

Stockman, head of the Office of Management and Budget, was opposed to social safety nets and froze its appropriation. Russell went to Washington to meet with Republican lawmakers. “I don’t know whether I’m a left-wing Republican or a right-wing Democrat,” she said, emphasizing that she was *for* kids. The funds were unfrozen.

Rice sums up Russell as “a Hollywood sex symbol who studied the Bible when the cameras weren’t rolling,” a world-famous movie star who wasn’t a top box-office draw, and “an advocate of orphaned children who aligned with a political party that challenged the social programs she championed” (310). All true. But none of these dichotomies crystallize Russell’s singular screen presence. For years I’ve wondered why watching her films makes me feel so ridiculously cheerful. Maybe it’s because Russell projects that self-contained resourcefulness I admire in prewar Barbara Stanwyck—and does so in a postwar context when actresses were consigned largely to marriage-minded or helpmate roles. Russell’s persona strikes me as being against the grain for her time—in fact, precociously modern. Never mind that Hughes sold her as Moody, Mean, and Magnificent. What I love her for is more along the lines of Comely, Comic, and eminently Capable.

BOOK DATA. Christina Rice, *Mean . . . Moody . . . Magnificent!: Jane Russell and the Marketing of a Hollywood Legend*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. \$29.95 cloth; \$28.95 e-book. 392 pages.

CARRIE RICKEY, film critic emerita of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, is writing a biography of filmmaker Agnes Varda.

## SUDHIR MAHADEVAN

***Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* by Debashree Mukherjee**  
**and**  
***Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* by Usha Iyer**

Two groundbreaking new books on Indian cinema have been published in the past year, authored by Debashree Mukherjee and Usha Iyer, respectively. Together, the two books span the pre- and postindependence periods of Hindi-language cinema from Bombay.

What should be studied when studying the making of movies, asks Debashree Mukherjee in *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, her inexhaustibly rewarding account of Bombay cinema as it transitioned to sound and strived toward the establishment of an industrial basis for the production of movies. As a former film-industry professional herself, Mukherjee presents the history of Bombay cinema through the “somatic and ethnographic lens” (33)

of her own work experiences in Bombay (now Mumbai), using her “first-hand experience . . . as a sensory route into the past” (37).

*Bombay Hustle* therefore is not an account that settles for the stability of “industry,” “systems,” or “modes of production” as constructs. Instead, Bombay cinema between 1929 and 1942 (roughly the years covered by this book) is described by Mukherjee as a “cine-ecology,” an agglomeration of people, technologies, material practices, urban locations, and sensations that together constituted the cinema as lucrative ideation, alluring spectacle, and back-breaking work.

Mukherjee searches for “the life of cinema” and the “everyday meanings of cinema as filmmaking” (186). Her study underscores, in her choice of words, the volatility, precarity, and speculative nature of filmmaking, and the energy, depletion, and sometimes fatal struggles of those who found themselves pulled in by the allure of the cinema. The result is a profoundly empathetic study that brings alive the endless hustling (hence the title), the “jostle and push” that characterized Bombay cinema and Bombay the city alike (4).

In the first part of the book, “Elasticity: Infrastructural Maneuvers,” Mukherjee describes a “cine-ecology” of film production characterized by intense speculation and risk taking, as well as by hitherto unnoticed technologies of organization and rationalization that have been obscured by subsequent characterizations of the film industry in India as chaotic and disorganized. In the process, Mukherjee corrects lazy and unfavorable comparisons with the mature oligopoly of the Hollywood studio system.

She also answers long-pending questions of why Bombay became the preeminent and first major center of film production in India. It was not solely because of the language of its movies (Hindi-Urdu), as popular and academic accounts often contend. Rather, part of the answer lies in the thorough “financialization of everyday life” under way in Bombay, as indigenous bazaar traders betted on cotton-futures markets while Bombay’s elites engaged in corporate-shares trading. Both forms of speculation saturated the cine-ecology. Cotton merchants invested in film. Studios organized themselves on corporate lines while drawing on indigenous credit markets for loans to pay dividends to shareholders. So literal were the connections (described in fascinating detail) between speculation and filmmaking that film magazines carried cotton prices, and the films of the period routinely featured villains who were paper-savvy gamblers, swindlers, insurance agents, stockbrokers, race bettors, and the like.

If all this sounds like one big “hustle,” it was indeed. But Mukherjee argues that this decentralized, dynamic, and diverse cine-ecology that drew on varied sources of finance while also performatively donning the mantle of corporate rationalization (and selectively appropriating some of its elements) would precisely explain why Bombay cinema thereby became one of the most prolific centers of film production.

Refuting the “disorganization” thesis that has damned this period, Mukherjee’s research also discovers the presence of continuity scripts, double-unit production systems, and divisions of labor and expertise. Industry associations organized exhibitions to convey that they operated along “scientific” lines, in tune with the nationalist valorization of science and industrial organization.

The drive to modernize also characterized the transition to sound in 1931. Films repeatedly and reflexively staged plot lines in which public concerns about whether acting was a respectable profession for women were translated into courtroom scenes of passionate and principled oratory, “an affective vocality” through which the female character would declaim the respectability of her profession in the performing arts. Mukherjee is clear (and the examples abound in her book) that the desire to be modern, both in films and otherwise, obsessively centered on fixing the meanings of the “modern Indian” woman (164).

If the first part of the book documents the “will to modernize” in Bombay’s cine-ecology, the second part, “Energy: Intimate Struggles,” documents the corporeal consequences of doing so on the bodies of those who worked within this cine-ecology (40). Mukherjee refuses to let the silhouetted “spot boy” in a surviving production still or the female extra recede into oblivion.

By 1939, nearly forty thousand workers were employed in Bombay’s film industry (28). Mukherjee’s discussions of these solitary figures and their corporeal microhistories are theoretically motivated. Mukherjee draws on conceptual vocabulary from European (Walter Benjamin) and South Asian (Anand Coomaraswamy) philosophical lineages to illuminate the cinema’s role as a wondrous, awakening medium (220). Conversely, in trying to understand the dramatic bodily depletion (230) that occurred in the hunger strike staged by the famous actress Shanta Apte to protest her working conditions, Mukherjee walks the reader through a wide range of examples that make Apte’s strike meaningful in its context. These include Gandhi’s “bio moral” politics of fasting (263), debates on whether film production ought to come under the purview of a so-called Factories Act and therefore be afforded labor protections,

and thermodynamic models of abstract labor power that influenced elite discourses of labor in British India and elsewhere. The “pervasive aesthetics of vitality” of the period (291) resulted both in fictional accidents, like an accidental car crash that brings romantic lovers together, and nonfictional ones, involving wild animals, uncontrollable mobs, and a dangerous river current that swept away and drowned four stuntmen. What motivated Mohammed Rafique, a stuntman, to reportedly run fatally toward a speeding car (instead of evading it as required by the script) and die? Mukherjee draws on Gilles Deleuze and Franco Berardi to propose that the exhausted cine worker’s desire to be part of cinema found—in this case, “another rhythm.” She points to Rafique’s “negative agency,” his seemingly inexplicable “encounter with another film body [as] an expression of that which has become unbearable in the cine-ecology” (295), the endless toll of life and limb in the intense frenetic pace of moviemaking.

Ultimately, argues Mukherjee, the everyday life of cinema in Bombay was one of complex and incommensurable temporal and spatial rhythms ranging in scale from the global-financial (financial speculation, the stock-market crash, cotton trades) to the individuating and intimate (waiting for a call to work as an extra, decelerating one’s body in a hunger strike, dying a sudden death in an electrocution on set).

Adopting an ethnographer’s gaze to the past, Mukherjee permits the “everyday” and “ecology” both to be understood capaciously and enacted accordingly as method, allowing for an extraordinary range of materials impressively and urgently relevant to an understanding of Bombay cinema. Mukherjee’s book foregrounds issues of labor and work, linking them to film history—among the first to do so in recent scholarship on Indian cinema.

Labor, virtuosic skill, training, and rehearsals also feature centrally in Usha Iyer’s *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema*. Playback singing and song-and-dance sequences are distinctive formal features of Indian commercial cinema that have already been well recognized. Iyer’s book distinguishes itself by attending to the neglected area of film dance, especially to the bodies of dancing women in the history of Hindi cinema. Iyer’s account of film dance, roughly from the 1930s to the 1990s, considers the contributions of not just on-screen stars (dancer-actresses) but also off-screen choreographers, playback singers, costume and set designers, the “cine-choreography” of the camera with the dancing body, and the background dancers—in short, “the many bodies that produce the on-screen performing bodies” (5). Iyer terms this

composite assemblage of animated human and nonhuman elements the “choreo-musicking body” (4–5), and it is an essential premise of this book (and an index of the theoretical *and* historiographical ambition that it fully realizes) that dancing bodies be treated as “interpellated materializations of biology, history, technology” (1).

Initial chapters of the book generate an analytical vocabulary of film dance tailored to Hindi cinema. Iyer distinguishes between song-and-dance sequences that are “narrative numbers” (that tend to extend narrative situations of romance, for instance) and those that are “production numbers.” It is in the latter that dance is foregrounded as an experience of embodied and kinesthetic spectatorship for diegetic and nondiegetic gazes alike, with the female dancer-actress at the center of the spectacle. In these numbers, the male hero is marginalized and the dancer-actress “wrests cinematic authorship” (12) of the movie, flaunting her artistry.

Furthermore, while scholars speak of “song picturization” to underscore the priority accorded to song composition in Hindi cinema, which is then visualized for the screen, Iyer proposes the importance of “dance musicalization” in the history of Hindi cinema (4–5). Here, it is the dancing star’s body and skills that are paramount, even determining the nature of the singing style of the playback singers. Readers familiar with Hindi cinema will instantly recognize Iyer’s example of the link between playback singer Asha Bhosle’s sultry singing voice and the cabaret numbers danced by the Anglo-Burmese Helen in countless iconic Hindi films.

These initial chapters generate extremely insightful readings of iconic dance sequences. Thus, combining an attention to set design through a “body-space-movement” framework with a deconstruction of the dancing body into “zones” of face, torso, and limbs allows Iyer to read the famous “Ek-DoTeen” dance number from *Tezaab* (N. Chandra, 1988) as a “thicky corporeal event” registering the contradictions of that decade of economic deregulation and globalization (198).

Another key ambition of the book is to move beyond frameworks of “ideological suspicion” directed toward the dancing female body (13). Instead, Iyer attends to the “neuro-musculature” that foregrounds labor, the “gestural idiolects” that might undermine social codes and norms, and the “movement vocabularies” that inform the dancing body (6–7). In a series of scintillating chapters that constitute the heart of the book, Iyer charts the range of performative repertoires that have informed styles of film dance since the 1920s. In response to claims that India has lacked a modern

dance tradition, Iyer offers this account of film dance as just such an example.

A history that is at once international, national, and cosmopolitan then unfolds. In the dances performed by the iconic dancing film stars of the 1930s and 1940s, like Sadhona Bose and the mixed-race German-Indian dancer Azurie, one sees the influence of international trends such as the Oriental dances of Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova—trends that were respectable enough to allow middle-class women to enter the world of Indian cinema. In the postindependence period of the 1950s and 1960s, Hindi cinema’s major dancer-actresses like Vyjayanthimala and Waheeda Rehman were trained in classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam.

But, as Iyer argues, the performance repertoires of lower-caste Indian court and temple dancers preceded, influenced, and survived in both Oriental dance and classical Indian dance forms like Bharatanatyam, even as the temple and court dancers were themselves rendered disreputable, their dances gentrified, textualized, and refashioned by Indian social elites. (Ruth St. Denis had reportedly encountered Indian dancing girls at a Coney Island fair.) It is through such processes of embourgeoisement and adaption that marginalized dance forms have made their way into Hindi cinema. The dancing star Helen’s spectacular cabaret dances in Hindi cinema of the 1960s do not just retain the mark of international dancing styles, such as flamenco and cha-cha, but also show the legacy of Anglo-Indian performers who entered the film industry even before the arrival of sound and before the cinema was embraced as a respectable profession by Indian middle-class actresses.

Film dance, argues Usha Iyer, carries the “corporeal histories” of both the subaltern and elite South Asian and international dancing bodies, histories that are not so easily classified along lines of caste, class, religion, and region (13). Performance traditions do not “leave clear textual or archival traces,” but Iyer carefully uncovers them, thread by thread, through “the webs of patriarchal industrial practices” (13).

Indian cinema, Iyer shows, has repeatedly returned to the question of what to do with the dancing woman or with women in public performance cultures. The desire to claim the dancing actress as a socially respectable figure produced the genres of the “dance social” in the 1930s and 1940s and the “melodramas of dance reform” in the 1950s and 1960s, utilizing narratives of recuperation in which social respectability and dance as profession had to be reconciled somehow within the figure of the female star (128, 168).

Readers at this point must surely notice the connection between Debashree Mukherjee's discussion of the "affective vocality" of female characters justifying female public speech and performance in the self-reflexive talkie films of the 1930s and 1940s on the one hand, and the "dance socials" described by Usha Iyer for those same decades that similarly justify dancing on the other. Indeed, there is much that the two books share. Both scholars are invested not only in writing the history of women in Indian cinema but also in restoring Indian cinema's history to its women. Both scholars assume that the real—the historicity of laboring bodies and practices—must be "coaxed" out of the image, which in turn must be seen as an effect of the bodies that work to produce it, not solely as their visual ground. For instance, in her discussion her discussion of *Guide* (Vijay Anand and Tad Danielewski, 1965), Iyer expands the field of historical relations that make the movie meaningful, pointing out the parallels between the diegetic regrets voiced by the male lead in the movie for encouraging the heroine of the film, Rosie (Waheeda Rehman) to follow her passion of dancing on the one hand, and the marital discord between the 1930s dancer-actress Sadhona Bose and her film director husband, Madhu Bose, on the other.

Toward the end of her study, Debashree Mukherjee raises the issue of the relation between Bombay and regional cinemas in India. Films in regional languages other than Hindi were being made in Bombay in the years after the arrival of sound and before other regional centers of film production emerged. Conversely, even after independence, regional studios in South India were producing Hindi-language films with stars of Bombay cinema. Iyer compares the Hindi-language films of the South Indian star Vyjayanthimala, produced by South Indian studios in the 1950s, with subsequent ones produced by Bombay studios, and the variant ways in South India and Bombay showcased Vyjayanthimala's classical dance training in the South Indian dance form of Bharatanatyam.

Certainly, there are key differences in the two scholars' methods. Mukherjee's book is invested in the idea of a deeply relational cine-ecology of "multispecies actants" in which human, machinic, and other elements combine into varying context-specific assemblages (231). Iyer terms the "dancer-actress" an analytical category for the nexus between industry, narrative, and spectatorship, while the terms of such a formulation point toward the centrality of the dancing (human) bodies on-screen, no matter how cine-choreographed and "pleated" with other material elements such bodies may be (6, 9). Fascinatingly, the words that echo from Mukherjee's study are *precarity*, *contingency*,

*risk*, *vitality*, *exhaustion*, and *depletion*, whereas Iyer's account speaks of *virtuosity*, *pleasure*, *delight*, *skill*, *rehearsal*, *training*. Perhaps these differences point to the different objects of each scholar's history: production practices in one, and dancing women in the other.

The subtitle of Mukherjee's book, *Making Movies in a Colonial City*, indicates what is new about this book in terms of academic Indian film studies: a desire to formulate an object of inquiry conceived at a level so broad that it cannot be siloed into subcategories such as industrial or institutional history, or star studies, or genre history. In this, Mukherjee seems to gesture toward the titles of popular histories that one might find of, say, Hollywood, Bollywood, or Hong Kong cinema, but with the rigor of an innovative historian deeply and widely familiar with an extraordinary range of sources to pull off such an expansive account.

The subtitle of Iyer's book includes the phrase *Choreographing Corporeal Histories*, comprising in part a history of stylized gestures and movement vocabularies. It is to Iyer's singular credit that these very gestures and movements can be seen as the effects of professional networks, industry hierarchies, performance histories, and more on the one hand, and the labor and craft of background dancers, choreographers, musicians, singers, and stars on the other. Drawing thoughtfully and insightfully on a wide array of sources (archival, popular, anecdotal, and visual), Iyer turns spectacular dance numbers in Hindi cinema into complex historical inscriptions of production logics and human labor.

BOOK DATA. Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. \$105 cloth; \$30 paper; \$29.99 e-book. 448 pages.

Usha Iyer, *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. \$125 cloth; \$35 paper; \$34.99 e-book. 288 pages.

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## MARIANA JOHNSON

### *Cinema of Exploration: Essays on an Adventurous Film Practice* edited by James Leo Cahill and Luca Caminati

Explorers and exploration have been central to the evolution of cinema from the start. The earliest filmmakers harnessed the camera's ability to capture fragments of the unfamiliar, from far-flung geographical sites and their