

## Film Culture, Politics and Industry

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In this essay I discuss a familiar question: what do we make of film as industrial product and film as cultural entity? For the purposes of the essay I use 'film culture' in a restricted sense to refer to film consumption, or the sphere of circulation of the cinema among various audience groups. At the very outset I wish to point out that I make a number of statements, at times provocative ones, without providing satisfactory clarifications or evidence. This is convenient way to deal with difficult problems. However, I may be forgiven for opting for the easy way out in the light of the constraints of space (and the inability to provide detailed footnotes).

In the context of Andhra Pradesh, possibly other parts of the country as well, film consumption is linked to politics on the one hand and the film industry on the other. I am not referring merely to the famous 'south-Indian' case of fans associations of the film-stars-turned-politicians. On the contrary, we need to ask foundational questions of film culture that may in fact have been obscured by the overt linkages between film and politics as witnessed in the MGR and NTR phenomena. Yet, fans associations in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and, increasingly, even Kerala, should alert us to deeper connections between film cultures and politics. It is my contention that these connections exist even when there are no direct links between audience groups and political parties and even when fans associations themselves are absent. Indeed, fans associations, regardless of what can be said about their linkages with the politics of linguistic identity/nationalism etc, are but one expression of that something that we may have missed in our anxiety to make sense of the obscene overlap between the cinema and politics.

I will draw attention to the circulation of Hong Kong action films in India in order to skirt around the politics of linguistic identity. Despite the popularity of the genre and some of the stars associated with it in different parts of Andhra Pradesh, it is almost certain that there have never been fans associations of a Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan in this state. In fact, fans associations of Hong Kong stars are so emphatically absent that there was no competing response to the inauguration of the All India Jackie Chan Fans Association in Vijayawada. As it turned out this association was one of the attempts by a local distributor to generate interest in the latest Jackie Chan release. He hoped that 'real' associations of the star's fans would be established in response to the announcement. The distributor's failure to elicit a response is more evidence that fans associations and language politics are inseparable.

However, considering the fact that fans associations are institutions marked by their obsessive engagement with the cinema (noisy celebrations within the auditorium, decoration of cinema halls), which is carried to spaces outside/beyond the cinema hall (organizing poor feeding, celebrating religious festivals etc under the aegis of the association), we notice that a similar process is at work even in the case of Hong Kong films. I have in mind those martial arts schools/academies that exhibit rather direct allegiances to Hong Kong films and stars. There are of course 'respectable' martial arts schools run by experts who sneer at films and stars. But there are others like the Dragon Fist Martial Arts Academy, Hyderabad. It is named after a Jackie Chan film (*Dragon Fist*, Lo Wei, 1978), has an office displaying a large Bruce Lee poster, and is run by a man who tried unsuccessfully to make a Telugu martial arts film called *Karate Fighters*. The school's publication, *Martial Arts*, often features local and Hong Kong action stars such as Suman, Vijayashanthi, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan on the cover. And then there is Sampathi Ramana, the chief instructor of Okinawan Goju-Ryu Universal Martial Arts, Madanapalle. A

house painter by profession, Ramana is an important organizer of the Balija caste and an activist of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He is also an active member of the fans association of the Telugu film star Chiranjeevi who belongs to his caste. For the last 13 years he has been a karate instructor. Five years ago he established the karate school which he currently heads. Classes are held, among other places, in the compound of Jyothi Talkies which screens martial arts and sex films. Ramana was inspired to learn karate after watching the films of Bruce Lee and Arjun (who featured in Telugu action films). He watches all Hong Kong martial arts and action films released in the town and often takes his students to watch (and learn from) these films (Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2001). Some martial arts schools are therefore fans-association-like formations insofar as they are institutional spaces for the *acting out* of the obsession with the cinema. With hindsight, we can see that the fans association itself is only one such space.

The cinema is so central to our lives that there are various manifestation of the obsession with it. For the purposes of this essay I will ignore possible psychological explanations for the phenomenon. A historical explanation for the social-political importance of the cinema in the Indian context is provided by K. Sivathamby who famously states:

The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with 'all and sundry' (Sivathamby 1981: 18).

Even if cinema is not the 'first' and although the possibilities it opened up are not unique to Tamil Nadu, it is possible to argue after Sivathamby that the promise of democracy, whether or not it was realized, is what makes the cinema *political*. DMK, MGR, and NTR phenomena are specific but secondary manifestations of the founding promise of the cinema.

This promise revolves around the fact of physical presence: I am entitled to be present here, regardless of everything else. Often there is an inversion of the obvious fact of the presence of the viewer at the cinema in the following manner: the cinema exists because of my presence and for me. Further, the 'I' at the cinema is always a member of a collective: *we make the film happen*. Anyone who has watched a Chiranjeevi or Rajnikanth film knows exactly what I am talking about. Not only do these stars address spectators in rather direct ways (including by looking at the camera) but seem to perform according to 'our' demands—notice that the whistling actually begins a few seconds *before* these stars make their first and much anticipated appearance, as if by whistling we can summon them to appear. Of course this is an inversion—we have been trained over generations to anticipate the action as much as the stars have been to perform to our expectations.

Film culture in our context is political for the following reasons: it is founded on a democratic promise and it develops around the notion of spectatorial rights. I not only have a right to be present in the cinema hall but have the further right to make demands of the narrative, the star, etc. The cinema has to acknowledge my presence and address my expectations.

A note of caution at this point. We cannot make sense of cinema in general and film culture(s) in particular if we assume that audiences are either manipulated or resisting collectives. Both approaches, which are mirror images, posit an antagonistic relationship between the film *industry* and its customers. In fact the political cannot be reduced to the question: is it progressive/regressive? We need to pitch the question of the political at a different level.

The film industry plays a crucial role in the emergence of a film culture. This ought to be fairly obvious once we move away from the manipulation/resistance frame and the non-existent opposition between industry and viewer. Before I go on to discuss the industry-film culture relationship, a brief discussion on the peculiar status of the film industry in India.

Once again I will cite the case of Hong Kong action films in India. The financial worth of the Indian market is so miniscule for the Hong Kong film industry that in the words of the distribution executive, Chiu Yi Leung, the Indian market is 'just a bonus.' According to Wellington Fung, the former CEO of Media Asia Distribution, Hong Kong, the volume of film exports to India is about half a million US dollars a year. This is a small even my Indian film industry standards. Telugu blockbusters could cost up to four times this amount to produce. Contrast the low financial worth of Hong Kong films to the kind of cultural presence they have had in Andhra Pradesh. I have already mentioned martial arts schools. In print Hong Kong action films have spawned a new genre of 'detective' fiction and numerous self help books (learn-kung-fu-in-thirty-days and such like). A new generation of stars performing their own stunts and supposedly trained in east Asian martial arts emerged in the late seventies even as the film industry's biggest star NT Rama Rao played the role of a karate champion in *Yugapurushudu* (K. Bapaiah, 1978). The female vigilante film, often featuring 'Lady Superstar' Vijayashanthi, is as much a tribute to the female actions stars of Hong Kong as the indigenous 'cow girls' of the earlier decades. Not to forget remakes such as *Hello Brother* (EVV Satyanarayana, 1994), which is based on the Jackie Chan starrer *Twin Dragons* (Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, 1992). There have also been attempts at producing full-length martial arts films (for example, *Bhadrachalam*, Shankar, 2001).

The larger issue, of which the case of Hong Kong films in Andhra is a case in point, is the vast gap between the financial worth of the film industry and the all too visible cultural presence of the cinema in spaces well beyond the cinema hall. On the one hand, the cultural presence of the cinema is phenomenal, perhaps unparalleled in any other part of the world. On the other, the industry is unable to translate the socio-cultural importance of the cinema in our country into economic terms. Cultural success and economic failure are both equally glaring. Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes the phenomenon as the industry's 'resistance to industrialism' (Rajadhyaksha 2002). The phrase sums up the inability of the industry to generate profit, to attract institutional investment and to standardize the product (the alleged absence of the script and other related shortcomings are often listed at year-end reviews of our various film industries).

The lack of fit between the film industry as an economic entity and cinema as a cultural, social and political phenomenon is of crucial importance in our context. This excess of signification, of meaning, is something that the film industry has to grapple with on a day-to-day basis.

We need to conceive of film cultures as being excessive of the economic logic of the film industry, not as resistant to some prior political intention of the industry. This is not to say that the film industry is not interested in consumer compliance or in the production of a mass audience whose reaction is predictable. As a matter of fact a variety of coercive and pedagogic exercises have been and continue to be undertaken towards this end (discussed below). Remarkably, the industry is also indulgent towards audiences and *their* excesses. For this reason I suggest that the film industry's link to film cultures has to be subjected to detailed examination. Let me illustrate by examining what I call the *B circuits* of distribution and exhibition. Once again I will stay with Hong Kong films and its circulation in this circuit.

The B circuit is the vast segment of the film industry that comprises of hundreds of small distribution companies (often dealing with re-runs, soft-porn films, cheap imports, films dubbed

from other languages etc) and run down cinema halls in cities (the legendary Lighthouse in Abids, Hyderabad, which is now closed, for example) as well as small towns. Characterized by low levels of investment, this segment is witness to repeated interventions by both distributors and exhibitors which result in the de-standardization of a film's status as an industrial product. Another distinction of the B circuit is its questionable legality: condemned prints, uncensored films, censored films with sexually explicit interpolations and prints whose rights have lapsed are to be found circulating here.

In qualitative terms, the B-circuit is the 'final frontier' of the film industry – beyond this there is no market. Films reach this segment after their run in the more profitable distribution and exhibition circuit is over. So that what we get here is the local industry's equivalent of what the Indian market is to the Hong Kong film industry ('just a bonus').

In geographical terms the B distributor is generally confined to territories consisting primarily of non-metropolitan centres. Most cinema halls available to such distributors are run down and have low ticket prices (around ten rupees for the highest seats). The margins are so low that it is not economically viable for major players to operate at this level.

I am aware that I am not the only one trying to understand this segment of the industry. Brighupathi Singh for instance is working with a concept he calls the C-circuit. I would like to think of the B circuit as an analytical category, rather than a merely descriptive one. Two sets of existing film industry categories and the B circuit need to be distinguished. The industry categorizes exhibition centres as A, B and C-class centres on the basis of market size, often measured in terms of the population of the place. The industry also divides cinema halls into A, B and C categories based on location as well as the kind of facilities they offer. The B circuit, I suggest, is a segment of the industry that cuts across existing industry categories: it is inclusive of B and C class cinema halls in A, B and C centres and the distributors who feed these cinema halls.

B circuit as an analytical category might allow us to distinguish between different ways in which the film industry functions. At a time when there are very clear signs of industrialization, especially of the distribution and exhibition sectors (cineplexes, increasing importance of overseas distribution, dubbing of Hollywood films into local languages), there is a need to account for what is happening in those segments of the industry that are evidently unaffected by such changes.

Hong Kong cinema has been successful in the B circuit. The point is not that it is a hit with the lower classes or the small town audiences but that the B circuit distributors actively promote it using a variety of means and in doing so demonstrate the enormous disparity between economic worth of film (this time an import) and its cultural significance. The life of Hong Kong cinema in the B circuit needs to be read against the backdrop of the street corner martial arts school, the Telugu detective novel and other phenomena that exhibit the 'influence' of the genre. In rather direct ways these are consequences of the B circuit intervention.

For Hong Kong films in the B circuit it is not uncommon for a film's title to change each time it is re-released. On occasion film publicity is misleading: one distributor sought to create the impression that he was releasing new films when the renamed older Jackie Chan films to echo recent releases (*I am I* was the name given to the older *Thunderbolt* as a response to *Who am I?* and *Drunken Master II* was renamed *Dangerous Guy* when *Mr. Nice Guy* was being released). Another ingenious distributor claimed that a film had stars who were 'faster than Jet Li and Jackie Chan' but made sure that 'faster than' was in small letters so as to create the impression that the two giants of Hong Kong cinema were starring in the film.

Typically, in the B circuit, relatively minor or unknown Hong Kong stars are often passed off as relatives/associates of major ones. We have the actor-director Samo Hung being introduced in locally produced film publicity as Jackie Chan's 'guru'. A female action star was claimed to be Bruce Lee's daughter (a good 5 years before the 'real' daughter made her film debut). I would like to see these examples as attempting to do more than cheating the semi-literate action film buff.

Attempts of the kind mentioned above no doubt *destabilize* films as products and would therefore be prime examples of the industry's resistance to industrialism. As Hollywood has shown, one of the necessary steps towards greater industrialization of cinema is to ensure standardized products as well as viewing conditions. By tailoring the publicity campaign to address what are seen as a given set of existing expectations, the B circuit puts itself at considerable risk: it acknowledges that viewer expectations are legitimate and goes on to meet them on grounds that place it at a considerable disadvantage. When the distributor creates the grounds for comparing Samo Hung and Jackie Chan, he is firstly supplying a star where there was none (Hung was not recognized as a star and consequently had no value locally). In the process the distributor accepts as legitimate viewer expectation (treated as a given) that films should have stars of a certain kind. He is risking rejection since the viewer may watch the film and refuse to accept that there is a ground for comparison between the two stars or go to the extent of refusing to accord to Hung any star-value.

This specific kind of risk of rejection is not specific to Hong Kong films. It is not uncommon for cinema halls showing soft-porn films to have a riot on their hands when the audience is disappointed by the absence of the mandatory explicit sequence. Having recognized illegitimate desires, the cinema hall risks retribution for not adequately addressing them. This is not a feature of the B circuit alone. In 1993 advertisements signed by 'Superstar' Krishna appeared in Telugu newspapers appealing to fans not to be upset with the star's role in the film *Vaarasadu* (EVV Satyanarayana, 1993). The film had a sequence in which the younger Nagarjuna held Krishna by the collar. The *Vaarasadu* type campaign can only occur in a context in which the expectations of the 'fan', who in this case is organized, are treated as legitimate. What we may be witnessing in these instances is the industry's acknowledgement of spectatorial rights.

What of the industry's resistance to industrialism? Even as we acknowledge the interesting connections between the industry backward industrial status, film cultures and politics we need to note that industrial *aspirations* are frequently expressed by different segments of the industry. Let me cite a few examples to point out how complex an entity the film industry is. There has been some discussion on Rajnikanth's recent attempt to 'patent' a gesture he makes in the film *Baba* (Suresh Krishna, 2002). Lawrence Liang, I am sure has much to say about this in his essay (**see his essay in this issue**). I will not go over the debate on the star's move here. I suggest that the star's move is one of the many seemingly strange ways in which the industry attempts to assert its *industrial* status.

In the exhibition sector, attempts at disciplining the audience are key indicators of an industrial aspiration. Ensuring audience discipline is an established means of producing standardized conditions of viewing. Not surprisingly discipline often accompanies increasing levels of comfort offered to the customer. In Madanapalle, Srikrishna, the town's first air-conditioned cinema hall segregates the sexes at the booking counters and also inside the auditorium. The management of the theatre does not permit the audience to whistle after the first week of a film's release. This, I argue, is an industrial aspiration of the kind that film history is familiar with and much has been said about this mode of cleaning up the cinema halls in the histories of American cinema. But it is not only air-conditioned cinema halls aiming to attract the middle class customer that aspire to standardize the conditions of viewing. Jyothi theatre, also situated in Madanapalle, is a typical

example of a B circuit cinema hall for it still has wooden benches in the lower stalls and is notorious for screening soft-porn films. When it screens a soft-porn film it ensures that the booking counter is closed when the film commences. No one is allowed to whistle or make lewd comments. No one can leave the auditorium till the screening is over. Precautions against police raids, certainly. But perfect customer compliance is achieved and stable conditions of viewing have been created.

In conclusion, theorising film culture might just be most ambitious project undertaken by students of the cinema: not only does it have to grapple with the film industry, about which we know very little, but also has to provide an account of what the political means in our context.

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## **References**

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