

Introduction. From Highbrow to Lowbrow: Studies of Indian B-grade cinema and beyond

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Cardboard skulls decorating the book of the dead's pink cover—the *Necronomicon*; intoxicated young ladies having a 'kitty party' then gang raping their male servant; secret agents 077 and 707 serving the nation; a shape-shifting monster's head rotates 180 degrees while tracing a doomed bride in red and the list of similar images is far from exhaustive. The above mentioned aesthetical and narrative cinematic devices just happen to come from a variety of Indian films—usually ascribed to the 'lower' cinematic cultures and labeled as exploitative, B-grade or even 'trash' cinema. Often despised and ridiculed by academicians, critics, and the big budget film industries while at the same time enjoying vast popularity in smaller urban centers and towns, these Indian low budget films co-exist with Bollywood and other major industries—yet work by their own sets of rules and agendas. These films remain a part of the national as well as global film consumption, even if slightly overshadowed by the blockbuster or Arthouse cinemas. Despite the changing trends in India's film productions and aesthetics, the low budget cinema retains its cult status throughout the country—and this is most evident while taking a stroll down the Grant Road in Mumbai, lined up with numerous video stalls and offering enormous amounts of cheaply produced '3 films in 1' type of DVDs: the genre selection ranging from action (fight) to horror; from mythological to soft-core sex films.

The existence and popularity of these films raise several questions: What is the place of low budget and B-grade films in the broader discussions on Indian cinema? What do these films tell us about the industry and spectatorship? What is their message?

It is the primary task for this collection of articles to tackle these issues and to investigate the complex relationship between low budget cinema and the very idea of 'convention'. For if we consider all these films to be a certain kind of a *paracinema*, then, according to Jeffrey Sconce, this cinema has a unique aspiration to rise to the status of 'counter-cinema' (Sconce 1995, 374). Furthermore, as Sconce observes,

'paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic "art" aggressively attacking the established canon of "quality" cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art' (ibid.). Although the quotation by Sconce was first used to define American low budget and *eurotrash* cinemas (which by no means are far more 'aggressive' than the Indian paracinematic forms) it is still important to investigate how the usage of imitation, parody, pastiche and other postmodern strategies—so popular in the Indian low budget cinema—work within the context of Indian cinematic art cultures in transgressing and subverting the existing official normativities as well as what other functions these strategies perform.

The majority of articles in this *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* issue were collected after the conference 'The Body in the Cinemas of South Asia', held at the Vilnius University Centre of Oriental Studies and co-organized by Dr. Valentina Vitali (University of East London) and Dr. Deimantas Valančiūnas (Vilnius University).¹ The conference, which gathered Indian film scholars and film enthusiasts from 11 countries, was a significant event for two main reasons. Firstly, it was the first academic event of this kind both in Lithuania and in the region. It created a platform for scholars from Eastern Europe as well as other countries to bridge their academic interest and research in the field of South Asian film studies. Secondly, this conference was an attempt to encapsulate the different approaches in the studies of South Asian film, including not just the research in the mainstream cinema but also in some of the most diverse and often neglected film genres and productions, such as horror, exploitation and B-grade.

The success of bridging two sometimes completely separated industries was perhaps the result of the chosen thematic focus—the signifier of the 'body' and its many uses (and misuses) in films. The construction, function and performance of the body on the screen have always been the object of film studies. Rarely, however, has the subject been given full and direct consideration as a central dimension of South Asian cinemas. Therefore, the conference proposed a variety of ways to investigate the cultural, ideological and representational construction of the body in South Asian cinemas, paying close attention to the discourses of gender, sexuality and identity. The body on the screen becomes a platform to negotiate, transgress and subvert a number of tensions, fears and/ or desires—transforming the private into public and the personal into national.

In a similar way, this collection of articles puts a strong emphasis on the signifier of the body in Indian cinema, but also looks at its broader functionality, beyond the established canon of the commercial Indian cinema industries and venturing into the 'lowest' layers of the cinema—its B-grade circles.

¹ More on the conference and the detailed programme: <http://bodyinsouthasiancinema.wordpress.com>

The majority of papers presented at the conference deal with the Hindi cinema. This is not surprising—the spread and consumption of Hindi films is undeniably global. Hindi films were also a major cinema production that had been imported and circulated in the former Soviet Union countries—Lithuania (or, for that matter, Poland) being of no exception. Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a growing amount of academic research and monographs concerning mainstream Hindi cinema. Yet, while there remains a lack of substantive research on regional cinemas and, for that matter, on the smaller sections of Hindi cinema (in the low budget or B-grade circles), there has been more and more attempts by established Indian film scholars to look beyond the umbrella term of ‘Bollywood’ and to search for alternative approaches to the study of the variety of forms in the Hindi cinema—one of which is the recent collection of articles *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood. The Many Forms of Hindi Cinema* (Dwyer, Pinto 2011).

This *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* issue is yet another modest attempt to contribute to the field.

The present *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* volume also concentrates on the Hindi cinema—with the exception of the article ‘The Politics around “B-Grade” Cinema in Bengal: Re-viewing Popular Bengali Film Culture in the 1980s–1990s’ by Anugyan Nag and Spandan Bhattacharya, which is an excursion into the Bengali cinema industry and it is here where this volume begins.

Nag and Bhattacharya take a fresh and challenging look at the Bengali cinema production of the 1980s and the early 1990s, which, undeservedly, is often presented in the various media as being of ‘low quality’ and ‘bad taste’. The authors investigate the social and economic conditions of the Bengali cinema in the abovementioned period, taking into consideration both the declining spectatorship of the upper class *bhadraloks* and the formations of new popular discourses in cinema. Their discussion on the concept of the B-grade cinema and new aesthetic and language-related discourses in the context of Bengali cinematic culture is a fruitful attempt to establish certain links between styles, genres, audience, reception and the notions of the popular and mainstream.

Action (or fight) films constitute an ample part of many B-grade film productions. Surprisingly, other than the abundant research concerning the Amitabh Bacchan persona and the *Angry young man* type of films of the 1970s, there has been little research done on the variety of action, fight and stunt films of Hindi cinema. The pioneering work in this field is undoubtedly credited to Valentina Vitali (2008) and the next article in this collection is Krzysztof Lipka-Chudzik’s contribution to the topic—‘Bodies, Bollywood and Bond. The evolving image of secret agents in Hindi spy thrillers inspired by the 007 franchise’. This article is an impressive historiographic account of the development

of the specific James Bond influenced movie genre in India. From the action film *Farz* (1967) to *Agent Vinod* (2012) the author traces the significant thematic and aesthetic changes in the formation and development of the Hindi Bond films. Drawing parallels with the original James Bond franchise films, the author investigates the uniqueness of Indian Bond films, its pastiche forms and historical evolution in terms of the subject-matter and the construction of the male body.

The exploitation and B-grade cinema is inseparable from the horror film genre, which is still largely neglected in the academic Indian film studies, with only occasional and somewhat fragmented attention. Therefore, three articles in this volume by the authors Deimantas Valančiūnas, Mithuraaj Dhusiya and Aditi Sen explore this terrain in Indian cinema.

Deimantas Valančiūnas' article 'Indian Horror: the Western monstrosity and the fears of the nation in the Ramsay Brothers' *Bandh Darwaza*' researches the film *Bandh Darwaza* (1990) by the pioneers and the best known film-making family in Indian horror—the Ramsay brothers. By employing a post-colonial reading of the film, the author draws attention to the Western gothic imagery used in the film. In the article Valančiūnas proposes the idea that *Bandh Darwaza*, which was created just before the economic liberalization in 1991, appears as an embodiment of the anxiety and fears related to the forthcoming changes this liberalization supposedly could bring about. Connecting the economic liberalization and the inevitable Western intervention into the sacred domain of 'Indianness', protected by the Indian nationalism, the film transforms the phobia of the unknown into a Dracula, the deformed monster of the Western classical horror tradition.

Horror cinema as a certain site to explore socio-political tensions is also the core idea of the article 'Shape Shifting Masculinities: Accounts of maleness in Indian man-to-animal transformation horror films' by Mithuraaj Dhusiya. The author researches the topic of shape-shifting and man-to-animal transformations in two films, belonging to different Indian film industries—a well known Hindi film *Jaani Dushman* (1979) and *Punnami Naagu* (1980) made in Telugu language. While female to animal transformations was a commonly deployed motif in the fantasy films of the 1980s (usually employing the topic of female transformation into snakes, e.g. *Nagina* (1986)), there is still little scholarship on male-to-animal transformations. Dhusiya investigates how the theme of bodily transformation correlates with the discourses of gender and masculine subjectivities, related to the broader socio-historical transformations in India—namely, how the films function as a site of critique on the politics of the National Emergency or the caste-based politics.

Aditi Sen in her article "'I Wasn't Born With Enough Middle Fingers": How low-budget horror films defy sexual morality and heteronormativity in Bollywood'

ventures even further beyond the established B-grade horror traditions of the Ramsay brothers to the bottom of India's horror production, investigating the uncategorized low (or, perhaps, 'no') budget films by such directors as Kanti Shah, Harinam Singh etc. In her witty and pioneering research Aditi Sen explains, how certain narrative and visual strategies employed by these low budget horror films subvert conventional Bollywood norms and aesthetics as well as interrogates the very idea of normativity. These films, according to the author, open up the space for dialogue that the mainstream cinema has totally neglected—particularly, in the areas of incest, female lust, the othering of male sexuality, and transgendered identities.

The last two articles in this collection deal with mainstream Bollywood, but choose to focus on various strategies deployed in the films, which subvert and transgress the conventional approach to the female body and sexuality.

Sabrina Ciolfi in her article 'Demure Heroines Expressing Sexual Desire: Hints of traditional motifs in popular Hindi cinema', researches a number of popular Hindi films released between the 1990s and early 2000s, belonging to a certain subgenre of Hindi cinema—the family drama, usually concerned with the concept of a joint-family as an embodiment of Hindu values and traditions. The author investigates how films construct the leading female characters as chaste and virtuous women while at the same time looking for the ways to perform their eroticism and sexual desires, usually by deploying certain tactics and strategies of erotic depictions, hints and motifs found in the classical Sanskrit literature and aesthetics.

Ravneet Kaur, on the other hand, in her article 'Framing the Body and the Body of Frame: Item songs in popular Hindi cinema' investigates those famous item songs—a specific film structural component of the song/ dance sequences in Hindi films. In the past few years there has been much scholarship produced for the analysis of the songs and dances in Hindi films (e.g. Gopal, Moorti 2008; Morcom 2013); however, research dealing exclusively with item songs is quite rare. Therefore, Ravneet Kaur in her article proceeds with a thorough cinematic investigation of the structural composition of the item song. The author analyses item songs using the concept of the 'frame' and paying great attention to the various cinematographic aspects of the item songs (camera positions, editing), relating them to problematic debates on gender, culture and consumption.

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