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Cinema in the City: Tangible Forms, Transformations and the Punctuation of Everyday Life

Lakshmi Srinivas

In India, cinema does not exist merely on the screen; it permeates everyday life. Just as formula films are punctuated with song and dance, fantastic interludes which at times break from the narrative to express the dreams, wishes and desires—in short the “inner-world” [Kakar 1980] of characters—everyday life in India may be seen to be punctuated with the fantasy world of cinema. If popular Indian cinema is indeed a “collective fantasy” or “group daydream... containing the unconscious material and hidden wishes of a vast number of people” [Kakar 1980: 12], what is to be made of the images from this fantasy world which populate the urban landscape? What does cinema’s spectacular presence in the Indian city mean for cinema? For urban life?

Scholars of film in India have commented on cinema’s ubiquity and presence outside the theater, noting the pervasiveness of film music, film fashions and film magazines and of the posters and other visible icons of films, such as “decals, painted signboards, giant movie hoardings [billboards] and towering cut-outs” that clutter urban space [Dickey 2005: 69; see also Dickey 1993]. The colorful posters, “cut-outs” and hoardings which announce a film and which make cinema’s presence in the city tangible have been studied as art [Dwyer and Patel 2002] and as advertisements, “circulations and reproductions” of cinema which form a mediascape and which provide urban spectacle [Jacob 1998]. Taking a phenomenological perspective, this essay provides a descriptive analysis of the incorporation of cinema into everyday settings, addressing the significance of this presence in the context of the flow of urban life and for the “extra-cinematic experience” [Spitulnik 2002]. While study of posters and billboards as advertisement acknowledges their intentional role, this essay comments on the unintentional aspects of cinema’s visual and tangible presence outside the theater, and the kinds of reaction and interaction it attracts.

Driving or walking along the streets of Bangalore, one comes across images of cinema all over the city. Movie posters are plastered on walls, outside stores, at bus stops, a collage of vivid color and dramatic images against which everyday life plays out. On some streets there is no sidewalk and traffic is heavy, so it is...
impossible to stop: one sees the posters as a blur; some features stand out, others fade [Figure 1]. It is a movie slide-show in which the traveler is complicit. If one stops to look at them, one notices a random collection of old and new, posters for films that have long gone next to those for the anticipated new releases, posters in different languages—Hindi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam—for a variety of tastes and audience cultures, as well as posters for Adult films with the letter “A” emblazoned on them and accompanying suggestive and dodgy images, mixed in with feel-good romances for the entire family. Older posters are the worse for wear, torn, stained and with a moth-eaten look about them, often pasted over with newer ones [Figure 2]. Some posters record the life of a film: a poster with “25 days” or “100 days” stamped on it triumphantly announces the film’s successful stay in theaters and its durability in the face of fierce competition, there being a shortage of theaters and an over-supply of films.

Apart from the movie posters, cut-outs and hoardings or billboards bring a film and its characters into urban space. In the dense commercial area of Bangalore known as Majestic, where many theaters exist side by side or around the corner from one another, cut-outs, hoardings and decorations celebrating a newly released film will transform the entire street. Sixty- to 70-foot-high cut-outs fixed by wooden scaffolding to the theater façade loom above the street,

Figure 1  Traffic swirls around movie billboards in Mysore city at a busy intersection on the Bangalore–Mysore highway. The billboard features a Kannada film. In its shadow is a stall. The everyday world embeds and frames the fantasy world. (Taken by the author in summer 2007 from the bus on the Bangalore–Mysore road; © Lakshmi Srinivas).
giving it a surreal look [Figure 3]. It used to be possible to have cut-outs of over 100 feet, but a city regulation has banned them as too dangerous. So also with posters: in 1998 when I was doing fieldwork in Bangalore there was a ban on sticking posters on walls and the exterior of buildings in efforts to clean up the city, part of a broader effort that involved discussions of improvement of garbage collection and beautifying traffic islands by planting flowering plants. Posters were also seen as contributing to disorder in the city, the argument I heard from film business insiders as well as city residents was that posters and cut-outs incited fans to disorderly acts and contributed to law-and-order problems in the city. The random sticking of posters on all free surfaces, seen as disorderly and “unclean,” is possibly related to the view that popular cinema itself is a low and vulgar form, a prejudice against popular cinema that is always present [Dickey 1993; Pandian 1996]. However, more empirical studies are needed on this topic.

Bangalore has a cinema culture where a variety of films find audiences, and the posters and billboards provide evidence of such plurality. Posters for locally made Kannada-language films share wall space with Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam-language films made in neighboring South Indian states [Figure 4], as well as posters for Hindi-language Bollywood films, and Hollywood films (depending on the part of the city one is in), martial arts B-movies from Hong Kong often screened as Morning Shows, as well as the aforementioned Adult films, all of which
indicate the varied fare on offer and the tastes of movie-goers. Posters in different languages generate speculation about the identity of the film among residents, who may be unable to decipher the script.\textsuperscript{1} The larger-than-life images of the stars aid in decoding and identifying a film and its language. In 2007, the Kannada film \textit{Mungaru Male} [2006] was a sensation, a surprise “superhit” which became the buzz in Bangalore. The cheerful and chubby face of Ganesh, star of the film, was easily recognizable even to those who could not read the Kannada on the poster [Dwyer and Patel 2002: 193–194]. Posters then are designed for recognition and ease of decoding, rather than for actual “reading.”\textsuperscript{2} The exaggerated themes of the films [Nandy 1980], \textit{i.e.}, love, drama, loss, etc., further amplified in posters give a snapshot of the film, or its emotional tone. While the poster for \textit{Mungaru Male}, a romantic drama, has the hero and heroine smiling playfully, the poster and cut-out for \textit{Om
[1995], a dark (Kannada) film that was a superhit when it was released over a decade ago, and which featured a brush with gangsters, has the hero of the film Shivrajkumar looking menacing and brandishing a machete, with blood on his clothes [Figure 5]. While posters may generate some curiosity about the film, or draw the gaze of passers-by with their vibrance, for those who have already seen the film a look at the poster may transport them back to their viewing experience, offering a revisiting of the film and the movie event. Looking at the posters, one can almost hear the music. The presence of cinema in the urban landscape then can provide transcendence in everyday life, much like emotions [Katz 1999]; posters allow one to daydream, something that Bollywood has picked up on. In the film Om Shanti Om [2007], Shahrukh Khan’s character Om Prakash is a young man from a humble background who is fascinated with the world of movies. He has an imaginary relationship with a Bollywood heroine and stops every day to “talk” to the gigantic image of her on the billboard that advertises her recent film. The billboard is more than an advertisement; it becomes a portal into this magical world. Standing in front of the billboard, Om is fearless about his own dreams. He reveals his innermost wishes and desires to the billboard image, even declaring his love for the heroine to her image.

Movie posters show up in the interstices of urban settings [Figures 6–9]. It is not clear that they necessarily function as advertisements or that the person
who placed them worked with this intention, as they appear to be pasted wherever some empty space was to be found. While new posters may draw attention and may incite curiosity about the film and actually function as intended advertisements, they are just as likely to function as a kind of urban wallpaper or filler and be disregarded or used as a backdrop for everyday activities. People take their presence for granted as part of the cityscape and go about their business. Surfaces where there are no posters or walls where posters had been removed look bare and unfinished; one is left with the nagging feeling that something is missing.4

Fantasy worlds then are framed by and embedded in the mundane. Passers-by in Majestic browsing the footpath stalls encounter posters of movies and stars among newspapers and news magazines, household goods such as mosquito

Figure 5 Cut-out of the Kannada film Om outside the Majestic Theatre, showing the hero Shivarajkumar in a tough role holding a machete. (Taken by the author in Bangalore, 1998; © Lakshmi Srinivas).
Figure 6  Poster of the Kannada film Andamans, expressing emotional drama and the family theme. (Taken by the author in Bangalore, 1998; © Lakshmi Srinivas).

Figure 7  Crowds of moviegoers outside the Majestic Theatre speak to its popularity and provide advertising for the film. (Taken by the author in Bangalore, 1998; © Lakshmi Srinivas).
Figure 8  Movie posters stuck on all available surfaces provide a backdrop for everyday life rather than advertising for the film. The aesthetic is one of spontaneity rather than a purposeful appeal to a target audience. (Taken by Sharath Srinivas, Bangalore 2001; © Lakshmi Srinivas).

Figure 9  Newsstand in Majestic displaying posters of film stars and cricketers. (Taken by Sharath Srinivas, 2001; © Lakshmi Srinivas).
nets, plastic buckets, combs and sandals. Hawkers who set up shop against a wall of posters or under hoardings are framed against the backdrop of melodrama as they carry on the mundane task of selling stuff. The urban poor use walls to dry cowdung cakes on for fuel, and one may find posters of popular stars with flat cowdung cakes on their faces and bodies. The wall along with its posters may be used as a spittoon or toilet [Figure 10], with passers-by calmly spitting betel-juice\(^5\) on the poster or urinating on the images of stars. Posters offer an opportunity to interact with them, even leave one’s mark on them. Standing at a bus stop waiting for a bus that is late, one may pass the time by scratching out the eyes on a poster, drawing moustaches or adding lewd markings. One finds posters with portions torn out, and one might see a stray cow snacking on them.

Not only are cinematic images transformed in the everyday context, images are also freely mobile in the urban landscape. Autorickshaws in Bangalore frequently play film music, and I found it a useful opportunity to start a conversation about movies with the driver. Many autorickshaw drivers and car owners are fans of cinema, especially regional and Kannada cinema. Autorickshaws have images of stars on the exterior and the interior [Figure 11]. One can ride around the city with a picture of the Kannada film legend Dr. Rajkumar or stars Jaggesh, Ramesh, Rajnikant or any number of other favorite matinee idols, while listening to songs from the movies. Arriving at one’s destination can be a rude

Figure 10 Wall with posters provides a backdrop for people waiting for buses and autorickshaws. A man uses the wall as a urinal even though a sign nearby indicates the presence of a public toilet. (Bangalore, 1998; © Lakshmi Srinivas).
and sudden jolt out of the dreamworld. The lines between reality and fantasy are indeed blurred and some activities focus on re-drawing the boundaries to separate these worlds. Movie star images find their way onto school supplies including pencil boxes, backpacks, thermos flasks and exercise books. Attending a convent school in Bangalore, as students we would be required to cover our exercise books with brown paper, thus effectively blocking out the fantasy world of film from intruding on the imagined world of mathematics, history and English composition. In this context the ban on plastering movie posters on any free surface available assumes a significance, as it is also an attempt to erase the presence of cinema in a form that is freely accessible.

The visual presence of cinema outside the theater highlights the expressive culture that frames regional cinema and its reception, distinguishing it from the reception culture for Hollywood films or even Bollywood, both of which are popular in Bangalore as they are throughout India, a difference that is visible in the treatment of theater facades and billboards. Theaters screening newly released Kannada films are lavishly adorned with tinsel, pennants, lights and balloons, creating a festive air. Posters and billboards immediately outside the theater are draped with garlands and tinsel. Theater awnings are decorated with flowers, or colored tissue paper made to look like flowers, arranged to spell out “Welcome” or in Kannada “Suswagatha.” The doorway of the theater may have a row of mango leaves strung above it, an auspicious symbol for Hindus always found in Hindu homes and temples on festival days. Tamil and Telugu films are also welcomed in this way, inviting participation in the celebratory feeling even
among passers-by who may never see the movie. Theaters hosting Bollywood films are for the most part left bare and unadorned, as are theaters in the city’s Cantonment area: these screen Hollywood movies, suggesting a variation in the public culture and aesthetics that situate these different films where a folk aesthetic encompasses regional cinema screened in certain parts of the city. However, it does not extend its embrace to Hollywood films screened in the Cantonment as well as Bollywood films.

While I have focused for the most part on images of the movies and the stars, it is not only images of the films and their stars that signal the presence of cinema. Cinema lives in the enthusiastic crowds that gather both to watch the films and to watch the filmmaking process. Filming in the city, referred to as “shooting” by film-industry insiders, is certain to attract large crowds. At a film shooting traffic can come to a halt as onlookers throng the streets trying to touch the star and shout out to him. Crowds outside theaters contribute to cinema’s visual presence as well. Actual advertisement for films may have as much to do with images of the audience as it does the films. Savvy exhibitors allow lines at ticket counters to grow as testimony of a film’s popularity. A large and enthusiastic crowd is a good advertisement adding to the spectacle.

Media anthropologists have called for a broadening of the analytic frame to encompass the extra-cinematic experience, to understand more fully the meaning and significance of cinema [Spitulnik 2002]. An examination of cinema’s visual presence beyond the theater underlines the need for such an understanding and for a reframing of the cinematic experience to encompass cinema’s non-celluloid forms. Cinema in India is lived as everyday fantasy and desire [Kakar 1980], a reference point that is always present. At the same time cinema is so much a part of everyday life that it merges with the mundane showing that everyday and fantasy spaces have blurred edges. The pastiche of everyday life incorporates the fantasy world of cinema, reframing and repackaging it, making it relevant to daily life.

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NOTES

1. While many residents of Bangalore can understand and speak three or more languages, large numbers of the mass audience for popular cinema are illiterate or semiliterate. Even the educated are not able to read and write in all the languages that they can speak. Many in-migrants from other states are not able to distinguish between the south Indian languages of Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam and cannot read the distinct scripts of each.

2. Comparing Hollywood posters to Indian film posters, Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel remark that the latter “rarely use text,” which is “seen as a cultural barrier” given
the Indian film industry’s national and international distribution terrain [Dwyer and Patel 2002: 193–194].

3. See also Dickey [2005: 69–70].

4. Some middle-class residents and members of the intelligentsia were in favor of this clean-up effort. They saw the random presence of posters as a symptom of a deeper anarchy in the city. However I did not interview or survey residents systematically on their views regarding the presence or absence of posters.

5. In India and other parts of South Asia, betel leaves (*Piper betle*) are chewed with processed areca nut (*Areca catechu*, also known as *betel nut*), lime and sometimes with tobacco. This has the effect of a mild stimulant. The mixture when chewed stains the saliva red.

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