
Infrastructures and Archives of the B-circuit

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Disregarded, disreputable, provincial, seedy, illicit, cheap, scrap, or just plain trash: there are many ways to describe the forms of screen culture that populate this issue of *BioScope*. From Bhojpuri action cinema to film paraphernalia sold by the kilogram by the scrap-merchant; from 1980s Malayalam soft-porn to “cracked” games consoles; these forms of screen culture inhabit a netherworld of disregard, disrespect, and, often, discontent. They are produced and circulated through intersecting infrastructures of illegitimacy and inhabit spaces and forms peripheral to the mainstream, the national, the metropolis, and film and media scholarship. Nonetheless, they engage audiences across South Asia, either through their localized appeal, their wide accessibility, their easy circulation, or the notoriety of their illicit forms. And they have now appeared in the scholarly limelight too. This issue of *BioScope* brings together a series of articles that illustrate the persistence, relevance, and appeal of this broad field of screen culture.

There is no agreed terminology by which to address these various forms of degraded media artifacts. The five articles dealing with the cinema in this issue variously speak of low-budget cinema, of paracinema, provincial cinema, B-films, C- and D-circuits, soft-porn, and morning shows, and even trash and scrap. Such terms aim to capture low-budget film production practices, non-metropolitan audiences, single-screen cinema halls, amateur and aficionado engagements, make-shift practices of making and screening, non-standardized industrial practices of all sorts, including illegal or illicit ones, pornography, and so on. Significant precursors to the work presented here (in particular, Singh, 2008; Srinivas, 2003) use adjacent but different terminologies with regard to the sorts of “circuits” in which such films and media artifacts circulate. The idea of the B-circuit comes from modes of film distribution in India that differentiate between metropolitan areas and their hinterlands, as well as between different classes of cinema halls. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, different distribution arrangements have generated different terminologies, for example, using the notion of the “run” that also appears in India, Iran, and elsewhere. The least respectable or desirable products are on show in cinema halls where films appear on their second or even third “run” through a territory. Current transitions away from celluloid have loosened the ways such terminology describes actual practices of production, distribution, and viewing

in particular places. This has also made them available outside the particularities of distribution arrangements, including in academic work. More significant than the consistency with which this terminology is applied, is how the notion of the “run” and the “circuit” alert us to the networks, routes, and sites through which things move and intersect, foregrounding their connectivity and relations.

What is the best way of describing the low-budget, peripheral, disregarded, unrespectable modes of filmmaking and viewing in South Asia? Retaining the notion of the “B” in both its Indian articulation as a circuit and the historical American form of the “B movie,” the *B-circuit* of screen culture under discussion in this issue of *BioScope* refers to an infrastructure for circulating the images, sounds, ideas, and objects associated with less than respectable, degraded, “modified,” and low-budget screen media, that can include bits of celluloid porn as well as modified games consoles. It is of questionable legality, marked by improvisation, often obsolete in other circuits, peripheral and provincial compared to what circulates in A-circuits. It is also now ripe for re-appropriation into new circuits of meaning and display.

The articles gathered here lay out in great empirical detail the lives and modes of work of those who inhabit such B-circuits, as filmmakers, audiences, archivists, artists, salesmen, and consumers. They also provide a closer look at the narratives, the aesthetics and the sounds of such B-circuit media. This is particularly significant given the relative paucity of engaged scholarly attention to these cultural forms. All articles respond in different ways to the desire to recuperate something that appears to remain unseen, unstudied, or unloved given the broad contexts of disdain, disapproval, hostility, and suspicion of the screen culture of the B-circuit, from a generalized contempt to particular modes of “cinophobia” (Ahmad, 2014; Vasudevan, 1995).

Akshaya Kumar’s detailed narrative and aesthetic analysis of contemporary Bhojpuri action cinema highlight how a markedly local and rural form exists in continuous conversation with its Hindi A-circuit equivalents, thereby destabilizing how we might understand the relationships not only between A- and B-circuits, but also those among folk forms, cinema, and provincial or regional media cultures. Similarly, the low-budget nature of the Bhojpuri cinema shows great similarities, and in places direct interaction, with similar low-budget practices in Hindi and Malayalam cinema, discussed by Subba and Mini, respectively. It is valuable to explore these related sites and modes of filmmaking jointly, as their apparent singularity of form and peculiarity of production dissipate when compared to similar modes of B-circuit films in different places across the South Asian region. Not only does this open up a space for comparative work, it also illustrates the wider critical significance of such a vast terrain of screen culture that does not appear to “play by the book.”

The article on gaming cultures in the bazaars of Delhi by Maitrayee Dekka illustrates how a range of screen-based arts and entertainment share the infrastructures that facilitate the making and viewing of B-circuit cinema. The bazaar constitutes one of the intersections of the infrastructures by which pirated films, the modified games consoles that Dekka terms “gray products,” as well as pornography and regional music CDs encounter a range of consumers via the medium of salesmen–distributor–producers. The bazaar, the provincial town, the shooting spot, and the single-screen theater are all part of the material and social infrastructures by which B-circuit materials are produced and circulated.

This is not a static terrain, however. With the changing fate of the single-screen theater and transitions to digital making, viewing, and selling, the B-circuit is as much in flux as more respectable forms of screen culture. The dissolution of the institution of the morning show across South Asia is a telltale sign of the changes to this field of media culture. Changing modes of production, financing, exhibition, distribution, copying, and consumption have produced new relationships between what we may term “A” grade products and its many others. All the articles collected here recount in some manner the huge shifts that have occurred with the rise of the internet as a part of the infrastructure of the B-circuit. It is the intersection between these changes in technology and the dissolution of older screen cultures that Ashim Ahluwalia reflects upon in an interview with Ranjani Mazumdar reproduced here. His award-winning film *Miss Lovely* (2012) explores the worlds of 1980s sex-horror cinema made in Bombay and the interview frames the demise of this world as one that is intrinsically linked to economic and technological transformations.

Contrary to expectation, perhaps, these structural changes have also generated new B-circuit media forms: the games consoles that once were the envy of well-heeled youngsters are now within reach of a much broader constituency who can afford these elsewhere obsolete devices. Similarly, the shifting balance between Hindi and Bhojpuri cinema in the single-screen theaters of the Bhojpuri-speaking region has generated particular aesthetic and narrative transitions within the popular Bhojpuri cinema. Rather than the end of the B-circuit, then, there are concrete indications of new and reconstituted forms of screen culture that emerge out of these much wider transitions. With regard to the game consoles she discusses, Dekka notes that creative intervention in, and improvisation around, technologies that elsewhere have ceased to be desirable or relevant, can revive or modify dead technology to return to life as “zombie media” (Deka). Similarly, Timothy P.A. Cooper discusses Guddu Khan’s expansive collection of Pakistani film paraphernalia, bought and rescued by this amateur archivist when such artifacts threatened to become literal trash or scrap (*raddi*). With the transition of his collections onto the internet, Guddu Khan has produced an online archive that is in equal measures expansive and idiosyncratic. Darshana Mini’s article about the “lingering ghostly presence of a recently deceased film form,” namely Malayalam soft-porn, similarly bespeaks the zombie forms of the B-circuit, with *thundu* or cut-pieces of such porn reappearing in a range of different sites, as is also intimated by Ahluwalia. Guddu Khan, Dekka’s computer game merchants and Mini’s deceased films operate within the realm that Sudhir Mahadevan describes as the “obviation of obsolence” (2010), where what is destined to be *raddi* is repurposed and re-circulated. Such a lack of obsolescence bespeaks the B-circuit, in which little is permanently lost, and lots remains in motion. New forms of screen culture emerge, while old forms linger and are adapted.

The lingering of forms past lends itself to various modes of reclamation, some of which are commercial, archival, artistic, and scholarly, but most of which are in some manner nostalgic. It is perhaps not surprising that B-circuit forms of screen culture which were once deemed dangerously distracting, corrupting, or infantilizing, have, with the passage of time and the appearance of newer disturbances, become ripe for reclamation. What was once “scrap” can now be exhibited in galleries and art festivals, such as when Guddu Khan’s diligently conserved personal archives of film

paraphernalia find their way into the Alliance Française in Karachi or the “bits” used by Ahluwalia in *Miss Lovely* are screened in Cannes. Such reclamations can be thought of as a form of cultural “modding,” the term used by Deka to describe the ways in which bazaar traders modify old consoles to be able to play new games. Modding reclaims forms and makes them reach out into new spaces, living parallel lives among new constituencies. However, such new leases of life are premised on a fundamental transformation, a modification of the form or its context, which then makes them safe for such reclamation, as art, or by cinephiles, as archival material or other, more respectable, forms. As Mini notes, the labeling of Malayalam soft porn with “mallu aunty” tags online derives from a “nostalgic impulse,” “for these phrases and figures belong to the weathered era of celluloid.” The interest in such fading cinema cultures by artists such as Priyaranjan Lal, discussed by Mini, and by filmmakers such as Ashim Ahluwalia, illustrates the new forms of work that can now be brought to bear on these remnants of B-circuit screen culture.

Alongside the artists and cultural institutions, there has also been a renewed scholarly interest, of which this issue of *BioScope* is evidence. Both Mini and Subba suggest that the modes of filmmaking they attend to are “swept under the carpet” by film history. Yet both belong to a generation of scholars who are exploring exactly these infrastructures, modes of production, and texts, alongside the artists, filmmakers, and archivist that are pursuing such fields. They are shaping the scholarly engagement with these modes of cinema. The emergence of new work also raises the question whether the current interest in the B-circuit or low-budget cinema says something about the way its actual “threat” or danger has been neutralized. Does their modification allow a nostalgic sympathy, a safe cinephilia, and perhaps a knowing indulgence of forms that now appear at a comfortable temporal or geographic distance? And, perhaps more acutely, what are those screen cultures that remain off limits to scholarship due to their provincial invisibility, their circulations in spaces of disrespectability or scholarly intractability, their apparent lack of value, culturally and conceptually? If anything, the articles gathered in this issue of *BioScope* will push us to consider what those spaces of scholarly intractability are and where the knife of critical engagement slides too smoothly through the terrain of the apparently outrageous.

The books reviewed in this issue attest to a critical evaluative moment within Indian screen studies. It is a sign of the robust nature of the field that scholars are extending and pushing back against some of the foundational debates in Indian film historiography. Corey Creekmur highlights this in his review of Rosie Thomas’ *Bombay before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*. Thomas is centrally concerned with alternative histories and parallel archives of Indian cinema. Her discussions of Arabian Nights fantasy films, stunt films, and archives of 1950s B-movies challenge us to confront the hierarchies of taste evident even within studies of the “popular.” Aarti Wani’s *The Fantasy of Modernity: Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema in the 1950s* asks us to revisit the 1950s through the analytic of the city and utopic visions of romance. In her review, Sangita Gopal is particularly intrigued by the argument that our assumptions about the oppressive power of the Hindi cinema’s patriarchal family might be based on a limited archive of films and hence driven by the exceptional. Manishita Dass’ *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India* returns to traditionally privileged early genres such as the mythological and the social film but

uses print culture and public sphere debates to investigate how categories such good and bad cinema emerged in the first place. All three books, therefore, narrate tensions around the boundaries of popular cinema, constructions of the mass spectator, and what has been left out of the histories we have forged so far.

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