Reviewed by Rakesh Sengupta

Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay

by Samhita Sunya
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The globality of Hindi cinema is often an anecdotal entry point into alternative internationalisms. When Indians based in cosmopolitan spaces of the Global North strike up a conversation with fellow emigrants from Africa, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, or the Middle East, the discussion is likely to revolve around their mutual fondness for Hindi cinema, its stars, and its songs. Oral and anecdotal histories of Hindi cinema’s popularity in non-Anglophone parts of the world abound in such multicultural encounters in the West. Nonetheless, these auto-ethnographic accounts rarely inform the theoretical basis for research in film studies where the influence of Hollywood, European arthouse, and international festival cinema largely continues to obscure other transnational flows and fandoms.

Samhita Sunya’s recent book, Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay, addresses this lacuna, one sustained by archival challenges as well as scholarly disdain for Hindi cinema’s formal, capital, and libidinal excesses. Understandably, Sunya’s book returns to some of the foundational concepts and theories of film studies to reorient our understanding of how ideas of world cinema, cinephilia, gender, excess, and circulation might operate and interrelate outside of a bipolar world order. At the very outset, Sunya deploys an eccentric Hindi song called “Akira Kurosawa” to tease out broader

questions about Hindi cinema’s contemporaneity with postwar art cinema in the 1960s while also inquiring into its political accountability as a mass cultural form. The transnational and the regional are mutually constitutive vectors operating in the backdrop of Cold War–era worldmaking as well as secessionist movements in postcolonial India. Sunya also discusses the traffic of ideas across the Bombay and Madras film industries in that decade, which anticipates the rest of the book’s investment in the underexplored traffic of personnel, capital, and technology across these regional industries.

In chapter 1, Sunya opens the discussion of world cinema through “problems and possibilities of distribution in translation,” with a critical emphasis on how the category of world cinema excluded commercial Indian films despite their extensive circulation in “not only the Indian Ocean regions of East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia but also Fiji, the Caribbean, Central Asia, West Asia, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and East Asia.” The constricted geography of world cinema, Sunya argues, was a result of “auteur-derived nationality and unity” as well as “racialized, (neo)colonial hierarchies” of spectatorship. The idealization of film spectators as literate and cosmopolitan was adopted in reformist state discourses of “film appreciation” as well. Additionally, Sunya excavates an interesting history of the establishment of the Indian Motion Picture Export Corporation (IMPEC) in 1963, which aimed to nationalize overseas distribution and regulate commercial cinema’s circulation in the image of the state. The film song was paradoxically decried as the most unexportable element of an Indian film, but Sunya shows how, on the contrary, it was often the most beloved constituent of a film for audiences overseas. The author offers a much-needed corrective to such civilizing discourses through her meticulous study of the disaggregated Indian film text that offers no authorial or national unity. She also vindicates the “willingly seduced spectator” whose “cinephilic reciprocities” create a more agential understanding of commercial film audiences.

Chapter 2 historicizes the topos of prem nagar (city of love) in Bombay film songs, whose anti-caste utopian origins lie in the folk songs and poetry of saint-mystics such as Kabir in the fifteenth century and Bulleh Shah in the eighteenth. The author’s encyclopedic knowledge of Hindi film song lyrics and careful attention toward their textual genealogies show how the lyrical trope of prem nagar in Bombay cinema reveals a unique utopianism vis-à-vis its postcolonial possibilities and capitalist excesses, contributing to “an alternate formation of the progressive that ensues out of participatory cinephilic engagements.” The concept of “love-as-cinephilia,” despite its seemingly plain trappings, seeks to explore “what both love and cinema meant for shaping a world order” during the Cold War period. As an inclusive category

2 Sunya, 1.
3 Sunya, 31, 40.
4 Sunya, 47, 48.
5 Sunya, 17.
6 Sunya, 46.
7 Sunya, 49, 205.
8 Sunya, 84.
9 Sunya, 84, 15.
with transnational sway, Sunya’s conceptualization of cinephilia combines the social with the formal and the accessible with the aesthetic. She discusses how the collapse of authorial unity and the lack of control of the film text led to its publicness, engendering a collective cinephilia that operated beyond the confines of the screen and the borders of the nation.

Sunya’s ingenious exploration of the self-reflexivity of oddball Indian films “from low-budget comedies . . . to prestige productions, to failures, to remakes” contributes to her understanding of film production and reception beyond world cinema’s binaries of art and commerce. Her findings from “press sources, trade journal reports, parliamentary proceedings, memoirs, and archival ephemera” are well supported by “allegorical commentaries” of such lesser-known films. Throughout the book, the author shows how the analysis of cinema’s self-reflexivity should not only depart from ahistorical and reformist conceptions of the medium but also uncover alternative histories of Indian cinema’s production, circulation, and reception beyond what conventional film archives can tell us. Therefore, Sunya approaches the films as not only media artifacts but also media archives that unlock historiographic possibilities through granular and grounded analysis.

In chapter 3, the extensive allegorical reading of the Indo-Soviet prestige co-production *Pardesi/Khozhdenie* (Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Vasili Pronin, 1957) demonstrates how “the film’s diegetic world and production contexts thoroughly infused one another.” Sunya studies the co-production as a homosocialist mode of “friendship and exchange” between two men and two nations, which renounces formal excesses of commerce as well as diegetic excesses of romance. Through this critique, the author arrives at a provocative parallel between the heteropatriarchal devaluation of love in the film’s diegesis as apolitical and the productivist understanding of commercial cinema’s excesses as “inconsequential.” Femininity and love become diegetic obstacles for men in this fraternal process and emerge as “ekphrastic arguments” against the excess of aesthetic pleasure and commercial gain. Spectatorships of pleasure, Sunya argues, contest the productivity of masculine progressivism and appear allegorically as “siren-like temptations” through the diegetic figure of the singing and dancing actress.

In chapter 4, the author embarks on a similar allegorical analysis of *Padosan* (Jyoti Swaroop, 1968) to demonstrate the film’s self-reflexive validation of playback singing and other seductive artifices of Hindi cinema. Among other brilliant maneuvers in the book, Sunya adds a sonic dimension to Laura Mulvey’s critique of the scopophilic apparatus of the window. Blurring the popular-parallel divide again, she compares the comedy *Padosan* with a contemporaneous new wave film *Dastak* (Rajinder Singh Bedi, 1970) to show how the “window-as-cinema” in both films offers divergent articulations
of gender and sexuality in relation to leakages and intrusions of noise. Whereas the audiovisual pleasures of Indian film music are consensually negotiated in *Padosan*, the middle-class values of conjugality in *Dastak* are constantly threatened by eavesdroppers of the film’s diegetic music.

In the fifth and final chapter, Sunya studies popular Indian cinema as part of an extended and excessive transnational network of trafficking and connects the feminized object of Hindi cinema to a fascinating material history of celluloid bangles. The Indo-Iranian commercial venture *Subah-O-Sham/Homa-ye Sa’adat* (Tapi Chanakya, 1972) was a cross-industry collaboration involving multiple media capitals—Madras, Bombay, and Tehran—“outside the contemporaneous arena of so-called world cinema.” Drawing allegorical parallels between commercial Indian films smuggled into Iran and the trafficked female protagonist of the film, Sunya argues that the characterization of the singer-dancer actress shores up a metonymic defense of song-dance attractions in cinema against statist discourses of reform and regulation. The author’s and the film’s objectives become one and the same as both “extol the value of cinema as a medium that is accessible to a vast public” in their vindication of the formal excesses of songs and dances “that are beloved by audiences across lines of class, language and nationality.”

*Sirens of Modernity* is not a page-turner because it is rich in details and detours that unsettle several parochial assumptions of film studies and demands from its reader substantial knowledge of popular Indian cinema beyond the canon. There is much to unpack historically and conceptually in Sunya’s groundbreaking and sophisticated study of Indian commercial cinema, its self-reflexivity, and its excesses. Film and media studies continues to harbor a narrow definition of the global that obscures regional complexities and transnational interactions within the Global South. However, merely evidencing transnational circulation of media outside of the West is not the book’s endgame. If the global is still constituted via routes of European colonialism or US imperialism, the Global North arguably retains greater theoretical leverage and can continue to speak for the rest of the regional world. Therefore, by shifting the geographies of media circulation and reception, Sunya’s book also contests and expands the location of film theory. Hopefully, *Sirens of Modernity* will inspire more research that centers media texts, objects, and contexts beyond bipolar Cold War imaginaries of the field and open new routes of historiographic and theoretical inquiry.

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17 Sunya, 126.
18 Sunya, 170.
19 Sunya, 203.