Bollywood and Postmodernism
Popular Indian Cinema in the 21st Century

Neelam Sidhar Wright
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I am grateful to the following people for all their support, guidance, feedback and encouragement throughout the course of researching and writing this book: Richard Murphy, Thomas Austin, Andy Medhurst, Sue Thornham, Shohini Chaudhuri, Margaret Reynolds, Steve Jones, Sharif Mowlabocus, the D.Phil. student organisers of the McCSA postgraduate conference 2008, staff at the BFI library, the British Library, the University of Sussex library and the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai, Leena Yadav, Pollyana Ruiz, Iain M. Smith, Michael Lawrence and his Indian cinema undergraduate students, Rachael Castell and Eliot Grove from Raindance East, Asjad Nazir, Bobby Friction, Jeremy Wooding, Herbert Krill, Paulo Mantovani, Ian Huffer, Niall Richardson, Rosalind Galt, Corey Creekmur, Abhiji Rao, Kay Dickinson, Richard Dyer, Ian Garwood, Stephen Barber, André Rinke, Sara Schmitz, Catherine Reynolds and Helen Wright. I am also very grateful to Gillian Leslie and the editorial team at Edinburgh University Press for their advice in preparing this book for publication. Thank you to Exotic India Art Pvt. Ltd for permitting me use of two artworks from their collection (‘Shri Krishna’ and ‘Mumtaz Mahal’ by Kailash Raj), and to Nidhi Chopra at Pop Goes the Art for allowing me to use her original artwork for my cover design. I would also like to thank my parents, my brother Vikram, and my husband Christopher for accompanying me in sitting through all those Bollywood films, and for always sharing my enthusiasm, interest and belief in this project. Finally, thanks to Annapurna and Amenic, whose births during the times of writing have given this book its greatest purpose and meaning.
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### Abbreviations of Film Titles

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>DCH</td>
<td><em>Dil Chahta Hai</em> (2001)</td>
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<td>KANK</td>
<td><em>Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna</em> (2006)</td>
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<td>K3G</td>
<td><em>Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham</em> (2001)</td>
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<td>K2H2</td>
<td><em>Kuch Kuch Hota Hai</em> (1998)</td>
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<td>MNIK</td>
<td><em>My Name Is Khan</em> (2013)</td>
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<td>OSO</td>
<td><em>Om Shanti Om</em> (2007)</td>
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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Bollywood Eclipse

In May 1998, the Indian Government announced that it would grant the Bombay film industry (commonly referred to as Bollywood) the right to finance its films through foreign funding, bank loans and commercial investment. With this new industry status, Indian filmmakers would no longer need to seek money from the government or resort to black money laundering via the criminal underworld, but could instead have their productions backed by global sponsors and multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola and Nokia. Within this climate of economic restructuring, Bollywood also opened itself up to several aesthetic makeovers. In 1998 it adopted the frenetic editing

Figure 1.1: Bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit as Mona Lisa in Gaja Gamini (Dashaka Films, 2000).
techniques of popular Music Television (MTV) to re-image its song sequences (*Dil Se*, 1998). A year later, in 1999, the release of Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* marked the beginnings of a new, visually ‘excessive’ style of filmmaking. This novel aestheticism was achieved not only through Bhansali’s designer *mise-en-scène* and extravagant cinematography, but also through the careful casting of Miss World contest winner Aishwarya Rai – a rising star who would exhibit a kind of hyper-femininity and visual perfection previously unknown to the cinema.\(^1\) Rai was soon branded as ‘the new face of film’ by *Time* magazine,\(^2\) and her unique star quality was soon matched by that of male star Hrithik Roshan in 2000. Roshan’s hyper-masculine physique and almost superhumanly fluid dancing abilities in his first feature *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai* made him an astonishing overnight success, with the Indian press describing the Indian public’s feverishly fanatical response to his cinematic debut as ‘Hrithik mania’. In this same year, India also witnessed the revival of its biggest film star Amitabh Bachchan, who (previously representative as a working-class hero and socialist political figure, both in and outside of his films) now returned with a new, internationalised affluent image – an iconic white goatee beard and designer suit – as a pop star and television show host.\(^3\) Bachchan also used this time to relaunch his film career by starring as a cynical headmaster in Bollywood’s *Dead Poets Society*-inspired *Mohabbatein*, and was subsequently voted the biggest star of the millennium in a BBC poll. Since that time, Bachchan has worked on over seventy films and has often appeared in middle-class patriarchal or darker anti-heroic (sometimes even villainous) lead roles. The year 2000 also saw the release of M. F. Hussain’s *Gaja Gamini*, a film with avant-garde qualities which was one of the first commercially released art films with a major Bollywood cast (including superstars Madhuri Dixit and Shah Rukh Khan) to display an explicitly postmodern aesthetic style: an abstraction of realism through the fusion of historical events and mythology, a blending of canvas art, theatre and cinema aesthetics, temporal and spatial suspension (with the collapsing together of different historical eras), the intersection of multiple story worlds, and the subordination of narrative coherence and meaning in favour of image saturation. This film aimed to communicate a pseudo-feminist politics by questioning modes of representation of women throughout history and playfully drawing attention to Dixit’s female star persona – most famously by reconstructing her image in the form of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa.\(^4\)

A year later, 2001 saw Bollywood’s industry status finally take effect and saw its global circulation realised. Santosh Sivan’s *Asoka* was marketed across the UK and screened at London’s Empire Leicester Square. Karan Johar’s big-budget family melodrama *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* followed soon after, proving to be the industry’s highest international grosser, with many non-Indian European audiences flocking to see the film. This film, coupled
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with Farhan Akhtar’s smart and stylish tale of urban youth *Dil Chahta Hai*, marked the beginning of a new generation of young directors in Bollywood who promised to challenge old-fashioned attitudes and promote a newer, more modernised India. Meanwhile in Hollywood, Baz Luhrmann also helped draw attention to Bollywood with his homage to the cinema in his Oscar-nominated *Moulin Rouge*. Further global awareness was received in 2002 with Hollywood’s first fully-fledged Bollywood-themed film *The Guru*, and a similar tribute in the West End in the form of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Bombay Dreams*. While the West showed its critical appreciation of Indian culture largely through East–West hybridised productions such as BAFTA, and Golden Globe nominated *Bend It Like Beckham* and Golden Lion winner *Monsoon Wedding*, Bollywood orchestrated its own international publicity by exhibiting Bhansali’s even more visually operatic follow-up film *Devdas* at the Cannes Film Festival. This hype was further exceeded in the same year by the Oscar nomination of the colonial-period sports film *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* and the promotion of Bollywood fashion by *Vanity Fair* and major department stores in London and New York. Meanwhile, in India, Sanjay Gupta inaugurated a new era of cross-cultural remakes in Bollywood with his Hindi adaptation of Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*. A year later, Bollywood produced another indirect Hollywood remake in the form of *Koi . . . Mil Gaya* – a formally unacknowledged reinterpretation of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*.

While the West continued to play with mixing Hollywood and Bollywood conventions in *Bride and Prejudice*, 2004 brought about further hybridity and creativity in Hindi filmmaking. Farah Khan’s *Main Hoon Na* wowed audiences with its *Matrix*-inspired special effects action choreography, while *Hum Tum*, one of the biggest hits of the year, experimented with inserting animation sequences into its live-action diegesis. In 2005, Bollywood released its first full-length feature animation *Hanuman*, again something novel that was received well by Indian audiences. One more landmark film came in the form of yet another Bhansali production, *Black* – a film which lacked the so-called ‘essential’ song and dance elements required for a film to be commercially successful in India. *Black* presented a remarkably unglamorous role to its lead actress Rani Mukherjee (one of the industry’s top stars), who took on a deaf, blind and mute character, earning her several awards and the film critical acclaim. Most importantly, the film’s commercial success in India signalled the changing and diversifying tastes of the Indian viewing public. At the same time, India demonstrated the power and influence Bollywood stars had over their audiences when the *Times of India* group launched ‘India Poised’ – a government-supported initiative which combined politics with entertainment media in order to reinvigorate the country’s future leadership. Following the model of Western panel shows such as *Pop Idol*, the
campaign ran a television show called Lead India, inviting members of the Indian public to apply and compete for a place in India’s assembly elections. Audiences were able to vote for their favourite contestants via an SMS text or online ballot. Most significantly, despite the serious politics behind this campaign, the judges’ panel on the programme comprised Bollywood industry professionals such as lyricist Javed Akhtar and movie star Akshay Kumar. The India Poised publicity campaign also included adverts starring Bollywood megastars such as Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan, which were displayed on TV channels and before film screenings in Cineplex theatres across the country.

In 2006, Bollywood production companies realised the potential for mass profit through film franchises and launched their first blockbuster movie sequels, Krrish and Dhoom 2. This year also marked a first in the industry for self-adaptation, producing two big-budget remakes of landmark Hindi films from previous eras: Don and Umrao Jaan. Interestingly, these new sequels and remakes challenged assumptions regarding Bollywood’s supposed moral high ground, instead casting their lead stars in negative roles: Hrithik Roshan as a master-thief in Dhoom 2, Shah Rukh Khan as a ruthless Mafia boss in Don: The Chase Begins, and Amitabh Bachchan as a torturing psychopath in Aag (a 2008 remake of the legendary seventies ‘curry Western’ Sholay). Bollywood’s trend for recycling continued to increase in the following years. In 2007 – the same year that the word ‘Bollywood’ entered the Oxford English Dictionary, veteran Indian actor Anupam Kher appeared in Ang Lee’s Chinese espionage thriller Lust, Caution, and Indian film actress Shilpa Shetty won the public’s vote on Big Brother in the UK – the industry’s previous record for highest-grossing film was broken by Om Shanti Om, a postmodern remake of 1980s Indian film Karz. Other films in the top ten of highest grossers that year included formally unacknowledged versions of Hollywood’s Three Men and a Baby and Hitch. The next year, 2008, followed in similar vein with two more hit sequels (Golmaal Returns and Sarkar Raj) and Ghajini, which, despite being a Bollywood remake of a South Indian film adaptation of Christopher Nolan’s Memento, then became the most successful Indian film of all time. This was also the year American rap star Snoop Dog fashioned a turban and produced the theme song for the Bollywood hit film Singh Is Kinng. In 2009, Warner Bros Pictures released its first Hindi film – martial arts comedy Chandni Chowk to China – while Bollywood was drawn into the Hollywood awards limelight once more with Shah Rukh Khan presenting at the Golden Globes and, more indirectly, through Danny Boyle’s award-winning Slumdog Millionaire. Despite its grittier aesthetics, Boyle’s film paid homage to the Bollywood style with an end-credit dance sequence, and by employing for its soundtrack Bollywood composer A. R. Rahman (who subsequently won an Oscar for his collaboration). The film also launched the international career of
Bollywood actor Anil Kapoor, who would go on to appear in major US film and television projects (the Fox network’s *24* and *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*). Thus, 2009 marked a significant increase in global casting, with Australian pop star Kylie Minogue appearing in a song sequence with Akshay Kumar in Bollywood underwater action film *Blue* and Sylvester Stallone evoking his action-star persona in *Kambakkht Ishq*, a romantic comedy set in LA (also featuring Hollywood actress Denise Richards). Aishwarya Rai added another film to her list of international productions by starring in Hollywood’s *Pink Panther 2*, while transnational productions came in the form of the attempted revival by Jennifer Lynch (daughter of surrealist director David Lynch) of the Indian snake film genre in *Hiss* and Indian company UTV Motion Pictures’ financing of the Hollywood film *ExTerminators*.

The above shifts in Bollywood’s film production all take place after its economic liberalisation, and many of them point towards a new, consumer-centred, cross-cultural, self-reflexive, visually spectacular and nostalgic style of filmmaking in India. Bollywood’s increased impulse to repeat and recycle, to excessively express and visualise, to commercialise and self-commodify, to appropriate other cultural works and to de-differentiate binaries or blur distinctions through such processes also suggests that the cinema has, in its restructuring, acquired strikingly postmodern qualities.

**NEW BOLLYWOOD**

Some scholars have already gone further in demonstrating recent changes within the Hindi film industry by hailing an entirely new form of cinema, which is sometimes described as ‘New Bollywood’. Sangita Gopal (2011) distinguishes this new cinema by pointing to the increased capitalisation, regulation and restructuring of the Hindi film industry and its altered distribution and exhibition processes, the commercialisation and branding of Bollywood and its immersion in a global economy, and the rise of the urban middle classes and ‘transnational’ audiences. In terms of film content, she observes ‘radically novel styles of filmmaking’ making a greater use of ‘high-end technology’ (including steadicams), a merging of popular and parallel cinema, a digression from the song-sequence formula (in the form of multiplex or *Hatke* films), genre diversity (particularly Hollywood-style horror and comedy), a ‘triumphant’ use of Hinglish, an obsession with remakes, and most significantly, the cinema’s shifting focus towards the subjectivity of the ‘conjugated couple’ (Gopal, 2011). As regards the difference between New Bollywood and earlier cinematic periods, Gopal distinguishes classical Hindi cinema’s ‘self-imposed homogeneity enforced by the all-embracing format of the social film and the masala’ (3). She acknowledges that many of the above
filmmaking processes have been present in earlier forms of the cinema (particularly films from the 1970s), but asserts that this filmmaking style has since ‘solidified’ (14) from 1991 onwards, and ‘only begins to emerge as a distinctive product in the post-liberalization era’ (3). As she stresses, ‘New is necessary in order to emphasise that post-liberalization Mumbai film, while owing much to changes in the previous two decades, is nonetheless a radically new art form that must be analysed on its own terms’ (14). However, the innovative style Gopal refers to often corresponds to a type of cinema (Hatke) that is seen as somewhat alternative to the commercial blockbusters that this book will investigate as part of ‘New Bollywood’.

Although it aims equally to demonstrate a significant shift in Bollywood cinema aesthetics in recent years, my study of popular Indian cinema does not intend to create an explicit binary of ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Bollywood. Rather, it exposes a postmodern dialogue between the Hindi cinema of the present and that of the past, which has ultimately allowed the cinema to reinvent itself. The ‘New’ in this case resides in the postmodern sense of the word; Bollywood’s ‘postmodern turn’ implies a shift that reworks or revisits previous aesthetic trends in order to produce an aesthetic that is altogether different. As with all postmodern works, we are not talking about a clear-cut break from the ‘classical’ in the traditional sense. Rather, we are discussing a transformation and change that takes place through a special kind of continuity – a reworking of the past.10 ‘New Bollywood’ here refers to contemporary films which exhibit a strong postmodern aesthetic style which was not as present in the 1990s (when popular Indian cinema officially became ‘Bollywood’). After 2000, this aesthetic style came to dominate the cinema and has been used as a means of internally commenting on and critiquing the industry in its current form.

DEFINING THE ‘CONTEMPORARY’

A certain widespread disregard for post-1990s popular Indian films has been evident, from popular film journalism (an October 2007 issue of Total Film magazine offers an introductory timeline of Bollywood cinema, stopping at 1996), reference compendiums and introductory film guides (such as the BFI 100 Bollywood Films [2005], which reveals a bias towards earlier periods of the cinema’s history), to established film societies and organisations such as the British Film Institute (in 2007 its web archive provided a canonical list of the ‘greatest Indian films of all time’, which included only one post-millennium release).11 In this book I will reveal how film institutions, scholars and educators concerned with Indian cinema have (until very recently) habitually refrained from moving their focus beyond issues surrounding national identity or diaspora politics, and therefore films released after the mid-1990s. Such
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accounts would have us believe that popular Indian cinema is anything but ‘contemporary’. As I demonstrate in the following chapter, there seems to be a shared sense among many film scholars that newer Bollywood films display a certain ‘lack’ of critical appeal and are in some way of lesser value than their canonised predecessors. I challenge this assumption, and instead suggest that the problem lies in the fact that these newer films often do not fit existing models and established theories, and are thus often left unacknowledged in the hope that we may never assume their significance. Indian cinema has ultimately been a platform for exploring cultural tradition in India. The ‘contemporary’, it seems, then, poses a threat to our precious established definitions of popular ‘traditional’ Indian cinema.

We must be wary of the limitations inherent in purely offering definitions of a cinema that no longer dominates, and of the dangers posed by this elision of contemporary filmmaking processes. Let us consider, for example, the inadequacy of conceptualising contemporary Hollywood cinema without acknowledging any of the developments that have taken place after 1996. Could one justifiably describe popular American cinema without considering the impact of CGI after The Matrix (1999), the Internet and its influence on film marketing strategies, recent shifts in the global economy, the emergence of DVD and digital filmmaking, or the aftermath of 9/11? Likewise, in television, could we claim to understand the medium today if we overlooked its shift from analogue to digital broadcasting formats? Like its Western counterpart, popular Indian cinema has changed dramatically in the last fifteen years. The pleasures on offer in 1990s Indian cinema no longer suffice – they no longer wholly embrace the needs of today’s Bollywood audience. A lead character’s charm alone is no longer enough to push a movie to the box-office top spot. The leading actor must now be more marketable as a superstar and be able to do his own stunts. He must be measured and approved, exhibiting an actual talent in acting and dancing. He must sponsor a decent haircut, display the muscles of a superhero, and be the face of an internationally renowned consumer brand. He must offer everything a Hollywood A-list actor does – and more. The much talked-about rebranding of Bollywood megastar Shah Rukh Khan demonstrates this shift perfectly. Khan is famously known for having initially gained popularity in the 1990s despite his scruffy hair, dark skin and ordinary stature. He originally won audiences over because of his mischievous smile and ‘cheeky yet charming’ character (see Chopra, 2007). However, the actor himself has recently discussed his need to reinvent his image (through hair extensions, chest waxing, intensive body building and skin-lightening) in order to meet the demands of current younger Bollywood audiences – including his own son. In a television interview with director Farah Khan on the Indian celebrity talk show Koffee with Karan (hosted by Bollywood director and producer Karan Johar), the three discuss Shah Rukh Khan’s radical makeover for the then-upcoming film
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Om Shanti Om, for which he physically trained for months to achieve a leaner, muscular body. Farah Khan declares the film to have launched an entirely new look for Khan, which she describes as an ‘item boy’ image. In Bollywood film, an ‘item number’ usually refers to the objectification of a seductive female performer (the ‘item girl’) in a singular, highly-sexualised song sequence which is inserted in a film independently of its narrative context, but this has been extended across gender in recent years, with actors Abhishek Bachchan, Hrithik Roshan and Shah Rukh Khan occupying similar roles in films (see Bachchan in Rakht [2004] and Roshan in Krazzy 4 [2008]). Such shifts on the level of star image and on-screen sexuality are prime examples of how films have changed in terms of their aesthetics in the post-millennial era – signalling a New Bollywood cinema with a more contemporary visual style.

Like ‘New Bollywood’, ‘contemporary Bollywood’ here also refers to a cinema beyond the aforementioned period of first-generation NRI movies, specifically films released post-millennium. I shift between the terms ‘New’ and ‘contemporary’ – the former helping to emphasise the cinema as aesthetically distinct and innovative, and the latter accentuating the post-millennial

Figure 1.2: Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan in Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (Yash Raj Films, 1995) and post-millennium in Om Shanti Om (Red Chillies Entertainment, 2007).
era. While hesitant to confine my research to a fixed historical period, I have found that the most significant factors solidifying change within the industry emerge from 2001 on. The year 2001 in particular beckoned a change with regard to the ‘polish’ of Bollywood cinema in terms of its actor-stars as well as its general production. The release of Farhan Akhtar’s *Dil Chahta Hai* that year is almost unanimously seen as a landmark moment in this sense, and thus is a key text which I explore in more depth (see Chapter 7).

**THE POSTMODERN**

Despite ‘postmodernism’ being a highly debated and perplexing descriptive term, the phenomenon has already brought much to cinema and its academic study in the West. As a mode of film practice, it allows texts to inscribe and subvert prevailing conventions and question ideology, subjectivity and historical knowledge, allowing us to ‘reconsider the operations by which we both create and give meaning to our culture through representation’ (Hutcheon, 1989: 117). In doing so, it draws our attention to certain films’ consciously mimetic and anti-original qualities and to how contemporary films now seek to ‘rework’ rather than invent stories. Postmodern films facilitate an act of looking from both sides of the screen (Degli-Eposti, 1998: 5) and will (mis)represent identity in a way that exposes it as something to be understood as decentred and complex rather than whole and fixed. Postmodernism also increases the tension between, and closeness of, the political and the aesthetic, paradoxically creating texts that are at once culturally resistant and yet seem politically barren (Connor, 1989: 180). Postmodernism has helped us to understand and create shifts in knowledge and thinking, economic and social ordering, and aesthetic debates in the contemporary Western climate. It has offered us a means to investigate how capitalism and globalisation have impacted upon our society, pushing our artistic cultural practice towards profit-driven eclecticism and a saturation of media images and signs. The concept has also proved useful in helping to reveal how even the most commercial and trivial art forms can have the potential to interrogate: to be oppositional, contestatory, aesthetically diverse and ideologically ambivalent (Hill, 1998: 101–2). We are able to appreciate how popular cinema can use irony as a means of questioning truth, reality and artificiality, how it can manipulate images for commercial ends while problematising image-creation itself (Harvey, 1990: 323).

Postmodernism has thus provided us with new reading strategies and different systems of interpreting films (Degli-Eposti, 1988: 16). With this in mind, this book attempts to apply the concept to Bollywood cinema in order to enrich our understanding of its contemporary filmmaking processes and shed light on a range of issues and questions concerning popular Indian film. My
study of New Bollywood explores reasons behind the lack of scholarly attention paid to post-millennial Bollywood films, particularly in existing Indian film criticism and Western film studies courses. Within this, I consider the issue of non-Indian audiences’ lack of interest in – even rejection of – popular Hindi film texts, suggesting that Hindi cinema may have a more unusually unique film language and logic of pleasure compared to other, more accessible Asian cinemas. This study also argues that contemporary Indian popular cinema should not be dismissed as crass, mindless entertainment, or considered unworthy of intellectual engagement. Rather, it suggests that there is a credible, academically engaging cinema to be found beyond high art, political and diasporic Indian cinema, and that current popular Indian cinema can be found to be equally fascinating and revealing in a postmodern sense.

In addition, far from declaring it a straightforward continuation of previous eras of filmmaking, I demonstrate how post-millennial Bollywood has mutated away from certain modes of representation, so much so that it can be described as representing a kind of renaissance period for the cinema. Among the cinema’s many formal aesthetic changes, the ‘noughties’ decade saw the emergence of a new genre of contemporary Hindi cinema in the form of the remake. In studying this recent phenomenon, I reveal how Bollywood uses postmodern methods of appropriation in order to reinvigorate itself and attempt to break free of its formulaic trappings. This postmodern reading will help us to rethink and expand our current definitions of Bollywood, as well as understand how postmodern techniques can enable a seemingly monolithic and nationalistic cinema to become more fragmented and experimental.

POSTMODERNISM AND ITS SCEPTICS

As with most scholarship on postmodernism, this study will naturally prompt certain reservations and scepticism from those who argue that the ‘postmodern’ is a much too contested, incoherent and problematic concept to work with, let alone apply to non-Western cinema. It is therefore important to assert here that the purpose of this book is not to affirm postmodernism as an unproblematic, self-evident and self-fulfilling category, but instead to raise further questions about its historical and geographical emergence, whilst examining its usefulness as a hermeneutic tool for studying non-Western popular art forms. Indeed, the entire ‘postmodern conundrum’ is far from solved here, but as with other seminal works on this subject, the very goal here is to stimulate a new discussion about the value of postmodern theory in film studies and to foster new methods of analysing contemporary Indian cinema. This book introduces the concept of a postmodern Bollywood cinema, and this concept deserves (like other new theories and methodologies) to be tested, refined and
developed by others before it can be as straightforward and unproblematic as some may urge it to be. Nevertheless, rather than taking the term for granted and overlooking its polysemy, or discussing it too abstractly, I make definitions of key postmodern concepts clear by firstly breaking them down into a series of identifiable aesthetic conventions and then exploring them further through detailed case studies offering close textual analysis of a select range of contemporary Bollywood texts.

Undeniably, postmodernism has traditionally been viewed as a specifically Western phenomenon. Key postmodern theorists have spoken of it as ‘the West’s “modern neurosis”’ (Lyotard, 1992: 79–80), as a ‘global, yet American postmodern culture . . . a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world (Jameson, 1991: 57), and have explicitly argued that ‘postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary . . . [and] does not really describe an international cultural phenomenon, for it is primarily European and American’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 4). However, some scholars have since reviewed and withdrawn this opinion (in her 2002 revised edition of The Politics of the Postmodern, Hutcheon changes her perspective on postmodernism’s global reach and addresses the concept’s subsequent internationalisation14) whilst others have explored the idea of alternative modernities that may be more culturally specific (see Chapter 4). What is more, Ajay Gehlawat (2010) has reminded us that despite the dangers posed by the application of a Eurocentric hermeneutics, ‘indigenous frames of reference can also be a trap’ (xvii).

Admittedly, it is still somewhat a challenging task to find explicit examples of (let alone discourses on) postmodern cultural art in India – even after considering the well-publicised novels of British Indian literary author Salman Rushdie (see Das, 2007), the work of artists such as Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (whose portfolio entitled ‘Bollywood Satirized’ in a 2001 exhibition mocked commercial films for reinforcing Indian traditional socio-cultural prejudices by manipulating and subverting images from existing film posters15), or the post-1990s Adhunantika movement in Bengali literature, with its poetry and short stories sharing many characteristics with the postmodern including plurality, de-territorialisation, eclecticism, multi-linearity, pastiche, irony and de-centredness.16 The renowned Indian art critic and curator Geeta Kapur has perhaps been most influential in demonstrating that both modern and postmodern art exist in contemporary India. In her book When Was Modernism (2000), Kapur traces both modernism and the postmodern in contemporary Indian art, periodising it from the 1930s onwards. Among India’s postmodern pioneers, she notes artists such as K. G. Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar and Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, whose work exhibits a self-conscious eclecticism, parodic force (particularly towards high modernism), intertextuality, pop art aesthetics, excess of signs, and a ‘pictorial vocabulary’ (313–14), often engaging
in ‘instrumental pastiche’ and a play with simulacra, and ultimately exploiting cultural codes (319). From the 1980s onwards, such artists are seen to ‘disrupt’ and ‘provide a relief’ from Indian modernism (319), although Kapur explicitly cites cinema as the place from which postmodernism can most effectively emerge (320). Thus Kapur asserts that ‘before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely in its own terms and in that process also characterizes it, we have to introduce from the vantage-point of the periphery the transgressions of uncategorized practice’ (297).

A small handful of scholars, in particular Vijay Mishra (2008), Gehlawat (2010) and Rajinder Dudrah (2012), have recently begun to register and tackle the concept of a ‘Postmodern Bollywood’ cinema. Gehlawat, who has advocated a study of Bollywood through applying what Arjun Appadurai has termed a ‘postmodern praxis’ (Appadurai [1996], cited in Gehlawat: 118), acknowledges that a postmodern reading assumes intent on the part of the filmmaker, and arguably requires a certain level of sophistication, literacy and self-consciousness on the part of the viewer, which could be seen as problematic when considering the lesser-privileged and under-educated members of the Indian film audience. However, Gehlawat challenges prevailing scholarly emphasis on passive spectatorship by emphasising the difference between intentionality and consciousness, highlighting Indian cinema’s fundamentally ‘transgressive disruptive semiotics’ (57) which provide a distancing effect, and arguing that Bollywood in fact serves as a ‘teaching machine’ for subaltern audiences (79). My own study of New Bollywood, which reveals a dramatic increase in remaking (as homage) and referencing of other canonical film texts, suggests that the cinema explicitly offers a unique kind of pleasure through cinephilia and that audiences are already able to pick up on these playful references. The rise of multiplex cinemas (targeting urban middle classes) and a greater investment in diasporic and broader global audiences also further complicate the argument that the Bollywood audience is too illiterate and passive to pick up on complex postmodern references.

Another issue that could be raised against this application of the postmodern concerns how we account for the appearance of seemingly postmodern processes, such as self-consciousness, in earlier periods of Hindi cinema. This matter is addressed in several ways: (1) by distinguishing the idiosyncrasies of New Bollywood’s pastiche/parody/self-reflexivity from other forms of textual referencing; (2) by my identifying a ‘postmodern politics’ (Hutcheon, 1988, 1989) within recent films; and (3) by exploring the difference between cultural mimicry, which is intrinsic to Indian cinematic tradition, and postmodern blank pastiche or parody in recent Bollywood cinema. However, the very fact that I draw connections between postmodern devices and traditional Indian artistic traditions (for example, Chapter 7 looks at hyperrealism and figural aesthetics in ancient Indian miniature paintings) demonstrates my intention to
question also whether postmodernism is purely a contemporary phenomenon, or whether other versions of it have existed in the past. Further distinctions are made with regard to New Bollywood’s innovative remaking processes. After considering how repetition has historically functioned as a fundamental process in Indian artistic culture (through a brief historical account of remaking in classical Hindi cinema), I go on to explain how remaking in New Bollywood operates differently. Here, remaking is used to convey postmodern concerns such as the prevalence of stylistic excess over discourse (figural aestheticism), self-referential critique, identity fragmentation, and a questioning or crisis of representation.

THE POSTMODERN TERRAIN

In his attempt to critique various theorisations of the postmodern, Norman K. Denzin (1991) has distinguished how key theorists such as Fredric Jameson (1991), Jean-François Lyotard (1992) and Jean Baudrillard (1983) share a common nostalgic desire for an aesthetics of the past (Denzin: 48). Postmodernism’s relationship to the past is multifaceted, but can generally be divided into two perspectives, the first consisting of the postmodern text having an inferior relationship to that of the past/history, with negative, unproductive and often destructive consequences, and the second a perspective that diversely suggests how new postmodern art has the potential for a critical revaluation of the past, resulting in a ‘freeing up’ of the text and its meaning. Jameson, Baudrillard and Terry Eagleton (1986) can be seen to fall into the first category. Jameson in particular, in his essay ‘Postmodernism or the logic of late capitalism’, warns of the destructive postmodern text, which achieves nothing but a plagiarised copy of an original work of art, stripped of authenticity and aura, which he describes as resulting in a ‘waning of affect’ (1984: 69). Jameson situates himself as a Marxist, using the concept of postmodernism to tie in with and account for the damage caused by the capitalisation of art. The postmodern text, with its ‘depthlessness’ (60), its ‘blank parodying’ (65) of authentic works, and its commercially driven existence, becomes an ideal target as a flagship for capitalism. Eagleton likewise echoes Jameson’s argument, complaining of postmodernism as a ‘sick joke’ (1986: 131), an empty pastiche which ‘mimes the formal resolution of art and life . . . while remorselessly emptying it of its political content’ (132). This pessimism is further added to by Baudrillard, who introduces the notion of the postmodern simulacra – a textual reproduction of an authentic work which aims to subvert and pervert notions of reality, truth and hence history. For Baudrillard, the modern image as simulation ‘does no more than resemble itself and escape in its own logic’ (195) and thus becomes a ‘death sentence’
for all possible reference and meaning (196). Baudrillard’s preoccupations lie predominantly with the abduction, mutilation and ‘terrorism’ of the real (196) by the postmodern text. Reality, once it has been swallowed up by the postmodern simulacra, has become unreachable and replaced by empty recycled images of hypersimulation and hyperrealism (197).

For all three theorists, the mass production and recycling of previous works of art has led to current aesthetics being intellectually frowned upon and enjoyed at a purely sensationalist level – resulting in an increased ‘painful nostalgia’ (Friedberg, 1994: 188) or hopeless mourning for the past. In the case of cinema, mainstream American filmmakers have for a long time, if not always, been guilty of mass profit-based production and the parodying or remaking of previous films. Therefore, in the light of the consequences of these postmodern traits indicated by Jameson and Baudrillard, it would appear that mainstream cinema is doomed:

A whole generation of films is appearing which . . . lack only an imaginary and that particular hallucination which makes cinema what it is [. . .] cinema increasingly approaches . . . in its banality, in its veracity, in its starkness, in its tedium . . . in its pretension to be the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the maddest of enterprises. (Baudrillard: 195)

The constant memory and loss of authenticity of the past are perhaps unavoidable. However, not all postmodern critics have declared this cultural phase a catastrophe. While similarly attempting to uncover the relationship between the postmodern and the past, Jean-François Lyotard has also credited the postmodern movement with helping to liberate texts by questioning the importance and prioritisation of textual meaning (an effort he no longer sees as essential in the pursuit of aesthetic appreciation). Lyotard commends the postmodern for its abstraction of truth and realism, which has resulted in a breaking down of grand narratives such as history, religion, science, and existing art institutions which presume to dictate what is and is not to be classified as a work of art. Postmodernism embraces the popular text, with all its banalities, trivialities and commercialism, merging it with and presenting it alongside established works of ‘high art’. This celebratory destabilisation of such totalising social institutions is also, according to Lyotard, accompanied by another liberating postmodern trait – the loss of meaning. To reject the need for a work to mean something is to again defy and break down the rules by which established art institutions operate: ‘Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and writer therefore work without rules . . . in order to establish the rules of what will have been made’ (Lyotard: 15).

The notion of freedom of interpretation and the breaking of boundaries
is further explored by Scott Lash (1988). Lash stresses how postmodern texts fundamentally break down the rules and boundaries of difference (for example, between good and bad art, or high and low culture), resulting in an elimination of difference altogether. This process of ‘de-differentiation’ (312) can also be seen to free the text and its reader. The indulgence in pure sensation and spectacle renders both textual meaning and interpretation unnecessary. The instability of the boundaries and conventions constructing art and realism are exposed (329), allowing several conflicting styles to coexist within a single text. However, although these theorisations work well in developing an appreciation of the postmodern text, they still do not account for how we are to resolve the problem of that which has been lost from past forms of classical and modernist art.

Perhaps the most useful attempt at resolving the conflict between the nostalgic past and present postmodernist age is that of Linda Hutcheon. Rather than perceiving the two as separate, Hutcheon argues that this ‘mere’ nostalgic return and constant referencing of the past is not simply postmodernism scraping together the remains of what went before, but rather a ‘critical reworking’ of the past (1988: 4). This method of critiquing previous works is unique to postmodernism as a result of its ability to simultaneously conform to and resist the past and its conventions:

\[\ldots\] the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalising forces that postmodernism exists to challenge. Challenge, but not deny \ldots\] Postmodernism \ldots\] refuses to posit any \ldots\] master narrative \ldots\] It argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any less illusory. (Hutcheon, 1988: 13)

Hutcheon’s theorisation is valuable not only as an attack on those who outwardly reject postmodernism, but also because it exposes an intellectual link between or progression from the past (history, modernism) to the current state of art. As my own study reveals, New Bollywood texts could be seen to be guilty of both – a seemingly full-scale immersion in Jamesonian postmodern blank pastiche, which in fact at times reveals itself as a playful postmodern critiquing of the past.

**A STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

My investigation begins with a review of Indian film criticism (Chapter 2), Bollywood’s circulation at film festivals, and pedagogical practices (Chapter 3). I ascertain how previous published work on Indian cinema and certain teaching trends have shaped our current understanding of (and critical
attitudes towards) popular Indian films. Inspired by the postmodern notion of history as narrative (which chooses to perceive historical discourse as subjective storytelling rather than something conveying [actual] universal truth or fact), I demonstrate how India’s cinematic history has been articulated through particular intellectual discourses cultivated within the discipline of Indian film studies. As I reveal, these discourses tend to focus upon a particular set of themes in order to fulfil specific social and political agendas, thus often neglecting to analyse certain aspects of the text’s formal aesthetics. Chapter 2 observes the censuring and disregard for Bollywood in traditional approaches to Indian cinema by reviewing a variety of literary sources. These include historical biographies, textbooks and introductory guidebooks by renowned Indian cinema scholars, and press interviews with industry professionals. Chapter 3 goes on to look at film festival brochures, and pedagogical accounts by those who have taught the subject to a Western audience, as well as incorporating more empirically-based data taken from university syllabuses on Bollywood, formal conversations with film scholars at academic conferences, and my own personal observations of non-Indian undergraduate students’ experiences of intellectually engaging with Indian film texts. Using this information, I argue that many of the academic approaches towards, and much critical journalistic writing on, Bollywood have worked against Bollywood’s interests in securing international appeal. Although valuable and informative, this literature has often failed to adequately address significant aesthetic shifts within the industry over the last decade, instead producing outmoded or woolly definitions of contemporary Bollywood which have hindered its global inauguration in terms both of commercial success and academic interest. In order to motion a change in Indian film scholarship, Chapter 3 also draws attention to more recent published work on contemporary Bollywood, which has begun to address the significance of and offer innovative approaches to analysing this distinctive era of cinema.

Since Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate a widespread devaluation and marginalisation of Bollywood, my subsequent postmodern reading aptly serves as a means of responding to and countering such attitudes by redefining the cinema in its contemporary form. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how the Indian film industry has taken a postmodern turn after the millennium as a response to Bollywood’s increased global exchanges and commercialisation. After a review in Chapter 4 of existing academic attempts to place the concept in a global or international context, Chapter 5 observes how the postmodern, as an aesthetic style and fluid cultural practice, manifests in contemporary Bollywood film texts. To aid my investigation, I draw upon the various concepts and traits identified by postmodern theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard and Hayden White, as well as postmodern film theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Peter and Will Brooker, and
M. Keith Brooker. As the field of postmodern Bollywood cinema studies is relatively uncharted, I feel it is important to employ a variety of tools and strategies throughout my research in order to demonstrate the cinema’s versatility (hopefully assisting its flexible application in future film studies courses) and to aim for experimentation and exploration rather than an absolute concretion of the concept. Thus, my methodology here shifts between formalist film theory, semiotics, (post)structuralism, broad cultural politics, and some Marxist poetics.

In Chapter 5, my analysis of postmodern Bollywood cinema crucially includes a close reading of three key films which I consider to be prime examples of this new form of filmmaking. The first of these, *Om Shanti Om*, directed by Farah Khan (perhaps Bollywood’s female equivalent of pastiche-auteur Quentin Tarantino), provides a complex self-critique by employing a variety of postmodern devices including pastiche and nostalgic recycling, which inhabit everything from its narrative and plot to its visual aesthetics and formal structure. Through these strategies, the film is able simultaneously to celebrate, exploit and dismantle its own cinematic conventions and modes of representation. A second example of postmodern Bollywood is offered through *Koi ... Mil Gaya* – the film that initiated and signalled the Bombay film industry’s yielding to the previously unfamiliar territory of science-fiction. This film usefully demonstrates how Bollywood uses postmodern methods to play and experiment with a long-established theme of post-independence Hindi cinema: the tension between modernity (progress, the future) and tradition (regression, the past). Whereas previously Bombay film narratives would conclude with the rejection of the former and a return to the latter, as I reveal, *Koi ... Mil Gaya* in fact facilitates the blurring of these two binaries in order to ultimately render them both as suspect. The film also reveals how a comparative study of a Bollywood remake of a Hollywood original (in this case, *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*) can help us to better understand both the interconnectedness and the distinctive differences in film language between these two dominant cinemas. My final case study uses *Abhay* as an example of avant-garde techniques emerging within mainstream Indian cinema. Through its constant interchange between conventional cinematic realism and absurd comic book representation, the film demonstrates how some popular Indian films deconstruct (Western) notions of realism by innovatively dissolving the divide between non-fiction and fantasy. In doing so, the film contests the negative elitist criticism Bollywood has received, instead revealing a cinema that cannot be underestimated and easily categorised, instead sitting comfortably between the posts of mainstream popular entertainment and radical art.

Chapters 6 and 7 continue to provide further examples of postmodern aesthetics in contemporary Bollywood cinema, this time looking more specifically at a particular kind of filmmaking that has emerged prolifically over
recent years: the Bollywood remake. On the basis of research that considered 144 Indian film remakes (almost one hundred of which were produced after 2000), I discuss how remaking has become a platform for innovation and creative translation in Bollywood, offering a unique form of cinephilic pleasure for its audiences. Drawing upon various theoretical work on textual adaptation – including issues of textual fidelity that continue to plague the Bollywood remake’s critical reception – I look at how the diverse methods of remaking that Bollywood employs (intertextuality, cross-cultural borrowing, aesthetic as well as narrative appropriation, pastiche and parody) allow it to experiment with and innovate in its filmmaking practices. For example, in Chapter 6, I explore how certain film stars are used as intertexts through ‘celebrity’ or ‘genetic’ intertextuality, while Chapter 7 looks at how Bollywood uses figural excess to rework and distinguish itself aesthetically from previous canonical Indian film texts. I also explore how Bollywood cinema hybridises with Hollywood modes of filmmaking in order to de-authenticate and dismantle both American and its own cinematic codes and conventions.

After looking initially at how repetition has always been a fundamental characteristic of Indian artistic culture, I go on to explain how remaking became a central or signature feature of Bollywood cinema in the first decade of the twenty-first century, embodying postmodern concerns such as the prevalence of stylistic excess over discourse, self-referential critique, identity fragmentation, and a questioning or crisis of representation. The film texts I explore include remakes or ‘re-imaginings’ of films as diverse as Hollywood’s critically acclaimed The Godfather and the testosterone-driven Fight Club, the Indian socio-realist drama Devdas, the independent American cult movie Reservoir Dogs, the special effects sci-fi film The Matrix, New Hollywood’s taboo-breaking classic Bonnie and Clyde, and South Korea’s international award-winning Oldboy. My analysis of postmodern remaking in Bollywood further explains how the cinema has changed and evolved since the 1990s, and I argue that such films can help enrich our understanding of Bollywood’s current film language and aesthetics, revealing an Indian cinema that is at both its most innovative and its most self-destructive.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I provide a redefinition of contemporary Bollywood cinema, propose the value of postmodernism as a new alternative method for studying, teaching and articulating Bollywood in the West (particularly offering us a means by which to better engage with the visual aesthetics of popular Indian films), and, lastly, push towards a more global view of the postmodern, which can help us to expand and update our understanding of the concept as well as emphasise its potential for international application and cultural impact.

Over the past fifteen years, Bollywood film production has beckoned to a significant intervention in popular Indian cinema. There has been a break or
interruption in its filmmaking methods, an obscuring or eclipsing of previous cinematic processes. I believe that newer Bollywood texts contain culturally, aesthetically and politically subversive qualities which endeavour to overpower previous aesthetic modes and conventions, revealing a postmodern shift that has enabled a darkening of these films’ internal agendas.

This study of post-millennial Bollywood cinema concentrates on films produced between 2000 and 2009, although more recent film releases and developments are also considered, particularly in the final chapter. It is also important to note that this study will not explore any of the numerous other regional cinemas within India. While choosing to focus on a particular Indian film industry, I have considered that there may be other varieties of Indian cinema containing similar tropes to those discussed in this book. Therefore I do not at this stage wish to sign off my approach as being exclusively applicable or restricted to the remit of Bombay cinema, nor to assert that this is automatically reflective of every kind of contemporary popular Indian film. But I do envisage that my approach may be useful and adaptable when analysing other kinds of commercial Indian cinema, such as Tamil Nadu-based films.18

The aim of this book is ultimately to explain what postmodernism means in the context of Bollywood cinema, to demonstrate how to apply the concept when analysing Bollywood films, and, lastly, to understand what postmodernism tells us about the change and function of Bollywood film language after the twenty-first century. This postmodern approach to Bollywood film helps us consider what an (originally) Western theoretical framework can actively do to raise our appreciation and alter our understanding of contemporary popular Indian cinema, and what the Indian cinema in turn can do for our understanding of postmodernism as a global concept.19

NOTES

1. Even Hollywood’s then most popular actress, Julia Roberts, described Rai as the most beautiful woman in the world.
3. From 2000 to 2005 Bachchan was the host for Kaun Banega Crorepati, India’s version of the British quiz show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?
4. The Mona Lisa remains one of the most famously appropriated images in postmodern art – for example, see Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 ready-made L.H.O.O.Q., Andy Warhol’s multiple 1963 screen prints and Subodh Gupta’s 2010 three-dimensional sculpture Et tu, Duchamp?
5. The prize also included a scholarship to study leadership and politics at Harvard University and Rs 50 lakh for a public-welfare project.
6. Star TV channel in India, America and the UK.
7. Although the Hindi film industry had sporadically produced Indian cinema remakes prior to this time, the solid trend for self-remakes was only realised post-millennium.
8. By announcing the demise of family epics and acknowledging the diversifying tastes of the Indian viewing public, Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari (2004) have also been eager to assert that Bollywood has superseded its 1990s era and that contemporary Bollywood is ‘evolving, morphing and mutating’ (146). The authors note how the cinema may be on the cusp of a global breakthrough and query the possibility of a new wave emerging from within commercial cinema (141).

9. See Chapter 8 for a more detailed discussion of this type of cinema.

10. Bollywood paradoxically moves forward, yet remains stuck in its ways, and this is something that the cinema has explicitly begun to addresses self-reflexively in its films – see my analysis of Om Shanti Om in Chapter 5.


12. In 2007 Khan was heavily criticised for endorsing ‘Fair-and-Handsome’, an Indian men’s skin-lightening product. The advertising campaign was considered racist towards naturally darker-skin-toned Indians.


15. For a more detailed account of Matthew’s work see Bhattacharya (2005).


17. It is important to clarify that the postmodern Indian cinema Kapur refers to here is not necessarily the contemporary Bollywood variety. For example, in her book she refers to the films of director Kumar Sahani, who is more aligned with India’s parallel cinema movement. However, in her other work, Kapur does consider postmodern sentiments in more commercial art films, such as Gaja Gamini (see Kapur, 2001: 12).

18. See my section on Abhay in Chapter 5, which acknowledges that this postmodern approach may be transferable to other Indian cinematic forms. See also Peter C. Pugsley’s discussion of image-centred aesthetics in Tamil cinema (2013).

19. This book is based on my doctoral thesis (see Wright, 2010), and some of the ideas discussed in it have been published in the special edition Scope e-book Cultural Borrowings: Appropriation, Reworking, Transformation (Wright, 2009).