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## INDIAN CINEMA: A HUNDRED YEARS, A HUNDRED CINEMAS

### INTRODUCTION

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Indian Cinema has overwhelmingly been thought and written of as the sum of its stars, songs, and studios, which come together on-screen in melodramas about life and death, love and marriage. For this special issue of *Wide Screen*, we invited papers that prospect the cinematic terrain beyond these big-budget, mass-audience, song-and-dance spectacles. Contributors were invited to reflect on the many films, filmmakers and filmgoers that have participated in (and perhaps even thrived outside) what we call ‘Indian cinema.’ This issue focuses on moving images in excess of the ‘formula’ film: special-effects driven devotionals, horror films, wrestling pictures and revenge thrillers, rape dramas and sex-ed films. Equally, contributors focus on the material infrastructures through which India’s popular cinemas have been made and moved: activities of production, circuits of distribution, sites of exhibition, and forms of consumption. The special issue before you includes studies of visceral genre pictures and glossy film advertising, interviews with dubbing artists and documentary filmmakers. This is not simply an attempt to fill in a small blank in Indian film history, but to radically revise our understanding of the global culture industry (mis?)recognized as Bollywood, and critically expand our understanding of the diverse practices, pleasures, and publics that have constituted ‘cinema’ in the subcontinent over the past century.

Academic interest in Indian popular cinema was itself first motivated by the desire to reclaim a derogated film aesthetic: melodrama, which critics had long excoriated as unrealistic, and which the Indian state had attempted to supersede with a parallel realist cinema. Early scholarly writing demonstrated not only that Bombay

cinema's stigmatized song-and-dance aesthetic derived from respected performance traditions in the subcontinent (Kapur 1987, Rajadhyaksha 1987), but that its narratives of love, marriage, and family ritual foster pathos and pleasure in the viewer by means too sophisticated to be dismissed as brainwashing or bad taste (Thomas 1985, Vasudevan 1989). Bombay cinema has since proven grist for countless projects illuminating the ways in which the "melodramatic mode" hails the "melodramatic public" (Vasudevan 2010), either through nation-building narratives (Chakravarty 1993, Prasad 1998, Bhattacharya 2012) or through representations of mass traumatic experiences like partition, communalism, and globalization (Bhaskar 2009, Sarkar 2009, Gopal 2012). However, the rehabilitation of this melodramatic aesthetic has not been accompanied by a comparable rehabilitation of most other Indian popular film aesthetics (Dickey and Dudrah 2012). Joining studies of mythological films from the 1920s (Bhaumik 2001), 30s' stunt films (Thomas 2005), 60s' wrestling films (Vitali 2008), and 70s' devotional films (Das 1980), this issue of *Wide Screen* includes three essays that are in conversation with the discourse on popular Indian cinema. Shaunak Sen and Mithuraaj Dhusiya's papers contribute to the growing scholarship on horror in Indian cinema. While Sen looks at two contemporary Hindi films, namely Pawan Kriplani's *Ragini MMS* (2011) and *13B* (Kumar 2009), marking the distinction of 'New Horror' from the older aesthetic and indeed pedigree of horror that is associated with the films of the Ramsay Brothers, Dhusiya examines the Tamil film *Kanchana: Muni 2* (Lawrence 2011), and the Telugu *Punnami Nagu* (Reddy 2009) as texts that move against the structures of heteronormativity thereby creating room for protagonists of alternative gender identities. The other end of the spectrum of "respectability" is taken up in Dennis Hanlon's article on the documentary films of Anand Patwardhan wherein he traces the influence of the Third-Cinema movement that originated in Latin America. Hanlon's paper is closely aligned with and in fact almost supplemented by Pallavi Paul's interview of documentary filmmaker R.V Ramani. Ramani's presence brings forth a distinct voice from within the documentary tradition as he speaks of the aesthetics and politics of documentary and what that form enables.

Simultaneously, essaying a "new film history" (Chapman et al. 2007, Smoodin 2007) of Indian popular cinema has meant documenting off-screen practices of production and circulation, extending recognition beyond the masculine ranks of directors and producers to actresses and singers who may have been gendered 'out' of

stardom (Mukherjee 2011, Majumdar 2009); it has meant widening the terrain of film consumption beyond an abstractly conceived spectator-subject to encompass viewing bodies as different as censorship committees (Jaikumar 2007), fan clubs (Srinivas 2009), and diasporic audiences (Desai 2004). Debashree Mukherjee's interview of dubbing artiste Surekha in this issue provides rare insight into unseen (or should we say unheard) labor economies that comprise the film 'industry'. Finally, as a corollary to her previous work on the film poster (2003), we have Ranjani Mazumdar's photo-essay, packed with fascinating advertisements from 1960s' film magazines, expanding and complicating our understanding of the public life of popular cinema in the subcontinent.

The centenary of Indian cinema witnessed intense reflection in the realm of Indian cinema, both in practice—as filmmakers clamored to make commemorative films, videos and tributes marking the centenary of Indian cinema—as well as in the realm of academic work. Conferences organized across the world, where scholars working on the past, present and future(s) of all that entails Indian cinema, are testament to the growing nature of this field. This issue of *Wide Screen* is a part of this growing body of work.