



the south asianist

Santosh (happiness) going to the cinema

Catarina Mourão

Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 113–130 | ISSN 2050-487X | www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk

Santosh (happiness) going to the cinema

Catarina Mourão

Filmmaker, mouraocatarina@gmail.com

I came to Bangalore in April 2012 to research for a documentary on the role of Hindi popular cinema in the middle class and specially the way some of the films set in European locations were clearly addressing the diaspora, the NRI communities all over the world, but also the new empowered Indian middle class who triggered by the films choose these same locations to spend their honey-moons, or wedding anniversaries. In Bangalore, where some of my characters live, I was completely mesmerized by the impact of cinemas, and how they still attract so many people. In Europe the cinema theatres are closing down as a consequence of the new technologies of screening and distribution. Cinema as a communal experience is dying in the West. And yet in India in the city of Bangalore, known for its thriving technology and new media, cinema theatres are still playing a strong dynamic role in people's daily lives. Many economical, cultural and sociological reasons can be found to explain why India still has the strongest film industry in the world. In order to better understand how Hindi popular cinema worked with its audience I decided to meet up with film critic M.K. Raghavendra in his house, one hot afternoon.





Introduction

M K Raghavendra is a film scholar and researcher. He has published two academic studies of Indian cinema: 'Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema' (Oxford University Press, 2008) and 'Bipolar Identity: Region, Nation and the Kannada Language Film' (Oxford University Press, 2011). Apart from being a film scholar, he is also an ardent cinephile and the author of '50 Indian Film Classics' (HarperCollins, 2009). His next book '50 International Filmmakers' is being published by HarperCollins in 2012.

The conversation between Raghavendra and I will hopefully enrich the evocative images of my first encounter with Santosh Cinema in Bangalore. In these images I wish to evoke the sensorial experience of going to the Cinema, a cultural experience which transcends the film projected on the screen.

CM: I find there is very little realism in Hindi films and yet people connect to them. Hindi cinema is very popular. How can people create

identification with something which is far away from their everyday life?

MKR: Hindi Cinema was very moralistic, a popular depiction of how the world should be, with a big dichotomy between good and evil... everything's ideal. See... Art in the West is based on mimesis, art imitates the action, the aristotelic mimetic theory. For Indian philosophy art is truer than the real, there is a postulate that believes that reality is based on archetypes, on traditional notions of good and bad, notions of wickedness. For example, the character of a doctor in Hindi Film is always a good character. Indian Art Cinema tried to be realistic. Popular cinema has a firm belief that art should not replicate the world.

CM: But if Indian society is changing so much, how much does this change popular Hindi cinema?

MKR: Films are changing. But either they become sensationalist, full of morals, or they become escapist. Escapism appeared in Indian cinema in the context of the war between India and China in 1961, when India lost the war.

Indian cinema which before was fairly socially responsible, even if it wasn't realistic, after 1961 with the end of an optimistic era following the Independence, Hindi Cinema became socially irresponsible, showing foreign locations, dances, lavish spending. Each location for Indian cinema has a certain quality, like people and archetypes,

symbolically. Switzerland, Europe, the Alps denote pleasure, this is its meaning in the popular conscious. A marriage is an auspicious location, it must happen in an ideal location, and so film recreates an atmosphere which reflects this ideal which should follow marriage, and this is why you have locations like Switzerland. If on the other hand you want to depict a business man, you show London, New York, Kuala Lumpur; these spots immediately signify work, and money making. Locations work like characters, like the doctor or the sick man, who is always a victim, and therefore a good character.

CM: And if an author tries to subvert these categories, how does the audience react?

MKR: It never works and nobody attempts to subvert these categories. The audience wouldn't catch on. There is no irony in Indian Popular Cinema, there is sarcasm, but no irony or nuances. Indian Cinema has changed but not that much. The same goes for its characters: poor people will always remain poor because this is an unchanged category, a stereotype in popular Indian cinema, there is no transformation. Poor people are emblems of poverty.

CM: How much does this have to do with religion?

MKR: Religion is a problematic word, because Hinduism is not really a religion in the way Christianity is a religion. More than the belief of the faith it's the culture which characterizes Hinduism, a cultural perception. Indian popular cinema thinks it is copying Hollywood cinema but what these filmmakers are doing is copying what their perception of Hollywood cinema which has nothing to do with the film itself.

There is no causal link between scenes in popular Indian cinema, its based on individual anecdotal episodes. This is why they are so long, you can chop of a scene it won't make a difference. Films like Sholay or other films, after seeing them many times one still cannot name the order of events. The plot derives from one primary event, one first cause which corresponds to something mythical connected to our previous lives. There is no change or character development. People are never proactive, they are placed in situations passively.





CM: But if there is no transformation, no suspense, how can the audience get hooked on the films?

MKR: There are two kinds of narration; one that emphasizes the unknown, the suspense, another which emphasizes the familiar, what the audience can predict. Detective stories don't work at all in Indian popular cinema.

CM: But how can escapism and familiarity work together. When I want to alienate myself I want something which I don't know or cannot control?

MKR: No, its an escapism which reaffirms what people think things should be like. Its not an escape from the familiar but an escape from the unmanageability of the real world.

CM: You say the spectator in Indian popular cinema is a passive one, and yet I witnessed a lot of interaction within the audience who is watching the film in the Indian cinema...there is a dialogue with people in the room.

MKR: Yes, because people already know what is happening and the film is reinforcing traditional sentiments. People react because they are responding as in recognition. Titanic,

the film, was the most successful Hollywood film in India, because of the love story which people engage and recognize.

Up to 2000 Indian cinema was a banned cinema, and cinema had a very big role in imagining the nation and the idea was that cinema should be understood by people in the whole sub-continent despite the variety of different languages. So in a way Indian cinema language could be resumed in 4 or 5 words. The centre of India would be the cow-belt¹ so films would be centred in Uttar Pradesh. Movies like Mother India for example.

Now after 2000, films are set in cities like Bombay, and Indian cinema tries to recreate the atmosphere of Hollywood action movies set in LA or NY, and in this way it becomes much more concerned in addressing the diaspora, the Indian communities abroad. The NRI are definitely more important as a subject theme and audience than the farmers in Benares.



¹Cow Belt (or Hindu Belt) is the combined area of



Recently Hindi cinema has taken upon itself this idea that the state is evil and because of this the State itself is acting evil. Hindi popular cinema shows corruption and more and more the power recreates this image represented in the movies. Policemen are always corrupt in recent popular Indian cinema.

I believe Indian popular cinema has in a way lost its morality and its become completely consumer driven. Corruption is seen as an unavoidable thing which is almost a good thing. People are shown spending loads of money, and this raises the issue of how they are making this money. And many films seem to legitimize this way of life. It lives in a moral vacuum.

The villain appeared in the 70's. Earlier movies had 4 or 5 different devices to secure different moods, an earthquake, one flood, one lightning. In the 70's the villain replaces all of these. But still it is a villain without motivation, because there is no conspiracy in the plot, we

don't know what he wants to do, neither does he.

CM: If there is no motivation, there is no fear. So how do people react to this cinema and respond emotionally, if Hindi cinema is as flat as you say.

MKR: Audiences don't respond with fear, they don't respond with anticipation, they just respond with recognition, as if they would throw eggs at the evil character. There are certain icons that represent a certain feeling or sentiment, like Hitler would be an icon of hatred today, and people are invited to throw stones at them. They know right from the beginning that he will be an obstacle to the happiness of someone. It's the recognition of a prescribed response. Even music is not subtle, it is there to point directly to what you should feel. This explains why people watch the same movie many times. People are not looking for the story or the drama, or the unexpected, on the contrary its like a religious ritual where they know exactly what will happen next.

CM: When did you start watching cinema and becoming a cine-file?

MKR: I'm part of the film society movement and I was brought up on Hollywood. I am great fan of European cinema, specially Bresson, Rivette and Tarkovsky. It is only when you understand the complexities of world cinema that you can start to understand the complexities of Indian cinema. You can only understand

water from the outside, a fish does not understand water so you have to look from the outside to understand Indian cinema.

I wanted to make films when I was in college, I adored American classical cinema of the 50's and 60's and the French new wave. I was a very big fan of Rohmer, not so much Godard. I used to see German cinema at the Goethe Institute, and French cinema at the Alliance Française. I never lived abroad and I was never in America.

CM: I recall that part of the French new wave movement was the whole cinefilia, and the obsession of watching movies all the time and writing about them. Did the fact that there were people watching these films here in Bangalore and the rest of India provoke any kind of film movement?

MKR: No we were a small group...I came from a film society movement but even in film societies there was little knowledge about many wonderful directors like DeSica or Mizoguchi, Alain Corneau, or Bunuel. Films societies are basically not very worried in exploring new cinematographies.



Nowadays I am more and more interested in the politics of cinema, and specially within popular cinema how the politics of cinema work unconsciously in the audience.

CM: What is happening with art cinema in India at the moment? Are there followers of Satyajit Ray?

MKR: Satyajit Ray is a truly Aristotelic filmmaker, there is no filmmaker like him in India even within Indian Art Cinema. I left Raghavendra's house that hot afternoon thinking how much this conversation had helped to question or reaffirm some of my preconceptions on Hindi popular cinema. The traffic in Bangalore was intense. Nearby people were already queuing up in front of cinema theatre Santosh. I looked around and did a full 360 ° pan with my eyes and body. In between the queues, three children were sleeping on the ground next to an old man selling sweetened tea. Further away a woman with a baby on her back was collecting garbage from the floor and inspecting to look for anything eatable. I thought of Raghavendra's words about the truth in art and how reality in India is based on



mythical archetypes. I thought of the French new wave and how exhilarating it was in the 1960's to go out in the streets and shoot life in all its roughness and unpredictability.

I wondered how much was Hindi popular cinema playing a role on the maintenance of a traditional caste-system based society which leaves out such a big portion of the population.

I took my camera and started taking these pictures. I imagined a character a bit like the

protagonist of Woody Allen's "Purple Rose of Cairo" or Buster Keaton in "Sherlock Holmes Junior" coming out of the screen, leaving the cinema and confronting himself/herself with the streets of Bangalore.

What would she make of it? How alienating and escapist would she find it? 🤖

Catarina Mourão

Lisbon 4 September 2013

