

***Lagaan* and the role of music in Bollywood cinema**

by Christian Hayes

Clearly one of the most distinctive aspects of popular Indian cinema is its music. In this essay I will look at the function of music in Bollywood cinema, using *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) as an example and exploring how the device of the song-and-dance reveals illuminating aspects of Bollywood cinema culture, such as Bollywood cinema's relationship to its audience as well as its wider position within society.

Music, particularly song and dance, lies at the very heart of popular Indian cinema and the cinema itself is central to its nation. As is often stated, India produces the largest output of films in the world.¹ 'Bollywood', however, is the term given to the Bombay (now Mumbai) film industry. Since there are many regional film industries within India, Bollywood cinema accounts for only a portion of the country's total output.² In 1998, for example, Bollywood produced 153 films out of a total of 693 features nationwide.³ It is clear from such an output that India has a thriving culture of cinemagoers. Bollywood cinema, however, is the primary industry for international markets, such as America and Britain.⁴ It is the industry that is most discussed, written about and accepted around the

¹ Tejaswinti Ganti, *Bollywood: a guidebook to popular Hindi cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004) p.3

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.228

⁴ Ibid., p.39

world. Bollywood cinema, then, clearly has a particularly strong appeal for millions of viewers worldwide, and this appeal, I suspect, has much to do with its music.

The music industry in India is firmly bound to the film industry since the songs and music from Bollywood's films makes up 80% of the music sales of the entire country.⁵ As a result, cinema infiltrates the cultural and social spaces of India through its music. Its music shops are filled with a myriad of music from cinema, indexed via director, star, films, genres, and decades (amongst other categories). India's music shops do not favour present from past, instead representing the entire history of sound film in music recordings.⁶ If sold alongside a large selection of video and DVD, this must represent a historical treasure-trove of Indian film in one location. Outside of such consumer spaces, music is just as much alive: in the streets, music comes from market stalls, taxis and auto-rickshaws. It is even used for more organised occasions such as weddings, elections and religious events.⁷ In India, therefore, cinema plays beyond the cinema screens and television sets which on the whole constrict films in the West, and inadvertently is transported through its music into its homes, streets and cities.

It was with the innovation of sound, reaching Indian cinema in 1931, that allowed the fusion of cinema and music to occur from the very beginning.⁸ That since then almost every film has contained songs sung by its characters makes India's silent cinema seem like a dark-age that only served to delay the natural transition from the folk music of pre-

⁵ Ibid., p.78

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

cinema to the merging of music with film in the all-singing sound era.⁹ A film without music in Bollywood is seen as conflicting with the mainstream, whereas in contemporary Hollywood musicals are scarce and serve to remind filmgoers of what was a once-popular genre. In this respect, the comparison between Hollywood and Bollywood presents us with oppositional industry practices, and, as we shall see, different kinds of audiences.

I will now look at the function of music within the films themselves, using *Lagaan* (2001) as an example. *Lagaan* is a particularly high-profile Bollywood film that received a kind of acceptance in the West when it was nominated for Best Foreign film at the 2002 Academy Awards and was a huge success in domestic and foreign markets. This film contains six songs along with a composed score that appears regularly throughout.

In an attempt to define the function of songs in Bollywood cinema, Tejaswini Ganti tells us that, ‘To those unfamiliar with popular Hindi cinema, song sequences seem to be ruptures in continuity and verisimilitude. However, rather than being an extraneous feature, music and song in popular cinema define and propel plot development.’¹⁰ According to this definition, then, songs have a narrative function: to aid the story on its course. I would argue that this definition would apply for certain examples but that songs serves several different functions at once. Firstly, the songs do not always aid plot development. In *Lagaan*, The villagers of the film are experiencing a drought and are unable to grow enough food unless the rains come. The first song, which appears about thirty minutes into the film, occurs when the villagers see heavy clouds coming in the

⁹ Ibid., p.11

¹⁰ Ibid., p.80

distance and they break into a celebratory song and dance. It would seem as though a significant plot point is occurring: that the drought is ending and their situation, and the film's plot, is changing direction. Yet as the song ends, the skies clear and it becomes apparent that the villagers sang too soon. The arrival of the clouds, therefore, is a kind of bluff for both the villagers and the audience. The coming of the clouds and the celebratory song suggests that the story is moving forward, but by the end of the song, their situation has not changed for the better nor for the worse.

This song must have other functions, then, if it is not aiding the narrative. There is a sense that this song occurs for its own sake, almost because this is a Bollywood film and this is what is expected. It would therefore be a celebration of song and dance itself, an uplifting and joyous indulgence. Yet it has further purpose than this. If it does not have a narrative purpose, then it does serve to define character; in this case, of the villagers as a whole, as a close-knit and passionate community and the passion with which they sing reaffirms the sheer importance of the coming rain and how essential it is for the villagers. The story makes sure to position the rain, food and *lagaan* (the tax they are forced to pay) as life or death situations for the villagers.

Talking about the difference between Hollywood and Bollywood musicals, critics Gokulsing and Dissanayake write that,

whereas Hollywood filmmakers strove to conceal the constructed nature of their work so that the realistic narrative was wholly dominant, Indian filmmakers made

no attempt to conceal the fact that what was shown on the screen was a creation, an illusion, a fiction.¹¹

This suggests that Bollywood cinema is self-conscious, aware of itself and its audience. The song and dance sequences, then, break from the realism of the film and exists within a different set of rules. This shift between different modes of realism causes the film to become aware of its own illusionary machinations. The audience must by now understand this break in realism, causing a relationship between the film and the audience that differs from the Hollywood norm. In the second song of *Lagaan*, for example, the actors line up as though on a stage, clearly performing directly for an audience: *the* audience sitting in the cinema. At another point Amir Khan's character Bhuvan looks directly into the camera while singing. This reveals a direct relationship between the film and its audience, a sense of the audience being explicitly *shown* something by the actors on the screen.

It is Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel that make the connection between Bollywood cinema and Tom Gunning's theories of the cinema of attraction.¹² However, they do not explore this connection in any detail. In relation to Gunning's theory of the cinema of attractions, Bollywood song and dance sequences are temporally very interesting. Gunning, talking about the mini-spectacles of early cinema, writes:

¹¹ K. Moti Gokilsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003), p.95

¹² Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p.30

In effect, attractions have one basic temporality, that of the alternation of presence/absence that is embodied in each act of display. In this intense form of present tense, the attraction is displayed with the immediacy of a “Here it is! Look at it.”¹³

“Here it is! Look at it” is exactly what Amir Khan is doing when he looks into the camera, willing the audience to watch the spectacle unfolding before them. There is also a sense, however, that temporally, these songs do not ‘unfold’ but occur in the ‘intense form of present tense’ that Gunning mentions. The fourth song of the film demonstrates this. In this song the love triangle between the hero, Bhuvan (Amir Khan), Gauri (Gracy Singh) the village girl, and Elizabeth (Elizabeth Russell) the English sister of the villainous Captain Russell, is emphasised. The narrative does appear to halt for this sequence to be carried out. Within the sequence, we witness a temporal, as well as spatial, freedom, as the film cuts between Bhuvan and Gauri in the daytime, and Elizabeth in both the day and night time, as well as to fantasies of Elizabeth as one of the villagers, and Bhuvan as one of the English aristocracy dancing with Elizabeth at a ball. Within this, the location and the characters’ costumes change between shots, making clear that the rules and logic of realism that govern the narrative sequences of the films are not adhered to. This turns the sequence into a fantasy that merges the psychological perspectives of three different characters at once. Cutting between different locations,

¹³ Tom Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’ The temporality of the cinema of attractions’ in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds.), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.44

costumes, and possibly even different perspectives, would not appear out of place in a Hollywood montage or even a European art film. Yet the fact that the characters are singing diegetically to non-diegetic music whilst moving across disparate locations fuses contradictory temporal logic together. This contradicts the temporal rules of the narrative sequences, and since the narrative stops for this fantasy (which freely commands space and time) to play out, these songs appear to be carried out within a space where time is temporarily frozen and has no say, in other words, in the ‘intense form of the present tense’ that Gunning talks about.

Bollywood star Shahrukh Khan, discussing the relationship between Indian audiences and the films on-screen, says that the audience fully understands this break in reality and it is openly accepted that they must suspend their disbelief.¹⁴ The filmmakers too, then, fully understand the liberties of song and dance sequences. This translates into the film itself wherein it becomes self-conscious of itself as a film, inadvertently commenting on the illusionary nature of cinema in an almost playful way. One would not expect to find such self-reflexivity in a cinema so intent on creating pure entertainment. Many respected *auteurs* of world cinema have attempted the same kind of self-reflexivity in their films, such as Godard’s turning the camera in on itself in *Le Mépris* (1963) or characters discussing the very scene they are in and looking at the camera in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), or even Abbas Kiarostami’s video epilogue to *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), showing the crew on set making the film we have just seen. Except that Bollywood cinema does not achieve this in such a self-conscious, purposeful way; it is a byproduct

¹⁴ Ganti, *Bollywood*, p.202

of a system that has been established over time. Bollywood, then, is positioned some way between the realism and continuity that Hollywood maintains and the extremes of the *avant-garde*.

This direct relationship between the screen and the audience extends to outside of the films themselves. Sutanu Gupta, a Bollywood screenwriter, talking about how much harder he believes it is to write a Bollywood screenplay than a Hollywood screenplay, said in an interview that,

audiences have a very set belief that the kind of entertainment which is given in cinema should be containing everything – they should see part of family life; they should see romance; they should have songs; they want everything! Which becomes very difficult. At the same time they hate hodge-podge films. They want to know what is the emphasis – whether it's an action film, a thriller, a revenge, or a ghost or a love story.¹⁵

There is certainly a sense that Bollywood is quick to appease the demand of the audience, that their desire is translated by the filmmakers directly to their cinema screens, suggesting a communicative relationship between audience and filmmakers. Yet this discerning of what the audience wants must have been established over many years, and, like Hollywood, it appears as though it is their main priority to make sure the entertainment they produce fulfils every desire and in this way makes the experience as

¹⁵ Ibid., p.174

purely entertaining as possible. It almost seems appropriate to mention Richard Dyer's article 'Entertainment and Utopia' here, as though Bollywood cinema fulfils every incomplete desire that their audience has and presents it to them on-screen over and over again.¹⁶ Yet in light of this, cinema in India serves a very vital purpose. Director Aditya Chopra tells us about the importance of cinema in society:

Here, the common man, his ultimate dream, is escapism, is to watch films... That's his ultimate, because you're dealing to a country of have-nots...people here who work throughout the day, earn daily wages, and probably skip a meal to see a film! So he has the right to take his films very seriously and he does take his films very seriously, so that's why [the filmmakers] need to take it very seriously.¹⁷

The intense popularity of the cinema in India, then, stems from the vital position of cinema in people's lives. Cinema functions as an escapism, as an entertainment and as the dominant cultural form (in place of theatre or opera¹⁸), and as we have seen, the very reason for this is the pleasure and spectacle that the audience derive from its musical sequences. It is this vital position of cinema in people's lives that lead to the popularity of music outside of the cinema since it reminds its listeners of being back in the cinema;

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia' in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movie and Methods vol. 2* (California: University of California Press, 1985)

¹⁷ Ganti, *Bollywood*, pp.193-4

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.193

they are going to the movies vicariously through the music. This also explains why even though, as screenwriter Sutanu Gupta mentioned earlier, audiences demand genre films, the genre is always also a musical. With the audience's appetite for musicals, diversity in Bollywood cinema can only go so far.

Cinema also takes up much television air-time with a variety of film programmes, mainly centred around the music. Shows that, for example, play only the musical scenes of films, and even film-music game shows.¹⁹ It would appear, then, that Bollywood cinema culture reaches far further than cinema does in the West, infiltrating other media industries and most crucially, having a vital place in people's lives. Their relationship to cinema is much more intense than in the West, both outside and inside of the cinema. Inside of the cinema, the audience is addressed directly by the film on-screen during the fantastical sequences of music, sequences that fulfil their desires for spectacle and escape. It is through its use of music, then, that Bollywood cinema has created such a uniquely intimate relationship between its films and its audience, and such a uniquely intense film-going culture.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.79

Bibliography

Chakravarty, Sumita S., *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993)

Dissanayake, Wimal and Gokilsing, K. Moti, *Indian Popular Cinema* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003)

Dwyer, Rachel and Patel, Divia, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002)

Dyer, Richard, 'Entertainment and Utopia' in Nichols, Bill (ed.), *Movie and Methods vol. 2* (California: University of California Press, 1985)

Ganti, Tejaswinti, *Bollywood: a guidebook to popular Hindi cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Gunning, Tom, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't'" The temporality of the cinema of attractions' in Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer (eds.), *The Silent Cinema Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Mishra, Vijay, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Filmography

Lagaan (India, 2001), dir: Ashutosh Gowariker

Le Mépris (France/Italy, 1963), dir: Jean-Luc Godard

Pierrot le Fou (France/Italy, 1965), dir: Jean-Luc Godard

A Taste of Cherry (Iran, 1997), dir: Abbas Kiarostami

very different to that of Hollywood. It dominates life and music itself causes cinema's relationship with its audience to be a far more intimate one as it personally addresses the audience and forges a sense of community.

and in turn explains the popularity of music; perhaps music is popular partly because it reminds its listeners of being at the cinema. It is interesting that audiences demand a genre for their films, yet whichever genre the film is, it is always also a musical. Diversity in Bollywood cinema, then, can only go so far.

It is a testament to the popularity of the musical that audiences do not demand something radically different, especially since movies spill out of the cinema and infiltrates many other aspects of society. As we have seen, film music plays on the street and in the home. It also takes up much television air-time with a variety of film programmes, mainly centred around the music. Shows that, for example, play only the musical scenes of films, and even film music game shows

See pp.192-3

The audience, then, want clearly defined genres. Interestingly, all these genres mentioned here are also musicals.

[The way the screenwriter talks about the audience suggests an openly communicative relationship between the filmmakers and the audiences, that the audiences have the greatest influence upon the films, that their desires become directly represented on the screen.]

Melodrama?

This is similar

[[This is comparable to the kind of postmodern, self-reflexive devices of such high-art extremes as Jean-Luc Godard in *Le Mepris* showing us audiences on-screen or characters looking into the camera in *Pierrot le Fou*, or Abbas Kiarostami's video epilogue to *A Taste of Cherry*, showing the camera crew and actors of the film we have just seen. Except that, such results do not have to be so explicitly made but clearly happen inadvertently, even in the perceived broad entertainment of Bollywood.

Contrary

Rachel Dwyer, Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002)

p.30:

‘A Cinema of Attractions?’

Ravi Vasudevan argues that in Indian cinema the ‘relationship between narrative, performance sequence and action spectacle is loosely structured in the fashion of a cinema of attractions.’

‘The main ‘attractions’ of Hindi cinema include the sets and costumes, action sequences (‘thrills’), presentation of the stars, grandiloquent dialogues, song and dance sequences, comedy interludes and special effects. These attractions are part of the problem that has held back the Hindi film industry from gaining recognition as a form of cultural capital.

p.35:

‘I must contest the absurd claim that in some way music is more important in India than elsewhere. Perhaps there is some confusion with the decline of participation in making music in the West, for music remains omnipresent there too.

Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.), *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 2000)

‘Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema’, Ashish Rajadhyaksha

p.267

‘an approximate 23 million people, over 2 per cent of our total national population (and possibly half the population of many established film-making nations), go to the cinema every *day*. It is also the case that this audience has been, over the broad part of this century, remarkably resistant to the cultural invasion of Hollywood.

The spectacle of them is reminiscent of the spectacle discussed

Time. Splitting a moment. (maybe later?)

The film often deals with such extremes: Melodrama. ‘The film does position food, rain and *lagaan* into a life or death issue.’

An interesting relationship with the audience

melodrama

The ‘sentimentality’ in a Bollywood film, I would argue, functions differently to the sentimentality that Hollywood is often criticised for. Whereas sentimentality in Hollywood is seen as a forced, and therefore dishonest, expression of emotions, the sentimentality found in *Lagaan* comes across as a surprisingly honest expression. The minutia of a mere cricket match is amplified to signify a matter of life and death for the villagers.

Music fits comfortably within this melodrama

Relationship with the audience: Also, for the audience, it is the sheer spectacle of the song and dance that rids it of any need for explanation.

These song and dance sequences are temporally interesting. Tom Gunning, talking about the mini spectacles of the Cinema of Attraction relates the early films of occurring, ‘---in the present tense’.

I’m showing the audience that there is a man who’s jumping from 100 feet, on the back of a horse, and nothing happens to him or his genitals, and he rides off very happily on this horse and goes and saves the princess. They *know* it is unreal! You know, there’s a level of intelligence which 100 percent understands it’s unreal, *but*, you are sitting there, you say, “I forgive that, *yaar!* I know it’s unreal *yaar!*”

(while the music overhead is, as in many Hollywood musicals, non-diegetic), connects

in a way that defies reality’s (as well as Hollywood’s) laws of space and time.

Since the narrative seems to stop for this fantasy to play out, and that within this sequence space and time are

These musical sequences are abstract fantasies, freely commanding time and space. They stop the film in its tracks and appear to be carried out within frozen time.

A Bollywood screenwriter, talking about

The arrival of clouds works as a kind of bluff for the villagers, as well as the audience. The break into song suggests that their situation has changed and that the story is moving forward. However, by the end of the song, their situation has not changed at all.

This song, then, does not propel the plot and send the story in another direction. The song brings the illusion of a change in plot, but that disappears with the clouds. What it does do is affirm

In the first song the villagers sing and dance about the heavy clouds they see coming, believing the rains to finally be arriving and the drought to be over. Yet the villagers sang too soon since as the song ends, the skies clear.

The importance of music.

Melodrama

The function of music in Lagaan.

Film and the Media: TV, etc.

The films that emerge from Bollywood appear, before all else, as vehicles for songs that will then have afterlives outside of the films from which they came.

From Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood*: The anticipation of the monsoon rains is likened to the anticipation of one's lover. P.81

An interesting investigation would be finding out whether Richard Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia' model, designed for classical Hollywood cinema, would fit when held up against Hindi cinema.

A melodrama of honesty

expression of dishonest and ingenuine

Lagaan

There are six songs in *Lagaan*

In the first song the villagers sing and dance about the heavy clouds they see coming, believing the rains to finally be arriving and the drought to be over. Yet the villagers sang too soon since as the song ends, the skies clear.

The second is a rousing, uplifting song that coincides with the gaining of extra players, about being unafraid to meet challenges.

They line up as though on a stage, clearly performing for an audience.

It appears to move the story forward but in fact it merely reinstates what has already been made clear: that players are needed. ---'s courage and the absolute necessity of his finding a team is dwelled upon and highlighted.

With this song, they slowly win over other players who join them in their celebratory dance.

3rd song: Krishna's birthday. In this song Gauri's jealousy becomes apparent,

The songs, therefore, do not propel the plot but develop character.

4th song makes clear the love triangle and ---'s indecision between the two women.

5th song a rousing reinstatement of the villager's strong will and a training montage of the villagers.

6th song: a song of encouragement and prayer instigated by the women of the village

~~7th song: a reprise of 1st song as rain arrives~~

Music is fundamental to a cinema that is integral to its nation and society.

[How big the film industry is, therefore how big the music industry is. Audience numbers. – see Bombay cinema and diasporic desire?]

Preface of *Temples of Desire*: 'The interesting thing about the match in *Lagaan* is that the subaltern side wins but not before, as is the norm in Bollywood cinema, divine intercession is prayed for the night before the final day of the match.' P.xx