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Querying the 'Traditional' Roots of Silent Cinema in Asia

First and foremost the nature of the origins of cinema in Asia in the earliest phase of the global spread of film technology is related to availability of labour. Although this is very true of early cinema in Europe and America as well it is not so in the very exclusive manner as it is for early Asian cinemas. To clarify this, I must qualify the word 'cinema' itself. By 'cinema' here I isolate a strand of films that have discursively come to occupy the entire space of the cinematic apparatus. Here I am alluding to the cinema developing out of modern literary and theatrical traditions. Not only this, this certain cinema was from the very beginning claiming to be the only viable and respectable version of the apparatus, an ideological stance that seemed commonsensical enough to have been taken up as the norm by all early film cultures without exception. The space of this apparatus wedded to literary movements, it maybe argued, remains intact even today in an age where technological 'fabrications' have become mediators of cinematic practices. This point is something that I shall come back to towards the end of the paper.

What follows from this clarification is the fact that given this *a priori* arrest of the apparatus by a literary cinema, or at least by the idea of it, certain film cultures with well formulated modern literary artistic traditions— and we can safely restrict this sphere to Europe and America for the early years of cinema— did not face the 'labour' question as acutely as did others. That is to say, artists from 'respectable' artistic traditions, after an initial hesitation, took to cinema with enthusiasm. However, the problematic of labour would have a profound impact on the ways in which extra-Euro-American cinema developed. In India for example it might be argued that it was the available labour pool for cinema that determined in large measures the kind of cinema that was produced during the silent era. In Japan the situation was very similar but was modified by a number of cultural factors that would see Japanese cinema not only master the techniques of Western cinema, but, I would argue, far outclass cinema produced anywhere in Europe or America, Russia and Germany included.

In what follows, for most of the paper I shall follow some of the implications of the labour question for the history of early cinema in India. I shall towards the end briefly delineate the differences of this history with the history of early film in Japan to provide a sharper relief for these developments before concluding by way of remarks about the relevance of these considerations for the histories of Asian cinema today.

Traditions, bodies and performances

The history of early Indian cinema, and in this case I am referring to film production in Bombay where the bulk of early Indian films were made, has a peculiar relationship with the history of early global cinema. On the one hand, much of it can be easily plotted in a narrative of dialogue and emulation of Western cinema, a fact that has until now been seen by most casual observers, including certain schools of historians, as a derivation of Western modernity. On the

other hand, it is quite apparent that this dialogue was at best peculiarly selective to suit certain cultural and material conditions of film production in India. Not that it was fragmentary in any way or insubstantial; that mantle rests with the emulators of the apparatus, of modern literary cinema. Instead, purveyors of early cinema were astute prospectors of the market checking out mass euphoria for certain kinds of films and tailoring indigenous film production towards those directions. And when the system matured there was not reason to believe that the home product was in any way incoherent when it came to techniques of cinematic narratology.

Embedded in this uneven history of the mutually informing parallel tracks of Western and Indian cinemas are longstanding thorny issues of the cultural meaning of the production of a modern art form like cinema in a geo-political terrain still given to 'traditional' ways of life. Some have argued that the initial emphasis on producing films with stories culled from the vast store of mythological narratives was a way to take advantage of the wave of national awakening to forge an intimate mode of address for the people of India. The public energies of the nationalist context allowed for the absorption of a modern technological medium like cinema into Indian 'tradition'. Others have taken it for granted that given the 'traditional' proclivities of the Indian masses when it came to matters cultural it was only commonsensical to produce such films. Whatever be the nuances of the arguments put forward on this count, the consensus remains that early Indian film was inextricably linked to 'tradition'. In such arguments the word 'tradition' is used as shorthand for cultural texts and practices related to Indian religion or a prescribed ritualistic regime that explicitly configures the sacral in the everyday lives of Indians.

However, the issue is complicated by the filmography of early cinema in India. A very small percentage of the 1500 or so films produced in the silent cinema era are devoted to Indian religious subjects or display hints of imaging a prescribed ritualistic regime of gestures and social behaviour. The bulk of cinema in this period consisted of a mix of fantasy films derived from the various story traditions popular on the subcontinent, the most significant one being the *Arabian Nights*, and stunt romance adventure films that underwent nuanced modulations through the 1920s to emerge as a fully modern action film genre by the time the talkies arrived in 1931. Together I characterize these films as adventure romance films. Not much of this cinema survives outside of film stills and the fitful and random recordings of the experiences of film personnel and cinema-goers of that generation. However, the historical record is clear enough to complicate the consensus on the 'traditional' moorings of early Indian cinema. As I have argued elsewhere, the memory of this cinema continues to be recorded in an apparatus that, in the Indian case, is wedded to the idea of 'tradition', and here I emphasize, a very particular idea of 'tradition', rather than a notion of tradition linked to the tenets of 'writing' as in the case of Western modernity.

This is not to doubt the value of the scholarship about Indian cinema's relationship with tradition but to point to the fact that no framework for the analysis of early Indian cinema's history is available to scholars and students outside of that of 'tradition'. Although the use of hegemonic framework of a certain 'tradition' to read almost all cultural history of pre-independence twentieth century India is being challenged we are far from seeing this 'outside' of

this tradition as being molecular to Indian experience and therefore a more relevant historical framework.

So to frame the question in a rather rough and ready manner: What does the history of early Indian cinema look like when seen through the filter of fantasy and stunt adventure romance films? And this question brings us squarely back to the issue of labour in early Indian cinema. For this cinema, from the very beginning, was plagued by the non-availability of 'respectable' bodies that could have led to a literary cinema of the kind that the West had achieved fairly early on in its history of cinema. The evidence submitted to the Indian Cinematograph Committee of 1926-28 bears the constant lament of Indian middle class filmmakers for such a cinema. And in almost all cases depositors of evidence were of the opinion that middle class reluctance to join the film industry was a major contributing factor to the lack of classy cinema in India. Thus cinema was left to the vagaries of cinematic speculators and latest fads of a fickle audience, leading to an inferior kind of art when compared with the imported cinema.

When asked to describe the industry many went on to decry the presence of illiterate performers, and especially, express horror at the presence of female actors from the courtesan and prostitute class. Implied in the evidence set before the Committee was an equation, in the middle class mind, between the content of fantasy and adventure romance films and the kinds of bodies that essayed the tale into its cinematic variant. The stories and performers were all seen as rising from a disreputable quarter of popular performances, from a space that for the lack of a better word I have called the *bazaar*, serving the rude and simple desires of the unlettered folk of the subcontinent. Dirty bodies, then, in and for a sordid cultural universe. The adaptations were further damned by the fact they seemed to be badly produced and were mostly thinly disguised plagiarisms of the immensely popular imported stunt film. The solution to this problem was a universally endorsed one – bring in the literate middle class and one would get a 'better' cinema.

Whatever might be the value of the lament of the middle class for the history of modern India it did however set up the creative dimensions of early cinema in the subcontinent in the correct material perspective. Early film producers were astute enough to spot the immense popularity of imported stunt and fantasy films (and the *Thief of Bagdad* – both a stunt and fantasy film – was a pivotal moment in this realization) amongst the mass audiences in Indian cities and towns. They then followed this observation by formulating an 'Indian' variant by inventing the correct setting for lush Orientalist fantasies and hair-raising physical stunts to unfold. This setting more often than not happened to be a fictive princely state of India set in an unspecified historical epoch, the political machinations in these settings gave the filmmakers ample opportunity to exercise their skills at inventing effects of increasingly spectacular fantasy and physical adventure. The producers were also canny enough to realize that given the kind of performers willing to do cinema this was the kind of film that took advantage of the natural skill of the performers to the hilt. Thus body builders and acrobats could be apt stunt film heroes while courtesans tutored in the *ars erotica* could essay fantasies of sex in Orientalist extravaganzas.

When we do a survey of the proposals for 'good' cinema presented by middle class cultural observers to the Committee we come up with a spectrum of what was considered 'respectable'

for a public sphere modulated to middle class tastes from a cinema adapted from the religious classics of the subcontinent (but in the hand of the knowledgeable middle class) to a cinema inspired by modern literary values. The viewpoints came from all ideological positions encompassing the political Right as well as what could be taken as a very early Socialist point of view that was beginning to congeal in India for the first time. What these views had in common was a fantasy of 'tradition' that could be defined as a reproducible vision of a stable social order. Such a vision could easily accommodate social radicalism provided such radicalism was aimed at establishing a stable social order, a new one but stable nonetheless. The cinema produced by the available labour was thus from this point of view a sign of the chaotic, symbolic of unruly forces and therefore incapable of reproducing 'tradition'. Indeed it was this classicized stable notion of tradition that provided the vantage point from which the heady physical energies of the adventure romance film could be criticized as being harmful for society.

The irony, from my point of view, is that the cinema being decried by middle class critics of early Indian films was very much within the framework of the definition of 'tradition' as presented above. They were also traditional in a more literal sense of being derived from traditions of storytelling and performance that had long histories in the subcontinent. In the first place, the films were mostly romances dedicated in the main towards the formation of the romantic couple at the end of the resolution of social tensions that held back the fruitful coming together of the sexes. Indeed, the couple was made only possible after the social order had been reconfigured to a stable and harmonious one, one that could include the new sexual energies of the couple. Men and women had to settle scores with residual conservative habits, the siren call of the past, before they could do justice to the adventurous stirrings of the flesh and mind. But for this the social setting had to change as well. Thus was set up a long standing genre of Indian cinema – the formation of the couple was tantamount to the setting up of a new kingdom defined by justice and harmony. An older social order had to be shaken up, social ties loosened and made lyrical and more reciprocal, to allow for sexual adventure. However, despite these changes an idea of stable reproducible vision of society, a 'tradition', was never given up.

In the second place, such films were derived from older performance and graphic traditions of the Indic subcontinent consisting of a motley collection of martial, theatrical, storytelling and painterly practices. In the epoch just previous to the setting up of the Indian film industries these traditions had come together in the Parsi Theatre from which many artistic practices were adopted by the new medium. The fantasy films had roots in the *Arabian Nights*-type story while the adventure romance was clearly indebted to traditions of the oral heroic ballad which were in most cases intimately related to painterly and performance traditions. But beyond this, and very significant for our discussion, were the traditions of the *ars erotica* that were mastered in the palaces, and the courtesan's quarters the most explicit public circulation of which were erotic graphics in the form of drawings and paintings that circulated extensively in the *bazaars* of India. Moreover, there are indications in colonial records that many local live performance traditions were not averse to being sexually graphic. For men, there were the traditions of the martial arts of wrestling, horse-riding and hunting amongst others that were considered amongst

the arts by cultural commentators and audiences alike. Public wrestling displays had a haloed history that had been redefined with the setting up of the princely states. Likewise something like hunting had always had an aura of public performance with an entire society participating in the proceedings. And it was from this world of the martial and erotic arts that the first subaltern stars of Indian cinema emerged.

Traditions and the modern

As seen above, the popular film traditions of the *bazaar* were in line with conventional ideas of what a tradition might constitute as well as with performance traditions with sanctified histories within the Indic cultural ecumene. However, the relationship that the performance traditions described above had with the modern or with the modernizing process through cinema was a very different one than the one established by high cultural traditions. To put it in a provocatively simplified formulation: in colonial twentieth century India, popular cultural traditions of the *bazaar*, especially the ones to do with spectacular live performances, took on the challenge of adapting to the speeds of the modern while high cultural traditions modernized in some ways as critiques of Western modernity. For the latter, the point of the modern was to set up a society that did justice to Indian tradition. For some, there remained the illusion of having a modern society that somehow avoided the pitfalls of alienation and brutalization of Western modernizing drives.

The wildly popular romance adventure film was however beginning a strand of Indian film history that would over time mutate into the hypermodernity of the *masala* film of the 1970s, a legacy that remains the mainstay of popular Hindi cinema till date. And the important point to note is that this strand of film history begins, in a manner of speaking, *from below*. That is to say, the kind of energies that the adventure romance film sought to configure was made possible only by certain labouring bodies; that middle class bodies were by definition ruled out from this realm of the modern. However, the important fact remains that although middle class cultural commentators might have denounced such cinema to the Cinematograph Committee, the immense popularity of adventure romance films amongst a new generation of proto-middle class young audience was pointing towards the inauguration of a new regime of desire that would irreversibly transform the Indian cultural ecumene in the years to come. And this desire too has a long history and tradition within the Indian context, a tradition that remains untouched by historians till date.

Such a tradition has multiple social locales within Indian society but is marked by one uniting factor – the crossing of prescribed social boundaries by wit or by force, the traditions of the trickster or the hero in the vast corpus of Indian stories, story traditions that are related to cultic movements to a democratic vision of Indian social and political practices. The connection of such story traditions with the *Sufis* for example is an established fact. In these stories established hierarchies of power are overturned and material pleasures redistributed to accommodate the excluded and the ‘setting’ of such tales reveal a more open and interactive vision of Indic societies, a society more amenable to the forces of multiplicities. The trickster or the adventure story hero after all is defined by multiplicity. This fiction can be characterized as belonging to

the courtly tradition of fiction (the cults being responsible for reproducing in such tales a mirror for the princes in their role as tutors to the court) reflecting a mix of martial and commercial glory in social and cultural life. The village well, the path leading to temples, the harem or the *bazaar* amongst others could be ambiguous sites of passage where fortune and beauty could be won by the alert hero. **What is important for our purposes here is to emphasize that such a tradition is fully formed and autonomous in its own right, defining a worldview and a position from which an entire functional society can be fantasized.** And the reason why such a viewpoint comes to dominate cinema in this period is a simple one – modernization was breaking up older rigidities liberating objects of desire that could be coveted by anyone, irrespective of social status. At least, this was the myth of the modern and in some ways a very popular perception amongst the masses in the early part of the twentieth century. Thus is in a period when social restrictions were loosening up a worldview that presented wit and heroism as the way to personal glory was bound to become a very effective medium to mediate popular psychologies of the times. And this would explain the reasons for its success amongst the young proto-middle class young of the times as well.

In a period when every supposed site of impermeability to outside influences on established powers of class, caste, gender and age was being rendered ephemeral and powerless due to the intense churning up occasioned by the coming together of Bombay city, such a magical universe of treasures to be attained for anyone willing to be on the lookout must have been quite plausible. In an era of intense speculation, the opening up new sectors of jobs resulting in the redefinition of social power along the age and generation axis and the onset of branded commodity capitalism coupled with the relaxing of rules for interactions between the genders and increasing individualization of young adults were apt contexts for the ideology of the adventure romance to take roots in the fantasies of the young urbanite. It is this tradition of history as defined by the magic of the chance encounter that was being modernized in through this genre, a strand of history that remains to be documented. It is only the massive presence and popularity of this genre in India and Asia that gives us a hint of the historically formative role the psychologies delineated in these stories have had. With the arrival of the modern and the entrenchment of a speculative dimension to life in the urban everyday, the notion of adventure could encompass an entire spectrum of human experiences from the physically adventurous to the more abstract quick and exciting sensory flows elicited by a passage through a city now promising easy access to heady pleasurable experiences.

What we thus begin to notice is the gradual formulation of excitement and adventure as the framing experiential field for emotional registers to unfold, be it romance, be it compassion or fear and horror. But coming back to the issue of labour and acting bodies the thing to note is the fact that certain regimes of bodily experiences that were outside the realm of the new middle class lifestyles were gradually beginning to get molecularized via lower caste and working class performers in cinema. The context where such a development becomes significant is in the ways the modern was challenging existing regimes of corporeal life in Indian society. Colonial governance worked through a classification of Indian populations into watertight professional

groups where the middle classes were firmly tied down to commercial, scribal and administrative labour. In this scheme physical labour was the domain of the peasant and the artisanal classes. And it would be vital to see such a division as substantially informing the psychic lives of Indians where groups descended from the peasantry and the artisanal classes were gradually absorbed into sedentary intellectual labour. This was one of the main reasons why nineteenth century middle class fiction was obsessed with fantasized historical martial stories reflecting a past that the class had exited very recently with the onset of colonialism. Further, colonialism had taken away community organization of policing and civic defense that led to a further alienation of the middle class from the world of labour and physical excitement. With the modern city however the situation was to change radically as life in the city involved a more open and physically active everyday and this would occasion the reconfiguration of traditional fiction into a metaphor for life in the modern world.

In this scheme then lower caste or working class labouring bodies in stunt adventure romance films would stand on the one hand for a certain 'subalternization' of middle class life – the increasing propinquity with the world of physical labour, *as well as* the realities of the 'upward mobility' of the working classes in terms of modern class formation, that was even welcomed by the young as a *frisson* of modern pleasures. On the other hand, the history of the middle classes in India rooted in the countryside of martial traditions allowed it to pose itself as the defender of the subaltern against the forces of colonial modernization, a fact that seems strange from today's vantage point where the middle classes in the Bombay film industry very openly announce their distance from countryside audiences. But in the 1920s the routes of social power were still complicatedly enough placed between subaltern and middle class identities to allow for an active defense of peasant and martial bodies that were beginning to get transformed into the working classes in Indian cities. Without going into details it is sufficient to note that regal power was firmly located in the power dynamics of peasant groups and the scribal and commercial middle classes had an active interest in keeping alive such psychologies since such circuits of power translated into patronage for them. The village of the princely state was very much alive in the heart of Bombay city.

While this latter fact is very much in line with the earlier point made about nineteenth century literary production in India, I would argue that such a reflex undergoes a fundamental transformation with the opening up of society and the rise of a younger generation of modernizing Indians taking over the public sphere in Indian cities. And this shift of emphasis would be marked in the rapid transformation that the genre underwent from being 'traditional' yarns about princely state intrigue to modern narratives set in similar locations but now replete with cars, trains and protagonists with a pronounced urban swagger. The fact that subaltern labour in early Indian cinema bore on it the imprint of a cultural world, the dynamics of a certain history, allowed such figures to be transmuted into the new context of the modern.

The interrelational mapping of older trajectories of middle class dreams of indigenous governance and the new sensory reflexes of a young India on to each other thus provides the context of labour in early Bombay films and its mass success amongst Indian audiences. We find

in these films a more 'public' vision of modern Indian history intimately related to the high speeds of the modern, speeds that would be more or less prohibited in the classical phase of post-independence mainstream film production. The adventure romance-fantasy film complex would mutate into a secondary but immensely popular B-cinema genre of period fantasy films meant for unlettered and semi-literate subaltern audience, 'unlettered' being the key functional term here since the classification of films in the post-independence period more or less followed imputed domains of separate literacies although actual audience profiles might reveal a more interesting heterogeneous viewership for at least certain variants of the genre. Thus the development of the genre into a modern form such as the Hunterwali films was not followed up in the first forty or so years of the talkies.

And yet a close perusal of the history of popular film iconography would reveal interesting continuities between these genres and mainstream cinema, much beyond the more obvious remnants in the B-thriller as well as the *masala* cinema of the 1970s. For example, the embracing of the openness of the modern by increasing numbers of middle classes, a process that would never exclude the rural from the urban, would lead to the formulation of the peculiar form of governance that Nehruvian socialism was all about. An analysis of the discursive regime of the State would reveal the romance of a pre-modern India of the countryside and the princely state that would be pivotal to the definition of bureaucratic paternalism in rural India. In *Madhumati*, we find the image of the modern Indian bureaucrat-type hero inhabiting the terrain of earlier stunt-fantasy cinema – a sort of princely state – in a dream that reveals his previous life to him. Here, the modern Indian male falls in love with a tribal woman and has to fight tyrants of the kind popular in B-films set in princely states thus revealing genealogies with the unruly desires of the dashing prince of the adventure romance film. Thus is added another dimension to the saga of the Indian middle class's continuing fascination with and meditations on the allure of the countryside and modes of power located in subaltern lives, a fascination with a certain tradition of thinking about public life that would seek to locate issues like governance, democracy and a just society in a logic of multiplicity and heterogeneity rather than in classical law.

Hidden in this fascination is the 'downward' spiral of the middle classes towards popular desires through breaking down of classical taboo lines, in other words, a move towards pleasures that in the very beginning of film history could only be depicted by the labour of subaltern bodies, the proper inhabitants of the Garden of Allah of 'natural' sensory delights in the modern. Hidden in popular cinema were abstract figures of the power of popular culture, mimicking the ravages of natural forces, threatening to break down all established taboo lines that spelt security to the propertied classes thus giving rise to horrible Spenglerian images of social chaos in the fantasies of the elite. But for our purposes it should be noted that if taboos were a tradition then so were there traditions of the unruly pleasures of history that were coming to the fore in the high speeds of the modern thus also molecularizing traditions of social and political labour that had until now been looked down upon as being beyond the social pale. The siren call of the modern would time and again make the middle class complicit in the pleasures of such labour regimes

despite its disavowals, making action cinema the dominant cinematic genre of Indian cinema through the ages.

Finally...early Asian cinema

The beginnings of early cinema in much of Asia, most notably the three main film cultures of the 1920s – India, Japan and China, display remarkable similarities of material and discursive contexts for film production. In all these cultures the popularity of stunt and comedy films led to the formulation of a *bazaar* cinema that took to ‘traditions’ of the martial and the erotic arts to establish the fledgling film industries. In all cases there was a crisis of labour occasioned by the traditional middle classes staying away from cinema leaving the latter firmly in the hands of the *bazaar*. However, the political contexts for these cinemas would soon reveal their subterranean influences and Japanese cinema, for example, would take a more markedly route towards cinematic modernity than the Indian industry. Key to Japanese developments would be a consolidated national policy towards modernization in the hands of the Japanese themselves that would over time bring the educated middle classes with high cultural aspirations into cinema in large numbers. Not only this, the integration of the Japanese middle classes into artistic traditions was a more organic affair than in India, where the events of 1857 produced an irreversible gap – cultural and economic – between elite and the countryside and amongst various elite groups as well. Above all, colonial control of the economy made the development of a ‘national’ economy growing in response to local needs impossible. The rapidity and intensity of Japanese industrialization on a mass scale, producing vast industrial surpluses to subsidize modernization in the countryside, would ensure a deep and intense modernization of the traditional arts, something that never occurred in India. For the Japanese the contradiction between the modern and the pre-modern traditional is not as stark as in the Indian case. This allowed for the literate traditions to be adapted into cinema fairly early on in film history. In short, Japan solved its ‘labour’ problem fairly soon after the onset of industrial production of films. This would, in the end, translate to a very different political stance towards the interface between modernity and tradition that would, in turn, guide the imperatives of the Japanese industry.

Thus despite similar beginnings the histories of Japanese and Indian cinema diverge in substantial ways from even as early as the 1920s. However, one cannot but notice the similarities as well and it might well be worth tarrying and considering the significance of such similarities. Foremost, there remain the parallel developments of early ‘traditional’ action cinema followed by the birth of the ‘modern’ action film in the 1970s. Whatever might have been the achievements of Japanese cinema in the realms of art house cinema, the tradition of action cinema has remained a strong one and indeed informed a considerable proportion of the so called art film production. Such considerations become interesting in the light of the dominance of action and ‘extreme’ genres of films in Asian cinemas today. In these cinemas we find a mutation of the earlier validation of the popular in the ‘traditional’ and the endorsement of the reproduction of society through the popular into a cinema of the ‘outsider’. The ‘outsider’ masked prince or samurai warrior as reformer and rejuvenator of society becomes the story of the ‘outsider’ seeking mere survival in society. And yet even in the latter scheme the ‘outsider’

must have, like in the 'traditional' action film, some redemptive quality in order to justify use of violence against ordered society and this redemptive quality more often than not is configured in the form of a superior ethical vision against a corrupt society. This remains a hallmark of the action film across its many mutations in the twentieth century.

And there is indeed within these mutations a variant of the 'outsider' that mediates the 'traditional' history of the action cinema in Asia with its modern form, and that is the figure of the Mafioso and the vigilante 'outsider' so closely connected to Mafia-type behaviour in cinematic lore. The genealogy of such figures would throw up contradictions at the heart of Capitalism that need to be queried precisely along the constructions of 'tradition' and the modern mapped against transitions from pre-modern peasant societies to modern industrial ones in Asia. Not only do these figures literally embody the transition of the Asian pre-modern into the modern as working or middle class descendants of pre-modern social groups but Asian cinema has time and again used such figures to query the ethical content of capitalist modernity, at once endorsing new forms of pleasures as 'progress' in terms of individual and aesthetic freedom, but also trying to figure out the correct ethical social dimension within which the shock of the new can be absorbed into history. If the paradisiacal visions of modern pleasures in early action cinema have increasingly given way to dystopic visions of society that is because of the capture of all pleasures by the contradiction of complete sensory freedom existing in a morally conservative society, precisely the fact that allows for the arrest of these sites of extreme pleasure by Capital in regressive mythic forms of mass entertainment and cultural propaganda.

And it is this intense marginalization of extreme pleasures from the centre of modern society that forces cinema to locate the 'real' pleasures of the modern, or the 'truth' of modern pleasures in the subaltern margins of society. Against the paradise of extreme pleasures opened up by sensory speculation, in the largest sense of the term, there remains middle class moral opprobrium and thus the sensory shock of paradise continues to be configured by subaltern bodies that embody such pleasures in the face of repression. Cinema was until recently used by this class to police its own boundaries against the excesses of the modern, something that increasingly gives way as this class disintegrates against the democratizing force of Capital and thus leads to a new round of 'subalternization' of the societal centre. Extreme action cinema codes the ethical contradictions thrown up by the disintegration of a well-ordered nuclear family-based middle class society into one marked by a confusion of the senses. We become plural in our senses, incapable of being bound by the diktats of class, religion or any form of institutional fiat. History too happens in the miscegenation of sensory categories of experience rather than according to the theorist's classification of society in ideologies. Here the Wadias running off to watch cinema by playing hookey from school join Truffaut and Tsai Ming-liang in their flights from certainties of a hierarchical and disciplinarian society.

The 'outsider' in contemporary extreme Asian cinema is one who participates in the heady sensory pleasures of the modern only to seek out an ethical manner in which pleasures can be obtained and enjoyed (**not necessarily for himself or herself**). As the Sergio Leone Westerns with Clint Eastwood show, such a pursuit is a pure abstraction, an exploration of the possibility

of socially envisioning the pursuit of extreme sensations in an ethical manner. The 'outsider' allows us to question the inevitability of ethical corruption in the pursuit of pleasures in society. The 'outsider' is impartial as merely a remover of psychic exploitation. S/he is neither on the side of tradition nor of the modern, neither on pleasure's side nor on asceticism's. The outsider only aims at opening up repression of the senses that has collected as a historical legacy in a psychoscape to sensory freedom and dignity. And here contemporary action cinemas reach back to the tradition of fantasy narratives that are marked by their emphasis on the material and material pleasures and the hero fighting iniquitous arrests of pleasure in search of material and ethical glory, a tradition of stories forged in the pre-modern past when most societies were literally on the move in search of the promised land of plenty and harmony; but above all for conditions for a just society. Asian action cinema in the twentieth century thus continuously delineates the quest for paradise in the nomadic heart of the modern, something that Western cinema has only recently begun to talk about at its own centre as opposed to the decades when it had banished such cinema to the margins of film production.