

Journal Title: Wide Screen

Vol. 9, No.1, July 2022

ISSN: 1757-3920

URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>

BOOK REVIEW
BOMBAY HUSTLE: MAKING MOVIES IN A COLONIAL CITY

AMRITA CHAKRAVARTY

The existential crisis of film studies caused by the displacement of cinema as a central cultural force in the twenty first century has fostered disciplinary trajectories that seek to expand the ambit of cinema as a critical category. From media archaeological approaches that connect an expanded definition of cinema to different accounts of its emergence, to new infrastructure studies that explore the co-constitution of media and the everyday. Such theoretical interventions, however, sometimes tend to reinforce the decentering of cinema that originally drove the project to refigure the object of film studies. Indeed, film studies itself has given way to a proliferation of media studies, variously prefixed, that seem to confirm rather than dispute the idea that cinema is no longer an ideal site to think about media in our time. It is against this that Debashree Mukherjee's new book, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, registers a new critical framework to think about cinema and through cinema. Addressing the emergence of the talkie industry in Bombay in the inter-war years, Mukherjee stakes out radical new theoretical terrain through a historical study of production practices.

Although her case studies are drawn from the talkie years between 1939 and 1942, Mukherjee resists conventional periodizing nomenclature. Her own characterization of the period follows from the concept of the cine-ecology as a culturally and historically-specific formation of filmmaking and film culture encompassing a range of different institutional and individual actors, the physical and technological infrastructures of film production, the practices and rhythms of film work, and the city and the region embedding all of these. The eschewal of a historicizing tag also allows her to keep intact a dialogue between a historical cine-ecology and the industry of the present. Even as the talkie cine-ecology is indelibly

marked by the epoch of late industrial modernity, Mukherjee's probing analysis of its inchoate practices and emergent cultural logics often reach into very contemporary debates about the status of the worker and regimes of work under finance capitalism and the new creative economies. Indeed, the eponymous "hustle" referring to the experience of working, creating and struggling in the cine-ecology assumes a new resonance amid heated debates about nepotism and the #MeToo movement in Bollywood.

The capaciousness of the cine-ecology, as a configuration of film forever in the process of becoming, embodies Mukherjee's larger methodological approach as well. The cine-ecology resists any unitary reading of what constitutes cinema, as well as what different practices its production, distribution and consumption entail. It is alive to continuities and relays across a network of bodies, spaces, institutions and imaginaries that scuttle any attempts to compartmentalize, sequentialize, or otherwise fix elements, essences and processes. Mukherjee's use of the term ecology avoids the narrow climatological emphasis associated with the concept in environmental media studies, as also the techno-determinism of traditional media ecology scholarship exemplified by the materialist approaches of Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler. Cine-ecology thus conjugated, addresses the idea of cinema writ large, of cinema affected by and affecting the world. An ecological conception of film allows Mukherjee to traverse the many registers of the cinema – industrial, technological, legal, financial, cultural, aesthetic, spatial, temporal – and to thus approximate more closely the way that cinema is actually dispersed across multiple modes and scales. Thinking through the cine-ecology also yields other productive categories, such as the cine-worker, a position delineated not through the conventional criteria of remuneration or the opposition between creative and manual work, but as any body implicated in the cinematic enterprise. As such, the cine-worker allows us to consider affinities and intersections among roles and identities ordinarily quarantined from one another in media industries work.

The chapters are grouped into two broad sections: the first being concerned with the evolving instruments, networks, narratives and imaginaries that supported the talkie industry at its incipience; the second half of the book charts an account of embodiment within the new techno-industrial configuration of the talkies. While Mukherjee refrains from following a linear or chronological sequence of events, the first section seems to serve the purpose of mapping the historical coordinates of a particular phase of filmmaking and film industrial activity, setting the stage for the flights of philosophical speculation in the book's second half. The account of industrial consolidation, through financial interlinkages with the city's speculative trade in cotton futures, a shared ideological framework of scientific rationality and nationalistic

self-reliance, and the intermedial attunements that primed film audiences and practitioners alike for the new experience of “talking films” – the first three chapters entwine film history with a history of the modern metropolis. Extensive archival research supports these chapters, including short accounts of the formation and operational structures of Ranjit Movitone, Sagar Movietone, and Bombay Talkies, an industrial exhibition mounted on a grand scale in 1939, and the recounting of a lawsuit brought against the studio Circo by a minority shareholder.

Some of the more salient arguments made by Mukherjee in this section include the consideration of film alongside other business forms and cultural practices that intervene concretely in the spatial and financial organisation of film, and also participate in a shared universe of rhetoric around the same. Thus, the cotton trade is not only directly related to the talkie business through the routing of surplus and untaxed incomes into films and providing its audiences of mill-hands and factory workers, it also created a business culture of speculation which animated an extended economy of futures trading. Cinema is located, then, on a continuum of speculation from *satta* to horse racing to cotton trading. In a similar vein, Mukherjee describes the imbrication of film within a regime of scientific modernity, called upon to signify industrial advancement not only in its cutting-edge technical equipment but also in the organisation and composition of its personnel and the streamlining of its production processes. Such demands were further tied up with late colonial aspirations for indigenous industry and the consequent incorporation of science into a national teleology. Here, Mukherjee makes an original intervention in longstanding debates on cinema and its relation to the developmentalist state through a consideration of specific productions practices – including the continuity script and the strategy of double unit shooting – that complicate widely accepted narratives of the relative backwardness of Bombay cinema until its millennial incarnation, as well as the manner in which film was implicated in the nationalist enterprise. As with her discussion on speculation, Mukherjee draws attention to a cultural and discursive milieu of colonial science that cinema participated in, as a technological object, as an incipient industrial and would-be corporate form, and as an affective medium standing in for the marvel of modernity. An attention to the materiality and contingency of technology and production practices allows her to reframe issues such as the question of the historical disreputability of the film industry, where the desire to incorporate the educated middle class into its ranks was another aspect of its performance of scientific specialization. That Mukherjee is able to unfurl such connections is also partly due to the novelty of her method, bringing to bear a kind of textual analysis normally reserved for discussions of the screen narrative to a study of film production.

One of the relatively less successful parts of the book, the chapter on sound provocatively argues for an expansion of South Asian sound studies to include a greater discussion of dialogue and speech, which Mukherjee considers to be severely neglected aspects in the scholarly constitution of the “aural” in film. As in the preceding chapters of the section, Mukherjee charts a broader landscape of cultural activity within which film production can be located. Prolific political speech-making and a burgeoning telecommunications and recording industry “acoustically attuned” audiences to the talkie film’s particular mode of audio-visual displacement, while urban theater lent it its declamatory acting style. Mukherjee shows how all these intermedial borrowings also inexorably associated cinema with disreputable cultural forms and professions, in turn generating what she refers to as genres of industrial argumentation – metanarratives that justify the social shifts and lifestyle changes that were both entailed by and helped to sustain the cinematic enterprise. However, the chapter’s discussion of a late colonial public sphere marked by a crowded acoustic field, and the account of cinema’s own resolution of the women’s question through generic manoeuvres remain a bit disjoint. While tantalizing, the idea of the acousmatic attunement produced by an intermedial matrix of technological practices adjacent to cinema does not really help to explicate the particular anxiety created by the audiovisual coupling of the talkie film. Indeed, the concept in its intimation of habitual cultures of listening prevents a fuller account of the novelty of the encounter with film sound – whether speech or music. This is one of the few places where Mukherjee’s commitment to dispense with a linear sequence of beginnings and endings undercuts – save for a few paragraphs on the disorientation and new acoustic sensitivity produced by sound – the historical specificity of an industrial and infrastructural transformation. Another strand, too quickly abandoned, involves the proliferation of print media forms such as the song booklet engendered by the talkie. Mukherjee’s assertion of the dispersed ecology of film sound across speech, image and text has radical implications for the very object of research on sound, demanding that we pay as much attention to reading and viewing publics as to listening publics.

The book’s second half is an ambitious project to read film practice through the metaphor of energy. Alluding to but ultimately departing from the field of energy studies which centers the role of energy in historical and cultural analyses, Mukherjee deploys the category to understand cinema at the intersection of infrastructure and the human body. Cinema emerges as a privileged site to understand the scrambling of ontological categories produced by the confrontation of man and machine, producing a machinic conception of human capability and an anthropomorphic vision of inanimate machinery. Conceiving of the film enterprise as a

constantly shifting network of energy flows, Mukherjee posits circulation as the primary mode of the cinematic, generated through the interaction of bodies and objects.

Mukherjee moves through a dense archival field to extrapolate what she dubs an aesthetics of vitality. Such an aesthetics devolves on the fetishistic value accorded to energy in contemporary ideas of industrial productivity as well as a conflation of the national body politic with the body of health. Mukherjee reads narratives of energy against the widely-acknowledged tendency towards allegorical texts in a period of colonial surveillance. An anxiety over depleted vitality connects films across generic lines from *Nav Jeevan* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Duniya Na Maane* (1937) to *Sant Tukaram* (1936), revealing the common horizon of colonial struggle within which they were made. Even more interesting is Mukherjee's juxtaposition of Walter Benjamin's concept of innervation and Anand Coomaraswamy's aesthetic theory of *samvega*, to understand the relationship between cinema and its publics. Examining different texts on cinema's ability to variously rejuvenate, discipline or otherwise catalyze bodies into action, Mukherjee presents a theory of film spectatorship as a form of embodied cognition. Envisioning cinema as a somatic encounter between the human body and the body of technology, Mukherjee goes on to explore the human and non-human intimacies entailed at every level of the cinematic enterprise, including the behind-the-scenes life of the studio.

A very different view of the film studio emerges in this second half of the book, moving away from the purely logistical and infrastructural sense to understand it as a site produced through the entanglement of bodies, equipment, weather, geography and sociality. Through different accounts of an actress' solitary hunger strike, the drowning of three extras, a stunt gone wrong, and two similar but ultimately divergent cases of workplace harassment, Mukherjee tracks the everyday lived experience of a period of frenetic commercial production and corporatization as it rebounded on the body of the film worker. Rather than approaching the studio as a self-evident form, Mukherjee deduces the thing that is the studio from the experiences of various levels of cine-workers engaged in it. In a remarkable chapter on the actor Shanta Apte, Mukherjee conjoins a discussion of film labor with an energy studies concern with the extraction and depletion of natural resources. But unlike energy studies' decentering of the human, Mukherjee devotes herself to a deeper understanding of human labor itself as a source of energy susceptible to extraction and exhaustion. Focusing Apte's own account of industrial exploitation, Mukherjee examines the consequences of a capitalist ideology of energy and its conflation of mechanical and organic categories. With Apte, Mukherjee asks what it means for humans to be treated as if they were machines. But rather

than falling back into a narrow humanism, such an address forces a confrontation with a regime of neglect that unevenly distributes risk across bodies and objects. It throws light on an industrial logic that is agnostic to the boundaries between different categories of objects. Mukherjee reads Apte's hunger strike against her employer Prabhat studio and her polemical tracts railing against the injustices of film work as acts of individuation, attempts to delineate the boundaries of the self in a profession where actresses' tired bodies "synchronized" with overheated arc lamps. For Mukherjee, then, Apte's acts of refusal and critique constitute a form of resistance in which the state of depletion that is the consequence of an extractivist regime is symbolically weaponized against the system.

Such resistance is not always possible however, and the book's final chapter recounts shooting accidents and incidents where the social protocols, improvised structures, and indefinite schedules of studio work combine to create a particularly precarious category of film labor. Mukherjee further identifies overlaps between this class of film proletariat and the figure of the fan. In an interesting refiguration of the idea of fan labor, Mukherjee draws attention to a circularity inherent in the cinematic field where the film worker is often first a film fan. Also included in this latter section is a meditation on cinematic duration – the time of waiting and the long years of preparation that define film work – that unfold a very different imagination of cinematic temporality, from the perspective of film production. Drawing attention to ubiquitous aspects of the film worker's everyday, Mukherjee is able to resignify the stakes of film work which entails a low-grade exposure to quotidian forms of violence alongside the more spectacular on-set mishap.

This is an important book, not only because it expands our understanding of a particular decade in the life of Bombay cinema, but also because it extends our ways of thinking about cinema more generally. Mukherjee's felicity for drawing on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, combining an ethnographer's attention to detail with the media historian's ability to apprehend connections between disparate times and places, yields an account that is as dense as the cine-ecology she describes. That the reader is able to comfortably navigate such a rhizomatic terrain is further due to Mukherjee's evocative literary style. With *Bombay Hustle*, Mukherjee has achieved a rare feat – an academic tome accessible to a truly diverse readership of film theorists and media professionals, historians, legal scholars, anthropologists, and cinephiles.

About the author: Amrita Chakravarty is a PhD candidate in Film and Media Studies and Comparative Literature at Yale University. She was previously a senior researcher at criticalcollective.in, in charge of curating the website's section on India cinema. She also holds an MPhil in Cinema Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU.

Contact: amrita.chakravarty93@gmail.com
