Chapter 7

Postmodern Cinema of Seduction: Subaltern/Folk-Inspired Hindi Film Song and Dance, and the Art of Deferral and Play

Reena Dube
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

If there is one phrase that has been used most often by Western audiences for popular Indian cinema, it is the phrase “musicals.” The description gestures both at the fixation of Indian cinema on an earlier stage of cinematic evolution and the simple and uncomplicated pleasure derived by the audience from popular Hindi films that have an audience all over the world. This essay examines Hindi film “song and dance” spectacles as the art of deferment in the postmodern cinema of seduction, a notion derived from the work of Jean Baudrillard and the insights of Freud-Lacan-Zizek and Baudrillard himself on deferral and seduction. This chapter makes this claim not as an overarching theoretical nomenclature for all song and dance sequences in Hindi films. Instead the author argues for the primacy of the art of deferment and play in a postmodern cinema of seduction within the limited scope of her reading of a North Indian subaltern/folk-inspired song and dance Hindi film, Amol Palekar and Sandhya Gokhale directed Paheli (Riddle, 2005).
INTRODUCTION

If there is one phrase that has been used most often by Western audiences for popular Indian cinema, it is the phrase “musicals.” The description gestures both at the fixation of Indian cinema on an earlier stage of cinematic evolution (the 1940’s and 50’s by Western standards) and the simple and uncomplicated pleasure derived by the audience of the song and dance routines from popular Hindi films that have an audience all over the world.¹ It is not only the ever expanding Indian diaspora, but a significant proportion of non-Indians who are fascinated by the exotic, larger than life qualities inherent in the song and dance routines in Hindi films. The lavish sets, production value, and extravagant costumes have inspired stars like Madonna, Shakira and Britney Spears to incorporate the Bollywood style of dance or music into their film soundtrack, songs, videos and stage shows. ² Despite objections by commentators: they point to the fact that Hollywood musicals are about singing and dancing while in Hindi films the song and dance are a vital element of the narrative: the labeling of Hindi popular films that contain song and dance as musicals persists.³

An interesting aspect of this appellation is that it is not only used by Hollywood actors when they express their desire to work in the world’s largest and most prolific film industry⁴, it is a preferred self-description of Indian filmmakers and audiences themselves, even when they refer to in a disparaging way!⁵ For instance one common opinion is that in Bollywood movies, people break into song, “often in picturesque far-flung locations, apropos of nothing – a style that may bemuse a Western audience, but one that helps to set Indian cinema apart” (Hundred Years of Indian Cinema, 2013). What is apparent is that this appellation is both a burden as well as a mark of distinction. Witness the comment of noted Jananpith award-winning actor, director, playwright and ex-Chairman of the National Film Institute of India, Girish Karnad, who believes that Indian cinema has successfully warded off Hollywood’s invasion because of its song and dance tradition:

*If we would have made films like Satyajit Ray, continued without song and dance, we would have been swallowed up by Hollywood by now. Italian cinema is gone, Japanese cinema is gone, and even French can’t compete with Hollywood. We don’t have to worry. Our songs and dancers have protected us. So, why should we give up our strength?* (Karnad, 2013).⁶

Karnad’s description of the song and dance as “protection” and “strength” of Indian cinema that has been a bulwark against absorption in the maw of global Hollywood is illustrative of a contemporary re-habilitation of the function of song and dance for/in Indian cinema. The re-estimation has led Lalitha Gopalan to look at this unnecessary intrusion, amongst others, as the hallmark of a post-colonial
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