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Introduction to Film Studies

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<div align="center">Breaking Hollywood: Unapologetic Filmmaking</div>

Popular Indian cinema is overt, extravagant, chaotic, and unapologetically entertaining. Breaking away from so-called "traditional" Western narrative structures, themes, and storytelling devices, the popular masala format is a melting pot of genres that many Indian films employ in order to create an exorbitant plot with references to popular media, the use of rasa theory acting, and frequent song and dance numbers. By being simultaneously scattered yet closely intertwined with the stories that Indian cinephiles know and love, this masala format balances familiarity and unpredictability to create a product that no commercial Hollywood first-cinema film can replicate.

One of the most essential devices that the masala film form employs is that of familiarity and nostalgia; by casting famous actors from the Indian cinematic field and referencing both Indian and Western storylines this form of Indian film appeals to the dedicated Indian cinephile fanbase and is especially crafted for their enjoyment. *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007) is a prime example of this intertextuality—a term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to "the processes of cross-referencing by a text that relies overtly on other texts" (Shastri 2011, 32). When looking at its casting, one can see a lineup of famous stars including Shah Ruhk Khan who first began his acting career in 1992 and has since been featured in nearly one hundred films. As an Indian cinema actor, his fan base stretches internationally, and his performing presence alone is an attraction grand enough to draw in audiences. Although actress Deepika Padukone was not a

familiar face prior to *Om Shanti Om* and in fact made her acting debut in the film, her role is still one marked by familiarity and nostalgia. According to Shastri (34), Padukone's character, Shanti Priya, herself was "a throwback to Bollywood actress Hema Malini," a popular Indian actress from the 1970s.

In this way, the nostalgic nature of the masala film in terms of on screen talent is highly versatile, for filmmakers not only recruit popular living actors, but many also take an ontological approach to their cinema, incorporating references to actors of the past. In the case of *Om Shanti Om*, filmmaker Farah Khan goes as far as to include the real video images of deceased Indian cinema actors of the past within the film. During the number "Dhoom Taana," which in the diegetic reality of the film takes place in the 1970's, character Shanti Priya is seen dancing, singing, and interacting with deceased actors of that era. As a celebration of both Indian cinema of the 1970's and Indian cinematic fanbase culture, the scene depicts a viewing of Shanti Priya's latest film. During this scene, the camera begins showing the diegetic reality of both Shah Ruhk Khan and Deepika Padukone's first principal characters, Om Makhija and Shanti Priya, as they sit in a large and highly decorated movie theater. However, as the camera pans to show Priya sitting in her box seat, the format of the film completely changes, switching to depict a frame-within-a-frame view. Priya is seen not as herself but as a character she is portraying as an actress, and surrounding her are dozens of background dancers. The mise en scène of the film undergoes a dramatic shift as the scenes rapidly change from location to location—from a storm-ridden forest with flaming pillars, to a red and gold room adorned with lights, to a neon pink tennis court, to a pirate-ridden beach. The one constant throughout the entire scene is the presence of Priya's characters in her frequently changing yet always extravagant outfits, hair, and makeup with her frequently changing male counterpart. These over-the-top adornments as well

as the comically fraudulent background seem to serve no use to further the plot, however, within the diegetic reality of Priya's character, it serves to illustrate the love between her and her male counterpart without the depictions of explicit intimacy. Furthermore this portrayal of love transcends the reality-within-a-reality of the film, for in the audience Om Makhija mentally casts himself as the role of Priya's counterpart, allowing his love for the real Shanti Priya to fester.

In the implied profilmic reality of the film that Om Makhija and Shanti Priya are watching, the character of Shanti Priya's male counterpart is played by the aforementioned deceased actors of the 1970s. Not only does this contribute to the periodical setting of the film and stay in line with the film's themes surrounding reincarnation, but it provides audiences with an unexpected yet delightful reference to the popular cinema of yesterday. Additionally, given the familiarity of these actors to audience members, two types of parasocial relationships are formed between the audience and the actors. One type is of romance, such as the relationship between Makhija and Priya, and one of self-insertion, such as the relationship between Makhija and the actors he replaces himself with. In this way, *Om Shanti Om* uses cinephilia as an attraction device in two ways; one in its profilmic reality by way of casting Shah Rukh Khan as its leading man, and one by way of its depiction of diegetic and parasocial love and relationships within its cinematic reality.

Additionally, the masala film format is heavily defined by its over-acting, which employs the use of the rasa theory. This theory states that there are nine different emotional compartments—love, laughter, fury, compassion, disgust, horror, bravery, wonder, and peace—and masala films engage the use of all of them, often in ways that would be considered unclever or cheap to Hollywood filmmakers. Western cinephilia often places heavy value on auteurism, the idea that a movie's value is placed solely on the work of one filmmaker, often a

straight white male. As stated by Shambu (2019, 34), this perspective typically places a heavy emphasis on storylines that are "'dark,' 'twisted,' 'provocative,' [and] 'edgy,'" and largely created for male viewership. However, the genre of masala film rejects this obsession, instead taking a more theatrical approach to its storytelling. Embedded in both its plot and performance, *Om Shanti Om* draws on the style of melodrama to create an emotionally heightened piece of work which simultaneously challenges Hollywood's belief that storytelling must be dark and grounded in order to be revered.

In *Om Shanti Om*, Shah Rukh Khan's second principle character, the reincarnated Om Kapoor, is on set for his next upcoming film when he takes issue with the plot of the movie and decides to change the script. As Om Kapoor, or OK, speaks, he exercises every muscle in his face to the point where the veins in his neck can be seen flexed against his skin. Within a span of 30 seconds, he throws his papers and walks off the frame as one of his co-creators yells, falls to the ground, and is taken by a heart attack. This level of melodrama would never be seen in Hollywood—yet, it is still taken seriously by Indian cinema viewers because it very authentically emphasizes that passion that OK and his co-creators have for the success of their film. Additionally, it mirrors the passion that filmgoers have about the dramatics of the Indian cinema they consume.

Directly following this short scene, the camera cuts to an extravagant dance number called "Disco of Distress." In this number, OK dances shirtless against female backup dancers with tight, revealing clothing. Filmed in the style of a music video with frequent cuts, pans, and decorative yet seemingly random mise en scene like drapery and rain, this number depicts a type of objectification seen infrequently in Western cinema: objectification for the female gaze. Inherently erotic in nature, the scene features many medium shots of actor Shah Rukh Khan that

put his classically fit body on display. As an actor, Khan does not stray away from the eroticism, but instead invites the viewer to experience the body he puts on display by running his fingers down his chest, thrusting his hips, and staring directly into the camera with a smirk. Although he is surrounded by female characters, they are not the ones the camera is focused on; however, he moves in synchronization with them, embracing the choreography that one may consider to be traditionally feminine. It certainly contrasts the "I'm Just Ken" number from Hollywood's latest box office hit, *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023), for in addition to being created for female viewership, it is inherently queer as well.

Within this scene and dance number, the rasa theory is heavily applied. OK goes through several stages of anger and disgust as he rejects the brief for his film, then makes a quick transition to love, compassion, and wonder as he performs his dance number.

While many Hollywood cinephiles would consider this type of performance to be corny or cheap, it has found great success not just in the world of Indian cinema, but internationally as well, for viewership is practiced in dramatically different ways by both groups of cinematic consumers. Unlike in Hollywood, repeated viewing and audience-participation are popular practices, and that is only possible and enjoyable when the devices of intertextual familiarity and melodramatic acting and performance are applied. Though many Hollywood film cinephiles and filmmakers may not acknowledge or respect Indian cinema as more than just "Bollywood," the Indian film industry is the highest-grossing film industry in the world because of its extravagant storytelling techniques and extensive fan base. By breaking Western stereotypes, it has surpassed Hollywood in terms of both filmmaking stereotypes and economical value.

Another film that rejects traditional Western film techniques and stereotypes both in its film content and creation is *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015). Filmed completely on an iPhone 5 on

the streets of Los Angeles with acting talent recruited from spaces for queer youth, *Tangerine*

depicts a highly authentic yet comical and thought-provoking story surrounding the lives of

black transgender sex workers. In its authenticity, it strays away from the shadows,

unapologetically depicting the poverty and moral grayness in its characters' reality. Yet at the

same time, it refuses to limit its characters and depictions to just those of negative grime and sex

work, instead finding empowerment in the unapologetic nature of the characters, whilst also

imagining a future for its characters that is not limited just to what the streets of Los Angeles

have to offer.

One of *Tangerine*'s most obvious rejections of popular Hollywood cinematography is its

filming apparatus, the iPhone 5. As stated by Malone (2020, 68), it results in a film that is rough

around the edges and overt, with a "highly saturated image" depicting "extremely close shots"

within a frame that contains a "far-reaching depth of field." In doing so, Baker rejects the

modern normative filmmaking techniques typically used by independent filmmakers that include

a low saturation and a shallow depth of field that captures subjects in the foreground yet blurs the

physical environment.

The second scene of *Tangerine* in which Sin-Dee leaves Donut Time to search for the

white "fish" whom her boyfriend had been cheating with her on, the combination of the iPhone

image and energetic editing illustrate both the physical environment and circumstances of

characters Sin-Dee and Alexandra in an aggressively overt way. As Sin-Dee gets out of her seat,

the iPhone positioned outside of the window spies on the women at an angle similar to that of a

surveillance camera, forcing the audience to view them in a voyeuristic way that is embedded

into the diegetic reality of the characters. As Sin-Dee walks out of Donut Time, her footsteps are

accompanied by non-diegetic sounds that resemble clicking gunshots and smashing noises. The

long-shot image of Donut Time is warped due to the iPhone 5's camera quality, making it appear larger in the centermost vertical third of the frame, as though it is reaching out to the viewer. This stretched image remains constant throughout the film, and when paired with the quick pan of the camera following Sin-Dee as she walks down the street, away from Donut Time, it creates a rather disorienting image. However, it is one that the viewer cannot ignore. The camera then breaks the 180 degree rule, moving from behind Sin-Dee's shoulder to the front of her body. It rushes in towards her and she struts down the street, emphasizing that she is on the move and there is nothing in her path that can stop her from finding the white woman her boyfriend had relations with.

As mentioned by Malone (2020, 70), the long depth of field paired with the oversaturation "destabilizes the audience's sense of reality," hiding nothing and emphasizing everything. There is a certain sense of discomfort that the moving image places on the viewer as it forces them to accept this new, overwhelming reality and jump on board with Sin-Dee as she embarks on an adventure that the viewer likely finds morally questionable. However, that moral questionability simply contributes to the unapologetic quality of Sin-Dee's character and builds *Tangerine* up to be the character-driven story that it is. *Tangerine* is not an easy film to watch, not because the plot is difficult to follow like in *Mirror* (Tarkovsky, 1975) or because the historical context might be missing like in *Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1967), but because it is literally so vibrant, loud, and warped that it places a strain on the eyes.

However, this heightened image is necessary in order to match the vibrancy, loudness, and unorthodox nature of the characters. As Sin-Dee walks down the street flaunting her hair and puffing out her chest, she does not try to cover the fact that her hair is a wig and her breasts are inserts because she is not trying to hide the fact that she is transgender. In this way, the iPhone

camera and overwhelming editing help support the characters in creating a world where black transgender women can live unapologetically and be embraced the same way the audiences come to quickly embrace the film. It creates a type of aggressive and exciting empathy where the audience is captivated by how unconcealed and open the characters are, and in turn cannot help but both imagine and accept a world where this warped reality is in fact always the truth.

However, *Tangerine* is also focused on crafting a different narrative. While it uses Sin-Dee's unapologetically overt nature to empower the group it depicts, it also illustrates black, transgender sex workers as nuanced individuals capable of picturing a life that may be considered more traditionally classic than a life of sex work.

The character Alexandra yearns for a different life. Throughout the entirety of the film, she is seen passing out flyers for her singing event to every character that she recognizes on the street in addition to making them verbally agree to attend her show. On the surface, her entertainment performance-related goals and her more poised demeanor contrast with the goals and personality of her best friend Sin-Dee to break the stereotype that all black transgender women have to be portrayed as loud and aggressive in order to be empowering. These two characters balance each other out and show that there is not one way that a black transgender woman should be expected to behave, showing that their "narratives are not homogenous" (Ridley 2019, 482).

Additionally, Alexandra shows that black transgender women are allowed to have dreams, and picture a life that some may consider to be typical only for white cisgender people. Alexandra has her moment to shine towards the middle of the film during her set at the bar. Wearing a tight red dress against a red curtain with her hair slicked and straightened, she presents herself in an elegant image that highly differs from her usually low-cut, skin-tight jeans. The

camera alternates frequently between close-ups on her face as she sings "Toyland" into the microphone, and medium shots of her poised sitting position, cutting away only to show Sin-Dee who refuses to look away from Alexandra. In this moment, Alexandra completely shatters the image that the film had previously constructed surrounding what a black transgender woman, especially one who works as a sex worker on the streets of Los Angeles, not only should act, but is allowed to act.

As she sits, Alexandra's hands are shown squirming. This nuanced acting choice also demonstrates that although she is performing for a nearly empty club for no money, she is still nervous. These nerves stem from her expectations for herself, both in terms of performance and presentation. As mentioned by LaVelle (2019, 486) in "Toyland" Alexandra sings about a life that she is "manifesting" for herself, where she can be a singer rather than confining herself to the societal expectations surrounding how she should present and in what field she can work. In this way, *Tangerine* imagines a world in which black transgender women can unapologetically be open about being transgender and at the same time can picture a life for themselves that transcends the expectations about what being a black transgender woman looks like.

Works Cited

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