

Project outline

The (inter)cultural politics of film musicals: lessons from Bollywood

Recent comparative approaches in film studies have focused on the interrelated ways in which cinema cultures around the world have drawn on, developed further and reinvented the Hollywood tradition of the film musical.¹ In its original and globally seminal forms, the Hollywood musical is often celebrated as an American – which is, by implication, ‘modern’ – genre *par excellence* for its cultural openness and inclusivity and its crossbreed character.² Musicals should thus be taken serious for their potential to advertise the spirit of democracy in a popular medium. Such a perception is likely to sound counterintuitive to many, since musicals have always been easily dismissed by influential quarters as opium for the people, the most blatant and unashamed endeavours of the culture industry to offer escapism in order to whitewash, veil and repress the complexity, power structures, conflicts and social inequalities of modern societies.

While it would require extensive empirical research to assess to which degree the majority of existing musicals can pass as attempts to reinvigorate a sense of democracy or merely affirm the traditional and/or hegemonic *status quo*, it seems to be a promising strategy to start by looking at a small selection of examples that stand out from the rest as they are marked by formal experiments. The thesis to be tested here is that innovations in form are necessary for any democratic and socially inclusive ‘content’ to withstand the rules of convention and to ‘function’ subversively to some extent. There is no understanding of the ‘exception’ without knowing about the ‘rule’, which is why the genre(s) and sub-genres of the musical, in all its cultural and historical variations, should be grasped according to their particular ‘logic’, i.e. the key principles that constitute them as conventions. Seeing exceptional examples in the contexts of the larger traditions of genre – which they continue and transform – on the one hand, and in the larger contexts of social, cultural and political history on the other, my aim is to reach out to identify a set of criteria that could serve as suggestions, in a refined normative sense, of what would make musicals ‘better’ to reflect and further a certain prospect of change.

¹ Corey K. Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad (eds.) *The International Film Musical*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012.

² Rick Altman. *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987.

For such an exploration, it seems thus vital to widen the lens to go beyond the bias in favour of American productions that still marks the bulk of academic contributions on the musical, together with the field's often-exclusive interest in the tradition's development in the Western world. While notable transformations, among others, in European and Soviet cinemas should be registered, it is in India's Bollywood tradition that the film musical has had its most popular presence by far. Unlike Western cinematic norms in which musicals were the exception rather than the rule, the specifically Indian amalgam of realist narrative and song/dance sequences marks the unique case that a musical form has become culturally prevalent in this particular tradition. Famous for its readiness to incorporate all kinds of stylistic and musical influences, Hindi and related cinema, it cannot be denied, is problematically centred around a rather limited inventory of stock motives; most importantly, the family, whose integrity is carefully held high as a cultural analogy for the project of national reconciliation, the construction of a national imaginary of 'Indianness'.³ Still, much attention has been given to how popular Indian cinema subverts conventional notions of identity and desire.⁴ The potential for such subversion, it seems to me, is considerably conditioned by the fundamental hybridity of the mixed narrative/song form, a genre-that-is-not-one resisting to be analytically reduced to *only one* logic of representation. Moreover, even though Bollywood predominantly links commerce to conservative values, the ways in which the genre is received abroad by diverse audiences, and the ways in which Bollywood appropriates and transforms cultural influences, often have considerable de-centring effects in both ways. Taking into account the intercultural dimensions in production and reception, I would reformulate my thesis, relating formal innovations in musicals not simply to aspects of social and democratic opening, but, more specifically, to significant moments of (inter)cultural negotiations. If the 'political' in film musicals is thus to be understood as involving processes within and between cultures, it becomes clear why Bollywood would offer itself as a primary point of departure and central focal point for the kind of investigation I am about to conduct.

For this academic project to succeed, expertise is to be gained in several interrelated fields. This includes the history of the American musical tradition, but also theories of genre studies in a world cinema context. Most crucially for my research, I have to deepen my knowledge regarding Indian cinema as a complex cultural phenomenon, its history and contexts, its

³ Kush Varia. *Bollywood. Gods, Glamour and Gossip*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012.

⁴ Ajay Gehlawat. *Twenty-First Century Bollywood*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015.

modes of production and ways of reception. A research stay in Delhi seems most promising to add considerably to my understanding of the field. Aside from exploring libraries and archives, cinemas and museums, I hope to get in contact with researchers to get a better grip on a complex subject. I plan to see production sites in Delhi and Mumbai, wishing to meet audiences and experience fan cultures. Last but not least, this would be an excellent opportunity to widen my horizon more generally regarding Indian political, social and cultural history.