

Guest Editor's Introduction

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The present special issue on the *Aesthetics of Space in India Cinema* brings together selected articles presented at the *CinemaSpace* conference organized by the Chao Center for Asian Studies (Rice University, Houston, Texas) in November 2011. Of the nine articles collected here, seven were presented at the conference, while two were written for this special issue. The focus on the city in the subtitle of the conference—“Conference on Indian Cinema and the City”—was not an attempt to privilege the city as the paradigmatic spatial grid for cinema.¹ Rather, the attempt was to think from the city, so to speak. The articles collected here reference space in relation to the city in multiple ways, even when they are not all about city spaces. Even when they are, the city is often imagined to be a specific aesthetic practice within cinema, as indicative of spatial configurations where questions of modernity are negotiated. This provisional sidestepping of the discussion of the

city as an object to thinking the city as a location of enunciation allows us to expand the scope of deliberations on spatiality in cinema outside a priori regimes of experience. It allows us to enter the discussion from the vantage point of specific cinematic practices.

This special issue is an intervention into the dynamic history of film studies as a discipline, as it pertains to Indian cinema. “Indian Cinema” here is not a descriptive category that desires to be inclusive. It denotes an object of analysis that has emerged through critical iterations; hence the use of the singular. The establishment of “film studies” as a discipline in India has been dated to the mid-1990s. This was the time when debates around films animated the pages of journals such as the *Economic and Political Weekly* and the concerns around the “popular” in journals such as the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, which had started publishing in the early 1980s, were consolidated. Other significant developments of the time included the publication of books on Indian cinema by scholars such as Sumita Chakravarty (Chakravarty 1993) and Madhava Prasad (Prasad 1998); the anthology *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, edited by Ravi S. Vasudevan (Vasudevan 2000); the conference on Indian cinema held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Shimla in 1995; conferences on Tamil- and Telugu-language cinemas that were held in 1997 (organized by the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai) and 1999 (organized by the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore, and Anveshi Research Centre For Women’s Studies, Hyderabad); and the setting up of the first department of film studies at Jadavpur University (Kolkata) in 1993. It is interesting to note that the early writings on Indian cinema, which came after the writings that emerged out of the film society movement, were mostly on South Indian cinema, especially Tamil cinema (e.g., Pandian 1992), where questions around its political location constituted the central thematic. Madhava Prasad’s attempt to imagine the link between the form of Hindi cinema and the form of the postcolonial Indian state in his influential *Ideology of the Hindi Film* also foregrounded the inherently political nature of Indian cinema and its links to modernity and its vicissitudes (Pandian 1992; Chakravarty 1993; Prasad 1998; Vasudevan 2000).

One of the welcome shifts in focus in the study of Indian cinema in the last decade or so has been in the attention paid by scholars of Indian cinema

to the formation of the industry, to early cinema, to histories of circulation, and the relationship between cinema and the city.² Two fallouts could be noted in relation to this shift. One is the entrenchment of the separation among the “popular,” the “parallel,” and the “experimental”; and second, the dissociation of the “political” as a concern from cinema.³ The present special issue, it is important to admit, does little in terms of consciously taking on these developments. But in putting together articles that cut across some of these divides, this special issue attempts to reinitiate the conversation between the popular, the parallel, and the experimental, and to reimagine questions of the political. The strong juxtaposition of cinemas in various languages in India around a single theme, in this issue, at one level rescues cinemas other than Hindi from being a footnote to the story of Indian cinema. On the other, such juxtaposition hopes to reintegrate these films and their concerns, not through an erasure of historical differences, but by reimagining them outside a simplified and taken-for-granted logic of distinct “regional” cinemas. One of the aspects of recent scholarship on Indian cinema that this issue hopes to sidestep is the emergence of “Bollywood” (which at times anachronistically refers to Hindi cinema in general) as the locus of enunciation of Indian cinema. While keeping distinctions between cinemas and their contingent historical organizations connected yet separate, the contributors hope to focus on specific aesthetic practices of cinemas in India. This special issue tries to bring together, in conversation around the themes of space, popular cinemas in four languages in India (hardly representative of the linguistic diversity of its cinema) with the purportedly avant-garde from the 1970s and 1980s to the new forms of experimental cinema in the last decade or so. The historical spread of this issue is another mode through which it attempts to initiate conversations without making films as objects read off of historical moments and to think through the ways in which historicizing can be reimagined when forms such as cinema are under consideration. Thinking through space, then, is an attempt in that direction.

Cinema is a quintessential location for exploring notions of “practiced place” as elaborated by Michel de Certeau, among others.⁴ Within this logic, cinema becomes a mode through which space is experienced, providing for a language for the modern. One of the reasons cinema located in the city has been the mainstay on the literature of cinema and space could precisely be

this. The “epoch of space,” as Michel Foucault described our present—“We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (Foucault 1986: 22)—is best apprehended by a form like cinema, in which assemblages of different kinds are at work. Cinema is also spatial art par excellence in that it operates within the constraints of the frame, at once a closed and an open system. The multilocal layering of spatialities in cinema allows for imagining space in cinemas as a dynamic, but not a hermetically closed, system. On the one hand, space is an experience; on the other, it is an aesthetic practice; and more often than not, it is indeed both, simultaneously. These multiple, contending, and overlapping modes of imagining space in cinema also provide us with ways of conceptualizing the modern subject as constituted in the interstices of these negotiations. It is indeed by bringing localities together with figurations that the subject could be imagined in the frames of cinematic representation. The articles collected in this special issue demonstrate that the imagination of geographical or conceptual closure of spatial imagination is an ideological operation. The conflict between realism and melodrama, often performatively staged in cinema, is also a conflict over the mode of imagining spaces as bound and unbound. Film cultures—as in the diverse case of India, where the melodramatic, a dynamic of excess and containment, has had a central role in both aesthetic and spectatorial practices (Vasudevan 2010)—provide us with material for elaborating upon these conflicts, as this special issue demonstrates. It traverses conceptions of space as diverse as the specific, such as locatable geographies and embedded places, to the conceptual, and the aesthetic. History, or the specific location of the efforts under discussion, provides the conditions of possibility for the aesthetic materialization of space, both through forms of focalization of the specific to the expanse of the universal.

The first three articles in this issue, while rooted in specific film cultures, attempt to lay bare some of the conceptual issues in thinking about the aesthetics of space in Indian cinema. Pointing to a shift from what he calls “enumerable to elaborated space” around the 1950s, especially in the genre of the “social,” and reading the cinematic rendering of city space along with novelistic traditions, Moinak Biswas suggests that the city form necessitates a narrative elaboration of space. Richard Suchenski’s discussion of the films

of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani attempts to link spatial practices to two forms of aesthetic practice, that of visual arts and music. By locating these films in an internationalist plane of experiments with cinema, Suchenski is able to capture the specificity of these practices in their particularity (in their attention to non-Western image and sound-making practices) and to the more universal engagements with cinema and its relationship to perspectival logic of the modern. Samhita Sunya, in an attempt to produce a genealogy of the trope of *prem nagar* (city of love) in film songs, focuses on the conceptual issues involved in Hindi cinema's spatial practices and in imaginaries of travel. While in premodern poetic traditions, *prem nagar* is imagined as the location of enunciation, in modern film songs, the space is ever in the future, "tied to a secular apparatus of mechanized movement." She argues that *prem nagar*, which is located in the interstices of poetry, music, and cinema, is indeed the city that is possible only through cinema. The attention to music and songs in cinema and the invocation of the context of progressive writing in India in the mid-twentieth century connect Sunya's article with the otherwise distinct concerns of Manishita Dass's article on IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) and the imagination of the Bombay street. Dass's article and the following article by Jenson Joseph locate the invocation of the city in Hindi and Malayalam cinemas, respectively, in the aesthetic practices at specific moments in the history of these cinemas. Dass uses song sequences from the films of the 1950s to look at the undeniable aesthetic marks left by IPTA's involvement in Hindi cinema and to understand the city street as a space where new community forms are imagined in the wake of the promises of the new nation and the onset of modernity. Jenson Joseph's article focuses on two Malayalam films, which deploy the city as a space of the universal, where contingent concerns could be negotiated outside the registers of locality and where a discerning, "contemplative spectator" could be assembled. The following two articles—by Nitya Vasudevan and Ratheesh Radhakrishnan—closely examine recent attempts within Tamil and Malayalam film traditions, respectively, to reimagine space. Vasudevan points to a new, rarefied spatial formation in Tamil cinema, namely, the *pet-tai*, in which the new forms of belongings are staged. Located somewhere between the city and the village and translating "areas"—real cities and towns—into the space of new forms of subjectivities, these films point to the

modes through which “local” is rearticulated. Radhakrishnan attempts to track the codes through which the urban can be specialized into a city, and to suggest that the city is an aesthetic experiment. Subhajit Chatterjee examines a moment of transformation in the “urban cinema,” especially in Hindi and Bengali, in which aesthetic concerns are located outside the dichotomies of realism and melodrama. These still unfolding practices, deploying what he terms “new junk aesthetics,” are in conversation with the frameworks of the “popular,” even as they negotiate the discourse of cult and cinephilia. Focusing on the architectural imagination of space, Priya Jaikumar’s article on the cinematic renderings of the “precolonial architectural form” of the *haveli* presents us with the possibility of entering the debate around space from a location at variance with the other articulations collected here. She attempts a political reading of the invocation of this form of architecture as an affective mode of belonging, outside the regimes that valorize the secular and the democratic, to emphasize the ambivalences in the national and the postcolonial readjustments of the social.

The special issue in its totality contributes to a reassessment of the dynamic present of Indian cinema by foregrounding vantage points and articulations that are often waylaid in the increasingly popular “Bollywood model” of film studies. One will have to relink the industrial and the circulatory to specific aesthetic practices in Indian cinema, of which “aesthetics of space” is one.

Notes

1. For landmark interventions on the question of the city in Indian cinema, see Kaarsholm (2004) and Mazumdar (2007).
2. The flourishing of scholarship during this period makes it difficult even to enumerate a representative list of books in these areas.
3. A notable exception to this is the anthology edited by Meheli Sen and Anustrup Basu (2013).
4. According to de Certeau:

A place (*lieu*) is in the order . . . in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of co-existence. . . . The law of the “proper” rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own “proper” and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.

... Space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs of contractual proximities. ... In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of the "proper."

... *Space is a practiced place* [emphases in the original]. (de Certeau 1984: 117)

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