

FILMS AS THINGS IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the visual is also material, in the sense that visual objects (even digital ones) can circulate through a variety of different spaces and, depending on the context, may acquire or express very different properties. This paper draws upon research conducted by the author in film archives in both India and the United Kingdom, aiming to show that non-fiction films (and lengths of film footage) shot by British colonial officials and visitors to India in the first half of the 20th century form visual “documents” that draw upon earlier film and photographic conventions. Concurrently, the nascent Indian fiction film gets underway, with the pioneering work of D. G. Phalke. Both cinemas use the same materials – even possibly the same kinds of camera – yet never intersect. This paper concludes that the full range of film is formed in the period, and subsequently, has to be considered so one can understand visual relations between Indian subjects and British colonisers.

KEYWORDS

Visual anthropology;
Colonial film; India.

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, Howard Morphy and I observed that the sub-discipline of visual anthropology had become dominated by the production and consumption of ethnographic film (Morphy and Banks 1997, 4-5). We argued that while making moving visual representations of social and cultural life was undoubtedly important, there was a danger that mainstream, non-visual anthropologists would increasingly fail to see these endeavours as having any relevance for their work. In addition, as Jay Ruby has subsequently argued, the production of so-called ethnographic film has become increasingly dominated by professional filmmakers who, while undoubtedly making interesting films, are also ignorant of or uninterested in anthropological analysis (Ruby 2000).

The piece provoked a number of negative responses, with most arguing that Morphy and I were more concerned with policing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries than with advancing a genuinely open intellectual agenda (for example, Taylor 1998). Few, however, gave any serious consideration to the other main core of our argument, which is that the visual is also material. This shifts not merely the substantive focus of the sub-discipline – from the production of films to the study of objects – but relocates the intellectual centre, away from issues of representation and towards an examination of social relations. This, in our opinion, makes for a more – not less – anthropological or sociological approach. Visual media (that is to say, film and photography, but also drawings, paintings and diagrams) often represent material objects and aspects of the material world, but visual media themselves also exist as material objects. As objects they circulate throughout the human world through systems of exchange and thus become a prime means through which to examine the social relations of exchange. This in no way diminishes their representational qualities, for it is normally these that ostensibly motivate the processes of exchange in the first place (for example, children exchanging cigarette cards of famous football or baseball players in days gone by, Pokémon or superhero characters today). The materiality of visual media is surely often overlooked or analytically unmarked, but to overlook it in all cases is to make a serious sociological error. To put in other words, and highlighting the theme of this volume, visual media not only proffer evidence about the material world, they also proffer evidence about themselves as objects in that world.

MATERIAL EVIDENCE

It is in representational mode that images are most often considered evidence. The 19th century photographs exhibited in the 2001 National Portrait Gallery exhibition, “The Beautiful and the Damned” were originally taken to provide evidence of their subjects’ madness, criminality

or social celebrity (Hamilton and Hargreaves 2001); a century later a grainy shopping-centre security camera image is referred to as “chilling evidence of the ease with which the crime [a child’s abduction and subsequent murder] was both committed and subsequently detected” (Mirzoeff 1999, 2); David Hemmings, the photographer in Antonioni’s film *Blowup* (1966), accidentally photographs what appears to be a murder in a London park. Yet in none of these cases are the actual image evidence of what is claimed. Bertillon, Huxley and the other 19th century “scientific” photographers were working on a flawed agenda that falsely presumed a correlation between physiognomy and social or medical pathology: a correlation that could be confirmed and mapped by cameras.¹ While the shopping centre video footage was certainly used as evidence in the subsequent court case, it only acts in evidential manner as part of a chain of evidence: the images show no “evidence” of the crime that was committed. The driving narrative of *Blowup* revolves, of course, around the very ambiguity of what the images appear to show, which itself acts as a metaphor for the ambiguity of the status, motivations and indeed mental state of the Hemmings character. In short, representational evidentiality is complex, layered, and subject to interpretation at every step.

Material evidentiality is similarly complex yet stems from the brute and irreducible fact of material presence. As Chris Pinney has noted, while the dominant realist modes of visual representation in the West depend on a unity of time and space and presume a unitary viewing subject, this is by no means universal – Pinney argues for India as an exception – nor determined by the photomechanical means of representation (Pinney 1992). What does, however, unite the photo-representational practices of both India and the West is the occupation of fixed points in space-time by the material objects of representation. While the things represented may be unitary or multiple, and the mode of representation linear and perspectival or fragmented and montaged, the objects that convey the representations – film strips, photographs, posters – are unique, singular and locatable, in time if not in space. Similarly, and going beyond the materiality of the image-objects themselves, the material conditions by which such image-objects come into existence, are preserved and reproduced,² inflected by local socio-economic conditions – e.g., late capitalist market relations – but only up

1. Bertillon’s development of the profile and full-face “mug shot” in the 1880s for the identification of criminals still remains in use today, however; see also Phillips, Hallowell and Squiers (1997).

2. While the relationship between an “original” photograph and its subsequent reproductions can be a matter for concern (Banks 2001, 60; Benjamin 1992), for the purposes of this argument all reproductions are unique in their materiality. The “same” image may be reproduced in hundreds, or indeed millions, of copies – in a daily newspaper for example – yet in each case the ‘performance’ of that image (Edwards 2001) is slightly different, depending on the historical and social context of its consumption.

to a point: chemical developing baths and offset lithography presumably work in much the same way as technical processes in India and the West, regardless of the social relations surrounding such processes. Finally, because of the similarities of being and origin, image-objects must often – if not always – be considered in dialogue with one another as well as with their makers, owners and consumers; whatever evidence image-objects proffer, they do so contingently and within a field of social relations that they both influence and by which they are influenced. All objects are entangled in social relations by those who possess, exchange and seek to control them (see Thomas 1991 for examples from the colonial histories of the Pacific), and all image-objects derive at least part of their capacity to derive meaning from their relationships with others (see Edwards 2001: Chapter 2 for examples from the archives). Elsewhere I have considered contemporary Western practices of image-object exchange, circulation and commodification (e.g., Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, 57-61, 66-70), but below, I wish to follow the lead provided by Thomas and Edwards in considering the circulation of image-objects in a colonial context of domination and resistance to domination: the flow of films as objects in late colonial India.

Films of India from the colonial period – both those produced by resident or visiting British, as well as those produced by Indians themselves – can undoubtedly be “read” from their surface content alone. Indian scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha, for example, concludes from a reading of early Indian commercial films that the “private” space of the home, personified in the roles of wives and mothers in fictional narratives, represented a specific site of anti-colonial nationalism (Rajadhyaksha 1994); while my own viewings of amateur British films of India from the same period reveal a counterpointing fascination with mysterious and veiled Indian womanhood in the “public” arena of the streets and fields. But equally, many early Indian commercial films show no particular interest in women’s roles and domestic spaces, whereas many amateur British films are more concerned with the social activities of upper-class British women at garden parties and Governors’ receptions than with trying to get behind the veil of their Indian lower-class counterparts. It is necessary therefore to take a much broader perspective, at least initially, to consider the full range of films in circulation during the last decades of colonial rule. It is also necessary to consider the films as objects, not so much in the literal sense as rolls of celluloid, but as the summation and embodiment of a series of social and material processes.

A BRIEF TYPOLOGY OF FILM IN THE COLONIAL INDIAN MEDIASCAPE³

The first cinematic images were seen in India in July 1896, in a screening of the Lumière brothers' short films at Watson's Hotel in Bombay only a few months after they had been screened for the first time in Europe. The screenings were intended for a largely European – that is to say, British – audience, yet within two years Indians were beginning to experiment with the technology themselves. As in Europe and America, after the first tentative beginnings, film quickly took root in India, rapidly expanding across the sub-continent.

Conventional histories of Indian cinema focus exclusively on the development of the indigenous Indian feature film industry, often seeking to demonstrate stylistic linkages and continuities with earlier, pre-cinematic spectacular forms such as shadow puppetry and narrative religious paintings. But the mythological drama that is most associated with the development of Indian cinema was by no means the only film form to be found: an examination of the wider “cinemascape” (to borrow and adapt a term from Arjun Appadurai) reveals that there were at least four distinct types of film objects in circulation in the first four decades of the 20th century:

(1) The first films to be commercially screened in India – seen by Indians and Europeans – were all imported from Britain or the United States and dominated the market until the end of the 1920s, when the British-sponsored Indian Cinematograph Committee recommended that the indigenous film industry should be encouraged to produce more films for the domestic market. These earlier imported films were a mixture of familiar classics (to us, today) such as *Desert Song* (1929) and *Broadway Melody* (1929), as well as the rather more risqué American ‘B’ movies such as *Party Girl* (1930) and *Convention City* (1933) (neither of which I have ever seen but both of which were banned from screening on account of their “low moral tone”).

(2) An indigenous industry, however, began early on. The first commercial feature is generally reckoned to be D. G. Phalke's Bombay-produced *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913 (based on an episode from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata), after which some 1300 films were produced over the next two decades. The vast bulk of this production was made up of what quickly came to be known as “mythological films” – that is,

3. By necessity, the survey that follows must remain brief, perhaps too brief, and the details are subordinated to the purposes of my general argument in this paper. I hope to publish more on the films discussed in their own right and in their proper historical context in the near future. Unless otherwise referenced, the material that follows is sourced from articles in Chabria (1994b), Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994) and my own archival research at the Indian National Film and Television Archive (Pune), the Maharashtra State Archives (Mumbai), and the Centre for South Asian Studies (Cambridge).

dramatizations of stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other Hindu epic and religious texts. On the whole, contemporary life in India – whether filmed in a realist style or not – did not form the subject of early Indian commercial filmmaking.

(3) But there was a great deal of film activity elsewhere in the Indian visual landscape, even if nowhere near the scale of commercial cinema. By the 1920s British non-governmental bodies were regularly screening imported documentary films to Indian audiences for educational purposes. In 1926, for example, the British Social Hygiene Council applied to the Bombay Government to screen several films on venereal disease to Indian medical students.⁴ By the 1930s, educational documentary production was underway by these bodies in India, and annual events such as the Bombay Presidency “Baby and Health” weeks and “Red Cross” weeks were screening imported and locally made films such as *Relentless Foe* (on tuberculosis) and *Slaves of custom* (on the evils of early marriages).

(4) Away from the commercial and educational arenas there is a final category of film objects; films created locally by British amateur filmmakers which had very restricted circulation. So far, I have been able to trace about 100 non-commercial films made by British visitors or residents of India in the period leading up to Independence, although there must have been many more. Except for some earlier travelogues made by commercial companies, amateur film production begins in the late 1920s, with the bulk being produced through the 1930s. They deal with subjects as diverse as agricultural irrigation methods, skiing holidays, railway journeys, home life, and India’s architectural heritage – the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort, and so forth.⁵ Finally, there are some more minor categories of film: missionary propaganda films, foreign newsreels and the so-called “Royal” films commissioned by the rulers of Indian independent states. At the very end of the colonial period, a final British visual incursion is seen in India, the Griersonian documentary: intended to educate, inform and build a particular type of national character as the second World War gets underway.

4. As well as three factual films on “Syphilis”, “Gonorrhoea” and “Venereal Diseases in Men”, they also wished to show two dramatised films: *The Shadow* (“a vivid presentation of evils of Quack treatment, embodied in a moving narrative”) and *Whatsoever a man seweth* (“a story of two brothers who joined the army [which] shows the disastrous effects upon the life of one who succumbed to temptation and the prosperous career of the other who kept straight”) (HPD 1926-27, File 171). The description of *Whatsoever...* sounds very similar to the wartime South African Red Cross film *Mr Wise and Mr Foolish go to town*, itself a version of another film (Vaughan 1991, Chapter 8), indicating that some spaces of visual circulation were as large as the Empire itself.

5. These films form a class by virtue of their production and by their (presumed) consumption, rather than by form, style, subject matter or any other representational quality.

But a mere typology of film forms brings us no closer to understanding the discursive spaces that film opened up or moved into in order to allow a visual conversation between the British and the Indians. To do that, we must consider the trajectories of the films as objects, both as representatives of a class of objects (common goods in their commodity phase, following Igor Kopytoff – the many prints of commercial feature films in circulation, for example) and as singular objects – unique and unexchangeable (the single prints of many amateur films, for example) (Kopytoff 1986, 69).

THE SPACES OF SEEING AND BEING SEEN

The great age for visual interaction between the British and the Indians took place in the 19th century, as each side sought to express their comprehension of the other through visual media – first through paintings, etchings and three-dimensional plastic arts and then, from the middle of the century onwards, through still photography.⁶ By the time films-as-objects in India were great enough in number and sufficiently embedded within the visual landscape to acquire agency and to begin to circulate with predictable trajectories across that landscape, the certainties of 19th century visual scrutiny had largely waned – the endless “races and types of mankind” photographic projects of the period had dwindled to almost nothing. In a sense, then, Indian film-objects in their representational mode have little to say to us today about the mutual engagement of British and Indian individuals.



FIGURE 1
Dhobi ghat Lahore,
1930, from
Banks 1, with
kind permission
from the Centre
of South Asian
Studies, University
of Cambridge.

6. This photographic gaze was not exactly reciprocal, as Chris Pinney (1997) and others have demonstrated, but nor was it one-sided. While some of the British and other European photographers were combining the new sciences of photography and anthropometry in an attempt to map the races and types of the Indian population (a project complicated by the all-too obvious yet maddeningly obscure social hierarchy of caste), Indians were seeking to understand themselves through photography, a project complicated and yet vitalized by the changes that the British presence had brought to that conception of self. By the first or second decade of the 20th century it was clear that mere visual scrutiny of the Indians by the British – or vice versa – would reveal little about their inner selves or their modes of sociality.

They are not entirely mute, however. For example, some of the amateur British films still show traces of the “races and types” typologizing that typified some 19th century photographic projects, which in the Indian context had quickly transmuted into a typology of castes and occupations. Figure 1 shows a shot from a film made by my namesake, Dick Banks, of *dhobis*, or washermen, at Lahore. Banks, an ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) employee, was sent to India in 1929 to survey the site of a new chemical plant and, like many other travellers, took the opportunity to film the sights he saw on his trip. Photographs of washermen, together with barbers, potters, metalworkers and the like, were stock images in the 19th century photographic surveys.

But aside from these traces there is one area, one discursive space, through which all film objects travelled very distinctively and within which they exercised their agency. The rise of cinema in India from the beginning of the 20th century corresponds with the rise of a coherent and increasingly powerful set of actions and representations around the issue of Indian independence, or “home rule” as it was known. While it is possible to discuss the Indian nationalist movement in abstract terms, or to trace it through the papers and writings of politicians, a sense of nationalism as a lived project is only possible through an examination of the agents who contributed to the debates and via an examination of the objects and actions that they endowed with nationalist significance. One such class of objects – though not necessarily always the most articulate – are the films produced in India prior to independence.⁷

A standard reading of Indian photography – and therefore of later Indian film – holds that “traditional” stylistic and formal properties of pre-photographic and pre-cinematic Indian visual forms were carried through to the age of the camera (e.g., Gutman 1982). Yet such an approach overlooks a much changed and highly charged political landscape within which these later visual forms circulated (Pinney 1997, 96).

For example, D. G. Phalke, mentioned above and known today as the “father of Indian cinema”, is reported as saying when he saw an imported British film, *The Life of Christ* in late 1910 or early 1911: “while the *Life of Christ* was rolling fast before my eyes I was mentally visualizing the gods – Shri Krishna, Shri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya [geographical sites of great significance in Hindu mythology]... Could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?” (Chabria 1994, 8). To be sure, traditional aesthetic forms might have been deployed in the subsequent style and form of Indian cinema, but they were stimulated by a conjunction of changes in technical *and* political circumstances, not

7. Perhaps the most significant class of object endowed with nationalist significance in this period is cloth – see Bayly (1986), Tarlo (1996).

simply unproblematically transferred from one medium to another. It was not merely the technology, or the film form in the abstract, that excited Phalke and stimulated the creation of his films, but the potential trajectories he could see for the film objects he subsequently created: representations of Indian gods and heroes, certainly, but also objects that would circulate through Indian society as representatives of that loaded Gandhian term: *swadeshi* – “home industry” –, a social and political movement which sought to promote the creation and use of “home” products – most significantly cloth – over products imported from Britain. Phalke is said to have stated that: “My films are *swadeshi* in the sense that the capital, ownership, employees and stories are *swadeshi*” (Rajadhyaksha 1994, 38).

The space into which Phalke and other pioneers of Indian commercial cinema sought to insert their film-objects was a highly regulated space. The (British colonial) Government of the Bombay Presidency sought to regulate this space in two ways: firstly, by regulating the representational content of the films made and circulated, and secondly, by regulating the physical spaces where films were screened; that is to say, by regulating their materiality. Neither of these were straightforward matters, for the regulation of both content and performative context inevitably confined or blocked channels along which both foreign and indigenous films were travelling. In the area of morality, for example, there was as much objection on the part of the Bombay Board of Film Censors to perceived lewdness or indecency in imported American “B” movies as to such traits in locally-made Indian films. On this matter, the representation of partial nudity was not thought to be offensive or dangerous in a generalized abstract way; however, partial female nudity in an American film was dangerous for the perceived misrepresentation of white women, which might cause Indian audiences to lose respect for the British, whose women were supposed to represent the epitome of chaste Christian virtue; by contrast, any scenes of partial female nudity in Indian-made films would merely inflame desires and lead, ultimately, to venereal disease. Thus, the differing biographies and trajectories of the two kinds of film – American and Indian – while causing them to be subject to the same kinds of restraint in their further circulation, also brought about an implicit recognition of their contextual differences as films: the social relations and viewing practices of the United States, while distasteful to the Board, were recognised as supporting a space that allowed a certain kind of film object to exist in the United States, but the differing social relations in India did allow that same space to exist there.

But it was the space for nationalist discourse that the British sought most stringently to control, especially after 1927 when the Indian Cinematograph Committee recommended that the “solution” to the danger presented by the “immoral” films imported from the United States, was not to substitute them with more wholesome British products but to support and encourage

the indigenous industry.⁸ Indian filmmakers thus sought to send a variety of film-objects out into the Indian mediascape. Many of the more overtly political films – documentaries or actuality sequences of nationalist agitation – were stillborn, shot down in flames before they ever began to circulate and accumulate value. For example, in 1931 P. V. Rao made *Marthanda Varma*, an account of the legendary 18th century founder of Travancore State in South India, but the film was never approved for release; most likely due to its depictions of a peasant uprising, introduced with title cards such as “Freedom loving sons of the soil. Gird up your loins and fight for your birth-right. Rise up...!”. Similarly, in September 1934, Mr. M. B. Bilmoria, a filmmaker and equipment supplier of Bombay, wrote to the Secretary of the Home Department, Government of Bombay: “We desire to take a cinema film of the proceedings of Congress Meeting to be held in Bombay next month, but before we do so we would like to know whether the picture will be passed for exhibition in India, because if there is no chance of its being passed for exhibition we do not desire to undergo expenses for nothing”. He was told that the film’s suitability for exhibition could not be decided until it was made; given that there is no future reference to the film, Mr. Bilmoria presumably decided not to bother (HPD⁹ 1934, File 178).

Some nationalists were, however, occasionally able to insert their agency into film-objects. For example, in the late 1930s, nationalists sometimes interfered with prints of otherwise innocuous commercial films – altering their material aspect as objects, and sending them along new trajectories – by inserting additional material. During screenings of the apparently bland *Prem Veer* (“Heroic Love”) at the Novelty Cinema in Ahmedabad, the capital of the state of Gujarat, in December 1937, a title card was inserted, in Gujarati, inciting the audience to rise from their seats and sing the banned Hindu Nationalist anthem *Vande Mataram* (HPD 1938, File 49).

Overall though, it was the Indian-made commercial mythological films that succeeded best – both with the Board of Censors and with the audiences – and while some later writers have claimed that there are coded nationalist sentiments in these films (e.g., Rajadhyaksha 1994), there is no clear evidence that audiences of the time read these films in this way. By contrast, British amateur films followed very different trajectories from the commercial Indian-made ones and the British-made propaganda documentaries. On the one hand, as they were not intended for commercial release, they were free of the constraints of censorship and could show things otherwise thought unsuitable. For example, in the early 1930s, Charles Hunter made a four-minute amateur film about cotton

8. The stimulating recommendations included financial incentives to producers, the abolition of raw stock duty, and a reduction in the entertainment tax. While the British administration essentially ignored the report, it is obvious from the subsequent volume of Indian production that it nonetheless sent a powerful message to local producers.

9. Home (Political) Department papers, Government of Bombay; Maharashtra State Archive, Mumbai.

production and weaving, into which he jokily inserts a title card reading “Spinning yarn on Mr. Gandhi’s ‘chakra’ (‘spinning wheel’, but also a symbol of Indian or at least Hindu nationalism)¹⁰ – a reference that might have severely restricted the movement of an Indian-made film-object though its trajectory in the commercial distribution circuit. On the other hand, precisely because these British amateur films were not made for commercial release, their circulation as objects was extremely restricted. In terms of their biographies, these films have generally had very quiet lives and for the most part since their production have lain unseen in attics, basements, and archives.¹¹ Their highly visible absence in subsequent academic discussions of late Colonial India seems related to their long retirement in the archives and their lack of opportunity for performance.

CONCLUSION: FILMS AS THINGS

Both Indian commercial feature films and amateur British films of the same period circulated through the colonial Indian mediascape along trajectories that were often independent of one another, but that occasionally crossed. In terms of their production and consumption, they existed – and still exist – in isolated exchange spheres or spheres of consumption.¹² But in terms of the social relations existing between their producers, their subjects and their consumers, these various film objects went through the same discursive spaces and today continue to maintain a conversation with one another.

FIGURE 2
The infant Krishna
battles the snake
demon Kaliya,
from D. G. Phalke’s
“Kaliya Mardana”
(1919), with kind
permission from
the National Film
and Television
Archive, Pune.



10. Hunter 7 ‘Cotton’, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge

11. In recent years, however, their biographies have acquired new chapters. While a few scholars such as myself have taken an interest in them, they have become increasingly sought after by television production companies, which have brought them, often for the first time, into a commodity phase (Kopytoff 1986) of their existence, buying up the rights to their performance from the archives that hold them to incorporate sequences into modern documentaries on the Second World War, on the British empire, on British colonial reminiscences and so forth.

12. An exception being the British-made propaganda films, which often circulated in the same spaces as locally-made feature films, especially towards the end of the period when Griersonian documentaries were compulsorily screened in Indian cinemas before the main feature.

The significance of seeing films as objects, whether circulating as commodities or otherwise, lies in seeing the paths for social action and social engagement that their performative trajectories open up. By recreating India's mythological past in their films, for example, Phalke and his successors opened up a space to consider an independent India, albeit a Hindu one, in which social action took place between known individuals (even if they were gods or demons) with known outcomes (see Figure 2) – in sharp contrast to the unpredictable trajectories and outcomes that the films themselves encountered, subject as they were to commercial pressures and British regulation. In contrast, the British amateur documentary films were often engaged with India's present, but a present that was located in a quasi-ethnological past, one that did not connect with the Imperial present of Governors' garden parties and receptions. Against a background of growing nationalist sentiment and urban political agitation, the British amateurs sought to create and circulate objects among their colonial friends in India and back in Britain that told a story of harmonious but pre-industrial agrarian relations – hence the ethnological films about different forms of irrigation.

Reading the narrative content of Indian commercial mythological features alone, or of amateur British documentaries alone, or of professional propaganda films alone, tells us something – but not very much – about visual relations in colonial India. The British amateur documentaries, while seemingly transparent as a narrative record of events, are relatively mute as subjects of sociological interest. They can really only be understood and make sense to us today when seen as objects in circulation, set in their social and visual context, a context that includes Phalke's mythological dramas, and Red Cross films on better baby care. Seeing these films as differentiated members of a single class of objects, subject to differing constraints in their circulation and contexts of performance, allows us to see that they are part of a visual conversation between all the film creators and consumers of the period. The biographies of Colonial period film-objects are revealing today not individually but collectively, as revealing a network of paths of social action along which British and Indians could move in their wake.

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