to remake the dominant traditions of the popular film. Gadgets in the film function as symbolic representations of this technological modernity. An extension of the visual ensemble of Don and the power he exudes with his gadgets comprising primarily of sundry explosives render him a quasi-super hero. Akhtar's vision of the futuristic aspect of the film was foregrounded in his use of hyperstylisation. In the car chase sequence where Don is hunted by DCP D'Silva (Boman Irani), for instance, Akhtar uses split screens to convey the tempo and field of action. This device is associated with an exhibitionist address in the action blockbuster genre of films that employ what film scholar Jeffrey Sconce calls the "explosive apathy" which uses an accelerated velocity to draw attention to representation rather than narrative.[20] Driven by such kinetic energy of action, technology and verticality of the cityscape, *Don* reinvents Barot's thriller by creating a hyper-stylised format.

In the original *Don*, action was used primarily to reveal suspects (senior intelligence officer Malik is revealed as the head of Don's gang), foiled kidnapping (of Jasjit's children) and the final exposé of the gang. The central force behind these revelations was Vijay's helpless quest to establish his real identity as the police and his fellow

mobsters were hunting him down. It was in Vijay that the moral compass of the film got fixed; in Akhtar's version, the affable Vijay is marginalised. This was highlighted in the promotional posters and trailers of the film. Akhtar deviated from the original at two crucial moments of his film. Right before the narrative breaks for intermission, D'Silva is revealed as the mastermind behind the plan to kill Don and take over his "business". However, it is the climax of the film that overturns the entire premise of the plot and its moral centre. The audience is suddenly told that Vijay never got to participate in the swap with Don at all. Don was playing Vijay in order to buy his freedom and mobility. Here, Akhtar exploits the knowledge of the original to shockingly foreground the "non-role" of the street smart performer, Vijay.

Responding to this absence and twist in the film, Clare Wilkinson-Weber suggests that Vijay is not a desirable icon of consumption the way Don is. The publicity posters and trailers of the film were centered on the protagonist, Don. Dressed in black from head to toe with slick gadgets, he appeared as a brand. Weber further notes how "having escaped the bonds of Bombay to immerse itself himself in more striking landscapes of wealth and privilege, the new *Don* proposes that Don himself has escaped the possibility of emulation" (Wilkinson-Weber 2010: 137). The spaces of the mansion and that of a working class house cannot coincide even in the performative vocabulary of a narrative imperative.

Preventing the unfolding of Vijay's tale of lost identity in the new version, Farhan Akhtar distanced himself from the 'twist' of the swap that lay at the core of the original script of *Don*. A week before *Don* hit theatres across India, Akhtar asserted that *Don* becomes "an *entirely new film*". By the time it ends "you realise...that your point of reference for Don, the character, is not going to be applicable to this Don, because this is a *different* character. He may say the same lines, but he is not the same Don...because they are two *different* movies that happen to begin with a common premise." [21] So, while privileging the character of Don over Vijay, Farhan Akhtar's *Don* re-works the binaries embedded within the values associated with good and evil, Akhtar invests heavily in Don's hyperbolic declaration in the original—"*Don ko pakarna mushkil hi nahin namumkin hai*" ("It's not merely difficult to catch Don, it's impossible"). Akhtar cleverly takes this statement literally in the new version. Thus while drawing on the syntax of the original, Akhtar reinvented the narrative in the

remake. Further, he mobilised popular memory associated with the original dialogue track to build a narrative of defiance and innovation. This selective engagement with the basic premise of the original complicated the new *Don's* relationship to the original.

Within months of the release and success of its adaptation of Barot's *Don*, Akhtar announced its sequel titled, *Don 2: The Chase Continues* (2011). In the sequel he transports the story of Don (now primarily resting on the character of the new Don of 2006 rather than the original script) to the ganglands of the European mafia; thus displacing the simplistic relationship between the original film and the remake. While *Don* (2006) reinvented the mise-en-scène of the original, its point of reference was the original script by Salim-Javed. Farhan Akhtar, in an interview to *Hindustan Times* declared that *Don 2* "was like starting with a clean slate. I had the opportunity to do whatever I wanted to with those characters".[22] The sequel posits the possibility of converting the remake into a film franchise: the *Don* series.

While there are very few sequels in Bombay cinema, most recently, they have done very well at the box-office with films like *Dhoom* (2004; 2006) *Golmaal* (2006; 2008; 2012), *Dabangg* (2010, 2013), *Krish* (2006; 2013), *Wanted* (2008) and *Race* (2008; 2012). As a result, the franchise is now regarded as a way of reducing the risk involved in big budget productions (Ghosh 2011). Santosh Desai, an advertising professional, points out that "in the age of information overload, familiar signposts are reassuring and sequels offer the comfort of the predictable. You have an idea (of) what you are going to see" (Ghosh 2011). But what happens when the proverbial is defamiliarized? By conflating the categories of the remake and the sequel, Akhtar expanded the grammatical ontology of both. Rick Altman related the sequel to "repeatable titles" (like the *Godfather* Series (1972-1993) and *StarTrek* (1975-2013)) as well as to "proprietary characters" (e.g. James Bond, Rambo, Indiana Jones) which balance novelty and familiarity in repetition (Altman 1999). What the new *Don* series destabilizes is the chronological order of narration as well as the memory of the original.[23]

Moreover, the series reinvents Shah Rukh Khan as an action hero; and by extension, the persona of Don portrayed in the series is liberated from the original

film. Drawing on the hierarchical ties of stardom and re-working the formula of the "masala" blockbuster, Akhtar's *Don* film series showcases the ambiguous relationship between the *legacy* of the original and its remake. Before the release of *Don 2*, Akhtar announced the launch of *Don: The Origin*, a comic novel that was publicised as a prequel to his film at the Comic Con Express in Mumbai (fig. 5). With this move, Akhtar consciously marketed his reinvention of the original Don into a super-hero figure that drew on the iconography of the fantasy genre, Shah Rukh Khan's stardom and the inheritance of title from the original Don and superstar, Amitabh Bachchan on the one hand; and the global icon of Bombay cinema's blockbuster format on the other. Thus, Akhtar uses the figure of the star to channel the narrative through various locations, genres and formats and resurrects the Don brand within the contemporary context.
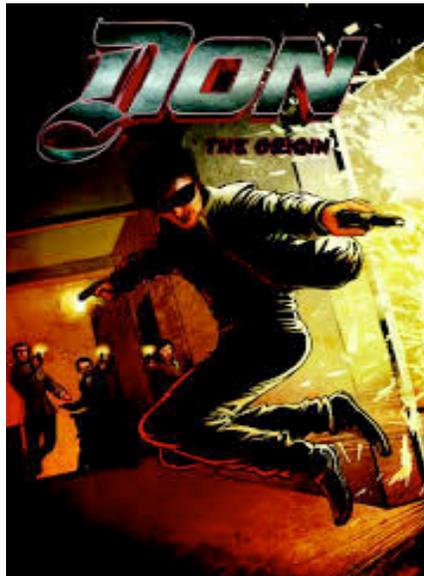
Fig. 5: Cover of *Don: The Origin* (Comic Novel)

As I have argued, Farhan Akhtar's *Don* series raises important questions regarding the mutability of the film object as it explodes the simple narrative of cinematic history while employing the stardom of Shah Rukh Khan in branding this franchise. Here the term "superstar" plays a critical role in defining the market value of the star. This value entails box-office returns, awards, world tours as well as the status of the stars within ancillary industries such as advertisement and fashion. Akhtar's *Don* deliberately mobilizes the hyper-stylized set design and action sequences to justify the rebranding of the film through Shah Rukh Khan. While in *Don*, Shah Rukh Khan bequeathed the role of superstar of the 1970s- Amitabh Bachchan, in Bhansali's

magnum opus *Devdas*, he partakes in commemorating a milestone tragic hero of Bombay cinema of the 1950s- Dilip Kumar. The lavish scale of the film's production becomes a means through which Bhansali makes an interjection in the long tradition of remakes of Devdas in the history of Bombay cinema. The multi-star cast, elaborate film sets, and extravagant costumes reconstruct the social realism of Bimal Roy's *Devdas* into a quintessential Bollywood saga of mytho-historical scale. While Akhtar plays on the notion of "legacy" and re-imagines Barot's stylish thriller in urbanesque and unchartered exotic locales, Bhansali relies on his intervention as a visual auteur of Bombay films by reconfiguring the long traveling narrative codes of the Devdas story. Again, the figure of the star influences the ways in which the legacy of the original film is repackaged in the remake. Thus the superstar triumvirate who has been associated with defining films of Bombay cinema—Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan—get revalorised in the remake while drawing attention to the memory of the film through the figure of the star. Bhansali mobilises the same by casting Khan as the quintessential tragic film hero and dramatizing the melodramatic tale on an epic scale.

Reconstructing Narrative Codes of Bombay films: The Visual Economy in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*

A dazzling carriage stops at the red carpet as film stars Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai step out to celebrate the premiere of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's extravagant saga of love, *Devdas* (2002), at the 55th Festival de Cannes. The first Indian film outside the art cinema circuit to be invited in the festival's out-of-competition category, Bhansali's *Devdas* embodied the distinctive features of popular Hindi cinema; melodrama, lavish production values, and an emphasis upon stars and spectacle (Ganti 2004: 3). Heralded at the festival as the epitome of "Bollywood's song-and-dance extravaganza"[24], the elaborate canvas of the film reinvented Indian cinema's proverbial tragic hero; and as the most enduring character on Indian screen, the cinematic profile of Devdas spans thirteen films in eight decades. The first was produced in 1928 by the Eastern Film Syndicate as a silent film (Naresh Chandra Mitra: 1928). The last and most recent version was Anurag Kashyap's reinterpretation of the Devdas myth in his *Dev D* (2009).

Devdas has its genesis in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novella by the same name and is the story of a doomed love affair between a rich landlord's son, Devdas Mukherjee, and his childhood sweetheart and neighbour, Parvati, who belongs to a different caste and class. A city educated Devdas returns to his village, Taj Sonapur, but is unable to break out of societal barriers of caste and class. Under pressure from his father, Devdas hastily concludes his romance with Parvati (also referred to as Paro). A jilted Parvati gives into parental pressure and marries a rich landlord/*zamindar* (Bhuvan). Tormented by Parvati's marriage, Devdas moves to the city of Calcutta and becomes an alcoholic. It is in this section of the novella that Sarat Chandra introduces Chandramukhi, the golden hearted courtesan who falls in love with Devdas. Devdas takes a train journey across the nation, only to land at Parvati's doorstep to breathe his last.

Devdas (1955) metaphorically depicted a newly independent India at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. The choice between rural and urban became central to the dislocation of old feudal values. The city came to represent the modern and all that was rural came to signify the traditional. In the novel, the city is dark, decadent and tragic while the village becomes a space that suppresses individualism. These modern contradictions further find expression in *Devdas's* melodramatic tenor, which reveals the ambivalences resulting in this collapse of the old world order and struggle to usher in the new. The film adaptations of *Devdas*, like Chattopadhyay's novel, explored these conflicts and contradictions in Devdas and made him into a "national hero" (Vasudevan 1989). The novel was a moderate success during its time and it was cinema that "elevated the fictional narrative from melodrama to myth" [25](Chopra 2007:198).

Bombay cinema's successful foray into the adaptation of Chattopadhyay's novella began in 1935 when director P.C. Barua made *Devdas* with K.L. Saigal as the lead figure. In her study of *Devdas*'s travels within Bombay cinema, Madhuja Mukherjee shows how Barua's *Devdas* marked a point of departure from the novella. For Mukherjee, it was the narrative style of Barua's film that sets the stage for the construction of a cinematic idiom that grows through other Devdases (Mukherjee 2009). Citing K.A. Abbas's comment in *FilmIndia,* Mukherjee argued that Parvati as a

pujarin (a devotee) gets incorporated in the visual vocabulary of the *Devdas* films. Abbas contends:

> Out of the very lens of the camera walked away the slender figure of a woman, going further and further, her back turned to the audience, a puja thali (vessel) in her hand. A beautiful figure—and mysterious. The audience kept guessing; who is she and why? And where is she going?[26]

Barua thus gave visual language and iconography to the characters from Chattopadhyay's novella which became the reference point for the many adaptations that followed.[27] But it was probably in Bimal Roy's *Devdas* (1955) that the story found its most popular form. Roy's *Devdas* emerged in a period of intense socio-political turbulence.

Forty-seven years after an entire "generation wept over *Devdas*" filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali cast Hindi cinema's superstar Shah Rukh Khan to in his 2002 remake *Devdas* remake. At a news conference held during the Cannes festival, Shah Rukh Khan said that remaking *Devdas* was like "trying to remake *The Sound of Music*. As far as an Indian audience and Indian cinema is concerned, you are treading on real thin ice" (Mckay 2002). Made with a huge budget of over five million USD, Bhansali's *Devdas* became the most expensive film in the history of the Bombay film industry. By modernising the visual and emotional tenor of the story from the social-romanticism of Bimal Roy's *Devdas* to an almost an epic historical form, Bhansali mobilized star discourses by casting Shah Rukh Khan, Chandramukhi (Madhuri Dixit) and Paro (Aishwarya Rai) to create an operatic spectacle that featured monumental set designs, costumes and jewellery.

In this regard, Shah Rukh Khan became a vehicle for both *Don* and *Devdas* and the perfect endorsement for a reinvention of the cultic space associated with the popular blockbuster film. By marrying the reified blockbuster film and the aura of the star, Bhansali and Akhtar invested primarily in Khan's stardom. He in turn displayed his "protean ability...to be interchangeable with Bollywood's multitude of stars, and thus, to be in some sense the 'star of stars'" (Chopra 2007: 129). In casting Khan as "Don" and "Devdas", Akhtar and Bhansali successfully portrayed him as the ultimate heir of Bombay Cinema.

Unlike the figure of the Vaishnav mendicants in Roy's film, in Bhansali's version the two women, played by Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya Rai, are adept at verbalising their love during the Durga Puja celebrations (see glossary) by performing a well-choreographed dance to '*Dola Re..*' (fig. 6). The women perform in Parvati's mansion and declare their love for Devdas. Through this performance in the domestic space of a *kothi*, Chandramukhi—the "other" woman—verbalises her love in a space that is traditionally denied to her. But soon the courtesan is confronted by Paro's son-in-law, Kalibabu and her family. Chandramukhi questions the value of Kalibabu and reminds him of the feudal link between the courtesans and Zamindars. Despite opening a space of defiance for Chandramukhi, Bhansali reverts back to melodrama and both women return to their delegated social spaces as the narrative carries on. Both women, like in the novel and in the earlier films, continue to occupy what Nandy referred to as the "conjugal presence that is mostly passive and ornamental" (Nandy 1995: 70).

Fig. 6: 'Dola Re..' from Bhansali's *Devdas* brought together two reigning stars of Bombay Cinema

Reacting strongly to such gross deviations and dissolution of the cultural nuances of Bengali culture, noted film director Rituparno Ghosh criticized the dance sequence as a preposterous insertion into the story "only to make Madhuri and Aishwarya dance"[28] (Ghosh 2002). The commercial imperatives of these historical deviations can be seen in producer Bharat Shah's triumphant declaration: "*Public wo song dekhne baar baar jayegi*" ("People will go and see the film over and over again just to

see this song").[29] Indeed, the song became the highlight of the film's promotions[30].

Opening on a high note, Bhansali's *Devdas* introduces an aspirational dreamscape that turns narration into a visual spectacle. The crisis of contradictions embodied in *Devdas* and the distinctions of class, caste, social standing, country and the city break through the overwhelming grandeur of the mise-en-scène. Ashis Nandy places the tragedy of Devdas as a representation of the "anguish of the first generation of a rural elite entering the pre-war colonial city. His (Devdas's) self-destruction bears the imprint of both his ambivalent defiance of the village to which he tries to return before his death in one last, doomed effort to reconnect to a lost past and escape anonymous death in a soulless city- and his rejection of the urbane charms of a seductive new lifestyle" (Nandy 1995: 52-53). These sites of Devdas's dislocation in Bhansali's film are overwhelmed by the grand sets, which obliterate all distinctions between class (which was the central conflict in the novel and Roy's film) and socially marked spaces of the streets, *kothas*, and *kothis*. The massive sets of Devdas and Paro's feudal family homes stand adjacent to one another in Bhansali's version (fig. 7); a spatial imagination criticized by Rituparno Ghosh since it causes the country/city narrative to get lost. By privileging the visual, Bhansali's *Devdas* creates two different orders of the story; in mobilising the visual opulence of space, the director collapses the social markers of interior/exterior, city and country and the spaces of legitimacy and illegitimacy. What we see on screen is a seamless unfolding of visual opulence and 'monumental sets;' thus all the spaces together, destroy the traditional cultural codes of narration. Corey Creekmur suggests that with Bhansali's *Devdas*, the contradictions of modernity are "artificially overstated"; thus exoticising the cinematic currency of the Devdas phenomenon.[31] .

Fig. 7: The opulent set of Chandramukhi's parlour in Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002)

In this narration, Bhansali exteriorises the melodrama of the original and transports it to the ocular terrain of the film. Towards the end, Devdas returns to meet Paro one last time before his imminent death and through circular tracking, the camera captures the mansion and we see Paro rush out to get a glimpse of Devdas. The official website of *Devdas* describes the set design of Paro's post marital abode, Zamindar Bhuwan's haveli as follows:

> (…) huge with long corridors. So huge that when she wants to meet a dying Devdas at the end, she has to run and run. One sees her becoming smaller and smaller and finally get hidden within the length the mansion. She never makes it to see Devdas and thus came out the pathos. The house also had painted walls with stand-still figures. Thus telling the story of Paro who without Devdas was like the paintings. Viewed as having life, yet quite lifeless. [32]

Bhansali inserts himself into the Devdas meta-text and myth while signposting his version wherein spectacle lends itself to a revised narration of the classic Devdas story. It is not the change in the story as much as the impetus laid on the costumes and the sets of the film that allowed for a re-imagining of the tale through sheer opulence. The film became an ode to the grandiosity of the tale and its symbolic power. The panoramic vision of Bhansali's *Devdas* used the trope of excess and contrasts starkly with Roy's depiction of Devdas, which operates within the conventions of social realism and draws attention to Bhansali's intervention and reinvention of Devdas. While his departures remained within the boundaries set forth by the original myth and archetype, Bhansali's *Devdas* invested both in the original

narrative and the legacy of the tragic figure. By contrast, Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D* (2009*)* defies the star system, narrative patterns, and visual templates established by his predecessors; thus embodying a strand of dissent against the celebratory regime of the Bollywood blockbuster.

Excavating the urban nether land: *Dev D* as the counter remake

How do we read Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D*, a "story of outcasts", a film which sets out to counter the legacy of Hindi cinema's tragic hero, Devdas? [33] Anurag Kashyap first became known through his writing (*Satya,* Varma:1998) and later forayed into filmmaking. A spate of critically acclaimed films like *Black Friday* (2004), *Gulaal* (2009) and *No Smoking* (2007) followed. But despite being established as a "master of modern cinema", Kashyap continued to be a peripheral player in the domain of mainstream Bombay cinema.[34] None of his films had easy releases. After a difficult negotiation with the censor board, *Paanch* (2003), his directorial debut film cleared, but became mired in disputes between the producer and distributors and was never released.[35] His next film, *Black Friday* (2005), an investigative docu-drama about the 1993 Mumbai terrorist blasts did not get a censor clearance until 2007; and, with the commercial failure of *No Smoking* (2007), Kashyap's survival in the industry became difficult. Despite these challenges, Kashyap gained critical appreciation for his unconventional subjects and experimental techniques of filmmaking (Mazumdar: 2010). His films traveled through numerous film festival circuits to establish him as an ace filmmaker. Given this profile, it was surprising that Kashyap chose Devdas as the theme of his film.

In *Dev D*, the coming-of-age story of Davinder Singh Dillon (Abhay Deol), Dev returns from London to visit his village after Parminder aka Paro (Mahie Gill), his childhood sweetheart, emails nude pictures to him. Unable to adequately respond to Paro's sexual assertiveness, Dev spurns her and moves to the city of Delhi where he becomes swamped by the urban rhythms of the city, and indulges in alcohol and drugs. In Kashyap's remake, he urbanizes the figure and relocates him to contemporary India.

Divided into three chapters, each narrating the story of Paro, Chanda and Dev, *Dev D* gave individual characters agency and rescued the dominant love triangle

narrative by decreasing the role of parental authority in the film. Kashyap's Paro is a rustic woman of strong, earthy sexuality who, in a daring portrayal of her unabashed sexuality, is shown carrying a folded mattress on her bicycle to the fields so she can have sex with Dev. The journey of Lenny, a half-Indian, half-French sex worker who turns to commercial sex after a scandalous MMS (Multi-media Service) video upturns her life, is tracked spatially by a handheld camera as she moves from her elite central Delhi abode to the lonely landscape of Canada, and back to Paharganj. The set design of her boudoir evokes decadence, deviance and a strange sense of freedom. It is here that Lenny is recast as Chandamukhi as societal restrictions are surrendered in order to narrate "the story about the times we live in" (Kashyap 2009), and Kashyap uses flashbacks to narrate each character's back stories. The subversion of popular idioms thus became the conduit to weave tales of modern India.

In an interview with Shradha Sukumaram of *Midday*, Kashyap defined the film as a "contemporary updated version of today and how Devdas is applicable to the youth of today, how youth looks at relationships, love, and the real things in an age of communication".[36] *Dev D* drew on news stories of MMS leaks such as a case involving the circulation of images of a schoolgirl who was recorded having sex. Similarly, in *Dev D*, Chandramukhi becomes a sex worker after she is humiliated by an Internet leak. Other incidents like the death of seven people because of a rich boy's drunken driving are also referenced in the narrative—Dev runs over pedestrians in a state of intoxication. Thus Kashyap's film focussed on its urban markets and its success in multiplexes across major film centres in India made the film a metropolitan hit.[37]

The first theatrical trailer of *Dev D* provided insightful pointers to the method that Kashyap employed to stamp his mark on the Devdas myth. The trailer introduced Dev through a scene where he has a verbal argument with his lover (who is she?) in a local bus. The running text commentary says: "All that Dev ever wanted was love." As the scene returns to interrupt the text, the woman jolts the audience out of its complacent knowledge of the idiom of Devdas and by extension the limits of popular Hindi cinema. She says all he "ever wants is to fuck". The running commentary returns to state: "the fuck up is that he has everything but love". A celebratory aural

track explodes and Kashyap formally introduces his cocaine snorting 'hero', Paro and Chanda. The trailer ends teasingly with the caveat: "This season try not falling in love". Integrating newspaper headlines with the visual sprawl of urban dystopia, *Dev D* subverted the templates of sex, sexuality, agency and desire, placing the narrative in the midst of a transforming youth culture (fig. 8).

Fig. 8: Abhay Deol as the modern Devdas

Kashyap's characterization of Dev defies his predecessors' representation of the conventional lover. In fact, in Kashyap's words Dev "does not know who he is and therefore his definition of love is very concocted, very confused".[38] Kashyap's first step to counter the Devdas myth was to cast Abhay Deol—the poster boy of independent cinema—instead of a megastar. Deol belongs to a family of film stars whose unconventional roles in films like Sanjay M. Khanduri's *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (2007), Navdeep Singh's *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007) and Dibakar Banerjee's *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye*! (2008).[39] In an article in *Screen India*, titled 'Abhay Deol is a Braveheart', the actor was praised for playing Devdas as an "adjective and not as a romantic hero" and emphasized his performance of the archetypal Devdas's flaws.[40] Thus, in *Dev D* Kashyap created not just a "counter" remake, he also supported an alternative system of stardom by casting the offbeat cinema's new star to play the lead in Devdas.

Defying Roy's social-realism and Bhansali's opulent set-designs, Kashyap composes the *mise-en-scène* of the film in a manner that infuses the characters with the kinetic rhythms of the city. As Dev moves from Punjab to Delhi, the pace of the film suddenly picks up. We are introduced to a neon-infused Delhi at night; Paharganj in *Dev D* is a heady underworld of alcohol, drugs and cheap hotels. Kashyap captured Paharganj's gritty dark alleys with a wide-angle lens and a special SI-2K camera, which allowed him to shoot up to 11 frames per second (fig. 9). The technique enabled the camera to adventurously introduce spectators to subconscious imagery and a kinetic urbanscape. Shots taken with a fish eye lens and the trippy movement of the frame accentuated a densely textured urban form seen through Dev's drunken eyes. For instance, the song 'Pardesi...' ('inhabitant from another land') moved Dev from the dislocated space of the streets to the subterranean world of abstract forms and night joints. The song track is fused with the films' stylized production design to create a *mise-en-scène* replete with graffiti, multi-colored lighting and a decadent ambience. Through such foregrounding of subterranean currents, Kashyap stages the changing nature of contemporary youth culture.

Fig. 9: The seedy lanes of Paharganj inhabited by Dev

Anurag Kashyap argued that *Devdas* was not just a novel, "it is an adjective…that is almost synonymous with love"[41]. And yet, he countered the very trope of this love (an intrinsic "ingredient" of the great Indian "masala" cinema) in order to redefine not just *Devdas*, the cinematic text, but a whole body of film practices built around this figure. Kashyap refers to Bhansali's *Devdas* through sequences at Lenny's boudoir showing a televised Madhuri performing the Mujra. He also places a poster of Bhansali's film, showing Shah Rukh Khan lighting a cigarette outside a neon lit underground bar in Paharganj. In this regard, by calling attention to Bhansali's remake, Kashyap

inserted the blockbuster film's idioms to distinguish his own art, and consciously constructed *Dev D* as a counter remake. *Dev D* was never just a remake of the novel; it was a film that relied on knowledge of Bhansali's *Devdas*.

For example, during Paro's tragic wedding scene, Patna ke Presley, an Elvis Presley-styled band, sang '*emotional atyachar*' while Paro danced and Dev drowned in vodka. This song became a highlight of the film during its promotion and acted as a potent vehicle through which Kashyap mocked the conventional tropes of tragic love. Thus, through *Dev D* Kashyap subverted one of the most enduring tragic stories in the history of Bombay cinema and in the process questioned and reconfigured the characters and themes that have defined the formulaic style of filmmaking associated with Bombay cinema. By shifting the focus of his narrative from the traditional dichotomy between the city and the country to the various currents within the contemporary city Kashyap—unlike Akhtar who relocates Don in a global cityscape and Bhansali who mythifies the mise-en-scène into an epic scale—explores the psycho-spatial subterranean underbelly of Delhi's disreputable alleys; which becomes the means through which the cinema industry's old parochial structures (i.e., narrative expectations, character sketches and stardom) are challenged.

Conclusion

In this paper I have traced the nodes along which Bombay cinema recycles its own archive and draws attention to the impulse of recovering, adapting and narrating its cultural history. In their interactions with popular culture, the film remakes of Bombay's old blockbuster films foreground the complexity of narrating the history of a film culture that embodies its own defined codes. The figure of the star thus becomes a potent way through which films get branded. While all three films— Farhan Akhtar's *Don* (2006, 2011), Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002), and Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D* (2009)—consciously intervene in the re-imagining of Bombay film history, their distinct set of methods and representations defy narration of Bombay cinema's past. Further, as the networks of travel are accelerated within global economy, Bombay cinema also explores its past through different means. This foregrounds the contradictions and density of materials that have defined

Bombay cinema in the last one hundred years. I have also explored how remaking popular films function as the method through which Bombay film history is narrated. This history—for a long time relegated to the margins of any serious engagement and only recovered in global mediascape as Bollywood routine—has seldom been acknowledged for its rich and distinct film culture. I have shown how this process of engaging with the touchstones of Bombay films has legitimized the "lowly" genre of the remake. The narrative, star profile, and mise-en-scène become the sites of this new narration. Whether it is *Don* (1978, 2006), *Sholay* (1975, 2007), *Karz* (1980, 2008), or *Agneepath* (1990, 2012), it is the quintessential "masala" blockbuster that has activated the popular remake as a major film practice in contemporary Bombay film industry. Through the discourse on stardom I have argued that the adaptation of old texts as brands remains the central driving premise of the popular remake. The fact that career-defining films that have long afterlives within popular culture are chosen to be remade—as opposed to critically-acclaimed cinema—highlights an alternative system of recording film history; not through formal frameworks of genre theories or art movements but the emotive charge of old films. The Bombay film remake thus assumes an ambiguous position toward its slippage between the forces of conformism and insurrection and entails a more complicated network of cinematic tourism that renders any homogenous reading of the Bombay film culture opaque. While Bombay films gained a greater currency in the last two decades as "Bollywood," film remakes use the tropes of this distinctive cinema by revisiting the narrative codes of the original while subverting and in some cases propagating the mythical after-life of the original. Moreover, this recovery of a cinema whose dominant profile itself is a derivative misnomer, Bombay film remakes engage with the past through cinematic idioms to create a contemporary oeuvre that is annotated, mutated and resurrected. By emphasizing the different centers in the narrative and casting, popular Bombay remakes then exercises a conscious act of self-fashioning. Thus, the creative recycling bin of Bombay film history becomes fodder for filmmakers to establish themselves vis-à-vis the touchstones that have defined Bombay film culture over the last century.

Notes:

1 Chander Lall represents Hollywood-based production houses Sony Pictures and Warner Bros. in India. The statement issued by him was in response to the legal battle between Mumbai based Production house, BR Films and another Hollywood studio,Twentieth Century Fox. Lall on behalf of Fox studios issued a notice against B.R.Films' *Banda Yeh Bindaas Hai* (Ravi Chopra, 2011) accusing the film of breach of Intellectual Property Rights of *My Cousin Vinny* (Jonathan Lynn, 1992). The legal battle became a fertile ground for discussion on cases relating to plagiarism that has haunted popular Hindi cinema for decades.

2 Recently, new remakes of old Bombay films have been announced. This includes popular films such as Satte pe Satta (Sippy 1982), Amar Akbar Anthony (Desai, 1978) and Qurbani (Khan 1980). Several uncredited reports on casting for numerous unconfirmed projects is also part of media speculation and finds wide range of coverage.

3 Ranjani Mazumdar "Aviation, Tourism and Dreaming in 1960s Bombay Cinema" *BioScope* Vol.2, No.2, 2011, pp.129-155 .

4 'Indian Cinema 1980-85', *Film Utsav* ,1985, pp. 23. India.

5 Madhava Prasad responds to Rajadhyaksha's article and situates the beginnings and recent "naturalization of Bollywood" in its relation to the "structural bilingualism of the Indian nation state", a metalanguage that articulates nationalist ideology in the period of globalization. (Prasad 2003)

6 A term used by André Bazin (1955).

7 Rosie Thomas argues that popular Indian cinema refutes the Western theoretical framework, both in terms of its industrial practices (like in case of genre for instance; as it accommodates the 'socials, the 'devotional' and the 'multistarrer') as well as in its consumption (clapping, booing etc.). The spectator thus assumes a critical position in defining the aesthetics of production of popular Hindi cinema and its (distinct) aesthetics of reception, embodied in the popular 'masala' quotient.

8 In an article titled, 'Khaike Paan Shah Rukh Wala', film critic Raja Sen introduces the cast of Akhtar's *Don*, while simultaneously comparing it with Barot's original cast, skeptically pointing to one of the biggest challenges in casting for Akhtar's *Don*. Posted 15, Nov 2005, http://www.rediff.com/movies/2005/nov/15sd1.htm.

9 As one of the biggest stars of the Bombay film industry Shah Rukh Khan is often referred to as "Baadshah Khan" or "King Khan".

10 The Bachchan phenomenon has been an intrinsic part of the study of stardom in popular Bombay cinema. It was in the 1970s that Hindi cinema got its first superstar in actor Rajesh Khanna. Khanna, however, was soon dethroned by Amitabh Bachchan's screen persona of the 'angry young man'. After 1985, Bachchan saw a downfall in his career with a spate of flops and an unsuccessful foray into politics and film production, but he managed to resurrect his stardom with the television show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (2000). Many scholars have argued that Bachchan is the most powerful and perhaps the "last iconic hero" of Bombay cinema (Mazumdar 2001:238). Also see Mishra (2002).

11 The idea of doubling was a common trope in Bombay cinema. Films like *Do Kaliyan* (R.Krishnan,1968), *Ram aur Shyam* (Tapi Chanakya, 1967), *Seeta aur Geeta* (Ramesh Sippy, 1972), *Chalbaaz* (Pankaj Parashar, 1989), *Anhonee* (KA Abbas, 1952) etc, use doubling as a trope. Besides bifurcating the moral universe within the narrative, or show bonds of kinship, the film also doubles the body of the star. See Neepa Majumdar "Doubling, Stardom, and Melodrama in Indian Cinema:

The 'Impossible' Role of Nargis" *Postscript*, 22.3 (Summer 2003): 89-103

12 Writer-lyricist Javed Akhtar in conversation with film journalists Prem Panicker and Raja Sen. October 19, 2006. Full report:
http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/oct/17farhan.htm

13 "I will always be remembered for Don" interview with Barot, October 16, 2006, http://specials.rediff.com/movies/2006/oct/16sld1.htm

14 Ibid.

15 Ranjani Mazumdar's "The Man Who Was Seen Too Much: Amitabh Bachchan on Film Posters", http://tasveergharindia.net/cmsdesk/essay/106/index.html

16 The iconic song "Khaike Paan Banaras Wala" acts as a visual and aural default in all these films.

17 These are the titles that are used in popular media discourses related to the stars. The princely titles are borrowed from the famous titles of their films, *Shehenshah* (Tinnu Anand, 1988) and *Baadshah* (Abbas-Mustan, 1999). Operating within the restricted flow of financial resources (privately financed) and investing heavily in the bonds of kinship, Bombay film industry has long defined its functioning within a system that can loosely be termed as family Empires. From studios like R.K. film studio to production houses like Yash Raj, to star's sons and daughters, familial ties are an intricate part of the functioning of the Bombay film industry. Firmly working within such a hierarchical structure of operation, the defining fence of insider and outsider domains are clearly marked.

18 This interview has been quoted in Anupama Chopra's *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema*, 2007: 161.

19 From selling biscuits to cars, soaps to cellular phone services, cola drink to men's fairness cream, Shah Rukh Khan emblematised the consumerist streak and purchasing power of the new middle class and held a promise of accessibility, comfort and modernisation.

20 In "Explosive Apathy", Jeffrey Sconce argues that explosive apathy within the action blockbuster genre involves a formal use of logical strategy that recalibrates the spectator's attention at the key plot point and breaks the pace of the impact of action to its aesthetics. (Perkins and Verevis: 2014, p. 30)

21 Prem Panicker and Raja Sen, Interview Series, Part 2,"Farhan, his dad and the don", October 18,2006, Rediff.com. Incomplete reference.

22 Shweta Mehta, '*Don 2* has nothing to do with original', *Hindustan Times*, May 29, 2011, Mumbai, See http://www.hindustantimes.com/Don-2-has-nothing-to-do-with-original/Article1-703312.aspx

23 Film sequels by definition constitute a "chronological extension of a ...precursor narrative that was originally presented as closed and complete in itself" (Budra and Schellenberg 1998: 7, 8) (my emphasis).

24 Prior to *Devdas*, Indian Cinema's association with the festival was restricted to "stark tales of poverty, feudal oppression and unemployment" in works of directors like Raj Kapoor, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and Satyajit Ray. The International media focused on this shift in the selection of *Devdas*. See "Bollywood Fever Grips Cannes",
http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/05/23/entertainment/cannes/main509992.shtml.

25 Though a literary success, Sarat Chandra's novella, enjoyed a great part of its enduring success due to its popular adaptation in cinema. Film scholar, Corey K. Creekmur suggests that much like Indian epics such as *Mahabharata* and

Ramayana, "No Indian ever sees *Devdas* for the first time" (Creekmur, 173). She goes on to suggest that in the process of transmission in popular culture, '*Devdas* has been made the vehicle of a continuous process of collective "remembering, repeating and working through"" (175). Creekmur rightly points to the mythic presence of Devdas for film-going public of India. This sustained engagement with this tragic figure has not only been adapted multiple times, the story has also inspired a number of films including Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957), Raj Kapoor's *Aah*(1953) and Prakash Mehra's *Muquaddar ka Sikander* (1978).

26 K.A. Abbas's statement to the film magazine, FilmIndia in 1940 cited by Madhuja Mukherjee in her 2009 essay 'Travels with *Devdas*: Notes on Image-Essay'.

27 Writing for *Sixth* the annual publication of the International Film Festival of India, Rita Ray points out that the phenomenal success of Barua's 1935 *Devdas* was as much due to his higher artistic values in "lighting and natural dialogue" as the fact that it fitted into "the social mores of a slightly puritanical and frustrated pre-war society" (Ray 1977).

28 Ghosh observed, "You just can't make a *thakurian* (upper-class Bengali woman) dance in Durga puja." He continued, "In no historical account of Bengali culture can such liberties be corroborated. Sanjay could've done it in a dream sequence. All he wanted was to make Madhuri and Aishwarya dance." Subhash K.Jha, "*Devdas* a hit, but literary debate rages", *The Times of India*, August 6, 2002; http://www.cscsarchive.org:8081/MediaArchive/art.nsf/%28docid%29/D7DB6F40F1F 9D5AEE5256C1500223BB6

29 "The making of *Devdas"* is a special DVD extra feature of Bhansali's *Devdas. The DVD is released by* Eros International Pvt. Lmt

30The promotional videos of the film made extensive use of the song. The official website of Bhansali's Devdas also credits choreographer Saroj Khan for her magic touch (that) surfaces yet again with her choreography in "Devdas ". This includes the much awaited "Dola re dola" song in which she orchestrates the nimble movements of Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya who blaze the screen together for the first time.

31 Corey K. Creekmur, "The *Devdas* Phenomenon" at http://www.uiowa.edu/~incinema/DEVDAS.html

32 The official website of *Devdas describes the set-design of each of the spaces inhabited by the three main characters in Bhansali's film. The details are available at* http://devdas.indiatimes.com/sets.htm

33 Filmmaker Anurag Kashyap wrote many blog pages for web page, *Passion for Cinema. In a blog post titled,* "Genesis 2: Happy Accidents" December 30, 2008 Kashyap describes the genesis of Dev D and his encounter with the endearing tragic hero, Devdas.

34 On August 29, 2009, ScreenIndia posted an article titled 'The old in the New' describing film directors like Vishal Bhardwaj, Dibakar Banerjee and Anurag Kashyap as the frontrunners of a new wave of films that have recently redefined the contours of popular Hindi cinema.

35 See Pankaj Kapoor, "Total Knockout: A Censor Punch for Paanch'" August 10, 2001, *The Times of India*. See details of the case and objections to the film in the article at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2001-08-10/delhi/27232804_1_board-of-film-certification-hindi-film-abhyankar

36 Sukumaram, Shradha. Interview with Anurag Kashyap. *Midday*. January 24, 2009. See full interview at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxRG2fzy3Cs

37 The growth of the multiplexes in the late 1990s is intricately related to the rising

consuming power of the metropolis. The extension of multiple screen theatres into a gamut of leisure activities like games, shopping and food accommodates the mainstream and fringe cinema. (For more, see Aparna Sharma's "India's Experience with the Multiplex", May 2003, seminar 525 and Ranjani Mazumdar's "Friction, Collision and the Grotesque: The Dystopic Fragments Of Bombay Cinema", in Ed. Gyan Prakash, *Noir Urbanism: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*).

38 Anurag Kashyap on *Dev D* in DVD extra of the film, "The Making of *Dev*".

39 Anuradha Sengupta Interview with Abhay Deol in CNBC TV18s, 'Abhay Deol: Independent cinema movement's mascot'. See Interview at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prFFhRXM_f4, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSjd2U3Bj9g

40 Harneet Singh, "Abhay Deol is a Braveheart", February 6, 2009, *ScreenIndia, Indian Express Archive, See, http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/abhay-deol-is-a-braveheart/420120/*

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Devdas, Dir. PC Barua, 1936
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Don, Dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2006, 2011

Glossary:
1. Rupees/lakhs/Crores: References to Indian Currency. Currently, $1=Rs 63.
2. Thakur/Zamindar: Landlord/Aristocrat.
3. Durga Puja: Durga Puja is an annual festival that is primarily celebrated in Bengal and celebrates the Hindu goddess.
4. Masala: A culinary term that refers to Indian condiments that enhance the 'flavor' of the dish (Thomas: 1986).
5. Kotha: Prostitute's parlour.
6. Lok Sabha or the House of the people: the lower house of the Parliament of India.

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**Visual Perception and Cultural
Memory: Typecast and Typecast(e)ing
in Malayalam Cinema**

by Sujith Kumar Parayil

This paper analyses how collective unconscious memory plays a dominant role in conceiving the subaltern[1] and dalit[2] bodies and its consciousness within the representational strategies followed by mainstream Malayalam cinema.[3] There is a flood of stereotypical images when it comes to the representation of subalterns by the mainstream Indian cinema. Movies that do take up the task of representing the marginalized often end up redeploying the stereotypes: by casting aside the subaltern as 'uncultured' and, now, as fundamentalist. Static images of tribals—and the otherness of their communities, rooted in a peculiar notion of the body of the subaltern, have also been reproduced. Popular Indian films often follow two schemas of visual or narrative strategies to redeploy the static image of a social group. The first is through the visible and direct representation of the physiognomy of the character as subaltern (denoted with racial, class and ethnic features), and the second is through the deployment of indirect, and sometimes, invisible social and cultural signifiers which mark the subaltern identity of the character (name, language, occupation, habits and nature, which connotes specific identity of caste or ethnic group). It is in this context that this paper attempts to contextualize one of the south Indian film actors Kalabhavan Mani to analyze how caste identity plays a dominant role in Malayalam cinema, and argue that memories of caste become an integral part of the visual perception of the Malayali spectator. Most of Mani's films adopt a particular mode of representation that treats his body and his persona as a cultural sign of difference. When compared to other mainstream Malayalam films, the narrative and mise-en-scène in Mani's films are very distinct in nature. They commonly depict specific visual narrative methods and typecast characters to recreate an imagined but subordinated world of the subaltern, which suits to Mani's lower caste identity and his dalit persona.

Before entering the cinema, Mani—who was born in a lower caste family in the Thrissur district of Kerala (in Southern India)—was popular in Kerala as a well-established mimicry artist from Kalabhavan (from where he got the prefix 'Kalabhavan'), a mimic theatre group based in Kochi.[4] He was also quite popular as a successful folksinger. He popularized folksongs that reverberated throughout the Indian musical recording industry, having released a series of very popular and financially successful folk song cassettes (Nadan Pattukal) and seasonal religious songs and Mappila Pattukal (Mappila Songs). Mani made his first appearance in the Malayalam film *Aksharam* (Sibi Malayil,1995) as an auto driver and in 1996, through the film *Sallaapam* (Sundardas, 1996)*,* he established himself as an actor. Since then, he has acted in several movies as a comedian in which he has been identified by his idiosyncratic laughing style. From 1998 onwards, he shifted towards "serious" roles, playing both heroes and villains. He has acted in nearly 160 films in all four south Indian languages: Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

Contemporary popular Malayalam cinema uses different visual and narrative techniques to re-establish the preconceived cultural notions of typified subaltern castes through indirect (without mentioning the caste identity of the characters) but certain legitimized signs and norms—such as name, habits, occupation, body, behaviour and occupied spaces. I argue that contemporary popular Malayalam films—whether driven by a "megastar", "superstar", or "popular star"[5]—works in a complex manner while dealing with the question of subalternity or marginality, where the difference is articulated not through the exclusion of the marginalized communities but through a careful and strategic politics of inclusion. In this inclusive perspective, the presentation of subaltern histories and their worldviews are integrated into cinematic narratives as subordinate views and as indicators of lower caste identity. This inclusiveness in representation has a historical continuity. In other words, it preserves and reproduces the collective historical consciousness and memory of (particularly about caste, class, gender and exclusion) the spectators, modifies them, and inserts them into the modern technology of cinema. It triggers the memories—both oral and textual—of the collective spectator to

recognize the social identity of the hero or the actor on the screen. In this act of perseverance, cinema functions as a historical tool as well as a pedagogical resource to generalize cultural memory. To overcome this idealized notion of subalternity, a subaltern citizen/hero—Mani—has to necessitate a struggle to justify his role as a protagonist who is capable of leading the particular narrative contents of the cinema. Precisely because of the heroic space of cinema is occupied by the outcaste in the film, "it shatters the stability of the delicate logical constructs around which are organized the discursive hegemonies of caste society" (Srinivas and Kaali 1998, 222).

In this paper, I consider the Malayalam films in which Mani acted during the period from 1995 to 2006. It is in this period that Mani started his career in Malayalam film industry as a comedian and subsequently took numerous roles, as both a comedian and as a serious hero, which established his career as a film actor. These films, though varied in their narratives, often portrayed certain unique features—such as differently-abled, orphan, etc.,—of Mani's character and these features or onscreen presences were indirectly juxtaposed with his off-screen persona and caste identity as a dalit. There are many ways in which this idea of 'differently-abled' is being articulated. In these films, his characters are shown either as physically challenged (limping, blindness, etc.), immature or with idiosyncratic behaviors, having a mental disability, or as a character who often experiences problems resulting from his inferior position or lack of cultural capital. Taking Mani's cinematic career and films as a case study, I examine how caste has been reformulated within Malayalam cinema. More precisely, the paper theorizes how Mani's off-screen persona and lower caste 'markers' correspond with the characters he performed on-screen. Even though caste indicators are not consciously deployed in his films, they are demonstrated through a careful insertion of culturally validated signifiers and socially practiced markers of caste. These incidental synonyms of caste are deeply rooted in the cultural history of the region and hence, in the perception of the Malayali and Indian viewers. This culturally legitimized perception and interrelated caste consciousness of the viewer is intrinsically enmeshed with the socio-cultural hierarchies, which is based upon the fundamental configuration of caste in India and Kerala.

Caste, as a fundamental aspect of the social and economic structure of Indian society, has its genesis in ancient India and occupies a powerful position in the social and political realms of modern discourse. It is one of the basic forms of social stratification based upon aspects of customary practice, occupation, purity, pollution, hierarchical bond, and so on. Despite debates on whether it was a traditional practice or a colonial invention, caste functions as a discriminative marker on which ideas of cultural superiority and subordination are articulated. Racial prejudice, hierarchical order, pollution, untouchability, humiliation, and caste-based violence are integral parts of this insidious system. The power and reality of caste continues to be a compelling and enduring aspect of Indians' everyday life (Bayly 2002), and it has been described as "the central faultiness of modern India" (Menon 2006, 1) that structures social relations and thus state action (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011). Although caste may not appear to be present as an observable identity within contemporary India, its existence cannot be denied, since it continues to exert power as a consciousness within modern contexts and institutions. This consciousness and subjective experiences of it have produced different affective relations and worldviews among the upper and lower castes. As K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu observe: "the experience of the dominant castes—their authority, visibility, power, economic presence—as well that of the lower castes—their subordination, oppression, invisibility, and economic and political marginalization—is a modern phenomenon" (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, 11).

Kerala, the southern Indian state, is well known for its developmental achievements in the field of education, health and quality of life (famously known as the Kerala model of development). However, the caste system in Kerala evolved to become one of the most complex and deep-rooted in India. Though practiced differently, the caste hierarchy was quite prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. As elsewhere, the system legitimized itself through the rhetoric of ritual purity. The caste order was kept in place by sartorial and bodily disciplines. Styles of clothing and of adorning the body, rules of distance and sight pollution, and food habits constituted a set of complex signs for expressing social relations (Parayil 2009, 71). The upper castes maintained

various practices and symbolic regulations in order to differentiate themselves from the lower castes. It is believed that the advent of colonial modernity and related socio-religious reforms in the twentieth century only changed the practice of rigid caste hierarchical system, so that caste practices—as "the subjectively effective identity of a social group"—continues to exist in both conscious or unconscious appropriation of these symbolic practices in the contemporary everyday lives of the Malayali (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, 10). The contemporary symbolic forms of 'caste,' having evolved from various cultural practices, are therefore continuously reproduced in mainstream cinema and cultural representations, and hence in the minds of viewers. In Malayalam cinema, subaltern groups have always carried the burden of imposed identities—as untouchables, socially deprived and culturally marginalized. Their identities are undermined, their everyday life degraded, and everyday misery obscured by these cultural representations (ibid, 13). Subaltern pasts have been devalued and their history hardly accounted for within dominant historical narratives. Nevertheless, in Indian mainstream visual representations, cultural notions of distinct caste identities are articulated through tropes of binary visual signifiers of the upper caste and lower castes, such as civilized/uncivilized, mature/immature, and master/servant.

When looking at Mani's characters in his early films, one can easily perceive how cultural notions of caste are visually articulated through identifiable signs such as skin colour, name, language, dress, body features, occupation, location, and social behavior. I argue, therefore, that the interrelationship between conditioned perceptions of the viewer and the cinematic representations of caste through various indexical signs on Mani's public persona, body, and characters become a composite site of his real-life caste identity. Caste, in this context, can be simultaneously made obvious even as it is obscured. However, the familiar depictions of the indexical connotation of caste are conventionalized and are deployed within films in such a way that no particular sign is necessarily about caste even as the total figuration of Mani's character is type-caste. To understand this paradox between the visible and the obscured, I examine the construction of Mani's characters and their representations on screen rather than follow a textual analysis of any of these films. Some important questions I wish to raise are:

why is Mani always cast in type-caste roles, and how do these roles communicate with the spectator within the social imaginary of Kerala? Does the cinematic narrative content perpetually construct a space for a subaltern hero within the existing narrative structure of the popular cinema or does it provide an alternative means of raising questions that need to be addressed for viewers? Additionally, one can also problematize issues such as: to whom are these films addressed? How do spectators identify with Mani? When addressing these questions, the paper will show that the visual-narratives of Mani's characters in these films invoke a perception attached to the cultural memories of the spectator that seeks particular ways of seeing Mani's body and persona as a type-caste figure. Therefore, the practice of seeing instantaneously produces binaries in perception through the distinguishable visual signifiers of the elite and the subaltern.

In Mani's films, the heroic narrative is occupied by the subaltern, and more specifically by an identifiable dalit, which is unconventional within the domain of stardom and hence needs to be justified within the films. This necessitated an unusual narrative structure—such as representation of the conventional social category of caste or subaltern pasts through indexical signs and its obscure presence and indirect articulation on the screen—for Mani's films whereby his characters try to overcome the imposed identity to achieve the popular imagination of star. Most of Mani's films are loaded with this tension between the objectified persona of the ideal star and Mani as a star with an embodied subaltern identity. It is at this point that the notion of an imagination of ideal star shared by a community of viewers comes to the forefront. It is at the level of the viewers' cultural memory and consciousness that Mani's heroes have to fight to survive. To put it more clearly, the image of the hero in Malayalam films is firmly rooted in the preference for white skin, manliness, elite traditionalism verging on ideas of 'aristocracy,' and a close affinity to the celebration of feudal memories of the upper castes. It is in this context that I propose to analyze Kalabhavan Mani's films in an attempt to understand how preconceived notions of caste and body play a crucial role in his films, and how the films themselves visually reproduce certain idea of typecasting that cater to the cultural expectations of the Malayali spectators. How do Mani's films re-enact the collective

consciousness of the spectator and in what way is this enactment connected to the unconscious memory of caste? Why does Mani's personas onscreen and off, as well as his body, become objects of this enactment? How can memory be used as a concept to elucidate the visual perception of the spectator? These questions will be interrogated while considering two rather unrelated instances: a recent police case registered against Mani, and a scene from the Tamil movie *Enthiran* (2010), directed by Shankar, which has been dubbed into many Indian languages.

The Off- and Onscreen Personas of the Dalit

On May 15th 2013, the Kerala Police registered a case against well-known actor Kalabhavan Mani for allegedly intimidating forest officials during a vehicle check at Kannamkuzhi near Athirappally in the Thrissur district of Kerala. The First Information Report (FIR) was filed based on a complaint by two forest officers, and the actor was charged with offences under the following sections of the Indian Penal Code: Sections 332 (voluntarily causing hurt to deter public servant from his/her duty); 294(b) (singing, reciting or uttering obscene songs, ballad or words, in or near any public place); 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation); and 34 (criminal act done by several persons with common intention) (*Times of India*, 2013; *The Indian Express*, 2013). Immediately following the incident, Mani absconded for a week and the police force were dramatically deployed at various locations to arrest him. The entire episode resembled the way in which the police typically hunt for a history-sheeter (a person with a criminal record or series of crime) or a wanted criminal. On Friday, May 24th 2013, Mani finally surrendered to the police and got anticipatory bail.

Interestingly, while the issue was unfolding, then Assistant Director General of Police (ADGP, Intelligence) T. P. Sen Kumar admitted in his keynote address at the State Conference of the Police Association that there was a 'class bias' in the police force. As an example, he cited the zeal with which the police were pursuing the case against Mani. He posed the following questions:

> Would the police have behaved the same way if it was Mammootty, Mohanlal, Dileep or Jayaram? If it was Mammootty or Mohanlal or Jayaram or Dileep who did the same thing, and not Kalabhavan

Mani, how would you [the police] have responded? Would they have faced the same fate as that of Kalabhavan Mani? (Deccan Chronicle, 2013; The Hindu, 2013).

Through this comparison between Mani and other 'superstars' and 'megastars' of the Malayalam film industry, the ADGP pointed to the biases present in the police force's treatment of the case. He made it clear that the state machinery maintained an entrenched class bias based on skin colour and social background. Such a bias has a history of its own and it continues to govern social perceptions and attitudes. The ADGP further pointed out:

> What this [the case against Mani] shows is that we still have not changed our colonial mindset of saluting the white man and crushing the black man under the police boots. Kalabhavan Mani has made it to the top from very humble beginnings. It is not about white colour. It is the fawning attitude we have towards the higher classes. While the higher class is saluted, the common man is abused. Such discrimination is found not just in the police department. The malaise seems to pervade the entire government machinery" (Deccan Chronicle, 2013).

The ADGP's remarks reveal that there is an overwhelming residue of the colonial mindset in all spheres of life. This mindset infiltrates our present consciousnesses, governs our perceptions based on class, caste and colour, and ultimately forms an attitude of discrimination.[6] In the case of Kalabhavan Mani, he is marked as an actor by difference. He cannot be treated as a star like other stars. His stardom is subjected to perceived social hierarchies and caste signifiers attached to both his social origins and to his body. For instance, when other prominent actors in the industry are called super/mega/popular stars, Mani is "fondly" referred to as *Keralthinte karthuthamuthu* or the Black Pearl of Kerala.

The above-mentioned case shows the way in which both the state and the communities of viewers share a common but dominant cultural perception of Mani, wherein his body becomes a cultural artifact. This instance also demonstrates how caste works in the public domain and how his personality and body are constantly recognized by an imposed social identity. At this point, I wish to turn to the second instance, in order to

show how these preconceived social markers of subaltern are reworked in a visual form.

In one of the scenes from the science fiction film *Enthiran* (*Robot*, 2010)—starring Rajnikanth and Aishwarya Rai—the hero and the heroine have an encounter with a subaltern character, enacted by Mani. The scene shows that after a quarrel with the hero, the annoyed heroine walks towards a toddy-tapper who appears with his traditional occupational tools and attire. The heroine then seeks his friendly company just to mock the hero; the naughty toddy-tapper eventually becomes aggressive and prevents her from leaving. Finally, after a minor scuffle with him, both the hero and the heroine manage to run away from the wicked toddy-tapper. Interestingly, this particular scene adopts a 'documentary' aesthetic to show an identifiably lower caste and racially coded man with a conventionally 'lower caste' occupation. This scene stands out from the other parts of the film following formal conventions of mainstream fiction films, which works within the imaginary of science fiction techno-thriller. The realistic appearance of the subaltern is idealized through multiple visual cues, which coalesce around the body, language, occupation, and aesthetics. In *Enthiran*, it is the encoded cultural semiotics of the body that produces meaning within the visual economy of the narrative. Mani (as Pachaimuthu) plays the mischievous, villainous, and half-naked character of the subaltern toddy-tapper[7], importantly echoing the very similar role of the mischievous toddy-tapper Rajappan in his second film *Sallapam*. Directed by Sundardas, *Sallapam* helped Mani establish his career in the Malayalam film industry. Mani appears in this comedic role as a toddy-tapper who behaves like a simpleton. He consistently pokes fun at the heroine with his ridiculous actions and parodic songs, however his character always keeps a fearful distance from the other protagonists. In a recent interview when asked "you established your career […] on the top of the coconut tree, as toddy-tapper, where do you locate yourself now?" Mani replied: "I am still sitting on the top of the coconut tree, unable to climb down".[8] His positioning as an actor is clear and well defined according to the prevailing imaginary relations of stardom, whereby as an actor, he still occupies a confined position because of the historically attributed caste markedness on his body, and hence, is unable to move away from the typecast roles.

Enthiran, however, signifies a transformation in his position within the space of the celluloid: in this film, there is a sense of proximity that he shares with the other protagonists in the screen space, his character is portrayed as too aggressive. This, on the one hand, clearly indicates his position in the south Indian film industry as an established actor who is capable to perform any mischievous and rough villainous roles. On the other hand, both *Sallapam* and *Enthiran* offer a common stereotype of the subaltern as passive, docile, and fearful yet antagonistic when faced with a problem. However, *Sallapam* also clearly shows the confined space that embodies the historically habituated rules of social spaces (fig. 1). This distribution of space presupposes the privileged sense of perception of the Malayali spectator, who can observe Mani's body only within the hierarchical social order of the society.

Fig. 1: Mani as Rajappan in *Sallapam.*

In both films, Mani's body, name, behavior, and occupation become markers of his social position, which is overdetermined by his caste. Cinema, therefore, reproduces some of these classifications based on racial and physiognomic features, class-based occupation, and ritual performances documented and fueled by colonial anthropology's historical attempts to map and categorize Indian castes. They similarly function as markers to identify both the elite and lower class subaltern groups (Parayil 2009). Mani has been similarly typecasted in other films that address a stigmatized caste identity as something inseparably attached to the subaltern's social position, attitudes, and habits.[9] Most importantly, these films portray his body as a site to reproduce caste stigmatization. His body is therefore assembled into a single unit that carries cultural expectations of lower caste people and subalternity held by typical Malayalam viewers, so that his characters, as a result, are never able to overcome this imposed identity.

Mani's off-screen persona is thus conflated with his onscreen characters in these popular films, forcing the subaltern/dalit actor to play a subaltern/dalit character.

In the visual economy of consumption, his body is cast as an inappropriate presence that maintains an unequal relationship with his co-stars: he is often portrayed as unsuitable to share the same onscreen space with other stars. For instance, in films such as *Valiyettan* (2000), *Aaram Thamburan* (1997), and *Narasimham* (2000)—films largely portraying feudal nostalgia in the characterization of the hero and his world— Mani is featured only in supporting and subservient roles. In the first, 'megastar' Mammootty plays the hero, while 'superstar' Mohanlal has the leading roles in the latter two. In all three films, Mani's characters contrast strongly with the sophisticated and aristocratic heroes and his characters remain dependent upon the upper caste heroes. The entire visual narratives are arranged according to the logic of this hierarchical social relation and dialectical worldviews. In *Aaram Thamburan*, for instance, Mani's character Bharathan is a close friend and follower of the hero, Induchoodan (Mohanlal), who flaunts feudal values and habits. However, Mani's character in the film not only belongs to lower class/caste order but also is shown in a morally and physically submissive position compared to the hero. It is through the help of the hero's masculine power and intellect that Mani's character is able to move away from his degraded social position and to achieve a better social status. The dialectical distinction is further substantiated through the visual cues and narrative plots of cultured and uncultured worlds of the hero and his comedian friend (Mani-Bharathan).

It is clear that there are power relations operating within the films' representations. However, it is important to note that these dialectical binaries of social relations are also a significant visual component of the perception of the viewer. Visual perception, or the practice of seeing, can be defined as a socially and culturally conditioned or discursively determined form of visuality, in which the viewer's perception of cultural norms and representational practices, and their familiarity become significant (see Foster, 1988, ix). In the case of Mani's films, it is the specific visual narrative forms, bodily indexes and their indicative correspondence with normative subaltern past and dalit identity that

function as powerful tools to generate a distinct perception in watching his films. These specific visual signifiers and narrative spaces for Mani and his body in the films are explicitly creating a binary in visual perception, which is influenced by caste and subaltern experiences and also discursively determined. The visual perception of the spectator here is conditioned and therefore, fragmented and unequal; it proceeds through the dialectics of binaries, in which unconscious memories of the past and habituated perception of caste plays a prominent role. This binary in visual perception is conditioned by spectators' historical sensibilities, their ideas of touch, and 'moral relativism' (see Guru, 2009). Especially, Kerala society had historical experiences of untouchability based on caste hierarchy, and its notions of distance pollution, bodily touch and sight. It is at this point that I would like to discuss how spectator's perception is combined with the unconscious memories of the past when watching films.

As I mentioned above, Mani's films are replete with dialectical signs of subaltern/lower caste and elite/upper caste mentalities, and it is spectators' memory that helps to identify those discrete signs on the screen. In everyday life, caste does not function according to the normative forms, instead it is through practice and experience that conventions of caste and its norms are circulated in society. The historical experience and practice of caste are integral to social memory, which is neither static nor contextually specific but rather amendable and retold. These subjective memories, which are not necessarily constituted through a person's lived experience, are significant tropes within the domain of visual perception to recognize the caste signifiers and binaries on screen. In other words, the practice of seeing invokes the 'prosthetic memory' of the spectator, where 'embodied gaze,' persistent social division and cultural practices become a pre-text to the film. Embodied gaze here refers to the specific practice of seeing (*darshan* of religious deity) in which the vision is bound with forms of semi-religious perceptions, wherein the reciprocal relation between the gazes—who is seeing and who is seen—are important to understand the dominant practices of visuality (Pinney 2004). Prosthetic memories, according to Alison Landsberg, do not come from a person's lived experience but can activate a sense of familiarity with the narrative event without a person's direct experience with the event.[10] The spontaneous

reactivation of the prosthetic memory of a spectator is attached to the textures of existing cultural and historical practices of the collective public—either experienced or non-experienced. Prominent historical events, sensory experiences, and feelings are also part of this process of constituting prosthetic memory. Here, memory connects with the past: "memory is of the past; memory is about the past" (See Ricoeur, 2004, 15; cited in McNeill, 2010, 20). The practices of seeing (perception) and image-making, therefore, are imbued with the signifiers of the cultural memory: "The body of cinema is potentially a part of the cultural memory of even very recent generations of spectators" (McNeill, 2010, 3). Moreover, within the 'twilight zone' of history and memory, the spectator's memory merges with the practiced or familiar history of the society. Eric Hobsbawn writes about this twilight zone between history and memory. According to him, this zone is a "no-man's land where individual memory extends through family traditions into the relatively dispassionate, public sphere of history" (Hobsbawn, quoted in McNeill, 2010, 3). It is this familiar history and memory that help the spectator decode the distinct signs of caste on screen. In other words, the viewer's visual perception is largely ingrained with historical consciousness, which includes social norms, customs and popular representational practices. In particular, while watching a film, it is the collective unconscious memories of the past, the caste marked social distinctions and the familiar representational schema that come into play in identifying the connoted social signifier of the character.

Comedian: Subaltern Laughter

The films in which Mani acted—either as comedian, villain, or hero—show that he is an actor with a difference; an actor who lacks the 'ideal' qualities of a star figure. Hence, in films, his body and characters are portrayed differently. He is recognized as a star but not quite popular or mainstream like other stars in the Malayalam film Industry.[11] In the process of simultaneous recognition and enunciation of difference, Mani as the subaltern subject becomes an object of laughter. The historically rooted caste markedness on his body and its difference, and submissive comedy gestures function as objects of laughter. In other words, within the domain of caste binaries, the subaltern presence, their inabilities, inhibitions, spontaneous acts, ignorance, language, tastes

and behaviors always prompt humor and laughter. Mani was an artist of repute in the field of mimicry before he set out to try his fortune in the film industry. Noticeably, in the early stage of his career, it was his skill with mimicry and folk songs along with his distinctive bodily movements and mode of speaking that earned him a distinct identity as a film star.[12] In mimicry, his 'drunken act' had been a phenomenal success. In many of his early movies, such as *Bhoothakkannadi* (1997) and *One Man Show* (2001) he was repeatedly cast as a lower caste drunkard or as the hero's self-mocking sidekick, as in *Aaram Thampuran* (1997)*, Summer in Bethlehem* (1998)*, Oru Maravthoor Kanavu* (1998), *Mr. Butler* (2000)*,* and *Narasimham* (2000).

Cinematic visual mechanisms and narratives have always showcased Mani's character and his body as markers of a subaltern—dalit—identity. Some of the earlier films need to be mentioned in this context. The distinct aspect of these films, other than Mani's usual typecasting as a lower caste character, is that all these roles are physically, mentally or emotionally disabled in some way or another (fig. 2). These roles of disabled comedians or heroes and their incapability, foolishness, self-mockery and otherness are some elements of comedy that function in the films. He was cast in a variety of roles such as a stray dog catcher (*Aakashathile Paravakal* [2001]); a mentally challenged and illegitimate son of an upper caste Nambudiri woman and a low caste man (*Karumadikkuttan* [2001]*);* the blind Ramu who falls in love with a deaf and dumb girl *(Vasanthiyum, Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum* [1999]*);* an adivasi (tribe), who lands in a non-adivasi small town (*Bamboo Boys* [2002]); a mad blacksmith *(Valkkannadi* [2002]); a bear in a zoo (*My Dear Karadi* [1999]); an auto driver-turned IAS officer who faces problems in his life because of his lower class origin (*Lokanaathan IAS* [2005]); a potter, who is an outcast from his village, but lives in another village where he is helping the villagers by doing all kinds of manual jobs (*Kanninum Kannadikum* [2004]): and a dalit police officer (*Kerala Police* [2007])*.* Even when he is cast as an upper caste character, his characters cannot come out of his entailed identity constructed through his peculiar body language and skin colour. One reason for this is that his personified figure is well-identifiable with that of an outcast, thereby going along with the popular imagination of the community of viewers. A close observation of his characters would reveal that they

do not overcome the social isolation that is endemic to subalternity as well as to isolation. In the film *Narasimham* (2000)*,* he is cast as a differently-abled Nambudiri who does not follow the traditional rituals and is therefore cast aside by others. Mani's role as Appukkuttan Nair in the film *The Guard* (2001) constructs a social world in a jungle far removed from society, where he encounters wilderness and wild animals. In this film too, the character is immune to poverty and other problems and is accompanied by his singing of folksongs, which affirms his subalternity.

There are many narrative plots and visual components that have the potential to reproduce Mani's subaltern positioning within the visual economy of south Indian cinema. Comedy through ridicule of his body and social background is one such generic components. Mimicry, folksongs, and drunkenness are inextricably associated with this early image of Mani as a common man belonging to the lower caste. Physically challenged or differently-abled situations are also part of this narrative content to show his inability or inferior position. These visual cues are particular to cinema and add up with various caste-inflected conventions. In short, he is low-caste, differently-abled and comical, and thus structurally/narratologically located as subordinate to the hero and to the diegetic world.

Fig. 2: Mani as the blind Ramu in
Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum.

Compared with other heroes in the film industry, Mani's characters embody a cultural 'otherness' that contrasts with, and at the same time complements, the leading hero and his world. This otherness, which is conceived as a series of lacks—of height, skin colour, beauty and wisdom—is conveyed through his humorous acts and self-mockery

(Rowena, 2004; Sanjeev and Venkiteshwaran, 2002). These lacks—as comedy—are overtly referenced in almost all his films, through either the scornful remarks by the elite hero or heroine or through Mani's own 'self-reflexive' mockery. Either way, they leave social marks of a distinct ethnic category on Mani's body. Most of these films may not directly reveal his caste or even that of the other heroes/heroines but it would be communicated through serious visual vocabularies and normative cultural idioms, which are part and parcel of the cultural memory of the region. The spectators could recognize these mediated social signifiers as a cultural mark of discrete communities. The visual synonyms or the aesthetic deliverance of Mani's body and persona is equated with the dark-skinned, the immature, the mentally or physically challenged, the dirty and the ugly, the unhygienic and the inferior ranked. In other words, he carries all the grounded signifiers of historical wounds that the lower caste community has suffered (see Geetha 2009; Rodrigues 2009).

This phenomenon, as an unequal balance of power, runs throughout almost all films, supplementing the star's heroism. S. V. Srinivas points out that "[t]he spectator's recognition of the figure on the screen as someone who has a history of providing pleasure, and of course resolving story level problems, was an adequate justification for the manner in which the star was presented as an unquestionable authority figure" (Srinivas 2006). Considering this, the relationship between many of these heroes and Mani is represented through a series of unequal binaries: dominant/subordinate, powerful/powerless or even master/servant. This binary logic is explicitly revealed in *Aaram Thamburan* (1997), *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998), *Valiyettan* (2000), *Narasimham* (2000), and *Natturajavu* (2004) in which Mani once again held supporting roles. Although such binaries may be rationalized by saying that it is a conventional narrative structure of cinema to distinguish and project the power of hero from that of supporting actor or comedian, Mani's idiosyncratic and submissive characters in these films often go beyond these narrative conventions. Instead, these roles allude to facets of social and caste hierarchy through the deployment of derogative remarks, bodily violence, servitude posture, and the characters' unquestionable faith towards heroes (as a friend or master). These binaries also encompass certain historically entrenched

collective memories of the spectator, where a subaltern's or a dalit's position is reinforced as a subordinate one, so that the subaltern cannot exercise political or social power. In these films, even if Mani's characters evoke or imitate positions of power, it is ultimately presented as an act of immaturity or as a laughable act of an innocent comedian.

These comedies typically employ a series of allusions to caste and race, and adopt a particularly scornful attitude towards the physiognomy and personal habits of the comedian.[13] In cinema's narration and representational strategies, it is the 'history' that has become a useful commodity to be 'fixed' and to satisfy the desire of the consumer/spectator (Sobchack, 1996, 6). Mani and his films become the victims of this conceived 'history' of the collective consciousness of the spectatorship. This historical consciousness and its perception demands a confined location for Mani's type-caste figure that can only imagine him in a space, which is culturally attributed to him and his people. In other words, the representation of Mani and the narratives in which he stars have always been intertwined with an invisible residue of the 'past'.[14] This asymmetry between the inserted past and the present prevents Mani from breaking any existing forms of dominant visuality and its forms, resulting in his role remaining subordinate and always bearing the 'marks of an inherent subalternity.'

It is in this context that we can say that Mani's films seem to belong to the genre of 'mass film' and that Mani becomes a 'class hero.' This distinction between mass film and class hero is a complex one. As S. V. Srinivas reminds us in his study of Telugu films, the insertion of the past into the narrative is "a definite sign that the film will rapidly re-establish the connection with the conventions of the mass film" (Srinivas 2006). On the other hand, a 'class hero,' according to Madhava Prasad, is a representation of the hero who embodies cultural and economic signifiers.[15] Even though most of Mani's films are popularly received, it is because of this inherent historical baggage and the floating signifiers of caste associated with his off-screen and onscreen personas that his films are treated as class-grade films. Although Mani became a class-grade film actor and his stardom relates to the popularity of class-grade films, his films do not

necessarily belong to mainstream Indian cinema in the way films of south Indian stars such as N T Rama Rao, Chiranjeevi, Rajanikanth, Mammootty, and Mohanlal do.

It is important here to understand why such class label is always attached to Mani's films considering the fact that these films are as popular as other superstar films of the Malayalam film industry. This opens up a complex domain of perceptual difference in watching, or conceiving films, where the idea of 'popular' and 'mainstream' is largely complemented through the socially legitimized persona of star rather than acting caliber of star or form of the film. The popular perception of the star or the socially legitimized image of a star persona is always equated with an idea that a star whose personified qualities and nature is either attached to upper class or upper-middle class mentalities. The narrative contents of their films and visuals often resonate with the values and norms of such class culture. In this domain, Mani's body—his off and onscreen persona—indeed stands out from the legitimized imagination of a star figure. However, his films are recognized but conceived differently; as an actor with different abilities. It must be noted here that films such as *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999), *Karumadikkuttan* (2001), *Valkannadi* (2002) and *Ben Johnson* (2005) are popular and box-office hits (blockbuster). Though these films are popularly acclaimed, the general perception about these films is that they are 'substandard' when compared to popular films performed by super stars. When Mani's film and a super star's film are broadcasted, family viewers prefer to watch the super stars' film. According to their perception, the narrative contents and forms of Mani's films are repetitive, unsophisticated, unusual, filled with vulgarity, violence, and a melodramatic performance by the actor. For instance, the first three films mentioned above more or less share a common narrative content. In *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum,* he is a visually challenged (Ramu) who lives with his bedridden father, mother and unmarried sister. His lover is a dumb girl. He looks after his family by singing on the roadsides and streets. As the movie progresses, the villain and his friend rape Ramu's sister and lover. The film ends with Mani's extraordinary performance while taking up his revenge against the villain. The film brings laughter and tears while detailing his lower class surroundings and his helpless position when the violent attacks took place

against him and his loved ones. In *Karumadikkuttan* and *Valkannadi*, his characters are mentally challenged and follow the similar narrative style pursued in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum.* However, most popular films of superstar—Mammootty and Mohanlal—are repetitive both in terms of form and content. Therefore, if the forms, contents and box-office success are markers of popularity, then Mani's films should also belong to the domain of popular-mainstream cinema. But there are social indicators in the cinema shared by the community of spectator, which differentiate Mani's films from other popular films. It is obvious that Mani's films are different and distinct because, as I mentioned earlier, the heroic position is occupied by a star whose persona and body is too unconventional to match up with the ideal star persona.

In the postcolonial condition, the articulation of subaltern identity and the ways in which it negotiates with the public are contingent and contextual, rather than unique and homogenous. The social spaces of the subaltern citizens are unequally dispersed, marginalized, and made invisible.[16] Popular visual culture offers—through shared visual vocabularies—a politics of representation either as a necessary identity for domination, or as a resistance against the inherent identity and subordination on the basis of caste, class or gender.[17] In the next section of the paper, I would like to examine how cinema as a popular medium provides spaces to practice, negotiate, and resist the conventions of caste, and how the visual synonyms and narrative techniques demonstrate such practices.

The Making of a Subaltern Star: Sympathy, Humiliation and De-masculinization

When we compare Mani's characters with that of other prominent stars in the south Indian film industry, Mani's hero, unlike other stars, is not in a position to engage in a dialogue–either moral or political–with society. For instance, as Madhava Prasad observes, superstars and megastars like Rajnikanth, Chiranjeevi, Mohanlal, and Mammootty make moral and political judgments in their films, and their characters bear the collective political and moral consciousness of the people (Prasad, 2009, 69). Indeed, the matter is not linked to the caste or community identity of the hero but to the spectator's identification with a popular hero or star. The consumption of the hero

coincides with the multifaceted charisma and the notion of an 'ideal star.' This ideal star can sometimes act as a person with transcendental and superhuman qualities and encounter real and imaginary situations (Prasad, 1998, 134; Srinivas, 2013, 232). It is the specific narratology of films as well as the spectator's identification with hero/star as a superhuman and charismatic individual that allows the hero to engage with society's political and moral consciousness. There are certain qualitative signs—such as glamour and masculinity—that have to be met by a star persona. However, Mani's hero always shows a lack of these qualitative signs, both physically and mentally. This is because Mani's persona as a star does not concur with the imaginary recognition of an ideal star by the spectator. Moreover, his persona and his cultural capital have been used to satisfy the community of viewers who, by identifying with Mani's figure, acts as a subject within the social relation of power. Instead of helping to collapse conservative morals and age-old traditions, the cinema hall enables the viewing public to engage with certain perspectives outside the ones they may hold in their everyday lives.[18]

The distance that Mani has to traverse to reach the level of other heroes in Malayalam cinema is complex. Firstly, he has to fight against cultural representations of the ethnographically categorized subaltern body, which is deeply entrenched in the practice of seeing and proliferated by forms of knowledge and image-making technologies. Secondly, he has to continuously negotiate with the public for his social space within the conceived boundaries of the dominant visual perception, which is determined by historically evolved structures of caste and social domination. While other Malayalam heroes would easily be cast in a number of roles across caste spectrum, Mani's hero, apart from having the additional burden of a differently-abled mind and body, typically must journey through an unchartered territory marred by several formidable hurdles. He has to enter into a dialogue with the social environment of the embodied gaze of the spectator that determines and defines the standardized bodily movement, the expected expressions of *natanam*, *bhavam*, and *rasam*, and the visual conventions that govern them. The embodied gaze functions according to the logic of hegemonic visual perception and the existing rules of social space. Rather than disrupting them—because

the sense of space is not empty, homogenous, or infinite—it corresponds to the presumption of a bounded, known universe (Rajagopal, 2011, 15).

Mani's heroes, however, try to overcome this particular type-caste visual construction and embodied gaze that is rooted in the dynamics of colonial ethnographic identity of caste and tribe in India (see Pinney, 1990). The body language and gestures of Mani is used as an indirect marker to reproduce this type-caste identity, which, on the other hand, recalls symbolic customary practices that prevailed in the hierarchical power relations of Kerala society. It is through the postures and gestures, and particular clothing arrangements (forms of non-verbal communication), that traditional relationships—of obedience and subordination—of lower caste or subaltern classes to the larger society are expressed. The body, mud, cow dung, paddy fields, folk tunes, derision, so-called 'dirty' jobs, and mimicry get blurred here in Mani's films, as an indispensable item in the cultural landscape and environment or social space of the subaltern. These objectifiable items of subaltern are the common elements in the visual-narratology of Mani's films. In his films, Mani's characters engage in several kinds of occupations traditionally held by lower castes, so that he frequently plays a shepherd, blacksmith, or toddy-taper. It is a process in which a mutual interplay between selective social semiotics and specific cultural environments attribute the visual form of the subaltern identity to Mani.

For instance, *Karumadikkuttan* plays with representations of the dalit while validating cultural stereotypes rooted in the cultural memory of the spectator. In this film, Mani plays the leading role as a mentally challenged—Karumadi (literally meaning 'black')—who is the son of a low caste man and an upper caste Brahmin woman. Although Karumadi is born into the upper echelon of the caste hierarchy, his conduct, eating habits, and behaviour betray his lower caste, dalit-paternity. Accordingly, the film is replete with references to the notions of purity and pollution. The social environments with which Karumadi engages best exemplify this. Mani's character is envisaged as a specific hero with numerous peculiar inabilities and immaturities which is quite different from the usual imagination of an ideal hero. In the film, the hero's experiences with love

and dejection make the viewer sympathetic to him. His helpless fatal cry during fights also earns him the empathy of the viewer. There is, additionally, a moment in which Mani's character of the subaltern hero is elevated to the status of the ideal hero image of the Malayali viewers. This happens when the masculine power of the hero is revealed with the help of the upper caste heroine. Although initially the heroine rejects Karumadi's love, he ultimately wins her by extending shelter to her and her mother when they are evicted from their home. Ultimately, the plot of the film presents Karumadi's manliness to satisfy the spectator's imagination of an ideal hero.

The ambivalent narrative strategy in *Karumadikkuttan* proves to be the dominant one in most of Mani's films, wherein his subaltern identity and various physical or social handicaps are portrayed as an innocent ability to do many good things. Mainstream Indian cinema subordinates the lower caste's world-views and reduces their spatial mobility through a mechanism of representation of disabled bodies and immature selves. Recognition of difference is articulated but not through a respectable manner, and it is also bound up with the spectator's 'recognition' of the potentiality of a 'historical actor' who bears the type-caste ethnographic signs. Mani, therefore, has to embody expectations held by the 'historical spectator.'[19] Compared to other heroes in Malayalam cinema such as Mammootty and Mohanlal—who are portrayed as bearers of middle class fantasies and feudal romances that become part of dominant visual culture— Mani's heroes are always social outcasts who inhabit subordinate visual spaces in order to satisfy the historical spectator's desire to recognize difference.

Mani's heroes usually experiences three phases during the course of a film: sympathy, humiliation, and finally achieving a sense of masculine identity or power with the help of others. Most of his films include a situation to incur sympathy for Mani's hero, gained through a display of his differently-enabled condition or through his character's torture and pain. The logic of sympathy is a necessary narrative and a visual strategy that accommodates his bare body and personified figure to fulfill the conceptual scheme of popular viewing practices of Kerala society. He has to prove his inability in all spheres, thus reinforcing his differences for the spectator's visual pleasure. Hence, Mani's

fictional characters always carry the historical and cultural baggage of the conditioned reality. Neither his characters nor his body are able to move away from this culturally conditioned norm that in order for Mani's character—always marked as different—to access the privileged position of society, he must always be passive and his success mediated by others. Thus the subaltern's or dalit's autonomy is not fully rejected, but can be conditionally negotiated.

The second component is the way in which Mani's body has been used in these films. A series of violence, torture, and humiliation towards his body is yet another significant plot that reinstitutes the subaltern helpless/subordinate situations, in which others can exercise an authoritative power over the body—the bare life—of a subaltern class. Mani's characters as Ramu in *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999), Bharathan in *Narasimham* (2000)*,* Karumadi *in Karumadikkuttan* (2001), Udumbu Vasu in *Akashathile Paravakal* (2001) and Appunni in *Valkannadi* (2002) variously illustrate the point that his corporeal presence belongs within the sphere of subaltern pasts, whereby he has no sovereign power on his own body, is obliged to do mediocre and dirty jobs, and occupy docile and helpless positions when people ridicule and attack him. In these, as well as in many other films, his subaltern subjectivity is further enunciated through his disabled body, either physically or mentally challenged. At the same time, they function as a narrative strategy that seeks a sympathetic consent from the spectators to accept, justify and approve Mani's heroic position as an ideal hero, but a differently endowed one. The enactment of endless violence—verbal and visual—to humiliate his presence may be yet another cinematic plot, but it signifies a historically conditioned consciousness in which the untouchables have no right to protect their body. Their corporeal presence is subjected to excessive authoritarian power exercised by the superior, and their bodies have been treated as dirt, inferior, decomposed and ugly (fig. 3). For instance, in *Karumadikuttan*, there is a violent sequence in which the villains strip Mani's clothes off and make him visibly naked while continuing their violent and brutal beating and inflicting humiliation on Mani's body. Mani's character, portrayed as mentally challenged and innocent, takes all these brutality and humiliation without any resistance except for the fatal cry. Through these extensive sequences of

humiliation and series of violence exercised by others, Mani's hero obtains the sympathetic support of the spectator and this ploy of sympathetic narrative structure helps to quench the psychological morals of the spectators. These morals are an outcome of a certain historical consciousness in which Mani's body—dalit and previously untouched—and his heroisms are compared with the dominant visual modes which are, on the other hand, replete with multiple logics of high class symbols, signifiers and aesthetics. Therefore, Mani's hero always has to do immature things and be open to internalize any form of violence and accusation in order to obtain and justify his heroic position in the film. In several films, there are many derogatory terms that have been used to refer to his lower caste body, inferior attitude, and lower caste origin. Visually, all these signifiers and their actualizations in the films produce a distinct counter-aesthetic form for Mani's film, and thereby, fall under the label of class films.

Fig. 3: Scenes from *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu.*

The third convention supplements the second one in the way in which subaltern 'de-masculinity' is articulated. The process of de-masculinized subjectivity is justified through the hero's mentally or physically challenged conditions, in which he is unable to resist powerful attacks. This de-masculinity is further foregrounded as his inability to defend the heroines from being molested and raped by the antiheros (Pandian 1989, 64). However, towards the end of all his films, Mani's characters overcome this de-masculinized position and "acquire" masculinity with the help of the heroines or other patronizing agencies in the films. This social elevation and reinforcement of masculinity through heterosexual romance implies the way in which mainstream films typically depicts masculinity. While dealing with the question of sexual politics or gender binaries, Mani's films are not exceptional but follow the same narrative structure of popular mainstream films, whereby the masculine power and patriarchical authority of the

hero/star is always asserted through the feminization of the female characters and heroines in these films. In Mani's films, the process of the idealization of femininity of the heroines is complicated and is mostly mediated through sexual assault/rape/humiliation of the heroine by the villain, or manifested through the continuous oppression by social and moral institutions or by the miserable economic situation of the heroines. Nevertheless, the films don't question sexual politics or gender binaries, but use them—as a narrative strategy—to reinforce Mani's heroes' masculinity in order to make a balance between the type-caste hero and an identifiable fair-skinned upper caste heroine. It is through the above-mentioned triadic form in visual narratives that Mani negotiates his presence in mainstream popular films as well as within the conditioned popular visual perception of the spectator.

Conclusion

Representations of ethnographic images of the subaltern are never produced in a social vacuum, but rather in a web of social imaginary, which perpetuates the visual formation of the image in cinema. The ethnicity, body, and language of the actor are conceived according to expectations of social subjectivities. Thus, images are formed within this social discourse in which the notion of dominance and subordination are crucial visual sensibilities that foreground the historical consciousness of the public. Mani's body and appearance as a hero could be located within this allegory of visuality. His characters (and thus images) are formed within the realm of specific power relations in which visual imaginary reconnects with culturally conditioned images of the past that invite specific ways of seeing. When Mani started acting as a hero, he had to satisfy the dominant form of the historically constituted visual sensibility within which his appearance is nothing but a subaltern or a dalit body, to support the spectator's scopophilia, involving social fantasies and an idealized but historically constructed notion of ethnic communities. Here, Mani becomes a 'historical actor'—whose persona and body reinforces subaltern pasts—within the domain of the 'historical spectator'. The consciousness of historical spectators is embedded within the recurrent dialectic of past, present and future, whereby 'prosthetic memory' of pasts plays a role in identifying the subaltern 'historical actor' (see Landsberg, 1995; Nichols, 1996). Visual perception

is a definite outcome of social positioning and historical consciousness of hierarchical social relations in which body and embodied subjectivities become a metaphor to perceive identity and meaning.

The histories of marginalized in India are also involved in cinematic representation and spectators' dominant visual perceptions. However, it cannot be argued that the subaltern or lower castes were excluded from the dominant perceptions of visuality (Parayil, 2009, 73). Instead, as Gyanendra Pandey points out, "the subaltern is a necessary presence, s/he cannot be wished or spirited away; and yet he or she cannot fully belong. S/he has to be the same—and yet different at the same time. Difference is not to be privileged, yet it must not be entirely denied" (2008, 280-81). There is always an effort to incorporate their world-views but always marked by their otherness within the social space, so that the subaltern functions within a schema of 'subordinated inclusion'. Mani's hero thus performs within this subordinated mode without encroaching upon the dominant spaces of the elite. He is engaging in these generic spaces with his half-naked body, mentally and physically differently enabled situation, as well as with the fight to survive, offering a scornful laugh and fatal cry to negotiate with the historical consciousness of the spectator and with their identification of an ideal hero.

It can be stated that the way caste identification works in Malayalam films in general, and Mani's films in particular, involves distinctive symbolic languages, derived from the restricted social relations of past time and refashioned by modernity. However, the argument here is not that caste signifiers are functioning according to the pre-modern social pretext. Instead, these signifiers are reworked within contemporary cultural memory and expressed within the Malayalam film industry in order to gratify the visual perception of the viewer. Caste in Malayalam cinema, therefore, is articulated in a series of inherent, sometimes invisible, signs that articulate social divisions within both historical and contemporary spaces. I contend that there is thus continuity within the representation of type-caste through the use of bodily indexes and allied comedy, imitation, mockery, and humiliation as visual signifiers of caste, which in turn represent an unacknowledged manifestation of the social order based on hierarchy.

The persistence of subordinated visual space, articulation of signs through physiognomy, bodily gestures, language, and mimesis, and the spectator's identification of difference creates a space for Mani as an actor and important cultural figure that recognizes him as both a dalit actor and as a subaltern citizen. His naked body and the figurative wounds upon it become a spectacular commodity. The humiliation and the mental and moral pain therefore function as a pleasurable commodity to satisfy the viewers' perception. These historical signs help to invoke the spectator's collective and prosthetic memory in which caste functions as a sign to articulate marginality and inequality.

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[1] In postcolonial discourse, "subaltern" refers to a social group or class who is politically, economically and socially marginalized from all spheres of life and is located beyond the hegemonic structure of the society (Guha, 1982). This perspective helps to reformulate the historical understanding about India, its specific configuration of power, the uneven historical transition of social relations and the development of class contradictions (Chakrabarty, 2000). As a concept, it also reinstates marginalized population into the forefront of history to discuss political consciousness, autonomy, and dependence of the group as well as to enunciate the politics of representation (Das, 1989). Postcolonial theorists often use subaltern as a useful category to think through both the implicit and explicit articulations of racial/caste/gender stereotypes and their representations (see Mayaram, Pandian and Skaria, 2005: Pandey, 2008).

[2] The term "dalit" was initially used to refer to all the oppressed including untouchables and outcastes, or those who exist below the entire caste system. However, it later acquired the meaning it now has, as the identity of the untouchable castes. Within the age-old caste hierarchical order in India, which is based upon 'varnas' (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysyas and Shudras), dalits were known as untouchables because their presence was considered to be so polluting—either by presence or by touch—that contact with them was to be avoided. Today, dalit is being reappropriated as a democratic description for the socially oppressed untouchable caste group by members themselves, in their fight to overcome historical injustices and gain equality and respect denied for them (See Webster 2001; Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013).

[3] Parallel to the Hindi/Mumbai (Bollywood) film industry are regional film industries in South India, which mainly consists of the Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam film industries. Though the history of Malayalam cinema begins in 1928, it is only after 1950 that Malayalam cinema made its overwhelming presence in the national industry. For decades, the Malayalam film industry was intertwined with the Hindi, Telugu and, in particular, Tamil film industries, which stressed themes of nationalism, mythology and so on. Despite the industry's slow development earlier on, today Malayalam films have achieved a higher degree of appreciation at the national and international film circuits, playing in art, commercial, and middle class or social cinemas. Malayalam film industry has many conflicting, competing and overlapping narratives, especially in regard to the division between commercial films and art cinema. Registers of middle class nostalgia and feudal past, ideological/social discontent or political unrest, and economic ills are some of the themes that found expression in varying degrees in Malayalam films through the years (Pillay, 1985; Swart, 2011; Joseph, 2013).

[4] Mimicry is a genre of popular performance, which includes voice and sound imitation of human and non-human beings and entities. In its early phase, it was performed by individual artists and later it became a team performance known as 'Mimics Parade' or 'Comedy Shows'. Mimicry troops and artists have used various performative techniques such as theatre, mime and cinematic plot to produce effective satirical comedy on the various happenings in society. One of the prominent forms of mimicry performance is the imitation of voices, body features and gestures of celebrity actors, political leaders and other prominent figures in society, and it also featured with making satirical parody of significant political and social events. Many mimicry artists have entered the Malayalam film industry and established their career as popular film actors in South India. Mimicry artists turned film actors like Suraj Venjaramoodu and Salim Kumar have recently won the most prestigious national award for best actor for their performances in the films Perariyathavar (2013) and Adaminte Makan Abu (2010) respectively. Kalabhavan Mani received special jury awards (both national and state level) for his performance in Vasantiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum (1999).

[5] In the South Indian film industries, megastar, superstar and popular star are the usual terms to refer the very popular actors. The terms refer to actors' stardom as well as their capability of an actor to make films a box office hit. In the Malayalam film industry, Mammootty is known as a megastar, Mohanlal as superstar, and Jayaram and Dilip as popular stars.

[6] In December 2013, there was another complaint lodged against Kalabhavan Mani for alleged misbehavior towards customs officials at Cochin International Airport. Later, he was summoned and fined Rs.7000 for carrying undeclared gold (after failing to declare a gold bangle he wore during a foreign trip in November). When interviewed about the incident, Mani claimed that he had been harassed by customs and the police for quite some time because of existing racial and caste prejudices.

[7] The term toddy-tapper usually refers to a person who specializes in tree climbing to collect the sap from the bark of the coconut/palm trees. Toddy is a liquor or beverage fermented from this sap. From the colonial anthropological classification to the present identification of caste, the occupational status becomes a decisive criterion to define the caste identity of different communities in India. Similarly, toddy tapping became the typical occupation to identify lower

castes such as Ezhavas and Tiyans in Kerala. This classification based on occupation is also coded with racial and caste signifiers.

[8] See "Exclusive Interview Kalabhavan Mani in Bachelor Party", http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnIn0NV31yk

[9] In general, there are many parameters that define the domain of cultural identity of the Malayali. Language, food, sartorial practice, ethnic culture and public festivals are some of the projected denominators, which commonly constitute the 'inner and outer' self of Malayali's cultural identity. Historically, this projected cultural identity was an inseparable product of the linguistic nationalism based on Malayalam language, which became one of the factors to the formation of Kerala state in 1956. However, within the domain of popular visual culture, the symbols and metaphors used to refer to this cultural identity are always attached to the upper caste section of the society. Their food practices, dress style and festivals are always incorporated as the dominant cultural identity of the Malayali. As such, existing caste divisions, distinct religious practices, minority cultures, and multiple regional dialects all offer critiques of this privileged cultural identity.

[10] For instance, when watching a film or a television program, people may have a memory of the narrative events that transpired without actually having experienced those events in any manner (see Landsberg, 1995).

[11] The recognition of the significant 'other' with differences and its ambivalence are some of the major tropes in postcolonial debates. Homi Bhabha describes this ambivalent denial and recognition of racial difference as 'colonial mimicry,' which he defines as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 86).

[12] Mani has sung folksongs in most of the films he has acted in, including *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum*, *Karumadikuttan*, *The Guard*, and *Bamboo Boys*.

[13] Bullying associated with physiognomic or bodily signs, skin colour, and the lower class origins of the comedian is a common form of visual narrative in South Indian Cinema (Srinivas Ravi .K and Sundar Kaali, 1998).

[14] History here refers to the social norms, cultural practices, events and phenomena that constitute the larger field of 'cultural history'. In the context of cinema, it is this cultural history, specific historical events or social phenomena that would help the culturally specific audience to unpack the cultural connotations attributed to the subaltern identity presented onscreen.

[15] According to Madhava Prasad, a hero with political representation is a mass hero and a hero with economic and cultural representation is a class hero (Prasad 2009, 69). In these categories, Mani's hero belongs to the second one.

[16] It has been argued that the lower castes, especially, dalits and untouchables, articulate a new self that was invented and formulated in the course of their engagement with colonial modernity. Eventually, the agency of lower castes engage with the traditional power structure and articulate claims on social spaces as well as the actual physical space that were generally closed to them (Mohan, 2006, 130). The discourse of 'colonial modernity' problematized caste and gender domination, including various aspects of everyday life that evolved out of the peculiar contradictions of power in the traditional society. These trends have led to the rise of new habits within the cultural fields of clothing, food, conjugal relations, and have simultaneously created a gendered space within public and private domains. However, the

effective histories of modernity were not a unique one and it created different mentalities, even in the same historical period and for the same people (Chatterjee, 2011, 170).

[17] This unequal 'visual economy' is not a result of modernity. As Partha Chatterjee has emphasized "this phenomenon (of modernity) cannot be understood as uneven development, because it is not simply a problem of different time lags or uneven dispersion over spaces. It becomes necessary to suspend the totalizing structural contrasts between the modern and premodern and focus instead on localized, contingent and often transient changes in actual practices" (2011, 170).

[18] D. R. Nagaraj argues that the Indian film public has a multiplicity of masks; a conservative viewer who defends private morality and family values might prove to be a passionate radical in the cinema hall, endorsing the collapse of the same tradition (Nagaraj; 2006, 114).

[19] Bill Nichols points out that "it is the ceaseless dialectic of past, present and future that sustains historical consciousness for the historical actor as well as the historical spectator" (Nichols, 1996, 56).

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INTERVIEW SECTION

SYNOPTIQUE

Death Becomes Her:
Bombay Cinema, Nation
and Kashmir

Kaushik Bhaumik in conversation with Desire Machine Collective, Guwahati

The conversation presented here, featuring filmmakers Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukaillya—who form the Desire Machine Collective (DMC), Guwahati—and film historian Kaushik Bhaumik, explores the ironic histories that inform a mythic love triangle of contemporary Indian history, connecting the Indian nation, Bombay cinema, and the region of Kashmir.[i] DMC did extensive research and documentation in Kashmir during the production of their video installation Nishan I.[ii] *While working on* Nishan I, *they stumbled upon a number of cinema halls that have remained closed since 1989 when Islamic doctrinaires enforced a ban on the showing of Bombay and imported cinema in the Valley. Subsequently, these halls came to be used by the occupying Indian military forces as barracks, interrogation centers and ammunition dumps. The conversation presented below takes up DMC's experience of Kashmir, Bombay cinema, and the workings of the nation-state through a discussion about the recent history of Firdous, one of the cinema halls in Srinagar (the capital of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir) that was closed down and was subsequently occupied by the Indian army. The Collective's ruminations about the fate of cinema in Kashmir and the logics of work such as* Nishan I *elicit a perception about the manner in which the senses become disciplined, furtive and strained in the presence of military disciplinary regimes, and how such a phenomenon spells the death of cinema in the lives of the people in many senses beyond the literal closing down of cinema halls. Disciplinary regimes spell the end of the organic pleasures that went into the making of cinema as a celebration of the potentials of life as such.[iii]*

KB: *Could you tell me a little about Firdous and about the manner in which its spaces were employed by the army?*

DMC: Prior to the insurgency in 1989, Kashmir had many well-attended movie houses. Firdous—then one of Srinagar's most popular theatres—was closed down as the Bollywood films being shown there were considered anti-Islamist. It was taken over by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Over the years, militants have carried out dozens of attacks, including a suicide attack, on the cinema hall. The premises were also under occupation of the Border Security Force (BSF), which replaced the CRPF to fight militancy in 1993, before it was again handed over to the CRPF in 2003. Last year,

after almost 21 years of occupation, the hall was vacated by the CRPF. It was used for years as a military interrogation centre that primarily targeted Kashmiri youth suspected of militancy. During this time, people were executed inside quite regularly.

The many cinema halls in Srinagar are all fortified and act as bunkers for the army. They use Firdous as their bunker and barracks and as cook houses, bath-houses, mess rooms, living quarters and ammunition dumps. The balcony of the auditorium is not used, while the lower section of the auditorium serves as a store and accommodation space. The smaller rooms and landings on the sides are also converted into living quarters, while the foyer is the recreation area where there is a television that the soldiers can watch in their spare time. There was a Hindu temple on the landing of the projection room (fig. 1).

Fig. 1: A view of Firdous Cinema, Srinagar, Kashmir.

KB: *The ironies of an army interrogation centre in a cinema hall called Firdous are many. Firdous, or paradise, is of course the word that appears in Jahangir's famous*

exclamation about Kashmir being paradise on earth. And then, Bombay cinema shot Kashmir endlessly in the 1960s and 1970s as a cinematic paradise. And, of course, cinema itself is an apparatus that is often used to promise us paradise in our imperfect lives.

DMC: It is perhaps not ironic that the favourite cinema 'location' for Bombay cinema through the '60's and '70's quickly turned into a battlefield set out of bounds to the civilians. The same cinematic voyeurism with which the directors filmed the landscape of Kashmir in numerous films, with its lakes, snow clad mountains, valleys and rivers, infiltrates certain discourses of the desire of the nation-state to retain control of Kashmir as a paradise that defines Indian nationhood (as can be evinced from the lyrical tone of Films Division coverage of life in the Valley in Nehruvian times). There was a kind of anthropological voyeurism involved, of the kind displayed by anthropologists like Furer-Haimendorf who were obsessed with the beautiful body of the tribal. They were expressing their own sexual desires through their writings and photography. A similar thing seems to have happened to Kashmir with Bombay cinema. Sometimes we might be too much in the thrall of 'structural' issues affecting Kashmir. It might be interesting to see the problem in Kashmir as 'auteur-driven' by the fantasies of discrete individuals—filmmakers, politicians, intellectuals etc.—fantasizing about Kashmir as an Edenic locale for playing out desires that cannot be actualized on the plains.

KB: *There is an excess of plains' histories that played out in infantile regressive forms such as we see in the Bombay cinema of the 1960s. Even then the excess created a certain kind of 'target' of the Kashmiri, especially women, in the eyes of the hero seeking to work out his plainsman excesses in a landscape where he was free from social and cultural surveillance. This target-creation as some kind of 'compensation' for the asceticism of a violent historical society is a structural function of discourse creation that is coeval with social constructs such as 'frustrated soldiers raping women in sexual denial over long periods'. Audiences, too, are interpellated through the filmic apparatus to run rampage over Kashmir in compensation for their anxiety-ridden lives on the plains. Of course, Kashmiri women were 'hyper-fair', making this option even more*

attractive to plainsmen obsessed with obtaining fair brides abetted by their familial fantasies. Plains' histories need the carrot and the stick, the stick of hard 'civilizational' life offset by the carrot of 'holidays in the mountains', cybernetic on-off codes that confuse the mind, create anxiety. We have been made to see only Kashmir as carrot, as Paradise, we never saw the underlying history of frustrations on the plains that fuelled such a fantasy.. Now if the local population reacts against this run of fantasy, the tendency would be to want to sweep away such reaction through the application of a nomadic force equivalent to the force of the total mass fantasy that India has about Kashmir.

DMC: We don't think there is any difference between the Shammi Kapoor films of the 1960s, with its voyeuristic tourism, and a film like Mani Ratnam's *Roja*. The premise is the same except that now the gaze cannot penetrate the landscape so easily; the paradise has turned sour due to political issues. The militarization of Kashmir can then be seen in some senses as some kind of a sublime castration carried out on the object of fantasy that no longer fulfills one's desires. Deleuze argues that the virtual worlds created by screen forms intervene in all aspects of things in the worlds on screen and the bodies in the worlds external to that screen. Cinema produces new concepts that change how we perceive and interact with the world.

KB: *When the military interrogation replaces cinema in Firdous, in some senses the interrogation of our desires by cinema is suddenly replaced by an interrogation of our sensory capacities by the military. This double meaning of interrogation in the irony that Firdous comes to embody over the decade probably relates to your formulation about war and cinema.*

DMC: Paul Virilio's understanding that "war is cinema and cinema is war" foregrounds what is fairly transparent: the long historical relationship between war and cinema. From the early days of the development of cinema, war and cinema share the same technologies—telescopic lenses, freeze frames, virtual reality, point-and-shoot—mutually inspire each other's narratives, and, in turn, construct the realities of their

audiences. Going back to the origins of cinema, we could speak of Marey's first chrono-photographic 'rifle'. This association continues with the pilotless Drone, an aircraft whose camera can take two thousand pictures and whose onboard television can broadcast live to a receptor station 240 kilometers away.

At Firdous, what is fascinating is that one form of cinema, Utopian fantasy films, are replaced by another kind of film…the interrogation. The cinematic apparatus is dismantled, but the seats remain. It is as if a ghost audience seated in the hall is being interrogated through the spectacle of the interrogation of individuals (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Viewing stalls inside Firdous, now abandoned and in ruins

We feel the after-images of this movie of army interrogation every time we are in Firdous. In terms of the early conception of photographic mediums as a 'ghost industry' where ghosts were phenomenon of electrical energy, this absence of image and light in the cinema halls with soldiers living, sleeping, dressing and eating in that space seems like an apparition and some kind of residual afterimages of films that have happened

here. A theater of the absurd is being played out in the dark, without an audience and any reference to time. Delirious new ghostly images invoked anew where the flow is disrupted, the past disconnects from the present.

But now all this will be whitewashed.

KB: *Yeah…it is as if one film was followed by another, which now will give way to the 'next release'. One is reminded from your metaphor of whitewashing the spectacle of the replacement of the poster of a just-gone film by that of the new one…the older film is 'whitewashed' over in favour of the new one.*

DMC: Modern political cinema begins from a very different position, premised not on the "already there" of the people, but on their absence. This, according to Deleuze, is also the answer found in modern political cinema. The stakes involved in proclaiming the people "missing" is nowhere more evident than in the postcolonial cinema of Rocha and Sembene. These filmmakers, Deleuze argues, understand that what is required is not simply an assertion of an identity counter to the one proposed in colonial rule; they thus resist the urge to evoke dubious notions of "origins" – a true identity, a unified peoples, prior to colonialist domination – and, instead, actively seek to forge a new collectivity, a people who belong not to the past, to history, but to the future: the people as future conditional.

KB: *Cinema operates in particular ways in the timecode of spaces like Kashmir, where life, until recently, was pastoral and non-industrial. Suddenly modernity comes along and seeks to discipline such a society. The lyrical presence of cinema is suddenly withdrawn by state diktat to announce the end of a certain historical timecode for populations.*

DMC: Just as war does, cinema also takes place in time, as the primary commitment we make to experience it is time-sensitive, not place-sensitive, and as space disappears in the cinema when scenes are flattened onto a screen. We are transported

quickly in our railway-car styled theater through 1-dimensional celluloid topography. Fittingly, the "cinematic" functions occasionally as a form of "kinematic," and kinematics. Cinema simulates the feelings of movement, speed, and immediacy, creating, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it, an imposture of immediacy.

A similar thing is achieved by the spectacle of the military, a certain kinematic effect where the spectacle forces us watchers to 'move'; it produces effects of speed and immediacy within people watching it. An essential dimension of trauma is the breaking up of the unifying thread of temporality. Trauma results in a dissociation and multiplicity, which leads to a disruption in the sense of being-in-time and a consciousness of duration. Trauma is pre-verbal and timeless—still and silent. The body used to be confined in space, and now it is time that imprisons us. It is the body in time—in a space-time too infinitely compressed for man not to feel a fundamental claustrophobia.

KB: *Yes, one is reminded of cinema's endless fascination with filming military drills…the Riefenstahl films. Indeed, one wonders whether the kind of disciplining of bodies that military surveillance is carrying out on Kashmiri bodies through the exercise of what Foucault called bio-power, a vast reality TV show if you wish, does not have something in common with the manner in which Bombay cinema today focuses on fit bodies, the script as fit narrative etc. After all, classical Hollywood cinema could only happen after certain docile bodies were made possible through military-industrial discipline* (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Military Kinematics – Kashmir at the speeds of the Indian armed forces (scene from *Nishan I*, a four-channel video installation with four channels of sound).

DMC: Exactly. something of that kind is happening. Controlling time is essential to war—the activity of the narrative consists in constructing coherent temporal ensembles in order to configure time and the role of nation-state in disrupting the linear assemblages of time of the local people. Disrupting communal activities of yore—watching movies in a cinema hall, weddings that traditionally took place at night and so on—is essential to military control of Kashmir. Against the earlier cinema of Kashmir as paradise, filled with good, easy-going people, a new kind of cinema of military discipline is being imposed. Indians on the whole take the army's presence in Kashmir for granted. There is, in a lot of popular media discourse, an unquestioned patriotism which flows through cricket, commerce, media and pro-army stands in Kashmir, and this, I guess, produces a certain kind of cinema of discipline towards a space like Kashmir.

KB: *Could you please say a little about the temple shrine placed in the space where the cinema screen once was in another of the Srinagar theatres?*

DMC: Cinema halls have been read as cathedrals and the speed effects of light as creating a form of collective experiences and memories in these new temples. The Hindu temple replacing the screen in Shiraz Theater does lend easily to the feeling of a ritualistic function of purification and purging of the space in progress. It also seems to function like an exorcism of the many ghost images that lie suspended in the dark auditorium and a substitution for the dark screen. It is a fascistic thing that is happening: the shrine coming into the cinema hall, the suppression of all signs of Islamic culture all over Kashmir in favour of Hindu cultural symbols, invokes for us some kind of Nazi *swastika* marching in. All this is deeply disturbing.

The only functional movie theater in Srinagar, Neelam, which does screen film right now, is also under army occupation, and moviegoers have to pass through intense security checks to enter. The body is being disciplined by such measures to some kind of military routine. So paraphrasing Paul Virilio, "cinemas were training camps which bonded people together in the face of death agony, teaching them to master the fear of what they did not know".

KB: *Before continuing with cinema, a little about* Nishan I, *the video installation that Sonal made in Srinagar, out of which the experiences of Firdous also come out.*

DMC: *Nishan I* looks at sensory disorders that result from a disruption of "organic flows" due to sustained conflict. It looks at interior spaces of a derelict apartment, with traces of absences of that which is repressed, while daily life goes on with apparent normalcy in the streets and canals outside. A departure from reality that war produces opens up many more dimensions puncturing the discourse of normalcy. The interior of the house unfolds in a complex labyrinth both in space and in time. Multiple geometric planes collude and liner perspective collapses in the fractured mind, and only fragments are left to us to make structures out of. Concealed behind the foreground (layers of dust) present only in the form of absence, in the threatening unknown is that which is expressed. The layers of time that don't fit at the seams create a dissonance,

discontinuity that is the cause of a discomfort. In this contraction, time and the disappearance of territorial space in times of war, multiple temporalities converge into one space, breaking the chronological continuity; in the fissures that are produced by the senses coming apart, perceived reality is destroyed and new realms of perception open up—the mundane everyday assumes the realm of myth and fairy tales (fig. 4).

Fig. 4: *Nishan I*, four-channel video installation with four channels of sound

Linear perspective invented during the European renaissance abstracts from psycho-physiological space that is an unpredictable flow of visual phenomenon, a homogeneous, unchanging infinite space—purely mathematical. It is an abstraction on which the camera is also based. It depicts the individual gaze. In Nishan, many perspectival planes collide, breaking the illusion of a single homogeneous, unchanging space and the single position for the viewer. The horizontal monumentality of the work also works against the vertical modernity, and one has to navigate the space and change one's position to experience the work. It is about the freeing up of perception and from being bound to single standpoint and immobile eye. Also *Nishan I* goes against the Renaissance perspectival stable view of the viewer looking out of the window, which creates an absolute distinction between the grounded viewer and the world in flux out there brought to focus from this point of grounded vision. The widow, however, has to be left out, as it is the location of the gaze. In Nishan, however, the window and interior space is also revealed, referencing the subject himself/herself and also making evident his/her centered gaze to the world outside. In this case, the house was used by the army as a bunker. A viewer who loses his gaze and is drawn into the continuous flow of sensory phenomenon loses this subject position and can merge with the object he is experiencing—the perceptual flow.

KB: *This of course then loops back to the Virilio equation between war and cinema through the idea of common use of visual devices that home on a target.* Nishan I *thus seeks to interrupt the habits of the vision that homes and targets.*

Back to cinema then. How do you think the love triangle between the Indian state, Bombay cinema and the 'regional' actually function?

DMC: The triangle relation you mention is quite a perverse one. Nation state and Bollywood cinema conspire and create identity and wipe out multiplicity of the regional by appropriating them as stereotypes or zones or a fantasy land. There are instances of films like *Dil se..* or *Tango Charlie* which need to be seen in this light.

In Kashmir, we think what happened was that a certain generation progressively got alienated from mainland India in a political sense. Then, the same films that entertained Kashmir in the 1960s were seen as an alien point of view… say where a Kashmiri is portrayed as a villain and is bashed up by a north Indian hero, this would be seen as some kind of negative gesture made by the Indian nation/Bombay cinema towards Kashmiris. It is with politicization that critiques of stereotyping Kashmir and Kashmiris arose. Then of course the Islamists brought in the logic of Bombay cinema as being anti-Islamic. But then there are other things. There is deep resentment amongst the Kashmiri young that young men from Kashmir cannot get into the Bombay film industry despite being so good-looking by cinematic standards. It is always the women who are coveted by the industry.

KB: *That brings us to the ironic historical loop that marks the passage of Kashmir in Bombay cinema in the 1960s into something like Firdous, and it involves the issue of unemployed young. After all, one may argue that the Shammi Kapoor films set in Kashmir mark a decisive break in the relationship between Bombay cinema and the nation-state ideal, with the stern task of nation-building giving way to frothy youth culture playing itself out freely in the margins of India. A logic of 'unemployment' is written into the content as well as the economics of such films. And somehow the*

events that lead to what happens in Firdous passes in substantial ways through discourses about the unemployed young.

DMC: Society is not able to quench youth desires. Cinema steps in, but over time this fantasy fails to quench youth desire. 1980s youth culture in India wanted to open up to liberal culture, but India was not liberal enough. A story of a Kashmiri young man seducing a Bombay girl was never made. The image is not liberated. Older images open up minds and bodies, but images that follow cannot answer the sensory needs of the young. National fantasy has no place for the Kashmiri youth or the young for that matter.

A narrative that we come across here in Kashmir very frequently is about young men who became militants after being unsuccessful in love—love defined by the logics of Bombay films watched in the cinema halls. Here, the energies of cinema turn so easily to insurgency. Indeed, we should be only making horror films given the levels of sexual repression the young have gone through.

KB: *People die for the loves inspired by cinema seen inside halls, and here we have people being executed inside cinema halls. Sublime castrations seem to abound in a nation perpetually in the grip of melodramatic throes of either repressed love or authoritarian patriotism. Yes, there is horror cinema all around the idea of Firdous – the interrogation film, the execution film, the military spectacle kinematics.*

DMC: The fact is that in spaces like Kashmir, Assam or Meghalaya, there is no culture of the film screen onto which people living in these regions can project their fantasies. Bombay cinema can step into the absence of indigenous screen cultures for a time, but it can never satisfy these regions' local people's fantasies about themselves. Cinema is about projecting one's thought onto a moving image, about contrasting one's experience with those depicted in cinematic images to figure out one's life's experiences. The cinema screen is some kind of prosthesis for perception. It teaches us what the contemporary is, what friendship or love are, etc. This is missing in Kashmir.

There is no space for fantasy. A similar thing is happening all over India, where multiplexes are rooting out screens. There is no representation of the desires of people—art-house cinema from 'regions' focus too much on village life, and Bollywood is urban only in a certain way. There is no representation of contemporary modern youth experience on screens in these regions. This connects strongly with the ban of Hindi cinema in Manipur and the huge popularity of Korean cinema and now Korean fashion in the state and slowly in the region.

KB: *In a sense, militarization of regions precisely produces the abolition of the 'cinematic' within populations. Militarization is aimed against the fantasies of sensory freedoms of the people. In a profound sense, militarization abolishes the cinema screen and what we call the 'cinematic' within our lives. Of course, the youth suffer most from the abolition of the 'cinematic'* (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Fade In/Fade Out in Kashmir (transformation scene from *Nishan I*, four-channel video installation with four channels of sound)

It is interesting to think in this respect about the situation in urban contexts from the 1970s onwards around the world, where a certain confused interface emerges between sensory radicalisms produced by cinema and political confusions of the time. For Kashmir, I have heard this story of an erstwhile JKLF leader trying to woo a contemporary academic by singing Hindi film songs to her on the phone through the night. You have lived through similar turbulent times in Assam in the same period. In some ways what happens in Kashmir and Assam after the 1970s is precisely the Indian state's inability to handle this new kind of youth sensory radicalism arising on the interface between cinema and politics.

DMC: I am an accidental becoming. In Guwahati, while I was growing up, I had an abundance of choices. Calcutta was a major reference point for Guwahati, sending films and books accessible to the middle class. We loved Bombay cinema. But I also saw Bergman films in 16mm in a hot room in Cotton College where I studied. Cinema was a space for meeting people, where we discussed our desires and fantasies. Before a place globalizes, cinema is already there to de-territorialize you; it expands the horizons of experience, where you are in the world, Utopian desires. Youth needs Utopia. Radical politics was possible because choices were available in what you read, what you saw and what you experienced. After 1989, the space for such politics went missing.

Today, there is this SEZ model driven homogenizing happening. Guwahati has been taken over by Delhi. New citizens are coming on who want to live and consume as the rest of India. Identical houses being built all over India, and media decides how you live. We are becoming like an island. We are living life televisual on a 70mm LCD screen.

KB: *The dynamism of what Deleuze calls 'any space whatever' where anything connects with anything gets curtailed in media-driven consumerist lives. There is this illusion that the world is at your doorstep on your television screens—a false 'any space whatever'. We are back to surveillance, but this time authored by Karan Johar, where the new Indian patriotism is wearing branded American clothes. It is ironic that it is in*

this time of standardization that, more than ever before, one needs films—of the kind Rivette makes or Pasolini's Trilogy of Life—set in 'any space whatever' to capture the complexity of Indian experience, but also to challenge that spurious and false discourse of 'unemployment' (something that a film such as Kamal Swaroop's Om Dar-b-Dar *was). I am reminded of* Nishan I *challenging the Renaissance single-point perspective through the invocation of miniature paintings and the plural nature of religious architecture in Kashmir.*

Finally, a meditation on the perception of the Bombay industry as a well-oiled machine productive of pleasure that wants to steamroll into quiet frontier regions and shake up such regions into industrial excitement. Sometimes there would be resistance to this noise (as in Manipur), sometimes magical success (as in the case of the JKLF leader I referred to above). For the Kashmiris, I guess Indian colonialism probably produced conditions fraught and pain-ridden akin to the 'intimate enemy' situation that Ashis Nandy speaks of with respect to British colonialism in India.

DMC: We see Bombay cinema as some kind of a neighbourhood cinema where there is a voyeuristic eye that goes around peeking into houses to see what's going on there. Kashmir is one such house that Bombay cinema peeks into…there are many others. The Northeast has had no place in Bombay cinema—so culturally alien is the Northeast to mainland sensibilities. This kind of neighbourhood cinema cannot respond to a multicultural society like India. Its vision is too uni-dimensional. Bombay cinema is not nomadic enough, like French cinema revealing new lives after May 1968 or like Asian cinema. It cannot imagine producing cinema in any space whatever. Ronnie Screwvala will produce *Dev D,* but it is anchored in the production of a patriotic film such as *Swades*. There is today a tyranny of nationalism in India and an idea of the global filtered through this patriotism.

It is possible that the images of Kashmir from 1960s Bombay cinema would have satisfied the father of this JKLF leader of whom you speak, but for the son's generation such images were not enough. They did not correspond to reality around the younger

generation. That's when the questioning of representation begins.

KB: *One thing that has always intrigued me about current Bombay cinema is the manner in which it can make films about spaces alien to its imagination only when some kind of popular marketable framework is provided for that space. So* Udaan *set in Jamshedpur post the 'nationalist' stardom of the Indian cricket captain whose domicile it is,* Peepli Live *when there is enough 'national' media focus on farmer suicides. Media popularity in the 'national' register of certain issues might be providing a new framework for the nation-Bombay cinema connection that was very feeble from the 1960s through the 1980s. Here, Mani Ratnam is a pioneer. He brings Kashmir back into Bombay cinema and Bombay cinema back into the nation-cinema nexus precisely when Kashmir becomes a media event. Firdous then becomes, ironically, a laboratory—a metaphor for the transformation of Indian lives, Bombay cinema and of everything in between, where bodies trained to live under the conditions of an earlier Bombay cinema are now being disciplined to a new regime of bio-power driven by media-fuelled consumerism and standardization of life towards a new order of productivity, failing which they shall be executed* (fig. 6).

Fig. 6: The derelict projector room of Firdous Cinema, Srinagar, Kashmir

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[i] Desire Machine Collective (DMC) consists of filmmakers Mriganka Madhukaillya and Sonal Jain, who are based in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, a state in northeastern India. Formed in 2004, DMC employ film, video, photography, space and multimedia installation in their works. They assume their name and theoretical disposition 'from *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, a seminal text from 1972 by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, [and they seek] to disrupt the neurotic symptoms that arise from constricting capitalist structures with healthier, schizophrenic cultural flows of desire and information.' In doing so, they seek to 'confront the many forms of fascism that lead to violence and injustice through their practice, both regionally in Guwahati, Assam, and around the world'. DMC have shown their work extensively around the world. Their work *Residue* was part of the India Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, 2012. *Residue* and *Nishan I* were shown at the *Being Singular Plural* show at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, curated by Sandhini Poddar in 2012. DMC also helm Periferry, 'a nomadic space on ferry for hybrid practices'. Periferry is 'a trans-local initiative which looks at critical uses of technology, collaborative experiments with local communities in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner. It works as a laboratory for people engaged in cross disciplinary practice.'

[ii] *Nishan I* is a 4 channel video installation with 4 channels of sound. Set in a derelict building in Srinagar, it is described by DMC as 'cityscapes in conflict zones are dotted with abandoned, disused houses that bereft of their primary functions serve as bunkers for the army. *Nishan I* registers the interior space of these homes with traces of the absences that are repressed within them. While daily life goes on, in apparent normalcy in the streets and canals outside. The window determines the relation with the world and this relates to the split between the interior and exterior, the ego and the gaze, public and private.'

iii The state of Jammu and Kashmir that forms the northern crown of the Indian nation-state has been the powder-keg for a global conflict over territorial sovereignty since its formation in 1947 when India and Pakistan gained independence from British rule through a partition of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of religious majorities. The state was, during colonial rule, an independent Princely State ruled by a dynasty of Hindu Dogra kings. Disputes began between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, which was a Muslim majority region and which Pakistan claimed should be part of it since the creation of nations in 1947 had been carried out on the basis of regional religious majorities. Pakistan invaded Kashmir in 1947 and things came to a head in 1948 through a UN Security Council engineered Cease Fire that resulted in an informal redrawing of national boundaries, leaving huge areas in Kashmir in control of Pakistan. Decades of border warfare followed that included two wars fought in 1965 and 1971 in addition to simmering political and cultural tensions among the people of the valley along the Indo-Pakistan/Hindu-Muslim axes of confrontations. Things came to a head when the Mujahideen movement was launched by Islamic radicals in 1989 in emulation of the Intifada in Palestine and in the aftermath of the events in Afghanistan and Punjab in the 1980s. The armed revolution was spearheaded by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) which has since faded out, ceding place to a spate of militant organizations deemed 'terrorist' by the Indian state and international liberal governments elsewhere. Links for activities in Kashmir with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are routinely quoted when discussing the issue. However, things remain, at best, nebulous, given the placement of the region under virtual Martial Law since the 1990s making it into an inaccessible fortress, an opaque zone for any sober consideration of historical or political matters. The Indian army's presence in the region has escalated steadily, as have accusations of gross violations of human rights by the army that include acts such as 'encounter killings without trial', 'disappearances', torture and rape and random interrogation and harassment of civilians, amongst others.

Questions for Kumar Shahani

by Aparna Frank[i]

Kumar Shahani is an internationally renowned filmmaker, who studied under Ritwik Ghatak and apprenticed with Robert Bresson. He is a recipient of the prestigious Prince Claus Award (1998). His films have won several Indian Filmfare Awards and his film 'Khayal Gatha' won the FIPRESCI Prize at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 1990. Mr. Shahani's essays have been published in the journals Framework and Social Scientist and he co-edited Cinema and Television: Fifty years of Reflection in France with Jacques Kermabon.

Aparna Frank: *In your many past interviews and essays, you have questioned simple definitions of "identity" and "culture", including the term "multiculturalism"; hence, I am curious, what does a phrase like "Indian cinema" mean to you?*

Kumar Shahani: The question of identity and culture was, as you know, the product of fascism, Nazism and imperial constructs. Right up to 1961, I remember filling up forms, which asked me not only what my nationality was, but also what my race, caste, etcetera were. Therefore, I have rejected these notions totally, fundamentally and I do not ever wish to build any ideology including that of multiculturalism upon notions that have brutalised millions of people. Corporate multiculturalism and state terror are the greatest threat to humanity—they work against the very ethos of individuation.

So, what does Indian cinema mean to me or to you, or to anyone else, who has fought for freedom, be it from one sort of hegemony or another? For me, and my gurus, Ritwik Ghatak, D.D Kosambi[ii], Jal Balaporia[iii] and their gurus-Eisenstein, Einstein, Rahmat Khan[iv], anything with a geographical name like "Indian" meant self-liberation. The conflict that every move in the direction of self-liberation produces between self-realisation and social, political, and economic self-determination is there for everyone to see in *Char Adhyay* (*Four Chapters*, 1997) [v]. Its multivalence itself frees us even of the constraints of form, of literariness, of painterliness or any determinism in philosophy and praxis.

AF: *So, even though you reject the repressive forms of 'Indian culture' and 'identity', you defend and even redefine identity and culture as a mode of individual freedom. Is that what you mean when you say that the geographical name 'Indian' meant self-liberation for Ghatak and even Eisenstein?*

KS: Yes, I mean "Indian" or 'Russian" in the sense of that which is opposed to global capital. Or, when Eisenstein was working on *Que Viva Mexico!*, he was 'Mexican' in terms of understanding that culture, immersing himself in that particular history. This does not mean that he was trying to impose a 'Russian' or a 'Mexican' view, but it was a self-liberating way of thinking, and it is actually very difficult to achieve. You call yourself 'Indian' or 'Russian' only so that you can realize yourself, not to restrict or imprison yourself. Names like 'Indian', 'American', etc., they themselves bind you into an identity, if they are used in a top-down manner, as from the perspective of a state—'the Russian state' or 'American state'—which is ridiculous in that it can pit one against the other. This leads to the 'other' being ostracized, demonized.

AF*: You have written about the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien (2008), studied with Bresson and Ghatak during your formative years (1963- 68), witnessed May 1968, interviewed Miklós Jancsó (1979)—therefore you have a rather remarkable engagement with diverse traditions in world-cinema. Is that kind of eclecticism something that you see happening within Indian cinema today?*

KS: I am sure that my younger colleagues will continue to engage themselves with diverse traditions in world cinema. Some of them, indeed, are happy to say that they have been inspired by the work done by my generation in combating the slots that we were thrust into as commodities on the international market. The engagement with self-realization is almost something instinctual, and I trust that my younger colleagues, my pupils and even those who at the moment aspire to make films, will continue to celebrate freedom.

AF: *In the essays you wrote during the Emergency[vi], published in* Framework[vii], *you express a strong skepticism toward any kind of institutionalization of film and art, which included realism, modernism and the avant-garde. Given that kind of critical*

distance, I am curious as to what, in your opinion, we are commemorating in the centennial of Indian cinema: its technological achievements, its consolidation as one of the largest film industries or its aesthetic contribution?

KS: I think that Realism and Modernism—including the avant-garde—more or less exhausted themselves with the immediate decade after the Second World War. In a sense, the United States and the Soviet Union—also India—put into question the very idea of a nation state because the new state was coming together if not in intention, certainly in reality of many different linguistic communities. There were new victories for women, for people of non-white origins, etc., preparing us for the postmodern situation across the globe in which the European Enlightenment and its corollaries were being gradually eroded. A new set of signs was beginning to appear from locations which did not necessarily have metropolitan centres in the imperial countries.

Technological achievements will always remain a question mark if they are not accompanied by social change of the sort that was brought about in 1771, 1789, 1917, 1947 and so on.[viii] History and commemoration are absolutely necessary for any evaluation of aesthetic and therefore ethical development of the entire civilization process.

AF: *Can you describe this correlation between technological change and art further?*

KS: You see this in Kosambi's writings very well, where technological intervention in agriculture changes social relationships between men and women, the relationship between different professions, trade, and a reflection of that in art. When these changes are *internalized* in art, you have these wonderful innovations, as in Buddhist art—Ajanta is a fine example. Buddhist art is the finest expression of being extraordinarily inclusive—as any art should be. The individuation in Buddhist art is unmatchable; each leaf, each *mudra* of the fingers, is treated with such care! It has its own individuality and it continues to do so, you see this even in Japan—the Lotus Garden. That is the kind of individuation that I aspire to.

AF: Maya Darpan *(Mirror of Illusion, 1972) [ix], often hailed as an 'Indian New Wave*

film', provides an eloquent, gentle alternative to the rhetoric of the films of May 1968 because it says that the necessity in "freedom is the recognition of necessity" is different from ideological or political necessities. What was the challenge for you, particularly because this was your first film, in terms of expressing this philosophical idea visually/cinematically?

KS: I will answer this question on a personal note. I met Jean-Luc Godard along with Jacques Kébadian who was Robert Bresson's first assistant. Very generously, Godard offered to Kébadian and to me an invitation to work on a film which he would put together of the viewpoints of immigrants in France on the nature of the post '68 European context.

I had loved the film that Chris Marker had made putting together the vision and practice of filmmakers from America and Europe in the context of Vietnam.[x] However, the problem that loomed before us was that neither Godard nor the political economy of the world at that time, would have in the slightest allowed a non-Eurocentric viewpoint its full flowering from the location of Paris, or London, or New York. Therefore, I came back to India where I thought I would find the opportunity to go beyond any effort that I could have made elsewhere to elaborate upon freedom as being conscious of the suffering of others, as love and beauty and colour. Of course, I have never been part of any New Wave, anywhere, nor ever wish to be.

AF: *Why did the expression of a non-Eurocentric point of view seem difficult or complicated at that time? Were the reasons political or a matter of resources?*

KS: Not that they were not struggling to get a non-Eurocentric point of view, of course they were. It is just that I remember from the time I went to Paris there were demonstrations for Vietnam, and I used to think that they had so many problems of their own, why are they not talking about them first? It was as if the problems were in Vietnam and none existed within the Western world. I couldn't see why they didn't first of all identify the problems at home and see Vietnam as an extension of their own problems. Then suddenly the breakthrough did happen in May '68. Something did come out of it, in terms of pressuring de Gaulle to leave for Germany and that, in itself, is an achievement. And the backlash to May 68 also showed that it had an

impact. In terms of cinema, I have seen the works of the Dziga Vertov group but didn't think much about it.

AF: *Your interest in history is very specific and distinct in that it comes from Kosambi's Marxist anthropology, Debiprasad Chattopadhyay's works. Which film(s) of yours would you characterize as coming close to an embodiment of Kosambi/ Chattopadhyay's works? Didn't you want to make a film "on Kosambi"?*

KS: I wish that Kosambi and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay[xi] were alive and could actually answer this question. I believe that their work inspired both the sensuousness and the abstraction, the making of the sign in all of my films.

I did think of a film "on Kosambi" but of course, it would have had nothing by way of biography. It would have had a lot to do with life as he observed it and had asked me to "record" and create a montage thereof.

AF: *Why the 'sign', as opposed to say 'symbol' or 'allegory'?*

KS: A sign can be elliptical; a sign can be persuasive and a sign can be interpreted. It elicits the viewer's own experience and it introduces a kind of proposal from the artist to the spectator, who is invited to accept the sign. Unlike the symbol, the sign is not tied to any absolute, fixed object or meaning.

One of the principles of the art forms and literature here has been named "*vyanjana*". I believe that it extends to other cultures as well. *Vyanjana* refers to meaning which emanates from the construction of an image or a phrase or the shift in the *laya* that deepens our experience in every way. I think the Chinese refer to it as 'indirection'. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra[xii] spoke about the same *ashtapadi* or icon or movement from perspectives that were in a sense the simultaneously existing layers of our civilization—Tantric, Buddhist, Vaishnav, Sufi.

AF: *In films like* The Bamboo Flute *(2000),* Bhavantarana *(Immanence, 1991) and* Khayal Gatha *(The Khayal Saga, 1988) you are engaged with various art forms.[xiii] Can you talk a little about your collaboration with musicians, painters, and dancers?*

Do these arts bring out something that lies concealed in film?

KS: You know, I have also collaborated with artists over long periods of time and not realized those films...as yet. One of the longest such 'collaborations' is of course with Vivan Sundaram[xiv]. My friendship with him and with Geeta Kapur[xv] goes back to 1967. By working with Vivan, I explored the bridge between Europe and India all the more. I got to know his aunt, Amrita Sher-Gil[xvi] better than any one I have known in my life! It was all like a reincarnation in Shimla, Paris, Budapest.

I had started working on films with Pina Bausch[xvii] and with Anish Kapoor[xviii] and the realization of those films would have, I believe, taken us all across to another horizon. I feel quite let down by the fact that Pina is no more and that there is no funding for the projected work with Anish. Akbar Padamsee[xix] has been like a teacher and the collaboration with him was based on the greatest amount of mutual respect and freedom. Somnath Hore's[xx] white on white work has seeped into every frame of *Char Adhyay* and into my often unspoken communication with K.K. Mahajan[xxi]. He had bought a special exposure meter which could do the minutest readings of the million whites in Somnath's 'Wounds' series, and the million densities of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings.

In *Maya Darpan*, Chandra[xxii] had first choreographed the dance sequence from her discipline of Bharatyanatyam[xxiii], but when she found that I was not quite happy with it, she erased it all and we found the right idiom in Mayurbhanj Chhau[xxiv] after the shooting of the main schedule was done in distant Alwar in Rajasthan. Both Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia[xxv] gave all of themselves to the vision of the films with an unparalleled generosity. I think, in our sangeet (composite of literature, music and dance), there is an ocean of unexplored movement, intervals that create themselves, even as they disappear. Isn't that true of both montage and modulation?

The point is, no film can be made on other arts as if it were some sort of a social scientific question. You have to transform and violate the other art to some extent; through juxtaposition and montage, you violate the unity of that particular work, and you have to, because unless you do that you cannot achieve a kind of

transcendence.

As Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra said of my film, it is not a film 'on' him, but something which goes beyond him and beyond gestures; it is an interpretation. So, I do plan in detail, but not on paper. It is more through dialogue with the people I work with and even the nature around me, which allows for a kind of revelation to occur in the shots. When it comes to the editing table, I need absolute attention and concentration, no distractions whatsoever.

AF: *Given your critical stance towards commercial cinema, do you see popular films, either Indian or Hollywood? Do you go to the movies, multiplexes?*

KS: From time to time, sometimes more intensively, so as to be able to cast a film's actors or discover some new relationships emerging because of economic or technological changes. I love it when a student asks me to look at any film or go to the theatre or an exhibition—particularly their own work. The technical quality of the average Indian film has improved much, but I don't know if it is going anywhere.

AF: *What do you think are the problems and challenges you are facing today as a filmmaker, compared to the challenges you faced in the 70s?*

KS: In the 1970s, finance capital was just beginning to bring down regimes and prop up dictators. That applied to both the First and the other worlds. After *Maya Darpan*, I had to wait for twelve years to make my second feature film *Tarang* (*The Wave,* 1984). Now, i.e. in the last decade, both finance capital and industrial capital are collapsing and I am sure that you are personally experiencing that collapse as every American citizen has to. Along with this collapse, there is a great destabilization in the relationships between one person and another, one word and another, one image and another, and the pixels that occupy our lives.

I have not been able to complete any film (or even begin many that I have researched on) in the last ten years!

AF: *What are your thoughts on digital filmmaking?*

KS: I have made a digital film *As the Crow Flies* (2004) with Akbar Padamsee. It takes a lot of time in post-production, and I would be interested in making more works digitally. I do want to discover what the aesthetic possibilities of that medium are. In this film itself, there are some indications of what the aesthetic possibilities might be, but it is just the beginning. One of the important aspects for me is about bringing individuation or that kind of 'accident' as it were, that takes place all the time, into digital film. You have to fight against how color, texture, form can get reduced into a sameness. At the same time, what a pity it is that the fantastic potential of the digital image has been reduced to imitating the world, or the cinema as it existed before. An exercise, a hegemony for an unnamed class of scoundrels. I am waiting for the day when this wonderful technology will fulfill its promises.

AF: *What films should the occasion of India's centennial celebration of film prompt us to revisit and restore?*

KS: Like Henri Langlois, I think that every frame ever shot anywhere on celluloid should be preserved. And now, there is a proliferation of images in emerging media. Those images are also worth preserving. How? I do not know. The great thing about anything that is photographed or recorded is that each moment, each event, is unique. In cinematography and imaging thereafter, Buddhist and Sufi art becomes the very fundamental principle for all practice: the celebration of the world in flux, each living moment in transformation allowed to find its own individual fullness and annihilation.

AF: *In one of Mani Kaul's interviews, he recalls with tremendous affection how the two of you were so inseparable at the Film Institute. Can you talk a little about your friendship with Mani Kaul?*

KS: During our last year at FTII, we didn't have a place to live. We moved around a lot, shared living space with others. We formed a kind of late-risers association because we couldn't find a place to sleep. And all the stray-dogs became our friends. It was quite wonderful in its own way! I remember my last meeting with Mani when he had gotten very ill. We talked at length about signs, signals. This was a kind of

preoccupation for us in films too, say the juxtapositions in Eisenstein or even in music. Mani was definitely more on the side of metaphysics, whereas I was interested in Kosambi.

AF: *This seems to be a ritual that is quite common in popular film journalism, but I want to subject you to it only once on this special occasion: What are your favorite films?*

KS: *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), *Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Dreyer, 1928), *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), *Sant Tukaram* (Vishnupant Govind Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, 1936), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960), *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1973), *Pather Panchali* (Satyajit Ray, 1955), *La prise du pouvoir par Louis XIV* (Roberto Rossellini, 1966), *Au hasard Balthazar* (Robert Bresson, 1966), *L'Argent* (Robert Bresson, 1983), *Ivan the Terrible* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1944 and 1958), *White Nights* (Luchino Visconti, 1957)...

(Interview conducted through electronic mail and phone, November 2013 and March 2014)

Select Filmography:
1972   *Maya Darpan (Mirror of Illusion)*
1984   *Tarang (The Wave)*
1989   *Khayal Gatha (The Khayal Saga)*
1990   *Kasba*
1991   *Bhavantarana (Immanence)*
1997   *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)*
2000   *The Bamboo Flute*
2004   *As the Crow Flies*

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[i] I thank Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya for her help in the transcription of the interview.

[ii] D.D. Kosambi (1907-1966)—renowned Marxist anthropologist, numismatist and mathematician, author of *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (1962) and numerous other works—was one of Kumar Shahani's mentors.

[iii] Late Pandit Jal K. Balaporia, famous musician, and teacher in the Gwalior style of Khayal music.

[iv] Ustad Rahmat Khan was one of the leading exponents of the Gwalior gharana.

[v] *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)* made by Shahani in 1997 is based on Rabindranath Tagore's 1934 novella of the same name.

[vi] The 'Emergency' refers to one of the most violent chapters in Indian history, when then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency under controversial and dubious

grounds of "internal disturbance". During this period, civil liberties were threatened, dissent suppressed, and the press censored. The 'Emergency' lasted from 26 June 1975 until 21 March 1977. See "India from Indira Gandhi's Emergency", by Munmun Jha in *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, David P.Forsythe (Ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2009): 5-16.

[vii] See the dossier on Kumar Shahani in *Framework*: *The Journal of Cinema and Media* 30/31, 1986: 68-100.

[viii] References to 1771 (Battle of Alamance, American Revolution), 1789 (French Revolution), 1917 (October Revolution), and 1947 (Indian Independence).

[ix] *Maya Darpan* (*Mirror of Illusion*, 1972) Kumar Shahani's first feature film, won the Filmfare Critics' Choice Award for Best Movie.

[x] *Far From Vietnam*, (Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Claude Lelouch, Chris Marker, Joris Ivens, William Klein, 1967).

[xi] Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (1918-1993), Marxist philosopher, author of *Lokyata* (1959), *Indian Atheism* (1969) and numerous other works.

[xii] Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926-2004), legendary dancer and teacher in the Odissi style.

[xiii] *Bamboo Flute, Bhavantarana (Immanence),* and *Khayal Gatha (The Khayal Saga)* are Shahani's films on the history and practice of various art forms such as the flute, Odissi dance and Khayal music respectively.

[xiv] Vivan Sundaram, leading contemporary painter, sculptor and video installation artist whose works have been shown at *Group Exhibition*, New Delhi (1974), *Pictorial Space*, New Delhi (1977), *Six Who Declined to Show at the Fourth Triennale*, New Delhi (1978), *the Second and Fourth Biennale,* Havana (1987 and 1991)*, the Second Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane (1996).

[xv] Geeta Kapur is a well-known theorist and historian of Indian art. She is the author of *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (2000).

[xvi] Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), one of the most prominent and influential modern artists. Her renowned paintings include, *Haldi* (*Turmeric) Grinders* (1930), *Young Man with Apples* (1932), *Group of Three girls* (1935), *Brahmacharis* (1937), *Woman on Charpoy* (1940), and *Elephants* (1940).

[xvii] Philippina "Pina" Bausch (1940-2009), celebrated performer, innovator and teacher of modern dance. Founder of Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch.

[xviii] Sir Anish Kapoor, renowned sculptor and installation artist, whose works include *Cloud Gate* (Chicago's Millennium Park), *Sky Mirror* (Rockefeller Center, New York, 2006), *Leviathan* (Grand Palais, 2011) and *The ArcelorMittal Orbit* with Cecil Balmond (Olympic park, London, 2012).

[xix] Akbar Padamsee, contemporary artist, sculptor and founding figure of Indian modernism. His famous works include *Lovers* (1953), *Jesus and Judas* (1955), and *Metascape* series (1972).

[xx] Somnath Hore (1921-2006), reputed printmaker and sculptor, known for his *Wounds* (1971) series and *Mother with Child*, bronze sculpture (1974).

[xxi] K.K. Mahajan (1944-2007) was one of the most innovative cinematographers who worked closely with Shahani in almost all of his films.

[xxii] Chandralekha (1928-2006), modern dance choreographer composed the dance sequence in Shahani's *Maya Darpan*.

[xxiii] Bharatyanatyam is a classical dance form that originated in Tamil Nadu (Southern India).

[xxiv] Mayurbhanj chhau, practiced in Orissa is a subcategory of the folk, martial dance called 'Chhau', also performed as 'Chho' in West Bengal.

[xxv] Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, acclaimed flautist and composer.

REVIEW SECTION

SYNOPTIQUE

Critical Review:
Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972)

by Aparna Frank

The objective of this critical review of Kumar Shahani's first feature *Maya Darpan* (*Mirror of Illusion*) is to present an introductory analysis of the film's formal composition as embodying the avant-garde ideal of reconciling art and life.[1] While it is not possible to account for all of *Maya Darpan*'s formal features such as sound, music, off-screen space, and poetic monologues in this review, I isolate two central aspects, namely colour, and non-diegetic shots for discussion. These two aspects, examined under the subheadings of 'Art' and 'Life' respectively, refer to the Soviet avant-garde's ideal to reconcile life and art. I use the references to suggest that *Maya Darpan* not only displays a similar aspiration, but also endows that aspiration with a philosophical significance, namely, the reconciliation of the individual and society.[2] Accordingly, the word 'Life' describes how non-diegetic montages act as gestures and traces from a world or society that lies outside the artistic realm of the diegesis. My analysis begins with a brief introduction on the significance of Shahani's association with Bresson for the film and concludes with an epilogue on the film's relevance for May 1968.

Introduction

Shahani's undergraduate study was in political science, but, claiming that of all the academic and aesthetic choices of that time, film appeared as the most 'reflective' art enabling him to better relate with his "environment", he chose film instead of pursuing graduate studies in the social sciences.[3] Shahani's first model for such a 'reflective' practice was Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), who showed that film could critically comment on historical events such as the partition through the discursive use of genres such as

melodrama and the epic. The second model that arguably offset the melodramatic trappings in Ghatak's works was the elliptical and somewhat enigmatic cinema of Bresson. The story of how Shahani sought an apprenticeship with Bresson after seeing *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) in Paris is well documented.[4] But the significance of Bresson for *Maya Darpan*—produced after his return from Paris—demands some consideration given Shahani's pursuit of the study of film as art and his participation in the events of May 1968.

In Paris, Shahani had initially planned on working with Godard, but later abandoned the idea because he found that his own goal to study the formal and aesthetic traditions of film diverged from the political path of Godard and the Dziga Vertov group at that time.[5] While he was involved, on the one hand, in the socio-political debates of May 1968 and participated in its demonstrations, when it came to film, Shahani was more committed to the practice of film as art than as a politically circumscribed instrument.[6] In this regard, Bresson's relentless emphasis on pure cinematography and the expunging of literary and theatrical traces from film becomes a model of artistic autonomy.[7] It demonstrates that in the artistic appearance of film form, meaning and truth are to be embedded and discovered, rather than stated and deduced, reconciling thereby both the autonomy of film as art and the need to analyze socio-political concerns. In other words, Bresson's cinema serves as a solution for those filmmakers who sought to preserve both the artistic identity and expression of social critique in a film's form without having to privilege one over the other.

This 'solution' is the construction of a formal language in which the expression of social critique is contained or deflected onto rhetorical aspects such as metonymy, aniconism, indirection and fragmented compositions. Bressonian cinema becomes, therefore, an extraordinary counter-gesture against the activist-modernism of May 1968 film groups that sought an identitarian relationship between radical film and social revolution, while equivocating or neglecting outright the discussion of film as art.[8] In refraining from the

cine-tactics of May 1968's film-culture, Bresson's own works from the time, namely *Une femme douce* (1969), and later *Le diable probablement* (1977), invite through abstraction and indirection a reflective critique on the relationship between the individual and modern, industrial Paris. The influence of Bresson thus contributes to a film form that Shahani's cinema shares with other eminent modernist-avant-gardists like Straub-Huillet, Sergei Parajanov, and Alexander Sokurov to cite a few.[9] Such a form, most provocatively instantiated in Straub-Huillet's claim that *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* was dedicated to Viet-Cong, reflects the paradoxical aspiration of an avant-garde or a radical artwork: the reconciliation of the aesthetic and the social within the artwork's form without reducing one to the other.[10] *Maya Darpan* follows this model by inlaying its ethical and normative concern (namely, the reconciliation of the individual and society), in disparate formal elements such as colour and non-diegetic inserts.

Art and Life in *Maya Darpan*

The justification for reading *Maya Darpan* in relation to the paradoxical aspiration of the avant-garde ideal is found at a preliminary level in the way Shahani departs from Nirmal Verma's short story on which the film is based.[11] Verma's *Maya Darpan* is an eloquent, imagistic portrayal of the world of a lonely figure—Taran. The story, narrated in third-person subjective point-of-view, centers around Taran, who lives with her aunt and father in a feudal household in a small town that is in the process of being industrialized. The subject of the story is the estranged relationship between Taran and her father, a proud patriarch who has failed to find her a suitable matrimonial match because he stubbornly believes in marrying her to a groom who shares his socio-economic class. Given that he has not succeeded in this search, he distances himself from his daughter, whose very presence within the household becomes a bitter reminder of his unfulfilled duties and his failure as a parent. The atmosphere in the house increasingly becomes unbearable and Taran considers leaving the house to visit her older brother who lives in the green mountains of a hill station. The only other source of escape and solace for Taran is the occasional visit from a companion-figure, an engineer who is actively involved in the urbanization of the town. The short story concludes with Taran deciding

to stay in the household with her father, as she dreams of the green landscape where her brother resides.

For Shahani, Verma's narrative becomes the ground for examining the antagonism between individual and society. He recasts Taran's strained relationship with her father as the tension between the caste and class-obsessed worldview of the feudal era and a modern individual consciousness. He thus awards attention to minor characters like the domestic aids Montu and Shambhu, by accenting their relationship with Taran, and also with the larger project of industrialization, as agents of the unskilled, peasant-labour force. He further introduces details not found in the literary source, such as the engineer setting up literacy centers for the workers, and scenes of the patriarch and his friends deriding the efforts of the engineer and mourning the consequent dissolution of class distinctions. But the most distinct departure from the short story lies in how Shahani's abstract compositions and extra-diegetic references educe the presence of a social discourse and critical perspective, rather than positing them as givens. Therefore, where Verma's literary style is fully explanatory and descriptive, Shahani's asyndetonic and paratactical approach—owed to the Bressonian aesthetic—allows for an objective and normative commentary to gestate in the film's form, thereby undercutting the subjective focalization of the short story.

The normative concern is made explicit in one of the concluding sequences in which a casual conversation between Taran and the engineer clinches the true content of the film. The laconic exchange begins with the engineer describing the impending, inevitable, change, or 'progress' in the town. He claims that the hills will be levelled, the hovels of the labourers replaced with houses, and that factories will be built beyond the canal. He explains rather tersely to Taran how he overcame his initial doubts regarding his involvement in the industrialization project by quoting Engels' description of the Hegelian dialectic: "freedom is the recognition of necessity".[12] When Taran asks the engineer what a person's own necessity is, he claims that it is not merely passion but

the ability "to look outside of oneself" and be in "wide open spaces". Taran responds approvingly with a smile, as though the engineer's words have confirmed a truth that she has silently sought. Following this breakthrough moment of didacticism, the film launches—in a series of metaphoric sequences—an unexpected reinterpretation of the engineer's words as one involving not the passive, Hegelian reconciliation of Taran to the situation in her home, but as the freedom to love and participate in class struggles. Like the short story's ending, Shahani portrays Taran as deciding to stay with her father, but he also shows her and the engineer as lovers who participate in a figuratively rendered class conflict. As lovers, they discuss the precarious project of urbanization and industrialization of modern India with Taran affirming that they have to expend "black blood" in an implied class conflict.[13] The conflict, portrayed as a dance, is filmed on a soundstage. At the beginning of the sequence, we see the dancers invite Taran into the stylized performance of a battle between two groups. Thus, by the end of the film, Taran—representing 'the individual'—appears to be antagonistically reconciled with society. She is shown to fight the forces of feudalism and capitalism both for herself and on behalf of the labouring class. The critical trajectory of the film can be summed up, therefore, as the attempt to address the philosophical dilemma of reconciling the individual with society without the subsumption of the individual under society. But this critical project, rather than unfolding in a linear and realistic manner, acquires its expression, as we shall see in the following sections, through the intersection of colour and montage.

1. Art: Colour and painting

Even at the first viewing of *Maya Darpan*, it is conspicuous that an artistic approach overrides a psychological and realistic description of characters and their world. Shots foreground the mansion's architecture and colour arrangements, to mediate in an aniconic rather than reflexive manner, the representation of Taran and her environment. The unusual establishing sequence of the film remarkably exemplifies this strategy of indirectly composing what we assume, by convention, to be a diegetic space. Following the title sequence, which is presented as a scroll of washed-out yellow surface with

brown and orange stains, the film places us in the middle of an ongoing camera movement. There is no establishing perspective here, only a series of lateral and forward tracking shots that expose in close-up and medium close-up, panels of desaturated yellow with traces of orange, grayish blue and black. The colour panels are not strictly abstract, but defined and contained in the architectural aspects, namely, walls, windows, doors, ceiling, and corridors of the house. As if refusing a perspective of the outside world, windowpanes bearing traces of bleached white paint exhibit discolouration and brushwork, and ochre walls with blotches of black appear as segments from a stain painting.

The lambent yellow of the walls and the pastel interiors hold more of a transcendent appeal than serving mood or diegetic information. The tracking camera also accentuates the thickness of colours; imitating the actions of brushwork, it brings out an impasto effect through its steady focus on the textures of the walls. Within the rooms, sharply highlighted clothes, kitchenware, stacked trunks, and electrical wire boxes exude a subdued beauty as though they are relics in a still-life painting. The still-life impression continues in the spread of dark indigos, blue and white, burgundy and white in the geometrically arranged 'clothes' drying on the line. All of these varied details that demonstrate the painterly character of the mise-en-scène introduce, right from the establishing sequence, the degree of independence colour and camera movement maintain from obligations of establishing realism or dramatic set-design.

Unlike the conventional rationales for colour design—such as the parading of garish colours for spectacle and design, staging depth, and establishing mood—the functions of colour in the film are somewhat less self-evident. First, as in most painterly uses of desaturated backgrounds, the desaturated yellows of the mansion and the pervasive browns in the décor, serve contrast. They bring out the sharpness of the saturated red, metallic orange, and purple in Taran's saris and her bronze skin tone.[14] For instance, in the scene where the aunt asks Taran to leave the mansion and visit Taran's brother in

the hills, we see the aunt hang clothes on a line. The colours of the clothes, kept uniformly white and brown, serve to sharpen the brightness of Taran's red sari. In the following shot, when Taran dons a purple sari and runs toward the train, the brown shade of the train again enhances the luminous purple.[15] These kinds of contrasts do not draw immediate attention to themselves, but they are iterated enough to compel the recognition of a pattern. More curiously, they are often the sole indicators of transitions or changes in the narrative. For instance, a significant portion of the film—after the Aunt's report of the angry episode with her brother—unfolds in presenting Taran's decision-making process through colours alone. We see Taran in combinations of white, red, yellow, and purple as she grapples with the decision to stay or leave. In these shots, given the absence of information through either dialogue or monologue, the veritable signs of expression and progression are inferred, in retrospect, through the aniconic display of sari colours.

The second, more innovative outcome is that the desaturated palette proposes a relationship with the world outside the mansion. Once we learn that the town will soon become an industrial zone, the framing of the old mansion as a site of fading beauty acquires a poignant character. The desaturated browns, yellows, and creams of its walls index the imprint of inevitable change and erosion. For instance, when we see black smoke from factories against a discoloured yellow-sky in the background of an exterior shot showing the engineer walking across the railway tracks, we recognize the black and yellow as echoing the colour scheme of the walls of the mansion. The long-take of this shot indeed makes it hard to ignore the smoke rising from the factories in the distance. Similarly, the desaturation acquires a social implication when we notice Shambhu, in his dust, cement and chalk smeared skin and clothes, merge with the ashen browns and discoloured walls of the kitchen. The desaturated patina of the mansion thus bolsters not only the perception of Taran's skin-tone as Shahani states, but also becomes in its evocation of the consequences of industrialization within the mansion, an objective counterpoint to the introspective space of Taran. As a result, even if one is inclined to read the mansion strictly as a form of feudal enclosure for

Taran, the cross-referencing of colours renders it as a space that is as vulnerable as its inhabitants are to the inexorable changes of the outside world.

The depiction of characters as painterly 'figures' becomes pronounced when we first see Taran's aunt seated with her back towards us. The camera frames her in medium shot, with an emphasis on the chromatic properties of the negative space: white sari against a yellow wall with the red and black highlights of her blanket. Free of iconic attributes (the face), the curved posture, and the accent on colour and contour define her less as a dramatic character than as an abstract figure in a painting. The camera tracks into another room, where we glimpse a woman sleeping on a bed. The woman is again presented primarily as a chromatic phenomenon; a figure draped in red sari against yellow negative space. When the camera pauses on her face, she slowly turns away, denying like the figure in the previous sequence, a facial rapport. It appears as though she turns to deliberately foreground the colour red and assert her dual presence as character and figure.

In another scene, when the Aunt asks Taran about her decision to visit her brother, the medium shot shows Taran in a red and yellowish-gold sari stretched in her bed, with her aunt in white standing at the corner of the bed. The framing gently underlines the spatial arrangement of the horizontal and the vertical figures and the simple but elegant contrast between the shining colours of the sari and the neutral décor. Similarly, in a shot that depicts Taran standing in the terrace and looking at her father and his visitors, the frame is fully devoted to the discoloured yellow walls of the terrace with Taran in her red sari positioned as a small figure in a flat, abstract panel. In yet another scene showing her fall on the bed after the first monologue, Shahani interjects an overhead shot of her sprawled as a red figure against the white bed. Throughout the film, we see this contrastive emphasis of the red sari against white and yellow configure Taran as a character and 'figure' poised simultaneously within the diegetic and painterly worlds.

The restrained juxtapositions of desaturated negative space and saturated saris, and the precise positioning of the figures are not unambiguously symbolic as one would notice in the bold colour references to the French and American flags in Godard's films, but suggest that a contradictory interpretation is provoked in relation to the diegetic world. That is, the painterly touches imbue a sensuousness that transcends our perception of the diegetic space as a realistic reflector of loneliness or desolation.[16] Taran, as a painterly-figure, appears ambiguous in that the bright red of her sari is neither reflective of her emotions nor her actions. She is languid and passive compared to the distracting vibrancy of the red she dons. The red refutes the impression of loneliness that is conveyed more overtly in her poetic monologues, and denies a symbolic association of her with courage, anger, and power. Inadequate as a symbol,[17] the red then appears to accent a potential, a 'not-yet', or a transformation in the future that is indeed revealed by the end of the film, when we notice the dancers attired in red. Thus, the political association of red with communism as the implied resolution of the film is not altogether invalid because the film concludes with a gesture that expresses revolution and conflict.

The painterly tendencies signal the contribution of Akbar Padamsee to the film. Akbar Padamsee—a prominent abstract modernist painter—conducted a workshop entitled 'Vision Exchange' during the years 1969-1972. Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, and their cinematographer K. K. Mahajan were participants in the workshop that led to Kaul's production of *Duvidha* (1973). Shahani has stated that the film's chromatic movement from red-yellow-orange to green was based on Padamsee's instructions.[18] But the most telling affinity between Padamsee's paintings of the fifties and *Maya Darpan* arises for me in Shahani's curious introduction of Taran and the engineer as nude lovers at the end of the film. In one of the key concluding sequences of the film, we see Taran in the engineer's living quarters. She takes the engineer's hand, places it on her breast, and describes to him that very action: "I put your hand on my breast". That particular gesture of the man's hand on his lover's breast, and their positioning in the following shot as nudes facing each other, recalls one of Padamsee's 'Lovers' (1952) shown at the

Jehangir Art Gallery in 1954. The painting—now remembered for the obscenity charge brought against Padamsee and his victorious acquittal—shows a nude woman holding a leafy stalk on her right hand and facing her lover on her left who has placed his left hand on her right breast.

The painting is not exactly reproduced in the film, but there is a strong similarity between the gestures and positions of the lovers, Taran's description of that act, and indeed the apt conjunction of the title of the painting with the pairing of Taran and the engineer as lovers. The reference to Padamsee's work, intentional or not, shows that perhaps Taran and the engineer have now entered a space where the contradiction between the diegesis and the sensuousness of the painterly inflections no longer holds. The key difference between Padamsee's painting and the film, nonetheless, is that Shahani marks an optimistic move in the narrative, whereas in Padamsee's portrait, the withdrawn figures are rigid in posture and carry a somber countenance. The cinematic lovers even appear to comment subtly on Padamsee's restrained and ironic interpretation of love by reclaiming it as a joyous act of freedom. Unlike Padamsee's stoic figures, Taran and the engineer are youthful, innocent and even appear playful as they prepare for the impending 'class- conflict'.

All of the painterly strategies in the film introduce a certain degree of abstraction in our perception of the characters and the diegesis. That is, they stage a dualism that is indeed exemplary of Eisenstein's prescription for colour composition in film:

> Just as the creaking of a boot had to be separated from the boot before it became an element of expressiveness, so must the notion of "orange colour" be separated from the contouring of an orange, before colour becomes part of a system of consciously controlled means of expression and impression. Before we can learn to distinguish three oranges on a patch of lawn both as three objects in the grass and as the three orange patches against a green background, we dare not think of colour composition.[19]

True to Eisenstein's prescription, at no point in the film does Shahani sacrifice his penchant for chromatic beauty and painterly laconicism, for the psychological delineation of his characters, or a dramatic treatment of the conflict between Taran and her father. His painterly inflections do not function to expose the illusionism of film, but bring out the expressive capabilities that assert the kind of artistic autonomy that Eisenstein preserves in his theory of colour. Furthermore, given that the underlying aim of *Maya Darpan* is normative[20] rather than cathartic, the painterly construct of Taran aids in her somewhat 'anonymous' appearance as a 'figure' with whom the viewer is not meant to completely "identify". The strategy of presenting characters as 'figures' and colours as an abstract, autonomous counterpoint, reins in an automatic involvement with the cinematic space as an exclusively diegetic and dramatic space.

A second interpretation is that the artistic concentration reveals a beauty which is not necessarily available to Taran's (inward) gaze and slumbering consciousness. After all, isn't the injunction placed on Taran to look outside herself? Thus the colour compositions, in contradicting the sense of loneliness and suffering hinted in the plot, represent a sensuousness that is first denied, but then experienced by the protagonist as her freedom to "look outside herself". The colours function proleptically to imply 'freedom' from the enclosing reality that the 'individual' so desires. Therefore, the didactic appeal to 'look outside of oneself' also translates for the spectator as a directive to 'look beyond' a character-driven hermeneutics and experience the aesthetic autonomy of the work. The attention to the artistic facture of a character and her world becomes an object lesson that impels the spectator to regard the film not as a linear, transparent, instrument of communication but as a complex ornament that buries its critical substance within its form.

Critics have observed Shahani's use of colour in *Maya Darpan* and have hyperbolically claimed that colour is the main innovation in the film and the "only successful colour experiment of New Indian cinema".[21] But the modest yet far-reaching implications of

colour emerge, as I have shown, only when we consider colour not as a stand-alone element, but in its relation to the ambivalent meanings it provokes and the unraveling of the cinematic content as a whole. These varied and enigmatic uses of colour and painting constitute, nonetheless, only one facet of the film's form. They are challenged by the less-ordered force of non-diegetic images that Shahani, departing from the environs of Verma's text, introduces as essential for construing the film's trajectory.

2. Life: Non-Diegetic inserts

The non-diegetic interruptions discussed in this section introduce a second layer to the film's diegetic movement. These interruptions or 'suspensions' sharply stand apart from the artistic enclave marked by the painterly aspects outlined in the previous section, and their significance to the diegesis is not patently provided. The first montage occurs after Taran's monologue, at the end of which, she falls sobbing on her bed. Perhaps as a way of obviating personal identification with the emotional overtones of Taran's poetic monologue, Shahani cuts from the shot of a weeping Taran to a compilation of documentary footage. The footage comprises of World War II air raids, images of devastation possibly from Hiroshima, scenes of Indian Independence activists beaten by police, and flicker-effects of what appears to be the negative of a painting. As an ambiguous interjection, the collage surprises because of its complete disjunction with the diegetic world and suspension of its painterly order. Mentioned in the title credits as "images of violence", the sequence, while appearing at first as a gesture in cinematic self-reflexivity, introduces a specific, historical content. As a rupturing presence of society and life external to Taran, the montage exposes the dark side of history almost as an act of instruction that attempts to awaken Taran from her inertia. Given that the collage depicts violence and suffering of historic proportion, one could surmise that it undermines the subjective content (Taran's loneliness) in the previous shot. If it articulates a criticism or a counter-argument, then it does so by interpreting the 'wide open space' as a space claimed by history, specifically by those who struggle(d) and sacrifice(d) for freedom.

A second suspension occurs in the sequence of Taran reading a letter from her brother in Assam. The letter, recited in a voice-over by her brother is edited in an audio-loop over images of Taran walking in a green landscape and a long-take of her seated aboard a steamer. The first inclination is to perceive the sequence as Taran's fantasy or mental image. But we transcend that diegetic foundation once the audio-loop repeats the following lines four times:

The long lone cries of the birds
Those cries... remember....
The mellow light,
a web of leaves
There are no memories here....

Only the wind and footfalls
Thin rain, frayed darkness
And then stillness... Trees, veils of fragrance
Forests rustling boundless...

The audio-loop, long-take of Taran on the steamer, and the montage showing her walking in the forest are consistent with the formal strategy of surpassing the diegetic context (Taran's fantasy). The iteration of the lines shifts the focalization from Taran and her brother to an impersonal, almost didactic instruction to the spectator to perceive nature as the sanctuary from the past ('there are no memories here'). Nature is indeed the conventional association of 'wide open space', but as emphasized in the line "there are no memories here", it is also implied as an antidote to not only Taran's suffering, but also to the remembrance of suffering and violence, as shown in the collage sequence. Furthermore, the sequence bears a proleptic significance in that the film concludes, rather ambiguously, with the shot of a steamer moving towards the landscape.[22]

In the short story, a Kali temple is mentioned as the place where the engineer lives. This minor descriptive detail from the short story is transformed into an occasion for expressing transgression in the film. In one of the key sequences in the film, we see Taran ask her aunt to narrate an anecdote of her father's interaction with the British.

The aunt describes her brother's proud, feudal demeanour towards the British and the sense of intimidation he wielded in the household. This diegetic sequence is interrupted by a cut to an extreme long shot of a woman/figure with flowing black hair seated by a river with her back facing us. The camera's pause allows us to grasp the striking chromatic contrast between the capacious spread of desaturated browns and reds in the landscape against the diminished but curious presence of the figure in blue. The following shot reverses the previous composition's emphasis on the negative space (landscape), by foregrounding a frontal view of the figure. Poised on the left side of the frame, the woman appears in medium close-up as a nude, smeared in blue paint with white lips and black flowing hair. Framed from her bust up, she is staring off-screen and her face expresses defiance. We recognize this woman as Taran and the figure she impersonates as Goddess Kali.

The comparison of characters with a religious icon is found in Ghatak's films where the female protagonist is often attired as Goddess Durga or symbolically addressed as "our mother". Such comparisons in Ghatak's cinema are strongly supported and flanked by dramatic content, such as tragic occurrences and emotional circumstances.[23] However, the meaning of the comparison in *Maya Darpan* remains unclear. We can propose a relationship of identity and call the montage a 'figurative' reaction-shot that describes Taran's anger towards her father and the fear he imposed on his sister and wife. But this reading delimits and flattens the content of the shot to a simile or metaphor and contradicts the film's consistent avoidance of psychological characterizations. A more complex meaning emerges if we ask; why the comparison to Kali? Kali, signified by her nudity, long and unruly dark hair, and bluish[24] black skin is the desublimated version of the more decorated and deified Goddess Parvati. If we include this materialist reading of Kali as 'Kalubai' or 'the Dark Lady' in Ancient India, where prior to her elevation by the higher castes as Goddess Parvati, she was worshipped by several tribes and cults, then the comparison evoked, is one of transgression, not merely against Taran's father, but the feudal class and caste to which he clings.[25] The anecdote narrated by the aunt exposes the patriarch's pride in his class and that pride is undermined through the

association of Taran with the subversive force of Kali. The montage, therefore, is not simply a metaphor or simile for Taran's emotion, but a form of hypocatastasis[26], or implied, indirect reference—as embodied in the form of Kali—to the criticism against feudal and caste pride.

A colour-montage that occurs within the diegetic space shows Taran following Montu to an area that we infer is Montu's home—the labourers' quarters. In an earlier scene, the engineer mentions that Montu has missed Taran's visits and this sequence shows her fulfilling that demand. As the camera forward tracks Montu and Taran, we see an inverted colour chord; instead of Taran, the tribal women are dressed in bright colours. Taran's white sari highlights the pink, green, black, and red in the clothes of the peasant-labourers. Given that Shahani has Taran draped in red throughout the film, it is noteworthy that as Taran enters Montu's living space, the same colour is seen draped on another woman. The woman, who might possibly be Montu's mother, gives Taran a glass of water. Taran drinks the water and leaves the quarters with Montu.

Except for a percussive soundtrack, the sequence is silent, and indeed speech becomes immaterial, because an inter-derivable arrangement of colours and the action of her drinking water in the home of a lower caste person have articulated the transgressive content of the sequence. It is the deliberate traversal of colour, between a known (Taran) and an unknown character (Montu's mother) that indirectly intimates the film's privileging of the tie between Taran and the labourers. The association of red with labourers is indeed reprised in the red attire of the dancers in the film's coda. The colour unites Taran with the varied worlds and lives that remain exterior to her slumbering consciousness, namely, the materialist cultures of pre-feudal Ancient India (red as sacrificial blood), the peasant labourers (attire of Montu's mother) and the revolution (attire of the dancers). The coalescence initiated by the colour suggests that the desired antidote of 'wide open space' includes a stance against oppressive social hierarchies by aligning oneself with the forgotten and the marginalized. [27]

The concluding montage is the dance that follows the last diegetic shot of Taran and the engineer. Choreographed for the film by Chandralekha—one of India's foremost avant-garde dancers—we see Taran being led into a dance group.[28] The colours of the dance recall the association of red with Montu's mother and confirm that the colour behaves as a proleptic sign of Taran's participation in the struggle. The camera tilts from the dancers on stage to the darkened bottom of the frame, and back up to the dancers. [29] The Mayurbhanj Chhau style of dance performed here is well known for its provenance in tribal and folk cultures, and the performers of this dance style are conventionally labourers. A distinct quality of the Mayurbhanj style is its incorporation of martial movements and drills, ritual imitation of bird and animal movements, and enactments of stories and episodes often taken from Indian epics.[30] The dance in the film preserves these conventions and enacts the climactic war of Kurukshetra from the epic Mahabharata. For instance, the two, warring, groups of dancers gesture the crossfire of bows and arrows, chariots, and replicate the distinct war formations and strategies (vyuhas) that are enumerated in the epic's description of the battle. The disc-like grouping of dancers (chakra vyuha) resemble the particular tactics and military designs described in the epic.[31] In terms of meaning, the choice of this particular folk-tribal dance style is consistent with the film's underlying interest in tribal cultures and their importance for Taran's anagnorisis. Furthermore, the conflict itself is a redefinition of 'freedom' and 'necessity' as rebellion against society rather than acquiescence to mechanistic progress.[32]

All of the above-mentioned 'ruptures' that comprise a second discourse function as an expression of 'life' that is not only external to the world of Taran, but as a specific kind of life and world, namely, nature (the audio-loop sequence), the world of victims ("images of violence"), and tribal groups and folk communities that have borne the violent brunt of both modernization and caste and class hierarchies. These non-diegetic expressions, however ephemeral and fleeting as they might appear, display that several autonomous discourses such as history, living traditions, and nature are central for construing the

freedom that Taran achieves. In terms of form, the painterly austerity of one segment of the film serves to augment the expressive force of the counter-discourse offered in these non-diegetic montage shots. For the more we are accustomed to the relentless rhythms of Taran's world, the greater our experience of shock and surprise when the disruptive sequences expose the fissure between the withdrawn world of Taran, the feudal patriarch, and a society that is changing and inexorably determining their lives. Consequently, when seen from the perspective of the montage sequences, the diegetic world itself, while representing the reality of isolation and alienation, tends to acquire an illusory quality that Shahani rightly cautions against by emphasizing, somewhat didactically, the idea of 'wide open spaces' and the need to 'look outside of oneself'.

Epilogue

The events of May 1968 represented for Shahani a potential for the dissolution of ideological differences and an opportunity for intellectuals, workers, and students to dialogue freely without entanglement in identity politics.[33] Unlike discussants in journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique* who explicitly conceived the 'cinematographic apparatus' as an 'ideological apparatus', Shahani, following the tradition of Bresson and Ghatak, treats the cinematographic apparatus essentially as art.[34] Upon his return from France, Shahani encountered India's own parallel to the events of May 1968 in the uprisings of Maoist rebels, labourers, and peasants in areas of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. The revolutions occurring in India at the time were volatile and uneven in producing their desired socio-political changes. Nonetheless, Shahani has described the situation as prompting his first feature to exude a political *tendency* rather than be identified as a 'political' film or a 'politically made' film.[35] In Indian cinema, the equivalents of a 'Third cinema' or 'political film' practice were filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and regional New Wave filmmakers like K.Hariharan, Govind Nihalani, and later on Shyam Benegal. By contrast, *Maya Darpan* brings neither a thematic solidarity nor symbolic affiliation with the political rhetoric evinced in the films of the Indian New Wave.

Shahani's interpretation of May 1968 indicates an aspirational and even philosophical appreciation of social change as an open-ended practice rather than one driven by party politics or institutional agendas. One could argue that a similar perspective colours his conception of film, and particularly the structure of *Maya Darpan*, where elliptical form rather than 'content' guarantees the expression of truth and concepts as embodied 'in', rather than 'through', art.[36] If we juxtapose a post-May 1968 film such as Godard and Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972) with *Maya Darpan* (both films were released the same year), we notice how the latter anchors its utopian ideals enigmatically throughout its artistic inflections instead of positing those ideals as givens. Where Godard and Gorin state in a voice-over by the end of the film that their main characters have to see themselves as historically contextualized, Shahani weaves this as a process or a movement concretized and internalized in film form. The film's daedal structure elicits an engagement akin to Ariadne's thread, compelling the spectator to discover ways of revising and redrawing the critical content from the subtle interactions of montage and colour among other elements. Moreover, he specifies the contents of the historical discourse (the suffering of workers, peasants) as pivotal for achieving individual freedom. Unlike *Maya Darpan*'s incremental expression of ethical and utopian content, the reflexive and Brechtian approach of *Tout va bien* leaves the spectator (at least this spectator) at an impasse in terms of connecting the excesses of its comic-theatrical-collage structure with its political discourse. In other words, *Tout va bien* leaves some room for the suspicion that the radical modernist film's assumed correlation between self-reflexivity, tracking shots, and socio-political commentary could involve as much of a leap of faith as the enchanted spectator of 'bourgeois cinema'.[37] While *Tout va bien* is exemplary of Godard's contribution to modernist film experimentation, its success in sustaining, as Sylvia Harvey states, "a productive tension between means of representation and that social reality which the means of representation strive to analyse and account for"[38] remains debatable to some degree.

Maya Darpan speaks to the vexed attempts of the Dziga Vertov Group and other Third Cinema films that sought a radical film form for radical politics, by showing that film as an austere and enigmatic art form can express and even specify the contours for social transformation. It is an unusual work in that it focuses on the conditions for a 'revolutionary' consciousness that is eventually lead to revolutionary action, rather than presupposing both the individual as a revolutionary and the revolutionary act. This is why the revolution appears figuratively as a desired and even conceptual conclusion rather than a real occurrence. And perhaps the film even implicitly claims that any kind of social change or affirmation of individual autonomy begins with acknowledging the autonomy of art. It is in showing that film could articulate the ideals and objectives motivating social change without having to forego its artistic appearance or surrender its enigmatic capabilities that *Maya Darpan* figures as a mature contributor to the discourse on the cinema of May 1968.

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[1] The phrase 'art into life' is attributed to Tatlin. There are obvious differences between Russian Constructivism and my use of the phrase apropos the works of Shahani. For instance, unlike the Constructivist context of collective revolutionary idealism, manifestoes and organized artist groups, there is no connotation of the "collective" or "movement" in ascribing the phrase "avant-garde" to Shahani and his contemporary Mani Kaul. Secondly, unlike Constructivism's interest in uniting art and life through industrial materials and technology, Kaul and Shahani are removed from a simplistic celebration of industry and technology that had indeed denuded and threatened pre-industrial modes of culture, economics and aesthetics. As Jaroslav Andel points out in his essay "The Constructivist Entanglement: Art into Politics, Politics into Art", Russian Constructivism was also a response to modern alienation. It is in this respect that the films of Kaul and Shahani, assuming the role of an avant-garde, respond to urban alienation resulting from Indian modernization. Jaroslav Andel, "The Constructivist Entanglement: Art into Politics, Politics into Art"in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*, Introduction by Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (Seattle: Henry Gallery Association, 1990): 223-240.

[2] I use the words 'art' and 'life' also in reference to Theodor Adorno's description of radical works as those exhibiting a tension between 'construction' and 'expression'. See Theodor Adorno, "Semblance and Expression" in *Aesthetic Theory,* Translated, edited and introduced by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: The Athlone Press, 1997) In a larger project, these references, in particular the work of Adorno and Adorno scholar Lydia Goehr, are fleshed out in the discussion of Shahani as an avant-garde filmmaker.

[3] He states: "Theatre is very extroverted. It tries to project all the time and I think cinema is more reflective. It could do that, so the choice was for something which could be reflective because of my own temperament possibly." Kumar Shahani, "Interview with

Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 270-72.

[4] Shahani's apprenticeship under Bresson is well-known and mentioned in several interviews. See Kumar Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 275. Shahani was Bresson's 'apprentice' during the production of *Une femme douce* (1969), and he can be spotted in the cinémathèque sequence seated behind Luc (Guy Frangin).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Shahani has described May 1968 in romantic terms as a time of 'love' and 'sharing'. He also mentions that Bresson participated in activities concerning the liberation of immigrants. Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", 276.

[7] For an elucidation by Bresson of his conception of pure cinema see his renowned work, Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, Trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1975.

[8] Sylvia Harvey writes that the film collectives of May 1968 felt "that art was to be regarded as a neutral or a universal language, that it could not be directly related to class struggle or to the development of a particular programme." See Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980) 32.

[9] The comparison of Shahani with Straub-Huillet is mentioned in passing by Aruna Vasudev. See Aruna Vasudev, "Form and Function" in *The New Indian Cinema* (Delhi: MacMillan India ltd, 1986) 105.

[10] For an excellent discussion on the political implications of *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, see, Kailan R. Rubinoff, "Authenticity as a Political Act: Straub-Huillet's Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach and the Post-War Bach Revival", *Music & Politics* 5, Number 1 (Winter 2011) pp.1-24.

[11] Verma was one of the key exponents of the Nai Kahani movement (New Literature movement) in Hindi literature during the 1950s-1960s. According to literary critic Ravinder Sher Singh, the Nai Kahani group represented a non-utopian approach that went against both the regional style of the socialist realist writers and a deep psychological trend in earlier writers. Known for a lyrical style that indirectly addressed themes and issues concerning the problems of Indian modernity through the focalization of introspective protagonists, Verma was accused of importing a modernist style that seemed inauthentic in comparison to regional realism. Ravinder Sher Singh, 'Introduction', in *Journey to another world in the works of Nirmal Verma*, (PhD dissertation., University of Washington, 2001),39, 1-78, 122.Nirmal Verma, "Maya Darpan" Translated by Geeta Kapur in *Maya Darpan and Other Stories* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

[12] This is an exact quote from Engels. While Engels is the author of the quote, he discusses it as a concept introduced by Hegel: "Hegel was the first man to make a proper explanation of the relations of freedom and necessity. In his eyes, freedom is the recognition of necessity." Friedrich Engels, "Freedom and Necessity" in *Landmarks of Scientific Socialism: Anti- Dühring*, Translated and edited by Austin Lewis (Chicago: Charles H Kerr company 1907),147. In some translations, the word "insight" substitutes "recognition". The concept as mentioned in Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right* is as

follows: "Thus freedom, the absolute will, the objective, and the circle of necessity, are all one principle, whose elements are the ethical forces. They rule the lives of individuals and in individuals as their modes have their shape, manifestation and actuality." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Third Part: The Ethical System, Section 145" in Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right*, Translated by S.W.Dyde (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 156.

[13] "Black blood" refers to the necessary expenditure of menstrual blood.

[14] In his essay, 'Interrogating Internationalism' Shahani confirms that the desaturation of the negative space was done to "strengthen the warmth of the human skin"." Kumar Shahani, "Interrogating Internationalism", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 19/20, May (1990): 8-9.

[15] We infer that the train was a fantasy because the engineer claims that there was a transportation strike.

[16] Shahani's description of his ideal cinematic images as 'sensuous' can be conceived as the basis for his cinematography. He states "…. One would have thought that that (sensuous) is the beginning of all experience and philosophy and whatever, of science, the basic sensuous experience. At any rate, that is most valid in art." Kumar Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983),280.

[17] Film critic Aruna Vasudev reads the film's colour trajectory from red and yellow to green in a linear symbolism, namely a progression from anger to nature. As valid as this interpretation might be, it is too simplistic and does not account for the ambivalence of the colour red as it is used in the film and its contradiction to the portrait of Taran as a withdrawn individual. See Aruna Vasudev, "Form and Function" in Aruna Vasudev, *The New Indian Cinema* (Delhi: MacMillan India ltd, 1986),102-103. Similarly, Arun Khopkar, in his essay "Works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani", identifies the color red in the bricks of the construction site and links it to the dance. He is also the only critic, as far as I know, to have observed how color is not used for expressing emotions or symbols. However, he makes a formalist claim for color as a stylistic element serving the establishment of a 'pattern' in the film, whereas I relate the value of color to the broader conceptual issues in the film. See Arun Khopkar, "Works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani", *70 years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, Ed. T.M.Ramachandran (Cinema India-International, 1985), 193-194.

[18] Shahani states: "lorsque je faisais mon premier film, je me souviens avoir dit à Akbar que je voulais du jaune ici, du vert à la fin et une touche de rouge au début. Et Akbar m'avait dit: 'Tu devrais avoir un axe sur lequel tu te déplacerais et à partir duquel tu pourrais travailler sur des équivalences émotionnelles'." See Meher Pestonji, Kumar Shahani and Akbar Padamsee, "Comprendre l'image: Meher Pestonji s'entretient avec Akbar Padamsee et Kumar Shahani du processus créatif en peinture et au cinéma" in *Indomania: Le cinéma Indien des origines à nos jours*, (Cinémathèque française, 1996), 165. Padamsee: "A red line then becomes yellow and yellow line would become red-red/orange and yellow/orange- sense of incandescence". Bhanumati Padamsee and Annapurna Garimella (editors), "Akbar Padamsee in conversation with Homi Bhabha" in *Akbar Padamsee: A Work in Language* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2010),21.

Padamsee's own paintings during 1956-58 used a colour trajectory of red-yellow-red/orange- yellow/orange that is repeated in the first hour of *Maya Darpan*.

[19] Sergei Eisenstein, "Colour Film" in *Notes of a film director*, Trans. by X. Danko (Moscow: Foreign languages publishing house, 1959),127.

[20] I use the word "normative" in the philosophical sense of Shahani's concern with outlining, somewhat didactically, what an ethical course of action would be for his protagonist and the spectator than providing a 'cathartic' solution in relation to the personal story of Taran alone.

[21] Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, "Maya Darpan", in *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 414.

[22] The sequence also reminds us of Ghatak's landscape and nature shots, but unlike Ghatak, it is devoid of mythological and patriotic texture and remains a somewhat independent meditation on nature.

[23] Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960),
Komal Gandhar (*The Gandhar Sublime* or *E-Flat*, 1961) and *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (*A River Named Titus*, 1973) all make analogies between characters and Goddess Durga.

[24] Arun Khopkar speculates that the colour blue could also be a reference to Matisse. Arun Khopkar, "The works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani" in *70 years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, Ed. T.M.Ramachandran (Cinema India-International, 1985),194.

[25] This materialist connotation of Kali would have appealed to Shahani through the works of his mentor, the Marxist anthropologist D.D. Kosambi. D.D. Kosambi "Goddesses as well as Demonesses" and "Cults to deified Women" in *Myth and Reality: Studies in the formation of Indian cultu*re (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962) 85-88.

[26] In rhetoric, hypocatastasis differs from metaphor and simile in that it avoids defining the subject of comparison. David Nevins Lord offers the following definition of hypocatastasis: "The hypocatastasis is a substitution, without a formal notice, of an act of one kind, with its object or conditions, for another, in order, by a resemblance, to exemplify that for which the substitute is used;" and further, "the figure is thus employed in expressing resemblances between the difficulties, the dispositions, the sensations, the results, or other characteristics that mark acts of different kinds ; not, like the simile and metaphor, in exhibiting likenesses of nature that subsist between agents or things themselves, that are the agents or objects of acts". See David Nivens Lord, *The Characteristics and Laws of Figurative Language*, (New York: Franklin Knight, 1857) 10-11; 67-8. One could argue that in Ghatak's cinema, the reference to a Goddess is more of a metaphor and simile, than hypocatastasis in that it is associated with the description of a character's emotion.

[27] This interpretation is also motivated by Adorno's lectures on history and freedom and is discussed in detail in my dissertation. The quote from Adorno that instantiates his thought on the interdependence of individual and social freedom is as follows: " an action is free if it is related transparently to the freedom of society as a whole." Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom Lectures: 1964-65*, Trans. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 266

[28] Bharathanatyam exponent and fusion dance choreographer Chandralekha's (1928-2006) involvement in the film, similar to Akbar Padamsee's, represents the context of an experimental culture during the time of the film's making. As a reputed modern dance

choreographer, she transformed classical dance (the Bharathanatyam) into a "living" contemporary form through the inclusion of martial arts and folk dances.

[29] Chandralekha writes that she introduced Shahani to the image of Kali in the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta and had proceeded with the colour scheme of red, black and white based on that image. She states, "What I saw was a jet-black stone image of Kali, white eyes, white sari, red border, white skulls, and red hibiscus flowers. … In between the movement of the people, I saw the movement of colours. And for me that was Kali- the movement of colour." Chandralekha as quoted in Rustom Barucha, *Chandralekha: woman, dance, resistance* (India: Harper Collins, 1999) 97.

[30] Preceding this dance in the film, Shahani shows Taran and the engineer allude to the dice game in the Mahabharatha epic. Mayurbhanj Chhau is one of the three kinds of 'Chhau' or 'Chho' dance from the states of Orissa and West Bengal respectively. Unlike the two other kinds of Chhau dance, Purulia and Seraikella, in which the dancers wear masks, in the Mayurbhanj style, the dancers use their face as a mask. My descriptions of Chhau and Mayurbhanj Chhau are drawn from the entry under 'India' *in The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theater*, Vol.5 by Ranbir Singh, Ravi Chaturvedi and Jasmine Jaywant, Edited by Don Rubin, Chua Soo Pong, Ravi Chaturvedi, Ramendu Majumdar, Minoru Tanokura and Katharine Brisbane (London: Routledge, 1998),134-136.

[31] I have not found any discussion by Chandralekha or Kumar Shahani on the imitation of vyuhas for the dance sequence, but the analogy is worth pursuing when one compares the gestures of the dancers with the geometric formation of the vyuhas. Ashish Lahiri describes the vyuha as an "intricate, labyrinthine, snare-like formation of troops which the enemy could not penetrate, and if they could, would not know how to extricate out of." Some of the vyuhas he lists are suchi-vyuha (needle formation), ardha-chandra-vyuha (crescent-shaped), krouncha-vyuha (crane shaped), mandala vyuha (circle) etc. Ashish Lahiri, "Technology and War" *in Science, Technology, Imperialism and War (Volume XV Part 1)*, Jyoti Bhushan Das Gupta (Ed) (New Delhi: First Impression, 2007), 294-5.

[32] This conception of freedom and necessity is further discussed in relation to Adorno's negative dialectics in my dissertation.

[33] 'Interview with Kumar Shahani' in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, 276-7.

[34] Marcelin Pleynet states: "The cinematographic apparatus is a strictly ideological apparatus; it disseminates bourgeois ideology before anything else." Marcelin Pleynet, "Economic-Ideological-Formal", Trans. from *Cinéthique*, no. 3, 1969, pp7-14 in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (BFI Publishing, 1980) 155.

[35] Shahani states: "And also there was another question of not making an explicitly political film, because by the time I came back here, political cinema had become almost pornographic….I wanted to make a film which would have all the politics implicit, rather than a kind of stupid populist stuff!" 'Interview with Kumar Shahani' in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, 278.

[36] This is a reference to Adorno's preference for 'form' oriented art as opposed to content-based art. Adorno preferred phrases such as 'autonomous form' to describe the uncompromising individuality of radical artworks in *Aesthetic Theory*. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* Trans., ed. and introduced by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London:

The Athlone Press, 1997): 49, 83. Also see Lydia Goehr's essay, "Dissonant Works and the listening public" on this topic in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge University Press, 2004 pp: 222-247),243.

[37] My argument is similar to one made by Allen S. Weiss in his criticism of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's call for "passionate detachment". Of the "invisible spectator", he states: "The guest might be invisible, but this does not mean naïve: the call for "passionate detachment" is perhaps not so different from that "willing suspension of disbelief" posited by Coleridge as a key feature of the aesthetic experience." See Allen S. Weiss, "Introduction", in *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* (New York: State University of new York Press, 1994) 7-8.

[38] Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980) 66.

SYNOPTIQUE

Srinivas, S. V. *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema.* Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013. Print. [Hardback]. xxi + 431 pp.

Review by Parichay Patra
Doctoral Candidate, Monash University, Australia

S. V. Srinivas teaches Cultural Studies at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore and is the coordinator of the Culture: Industries and Diversity in Asia (CIDASIA) research program at the centre. His research interests lie in star studies and popular industrial cultures. For more than a decade, he has published consistently on Telugu cinema,[1] including its stars, fan activities, its association with electoral politics and mass mobilization, its appropriation of East Asian martial arts cinema, and its responses to the various challenges posed by the sectarian politics ravaging Andhra Pradesh. Srinivas' research occupies a significant position in the existing literature on South Indian cinema and politics, and his methodology distinguishes his work from that of his predecessors in the field. While Indian Cinema Studies has almost always been dominated by works devoted to Bombay cinema as the national popular film industry, Srinivas' work brings relatively under-examined regional cinema(s) and its star-politicians to the fore.

Srinivas' new book appears at a time when the linguistic community called the 'Telugu' is at stake, *Vishalandhra* (greater Andhra Pradesh) is on the verge of extinction[2] and the

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[1] Telugu film industry is one of the four major south Indian film industries and is located primarily in the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. It is the second largest film industry in India (after Bollywood) and the state of Andhra Pradesh constitutes the single largest market for cinema in India. Moreover, the crossover of two generations of film stars into politics has attracted the attention of film scholars and social scientists alike.

[2] The popular demand for a separate state called Telangana has a long history. Since the formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh the movement for a separate state has been in vogue. Communist leaders like Sundarayya have published on the movement. Srinivas has shown how NTR resolved the crisis temporarily. Recently the Indian government made a public declaration concerning the formation of the new state, and thus the popular movement came to an end. The movement continues to exert a huge influence on the popular cultures of the region however; it has produced the folk songs of Gaddar, the revolutionary prose and verses of a number of insurgents, and a number of popular films as well.

formation of a new state called Telangana is in process. In *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N. T. Rama Rao* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), Srinivas expresses his hope that Telugu cinema will outlive both the tradition of cinema hall and the state of Andhra Pradesh. *Megastar* begins with a description of actor-turned-politician Chiranjeevi launching his *Praja Rajyam* party in 2008 in an extremely spectacular fashion at the temple city of Tirupathi, a sacred space that escapes the regional rivalries. *Megastar* spans three decades, and positions 1983 as a watershed year characterized by two events in the history of Telugu cinema: Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao's (NTR) election as the chief minister of the state and his subsequent exit from the industry,[3] and the release of *Khaidi* (A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1983), which launched Chiranjeevi as a star. Srinivas concentrated primarily on the fan phenomenon and the unique case of the production of the caderized fan[4], as the cinema-politics interface in the industry was his field of inquiry. He closely examines Chiranjeevi's career whose switch to politics provided him with an important case study. Srinivas critically analyzes Telugu film industry's production of a star-politician through extensive field research and a discussion of relevant film narratives.

In his most recent book *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema* (henceforth *Politics*), Srinivas situates the question of the cinema-politics interface previously raised in *Megastar* within a much larger historical framework. *Politics* is much more ambitious than *Megastar* as it traces Telugu cinema's complex linkages with politics, thus filling a gap in film studies as well as in the social sciences. There has always been a dearth of scholarly works on the subject. Here Srinivas considers five decades, from the era of Gandhian melodrama in the 1930s to a detailed reading of the phenomenal election campaign of NTR in 1982-1983. Srinivas looks at the intriguing history of Telugu cinema in order to critically examine the latter's potential to outlive the state of Andhra Pradesh.

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[3] It is not that NTR did not act in films after being sworn in as the chief minister; in fact he continued to produce and direct most of the films in which he acted. These films include: *Srimat Virat Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra* (NTR, 1984), *Brahmarishi Vishwamitra* (NTR, 1991), *Samrat Ashok* (NTR, 1992), *Srinatha Kavisarvabhauma* (Bapu, 1993). Srinivas mentions in *Politics* (2013) that *Charitra* was the last successful film to be directed and produced by NTR.
[4] The term designates the transformation of the fan into a political cadre campaigning for the star.

Srinivas relies upon archival research and textual analysis of films, popular publications, newspapers, and other visual materials. These are the primary methodologies used in the book. He makes extensive use of sociological, political, cultural, and film theories to formulate his argument and makes available a hitherto unprecedented range of materials (including government records, mainstream newspapers, film song booklets, film magazines, film industry publications, film chamber of commerce journals, 'yellow' journals, pulp fiction etc.), most of which have been gathered from M. V. Rayudu's Manasu Foundation in Bangalore, and other archives.

Further, Srinivas engages with sociologists and political scientists like K. Balagopal, K. C. Suri, and Atul Kohli who have written on NTR's election campaign and the landmark 1983 state assembly election in Andhra. Ranjani Mazumdar argued that the three major film studies trajectories in India are the nationalist, the ideological, and the biographical/historical. Unlike Madhava Prasad whose research on Bombay cinema is a representative work of the ideological school, Srinivas rejects ideological critique as a frame of research in favour of the economic history of the industry. Srinivas attempts to discuss the economic and political rise of the post-feudal, post-colonial elite as supported by the political economy of the industry. As the industry becomes increasingly successful in producing star-politicians like NTR as representatives of this elite group, the socio-political significance of cinema in Southern India gets manifested even more. In the concluding chapters of *Politics*, Srinivas tries to understand mass politics by extending the notion of populism through the analysis of film texts and theories of spectatorship.

Politics has a five-part structure, and the first two chapters are concerned primarily with the formation of the industry and the subsequent issues it raised. Srinivas discusses the way the agrarian capital of coastal Andhra was channelized and transformed into film industrial capital giving rise to a specific caste-class constellation that dominated the industry for years. The rich peasant class of coastal Andhra, consisting primarily of non-

Brahmin upper castes like Kamma, Reddy, Velama and others,[5] found the nascent cinema industry a safe destination for investment as investing in agriculture was risky during the global depression. This caste-class constellation formed a nationalist elite in Andhra, challenging the supremacy of the erstwhile feudal-lords.[6] Their cinema, known popularly and film-industrially as social-reform films, was substantially influenced by Gandhian ideology. Srinivas goes on to describe the respective careers of the two pioneers of this class, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam and B. N. Reddi, in detail. While Ramabrahmam is better known for infusing films with Gandhian nationalism, B. N. Reddi is associated with the aesthetic advancement of Telugu cinema with several literary adaptations to his credit. But what attracts Srinivas' attention is the similarity in their respective careers. Both of them belong to an era marked by the conclusive shift away from the feudal domination of the industry and industry's reliance on feudal investments, which paved the way clear for the rise of the landed gentry. In the next chapter, Srinivas dexterously links the question of the industry's caste-class hierarchy with the linguistic identity politics in the 1950s that contributed to the formation of Andhra Pradesh. The idea of a Telugu nation and the conception of Teluguness as a linguistic identity were reshaped by the fast-unto-death movement of Potti Sriramulu and the formation of the regional state. It ignored the popular demands for a separate Telangana, even though the movement for the latter coincided with the movement for the unified Andhra. The consequences included a huge cry for the faithful representation of Teluguness in Telugu cinema, for which the relocation of the industry from Madras to Hyderabad was necessary. Despite the assurance of government incentives in Hyderabad, very few people were interested in upholding Teluguness at the expense of better production facilities available in Madras. NTR's rival star Akkineni Nageswara Rao (known as ANR) relocated to Hyderabad for a certain period of time,

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[5] By the term non-Brahmin upper castes I mean the *Sudra* upper castes, which constitute the landed gentry of the region. With the transformation of the agrarian capital into the film-industrial capital these castes (especially the Kamma caste) started to dominate the industry, which continued till the advent of Chiranjeevi, the first non-Kamma star of the industry.

[6] Powerful feudal landlords of Nellore, Venkatagiri and Bobbili successfully appealed to the colonial administration to suspend the screening of Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's Gandhian social reform film *Raitu Bidda* (1939) in their respective areas. Accordingly, a distinction must be made between rich peasant-investors and the zamindars/Rajas, even though the Rajas of Chalapalli and Mirzapuram were among those who invested in the industry.

and NTR refused to follow his footsteps. The question that Srinivas formulates from this is how NTR became the symbol of Teluguness/Telugu pride in 1983 despite the fact that he, unlike ANR, never prioritized the concerns of nativity over production facilities.

To find an answer for this, Srinivas makes a journey through the career of NTR in the chapter that follows, starting from his mythological and folklore films, to the early *socials,* to the 1970s films launching him as a mobilizer of the masses, to the *campaign* films of the 1980s. He argues that Telugu cinema is essentially populist and its uniqueness lies in the relative absence of linguistic identity politics in its course, as opposed to its counterparts in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The abundance of mythological films in Telugu after the decline of the genre elsewhere is a case in point. Mythological films, unlike socials, are based on common Hindu myths familiar in every Indian household and they include hardly anything specifically concerning the Telugu identity in them. The most crucial part of Srinivas' argument is how the question of Teluguness itself was refashioned and how the way it used to be understood in the 1950s lost its relevance. Srinivas goes on to discuss how NTR spoke a high-sounding pseudo-classical Telugu in his cinema which he terms as *Mythological speech* and how this classical rhetoric specific to his cinema made its way to his political-electoral speech after his sudden crossover to politics. Carefully analyzing NTR's electoral campaign as mediated by the emergent print media of a pan-Andhra Pradesh variety, Srinivas makes the case for his argument of *misrecognition*. Srinivas argues that NTR's cinema and cine-politics *misrecognized* the spectator assembled before the screen/political meeting as the Telugu nation. The formation of this *Cinema Janam* (used derogatorily by NTR's detractors and political rivals) temporarily resolved the question of a separate Telangana by invoking Telugu nationalism.

Srinivas concludes his book with an account of the near-formation of a separate Telangana, of the vandalism perpetrated by some pro-Telangana activists on the statues of eminent Telugus in Hyderabad Tank Bund area, of the way *Telugu Talli* (mother goddess of the Telugu nation) has been replaced in the popular imagination by *Telangana Talli*, and how NTR's brand of electoral politics/speech has spread across

this part of the world even when his political ideology is in ruin.[7] Apparently a prequel to *Megastar*, *Politics* ends with a comparison between Chiranjeevi's Tirupathi meeting and that of N. T. Rama Rao (popularly known as NTR) as it looks for the reasons behind the moderate political success of Chiranjeevi in comparison with his predecessor. He defines how NTR's brand of political speech outlives his ideology, as Telugu cinema will certainly outlive Andhra Pradesh, and shows how Chiranjeevi fails miserably in following NTR. The only disconcerting thing about the conclusion is the notion of *pathetic performance* of NTR, it remains much less satisfactorily explored than other themes within the book.

In *Politics as Performance,* Srinivas challenges various existing paradigms in Indian cinema studies. Firstly, he looks critically at the sudden upsurge of historical research in contemporary Indian cinema studies. Srinivas mentions in no unambiguous terms that his interest lies not merely in writing a history; he is interested in asking whether cinema studies can enrich the historiographic experience by adding to the existing historical knowledge. Secondly, Srinivas challenges formulations of Madhava Prasad and Ravi Vasudevan, two renowned film scholars working primarily on Bombay cinema.[8] Prasad's explanation of the transition from the *mythological* to the *social* in Indian cinema has been reexamined with additions, as Srinivas argues that mythological and the folklore films provided the socials resources to create the on-screen male authority or the star as mobilizer (Srinivas 176). Srinivas points out the divergences between NTR and Amitabh Bacchan vehicles of the 1970s, even though the former include some remakes of the latter. The lineage of NTR as an authority figure is introduced but not supplanted, it is an assemblage of traditional authority figures unforeseen in Telugu cinema (225). Srinivas argues that the masses at NTR's rallies are different from the kind that Ravi Vasudevan has addressed as *melodramatic public*. The formation of the political subject is a much more complex process here as this is not a transition from film spectatorship to political community. The subject already is a part of the group

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[7] I have come across low-budget films produced and made in Telangana that mock NTR accusing him for depriving the people of Telangana of a separate state and other governmental welfare opportunities.

[8] Madhava Prasad is better known for his *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: OUP, 1998) and Ravi Vasudevan for editing one of the earliest volumes devoted to the popular cinema in India, namely *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (Delhi: OUP, 2000).

assembled for political purposes, he has "returned to the cinema, whose pleasures the biggest star of the industry recalls from the political platform" (299).

Politics is an extremely important work that has rightfully been published amidst the centennial celebrations of Indian cinema.[9] Locating it within the larger framework of Indian cinema studies, we can say that it refuses to accept the metahistorical, pan-Indian structures[10] that dominate our film studies; it problematizes these structures and comes up with its own alternative histories instead. Indeed, Srinivas claims a special status for his respective industry in his narrative of 'relocation,' by suggesting the exportation of NTR's electoral politics to the other parts of the nation. Here the cinematic argument is constituted around a city far removed from Mumbai. Scholars working on histories of various regional cinemas would do well to take note.

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[9] A number of conferences have been arranged across India and abroad to celebrate 100 years of Indian cinema. Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi are some of the institutions that have organized conferences/lectures series in India.

[10] Madhava Prasad's work on Bombay cinema is taught in all the film studies departments across India and the framework he has produced in the book has been taken as *the* existing paradigm for historical research. Regional cinema(s) have largely been ignored in the discipline of film studies, except for the auteurs who emerged from places like Bengal and Kerala.

TRANSLATIONS

SYNOPTIQUE

The Writer in the Film World:
Amritlal Nagar's *Seven Years*
of Film Experience[1]

Translation and Introduction by Suzanne L. Schulz

At the time of India's independence in August 1947, Hindi writer Amritlal Nagar made up his mind to leave the film industry, saying, "Now I am through with this business of drawing lines in the sand."[2] According to Nagar, the time had come to produce something substantial, which for him meant literature. Nagar, who eventually wrote fourteen novels, five translations, and countless short stories in Hindi, also wrote screenplays and film dialogues between 1940 and 1947, when he worked primarily in Bombay, but also in Kohlapur and Madras. After Nagar returned home to Lucknow in 1947 to devote himself full-time to writing novels and stories, he was praised for crafting richly visualized characters, a quality attributed to training in script and dialogue writing and one which he later brought to his work in radio in the 1950s.[3] Throughout his autobiographical writings and published interviews, Nagar displays an ambivalent fondness towards his prolific years in the film industry, characteristically stating in the early forties, "If I wrote as much in the field of literature as I do in the world of film, I'd have written five novels and fifty short stories by now."[4]

We can situate the "Seven Years" of Nagar's essay within the decline of well-established film studios that had thrived in the 1930s.[5] These studios provided steady employment and a structured work atmosphere for many writers, actors and

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[1] Amritlal Nagar, "Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav," in *Tukde Tukde Dastan* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons Publishers, 1986), 124-27.

[2] Shrilal Shukla, *Amritlal Nagar* (New Delhi Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 12.

[3] Ibid., 13.

[4] Devendra Chaubey, *Kathakar Amritlal Nagar* (Delhi: Jagat Ram and Sons), 30.

[5] Well-established studios that experienced a rapid decline in the 1940s and closed completely by the early 1950s include Prabhat Film Company, New Theatres, and Bombay Talkies, The exception in Nagar's list of studios is Sagar Movietone, which was only in existence from 1930-1940.

technicians.[6] By the early 1940s, a new crop of independent producers had entered the Indian film industry, attracting actors and other film personnel with high salaries. Nagar inhabited the film industry at exactly this transitional period. According to Nagar, it was during this time that the "good habits" of following scripts and producing socially relevant films were abandoned.[7]

Despite his critical commentary, Nagar diverges from prevalent assessments of poor quality films by poking fun, through an anecdote he attributes to the comic actor Noor Muhammad Charlie, at fixations on psychological depth and technical knowhow in filmmaking, as well as at "the cult of Rabindranath Tagore," a key figure of bourgeois arts and literature.[8] In the second half of his essay, Nagar speaks more directly about work and life in Bombay, and his critiques of weak story-writing and characterization belie his enjoyment of collaborating with director-producer Kishore Sahu, dubbing the first Russian and Tamil films into Hindi, and generally appreciating the cinematic medium.

Nagar's comments remind us that film workers were also film watchers. In this transitional era, many had enjoyed silent film viewings only a decade earlier. Nagar suggests that the era of the silent film was instructive for writers of talkies in the 1940s when he quotes screenwriter Tamerlane's excellent maxim that "the ears are four inches behind the eyes," emphasizing that dialogues are secondary accompaniments to scenes. Nagar also refers to the experience of frequenting cinema halls, where Kishore Sahu, already well known, had to sit in the balcony or the box, while Nagar was able to

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[6] For example, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy tell us how Bombay Talkies, one of the studios Nagar mentions, maintained for its staff childcare, healthy food, a library, a medical clinic, and how "[c]elebrated authors and scholars were constantly enlisted to conduct personnel seminars." Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 119.

[7] Amritlal Nagar, "Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav," in *Tukde Tukde Dastan* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons Publishers, 1986), 124.

[8] Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1913, was one of the most important figures in early 20th century India. The "cult of Tagore" is film historian Kaushik Bhaumik's phrase; Bhaumik associates Tagore with the "rise of the notion of the individual bourgeois artist." Kaushik Bhaumik, "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936" (Oxford University, 2001), 190.

sit in the cheapest class of seats, an indication of the insignificance conferred upon film writers.

As we consider Indian cinema's centenary, when lists are being drawn up of the best and the most important, it is time we seek stories of lesser-known figures of the Indian film industry.[9] Nagar was one of numerous Hindi and Urdu writers who worked in the Bombay film industry during the 1940s, but in Nagar's case, during his brief seven years in Bombay, he kept his feet firmly planted in both the film industry as well as in the rich literary cultures of his home city of Lucknow.[10] In "Seven Years of Film Experience," Nagar's bright-eyed reminiscences open a window onto the writer's labor in the film industry as he possessed and encountered an array of dissonant sensibilities that somehow worked together each time a film got made. There is something special about the perspective of someone just passing through, when everything remains new and somewhat astonishing.

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[9] Excellent work has recently been written on lesser-known film industry personnel. On industry practices and the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association, see Nitin Govil, "Recognizing 'Industry'," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013). On make-up artistry in the Bombay film industry, see Debashree Mukherjee, "A Material World: Notes on an Interview with Ram Tipnis," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010).

[10] One of the most familiar perspectives of a writer in 1940s Indian cinema is Manto's classic (Saʻādat Ḥasan Manṭo, *Ganje Farishte* (Lahore: Maktabah-yi Shiʻr o Adab, 1975). This book has been partially translated into English by Khalid Hasan in Saadat Hasan Manto and Khalid Hasan, *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World of the 1940s* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998). Another example of a writer who straddled both the Hindi literary world and the film world is Narendra Sharma. See Narendra Sharma and Ravikant, "Cine-Sangeet *Indra Ka Ghora Hai Aur Akashvani Uska Samman Karti Hai!*/ Film Music Is Lord Indra's Horse and Akashvani Respects It!," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012).

Seven Years of Film Experience[11]

(Amritlal Nagar, 1960)

In 1940, I entered the world of films in a time of transition. Back then, actors of old theatre companies, local amateur singers, and career writers were in the majority. Usually, there was much depravity; the hacks were no more than lackeys of the Seths. Stories in those days were all showiness and fighting. Crudity and licentiousness held sway. In some studios, Seths had set up playgrounds for their carnal amusement. From the clean atmosphere of New Theatres, Bombay Talkies, and Sagar Movietone, a few films had been made on the basis of the best social stories and Bengali and Gujarati novels. Premchand went and came back disappointed. Ugraji also had an indifferent stint before returning. Sudarshanji, on the other hand, had really got into it and made Bombay his home. The eminent poet Pradeepji had just attained prominence. Due to this healthy inflow of well-educated, cultured actors, technicians and writers, the old-timers were jealous and became hypercritical.

In this context I recall a delicious joke cracked by the then famous actor Shri Noor Mohammad Charlie. He narrated: "Listen Sir, literary artists do not stand a chance next to these career writers. Even if literary men have art, they don't know the art of selling it. Just imagine that Tagore Sahib wasn't the son of an important man, and poverty forced him to come, novel tucked under his arm, to sell it to a film company. Now picture him sitting in the Seth's office. Tagore Sahib is stroking his beard with his delicate hands and narrating an extremely psychological and tragic sequence. Sethji is puffing on *bidi*s and continuously yawning. For him, the word 'psychological' is like a thorn stuck in his throat and so, in the grips of fear, the poor man can't say a thing. The film heroine, that is to say, the Sethji's mistress, is also sitting right nearby. She too finds no pleasure in Tagore's novel."

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[11] Nagar, "Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav," 124-27.

"Meanwhile, when word came of the arrival of Munshi Brown-Nose, both the Seth and the heroine perked up. The Seth told Tagore Sahib that Munshi Brown-Nose is a 'very fine storywriter' whom he will be pleased to meet. Munshi made his appearance. His get-up was unusual. Wrinkled, dirty pajamas, soiled *sherwani*, a notebook under his left arm and his right flailing an 'Aadab.' As he came in, he glanced over at Tagore contemptuously and then told the heroine: 'Lady So-and-So, today I've come here determined to take a generous prize from you and Seth. By god, what a story and, you won't believe what dialogue I've written and what powerful psychology I've put in! Seth, I swear on my script, no other dialogue writer could have written it. And Seth, I wrote this story just for you. So many others were after me saying, 'Munshi Brown-Nose, give that story to me!' Mangu Bhai turned up at my house this morning, trying to arrange my first deal of the day for five thousand rupees. I said, I'm grateful, but I'm going to give the story to my Seth and no one else. After this, when I went out, Changu Bhai Seth was going by in a car. As soon as he saw me he stopped, and said, 'Munshi give me that story.' I managed to shake him off too. Then I met Hormozi Seth who forcibly dragged me to the Taj Mahal Hotel, plied me with whiskey, flattered me, placed ten thousand rupee notes before me and began to snatch the notebook from my hand, but I said, 'No, I'm giving this to my Seth and Lady So-and-So will be its heroine!' I explained that there is no other connoisseur like my Seth. Come on Seth, give me a *bidi* to celebrate this.'

"Guiding the Seth and his mistress into the palm of his hand, Munshi Brown-Nose resumed: 'these earnest college boys have come out into the *fillum* industry and spouting off *tek-neek and sy-cology*. C'mon Seth, next to Munshi Brown-Nose, what worth can they demonstrate through the miracles of technique or psychology? Come on Seth, all these guys start their scenarios with 'fade-in'—what's the new technique in that? I have begun this story-scenario with a 'fade-out.' People arrive at the cinema hall. At exactly three o'clock the screen fades out and then, just imagine, the company's name appears, then Lady So-and-So's name sparkles, then, picture this, in big letters your name glitters, people applaud, and the scene begins. I request your attention to the scene, Sethji. Munshi Brown-Nose has outdone himself when he writes, 'It's a moonlit night and for miles the oceans waves are flowing.' When the camera turns we see that it

is a desert—desert—desert! There is no human or human's spawn, no bird or beast of prey and the clouds are looming overhead; lightning flashes and torrential rains start falling. What a scene I've created, Seth, light me a *bidi* for it. Oh, yes, Seth, when the camera turns, what do you see? There is a tall palm tree standing there and one man is sitting in it. Who is that man, do you know? Go ahead, ask, who is it? Yes, he's your hero, Seth. And do you know what the hero is doing sitting in the tree? Go ahead, ask, what is he doing? It's here that I show the miracle of psychology! The villain has kidnapped the heroine, and the hero climbed up the tree to look for her. His eyes are filled with tears and he is singing a song, 'Darling…Darling…Darling...Darling.' Not just one time, not just two times, he calls out to his beloved a full four times. The hearts of listeners break. What a scene! Light me a *bidi* to celebrate."

In the beginning, I was fortunate enough to live and work with decent people. Two producer-directors who are today very famous, Shri Mahesh Kaul and Shri Kishore Sahu, became my close companions. Neither of them was merely a film person. Both had studied Indian and foreign literature and also wrote short stories. Maheshji and I lived together. In the beginning, during the period when Kishore lived in Shivaji Park, his mother looked after us too. Afterwards, due to conflicts of business and personal ambitions, we grew apart. There's no point in making all this public now. To help me forget that bitterness, I have cherished countless sweet memories. And what's more, our paths and areas of work have long since grown apart. Therefore, in this auspicious moment of confession I won't fail to mention that the three of us researched our tasks with great diligence and dedication. Kishore was a star, so apart from the balconies and boxes of select cinema halls he could not sit among the lower classes. For Maheshji and me it was easy to sit with every sort of public, from the 4 ½ *anna* class to the pricey class, and gauge their opinion.

Image 1: Nagar contributed to the screenplay and dialogue for Kishore Sahu's film *Raja* (1943). As was the practice, Nagar's name does not appear on posters and ads for the film (*filmindia,* January 1943) Image courtesy of National Film Archives, Pune.

Image 2: Nagar dubbed *Meera* (Hindi version, 1947) into Hindi from Tamil. A review in *filmindia* rates Nagar's dubbing as "50% successful" and acknowledges that it must have been "no end of a ticklish job to fit in Hindi words on the Tamil lip movement." (Review: *filmindia,* January 1948; Ad: *filmindia* January 1947). Image courtesy of National Film Archives, Pune.

I worked as a dialogue-writer for Kishore's initial films. We put our heads together for hours to break down every single scene in the film. I never enjoyed such a privilege with any other producer-director. The fact of the matter is that I felt a true personal connection with Kishore's work. Writing for others was nothing more than a business proposition. Perhaps because of Kishore's education at Bombay Talkies, he had the good habit that once the scenes were outlined and dialogues written, he didn't change even one word on the set. In my opinion, this is one major reason for Kishore's success in the world of films.

During my seven years in the film industry, I came to understand that often enough director-producers managed to aesthetically appreciate only those episodes, which they had already seen in some Hollywood movie. The knack for understanding story or

characterization was completely absent in most people. Some people wrote well with the help of their commercial instincts. But even those were few and far between.

For the most part, writers and directors considered a story "filmi" by the flow of its dialogues alone. This trend was extremely flawed. Such people functioned by abandoning the first principle of the film medium and continue to do so even today. Famous scenarist Tamerlane wrote: "Don't forget the fact that you are making motion pictures and also don't forget, that the ears are four inches behind the eyes." From this perspective, the scenarios from the silent cine-film era are still relevant. Dialogues are but complementary to scenes. Since I am no longer in the film business, I can say without exaggeration that in this respect we three were the *only* true scenarists at that time. Today's scenario-writing is another name for a camera-driven cinematography. There is a singular lack of dynamism in its narrative, or in acting, or in characterization.

As far as I know, I can safely say without boasting that I was the first Indian writer to "dub". Before me, under the auspices of Soviet Film Distributors, a couple of writers had made inspired attempts but without any success. This was indeed a very tricky job. I got the assignment to dub the Soviet Films picture, *Naseeruddin in Bukhara.* After removing the said film's Russian dialogues, I wrote Hindi dialogue to put in their place. And synching dialogues to the actors' lips of the original film was very challenging work indeed! I succeeded in it, but received even wider acclaim for the next Russian film *Zoya*. My third successful and satisfying assignment was the Indian Cuckoo Shrimati MS Subbulakshmi's Tamil film *Meera*.

From my time until now, the number of people who really understand stories in the film industry is very small. This is the greatest misfortune of our country's film industry. Experts in the subtleties of acting are also extremely rare and as a result our films have become distant from our lives.

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FESTIVAL REVIEWS

SYNOPTIQUE

Is It Dead Yet?:
The 42nd Festival du nouveau cinema

by Bradley Warren

It is surprising that, in 2013, we are still pronouncing the death of film; rather, it should be pronounced dead, past tense. It is expected that film festivals, just like the cinemas that are equipped to support them, will proliferate content in digital formats or other less salient media. Of the films that I viewed during this year's edition of the Festival du nouveau cinema—in this facet, identical to my experience at Cannes in May—only one was projected on film: Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982). Obviously, this reliquary of the past was an archival print, with such attention paid to its condition that there were gaps between reels. The film found only a very small and appreciative audience, despite it being very difficult to see Altman's film and even more so to see it *on* film. The superb performances and dizzying staging, with the symmetrical set bifurcated by a two-way mirror that allows two temporalities to occur simultaneously, leaves one to conclude that availability is the only reason that this is not discussed as a major work of Hollywood *auteur* cinema of the period, or as a seminal early queer film.

The small audience for this forgotten film was not particularly shocking, since audiences flock to this festival to discover lauded works from the festivals of Cannes, Locarno, and Venice. In this regard, the Festival du nouveau cinéma did not disappoint, beating TIFF and NYFF to the North American premières of modest Golden Lion winner *Sacro GRA* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2013) and Amat Escalante's Mexican extremity, *Heli* (2013), also recipient of the Louve d'or. For the greater part, I would like to focus on a pair of holdovers from Locarno, namely Corneliu Porumboiu's *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (2013) and Hong Sang-soo's *Our Sunhi* (2013). The former, constructed of sequence shots so long and few that you can count them (seventeen by

my count), makes no pretence to hide its reflexivity in a narrative about the production of a film. The opening sequence is a two-shot of the diegetic director and his lead actress, as she questions him about his form and style. Porumboiu establishes his rigorous style through narrative demands, as his intra-narrative surrogate acknowledges the capacity of digital formats to allow for increasingly long takes, but displays an appreciation of the structure offered by the limits of film in regard to shot duration. At this point, *When Evening Falls* has set a challenge for itself; *plan séquence* becomes a stylistic mode that is pure play, rather than signalling a functional aesthetic of mainstream filmmaking with celluloid or digital cameras. This reflective formal discourse is surprisingly captivating, and the Romanian *auteur* finds moments of beauty in the deliberate cinematography and *mise-en-scène*.

If Porumboiu endeavours to play within an established structure derived from the technological restraints of celluloid, Hong Sang-soo does the exact opposite in *Our Sunhi*, manipulating the digital format to draw out individual shots to spectacular, unruly lengths. His repetition of these shots manifests in the way that we might expect of a Hong film; that is, permutations of a limited number of characters in a pair of settings in which they drink to excess and acting out what Kim Kyung Hun frames as a cinema of insobriety (217). *Our Sunhi* might be considered a regression compared to the gender representation of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon,* released earlier in 2013 and a film I consider as a major work for the South Korean *auteur*. Nonetheless, Hong transforms the single spectacular bar scene in that film into an inebriated, *plan séquence* leitmotif. The long take encounters between Sunhi and her three suitors within the two settings— first, a Western-style restaurant where alcohol can't be served without an accompaniment of chicken, while the second is a more traditional Korean bar— progressively knit the relationships in Hong's insular cinematic world. Notable as well is the presence of a recursive song, inexplicably played on each visit to both drinking spaces. This acts as a fixed variable, further provoking the question that is so prescient in Hong's cinema: Do these moments belong to a linear narrative, or create parallel ones? One of the major jokes in the film has Sunhi's professor rewriting a letter of recommendation for her to travel to the United States for postgraduate studies, with

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both efforts reframing the same characteristics in a positive or negative light and equally composed without much consideration. Hong underlines the arbitrariness of privileging one of many forking paths, instead displaying a fascination with their variances.

Whereas for the Romanian *auteur*, the opportunities of digital filmmaking demands reflection upon the influence of technology on standards of form and filmmaking practices, Hong seizes the opportunity for new experiments within his cinematic microcosm of filmmakers and students. As an antidote to the austerity of these two films, Sion Sono's gonzo *Why Don't You Play in Hell?* (2013) continues the film-about-film obsession, shifting focus to amateur filmmakers in a genre hybrid that fetishizes the death of 35mm. Sono sets up a tangle of narratives originating in a celluloid past; the youthful filmmaking club unfortunately named the "Fuck Bombers" is doomed to cross paths with splintered Yakuza factions. All the while, the jingle from a toothpaste commercial is certain to get stuck in your head. The film is replete with allusions: a Bruce Lee imitator wears a yellow track suit referencing *Kill Bill, Volume 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), which is further referenced in the last act's showstopping blood bath, alongside the work of contemporaries Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano, while the narrative's professional projectionist is a dead ringer for 1960s innovator Seijun Suzuki. As much as Sono waxes nostalgic for celluloid, there is an underlying resignation to the medium's passing that belies his kitchen sink approach. If audience reception is any indication, Sono's film—recipient of the Temps Ø People's Choice Award—points towards an ongoing participation in the eulogy for celluloid, albeit in a palatable, aesthetically hyperactive form, rather than a minimalist one.

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