

Research seminar / Lecture Series with international guest speakers, Winter Semester 2023-24 and Summer Semester 2024

India as Method: Challenges and Perspectives in the Study of Media and Politics in Contemporary South Asia

Now the world's most populous country, India is both the largest producer of films and the largest democracy in the world. Committed to a constitutional order based on the principles of ethnic and religious inclusiveness in the wake of Independence and the Partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan in 1947, Indian history is dotted with moments of conflicts and crises including a period of authoritarian rule during the Emergency under prime minister Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977 and what is currently becoming apparent as an undeclared emergency under the increasingly authoritarian Hindu nationalist government since 2014. "India as Method" is a year-long research seminar which addresses the complex dynamics of media and politics in this moment of heightened conflict and crisis of democracy. This seminar emerges from the two-fold question—how cinema emerged and continues to emerge as a multivalent entity in this geographic category of India, *and* how the category of India itself is produced through specific cinematic practices and the sociopolitical relations and institutions surrounding them.

Politics and governance in India have long been inextricably linked to cinema and, more recently, digital media. As film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha argued, the cinema has been the only place where the ideals of India's constitution – particularly the idea of a polity which transcends caste, ethnic and religious difference – have ever become a reality, however fleetingly. Politicians certainly seek to associate themselves with film stars, and film stars have turned their fan clubs into parties and become politicians, particularly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. In the digital media ecology, where online platforms and videos increasingly serve as means of political agitation and organization, India's long history of communal violence has found new outlets in online communities, with real-life consequences for targeted minorities. More recently the cinema has emerged as a site of contention of Hindu nationalist policies in the films of recognizably Muslim stars such as Shah Rukh Khan. And across the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country, which political scientist Partha Chatterjee has recently characterized as an empire rather than a nation state, regional politics and insurgent movements from the rural Naxalite movement of the 1960s to contemporary movements particularly in the contested northwestern state of Kashmir and the eastern states of Assam and Manipur have been marked and driven by independent media practices.

Enlisting the insights of renowned specialists of Indian cinema and South Asian media culture, 'India as Method' proposes to study India as a laboratory of media practices which emerge against a backdrop of colonial and imperial legacies to work towards more equitable democratic policies, but also of countervailing media practices which work to call such policies into question.

The seminar consists of reading and discussion session accompanied by screenings. It is open to students of all degree programs in the department of theater, film and media studies at Goethe Universität, as well as students from anthropology, philosophy, literature, sociology, political science and other related fields.

The seminar is convened by Dr. Ritika Kaushik, post-doc in the Graduate Research Training Group "Konfigurationen des Films" (www.konfigurationen-des-films.de) and Prof. Dr. Vinzenz Hediger

It is recommended that participants in "India as Method" also follow the Lecture & Film "An Eye for the World: The Films of Satyajit Ray" (www.satyajit-ray.de).

Full program

Date	Speaker	Title and Abstract of Talk	Readings/Screening
3.11.23	Ravi Vasudevan	<p data-bbox="515 461 767 488">India as Film Studies</p> <p data-bbox="515 535 1145 1384">At a time when the name India is under potential erasure, to be displaced by avowedly "pre-colonial" terms, it is an occasion to reflect on the name, its genealogies and etymologies; the cultural affiliations, exclusions and potentialities it conjures up; as a state overseeing a congeries of linguistically and culturally diverse federal states; and as the dominant of the region, South Asia, itself a Cold War and "area studies" construct. In this way, a work of deconstruction could offer a broader method and template for the interrogation of methodological nationalism even as it explores the potentialities of multi-nation states. In this presentation, I propose to take for my entry point India as Film Studies, to reflect on key categories that have proven influential in an academic and intellectual engagement with India as cinema; how these may rest in problematic relation to each other and to the regions of India and South Asia; how concepts that appear novel may parallel forms observable in other cinemas; and also how terms that have come in from "elsewhere" may be reframed to dynamize conceptual debates and discussions across film contexts.</p> <p data-bbox="515 1431 1145 1599">The seminar takes as a reference point the multi-authored bid to think of categories and concepts animating the field of Indian and South Asian cinema in the special Keywords Issue of Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies (Volume 12, 2021)</p> <p data-bbox="515 1715 1145 1993">Ravi Vasudevan is a film and media historian. With Ravi Sundaram, he directs Sarai, the media research programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, and is co-founder of Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies (2010-). His recent publications include the edited works Documentary Now (Marg Special issue, 2018) and Media and the Constitution of the Political (2021)</p>	

The Vernacular Sensorium

My presentation will explore the concept of the “vernacular” less as a classification that arbitrates between languages (a historical locus in postcolonial studies) and more as a relational space between lingual performances. As theorists of accented speech (Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, Pavitra Sundar) argue, India’s vast multimodal, multilingual mediascapes unassailably situates us in a vernacular sensorium: complex lingual performances span not just reading and writing, but also speaking, listening, and viewing. Indeed, this media saturation offers a kind of test-bed for the theoretical and methodological promise of the vernacular. While this rethinking of the vernacular is based in sound studies, I turn to moving image studies to inquire into the lingual visualities of the vernacular sensorium.

Bishnupriya
Ghosh

24.11.2023

Bishnupriya Ghosh teaches in global media at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has published two monographs on the cultures of globalization: *When Borne Across: Cosmopolitics in the Indian Novel* (Rutgers UP, 2004) and *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (Duke UP, 2011). Her current research is on media, risk, and globalization: the co-edited *Routledge Companion to Media and Risk* (Routledge 2020) and a new monograph on viral pandemics, *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media* (Duke University Press, 2023). She is starting research on media environments of viral infection in a book of essays tentatively titled *Epidemic Intensities*.

Evacuee Cinema: Declaring a Method

Through the thematic and methodological pivots of the research underpinning *Evacuee Cinema*, the talk will demonstrate the ways in which this new history of partition and South Asian cinema seeks to make an intervention in its field. Pointing to regional connections across national boundaries, the work asserts that the cinemas of India and Pakistan must be explored in tandem to uncover the legacy of

Salma
Siddique

8.12.2023

partition for the culture industries of the region, one that is not hewn out of national erasures.

Salma Siddique is the PI of a DFG funded research project “Nitrate Cities: Spectatorship and Film Experience in Urban South Asia” at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.

Songs in Indian Cinema: Media Archeological Possibilities

22.12.2023 Rochona Majumdar

A considerable body of research has been devoted to understanding the distinctiveness of Indian cinema in terms of the ubiquity of songs and song and dance sequences. What happens if we treat songs as a medium situated both within and outside the film object/text? Dis-embedding the song from the film within which it is situated allows us to analyze it as a media object on its own. What are the yields of such an archeological approach?

Rochona Majumdar is Professor in the department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago.

Transnational as Method: Locating Indian Cine-Practice beyond India

12.1.24 Parichay Patra

This presentation raises the issue of realizing the potential of transnational cinema as method in the context of India, taking it beyond the usual framework of exhibition and reception. It wants to show how the transnational movements of film aesthetics, politics and ideologies create underexplored alliances and networks that place Indian cinema within the larger domain of the Global South, contradicting the narrative of exceptionalism that always plagued cinema studies in India.

Parichay Patra is an Assistant Professor at the School of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Jodhpur, India. His areas of interest include transnational cinema, global south cinemas, Indian and other new waves of the long 1960s.

Reclaiming the Narrative: Rise of Marginalised Voices in South Asian Cinema

19.01.2024 Meenakshi
Shedde

Meenakshi Shedde explores how marginalised voices in South Asian Cinema have been reclaiming the narrative. Dalit or low-caste filmmakers are increasingly 'coming out' as Dalit and making films and series reflecting lived experience. Likewise, minority voices fighting fierce Islamophobia through cinema, marginalised voices from North East India, and LGBT filmmakers are increasingly and confidently claiming their space centrestage.

Meenakshi Shedde, an independent film curator based in Mumbai, India, works in Indian and South Asian Cinema programming for the Berlin International Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival and Jio Mami Mumbai Film Festivals. Jury member on 25 film festivals worldwide, including the Cannes, Berlin and Venice Film Festivals, and Golden Globe International Voter, she is also a senior journalist and script mentor, and has written for/edited 21 books, mainly on cinema.

Persistence of the Community: On a Tendency in Indian Cinema

26.04.2024 Moinak
Biswas

It was commonly believed that with the development of modern forms, Indian cinema will present a fuller notion of the individual. We have had reasons to question that equation between modernity and individualization. This talk will

address the recent phenomenon of Indian regional films where serious content is treated in relation to locality and collective life, and trace the tendency back to the work of early masters of Indian art cinema. It would like to explore the nature of contemplation where individual-centric plots are missing.

Moinak Biswas is Professor of Film Studies at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He also makes films.

Realisms, Melodrama, and beyond in the Study of Indian Cinema

03.05.2024 Meheli Sen

From its very inception, questions of realism and melodrama—broadly understood—have informed studies of Indian cinema. With a few exceptions, critics and scholars have seen these aesthetic and analytical frameworks as hermetically sealed off—aligned to India’s Art and Popular cinemas respectively. In this seminar we will focus on the porosities and promiscuities between these categories in an exploration both epistemological and historical. An array of so-called “Art” and “Popular” films will be used as examples, including the works of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Ajay Kar, Tapan Sinha, Manmohan Desai, and Karan Johar.

Meheli Sen is Associate Professor in the department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures, and the Cinema Studies program at Rutgers University. She has co-edited *Figurations in Indian Film* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013), and her book, *Haunting Bollywood: Gender, Genre and the Supernatural in Hindi Commercial Cinema* was published in 2017 by The University of Texas Press.

17.05.2024 Ranjani Mazumdar

The Territorial Fragments of Globalisation in Contemporary Bombay Cinema

This presentation will examine the use of locations in Bombay cinema since the turn of the 21st century. The complicated workings of various kinds of production infrastructures typically shape cinema's topographical motivations and sense of scale. Through a comparative analysis of a set of films shot in and around Bombay with films shot in iconic locations outside India, I will establish how the aesthetic drives of vertical, horizontal, and transnational urbanism have generated a cartographic diversity in the cinematic imagination of globalised India.

Ranjani Mazumdar teaches cinema studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is the author of *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, and her current research focuses on globalisation and film culture, intermedial encounters, and the intersection of technology, travel, design, and colour in 1960s Bombay Cinema.

The Territorial Fragments of Globalisation in Contemporary Bombay Cinema

Shadow Lines: Tracing the Cinematic Legacies of the 1940s Indian Left Cultural Movement

24.5.2024 Manishita Dass

My talk explores some of the methodological challenges and insights that I have encountered and gained, respectively, while working on *Left Luggage*, my book-in-progress about the cinematic legacies of the vibrant left cultural movement spearheaded in the 1940s by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. How did my notion of "cinematic legacy" and approach to tracing it change in the course of doing archival research for this book? How do we map the subterranean ecology of intermedial, political, and affective networks, routes, and intersections through which the creative energies, utopian impulses, and political contradictions of the IPTA movement

travelled into Bombay's commercially oriented Hindi cinema and Calcutta's film culture in the 1950s-early 1960s? How do we excavate the structures of feeling and unrealized possibilities of a transitional moment in film and cultural history?

A Reader in Film & Global Media at Royal Holloway, University of London, Manishita Dass is the author of *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *The Cloud-Capped Star* (BFI Film Classics Series, Bloomsbury, 2020). Her research explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics, questions of modernity and cosmopolitanism, and intersections of film, visual, literary, performance, and leftist political cultures in South Asia through intermedial history, formal analysis, and a transregional lens.

On the Filmmaker's Archive

7.06.2024 Ruchir Joshi

Ruchir Joshi joined the film world in India in the early 1980s, when he was in his early twenties, first as an assistant director and then as an independent documentary and essay film-maker. In this talk Joshi will begin with mapping out the cinematic work-scape in India (specifically in Calcutta and Bombay) and putting it into the wider context of art-practice current at the time. The talk will go into the peculiar difficulties and challenges faced by film-makers aspiring to serious cinema, while unpacking the effects of a flickering, present-absent archive and archival practice on a milieu that was yet to form a stable relationship with distant and recent memory.

Ruchir Joshi is a film-maker, columnist and writer based in Calcutta. His films include *Egaro Mile /Eleven Miles* and *Tales from Planet Kolkata*. He is the author of a novel, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (Harper Collins UK and India). He is an opinion writer for leading newspapers and magazines in India, as well as a contributor of several essays and photo-text pieces to magazines, including *Granta*.

Mapping the networks of gendered performance, labor, and mobility: Decentering an Auteurist Historiography of Indian cinema

14.6.24 Priyadarshini Shanker

This paper intervenes in three prevailing frameworks of Indian film and media studies — auteurist approaches, history of film movements, and digital media studies—through three case studies that centralize the optics of feminist performances. I propose a corporeal intervention that potentially recasts the historiography of Indian cinema as a network of gender, performance, labor, and mobility. In decentering the cult of the auteur, by shifting the attention from the filmmaker to a set of creative skills, practices, and knowledge, as performed by female actors, engaged in the artistic production of Indian cinema, the aspiration is to move away from ideological readings of Indian cinema to push for a history and theorization of gendered performance. The idea is to pay a close attention to the production of performance and in doing so to explore the network of bodies, surfaces, spaces, and temporalities that inform the invisible cultures and economies of production which include a study of formal and informal networks between the onscreen performer and the offscreen personnel.

Dr. Priyadarshini Shanker is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and her research, teaching, and curatorial work focus on the intersection of gender, labor, and performance. She has a PhD in Cinema Studies from New York University and has published peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and photo essays on Indian film and media.

The Pedagogy of the Piratical

28.6.2024 Bhaskar Sarkar

(In Light of Malegaon Videocinemas)

Even as techno-nationalist fantasies fuel India's dreams of superpowerdom, inserting the country

into a universal narrative of global ascension via market liberalization, this talk begins from the premise that contemporary India's most inventive instances of home-spun entrepreneurialism remain outside the ambit of such top down mythologies. To think of India "as method" is to locate, understand, and learn from the myriad grass-root initiatives that seek to solve everyday problems and to conjure lifeworlds beyond the foreclosed horizons named by G20 and Davos. The presentation will focus on Malegaon videocinemas as one striking instance of the often subaltern and piratical cultural-economic emergences from India that scuttle universal paradigms to forge *southern* trajectories of self-expression and global enterprise.

Bhaskar Sarkar, Professor, Film and Media Studies, UC Santa Barbara, works in the areas of Indian cinema, piracy and the global South, and queer subcultures. He is the author of *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, and coeditor of *Documentary Testimonies*, *Asian Video Cultures*, and *Routledge Companion to Media and Risk*. Sarkar is currently finishing up the draft of his next monograph, *Cosmoplastics: Bollywood's Global Gesture*.

Transitioning into Noise: 1930s Film Technology Debates in India

12.07.24

Neepa
Majumdar

Using film excerpts, ads for sound recording and projection equipment, sound technicians' columns, as well as reports by and about salesmen-technicians, such as the Americans Wilford Deming Jr. and C. Willman, this talk will present debates about audio technologies and sonic cultures circulating in India during the period of cinema's conversion to sound (1931 to 1935). Since many audio discussions at the time centered on the problem of noise in sound recording and projection, the talk will approach the transition to sound through the lens of a spectrum of noise and meaning through which the audiovisual was understood. Analyzing ads for competing film sound technologies that made claims about *swadeshi* (or indigenously developed) recording equipment, I will use the lens of "imaginary media," as theorized by

media archaeologists, to focus on "impossible" machines such as the locally developed tropically sensitive sound machines advertised in film magazines of the period.

Neepta Majumdar is Associate Professor of Film & Media Studies in the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s to 1950s* (2009) and co-editor of the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Indian Cinema* (2022). Her research interests include film sound, star studies, South Asian early cinema, and documentary film. She is co-editor of the journals *[In]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* and *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*.