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Lidia Curti and Susanna Poole, eds., *Schermi indiani, linguaggi planetari. Tra Oriente e Occidente, modernità e tradizione, avanguardia e popolare* (Roma: Aracne, 2008), 209 pp.

Reviewed by **C. Bruna Mancini**

In the Introduction to his celebrated *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema* (2000), Prem Chowdhry observes that “empire cinema” (including productions of the 1930s and 1940s by both British and Hollywood filmmakers), provides the major manifestation of the classical binary opposition between colonial Self and colonized Other, encoded in colonialist discourse as a dichotomy necessary to domination. Empire films contributed to a vision of the Empire which emphasized “the unique imperial status, cultural and racial superiority and patriotic pride not only of the British but of the entire white western world”. Thus cinema emerged as the most influential propaganda vehicle in order to maintain the status quo in Britain and its colonies. Films like *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935, by Henry Hathaway, with Gary Cooper, Franchot Tone, and Richard Cromwell), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936, by Michael Curtiz with Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, and Patrick Knowles), *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937, by John Ford, with Shirley Temple, Victor McLaglen and C. Aubrey Smith), *The Drum* (1938, by Zoltan Korda, with Sabu, Raymond Massey, Roger Livesey), and *Gunga Din* (1939, by George Stevens, with Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen, Douglas Fairbanks Jr) served to prevent non-alignment, sociopolitical changes and revolt, while sustaining the importance of the strategic role of British presence in the colonies – India, in particular – for the ‘protection’ of the native inhabitants. After all, as Winston Churchill affirmed on 18 March 1931, in his famous speech “Our Duty in India”, the British people had to fight hard in order to maintain their “Indian Empire” and not to be led blindfold into a trap; obviously, their “mission” had a religious as well as a highly moral connotation, strictly connected to their glorious past and to the untamed spirit lodging in their breast:

What *spectacle* could be more *sorrowful* than that of this powerful country casting away with both hands, and up till now almost by general acquiescence, *the great inheritance which centuries have gathered*? What spectacle could be more *strange*, more *monstrous in its perversity*, than to see the Viceroy and the high officials and agents of the Crown in India labouring with all their influence and authority to unite and weave together into a confederacy all the forces adverse and hostile to our rule in India? ... It is a *hideous act of self-mutilation*, astounding to every nation in the world. The princes, the Europeans,

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the Moslems, the Depressed classes, the Anglo-Indians – none of them know what to do nor where to turn in the face of their apparent desertion by Great Britain. (emphases mine)

Using the encoding/decoding model masterly developed by Stuart Hall, based essentially on “dominant”, “negotiated” or “propositional” responses, Prem Chowdhry also demonstrates that, in the Thirties, Indian spectators inhabited a realm of ramifying differences and contradictions, stretching from acceptance to resistance. But this question seems even more complex if we consider that, as Lidia Curti puts it in her Introduction to *Schermi indiani, linguaggi planetari*, India’s devastated and partitioned territory – a diversified continent in terms of climate, geography, language and culture, putting into question the very concept of ‘nation’ – also makes the expression “Indian cinema” an abstraction; the term reflects the diversifications of a place which is in fact a complex connection of different countries and cultures. Curti observes how:

the various historical constructions show a cinema that is linked from its very beginning to traditional forms of Indian theatre, with its interweaving of natural and supernatural, its fixed frontal positioning, its frequent use of close ups and stylization. The general intention – at least before the arrival of sound – was that of maintaining the characteristics of live theatre, through the presence of a narrator in the cinema and intermezzos of music, dance and song, elements that were to become an essential part of Bollywood film language. This hybrid narrative technique, with its interpolation of songs, dances and comic sketches, also goes back to classical Sanscrit theatre and popular religious ceremonies.(12)

Moreover, after Independence, the Indian government mainly reproduced the inequalities and subalternity of the so-called *ancien régime*, exerting a “dominance without hegemony” to recall the title of Ranajit Guha’s renowned book of 1997; subsequently, many migrants from the Indian subcontinent reached the former ‘centre’ of the Empire, building new multiethnic urban communities which had to face a never dormant resurgence of xenophobia, hostility, and violence. The movies realized by Hanif Kureishi, Stephen Frears, Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, and Gurinder Chadha perfectly portray this hybrid “geography of diaspora and multidiaspora”, also considering its “transversal passages”; because, instead of a unidirectional displacement from the colonies towards the so-called motherland, many migrants paths touched Uganda, Madagascar, Guyana, and the Caribbean. Curti asserts in this respect that for the “directors, both male and female, who had been born and brought up in Britain, often with mixed race parentage, this implied a temporary return to a ‘home’ that was no longer home in the full sense of the term, in order to find their roots or, more probably, to set their films in their land of origin”(22).

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Thus the filmic *corpus* becomes the real post-colonial, 'in-between' space, in which 'colonizer' and 'colonized' can reciprocally observe each other and provide feedback. Several interesting examples of this productive and intense cultural exchange are attentively analyzed in the present volume. I refer in particular to "Linguaggi e percorsi in *Aparajito* di Satyajit Ray" by Fiorenzo Iuliano (27-43), "La 'scrittura' cinematografica di Hanif Kureishi" by Annalisa Spedaliere (63-80), "L'altra India: *Fire* di Deepa Mehta" by Laura Sarnelli (83-95), "A casa e altrove: il cinema di Mira Nair" by Alessandra Marino (97-115), "Il cinema di Gurinder Chadra" by Serena Guarracino (117-137), and "Mitografie di riscatto femminile: *Banditi Queene* di Shekhar Kapur" by Raffaella Malandrino (139-154), each of which concludes with a list of "Key words" and "Things to Ponder", clearly aimed at stimulating further discussion. The questions raised range from contacts between the different cinematographies and/or cultures to concepts of identity, gender-genre and subalternity, and again to the centre/borders, empire/nation, global/local oppositions. Constant references are also made to the rich critical apparatus developed in the fields of Cultural, Postcolonial, Subaltern, Feminist and Post-Feminist Studies.

In short, as Susanna Poole writes in her Afterword, "Bollywood come cinema 'altro'", if a film is a "stratified construction" in which different languages, stories and temporalities cross and come to a new life, the film spectator is also to be considered as a cultural construction, a complex crossing of languages, (his/her)stories, spaces, and times. Hence Bollywood too, a popular cinema with few aspirations to becoming experimental, can create disturbance, destabilization, and (positive) crisis. In fact, its multi-genre representation does not respect all the conventions of 'our' narrative cinema, constantly putting into question – both metaphorically and stylistically – the classical Occidental viewpoint, centered on the identification of the spectator with "a main male protagonist", in Laura Mulvey's words, and a straight progression of the story line. Thus, in a way, Bollywood 'exceeds' – in Edward Said's definition – the norms of the Occidental (film) culture, questioning our deepest beliefs and certainties, and depicting a reconciled, non-existent national imagery in order to create an idealized community as well as a coherent (and necessarily mythical) national identity:

In a territory inhabited by about a billion people talking over 800 different languages and belonging to a multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups, Bollywood offers a world view that in its absolute unreality may be shared by all. ... But the production of a homogeneous, coherent identity bears with it a form of violence: the exclusion of the internal 'others', the affliction shared by numbers of former colonies rebuilt as nation states. (164-5)

This temple of dreams and desires – as I would define Bollywood cinema – is the 'cinema of otherness' *par excellence* ("un altro cinema, un cinema

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‘altro’, ma anche il cinema di un altro”, Poole writes, craftly playing with the term ‘altro’/other). In fact, in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together* (1999), S. Brent Dale affirms that: “A cinema of otherness would be one in which the structure of production and the style of a finished film would necessarily be different than what we are expecting to see, indeed, what we have been trained to see. For those of us raised on Hollywood cinema, a cinema of otherness would be unrecognizable”. Using different narrative modes and techniques (from those of the Occidental ‘norm’), based upon a different way of viewing, different rhythms, the mythical re-invention of the past and the instability of personal and collective identity, Bollywood creates an unattainable dream:

Faced with the partial failure of the emancipation of the Indian people, and the substitution of colonial power with that of the multinational companies allied to local governments, the dream of an equalitarian, independent country has given way to the dream of Bollywood. Only the perfection of its artifice, together with its absolute cultural recognizability, allow it to represent for millions of Indians an ideal motherland India, an India of absence and desire.(175).