
Editorial

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Circulation, Adaptation, and Assemblage in Media History

In this issue of *BioScope*, our contributors track a dynamic in the way media production is assembled and adapted as it circulates among media forms and practices across and at the edge of different circuits and territories, combining the recording of actuality and staged material; transiting between folk forms, cinematic genres, and postcinematic genres; and shifting registers of public and political life. The media forms range from the key theatrical melodramas of Boucicault in the circuit between Australia, the Far East, and India, involving theatrical troupes and textual travel; a key documentary work of the Bangladeshi imaginary, *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom), rendered as an absorbing detective story about cinematic assemblage and public memory; so-called Manbhum videos, whose circulation introduced new cultural circuits and expressive possibilities for marginal languages, idioms, and social experiences in and at the edge of Bengal; and religious devotional films whose avowedly “possessed” spectator may be understood in the movement of sensory experience between folk and cinematic settings and through gender politics.

Kathryn Hansen’s scholarship in the field of folk and urban theatre histories has provided a rich ground to think about longer histories of cultural circulation and adaptation across media (Hansen, 1997, 2011). In this article, she provides a vivid account of cultural flows in empire and contributes to the excavation of genre categories in the South Asian context. She explores the impact of melodrama as a particular narrative, performative, and presentational aesthetic as it entered local circuits and reshaped existing forms. Hansen tracks the exhibition histories of Boucicault’s play *The Colleen Bawn*, and Kaikhushro Kabra’s Parsi theatre adaptation of it, *Bholee Jaan*. She undertakes a meticulous comparison of the two plays and makes an observation shared by other scholars using the melodrama category, especially in cinema, that is, melodrama is not only defined by the presence of music, whose theatrical use predates its arrival as a modern theatrical form, but also relates to a sensational assembling of plot, incident, and action. In the process, the article presents a stimulating description of how such sensational effects are deployed in the genre of the social. This emerges as a privileged genre with a rich conceptual history, capturing complex social imaginaries in the subcontinent’s encounter with modern transformation. The article goes on to outline

the wealth of productions, which took place within this theatrical repertoire, and its connections with new technological forms such as the cinema.

The film *Muktir Gaan* (Tareque and Catherine Masud, 1995) has acquired canonical status among narratives of the making of the Bangladeshi nation. The film seeks to render the experience of the 1971 War of Independence through the movement of a troupe of singers, but, in fact, assembles material of different types, including a fictional staging and stretching of the musicians' presence across the duration of the war. It draws upon footage shot by Lear Levin, a filmmaker from the United States, who had been involved in filming the war at the time. Levin does not try to conceal the fact that the footage he shot was in some instances also constructed, a practice he argues to be perfectly legitimate to the profession of the documentarist who seeks to represent authentic experience. Naeem Mohaiemen carefully unpacks the braiding of film material, drawing on interviews and testimony and the observation of discrepancies. To follow Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan (Keenan & Weizman, 2012; Weizman, 2014), Mohaiemen's method is akin to forensic architecture and aesthetics. He disaggregates the film, showing how it is composed of recordings taken at different times and staged happenings, including scenes staged by the Masuds, and invites us to participate in its assembly as a knowledgeable public that can still invest in the film's affective truth. In contrast, he observes that the nationalist public needed to believe that the film shows what actually happened and the extraordinary reluctance on the part of viewers to accept that the film contains any form of "staging." While such a perspective could perhaps be explained in 1995 because audiences had been denied images of the war because of censorship, the current demand that the war crimes of 1971 should be punished now places an extra, evidentiary demand on film material. There is perhaps a significant political gap here between a reasoned forensic analysis and exposition and the emotional logic of nationalist self-recovery. This is an increasingly assertive phenomenon that today poses a great challenge to the very possibilities of civil public and political discourse in the subcontinent.

Logics of assemblage and circulation acquire a different momentum and dispersed existence when we move from theatre and celluloid into digital practices. Madhuja Mukherjee argues that such shifts warrant a different and expanded account of what the cinema is and what it could be. This is a question which contributes to a growing research agenda, tracking digital film practice in new locations for feature filmmaking. Mukherjee makes the point that such initiatives also complicate issues of identity and territoriality, bringing new languages and spaces into view. Thus, the Manbhum video opens out what it means to inhabit and lie at the edges of the territory known as Bengal, bringing into play an expressivity of marginalized languages, cultural idioms, and landscapes. Mukherjee points out that this is not entirely a new territory: filmmakers such as Ritwik Ghatak and Tapan Sinha drew some of these marginalized practices into dialogic exchange with the dominant cultural forms of Bengali and Hindi. She also shows how we have to think of a new register of intermediality in exploring such works, drawing as they do on digital cameras and file transfer, folk forms and idioms, television aesthetics, and amateur filmmaking with shaky composition and low resolution. She argues that these composite forms combine to unsettle mainstream conventions. This may be done quite consciously, with folk and mythological entities commenting on modern politics and catastrophes, referring to digital

technology, and assuming the position of the news broadcaster. There is a considerable invention here in a form which alters the coordinates of media experience, its distribution, and reach. Whether the emergence of such media forms needs to be emplotted within a discourse of expanded cinema needs further reflection, but there is no doubt that it provides a new horizon for the cultural and political articulation of media publics.

Folk and ritual forms as a mode of sensory experience are also key to Uma Bhrugubanda's careful rendering of the appeal of the goddess film for women audiences. Bhrugubanda's argument is also about particular circuits and intersections between the sensate forms of folk and ritual performance captured in registers of sound and embodied devotional engagement and their transfer to the domain of film experience. She asserts the sustained "connection" between the two registers, insisting that cinema is neither simply a vehicle for the preservation and dissemination of the traditional nor is it entirely a displacement of it, repurposing recognizable forms of devotion and worship for the secularized politics of fan devotion. The latter, in SV Srinivas' (2006) argument, is a devotion which is always politically conditional on the star recognizing the rights of the fan. Returning our focus to the specificity of religious engagement, Bhrugubanda urges that such an experience is a distinctive register of the political, in the way the "possessed" female spectator responds to the goddess in her disruption of patriarchal rule. Apart from amplifying and diversifying what the cinema offers to the life of politics, Bhrugubanda draws our attention to the relation amongst different aesthetic, performative, and perceptual contexts. Following Talal Asad (2003), she argues that folk and religious experiences constitute a "habitus" defined by "embodied aptitudes...the self-developable means by which the subject achieves a range of human objects." Such a habitus may be transferred by filmmakers and spectators from folk performance into the cinema. Her ethnography shows how this works in the bid to reproduce the particular rhythmic intensities of folk drummers and the production of religious effigies and shrines in the space of the cinema. Such assemblages offer the possibilities of transportation of selves between cultural forms and spaces, complicating distinctions amongst the religious and the political, folk participation, and spectatorial distance.

In our archive section for this issue, we feature Ramesh Kumar's analysis of the fire which destroyed an important cache of nitrate films at the National Film Archives of India early this century. Kumar diagnoses the significance of this moment in terms of genuine loss and governmental neglect, including the possibilities of using safer acetate stock. But he also puts the loss in perspective, and how a fetishistic discourse has developed around nitrate, declaring its demise to be also that of the cinema. Such arguments are at once technologically regressive but can also function strategically to support heritage policies for film preservation. While noting the validity of preserving the various forms and aesthetic particularity of cinema's material existence, Kumar goes on to an exposition of the diverse ways the cinema is being archived. Here he refers to the developing focus on private collections, internet uploads of fans, users, and researchers, and how this opens up a rich terrain of historiography.

With this issue, *BioScope* presents its inaugural book reviews section. We are pleased to showcase three important books that are poised to alter the conversation on film historiography, materiality and circulation. Ashish Rajadhyaksha discusses Nitin

Govil's telescopic and dizzying study of a century of cinematic dialogue located between Bombay and Hollywood. From its very title, we can tell that *Orienting Hollywood* takes up the challenge of "provincializing Europe" and is committed to reorienting the unidirectional history of rhetoric and material influence that has dominated the story of Bombay's relationship with Los Angeles. Brian Larkin locates Sudhir Mahadevan's monograph, *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India* (2015), within the complex field of interdisciplinary interests in media and materiality. Larkin provides a nuanced survey of existing approaches to the study of technology and demonstrates how Mahadevan's book brings vital new insights through his archival excavation of intermediality, an insistence on local specificity, and an acute understanding of transnational traffic. Larkin's discussion of the "porosity of media" stands out as a striking image for thinking through intermediality. If Nitin Govil asks us to look at the cultural exchanges *between* two film industries and economies, Sudhir Mahadevan shows us how to look *across* media forms if we are to better grasp the meaning of cinema. We round up this section with a review of Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight's edited anthology, *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (2015). In her thoughtful review, Bindu Menon characterizes the volume as a dynamic response to the conundrum of a missing historical figure – "the phantasmatic woman in the film archive." Each essay picks up the challenge of archival absence and illegibility from a particular geocultural context to collectively create an inspiring manual for how we can expand the ambit of transnational film historiography if we deploy a feminist lens.

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