Fieldwork Piece

Decolonising Film Pedagogy from an Indian Classroom

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Abstract

This article is a critical introduction to a roundtable discussion on the question of pedagogy in Film and Media Studies. Occasioned by a discussion of a film studies textbook produced in India, which focused on the questions of decolonisation of pedagogic resources as well as a consideration of how film studies is taught in different parts of the world. Participated in by scholars based in the US, the UAE and India, the roundtable also highlighted histories of Film Studies in the Indian education system. The roundtable speakers included Ranjani Mazumdar (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), Neepa Majumdar (University of Pittsburgh), Debashree Mukherjee (Columbia University, New York), Dale Hudson (New York University, Abu Dhabi) and Uma Bhrugubanda (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad).

Keywords

Decolonising pedagogy, Film and Media Studies, decolonising, cinema studies, vernacular classrooms

Debates on 'decolonising'[2] pedagogy in Film and Media Studies in recent years have included questions about teaching the global (Llamas-Rodriguez, 2022), 'provincialising'[3] Euro-American syllabi, and decentering Western theory in African classrooms (Karam, 2018). However, as we present, 'decolonising' looks, feels and sounds differently across different contexts and when we examine Film and Media Studies in the Indian classroom, we note that the forms that this take includes (among others) a disjunction between a long history of popular engagement and viewing of films and the critical vocabulary to engage with film and media. This disjuncture between critical vocabulary and film-and-media-engaged student populations is especially significant for those coming from non-mainstream sections such as nonmetropolitan locations, non-English-language education and other kinds of marginalities including those of caste, gender and class. The vernacular classroom, thus, varies across India, through cities and states, where language, examples, vocabulary and expectations all vary greatly.[4]

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Film Studies: An Introduction is an attempt at addressing the gap between the popular and the critical and, thereby, participating in the ongoing conversations of the decolonisation of pedagogy in Film and Media Studies. The editors of the volume, all faculty at various Indian higher education institutions, have tried to bridge this gap by producing a shared vocabulary in two ways: one, by breaking down an existing body of ideas, theories and films in terms of Indian cinema, and two, by looking at Indian cinema' s own histories, concepts and theories. In its curatorial approach, the textbook, nevertheless, has not taken Indian as fixed or transparent – instead, with the term, it holds the categories of the regional/national/local/global in tension. Further, in building this critical vocabulary, we were predominantly driven by models that existed in introductory- level film study syllabi around the world. Such models were often marked by the use of the teleological, the evolutionary and the canonical–an approach that we replicated in the organisation of the textbook. We were also convinced that such a critical vocabulary be made affordable and accessible for a wider audience.

Reflecting on the volume but more importantly on the issue of film and media pedagogy, a group of scholars and teachers brought together a series of interrelated concerns around syllabi formation, classroom composition, textbook adoption and canon formations. The roundtable speakers included Ranjani Mazumdar (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), Neepa Majumdar (University of Pittsburgh), Debashree Mukherjee (Columbia University, New York), Dale Hudson (New York University, Abu Dhabi) and Uma Bhrugubanda (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad). We reproduce an edited version of that thought-provoking roundtable.

Debashree Mukherjee emphasised the importance of politicising and contesting Western domination in syllabi and textbooks that exclude non-Western film cultures, knowledge formations and archives. Mukherjee' s intervention, which calls for decolonial practices in syllabus making and de centring the classroom, aligns with the textbook' s central goal of emphasising pedagogy that speaks to the contingencies and contexts of the diverse Indian classroom. Dale Hudson through his granular exploration of the disjunctions between syllabi, theory and history emphasised that provincialising must remain an active and challenging element of film pedagogy. Uma Bhrugubanda articulated the idea of the classroom as a site for the coming together of political movements, theory and practice in the act of teaching and syllabi making, also noting the diversity of students' backgrounds in metropolitan classrooms. Ranjani Mazumdar mapped articles in the volume to existing scholarly debates and underscored the difficult task of reconciling broad historical frameworks of concepts with the granularity of those concepts in the classroom. Neepa Majumdar highlighted the importance of acts of 'unmarking' and 'positioning' South Asian authors alongside key critical debates as enabling a decolonial pedagogy.

Debashree Mukherjee

How do we train students in the basics of film theory as it is practised in the dominant educational centres of the world and yet inculcate a sense of confidence in the intuitive film languages that these students already possess in South Asia? Indian students or

students studying in India, who may or may not be Indian, come into their first undergraduate film course with no knowledge of who Andre Bazin is, but with a huge cultural exposure to films, film stars, film songs and film industrial mechanics learned from social media. […]

One of the standard textbooks in US universities at the undergraduate level is *Film Art: An Introduction* by Bordwell and Thompson [2010]. [T]he book introduces students to the basic elements of what is often called the language of film, the stylistic and technical aspects of cinema. The main strength of *Film Art* is its liberal use of film stills to illustrate terms like low-angle shot or high-key lighting. Now this textbook [*Film Studies: An Introduction*] also uses screenshots to great advantage, but the examples are mostly all from the various cinemas of India. We see explications of continuity editing and the 180- degree axis through set of screen grabs from *K3G*[5] [in the chapter by Carlos Tobias]. [T]he authors have tried to weave in film examples from a wide linguistic and regional sweep across India, [and …] seemingly innocuous screen grab choices do a lot of work. They put pressure on ideas of canons and classics. They muddle together old and new, mainstream and art, Bengali and Telugu. The editors have also added interviews with practitioners, thus bringing together histories of theory with histories of practice. [… I]n the chapter on sound by Uma Bhrugubanda, it is quite exhilarating to see the invocation of Michel Chion on vococentrism right next to Amitabh Bachchan' s views on dubbing or Rasool Pukutty' s views on location sound. Such a deft mixing of histories of Indian film practice, its industrial and technological specificities not only help students relate to the content but actually opens up some very important epistemes towards future research.

The standard textbooks of our field are resolutely US- or Europe- facing. Histories of cinematic innovation, creative invention, authorship and industrial structure take context such as Hollywood or France as the stable centres of these histories. Courses on film style and film history often give half a week to Indian cinema, often squeezed in with Japanese film! Therefore, a textbook grounded in South Asia, recentre s [and] decolonis es pedagogical strategies. Pavitra Sundar and I have written that a decolonial orientation to a medium like cinema, would insist on historical and geographical specificity and it would shift away from the oft-repeated question 'What is cinema?' to 'What does cinema do?'. And that then means 'What does cinema make possible and where?' In this vein, the chapters on sound and documentary do the work of decolonial reorienting because of the very particular histories of playback recording and documentary production in India. So, if we think of cinema itself as processual rather than ontological, something that continually shifts in form and address, we will no longer be able to present histories of the medium as if there were only one narrative trajectory that we could pursue. In fact, we will have to acknowledge that instead of the history of cinema, the world has always accommodated many histories of cinema.

Dale Hudson

As someone who teaches at an English-language university near India, it is thrilling to see an introductory textbook that recognis es the largest producer of films in the world is more than just Bollywood. [Teaching] in the UAE, where most residents are from

South Asia, to students from around the world, the idea of unsettling and decolonizing the conventional film studies curriculum is part of my everyday thinking. We usually teach against the textbook, so it is great to see that now we have one that we can teach alongside. [T]he India focus is unmarked in the book's title, where [usually in English language textbooks] Western is unmarked and everything else continues to be marked, making an important decolonial contribution to the field. […]. What I have been doing in my teaching is basically provincializing the conventions of the field, which includes c ritical reflection on how canons in film theory and film history have [been] produced[.] [F]ilms are embedded in gendered and raced assumptions about the[ir] time. I paired the conventional story of innovative businessmen in France and the United States with the story of colonial filmmaking [to show] how technologies of photographing and naming came into play at this early period.

I do not think that today we can only discuss [early Euro-American films] for their technical merit and their storytelling technique, but we really need to get into what are the ideologies that they were kind of naturalis ing [by continuing to teach from a Euro-American perspective]. [Lots] of colonial film archives [such as the …] British Film Institute [contain filmic evidence of] civilis ing missions that [constitute] an important part of early film history and has not been included in standard textbooks at all [including …] David Bordwell and Kristin Thomspon's latest update of their book from 1979.

In this regard this book is a great model for comparable ones focused in other places. Along with [including Pakistani and Bangladeshi filmmaking] […] [t]here could also be a little bit of space for Nepalese and Sri Lankan filmmaking to help to decolonis e South Asia from its India focus in English language scholarship. [And this is the] work of unsettling Western-centric film studies frameworks that we all inherit.

Uma Bhrughubanda

I' have been teaching [a course] called 'Gender and Indian Popular Cinema' for some years now, and each time I grapple with the question of how to balance the amount of film theory readings with the readings on Indian film history as well as general readings on Indian history and society. How can the course balance the emphasis on the specificity of cinema as a medium, along with the socio-political historical context that is needed to appreciate the films in a better way. Furthermore, I ask myself in order to have more grounded conversations about the question of 'gender' how much of global feminist theory, and how much of the history of the debates within the women's movement in India will be necessary? So, in that sense, creating a course is always a challenge, especially when you have a very diverse student body as we do in Indian classrooms. Each course confronts the question: what would be an 'adequate' training that will allow the student to begin thinking independently and feel 'prepared' enough to conceptualize and conduct further inquiry on their own. That is the central question confronting any effort at decolonis ing film studies and one which this volume takes up so admirably.

Ravinder Singh' s chapter, 'Silent Cinema in India', is a[n] account of the silent cinema produced in different centres in India with [a] box entry on Bombay and Calcutta studios. And I think together the two essays in this section provide a discussion on

method. Given the fact that so many of the silent era films are not actually available, how does one put together a history? [T]here is a subsection in this volume called regional cinemas, language, industries and star assemblages, in which the editors problematis e this idea of nation and region so that the readers do no t take these categories for granted. I really appreciate this fact. The first chapter is 'Assembling the Nation' by S. V. Srinivas, which discusses how cinema acts as a medium that mobilis e[s] the masses. The chapter demonstrates that there is an overlap between entities that we commonly think of as separate – the film audience and the masses as citizens of the new nation. The links between the cinema and politics lie precisely in the ways in which the stitching together of the nation is achieved through cinematic narratives. Similarly, Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai' s 'Dravidian Ideologues and Tamil cinema' is a fine example of how close readings of Tamil films allows us to perceive how local Tamil political ideologies we re elaborated through the medium of cinema.

The novelty of this volume lies in the fact that it is a cross between a conventional academic reader and a textbook. Some essays are a little more pedagogic in tone than some others. Therefore, I think that it will appeal to students and teachers at the undergraduate and graduate level as well as young people interested in filmmaking, Digital technology is enabling an increasing number of amateurs to venture into the film and media industries. The canonical textbooks on films and all the technical handbooks on cinematography or editing come from Western market[s] and many of the new film schools in India and elsewhere adopt them. A textbook like this which draws on Indian examples and also introduces [them to] film students who are actually learning the craft [is] invaluable. Keeping the Indian readership in mind, it might be a good idea to add a select bibliography of scholarship on cinema in Indian languages in future editions of this work. Alternatively, it might be good to include one or two articles on critics and historians who have been working in languages other than English to enrich the scope of film studies.

Ranjani Mazumdar

This is a collection that is clearly geared to draw young students to the field and help teachers with reading material to enhance the classroom experience. Importantly, the volume tries to address a wide range of debates that have emerged in the field of Indian film studies while maintaining a broad sense of the discipline internationally. Aarti Wani's elegant chapter shows how romantic love on screen in the 1950s responded to public discourses linked to inter-caste marriage, the Hindu Code Bill, and the introduction of the Special Marriages Act. With its transgressive power, love and romance had the potential to destabilise entrenched frameworks of the nation.

Jason Beaster-Jones' delineates the life of the film song, to provide an overview as well as an analysis of the unique role that songs play in popular cinema, The combination of regional influences with classical and diverse folk traditions, along with an international imagination, is something that must be heard and not just seen, insisting on a sonic existence in everyday life that may cut itself off from the image. Ananya Parikh introduces us to Indian art cinema by first unpacking the term art, and then providing a historical chronology of its use in the Indian context to suggest that the

term is as diverse as the popular mainstream is. Parikh looks at significant events like important film festivals, political groups like the IPTA, and a diversity of aesthetic practices to position the scholarly debate on how Indian art cinema should be defined. In Darshana Sreedhar Mini' s chapter, the B category and its shadow economy are unpacked to locate this form within discourses of taste, class, gender, and geographical space. This takes us to the physical sites where these films are screened, the location of the theatres, and the allotted time for screening alongside regular mainstream fare in some theatres. The author makes a very useful distinction between B-grade and B-circuit with the first being associated with a particular type of film practice and the second linked to the space of exhibition. From the shadows of the B circuit, Ishita Tiwari takes us to debates on the hyper-visible discourse and circulation of the term Bollywood since the 1990s. This vexed term has been discussed widely all over the world and continues to have a controversial existence. Bollywood is therefore placed specifically as a periodis ing force connecting the film industry to a global media economy of brand culture and diasporic aspirations to include India's globalised identity. In each of the five chapters, popular and academic discourses are woven in so that the reader gets a good sense of the existing scholarly debates on the topic being discussed, along with an unpacking of the positions, the key highlights and nuances, and a sense of a constantly shifting horizon of what constitutes the affective world of Indian cinema. This kind of structure is extremely use ful in helping students understand the inherent sense of instability attached to film cultures. This is why we need both the historically drawn-out big picture as well as a sense of the immediacy that is shaped by technological, economic and political churnings.

Neepa Majumdar

For pedagogical purposes, I myself prefer assigning readings that give students concepts that they can take with them elsewhere, methods of analysis that they can imitate and make their own, and a strong model of how to historicis e whatever it is they are interested in, both in terms of film history and in terms of the history of the field of film studies, the latter of which often gets short shrift in the undergraduate classroom, at least where I teach. […] I want to mention that when I read something with an eye to whether or not I can include it in a syllabus, my main interest is not to see what students will learn from a reading, but to see what they can do with a reading. And the difference is that I want students to be practitioners of scholarship; I want them to be excited to be practitioners of scholarship by reading materials that excite them and are accessible in terms of their methodology, so that they can go out and do something along the same lines. […]

Navaneetha Mokkil provides a lucid overview of 70s debates on feminism and film, beginning with Mulvey and her critics, moving from the concept of the male gaze that ends up erasing the female spectator, to Mary Ann Doane' s rebuttal [….] to [Tejaswini Niranjana's] twist on the concept of masquerade in her study of the Telugu star, Vijaya Shanti, then on to […] Judith Mayne onfantasy in spectatorship. Her inclusion of Niranjana' s work in this canonical debate…. in a completely unmarked way….is the most important way to do it […]. I see it as a model of how to open up global North

syllabi to other voices without marking such interventions as mere additions, rather as constitutive elements in this debate. [A]ttention to the history of film studies as a discipline [means that it] is very much grounded in the canon [and] located within Euro-American film studies and its development. It also leaves us very aware of unsettled debates in the field and of a sense of ongoing conversations as opposed to completed conversations. This is [a] history of ideas approach that actually, at least in the U.S. context, may be better suited to graduate courses or can be more productively used to end an undergraduate course, on say, genre or stardom. […] I' m particularly interested in the way in which the formation of film studies as a discipline is front and center. And in my own classroom, this comes up when I teach the French New Wave, because you cannot teach the French New Wave without talking about auteurism. [We] cannot talk about auteurism in the French New Wave without talking about, one, the revalidation of Hollywood as something to be taken seriously, which it wasn' t until then. [T]wo, the importance of looking at film styles, which previously was not done as much. It' s the French New Wave [and] auteurism that forced people to look at film style and not just narrative and theme. So we have a lot to thank auteur theory for, even if we consider it to be old-fashioned. So that is a place where I can tell my students: the reason you are sitting here in this classroom, enjoying a course on film and on stardom or whatever debates and areas of film culture that no one took seriously – you can thank cinephiles like Truffaut and Godard whose passion for the cinema led them to realize it was the dumping of Hollywood movies [in Europe after World War II] that enabled them to see hundreds of films at the same time that otherwise would have been separated by time and to notice a film director's stylistic continuities.

Some of the main concerns of the speakers and the editors also found reflection and nuance in the discussion that followed, where decolonisation was refracted further to underscore the necessary tension between canon-formation (in institutional moves such as syllabi-making and textbooks), on the one hand, and the place of marginal cinemas and media practices in India, on the other hand. This concern was also placed in perspective by faculty joining in from the border states of India, such as Kashmir, who noted the lack of engagement with the discipline of film studies in traditional syllabi. Other challenges of the classroom that were indicated resulted from post-pandemic viewing habits and the structure of semester-long courses that did not factor in enough screening time or infrastructure in Indian contexts, necessitating further discussions on how we hear, view, read and write cinema. The presence of film material in disciplines like the social sciences highlights the use of film in service of concepts rather than the concerns, themes and pedagogic methods established in Film and Media Studies. This distinction accentuates the continued need for close analysis of the filmic and granular reading techniques, as Ranjani Mazumdar suggested, which reinstate the importance of the narrative and the figural as pertinent to questions of aesthetic form that animate film and media pedagogy.

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Notes

1. Notes on the Publication of *Film Studies: An Introduction* (2022, edited by Vebhuti Duggal, Bindu Menon and Spandan Bhattacharya, Worldview Publishers).
2. Decoloniszing refers to acts of resistance to achieve indigenous sovereignty over the economy, political system and culture. By decoloniszing film and media pedagogy, scholars mean to recognisze how the dominant knowledge system is shaped by colonial, racial and spatial hierarchies and to change/challenge this by diversifying our study materials and teaching methods.
3. 'Provincialising' as an act of writing about the past was first conceptualised by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), who recognised the limitations of wWestern philosophy and history. Drawing on postcolonial theory and attempting to pluralise the history of political modernity and centralise historical difference, Chakarabarthy develops 'provincialising' as a conceptual category that displaces the universalist assumptions of Western enlightenment philosophy.
4. Uma Bhrugubanda notes this, below, when speaking about students' backgrounds in the classroom.
5. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness; dir. Karan Johar, 2001).

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