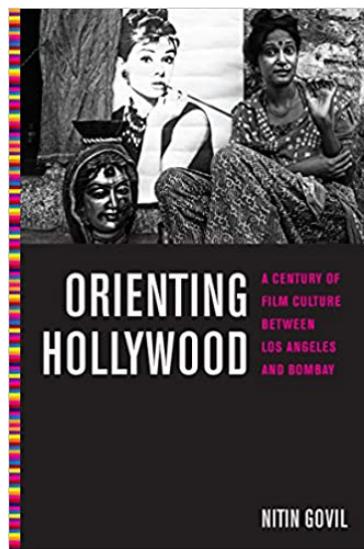


Book Review

Anjali Gera Roy

Orienting Hollywood: A Century of Film Culture



Nitin Govil. *Orienting Hollywood: A Century of Film Culture between Los Angeles and Bombay*. New York: New York University Press 2015

Nitin Govil's well-researched investigation into the deep implication of the twin media cultures of Hollywood and Bollywood in one another since the first decade of the 20th century, framed within the larger context of Indo-American relations during the colonial, postcolonial and global era, in *Orienting Hollywood: A Century of Film Culture between Los Angeles and Bombay*, traces the prolonged encounter between Hollywood and Bollywood that is invariably overlooked in the global media's recent euphoric coverage of the proliferating relationship between two of the world's largest media cultures. Through meticulously referencing media and other archives, interviews, policy documents reports and photographs and deploying a trans-historical comparative approach, Govil convincingly demonstrates that the itineraries of Hollywood and Bollywood, rather than being asymptotic, exhibit different levels of entan-

gements, or encounters as he calls them, for nearly a century. Govil complicates the idea of Hollywood's hegemonic position in relation to world cinematic industries to contend that Hollywood, in its being produced through its encounter with the "orient", is decentred through demonstrating both Hollywood's orientalizing of India and its spatial orientation with respect to India and its media cultures. The book offers an extremely nuanced account of the texture of this encounter at the discursive, material and affective levels through examining the varied trajectories of circulation that constitute media industries – material objects, expertise, personnel, capital, ideas and images.

Govil appropriates multiple discourses of orientalism, modernization, development, neo-orientalism and globalization to make his central argument about orienting Hollywood with respect to Bollywood. His book breaks new grounds by viewing the cross-contamination between the two media cultures as mirroring or shaping the larger economies of exchange within which media are embedded

including both macro political, economic and cultural forces and pragmatic contingencies. It revisits colonial and postcolonial archives to reveal that Hollywood's market share in India has been determined equally by colonial policies and nationalist resistance as well as postcolonial censorship, protectionism, trade regulations, foreign reserves and direct foreign investment. Similarly, Indian cinema's visibility overseas is shown to be the effect of the Indian state's progressive positioning within the west from an imagined exotic space and a real underdeveloped nation to an economic miracle in the 1990s.

While acknowledging the impact of global political and economic climate on the evolving encounter between the two cultures, he notes a disjuncture between the US's political and economic dominance and the positioning of its film industry within India. Notwithstanding its concurrence in its signification of modernity and technological advancement, Indian film industry's persistent insistence on its aesthetic difference from Hollywood and its carving a niche for itself not only in the domestic but also in the overseas market displaces Hollywood's hegemonic power. Similarly, the dissonance between the economic and the cultural is visible in the monumental failure of Hollywood co-productions that attempted to marry Hollywood capital and production techniques with their interpretation of a Bollywood grammar. Although India might have transited from Hollywood's last outpost at the turn of the 20th century to a frontier of opportunity in the 21st, its overall market share in India with respect to that of Bollywood remains abysmally low despite occasional box office successes. While demonstrating that the Indian mediascape was undoubtedly affected by India's politico-economic positioning vis a vis the US, Govil systematic unravelling of Hollywood's periodic incursions into India in the 1920s, 1940s and 1990s that were reversed by the emergence of production and dissemination technologies, an ideologically motivated indigenous industry, a fastidious and unpredictable audience and economic power call into question the Hollywood invasion theory. He also links Bollywood's in-

creasing global visibility to the transition in the Hollywood Bollywood relationship from aspirational goal to starting point for Indian media's global ambitions.

The four chapters following the introduction focus on different aspects of the encounter. In the first chapter, he argues that the dynamic of copying has framed relations between the two media industries. Maintaining that the question of copying in the context of Hollywood and Bollywood has exclusively focused on the media war against piracy, Govil calls attention to the dichotomy between the legitimization of imitation in the rhetoric of modernization and development and the institutionalizing of piracy that lies at the heart of western development and dismissal of the copy on high moral grounds in the formulation of intellectual property rights. Reading Harvey's notion of time-space compression with Sundaram's idea of porous legalities, he situates the culture of copying in India outside the logic of piracy to argue that piracy can indeed accelerate the move to development. It is in his deconstruction of the term Bollywood to signify a relation with the copy at its root or a complex set of material and discursive links between Bombay and Hollywood that suggests a new understanding of the copy. However, in his extended analysis of *Kaante's* adaptation of *Reservoir Dogs*, Govil reiterates standard assertions of postcolonial copying as a form of repetition with a difference, Indianization and adaptation and fails to extend the possibilities of the framework of mimicry.

One of the most interesting chapters engages with the ways money and investments manage the exchange between Hollywood and Bombay and they are imbricated in media industries. Hollywood's involvement with the Bombay film and media industries is revealed to be an exigency of protectionist regulations related to the expatriation of its earnings in India and the string of conditions that catalysed the direction of blocked funds to locational shootings, co-productions and, most important, investment in theatrical exhibition that insinuated Hollywood into India's iconic theatres since the era of the picture palaces and

introduced India to Hongkong cinema. Tracing the history of Hollywood co-production to the 1970s, he analyses two highly hyped co-productions of the 21st century to show that the principles of rationalised production that were married to a misconceived Bollywood aesthetic turned these into monumental failures. As opposed to co-production, Hollywood's foray into India's burgeoning television industry in the 1990s in which it capitalized on its stakes in both American film and television to siege on television as the new mode of transmission. However, Hollywood's transnationalization of production to take advantage of international labour economies through outsourcing postproduction and other functions to India based companies some owned by Bollywood producers completely implicates Bollywood in Hollywood.

The Chapter that follows moves on to examine the cultural politics of the new Indian movie theatre as a signifier of conspicuous consumption in which Hollywood is deeply implicated. However, Govil first provides an overview of American influence on transformations in the environment and imaginary of Indian exhibition. Pointing out that Hollywood's interest in developing infrastructure for exhibition emanated from its efforts to enhance the distribution of Hollywood cinema summarizes two failed attempts, one in the 1920s and the other in the 1990s before foregrounding American implication in the development of the IMAX as a one stop entertainment for Indian viewers. In the second section of the Chapter, he begins by looking at the transformation of the Lighthouse, Kolkata's iconic theatre dedicated to the screening of Hollywood films as an entry into India's entertainment revolution signified by the multiplex in which Hollywood played a significant role. The multiplex's coordination of three consumption heterotopias, namely the urban exterior, the theatrical interior, and an on-screen space and its alignment with the shopping mall's spectacularization of consumption signals the principles of McDonaldization and, thereby, domination of the

viewing and consuming experience by Hollywood. Govil concludes with the case study of Chanakya, an iconic theatre located in the diplomatic enclave that has served as the signifier of modernity both in its architectural design and theatrical content, to show that this last bastion of modernity caved in before the onslaught of globalization heralding the end of a chapter in Hollywood exhibition.

The final chapter explores the Hollywood Bollywood encounter through the lens of idea of emotional geographies and affective labour borrowing Goffman's notion of face work. The most visible component of this face-work is the promotional discourse of celebrity tourism through the well-publicized visits of Hollywood stars who have turned to India for spiritual upliftment, charity, social causes. Among these, the Indian turn of Hollywood celebrities on a magical, mystical tour of the east has carried forward the orientalist narrative while performing cultural work for Hollywood more than anything else. In addition to personal interactions, the epistolary transactions between Bollywood producers with their Hollywood counterparts as well as with fans have gone a long way in personalising the encounter. Finally, Govil turns to critique the notion of Bollywood as Hindu Hollywood and Hindu labour constructed by Hollywood to define the dynamics of the Indian film industry. He argues that the Hinduization of Bollywood by the US misrepresents an industry structured by crossing of caste, class and religious boundaries.

The book throws new light on the complex mediascape through which Hollywood and Bollywood have been coupled together and shows the history of film production, distribution and consumption is shaped by the perennial tug of war between Hollywood and Bollywood. The cinematic machine that Indian viewers have assumed to be an indigenous enterprise appears to be dictated by a western design that stretches to engulf the film industry even as Hollywood itself is consumed by its distant outpost.

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