"But it has Some Good Songs …": Introducing Students to the Aesthetics of the Popular Hindi Film Through Music

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Screening films in music classes often offers students a clearer understanding of different performing contexts and the culture that surrounds them. When they are available, scenes of live performances and on-screen interviews with musicians and other figures enhance students' understanding of different performing traditions and musical cultures beyond what could be gained from mere recordings and scholarly literature. While popular Hindi films are usually fictional and rarely present live performances, they still offer an ideal text through which music students can gain familiarity with South Asian culture—in no small part due to the fact that song-and-dance sequences are perhaps the single most distinguishing feature of popular Hindi films.

The first film with sound, *Alam Ara* or "Beauty of the World," which appeared in 1930, featured no fewer than seven song and dance sequences. Drawing clearly on recognizable forms of entertainment that combined music and drama in both folk and classical traditions, early Hindi films such as *Alam Ara* helped establish music, song, and dance as an integral part of the popular film genre throughout South Asia.[1] Today these song-and-dance sequences can occupy almost forty minutes of a film that already runs close to three hours; the sheer length of many popular Hindi films deters new audiences, and even within India, song and dance sequences represent to some what is wrong with Indian cinema. Film critic Kobita Sarkar has commented,

> The most irritating aspect of the song in the Hindi film is its sheer irrelevance. Many of them can be deleted entirely without in any way affecting the film's content, and many of them suppressed would do much to improve the general quality of the film… The interminable singing… merely slows the action and confuses the major issues at stake.[2]

But is this really so?

When students first read the syllabus for my class and realize that they will be viewing almost fifty hours of subtitled films and listening to at least one soundtrack after attending two hours of lecture each day within our three and a half week class, a small number of them leave to find another class. Those who stay, however, quickly begin to consider the song-and-dance sequences as fundamental, rather than extraneous, to the structure and sensibility of the film itself.

Alam Ara

Significances of Song and Dance Sequences

Conventionally, screenplay writers have inserted song-and-dance sequences in situations where they believe that music would express ideas more effectively than dialogue. Audiences may measure a screenplay writer and director's skill by determing how well these songs are integrated into the screenplay, so they will and do criticize songs that have apparently nothing to do with the rest of the film.[3] Song-and-dance sequences provide an efficient way to depict the progression of a developing romance, but they potentially convey more desire, passion, and fantasy than could ever be carried through conventional dialogue. Characters may

When students first read the syllabus for my class and realize that they will be viewing almost fifty hours of subtitled films and listening to at least one soundtrack after attending two hours of lecture each day within our three and a half week class, a small number of them leave to find another class. Those who stay,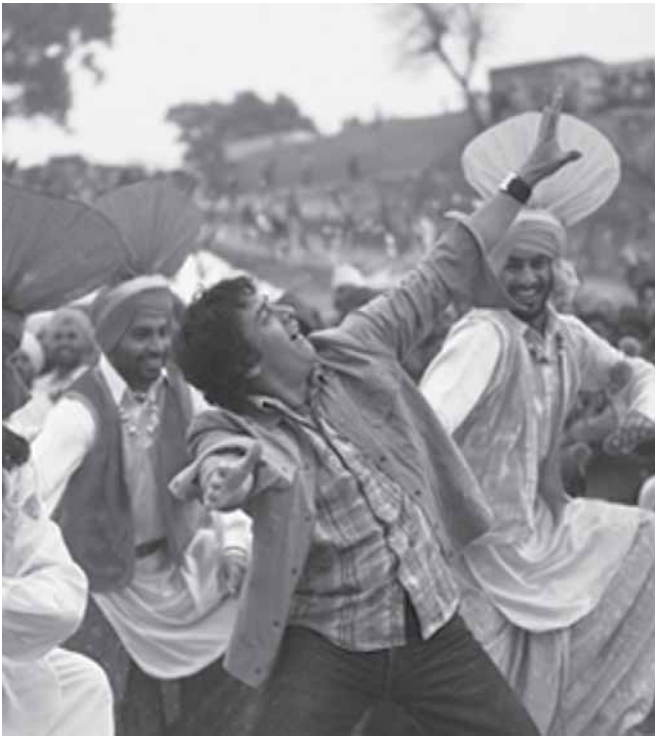 however, quickly begin to consider the song-and-dance sequences as fundamental, rather than extraneous, to the structure and sensibility of the film itself.

*Song and Dance Sequence in **Rang De Basanti***

sing and dance in the rain with wet clothes clinging suggestively to their bodies in terms that connote sexual situations while still passing the censor board; characters may also experience flashbacks to their childhood or provide us access to their innermost thoughts without other characters' being able to hear them.[4] Extraordinary costumes suggest that a scene may not be occurring in reality—especially when the characters on screen change costumes with every shot. The sequences are sometimes shot in spectacular locations, often far away from where the rest of the story unfolds, where they present an external realization of the emotional landscapes of characters' dreams and desires. Love sequences shot beside views of snowcapped mountains, waterfalls, lakes, and gardens, offer audiences a fantasy-like experience.

Many of these film song sequences were filmed in Kashmir before violence escalated there in the late 1980s.[5] Director and producer Yash Chopra has set the benchmark for setting his song sequences in stunning locations such as in his film *Silsila* (1981), which features its protagonists singing and dancing in the middle of Dutch tulip fields, and in the Swiss Alps. The convention of the song sequence enables us to not have to wonder how our characters from the tulips to the mountains, and how they will return to their homes in

India in the next scene—if they return at all.

Not surprisingly, many successful, popular Hindi films feature carefully selected film song composers and lyricists, and advertising their involvement in a particular film prior to a film's release in many cases motivates audiences to first purchase the soundtrack, and then tickets to the film itself. Popular film song composers (or "music directors") are as likely to refer to hip-hop and salsa as they are to reference more traditional genres such as *qawwali*, *bhangra*, and *ghazal*—in some cases, during the same soundtrack; as an example, the film *Veer-Zaara* (2004), originally scored by Madan Mohan, features both a performance of *qawwali* by Sufi devotional singers and a *bhangra* folk-dance performed in Punjab.

Film Soundtracks

Film soundtracks may play an important role in defining the film's location, as well as its protagonists. Music director Khayyam composed an exquisite score of *ghazals* for the film *Umrao Jaan* (1981) to help establish the biography of the famed

19th-century courtesan, expressed in poetry, music, and dance. A.R. Rahman's score for *Rang De Basanti* (2006), on the other hand, incorporates traditional Punjabi cultural elements (such as a woman's prayer in a Sikh *gurdwara* and a harvest festival *bhangra* dance) with hard-rock and hip-hop elements so as to depict the cosmopolitan life of contemporary college students at Delhi University.

Lyricism

Many prominent lyricists, such as Javed Akhtar and Gulzar, distinguished themselves as masterful poets before the film industry drew upon their ability to weave together conventions and thematic allusions, drawn from indigenous folk traditions, religious and mythological texts, and classical Sufi and Persian poetry that make allusions to contemporary culture. The entire plot of Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998), for example, is built upon the classical image of the moth who is drawn to the flame, and who dies as a result of it—an image that abounds in classical Persian poetry. Students who have already been systematically exposed to a repertory of Persian-influenced *qawwali* and *ghazal* film songs and their lyrics are surprised by their ability to recognize the symbolic role of Gulzar's lyrics and the genres themselves within *Dil Se*—an understanding that rests upon their ability to situate it within historical conventions. Guiding students so that may recognize these elements and how they are integrated expands their conception of South Asian culture to comprise the present and the past, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Furthermore, after students watch a number of popular Hindi films, they invariably notice that song and dance sequences do in fact influence the core of the film.[6] They may delay the development of the plot, distract us from other scenes in the narrative through reworking our sense

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stretch your knowledge and your intelligence beyond what you have done before. I continued to learn from Betty Radice when I worked on *The Rig Veda* (in 1981)[2] and though she had died by the time I did the last Penguin publication , *The Laws of Manu*, ten years later,[3] her friendly ghost still hovered over the work, as it continues to hover over my subsequent translations. The translations balance the more interpretive books, filling me up with a world of knowledge gleaned from an intimate and detailed response to a particular author, in contrast with the more diffuse and more self-generated conversation that drives me when I write the other sort of book. It troubles me that many departments do not regard translations as "real" works, that they will not count them toward tenure; for I have

learned most from my works of translation, and certainly contributed something that will be more useful to other scholars for a longerperiod of time, than my "original" works of scholarship.

While I was working on the first Penguin book, I was also working with R. C. Zaehner at All Souls College on my Oxford dissertation, which I did simply because I happened to be in Oxford (because my husband went to Oxford and I came along for the ride: serendipity) and because I had taken out of that 950 page Harvard dissertation *another* 500 pages (in addition to the original 950) that now supplied the material for a second work, first the Oxford D Phil. dissertation (in 1973) and then a book, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (in 1976)[4] Zaehner was working at that time on his wild book about Charles Manson (*Our Savage God*), and I benefited enormously from long, boozy dinners with him at the Elizabethan restaurant next door to the Sheep's Shop immortalized by Lewis Carroll; we talked about Manson and the Pope and Aristotle and cabbages and kings. I also realized, years later, that writing that book, which is in large part about the evil of death, was a way of trying to make sense of my father's death, my first major experience of inexplicable and unjust evil. In 1978, Eliade invited me to join the faculty in Chicago, and I did. And the rest, as they say, is history (of religions).

The lives of many women are, I think, inspired by their desire to be unlike their

mothers; but so often, like Alice in Looking-Glass Land, the farther we try to run away from that house of mirrors, the quicker we find ourselves walking back in at the door. This is part of my story, surely. And the accidents of marriage and professional opportunities landed me in a role that I had never dreamt of, indeed had never known the existence of, before I accepted it—the role of a professor of the History of Religions at the University widely regarded as the *axis mundi* of that discipline. Indeed, the discipline itself is now changing in new directions that render rather *vieux jeux* the approaches that were regarded as radical when I first tried them out. Somehow, like a Kafka character, I went to bed one night an *enfant terrible* and woke up the next morning an old fuddy duddy. But I don't regret missing my fifteen-minute allotment of, if not fame, at least trendiness. Non, je ne regrette rien.

Endnotes

1. *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook, translated from the Sanskrit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1975); reprinted 1976; second edition, 1979; reprinted 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1990, etc.). Translated into Italian by Mario Piantelli and Alberto Pelissero, and published under the title of *Dall'Ordine il Caos* (Biblioteca della Fenice, Parma: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1898).
2. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology, 108 Hymns Translated from the Sanskrit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1981).
3. *The Laws of Manu*, with Brian K. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991).
4. *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

But it has Some Good Songs

of space as well as time, link episodes within a respective film, heighten the emotional content of the unfolding drama and situate the scenes in one film within an established repertoire of conventions from earlier films and more historical forms of entertainment.[7] Students' ability to recognize how song-and-dance sequences define the aesthetics of popular Hindi films as a genre invariably corresponds to their ability to grasp a sense of the aesthetics of South Asian culture as whole.

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Skillman, Teri. "The Bombay Hindi Film Song Genre: A Historical Survey." *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, no. 18 (1986): 133-44.

Footnotes

1 Teri Skillman, "The Bombay Hindi Film Song Genre: A Historical Survey," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, no. 18 (1986): 133.
2 Kobita Sarkar, *Indian Cinema Today* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1975), 1. Cited in Biswarup Sen, *Of the People: Essays on Indian Popular Culture* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2006), 160-61.
3 Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80.
4 Ibid., 80.
5 David Martin-Jones, "Kabhi India Kabhie Scotland," *South Asian Popular Culture* 4, no. 1 (2006): 52.
6 See Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 19. Cited in Sen, *Of the People*, 166.
7 Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions*, 19.