

**Bollywood cinema has long been popular in India
but is now a cult phenomenon in Britain.
How do you account for this transformation?**

The term cult can mean a variety of things in different circumstances. From excessive religious worship, a strong devotion to a person or item, social cult groupings and mass suicide pacts - to a more cultural understanding of the term to mean popular texts and the practises of their devotees. Cult media can come in an array of forms – film, TV, bands, magazines and personalities. Concentrating on film - no film is cult as such, but adopted by its fans to be cult, as the films of Bollywood are.

It is not just the quirky and independent films that acquire cult status, as some mainstream Hollywood blockbusters are thought of as cult – *Star Wars* for example. A film's cult status is usually a matter of the way in which it is classified in consumption. However, cult filmmakers do often share the same subcultural ideology as the cult fan and have deliberately set out to produce cultalistic films.

Cult fans have an underlying desire to be different to the norm and do this by expressing a sub-cultural capital via their watching and vast knowledge of the world of cult cinema. DVDs now offer the cult fan a fantastically easy way to learn the extra titbits about their chosen cult film, with all the extras, commentaries by the director and leading cast members, making of documentaries and so forth.

Barthes (1975) discusses two kinds of narrative that can be applied to the world of cult cinema, the text of pleasure and the text of bliss, or *jouissance*. The first of which grants a sense of euphoria for the viewer and does not seek to unsettle by offering the familiar. The second, the text of bliss, imposes a state of loss; it seeks to

discomfort the viewer by unsettling their tastes, values and memories. Cult films therefore can be thought of as texts of bliss. Whereas mainstream cinema is concerned with texts of pleasure, as they are usually based on a familiar cinematic formula, unlike texts of bliss, where each cult film differing vastly from the next.

'In recent months, the Indian commercial cinema known alternatively as Bollywood has acquired the status of a novelty item, being something of a recent sensation, a cool new discovery.' (Bhattacharya, 2004). Bollywood has also laid the foundations in Western culture as cult cinema. Offering something different to the cinemagoer and DVD renter, more the latter due to British cinemas mostly still neglecting to give this genre screen space.

Maurice Sestier is said to begun started Bollywood back in 1896 when he started cinema exhibitions in Bombay. By the 1900s showmen were taking film beyond the cities and set up tent shows which at times would house as many as 10,000 spectators. (Hayward, 2000, p.420). However, Bollywood was truly established as an industry in the 1920s and this era saw the founding of the major studios in Bombay and Calcutta. Financing the industry was extremely difficult and mostly relied on trader-industrialists. Today's Bollywood is seen as an important film making industry and therefore finds it easier, not always though, to find funding.

To discuss the transformation of how Bollywood has become a cult phenomenon in Britain, I will be focusing on three Bollywood films that have made an impact on the British cinema landscape. First, *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), which is viewed by native audiences as an all, time favourite and was a classic blockbuster. It *'...ran continuously for five years at a cinema hall in Mumbai.'* (Joshi, 2001, p.123). *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), translated as 'Flames' or 'Embers', is a film about two brave ex-cons

saving a unfortunate village from the depravations of a gang of robbers whose leader is, quite simply, Evil incarnate.

The impersonation of the *Western* genre and its dramatization of the universal theme of good fighting evil make it an archetypal filmic experience for many Indian and international filmgoers alike. '*One Bollywood film that was volunteered as 29 per cent of the respondents' general favourite, was the 1975 blockbuster Sholay.*' (Bhattacharya, 2004).

The second example of Bollywood I will later be discussing in full is *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001). This film portrays the story of a drought stricken rural community rising up against the Raj and staking their livelihood on a game of cricket. The most expensive Indian film at the time of its release, it picked up the audience award at the *Locarno Film Festival*, got into the *UK Top 20 Film Charts* and gained an *Oscar* nomination in the *Best Foreign Film* category in 2002, which made it the most talked about Bollywood film of the new millennium. '*A hit both in India and in the UK, this film profiles the historical tensions between Indians and the British Empire.*' (Joshi, 2001, p.332).

Before *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) was entered as a contestant for the *Oscars* in 2002, or before Baz Luhrmann declared his debt to Bollywood's spectacular musicality in the making of the film *Moulin Rouge* (2001), or before Andrew Lloyd Webber deployed Bollywood's carnivalesque musicality in his *Bombay Dreams* (2002), Bollywood was a relatively unknown quantity in the west. The new millennium saw a real opening in international respect and enjoyment for the Indian cult genre – Bollywood.

The third film I have chosen for analysis is *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001). It was premiered in Tokyo due to the director's influences from their native cinema style and was screened at the *Venice Film Festival* in 2001. *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) takes the audience back to the age of Emperor Asoka, the conquering emperor who embraced pacifism in the end. My choice of films was mainly due to their popularity in the UK, not just in their native India. I also included *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) to compare how Bollywood has changed since the 1970s.

Many of the most memorable sections of a film usually centre on its mise-en-scene, a term originating from French meaning 'putting into the scene'. It was first applied to plays and theatre, but now it is also widely used in film analysis. Mise-en-scene includes setting, lighting, costume, character action and so on. I will be looking in depth at my chosen Bollywood films to see what makes Bollywood mise-en-scene different to the norm and how this in fact gives them cult film status.

At one level, Bollywood is crass, melodramatic excess, but at another level, it is exemplary entertainment cinema, which also makes it quite clear to the spectators that it is not reality. There is a distancing effect, which is associated with Brechtian theatre. Brecht wished to ensure the intellectual respect of his audience by making it continually aware that it was watching a play, not reality. He schooled actors to alienate themselves from their roles. He created epic theatre in which narrative, montage, self-contained scenes and rational argument were used to create a shock of realisation in the spectator.

Bollywood makes use of the self-contained scene idea, by occasionally breaking from dialogue into song and dance, yet still remaining part of the overall narrative. Songs are also an important part in Brechtian theatre to distance the audience and keep them fully aware it was a play, not reality.

Kumar (2005) explores how Bollywood movies exemplify the reversal in flow of media products - from West to East, to East to West. Kumar (2005) suggests Bollywood '*reversed the flow of information that was traditionally from the West to the East. And in this counter flow of media products, movies constitute a significant component, especially from India and China.*'

Bollywood has proved it can appeal to audiences outside of India. '*It should not be a surprise that popular Bollywood movies are also referred to as masala (hotchpotch) movies. There is always something for everyone.*' (Kumar, 2005). Let us take a closer look at the essence of Bollywood – the films themselves.

'When asked of what other genres of representation Bollywood reminded them, though 29 per cent picked music videos...17 per cent of respondents also picked lighter, non-didactic forms such as situational comedies and reality TV.' (Bhattacharya, 2004). What Bhattacharya's research suggests here is true, Bollywood offers multiple genres in one film, but being on average three to four hours long, they can afford to.

Sholay (Sippy, 1975) offers an action packed Western, with the compulsory love story running through the narrative. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) offers stories about love lost, found and repressed and ends with an epic cricket match. *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) offers sword fighting, love, war, mother and son relationships, male rivalry – especially between brothers, and self-identity issues. Whoever has said Bollywood is just colourful song and dance was very wrong. Each film has depth and a vast array of genre influences and themes.

Mobile framing, usually referred to as camera movement, includes pans – moving of the camera on a vertical axis, as if the camera was looking with just its head from side to side, to give the impression of a frame horizontally scanning space. The tracking shot – where the camera changes position, travelling in any direction along the ground – forward, backward, circularly, diagonally or from side to side.

Within all the Bollywood films I watched there was a common trend to shoot the song and dance scenes from high above, using the crane shot. Fast editing these shots with other angles gives these sequences a real aesthetic. The only film that made use of extreme close ups for dramatic effect was *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) when Emperor Asoka has the point of a sword near his eye for example. Depth of focus is used recurrently also, to fit in as many actors and actresses at a time into a single shot. Overall, both *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) and *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) used pretty much all styles of camera movement and shot, leaving *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) a little less adventurous.

'The NRIs usually want their films to be both trendy and traditional. Above all, they want them to look good and be slickly made.' (Joshi, 2001, p.335). This is certainly the case for the later Bollywood films I have looked at, but not so much for *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975).

Ellipsis is the term for periods of time that have been left out of the narrative and usually take the form of editing transitions. The fade and dissolve both suggest a passing of time, whereas the wipe signals a change of setting. The cut is more commonly used now a days to suggest either.

Bollywood's editing – or ellipsis – techniques have improved dramatically from the 1970s *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), which mainly used fades and editing was so unobtrusive

it is barely noteworthy. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) is a step up, with fast editing during the song and dance sequences, yet still using unimposing cuts and fades on the whole.

Asoka (Sivan, 2001) is where we see a total ellipsis transformation to music video fast paced editing and transition styles, not just for the song and dance scenes, but also for the wars, fighting and action sequences. There are multi-layered transitions using special effects through out the film also. Overall this film is barely recognisable as coming from the same genre as *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), with its humdrum scene transitions and editing.

Bollywood has absorbed more and more from MTV-style choreography, graphics, and quick-fire editing; as the production values have increased, the spangly outfits have accordingly shrunk. *'The staple of Indian cinema is the lengthy, highly stylized Musical.'* (Monaco, 2000, p.310). This was certainly there in the *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) and *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001). For me, the MTV style song and dance sequences are what I love about Bollywood.

As a newcomer to the genre, I was impressed by the fact these films also offer much more than just a few song and dance scenes. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) and *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) both drew me in with plot, comedy and average acting. They were able to keep me entertained more so than most mainstream American films and not just for the colourful, usually love story, song and dance. *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) however did not manage to keep me entertained in the same way, which is probably mainly due to the lack of MTV style editing and special effects of the other two films (also the very annoying female lead's voice).

Although Bollywood's film making practices might have little to do with Hollywood production styles, it is a cinema of entertainment geared to promoting popular songs, and film stars, much like Hollywood does. *'Sholay failed to do well initially, but box-office sales improved dramatically after the release of the soundtrack...'* (Joshi, 2001, p.124).

The Hollywood influences can be seen in *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) the most, as the female lead is less curvy than the one appearing in *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) – a conformation to the thinner female form imposed on Western culture. Finally, Bollywood always seems to offer a happy ending in its films, if a rough ride on the way. This is a similarity to mainstream Hollywood narrative structure.

Although I seem to be suggesting Bollywood is becoming more like Hollywood by the second, there is something distinct to Bollywood that could never change and frankly, the people of India would not let it. *'...earlier perspectives on globalization were later overtaken to a large extent by new evidence that suggested active resistance at the local level to the onslaught of modernization/westernization and dependency.'* (Kumar, 2005).

Since television sets are still not widely owned, this increases Bollywood's popularity as individuals use it as their major form of entertainment. The other side of the world, in Britain for example, Bollywood caters not only for curious non-Indians but also for the diaspora – Non-Resident Indians or NRIs. Kumar (2005) discusses Bollywood in terms of Bhabha's (1994) view of cultural hybridity as negotiation between the adopted land of the immigrant and the homeland, creating a third space, therefore placing Bollywood in this third space. *'For Indian immigrants living across the globe, movies from India are an essential part of their popular culture.'* (Kumar, 2005).

'Overseas ticket, video, and DVD sales now account for perhaps 40% of revenues for Bollywood, a multibillion-pound industry. "The export market for Hindi films is especially important due to the low value of the rupee," says Rachel Dwyer, chair of the Centre of South Asian Studies at the University of London and author of several books about Indian cinema and pop culture. "A ticket in London is 10 times the cost of a ticket in even the most upmarket theatre in India."' (Winter, 2003).

This was all facilitated when *'The Indian government eased its restrictions on importing foreign films in 1991 and rescinded the ban on dubbing, but this, instead of leading to the predicted demise of Bollywood, rejuvenated the industry after a short lag of a few years, indigenising the foreign influence as well as hybridizing the so-called indigenous elements...'* (Bhattacharya, 2004).

'Bollywood producers are targeting both audiences in India and in the diaspora, they would be constructing hybridization in the representation of the "material practices" (food, clothes, material symbols rooted in traditions and religion, etc.) and "everyday life" (the family routine and the outdoor routine). Identifying these hybrid practices can give us idea of the construction of 'hybrid identities' as opposed to 'national identity' in Bollywood movies, and help in dealing with the questions on hybrid identities.' (Kumar, 2005).

For *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), the appeal is more set to native audiences. If international audiences wished to watch a Western, they would probably choose one in their own language so they did not miss any of the action while reading subtitles. However, Bollywood of the new millennium does indeed seem to have a lot to offer the international cinema audience. Both *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) and *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) are epic, grand scale tales. *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) even uses British actors, with some dialogue actually in English. The film focusing around cricket is obviously appealing and familiar to British crowds, as well as allowing native audiences to enjoy a mockery of the foreign game.

The feeling of community spirit, on going multi cultural love interests, the love between mother and son, desire to break free from oppressive rulers and female jealousy over men are all internationally familiar films, universally understood and

engaged with. For the Indian viewer *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) shows familiar Hindu celebrations and religious ritual that international audiences can learn from and the diaspora identifies with. *Asoka's* (Sivan, 2001) themes include religion being highly respected and central in society, the respect for mother's and elders in general and arranged marriage.

'...core values of the Indian society, rooted in the myth, history and tradition, and values of globalization through disavowal. This also perhaps explains the narrative form of Indian movies that is a hybrid between the narrative structure of films from Hollywood and Indian epics.'
(Kumar, 2005).

There are some other aspects of Bollywood mise-en-scene I wish to mention in brief. Most of Bollywood seems to be filmed outdoors, on location rather than purpose built sets. This cuts costs and gives the films an epic aesthetic. Where interiors are used they are mainly large grand palaces and temples, with just as much epic splendour of the expansive landscapes and village shots of the exterior locations.

Bollywood acting style is commonly thought of as a weak point for these films, that it is over melodramatic. This is certainly true for *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) and *Lagaan's* (Gowariker, 2001) acting style is a little wooden. However, *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) seems to have calmed a little and is far more believable. In *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) there are three actors used as a kind of Shakespearian comedy trio to ease the audience after a scene of highly emotive drama. Similar comedy trios are used in *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) and *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975) but to lesser effect, the village fool or jester.

Costumes in Bollywood are mainly a talking point of the female characters, as they wear elaborate saris. Needless to say, costumes have improved since *Sholay's* (Sippy, 1975) day – the women wear less but the materials used look more luxurious

and exciting. Male costume in *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) is both for the British Raj and the Indian villagers – opposite ends of the scale. In *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) a lot of war-wear is worn, yet again rather expensive looking. Sound effects and soundtracks are both present in all the film I looked at, but *Asoka* (Sivan, 2001) used them the most, where non-diegetic sound features largely for dramatic effect.

In the increasing work researched and written about fan cultures, it is sometimes suggested that cult fans hold their object of fandom as important as a religion. However, Hills (2002) suggests that *'neoreligiosity, not religion is what we must consider when thinking about cult fandoms.'* (p.117). This might suggest that the worship that Bollywood cult objects receive from their cult fans is not religious worship, but a new form of this, neoreligiosity.

Returning to Bhattacharya's (2004) research, we can see Bollywood native fans as displaying neoreligiosity. *'As I interviewed and thought about the responses I was getting, another interesting feature of Bollywood watchers surfaced. A number of the respondents showed an ambiguity about discussing their habits as Bollywood watchers that led me to think that their relationship with this cinema produced a pleasure that was treated as a diasporic secret.'*

Let us take a few moments to consider how Bollywood has influenced British television and film. One of the most famous and noteworthy NRI filmmakers is Gurinder Chadha. She directed both *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha, 2004) a Bollywood-style version of Jane Austen's novel in which the Bennett's are transformed into an Indian family from Amritsar and *Bend it Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) which grossed some \$60m (£32m) in America almost entirely by word of mouth.

While at University in London, Chadha felt Indians were being kept down in British society and the education system. When she went to India for a year, to research and write her dissertation on women in the media, something sparked in her mind - that the media could lead to race awareness. Thus began her journey to create better images of people like her. Twenty years later, Chadha finds herself, to her surprise, positioned as one of the most commercial film directors in Britain today.

The films of Chadha are not the only aspects of culture touched by Bollywood. A few years back London's Victoria and Albert Museum held an exhibit on Bollywood's poster-art entitled *Cinema India: The Art of Bollywood* (26 June to 6 October 2002). Even the 2002 film *The Guru*, (Scherler Mayer, 2002) starring Heather Graham, held a flame for Bollywood. An Indian dance teacher leaves India to pursue fame in New York and gets mistaken for a sex guru - not a plot device traditionally associated with Bollywood, but song and dance scenes occur nevertheless.

On British television there has also been an influx of Bollywood influences. In June 2004, *Channel Four* aired a show called *Bollywood Star* (Dehaney, 2004), which offered six young hopefuls the chance to go to India and to appear in a Bollywood movie. The overall winner was picked by director Mahesh Bhatt who put this first ever British Bollywood star in one of his films.

Programmes like this show us things we do not often see on British television; exposes us to new sights and sounds, to different priorities and unfamiliar stories rather than the watery, predictable, across-the-board US/UK fare we are usually given. *Bollywood Star* may use a clichéd reality talent show formula, but it spices it with drama, emotion, dark humanity and lavish costumes; just like a good Bollywood film.

The BBC has also let Indian themed programmes perch on the sidelines of their schedules. Recently a three-part adaptation of Meera Syal's best-selling novel, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (DeEmmony, 2005) has been broadcast. Syal is interested in women suspended between two cultures: Indian tradition and liberal British society – the diaspora. Syal is also co-writer of the sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* (Bhaskar, 1998). The first hour episode of *Life Isn't...* (DeEmmony, 2005) managed to pack in love, marriage, infidelity, betrayal, death, birth, gender, God and the meaning of life – in the same vein of a good Bollywood film.

As we have seen, Bollywood offers something rare in cinema – originality, even if the genre as a whole follows a formulaic structure. Bollywood has broken down the Western barriers and influences our culture.

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