



The Media Studies Conference 2006

Strand Four

These sessions offer teachers opportunities to catch up with some recent research in a seminar context. They are not designed to offer practical teaching advice or resources

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1. Heroic Thoughts and Sexy Songs: young people viewing Hindi films *Shakuntala Banaji*

Researcher, Institute of Education, University of London

Hindi commercial cinema – colloquially known as ‘Bollywood’ cinema and always popular with audiences – is now the focus of rapidly escalating interest both amongst teachers of film and in the academic community. Beautifully choreographed songs and dances, aesthetically pleasing or lavish sets and costumes and sensational plots and characters have invited the attention of newer and wider audiences and, in tandem, given rise to a rash of literature that seeks to explain, or to explain away, the popularity of these ‘masala’ blockbusters. Dozens of scholarly and journalistic articles and several book-length studies have offered more or less convincing textual analyses of aspects of Hindi films ranging from nationalism and ‘culture’ to the so-called ‘role of women’ and ‘nature of the hero’.

Some previous studies have felt the need to apologise for the ways in which the writers imagine that audiences enjoy these films. Others have championed all aspects of these films and assumed that viewing them is essentially radical and transformative in that it empowers ‘Bollywood’ audiences by connecting them to a set of cultural traditions. When it comes to Bollywood audiences, strangely even respected academics have been happy with absurd generalisations and glaring clichés. Few have made any more than superficial attempts to engage seriously with the sociocultural contexts of Hindi film consumption or to explore the range of pleasures and meanings

Hindi films hold for viewers across the globe. Based on a three-year long study of Hindi films and their audiences in India and the UK, involving observations at over 80 film showings, conversations with over a hundred viewers and in-depth interviews with forty film fans, the research outlined in this session contributes a radically different perspective to debates about Bollywood and spectatorship.

This session pulls together a wide range of ideas and theories on Hindi film and audiences put forward in the last few decades and connects these to the sociopolitical contexts in which the films are watched and to the individual interpretations of young viewers in India and the UK. At a practical level, it explores the connections between film consumption in India and the diaspora, representations of gender and desire in Hindi films, with an especial focus on the construction of heroes, heroines and their appearance in song sequences. Original photographs and excerpts from observations and in-depth interviews with young viewers provide unique material for comparison with the films referred to.

2. Podcasting: What, Why and How?

Richard Berry

Senior Lecturer, University of Sunderland, Tyne and Wear

The session is intended to help delegates understand what Podcasting is and the impact it is having on media institutions and practices. Podcasting not only opens up a new distribution platform for media products but also changes the rules about who can distribute content on that platform. My emphasis in the session is primarily sound and radio, although where radio leads video inevitably follows when the technology catches up.

Podcasting not only offers opportunities for teachers to create new learning materials but also offers new opportunities for students easily to create and distribute their content to a wide audience. The session will provide some simple tips and guidance on how students and teachers can start Podcasting with little skill, virtually no money and just a few ideas.

3. Free Cinema: A Turning Point or a Footnote in British Cinema History?

Christophe Dupin

Research Assistant, Queen Mary's College, University of London

Although the expression sounds familiar to all those with some knowledge of British film history, 'Free Cinema' has, to use Lindsay Anderson's own words, "been defined, written about or attacked in terms so various that it isn't surprising there is now a great deal of confusion as to what exactly the term implies." One of the tasks in this session will be to define the nature of the Free Cinema phenomenon, and to determine in particular whether it possesses the required attributes of a 'film movement'.

Free Cinema was born on 5th February 1956, when a group led Lindsay Anderson managed to screen their short films together at the National Film Theatre. Although the films had been made independently from one another, their makers found that they had a definite attitude in common. They coined

the term 'Free Cinema' (a reference to the films having been made free from the pressures of the box-office and the demands of propaganda) and together they produced a manifesto in which they expressed their new film-making concerns. The event, initially intended as a one-off, made such an impact that five more programmes, showing (mainly documentary) films by young British and foreign film-makers, followed at the NFT between 1956 and 1959.

I will discuss whether Free Cinema was more than just a series of film programmes or a clever piece of cultural packaging and will examine what characterised the new attitude to film-making of the Free Cinema group, both theoretically (through an analysis of the successive manifestoes) and in practice (by looking at the films themselves). I will explore in particular what contemporary trends of British cinema Free Cinema openly criticised and challenged, and which ones inspired its makers. I will also investigate the themes common to the films shown under the Free Cinema banner (especially in terms of their relevance to the reality of 1950s British society and their 'belief in the significance of the everyday'). Another key point is the crucial relationship between the financial resources and technology available to the film-makers, and the movement's distinctive documentary aesthetics. Finally, I will show the limits of Free Cinema as a coherent movement and its premature end.

Free Cinema was not a stand-alone movement, and it is only by analysing it in the wider cultural context of mid-1950s Britain (particularly in relation to new developments in literature and drama) that its lasting influence British cinema can be fully appreciated.

4. Infernal Affairs and Kung Fu Hustle: Global/ Chinese Cinema *Wing-Fai Leung*

Research Assistant, University of Hertfordshire

Films from Hong Kong dominated the regional markets of Taiwan, Korea and South East Asia in the 1980s and early 1990s. Given that the most popular genres for exportation were action and comedy, it was relatively easy to sell homogeneous products to a variety of markets.

The decline of Hong Kong cinema since the mid-1990s is closely linked to the overwhelming change in the way feature films are consumed and the restructuring of local, regional and global film markets. Today, Hong Kong film production has lost many of its regional markets, many badly hit by the economic crisis of the late 1990s and never recovered subsequently. A generation of film-goers in Asia has grown up watching foreign movies, especially those from the cash-rich Hollywood studios. The disparity in production quality became apparent and commercial genre films from Hong Kong began to appear stale. Meanwhile film-makers look for new ways to cater for the mainland Chinese and international audiences, tactics that are seen as vital for future survival and against the competition of newly-emerged industries such as South Korea. As a result, the contents of co-productions and crossover films have often been compromised.

Informed by empirical research, I will examine two Chinese blockbusters and their place in the Greater China/ Asian/ global cinema landscape. The success of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (Andrew Lau & Mak Siu Fai, 2002-2003) was a result of careful adoption of the Hollywood production model: detailed

script, well known cast, famous director(s), high technical quality and aggressive marketing. Furthermore, it became a box-office hit all over Asia, distributed in North America and Western Europe including the UK, and is to be remade by Martin Scorsese as *The Departed*. On the other hand, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), a Columbia Asia backed China/ Hong Kong co-production was a deliberate attempt at de-regionalising the director/actor Stephen Chow's local humour in order to capture international audiences, a perfect example of combining something old (kung fu) and something new (computer generated imagery) to create contemporary cinematic spectacles bound for the global markets.

Film Studies have for a long time been dominated by textual analysis: since film is an international, universal medium, its contents are supposed to contain intrinsic meanings that can be discovered away from its actual sites of production and consumption. What has been happening in Hong Kong, however, points to paradigmatic shifts in the study of commercial film practices. This seminar will explore the complex and subtle criss-crossing of political economy and contemporary film production where local colours paradoxically meet de-regionalisation and globalisation.

5. **Dead Funny: Television Comedy and Offence** **Brett Mills**

Lecturer, Media and Cultural Studies, University of Glamorgan

Earlier this year, riots erupted across the world when the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad which many in the Muslim world found offensive. The repercussions are still not clear. The events have raised many questions about the nature of freedom, censorship, and media responsibilities, particularly in a globalised world. At the core of the problem is the assumption that a comic portrayal of Muhammad is offensive, and this is indicative of the ways in which comedy and offence often go hand in hand. This session will discuss the relationship between television comedy and offence, regulations, public service broadcasting, and social responsibility.

There's a long history of television comedy igniting debates about comic acceptability, but this session will focus on two case studies; *Jerry Springer - the Opera* (BBC, 2005) and *Brass Eye: Paedophilia* (Channel 4, 2001), respectively the most complained about, and third most complained about programmes in the history of British television. The programmes deal with two issues, which repeatedly ignite debate and controversy; religion and sexual abuse. However, analyses of the discourses surrounding them also show that they demonstrate particular attitudes towards comedy, and its role within society. The question will be asked - as it was by many at the time - of whether comedy is an appropriate mode for such topics. How and why does the comic treatment of such issues differ from more serious approaches in news and current affairs series?

Broadcasting exists within specific regulatory and industrial practices, and these are central to the debates over comedy and offence. The justifications that the BBC and Channel 4 offered for these broadcasts demonstrate particular attitudes towards the role of offence and comedy within broadcasting. Similarly, the adjudications made by the media regulator, OFCOM, draw on tensions between the anarchic nature of humour and the

ensuing offence it's capable of generating. The industrial structures affecting broadcast comedy, as opposed to general social rules for everyday humour, offer useful insights into the public's relationships with media, as well as policy makers' and regulators' often-different attitudes.

This session will also look at the history of broadcast comedy in Britain, drawing on other case studies, which shocked the nation. Reference will also be made to the specifics of British humour, and its relationship - and enshrinement - in public service broadcasting regulations. How can the tensions between free speech and offence be managed? After all, should people be being killed because of the jokes they make?

Brett Mills is the author of *Television Sitcom* (bfi, 2005)

6. **Sympathy for a Serial Killer: How Film Engenders Audience Sympathy for 'Unsympathetic' Characters** **Emma Smart**

bfi *Periodicals Librarian*, The bfi National Library

Taking as a starting point the uncharacteristic and uncomfortable spectator position of sympathising with a killer, this session examines the distinct ways cinema can manoeuvre an audience into this incongruous position. 'Sympathy for a serial killer' will highlight how fiction and non-fiction film can engender audience sympathy by closely examining the films *Monster* and *Aileen: life and death of a serial killer*. Looking at these films in terms of reception studies and theories of spectatorship will enable an examination of how far cinema can go in 'making' us sympathise with people we would normally abhor. Addressing the issue of how an audience can actively identify with the central figure of Aileen Wuornos and how we can feel sympathy for a character that we do not necessarily like, or who should not normally be in the privileged spectator position of someone we inherently identify with. Examining similar theories of identification with people who appear in non-fiction film the question will be asked is the documentary *Aileen: life and death of a serial killer* any less manipulative than its fictional counterpoint in engendering audience sympathy for Aileen? Is there such a thing as documentary truth? And does it matter how we are made to sympathise with this woman, just as long as we do.

7. **Work in Context – Approaches to Screen Advertising** **Jez Stewart**

Curator (Non Fiction), bfi National Film and Television Archive

Working with the advertising collection of the bfi's NFTVA has given me the opportunity to explore the screen advertisement as part of the nation's moving image heritage. For me, analysing the context in which a television or cinema ad was produced has been the key to unlocking the story behind both the most marvellous and the most mundane of commercials.

Traditional approaches to advertising can often be divided into the accusatory and the nostalgic – either following the arguments laid out by Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, or taking the celebrity talking heads approach of Channel 4's *The 100 Greatest TV Ads*, for example. Both

attitudes ultimately undermine the success of analysis, by either denying or demonising advertising's genuine appeal, or looking little beyond it.

The BBC's *Washes Whiter* series in 1990 marked a notable exception to this rule, bringing historical, social, political and psychological analysis together, and adding the equally important perspective of the advertising industry itself.

The agencies, production companies and facilities houses that form the backbone of commercial production are often crammed with talent, which uses the high budgets of their clients to express their creative vision. Alexander Mackendrick, the director of the Ealing comedy classics *Man in a White Suit* and *Ladykillers*, began his career as a copywriter at J. Walter Thompson, and his attitude to his background is very revealing: 'The training that I got in advertising was invaluable, though it's an industry that I in effect despise – not that it is any worse than the system which it represents, but that's quite enough. It's also got more intelligent and talented people in it than any other business I know.'

As much as advertising is reliant on this creativity, it is ultimately controlled by economics. David Ogilvy emphasised in *Ogilvy on Advertising* how, for him, advertising was not entertainment or an art form, but a medium of information. 'When I write an advertisement, I don't want you to tell me that you found it 'creative'. I want you to find it so interesting that you *buy the product*.' Where do the needs of the client, the creator and the consumer meet, and how does this shape the finished commercial?

This session will present examples from the history of screen advertising and will look at ways in which a context-based approach can open out their wider meaning as cultural products.

8. Celebrity: Campaign Politics, Hollywood and Show Business **Mark Wheeler**

Senior Lecturer, London Metropolitan University

This session outlines the relations between modern Hollywood and the political elite. It considers how the industry's leaders and major stars established inroads into the centres of power. Further, it analyses how celebrities provide practical and symbolic support in political campaigns and a key theme of the session will be to analyse whether entertainment values have been detrimentally incorporated into the US political process. Finally, it discusses how celebrities themselves, in the cases of Reagan and Schwartznegger, brokered entrance into mainstream politics.

The session will consider how the relations between US politicians and the film community reflect close affiliations between Hollywood and Washington. These links refer to the imperatives of the international film trade, which are beneficial for American governments and the motion picture industry. They also reflect Hollywood's position in the US body politic with reference to matters of culture, ethnicity and partisanship, and how modern Hollywood has fostered contacts among the political classes. For instance, industry players such as Lew Wasserman, Sid Sheinberg, David Geffen, Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg contributed to Bill Clinton's Presidential campaigns in 1992 and 1996, establishing influential relations with politicians enabling them to promote their interests.

Hollywood's political relations have existed primarily with the Democratic Party, yet shrewd executives cultivated conservatives, most especially President Ronald Reagan for whom registered Republican Taft Schreiber operated as MCA agents when he was a Hollywood star. Despite the predominantly liberal character of Hollywood's political classes, a sizeable number of Republicans have emerged, most recently, former star Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The relationship between Hollywood and politicians has been a two-way street as the political classes have realised stars appeal to a wider constituency e.g. during the Presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Reagan and Bill Clinton there were celebrity endorsements, the organisation of inaugural events or participation in the campaign process. Stars have been involved in causes, on the left (Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, Robert Vaughn and the Anti-Vietnam movement), in civil rights (Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis Jnr.), for Native Americans (Marlon Brando) or for the libertarian right (Charlton Heston and the National Riflemen's Association (NRA)). However, since 9/11, Hollywood 'liberals' have been vilified, this session will reflect on the changing responses to celebrity activism amongst the US media and the public throughout the years and in the light of a more conscious period of political film-making, which has emerged, with the release of films such *Good Night and Good Luck*.

Mark Wheeler is the author of *Politics and Society* (bfi, 2006)