



Day Two, Session One
Presentation 2

Teaching Indian / Asian Cinema

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I would like to use this opportunity to talk about some of my new work, work that is not related to Telugu cinema directly, while discussing my course titled ‘Stars at Work’. This was a single credit PhD level course which attempted to table some key issues in Indian stardom. The proposition made by the course is that Indian and Asian Cinema contexts are not just incidental to understand cinema’s post-celluloid life. Asia may be the ideal location for posing these questions because a new set of problems, which are not familiar from theories of Hollywood cinema, are thrown at you face in such a glaring manner. This is not to say that Indian stardom is unique and requires a special theory. The question really is what do the careers of Indian stars have to say to theories of stardom?

‘Stars at Work’ proposes that stars index a larger problem that cinema poses in its post-celluloid phase but also in its vibrant non-Western careers. This was not meant to be a survey course outlining the histories of stardom. The central problem has been outlined by two scholars present in this room in slightly different ways. One is Ashish [Rajadhyaksha] in his work on Bollywoodization and the other is Madhava [Prasad] whose essay on ‘fan *bhakti*

and subaltern sovereignty' (2009) revises our understanding of stars and politics. As is usual, I am sure that both of them will disagree in what I have made of their arguments but nevertheless...

One of the key problems with a lot of film studies work that is happening today, very interesting work dealing with fascinating new materials, is that it restages the obvious as a major discovery. As a result it falls short of doing justice to the new materials/contexts. For example, the obvious point about the cinema is it tends to be 'excessive'. It has historically been a form which has *incited* excessive responses. Miriam Hansen's work (1991) is useful to illustrate this point. Cinephilia is one axis along which the excess can be traced. When we look at the history of the medium, a question we can ask of an individual text is what it might tell us about the excesses of a particular period, and their socio-political implications. Excess is not necessarily a sign of radical subversion. The political claims made on behalf of the cinema become less valuable or less interesting for film students than they were in the 90's when they were first proposed when we begin with the premise that the form tends to elicit excessive responses. Why else would a term like cinephilia come into circulation?

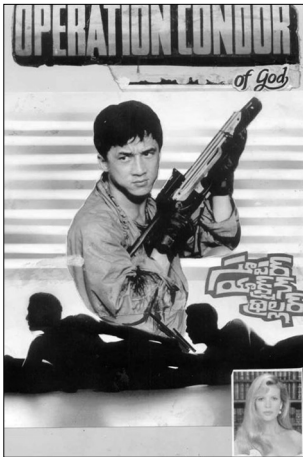
The second area of concern has to do with exhibition and distribution opening up incredible social and political possibilities. In *The Multiplex in India* written two non-Indian scholars Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill (2010) there is a surprisingly large section in the introduction outlining the substantial discussion in the Indian context on the social political and consequences of the arrival of cinema. For instance the question of caste and inclusion, whether the cinema had democratic possibilities, and so on. So the new arguments of the past decades are very much part of text books addressing undergraduate and graduate students. What new questions does exhibition/distribution throw up?

A third question emerges from Ashish Rajadhyaksha's work. We can call this the 'freakonomics' of cinema, or more accurately, the seemingly peculiar economic logic of the cinema as business/industry. The cinema in India is a loss making industry that has thrived for decades on end because of the underground or grey economies that it is part of. Sometimes, you can't understand what's happening textually unless you are aware of the economic forces at work. A body of fascinating work from the late 90's has drawn attention to this problem. Among others, young researchers at Sarai, Delhi, and some of them have gone out to do their M. Phils guided by our two friends here, Ranjani [Mazumdar] and Ira [Bhaskar] from J.N.U, have made valuable

contributions in this direction. However, material on piracy tends to stump film researchers. We often come across suggestions/claims that piracy is somehow subversive. Film students in India *ought* to be last people saying this because cinema has routinely witnessed so-called revenue leakages and in fact thrived in conditions of rather rampant illegality.

Stars, let me propose, are a point of entry into discussion of the excesses of cinema as well as its strange economics. As such, the question of whether or not stars are economically viable is by now a global concern. For instance Anita Elberse (2006) examines Hollywood stars and their economic worth: do they merely earn back their rent or do they do more? What happens to this history of ‘excesses’ and the economics of cinema as cinema itself becomes something else in the post-celuloid era? All of us routinely watch films on various devices rather than on the big screen and even in the cinema hall there is likely to be digital projection.

Going to celluloid proper and its very own sphere of circulation: here is a



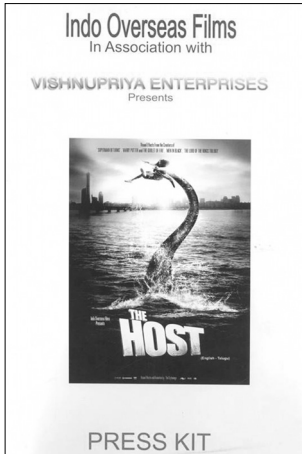
Indian poster for a Jackie Chan film

lobby card of a Jackie Chan film and this female star is Kim Basinger. They never worked together but in this lobby card, which is obviously a fake, they appear to. This kind of material serves as the backend, the always/already of the cinema in our context. There is illegality of sorts here, clear distortion of the film and evidence of *degeneration* of the economic value of cinema.

As films travel down the distribution chain, we notice the erosion of value even in the celluloid era. Further, neither Jackie Chan nor Kim Basinger has any control over the way their images are used. Hong Kong producers have no control

either. Recall Rajadhyaksha’s thesis on Indian cinema: there is a gap between high cultural visibility and low economic worth. What we can expect to see in a normal day in the life of cinema is evidence of precisely this gap.

Let me elaborate further using another example. *The Host* is a Korean blockbuster released in India in 2008. Some years ago we tracked this film as part of a project that we were doing. Notice the differences between the original publicity material used in the early stages of the publicity campaign in India and the final set of images. Within months of arrival of the film in India, before the film was even released—the film was transformed. *The Host* makes



A transformed poster of *The Host*

The Host (Bong Joon-ho, 2006)

During the course of its travels in India *The Host* became a standard B-grade creature film which is fully recognizable within the Hollywood paradigm, a poor imitation of *Jurassic Park* (1993) perhaps. In other words, the Korean blockbuster degenerates into an imitation of a Hollywood film.

As for piracy proper, the phenomenal circulation of Korean pop culture in parts of India is a direct consequence of piracy. I am using the work of Ranjani's student Neikolie Kuotsu (2010) here. He draws attention to how pirated DVDs that facilitated the spread of Korean pop culture in the North East India. So we have a huge presence of Korean popular culture in the North East and yet there was complete disaster when an attempt was made to introduce the Korean blockbuster in the theatrical exhibition circuits of India. Let me suggest that there is nothing subversive about the role played by piracy in the North East—this is just a day in the life of cinema all over India and, perhaps, other parts of Asia as well.



Korean Wave in North East India. Photo by Neikolie Kuotsu

The Asian contexts are particularly interesting because of the lack of control production centres of the region have on the way their commodities circulate and of course because of the rather lax implementation of copyright laws in most countries of the region. Although the North East Indian instance is very

context specific it is still possible to suggest that here too we notice the value-visibility mismatch: piracy returns zero revenue to Korean entertainment companies and yet, the Korean wave has undeniable socio-political and cultural consequences for the region.

Now against this background we notice the emergence of another economic model. After Rajadhyaksha we can call this the Bollywood model. Take the example of Shah Rukh Khan. His income from film is supposedly a very small proportion of his earnings from advertising, television, stage shows, cricket and so on. Clearly the star is part of a whole new economy of cinema in the post-celluloid era.

Now look at the obverse of it, a star who is an embodiment of a certain kind of a 'political' excess but, simultaneously, either incapable or unwilling to 'Bollywoodize' himself. And that is the star-politicians of the Southern India. My case in point is Rajnikanth who is not quite a politician but he has hit what we could call the glass ceiling of celluloid. Somebody who restricts himself to celluloid film can only go this far. Of course Rajnikanth's gone pretty far. But the interesting thing about Rajnikanth is that he has not made a transition to television. He does not often give interviews or appear on shows. Even when he does, he has nothing interesting to say! Rajnikanth is anything but 'telegenic' to use Anne Ciecko's phrase (2004). Technically speaking 'telegenesis' has to do with artificial insemination but I am using it in the sense that Ciecko uses the term to refer to televisual presence and to underscore the immobility of Rajnikanth across formats. So he is what Brian Gallagher (1997) would call a pure movie star (film work alone explains his popularity). Rajnikanth thus anchors the larger question of what the cinema is attempting to do or be at this moment in time.

Rajnikanth's alleged career in Japan allows us to compare and contrast other, non-Indian, non-Hollywood economic models and help us appreciate better the kind of problem that he is already grappling with. Japan is a very interesting case in contrast. Even from my limited understanding of Japanese cultural industries, it is possible to identify at least one important model for comparison. I will call this the 'Pokemon model' after the Japanese scholar Ichiya Nakamura. The model broadly is to have 'One property many formats'. Every year there is a summer Pokemon film release with new characters but film is a miniscule part of the big picture: Pokemon is also a game series, animation series on television, toys, cards and other merchandise and so on. These images give us some sense of what the animation scene is like in Japan. Here is a museum in Toei studio, Tokyo. This is not a store. This is the kind of



Museum in Toei Studio, Tokyo



Pokemon Train

merchandise that ‘one property’ like a Pokemon character can generate. Such is the size and visibility of the animation industry that we have a Pokemon train and Pokemon airplanes—for tourists and, possibly local fans as well. The season’s new releases are advertised all over the train. This is the kind of dispersal of a single set of properties possible in Japan. Film is but a small part of this scene.

What did Rajnikanth become in Japan, the land of Pokemon train and plane? As we all know, Rajnikanth become something of a sensation in Japan in the late 1990s thanks to *Muthu* (1995). We notice from the publicity of *Muthu* that Rajnikanth was a non-entity in Japan—obviously so because this was after all his first film to be released there. I interestingly, Rajnikanth did not even appear on the Japanese publicity material for *Muthu*. Instead, the entire campaign was focused on Meena, the female lead. *Muthu* went on to become one of the biggest hits in the art-house (mini theatre) circuit in Japan. After *Muthu* Rajnikanth’s face began to be shown in posters and he began to be used as a box office draw. However, no Indian film has had any degree of box office success in Japan since *Muthu*.



Muthu in Japan

Nevertheless, Rajnikanth’s success in Japan is often mobilized to present him as a really great star in the Indian context.

In spite of every attempt at Bollywoodization that is happening in the Indian context, in Japan Indian cinema got struck precisely in the same slot as Hong Kong, Korean and other Asian cinemas are getting stuck in India. So there seems to be a parallel development here. And today the miniscule presence of Indian cinema in Japan is all too clearly evident in this video store, Tsutaya, in

Tokyo. Seven floors of video, with acres of shelves and millions of discs and these are the only two rows that are dedicated to Indian cinema: art-house, NRI, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and every other kind included.



Tsutaya in Tokyo

Shah Rukh Khan too in the Japanese market suggests that there is no one solution to problems posed by unfamiliar markets.

Now for the generalization: if the cinema, especially Indian cinema, has always had a problem with realizing value in box office terms and has survived in spite of box office failure, what is the worth of a star? The history of stardom is a history of excess, at the performer end and the spectator end. Drawing on the notion of externalities that economic theorists use, the course concluded by suggesting that we might be at a stage when a new object of inquiry is staring us in the face. Joseph Stiglitz speaks of externalities as ‘unintended consequences’. Stars—or the cinema or cultural commodities in general for that matter—may or may not generate profits but they inevitably generate externalities, which range from grey market merchandise to political mobilizations. The thing to study then may well be the relationship between value and externalities. Madhava Prasad arrives at the problem from a very different perspective in his ‘fan *bhakti*’ essay. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Rajnikanth is his case in point. The challenge before Indian stars is not just to recover rent but to balance earnings and pure externalities, which cannot (yet) be monetized.

Thank You.