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# Cinema in the sculpting of the South Asian self: a textual reading

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In this article, I attempt to decipher the intangible and pre-theoretical dimension of South Asian modernity through the portal of cinema. By reading the South Asian experience through the inherently political realm of visual culture, this article examines the role of the cinematic image in the dissemination of elite ideology and the formation of political subjects. Drawing on the role of Tamil cinema and its actors in forming the populace of political devotees, the article unravels the complexities of aesthetic experience and its relation to ideas of the self. Tamil cinema is then contrasted with examples from Hindi and Burmese cinema, in which visual culture appears as a site of contestation and formation of multiple meanings. Cinema, in its vast abundance, therefore, can become invaluable material and site for the exploration of everyday struggle in South Asia.

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## Introduction

“In my own early life in Bombay...I saw and smelled modernity reading Life magazine...at the United States Information Service library, seeing B-grade films from Hollywood...I begged my brother at Stanford...to bring me back blue jeans and smelled America in his Right Guard when he returned” (Appadurai, 1996: 1).

Arjun Appadurai, noted for his anthropological endeavour on the notion of modernity, best captures the overwhelmingly sensory nature of how we experience the world in his characterisation of modernity as primarily ‘synaesthetic.’ In this vein, he looks back on the innocuous penetration of America into his everyday sense experience as constituting ‘the little defeats that explain how England lost the Empire in postcolonial Bombay’ (Appadurai 1996: 1).

A consideration of individual experience through visual sense perception gives birth to analysis that is grounded in a singularly immersive realm. Using the material that is received through the senses as a starting point, we can begin to grasp at the ‘here and now,’ the intangible and ‘pre-theoretical’ that is ‘modernity’ (Appadurai 1996: 1). Vivid attention is, therefore, drawn to the sensual construction of everyday experience, and we can begin to explore the vast meaning that is created by the content of visual culture and our relation to this material. Delving into South

Asia through the paradigm of cinema, this article focuses primarily on the visual field of ‘aesthetic’ experience, and in so doing it shares what Floistad (2007: 1) identifies as the primary focus of Asian, Arab and African aesthetics, which is the effect of aesthetic experience ‘on the recipient and their contribution to communal values’.

The existing literature suggests that when the mass media ‘intrude into bodily experience’ (Silverstone 1999: 10), the ‘self’ can be fundamentally affected by the ‘rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life’ (Featherstone 1991: 67). At the fulcrum of South Asian aesthetic experience is the medium of cinema. In particular, Indian cinema is understood as fundamentally influencing the ‘national society’s self-image’ (Farooqui 2006) and representing the ‘collective unconscious of the people’ (Singh and Bharadwaj 2000: 672). Therefore, unraveling the fundamentally political implications of Indian cinema, therefore, lies at the heart of this analysis. In an ‘ocular-centric’ era, ‘aesthetics has become too important to be left to the aesthetes’ (Postrel 2003: 1). Indian cinema can at once be illustrated as having projected elite power, moulding and even circumscribing ‘self-formation’ in South Asia, while at the same time, the role of the viewer has never been passive. Cinema, thus, can be shown to give rise to ‘resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in

general, agency' (Appadurai 1996: 7). Recognising the contested nature of meaning disseminated through cinema, the cinema, therefore, must be understood as an important 'terrain of struggle' (Simon 1989).

The focus of this article is on the non-elite 'self' of Antonio Gramsci's 'subalterns', i.e., 'peasants, the proletariat or those existing at the margins of society' (Smith 2010). In examining the use of cinema by the elite in order to exercise political power, the article proposes to employ Gramsci's conception of 'dominant ideology' as a useful tool, especially in understanding the mechanism of dissemination of 'ruling ideas' to the masses. According to Gramsci, the consciousness of the subaltern classes is 'primarily dominated by sediments of the ideologies of the elite' (Pandian 1989). Given the importance of cinema in India and its immeasurable penetration into the lives of ordinary people, the potential of cinema to constitute and carry 'sediments' of elite ideology is a crucial area of investigation. Translating Gramsci's framework into the modern context, in which the media is highly accessible and visible, Francese (2009: 25) has suggested that the 'people's philosophy', i.e., the 'subaltern' consciousness, is immersed in the dominant ideology through cinema alongside TV, popular music and propaganda. Following a discussion of how meaning, and thus 'ruling ideas' can be related to the recipient through

the medium of visual image, the article will examine the idea of the translation of elite 'sediments' into 'subjects' in the South Asian context.

### **The power of visual medium**

The power of the visual image (image, henceforth) to successfully communicate meaning to its viewers is imperative to its ability to spread or carry certain political ideas. According to the famous art historian, Sir Ernst Gombrich, the image is unique in its propensity to not only communicate meaning, but also to immediately impress its message upon its viewers; the visual 'reaches right out to the object it represents, and to the viewer it addresses' (cited in Woodfield 1996: 672). However, the ability of the image to communicate meaning, however, is crucially dependent on the contextual working of perception. A message can only be communicated to the viewer if the viewer recognises the 'signifier' that the author intends to represent, otherwise communication breaks down. The message related to the viewer by the use of the visual image, thus, 'is dependant upon who we are and what we recognize from past experience' (Eck 1985: 15). The cultural context of the subject is of paramount importance to the communication of meaning through visual culture.

On the importance of 'context' in the communication of meanings, Singh and

Bharadwaj (2006: 673) examined the use of the visual image in the communication of public health messages. They argued that 'local culture' is 'frequently part of the communication package'. At the same time, the ability of the medium to transmit ideology is contingent on the viewer's interpretation. In comparison to the 'fixed' meaning of text, Pinney (2002: 113) suggests that the 'laborious work' of allegory or context is necessary to prompt a particular association of the 'signifier' with the 'signified'. The successful transmission of a particular message using the visual image inevitably speaks to its viewers as 'insiders' to the culture through symbols and codes that are discernible and familiar. To be effective, therefore, it has been argued that media must speak to 'the local concept of the self' (Note 2007: 131).

### **Tamil Cinema**

In this section, I demonstrate the way in which cinema works to circumscribe self-formation by the elite taking examples from the politics of cinema in Tamil Nadu. From the very beginning, Tamil cinema has been infused with symbols and songs of political parties (Pandian 1989, 3). In particular, the Dravidian politicians have widely used cinema as a vessel for the dissemination of their political ideology, that is, for the promotion of anti-Brahmanism and Tamil nationalism (Jacob 2009: 9). One of the first leaders of Dravidian

politics was Conjeevaram Natarajan Annadurai (popularly known as Anna) who was also a writer, director and producer of Tamil films that were made to propagate his political ideology of a separate nation for Tamilians (native of Tamil Nadu). In recent history, Tamil cinema has played an indispensable role in the rise of prominent political figures; two most notable figures being the late Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran (popularly known by his initials MGR) and the incumbent Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha Jayaram. Both film star-turned politicians have accrued vast mass followings with the support of their films.

Inseparable from her status as a film star, which she achieved before she entered politics, the popularity surrounding Jayalalitha has been often described as a 'personality cult' (Pandey 2005: 60). Appearing as the female lead in over 140 films, the media surrounding Jayalalitha has been a significant factor in positing India's 'Iron Lady' (Rediff 2004) for three terms as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, despite accusations of 'unbridled corruption, abuse of power and vulgar displays of ill-gotten wealth' (Jeyaraj 2000). A spectacular use of the visual medium in Tamil politics is the immense, vibrantly coloured 'banner cut-out', which for many years acted as a highly visible 'propagandistic tool' (Brosius 2011:106). Huge and static flashes of lead actors from their films assumed a highly visible presence in the

cityscape of Chennai (Jacob 2009: 179) during the 1990s. The Jayalalitha cut-outs ‘cross-referenced the visual aesthetics of popular cinema as well as the ubiquitous printed poster images of deities and religious personalities’ (Jacob 1997: 332). Forging an identity based on her association with heroes of Tamil cinema, her own film career and her explicit self-assumption as a Hindu goddess, Jayalalitha’s method is ‘neither unique nor novel in Tamil electoral politics’ (Jacob 2009: 154). During her first term as Chief Minister (1991-96), Jayalalitha manifested herself in the guise of various goddesses; one such manifestation was witnessed ‘during Christmas of 1994...she appeared as the Virgin Mary on huge, wooden cut-outs all over Madras’...to celebrate her party’s 25th anniversary in 1998, ‘she was portrayed as [goddess] Kali, wearing a garland of skulls, depicting M. Karunanidhi, the leader of the rival party’<sup>1</sup> (Lama 2001: 11). The cult status of Jayalalitha, indebted at least in part to her fusion of cinema and popular religion in images of herself in the public sphere, is a testament to the power of aesthetics as a means to disseminate elite power. Inter-visual ‘tools’, such as the cut-outs, thus, ‘play a pivotal role in disseminating and regenerating the power of politicians in Tamil Nadu’ and in the case of Jayalalitha ‘greatly enhanced her charismatic hold over the Tamil populace’

(Jacob 1997: 327-37). Such political aesthetics facilitated the self-formation of political subjects as devotees of their extraordinarily influential actor-politician-deity.

A second example of a powerful cinematic celebrity in Tamil Nadu is MGR, who has attracted the greatest adulation of all the Dravidian party leaders till date (Jacob 2010: 172). His fame as a film star goes hand in hand with his popularity as a politician. MGR had a following of ‘tens of thousands of fans whose political loyalties were virtually inseparable from their appreciation of his acting skills’ (Jacob 2010: 171). MGR started his career in cinema by mainly doing mythological roles but later in his career, he assumed his most definitive character, that is, the character of a ‘working man combating everyday oppression’ (Pandian 1989). Identifying himself as a member of the ‘subaltern’ class on screen, MGR was able to ‘celebrate his subalternity’ in carefully constructed roles and ‘create a mood for the audience to identify themselves with him’ (Pandian 1989). The conflict between MGR as the ‘working man’ and ‘super-ordinate oppressors’ were at the core of many of his films, as is self-evident in the titles of his films: *Padagotti* (Boatman), *Meenava Nanban* (Fisherman Friend), *Thoilaali* (Worker), *Vivasayee* (Agriculturist), *Rickshaivkaran* (Rickshaw puller) (Jeyaraj 2000). Inviting the identification of the working man, in his films, MGR spoke directly to the ‘local concept of

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, it was M. Karunanidhi who first used the

self' (Note 2007: 131) in his very phrases and idioms drawn from the rhythms of everyday speech (see Guha 2007: 726). Just as Jayalalitha assumed the identity of the goddess in her early film roles in public life, MGR's public persona became indistinguishable from that of his on screen self. Unsurprisingly then, MGR 'lived out his most heroic cinematic roles in his public and private lives' (Jacob 2010: 170) leading to the conflation of the two in the eyes of his followers. In fact, 'when the followers were asked to substantiate their contention that MGR is good or a principled man, they invariably cited instances from his films' (Pandian 1989). While viewers were drawn in by the 'fragments of their reality presented in these narratives' (Pandian 1989), MGR's championing for the rights of the 'working man' can be set against the lack of change in actual conditions or substantive movement towards social justice on the part of MGR's political party (Pandian 1989). As Pandian (1992) and Dickey (1993) have emphasised, MGR's use of cinema can be seen to obscure the dominance of elite power and thus 'legitimise rather than mitigate the 'durable social inequalities directly experienced by the audience' (Rodgers 2009: 64). Instrumental in the formation of Tamil subaltern selves in the image of MGR, Pandian has suggested that the hold of MGR over the masses gave way to a 'false consciousness' facilitating the dominance of the political elite.

Giving rise to the 'MGR phenomenon' cinema, therefore, becomes an important 'terrain of political intervention' (Pandian 1989) in through which the process of self-formation can be importantly infiltrated.

### **Hindi Cinema**

In stark contrast with MGR's portrayal as the 'working man', many have identified this aspect as the glaringly 'absent image' (Klienmann 1996: 16) in contemporary Hindi films. Instead, specific 'discourses of consumerism and progress' (Mankekar 2002: 146) form the dominant strand of narratives in popular Hindi cinema. Nearly 35% of the population who live in poverty 'do not even find the token representation' in Hindi cinema (Farooqui 2006), while the representation of the rest of the population in Hindi cinema is deemed as 'alternative' cinema. In opposition to what Pandian (1992) and Dickey (1993) noted about MGR's exploitation of a facetious affinity with the poor for his own political gain, Hindi cinema has erased this 'reference to social justice, however fictitious in practice...' (Note 2002: 140). In the so-called 'new' genre of Hindi cinema, even the latter day 'angry young men' such as Amitabh Bachchan have chosen to represent the slogan of 'shining' new India. The lack of representation of the majority of the rural Indian population becomes problematic as 'facades of modernity...effectively mask the presence of



subaltern others' (Note 2002: 140). No longer it seems, does the dominant form of entertainment, in the words of 1940s film director V. Shantaram 'reflect the real India' (Guha 2007: 722). Defining modern India as a world of highly mobile, capitalist urban elites, the films dominating Hindi cinema today 'never show the streets...they never show the regular people...or the beggars or the dirt...most of the time they are not even in India, they are in Mauritius or Vancouver' (Rao 2007: 64). Reinforcing and legitimising the position of the highly-mobile urbanised elite, Hindi cinema's silent 'politics of inequality and escapism' work to 'implicitly suggest that India is normatively Hindu, patriarchal and upper caste' (Deshpande 2007: 17). This dominant representation can be implicated in maintaining the stratification of Indian society, and in moulding the aspirations of the wealthy Indian citizen in the form of the consumerist hero of today's Hindi cinema. According to Deshpande, popular Hindi cinema further penetrates the consciousness of the lower classes, which 'ape the bourgeois to identify with the dominant culture of our period' (Deshpande 2007: 97). Through the forceful representation of consumerist culture, Note (2007: 142) argues, a 'discipline to desire' is invoked, suggesting the ways in which self-formation can be circumscribed by the power of cinema. The fact that the self-formation of the lower classes is directly

affected by Hindi cinema may be overly determinative. The implicit politics of popular films, nonetheless, need to be unmasked and assessed in terms of their potential implications. Hence, the innocuous images of the everyday can be exposed as political, in their selective representations, as seen in the film roles of MGR as well as by established actors in Hindi cinema, cinema can enable the powerful to 'obscure social reality in ways convenient to itself' (Eagleton 1991: 5-6).

Investigating further the extent to which such political aesthetics have an effect on self-formation, an ethnographic view of cinema can better explore the ways in which aesthetics can equally prompt resistance on the part of the viewer. For example, Rao's (2007) study of rural Punjabi viewers highlights the resistance and self-expression of the viewer in response to Hindi cinema's representation of the modern Indian citizen. So, the agency of the viewer does sometimes override the dissemination of 'dominant ideology' of the elite. In this study, respondents decry the unrepresentative nature of Hindi films. Similarly, Rao (2007: 64) asks: 'where are films about corruption, hatred, unemployment, criminalization of politics?' Rather than 'aping' the bourgeoisie heroes of the films (Deshpande 2007), the viewers are discontent with their lives being 'written out of the film script' (Rao 2007: 64). The alienation of the viewer, therefore, leads to a rejection of dominant representations of Indianness in



Hindi cinema; ‘the globalized Indianness...did not resonate with the non-elite and rural audiences of Punjab’ (Rao 2007: 69).

The notion that cinema can provoke resistance and a solid contestation of dominant narratives is further demonstrated in a study by Derne (2005). He documented the responses of non-elite North Indian viewers to the ‘western’ values shown in the films in terms of its opposition and rejection. Therefore, if political aesthetics can be used for the dissemination of dominant ideology to influence self-formation, then the importance of rejection and resistance, as captured above, lends credence to the conceptualisation of the realm of the aesthetic as essentially a ‘terrain of struggle’ (Simon 1989).

### **Burmese Cinema**

In my final analytic of cinema and the sculpting of the South Asian ‘self’, I explore the viewers’ response to cinema in Myanmar (formerly Burma) in the 1990s. The cinema in Myanmar, bearing close relationship with Hindi cinema, began in 1910s as a medium of Burmese struggle for independence from British colonial government by incorporating social and political issues into its fold. Not surprisingly then, many of the early Burmese films were instantly censored and banned by the British government. In fact, the climate of heavy censorship has never been over. Skidmore (2001: 200-01) explains how

filmmaker U Sein was forced by the government censorship board to change the ending of his films that the military interpreted as a critique of the government, however oblique or at times non-existent these supposedly subversive messages may have been. Despite being forced by the censor board to change the title and the ending of one film, the viewers ‘easily grasped the real meaning of the film because they invariably related what they saw on the screen to their current suffering’ (Skidmore 2001: 200). Hence, elaborate descriptions of an alternative ending spread around the country because ‘the audiences had imaginations, so they participated in completing the film.’ The creative potential of the audience in their viewing of films can best be summed up by a film-maker; ‘filmmaker may not always intend a political message, but the audience naturally relates the film’s content to the national mood...sometimes I only have one or two messages, but people interpret it ten ways of their own’ (Skidmore 2001: 200-01).

### **Conclusion**

Political aesthetics can indeed be implicated in circumscribing self-formation, as shown above in the creation of film star devotees and in the self-formation of India’s aspiring middle class. It is necessary to pre-empt what are ‘often the all too hasty links between what images seem

to be saying' and 'what they do' (Jain 2007: 28). Thus, any analysis of political aesthetics must avoid casting subjects as 'variously inadequate' 'gullible', 'blind', and 'inarticulate', because their agency is surrendered to a pernicious form of superstition and seduction (Jain 2007: 12). The importance of cinema lies not in its' determinate effects, but in its' immense capacity to 'offer' forms of self-formation to the viewer. The ultimate meaning is 'made' by the response of the viewer because the construction of meaning can never be a passive affair (Woodfield 1996: 45). In this regard, Gramsci's conceptualisation of 'common sense' as the consciousness of the masses, and his emphasis on its 'contradictory' nature is illustrating. While Gramsci (1973: 327 cited in Pandian 1989: PE62) understood common sense as the ensemble of cultural presuppositions of the worldview of the masses, which is saturated with, and dominated by, the 'elite sediments,' Pandian (1989: PE62) argues that common sense is not completely regressive carrying only the 'sediments' of the dominant ideologies, but 'it contains progressive, autonomous elements as well which assert themselves when the subaltern classes act against the elite "occasionally and in flashes"'. Therefore, neither common sense nor ideologies are mere instruments of 'domination'; rather, they are different terrains of struggle wherein the propensity towards acts

of resistance and rejection are inherently present in the 'contradictory consciousness.'

Giving priority to the agency of the viewer in creating meaning and in the process of self-formation, should we, thus, heed Mitchell's (1996: 74) cry to 'scale down the rhetoric of the power of images?' While we should remain wary of consigning too much influence to the visual image in determining the formation of the self, the importance of the aesthetic as a 'terrain of struggle' cannot be overlooked. The images and narratives offered in cinema bring forth an opportunity for reaction, response and the formation of self, based on the information powerfully delivered to the senses, for 'seeing is an imaginative, constructive activity, an act of making' (Eck 1985: 14). The power of the image, thus, remains intact as political aesthetics give way for the seeding of ideology into the popular consciousness, while at the same creating a basis for resistance, thereby enabling new formations of the self to be constructed.

In sum, the theory of aesthetic in South Asia is absolutely political as are its practical implications, which indeed cannot be left to the aesthetes (Postrel 2003). With a focus on the study of audience response and the agency of the viewer, we should endeavour to understand the diverse ways in which aesthetics contribute to the formation of the self in a given context. As a crucial part of the South Asian texture of experience, and a tool for the elite and non-

elite alike, the realm of aesthetics is, according to Veena Das (2007), neither the reign of 'brute oppressors' nor 'noble resisters.' Yet the struggle and contestation of the self, appearing

in the realm of the aesthetic, should be regarded as an integral part of the 'rough and tumble' of the everyday life. 🧠

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