



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity by Sheldon H. Lu
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However, the analysis of Bollywood Cinema's appeal in the diaspora might have been developed further. Mishra makes some valid points about the cinema's simplified representations of the diaspora in recent films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), as well as its efforts to appeal to the diaspora not just in the films themselves, but through satellite television and live concert performances. His evaluation of the Canadian film *Masala* (1991) also brings up important questions about the perception of an authentic India in diasporic cultures. Yet his definition of the diaspora itself remains categorized as uniformly unhappy and passive, with only brief references to gender and geographical, generational, and religious differences in their interpretations of Bollywood Cinema, and more generally, of Indian identity. While Mishra's observations of isolation and longing within diasporic communities are certainly true, more attention should be paid to examining these differences further, especially in light of a number of recent films not mentioned in this book that have been produced by diasporic Indians and influenced by Bollywood Cinema.

Yet overall, *Bollywood Cinema* remains a groundbreaking text that exhibits great methodological versatility in outlining how the cinema's conflicting desires for tradition and modernity have been reproduced throughout its history. Increased global visibility from diasporic and non-Indian realms will undoubtedly play a role in Bollywood's next manifestation.

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China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity

By Sheldon H. Lu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001. \$55.00 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

For Western enthusiasts of Asian cinema, there's been an intriguing schism in the past decade or so between the massive international popularity of New Chinese filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige and those same filmmakers' endless battles against suppression in their own country. While these directors' overtly political works have been censored heavily in China, complicated economic and political factors (along with the increasingly vital international film festival market) have made them celebrities on the American art-house circuit, bringing the local (these directors generally focus on primitive, rural settings—sometimes subtly catering to Westerners' racist impressions of the Chinese as a "backward" people) to the global on a major scale. Anyone wishing to understand this contradiction—as well as just about anything else about the state of Chinese art and academia in the 1990s—will find a useful resource in Professor Sheldon H. Lu's *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, an ambitious attempt to chart the changing roles

of China's intellectuals and artists in an era of postmodern confusion over national identity.

The post-Cold War period has unleashed a shift in intellectual discourse in China, as both practical and political concerns have led to a more fluid sense of national identity and a corresponding lessening of influence on the part of academia. In his lengthy but extremely thorough first section of the book, titled "Theory, Criticism, Intellectual History," Lu addresses the confusion between the traditional and the postmodern that permeates every aspect of Chinese politics and culture in the wake of upheavals from the violence at Tiananmen Square to the return of Hong Kong from colonial British rule in 1997. While Lu acknowledges that post-socialist China's global position is fairly clear in terms of politics and economics, the cultural dimension is far more slippery and complex, and filled with contradictions that this book tries (mostly successfully) to delineate. China still operates under the ostensible stability of state rule, but the regime's policy of loosening economic restrictions (throughout the 1990s China became more and more integrated into the system of global capitalism) while tightening the grip on political freedom creates unusual problems for the country's artists and academics, as tastes are no longer dictated by the intellectual elite. Many of China's leading thinkers were forced into exile by the failure of the 1989 Democracy Movement, and an exploding culture industry has emerged to take their place, an industry that has found massive success with films, TV programs, best-selling books and pop music.

In this context, Lu defines transnational visuality as "the conventions and strategies of representing China in the post-modern age of global visual spectacles," and he includes many examples of such representations in order to explore the ways that China is perceived both by its own people and by the West (along with the ways in which the West is perceived by China). The films of the New Chinese directors and the oil paintings of "political pop" artists are particularly relevant to this topic, in that their importance in the global film festival and art markets contradicts their lack of visibility in their country of origin. The oil paintings of political pop, which combine concepts from American pop art with Chinese political icons, are censored on the mainland but earn their artists millions in the international marketplace (creating a contradiction on top of a contradiction, as critiques of commercialism become commercial products themselves). By the same token, the films of Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and their peers are largely financed internationally rather than domestically, and Lu points out that the political content that makes these films nearly unscreenable in China is what makes them hits on the world film festival circuit—and that critics of both these movies and the political pop movement would argue that the works' success is motivated more by political than artistic considerations.

Although references to Chinese films occur throughout the volume, the author's most intensive discussions of movies occur in the book's second section, titled, appropriately enough, "Cinema." Lu focuses largely on the usual suspects—widely discussed filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai—but delves more deeply into questions

of national identity than most other Western writers on the topic. Rather than trying to provide a comprehensive survey of important Chinese movies in the 1990s, the writer chooses a handful of specific texts that serve to illuminate the implications of the ongoing exchange of images between China and the West. This approach is especially enlightening in the author's analysis of Zhou Xiaowen's 1994 film, *Ermo*, a film about a peasant woman's attempts to acquire the biggest TV set in her village. Lu uses the movie's deceptively simple narrative as a springboard for a discussion of global postmodern culture, addressing what the film has to say about China's consumption of Western television programs like "Dynasty"; Lu also explores what *Ermo*'s international success says about the international art film audience's desires and interests (like many of Zhang and Chen's hits, *Ermo* downplays China's urban, modern landscape to orientalize and exoticize itself for the world market). The complicated transnational exchange of images that *Ermo* represents both literally within its narrative and on a more abstract theoretical level is emblematic of the sort of postmodernity that Lu is interested in examining, a postmodernity often practiced by artists and intellectuals of "flexible citizenship." These people, often born in China but now residing in Western countries, are responsible for the ways in which China is represented to global audiences, and in appropriating postmodernism they've found ways of asking questions about national identity amidst the challenges that China faces in the new century.

The downside to Lu's selective approach in his discussion of cinema is that while the individual analyses are pointed and original, the films seem at times to exist in a bit of a vacuum—there's little real sense of the politics and business of the Chinese film industry, or of the individual movies' context in terms of Chinese cinema as a whole. Given the author's focus on mapping China's relationship not only to the global community but to itself, the limited attention given to the reception of the films under discussion in their own country seems to be a misstep. Still, this is a minor complaint given how strong the book is on the other end of the equation, as it provides an endlessly fascinating series of commentaries on stars such as Anita Mui and Maggie Cheung and their relationships to Western audiences. In a chapter titled *The Heroic Trio* (named after a famous Hong Kong action film and coauthored with Anne T. Ciecko), Lu takes a look at Olivier Assayas's brilliant *Irma Vep*, a French film starring Cheung that uses its tale of a Chinese star being fired from a French movie to unleash a complex series of discourses about the self and the other. Cheung, who grew up in Britain, represents a complicated collection of postcolonial dilemmas regarding cultural identity, and Assayas takes advantage of Cheung's real-life biography as well as her public persona to create what Lu calls "a witty commentary on the fluid boundaries of global media."

As part of its project to map the complex cultural relationship between China and the West, the book also offers some intriguing revisionist analyses of popular English-language films, analyses that illuminate the political and economic issues under discussion as well as the specific movies

that the author references. Lu's examination of the 1997 James Bond movie, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, is particularly provocative and insightful as he explores how the film's tale of a media mogul's attempt to manufacture a war between China and Britain skillfully remaps the relationship between the two countries in the post-Cold War period. Lu also examines how the iconic figure of Michelle Yeoh, the Hong Kong action superstar who served as Pierce Brosnan's co-star in the Bond film, led Western audiences away from Suzie Wong stereotypes and toward a stronger image of Asian womanhood—and how, by extension, she challenged the Bond films' traditional sexism and misogyny. Of course, the irony is that in spite of the movie's attempt to place China and Britain on an equal level, it's still an "imperial film," with its successful release serving as a supreme example of the dominance of the Western media industry reinforced by a vast worldwide distribution network.

The subsequent sections of the book continue to define China's cultural landscape via the arts and entertainment, focusing on literature, soap operas, and avant-garde art. One of the book's greatest strengths is its complex approach to the relationship between academic theory and sociopolitical reality. Lu points out that while the Cultural Revolution may have been an inspiration for Western Marxist theory, the reality of it was a nightmare for the majority of Chinese citizens who lived through it. This may be an obvious observation in one sense, yet the author's approach is more complicated—he is able to acknowledge the tunnel vision of various schools of academic thought while still reinforcing the validity of those schools' insights. Lu also leads the way for intellectuals looking to place Chinese postmodernity in a context of recent academic thought, pointing out the unsettling alliance between popular culture, patriarchal discourse, and transnational capital that characterizes the Chinese media. One reason Zhang Yimou finds his films under constant attack by state officials is that they provide a devastating critique of Chinese masculinity—in a patriarchal society, Zhang's portrayals of men who are unable to function sexually or save their spouses and children are as incendiary as the films' overt political content.

The only downside to Lu's breadth is that at times the organization of the book seems a bit haphazard—key concepts such as transnational visibility are often defined a bit too late in the game, and sometimes discussions of individual works are split up across hundreds of pages when a more concentrated analysis might be more effective. This, however, is nitpicking, given the book's massive ambition and seriousness of thought, and in the end the author delivers on his promise to immerse the reader in late twentieth century China's cultural landscape. Ultimately the volume's greatest relevance comes from the fact that while it's both thorough and specific in terms of its detailed breakdown of Chinese art and culture, it nevertheless has a universal and timely theme: the question of whether or not nationalism is still relevant in the age of globalization. The addition of another question into the mix—what exactly are the intellectual and artist's roles in such a complex, ever changing cultural landscape?—makes *China, Transnational Visibility*,

Global Postmodernity a consistently informative and provocative work.

Jim Hemphill is a screenwriter and critic based in Los Angeles.

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Cinema India

The Visual Culture of Hindi Film

By Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002. \$24.00.

Cinema India is a legitimately self-proclaimed first: a scholarly analysis of the aesthetics and iconography of Hindi popular film as markers of both national and cultural identities. As the authors put forth in their introduction, their aim is to “explore that visual culture, its production and reception, and its cultural, historic and aesthetic significance.” Gratifyingly, the book fills in some holes in extant Hindi film publications—especially those of more recent years, which have employed ideological or political slants that are often overly complex and only marginally tied to the actual song-and-dance formula films that colorfully speckle the Indian landscape.

Rachel Dwyer, who has authored several books on Hindi film (most notably on the currently in vogue romance dramas), handles the historical overview of the industry and a close reading of two of its most tangible components of film style: settings and costumes. Divia Patel brings her palpable knowledge as an assistant curator in the Asian department of the Victoria and Albert Museum to the latter half of the book, with a historical account of film advertising and an in-depth analysis of the unmistakable, epically loud Hindi film poster.

Given *Cinema India*'s focus on the visual culture of Hindi film, its own production values are appropriately in sync: its high-gloss pages are chock-full of visuals, many in the rich, saturated colors that have come to define the contemporary Hindi film. If that seems like a trite concern on the part of this reviewer, it should be noted that just about every book on the subject up to this point has significantly lacked these qualities. Stills and images from this visually ripe industry have been infrequent in publications, and rarely have they appeared in the bold, vivid, sometimes kitschy, colors of their originals. In that respect, this book brings to its readers the visual stimulation, even hyper-stimulation, for which Bollywood (the Hollywood of Bombay) is famous, and this alone makes the book something of a requisite for Hindi film abecedarians. Indeed, the book's repeated mention of the significance to the genre of the cultural practice of *darshan*—that is, of a secularized Hindu “seeing,” whereby a look is a *two-way* affair that transpires “between the devotee and the deity that establishes religious authority”—is just as applicable to the book's own visual content and format. For, if such movies invite “*darshan* by [their] use of tableaux,” as the authors contend, then certainly denying readers those tab-

leaux reduces the impact of what it means to engage with a Hindi film.

Looks are of course not enough, and it is in the textual department that *Cinema India* exhibits some unevenness. The book begins with promising lucidity and a compact but comprehensive introduction to the history of Indian cinema. “Indian Cinema,” as chapter 1 is titled, tackles Hindi film's antecedents, its fragmentation into various subgenres (historicals, mythologicals, and stunt films), and even the misconceptions as regards its evolution as a national popular form. It appropriately debunks attempts by previous scholars to apply the rarefied *rasa* theory of aesthetic to the Hindi film and serves as a corrective to an earlier overemphasis on the “indigenous Indianness” of Hindi film—a viewpoint that doesn't adequately take into account all the multidirectional global flows of information, technology, fashion, culture, and such. Dwyer, instead, pays good attention to the century-long cross-pollination that resulted ultimately in the Hindi *masala* (“spice mix” formula) film: that is, the complex assortment of tensions, importations, and appropriations by and between colonizer and colonized, between north and south India, between Hindus and Muslims, nation and regions, state and individual, and Bollywood and Hollywood, to name a few. Here, too, is where the reader will find theoretical conjecture concerning the Hindi film's melodramatic form and its formulaic inclusion of song and dance, and will be introduced to the relationship between the Indian movie star and that aforementioned practice of *darshan*. Finally, the chapter addresses oft dismissed aspects of filmmaking in Indian popular cinema, such as distribution practices and working conditions.

It is in chapter 2, “Film Style: Settings and Costumes,” that the book disappointingly falters—not because of its intentions but because it delimits those intentions too narrowly. Indeed, as the authors maintain, a book that deals with the aesthetics of Hindi film has been long overdue, but, by focusing in this chapter almost exclusively on settings and costumes, only lip service is paid to other very integral and equally, if not more, significant cinematic components of film style and language—mise-en-scène, editing, sound. True, much of value could be illuminated vis-à-vis the aesthetic of the Hindi film industry from a study of these two elements, and Dwyer does investigate some worthwhile territory: the uses (and abuses) of women's clothing as a means of reinforcing patriarchy, location as spectacle, and sites of modernity as signifiers of authority. Unfortunately, Dwyer's approach is far too descriptive—and non-chronologically so—and only thinly analytical. As such, the chapter feels highly anecdotal, bereft of the rest of the book's historical grounding. In fact, the chapter has the feel of a long magazine exposé rather than of scholarly critique. (I was not at all surprised to discover—in fact, suspicion led to my searching the acknowledgements for confirmation—that this section of the material had been published elsewhere, in a book called *Fashion Cultures*.) It is unfortunate that this chapter feels almost like a departure from the rest of the text's concerted effort to explore with greater historical rigor the many facets of Indian popular film's visual style.