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Imagining global India: Bollywood’s transnational appeal

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Indian commercial cinema, often referred to as Bollywood, may be considered more than a national cinema because its transnational appeal encompasses a large and diverse audience. Bollywood’s affective aesthetics and narratives also differ significantly from the presumed ‘universal’ techniques and narratives of Hollywood. In recent years, films like ‘Dil Se’, ‘Kal Ho Naa Ho’ and ‘Guru’ export an image of Indianness that negotiates tensions between homeland and diaspora and underscores India’s cultural authority for its imagined community of viewers. By challenging the conventions of Hollywood, creating a sense of solidarity among diverse ethnic Indians and showing Indians as exemplary and superior to nationals from other developing nations, Bollywood demonstrates Appadurai’s point that there is something ‘critical and new in global cultural processes’. By imagining a global India, Bollywood appeals to the imaginations of its transnational audiences and challenges us to rethink our approaches to cinema and the world that global media is constantly reinventing.

Why are we a Third World country that begs from the West? We can be a First World country. (Guru, Mani Ratnam, 2007)

In 2008 Slumdog Millionaire, a relatively low budget film about a Mumbai youth who is a contestant on India’s ‘Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?’, surprised the Anglo-American film industry with its box office success and sweeping of the U.S. Academy Awards. The British film was a collaboration between Indian and British writers and directors, based on a novel by Vikas Swarup and directed principally by Danny Boyle. The film’s blending of action and melodrama, its use of on-location shots of Mumbai and a fast-paced narrative that moves back and forth across time to reach its happy ending also seemed to borrow from both Indian and Western commercial cinema. Despite being heralded as a ‘crossover’ film, however, its depiction of the impoverished and fragile lives of children in the slums of Mumbai offended a number of viewers in India. Controversy ensued over the film’s graphic and violent representations not only of the slums but also of the criminal underworld, which seemed to cast a negative reflection on the nation as a whole. At the time, India had been enjoying quite good press internationally for its economic boom and partnership with the USA in the war on terrorism.

Film scholar Brian Larkin compared the Indian response to Slumdog to what followed the international acclaim for Satyajit Ray’s Pather Panchali (1955). He notes that Ray’s adoption of Western aesthetics made his movie acceptable to Indian and European intellectuals but caused concern for nationalists who wanted India to be seen as a modern nation. With the increased access and speed of film images as they circulate through film festivals and awards events, and as they assume popularity in the public sphere, films’ representational value intensifies (Larkin 2009). In the case of Slumdog, the film’s realism
underscored the problems of underdevelopment in India in ways that Western viewers might expect. For fans of Indian cinema, however, *Slumdog* did not crossover, for it lacked both the affective aesthetics of Bollywood cinema (Jones 2010) and the formal complexity and ethos of Satyajit Ray’s films and those of other independent Indian filmmakers. Instead, *Slumdog’s* narrative reinforces an unacknowledged stereotype of India as a former colony, still developing nation, struggling for survival and not yet ready to assume First World status. Underscoring this Eurocentric view of India, film critic Roger Ebert wrote, ‘The film’s universal appeal will present the real India to millions of moviegoers for the first time.’¹

Such claims for the film’s representation of the ‘real’ India predictably sparked protests from India’s most beloved actor Amitabh Bachchan (for whom the child character Jamal swims through shit to obtain his autograph): ‘If *Slumdog Millionaire* projects India as [a] Third World, dirty underbelly, developing nation and causes pain and disgust among nationalists and patriots, let it be known that a murky underbelly exists and thrives even in the most developed nations. It’s just that the *Slumdog Millionaire* idea authored by an Indian and conceived and cinematically put together by a Westerner gets creative global recognition’ (quoted in Stephanie Nolan’s review in Canada’s *The Globe and Mail*, 3 February 2009). As Bachchan and postcolonial scholars understand, Western aesthetics and industrial capital here conspire to reinforce the view that only places like India have to deal with crime, poverty and corruption. But even if we see this nationalistic response as overly defensive, for surely viewers of Hollywood films see lots of the ‘murky underbelly’ of a developed nation, the point of reconsidering this controversy is to understand the relationship between what Ebert claims was the ‘universal’ appeal of a certain type of cinema and its presumed representation of the ‘real India’. If we understand that cinema itself is constantly negotiating the local and global in its stories and style of presentation, then we can begin to expand our understanding of the effects of cinema in the processes of cultural globalization. In this article, I want to explore the role of Indian commercial cinema, what is called ‘Bollywood’, as it circulates a quite different image of India to a vast multinational audience. In my conclusion, I reconsider the different cultural values and agendas that seem to underlie *Slumdog’s* and Bollywood’s representations of India in the twenty-first century.

While Bollywood has become a serious field of study for film scholars in recent years, it has been treated more often than not as a national cinema which is of importance only to the peoples of the subcontinent and their diasporic communities around the world. Given the millions if not billions of people who are thus potentially engaged and affected by Bollywood films, especially now that satellite TV and other means of accessing Bollywood productions are available, it seems important to reconsider Bollywood as a global medium in which modes of address are exerting at least as much ideological and cultural influence as Hollywood’s. In particular, it seems important that film scholars not limit their discussion of Bollywood to that of a national cinema, either in the local sense of where its films are produced or in the sense of an ethnic or Third World cinema that works as an oppositional cinema to transnational media conglomerates. Instead, Bollywood, as something between a national and a transnational cinema, sheds light on a now international imaginary as it reflects and potentially shapes attitudes, values and beliefs of its viewers. In other words, Bollywood’s narratives and structures of feeling not only challenge the ‘realism’ of Hollywood representations of India, but also extend the cultural authority and political significance of the nation by appealing (this time in the sense of making an appeal) affectively and ideologically to its transnational audiences.
My interpretation of Bollywood narratives and film style seeks to understand the role of cinema in the creation of a public culture, as Dwyer and Patel distinguish it from popular culture (2002). For these critics, popular culture (with its affinity to mass culture) seeks to locate what is specifically Indian in folk/oral traditions and takes a more or less ethnographic approach to understand questions of religious belief, family and kinship relations and aesthetic practices. In contrast, the idea of ‘public culture’ understands that films create meaning in the now global context of political, economic and social institutions. We can think of this as a social theory of film, which analyses a film’s narrative and style to reveal the ideological connections between cultural forms and political realities. Prasad credits Bollywood films since the 1990s with having established a ‘new aesthetic that is marked by consciousness of the global presence of Indians and India cinema’ and therefore, these films can offer us ‘crucial insights into the changing modalities of Indian national identity in a globalizing world’ (2008, 46–50). The films that I discuss exemplify Bollywood’s global consciousness as a national/transnational cinema and suggest what this might mean for how viewers imagine and perhaps identify with a global India.

Generally speaking, Bollywood refers to commercial, Hindi-language films made in Bombay/Mumbai since India’s independence. Yet, the term ‘Bollywood’ in no way represents the range of Indian cinema that has developed since moving images first appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. In his appendix to *Sociology Goes to the Movies* (2006), Dudrah describes six genres with an emerging seventh genre of horror films. One of these genres has been a long-established source of Indian cinema. What Dudrah calls ‘devotional’ films use Hindu mythology for their narrative content. Over time, Hindu mythology has also been an important structural element in other genres of Bollywood films. Patrick Colm Hogan’s *Understanding Indian Movies* discusses the ways in which Hindi and Urdu ancient and sacred texts illuminate the narrative structure of popular romance films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001). But as Rajadhyaksha has noted, changes in the film industry in India in the 1990s established Bollywood as a type of cinema recognized for its happy endings, song and dance sequences and family values (2008). Such films are produced outside Bombay and do not include all Hindi films. What remains important to all genres of Bollywood cinema is what Mooij has called Bollywood’s ‘masala’ style (2006). That style distinguishes Bollywood from Hollywood, creating different expectations and layers of meaning for its home audience and, as Mishra has persuasively argued, an ideal India for the diaspora as well as a set of ‘values that a diaspora should aspire to, and desire’ (2002, 269).

Although some critics are understandably critical of this ‘Bollywoodization of the Indian Cinema’, it is crucial to consider the political and cultural effects of its representations of India on diverse audiences. By representing the non-resident Indian (NRI) as the quintessentially cosmopolitan type, Bollywood is appealing to a new generation that is quite capable of seeing culture beyond ethnographical terms as a mash-up of values and practices taken from the world at large. Bollywood film style and narrative form inevitably allow the viewer to create a fluid identity connected but not reduced to traditional Indian culture (Rajan and Sharma 2006). On the other hand, films like the popular *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Yash Chopra, 1995), while using the diaspora as a space where values and ideologies may be contested, function as sites where ‘Indian values are triumphantly maintained’ (Mishra 2002, 259–260; see also Uberio 1998). In this way, Bollywood has developed crossover appeal that surpasses other national cinemas, even Hollywood, if we think in terms of numbers of viewers rather than box office amounts.
Although I explore connections among a variety of Bollywood films from the mid-1990s until roughly 2008, my purpose is not to think of Bollywood’s global trajectory in progressive or linear terms. Likewise, although I have paid particular attention to the films of Tamil director Mani Ratnam because, as a Bollywood outsider initially, he has engaged the historical and political tensions within India in ways that also address India’s emergence as a country of global importance, my argument for Bollywood’s transnational appeal is not dependent on an auteur cinema. Instead, Bollywood’s unique masala style incorporates, colonizes and transcends a local or heterogeneous view of culture. By representing characters as social types rather than as individuals, Ratnam consistently ties his characters’ personal fates to that of the nation. When other Bollywood films represent the nation through diasporic characters, the same process of character typing occurs, creating the view that Indians are exemplary, either as model citizens or immigrants (Desai 2006) or, as I explain, superior entrepreneurs when compared to other non-Euro-American nationals. To make this case, I look at an important scene in the popular and often cited film *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2003). Located in New York City, this film establishes the idea that Indians have found the secret of cosmopolitanism or what one might call a soft nationalism. Returning to the homeland and the initial contrast with *Slumdog Millionaire*, I examine *Guru* (Mani Ratnam, 2008). In *Guru*, a new spirit of Indian globalism detaches national identity entirely from its internally and externally diverse political or historical roots by focusing on the story of one man’s ambition to be successful in business. If the image of India represented in these Bollywood films is less ‘real’ than that represented in *Slumdog Millionaire*, these films nevertheless speak to their implied viewers’ imaginations as a form of agency which, as Arjun Appadurai has suggested, comprises a ‘key component of the new global order’ (Appadurai 1996, 31). Understanding Bollywood’s appeal as part of the ‘mediascape’ in which images and ideas circulate globally offers Western viewers in particular new ways of thinking about both India and the role of cinema in the age of cultural globalization.

Before 9/11: Bollywood’s representation of a terrorist

In retrospect, the film *Dil Se* (Mani Ratnam. 1997) seems even more admirable than it did in the years before the September attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City made terrorism an international concern. What struck me most about this film aside from the musical interludes – the song ‘Chaiyya, Chaiyya’ was so imprinted on my mind that it was easily recognized later in the opening credits of Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* (2006) – was its willingness to let the terrorist speak in her own words and through vivid images about the reasons for her commitment to the separatist group and their plans to blow up the Indian Independence Day ceremonies. It occurred to me at the time, late 1990s, that American commercial cinema could not allow for such oppositional voices within its representation of the nation. Instead, opposition was always imagined as literally ‘alien’ as in the film *Independence Day* (1996) or as psychotic as in the horror movie style of the film *Arlington Road* (1999). The director of *Dil Se*, Mani Ratnam, not a Bombay insider but coming from the south of India, became the principal filmmaker to explore, as the director himself has said, ‘the man who is caught in between, the human plight in these political journeys’.²

Many films in the 1990s, while the country was dominated by the conservative Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), villianized Pakistan for supporting separatist movements within India – for example the film *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and *Maachis* (1996). In this context *Dil Se* – and director Mani Ratnam’s earlier films *Roja* (1992) and
Bombay (1995) were exemplary in investigating the contradictions in and ambivalences towards Indian national identity at the time of the 50th anniversary of its independence from British colonial rule. Film scholar Chakravarty suggests that in the 1990s a new stage of cinematic representation begins to locate the source of terrorist action in the citizen’s own rage against the system of official corruption and state violence (2000). In Dil Se, however, such internal conflicts are already evolving in a global context.

In Dil Se, the traditional world of Roja (1992) and the regionally located ethnic environment of Mumbai (1995) are replaced by the globalized modernity of Delhi and its representative, Amar, the son of an army officer and a reporter for All India Radio. When Amar journeys beyond barbed-wired checkpoints in the north to interview villagers about their lives 50 years after India’s independence, they respond with unanimous criticism. Only when he cajoles a few children does he get an enthusiastic ‘India is the best’ sound byte for his programme. When he arranges a meeting with a guerrilla leader in the disputed regions of Kashmir, the global context of this supposedly internal conflict is exposed. Insisting they conduct the interview in English, Amar confronts the leader with receiving aid from Pakistan. His assumption that these men represent the interests of a foreign power is confounded by the leader’s retort, ‘Where did you get your recorder?’ In other words, black market and foreign-produced consumer goods are revealed as another sign of the loss of national sovereignty, less obviously threatening perhaps than the weapons but equally significant as signs of the way class, caste and ethnic prejudices have framed the conflict between globalization and localization to their own benefit.

In Dil Se, we see the love story becoming background as the lovers are turned into representative figures for larger political contradictions. Indeed, Amar’s demand that Meghna love him and the state’s demand for control of its disaffected regions are symbolically intertwined. The problem of national fragmentation embodied by the hero and the heroine ultimately has more effect on our reception of the film than the hero’s quest for love because in Dil Se, the traditional Western formula for romance cannot be resolved from the internal movements and adjustments of the couple. Some critics panned the film because they saw (rightly enough) that the hero is merely infatuated and that the heroine does not convince us that she returns his passion. But the failure of romance is not only personal. The hero’s desire does not respond to the historical and political causes of the heroine’s mistrust.

In a revealing dialogue, Amar confronts Meghna with his suspicions of her terrorist connections, and she responds with the story of the attacks by Indian soldiers that killed her family and ravaged her village and its women. The story is depicted in flashback, with the edginess of handheld cameras that put the audience in the extremely uncomfortable position of the rapist who pursues the young girl through narrow doorways until only her face is framed in the posture of a silent scream. In the ensuing argument with Amar, Meghna presents the activities of her group in terms of seeking social justice, not personal revenge.

In contrast, American films almost never develop the character or ideas of the terrorist. And when they do, as in Arlington Road (Mark Pellington, 1999), the terrorist is represented as an unstable individual, set on mass murder for the presumed sins of the state against his father. To be sure, the film offers hints that the terrorist is part of the Christian right, but there is no attempt to examine how the secular world of the hero has oppressed this group. The terms of the conflict remain explicitly within the realm of the individual’s psychological trauma; both the terrorist and the hero are portrayed as unbalanced. The audience is left with paranoia rather than with political insight.
What distinguishes Indian cinema in general is its avoidance of such psychoanalytical paradigms and its propensity instead to combine the social type with the individual, to explore a broader horizon of possibilities for connecting the characters’ plot to the social narrative. As Ganti writing from South Africa puts it, ‘From a Hindi filmmaker’s point of view, identification is not dependent upon an aesthetic of social realism or even a realistic mise-en-scène … but more dependent on whether the portrayal of the joys, sorrows, and dilemmas faced by the characters are able to resonate with – rather than replicate – audiences’ own experiences’. According to Ganti, Bollywood seeks to generate ‘a type of cultural empathy’ (2002, 285–286). And through cultural empathy, Bollywood films become a medium for identification with or consumption of India’s cultural authority.

This means that the expressive and aesthetic aspects of Bollywood productions include a variety of elements in the mise-en-scène that evoke meaningful connections on a visual and emotional level between the local references and the desire for national unity. The geopolitics of the staging of the songs in Dil Se in different regions of the country, for example, provides another layer of storytelling that is probably lost to most non-Indian audiences, yet on an emotional level the contrasts in location, style and tone among the different songs and singers are clear, and contribute to our understanding of the role of desire not only in the love story but also in the nationalist desire to embrace all India. The song and dance sequences also offer a more generous and inclusive physical and emotional landscape than the patriotic displays of the regional regiments (notably absent are regiments representing the northern territories) in the military parade sequences that explicitly represent the statist point of view in the film. Thus, the musical and visual coding of the film suggests that although the privileged, media producer Amar can imagine escape to another life elsewhere, the orphaned Meghna remains haunted by the memory of loss and trapped by the discipline of her group. In the end, the film rejects the possibility of reconciling their histories. Beaten up by Meghna’s comrades and weary from running away from the police, Amar finally catches up with Meghna, who is fitted with explosives and making her way to the parade grounds. As Amar embraces her, demanding that she admit her love for him, she leans against him. The bomb detonates. The deaths of Amar and Meghna, but not necessarily the abortion of the assassination attempt for which there are contingency plans, may be seen to represent the failures of both modernity and traditional structures to sustain the nation. In addition to its spectacular settings and music, Dil Se offers a deeper representation of the contradictions between globalization and localization than the vague conspiracy theories and special effects of American films like Arlington Road.

**Bollywood appeals to the NRI**

In the wake of the global war on terrorism, the particular demands of separatist or oppressed groups from the Palestinians and Kurds to the Kashmiris have been ignored or conflated with the war against Al Qaeda by Hollywood. In India, considerations of ethnic tensions within the nation, still brewing and occasionally bursting into renewed violence, have also been swept off-screen. Instead, visions of solidarity within the Indian nation promote the idea of India as the world’s largest democracy. The most telling international hit to follow Dil Se was Ashutosh Gowariker’s Lagaan (2001), an historical drama which underscores the cooperation of Indians from different regions, religious sects and castes in the 150 years of struggle against British colonialism. In 2001, anti-colonialism was a safe place from which to stage Indian national identity, and the shift in focus from the problem
of fragmentation to a programme of national unity coincided with the continued success of the conservative BJP party and its assumption of India’s political leadership.

As Internet and global media technologies made Bollywood films more accessible, producers extended *Lagaan*’s spectacle of Indian solidarity to non-resident and non-Indian audiences. Mediating the divide between rural and urban India and between India and its diasporic communities, Bollywood created both an ideal homeland and an idealized native son and daughter, which sparked protests from reviewers. In India, prejudice against the NRIs can be seen in the following comment by a New York journalist Aseem Chabra who writes, Bollywood is ‘bound in chains to the dictates of the overseas audiences [the NRIs], in whose cultural imagination India must remain a vast stretch of villages, fakirs, sadhus and cool spirituality’. Among the diasporic community, however, Bollywood’s representation of NRIs does not reflect the actual conditions of Indians living abroad. If Bollywood romanticizes India for the diaspora, it also romanticizes NRIs for the home audience. According to Chabra, commercial Indian cinema paints the image of NRIs as rich successful Indians in the UK and in the USA, whom Indians in India hope will reinvest their foreign-earned wealth in the homeland. But, he writes, ‘In reality we are part of the Indian Diaspora, creating our own Indian identity outside India. We are cab drivers, restaurant workers, teachers, Silicon Valley moguls, writers, filmmakers, doctors, lawyers, community activists, gays and lesbians, and battered women, living our own lives in adopted lands. Only few of us have plans of returning back home’. Whether Indians abroad see themselves as NRIs with an ongoing relationship to their homeland or as independent members of the Indian Diaspora, Bollywood has made ‘Indianness’ itself a cultural value that transcends or at least mediates every other question of identity or political affiliation. This appeal has enormous consequences for Bollywood’s popularity among diasporic audiences but it also gives back to its homeland audience a satisfying sense of India’s difference from other immigrant groups.

One good example of this process is the film *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2003). Here, conflicts within the ethnoscapes of the USA and India are dissolved rather than resolved by a narrative saturated with melodrama, enlivened by the charisma of the actors and presented as modern day *Lagaan* in which Indian solidarity allows for personal as well as national triumphs along the multinational streets of New York City.

*Kal Ho Naa Ho* seems at first to have nothing to do with politics. It is typical of many love stories in that two men love the same woman, and maybe not so typical in that the woman is allowed to love both of them. The woman’s story creates the frame narrative, placing her in New York City, which she describes in voice-over, according to the English subtitles, as a city ‘infested with Indians’. Thus, America is assimilated to Indian culture rather than repeat the tale of immigrants trying to make it in the alien world of the Big Apple. The hero of the film Aman – played by the well-known actor from *Dil Se*, Shahrukh Khan – is introduced as an angel, the answer to the family’s prayers, and he exercises almost miraculous knowledge and power over all the other characters.

In the main narrative, Aman denies his attraction to Naina and orchestrates her marriage to another man because he is suffering from an incurable heart condition. But his first miracle is to transform Naina’s mother’s failing American diner into a successful Indian restaurant. The third song in the film is a remake of the central song from *Lagaan* with new lyrics that are an even more strongly worded call to arms than those sung in the anti-colonial drama. But whom are these Indians uniting against in order to succeed in a small business in NYC? The East Asian restaurant owners across the street, of course. Aman dismisses them saying, ‘Chinese, Japanese, whatever … We must get India to NY … spread it in all directions because India can do anything anywhere anytime …’ It is
easy to laugh at this small example of international economic rivalry, but since the struggle against the rival restaurateurs is presented as the rationale for Gujarati and Punjabi immigrants to put their differences aside, it signals a new solidarity among different parts of the Indian Diaspora. The American flag, which is a prominent part of the mise-en-scène prior to this moment, is taken down during the song and dance sequence and an Indian flag is put in its place in the restaurant window. The point here is that despite living in a global city – and filmically NYC never looked so happily multicultural – the Indian immigrants are now presented as a united front and an extension of the imagined pre-eminence of their homeland. Unlike the early films by diasporic filmmakers such as Mira Nair, Kal Ho Naa Ho is not about displacement or discrimination by white America. Rather, the film builds on Lagaan’s myth-making powers to promote an Indian identity that can encompass its diasporic citizens as well as its multi-ethnic natives.

Just as the subplot involving the transformation of the failing American restaurant foregrounds the competitiveness of Indian cuisine through an appropriation of the theme song from Lagaan, the transformation of the three principal actors – from their wild night of dancing and drinking at a New York nightclub to the wedding party scene with its more traditional, or at least more Bollywood, forms of song and dance – signals the way in which Bollywood films are mediating the lives of Indians abroad and offering them a sense of belonging. At times, the song and dance sequences create imagined spaces where individual desire is allowed its fullest expression, while at other times, they recreate traditional spaces, but in both cases dance and music reterritorialize the homeland as a state of mind rather than as a particular place. Bollywood’s aesthetics thus engage audiences in social bonding in otherwise alien cultural landscapes.

As Desai has noted, this film speaks especially to second generation viewers who are presented as ‘model minority citizens, ones who embrace American empire and capital along with residency, but nevertheless hold some affiliation with the homeland nation state’ (2006, 130). Desai also notes how films respond to the ‘anxiety and ambivalence’ of diasporic communities after 9/11. Films such as Kal Ho Naa Ho present the cosmopolitanism of South Asians in America as a way of negotiating contemporary geopolitics through ‘narratives of cultural difference couched in terms of gender, sexuality, and family’ (133). In very direct ways as well, as I have pointed out in the scene where the mother’s restaurant business is saved by turning it into an Indian restaurant, the dynamic is not simply one of nostalgia for the homeland and desire for American-style modernity. The Indian Diaspora is distinguished from other immigrant groups in order to assert its cosmopolitanism and India’s cultural authority in a global context.

Globalizing India

The Bollywoodization not only of Indian cinema but also of ‘Indianness’ through global mediascapes increases the social prestige of Indian identity and implicitly the political authority of India. As a consequence, and despite the failure of the ‘India Shining’ political campaign in 2003–2004, the image of India as a global player has become part of the cultural imagination of the homeland and the diaspora alike. In 2000, the Indian version of ‘Would You Like to Be a Millionaire?’, the show that is also the frame narrative of Slumdog Millionaire, was inaugurated with Bollywood’s renowned actor Amitabh Bachchan as the host. Responding in 2007 to the aggressive neoliberal economic policies of the state, which had by then given industry status to the filmmaking business, director Mani Ratnam developed the story of an Indian entrepreneur who represents not only the actual ascendance of several Indian tycoons but also middle-class India’s interest in
finance capitalism and the stock market, and a new desire on the part of Indians from all castes and classes to ‘want to be a millionaire’, a fantasy/desire that has become a popular part of global culture.

Unlike Ratnam’s earlier films, which depict struggles among various constituencies within the nation, Guru shows how an individual might single-handedly create the means for establishing dominance within the nation and thereby create a new set of values for launching the nation to First World status in the global economy. When asked about the possible ambiguities in the character of Guru, the director responded,

The film and I don’t take a stance. It reflects the time period. India was different in its mindset soon after independence. We were a little more socialist then, sacrifices were important and the individual was not important. Today it is not like that, and youngsters are not ashamed of being ambitious. I think we can be ambitious. That is how we can beat the world. They call it the killer instinct. So, we have imperceptibly changed over the years, and this change is seen through one character.

Attentive as he had been in Dil Se to changes in the attitudes of mainstream Indian viewers, Ratnam now notes the ways in which representation of the nation has shifted from the collective desire for national unity to the representative desire of an individual Indian to ‘beat the world’.

In its execution, the film does not use Bollywood’s masala style as fully or effectively as the best Bollywood films. Instead, it uses elliptical editing and other special effect film techniques, skipping from one event to another without suggesting the effects of time, the duration of work, marriage or struggle to the top. The lack of real obstacles or difficult choices (not to mention the reduced number of song and dance sequences) in Guru’s story also takes away from the narrative pleasures or variety of feelings that give Bollywood films important nuances and layers of meaning. Nevertheless, such a big budget, star-studded production was sure to bring attention to the new India that Ratnam’s film describes and that seems to be reflected in India’s economic boom. The most significant aspect of the film’s representation of India’s transition from a neocolonial to an entrepreneurial nation appears through the film’s focus on the laconic but visually powerful figure of Abhishek Bachchan. As a ‘villager’ who chooses to speak only Hindi, Bachchan’s Guru is so overbearing that his story and point of view overwhelm all questions of India’s diverse historical, social or ethnic forces. I want to explore further the implications of this choice to simplify and concentrate the narrative, but in contrast to Dil Se, here Ratnam represents the new India through the unambiguous drive of an individual figure who inspires loyalty and pushes aside opposition with heroic, even myth-making, aplomb.

The material nature of Guru’s ambition in its capitalist, even imperialist, sense is clear from the prelude of the film in which the young man, having flunked his exams, leaves India to work for a subsidiary of Shell Oil in Istanbul. The film represents Istanbul in an anachronistic and orientalist fashion, underscoring, as Kal Ho Naa Ho had, the way Bollywood triangulates its desire for First World status by showing its superiority to another developing nation. When Guru decides to leave Istanbul to work for himself rather than ‘the white man’, he dismisses Turkey as a dependent country, though Turkey was never colonized. In fact, Dhirubhai Ambani, the person whom the character of Guru most closely resembles, got his start in Yemen. Istanbul is more picturesque, of course, but principally we are to understand that the Indian hero has no interest in working outside the homeland – especially, perhaps, in a Muslim country. A song and dance sequence with Arab–Hindi lyrics is performed by an Egyptian–Canadian singer, while a well-known Indian dancer’s version of Turkish belly dancing suggests in extreme terms the inauthenticity of this representation of Istanbul.
What becomes clear from the Turkish prelude is that the world of colonial and post-colonial struggle over the conditions of labour and between tradition and modernity in the formation of national identity will be replaced by the dynamics of capital accumulation and concentration. In tracing our hero’s rise from villager, to visionary to winner (as the film’s by-line explains), Guru will demonstrate how the Hindi language and even the traditional marriage dowry may become part of the calculations for turning India into a successful competitor in the global economy. Which is why, despite the glamour of the opening sequences in Istanbul, the making of an Indian millionaire requires his return to the homeland. Exotic but primitive Istanbul was just an entertaining opener, its overt sexuality like the offer to become a manager for Shell Oil, symbolizing the road not taken; the film narrative starts properly after the credit sequence and the introduction of the Indian heroine (Aishwarya Rai) dancing in more classically Indian fashion among the lush and natural beauty of her country’s landscapes.

In this story of becoming a millionaire, we see how Guru builds his company with little regard for the doubts of his associates or the principles of his mentor Manikdas Gupta (Mithun Chakraborty), the owner of an independent newspaper. Gupta represents the earlier, socialist times of Nehru, which Ratnam refers to in his interview. Initially on Guru’s side against the monopoly of neocolonialist brokers, Gupta becomes critical of Guru as his drive for success reproduces the system of bribery, intimidation and fraud that he once opposed. Yet, Gupta is too old to fight this new battle. He turns the problem over to his younger colleague and son-in-law, whose own deceptive tactics expose Guru’s practices and suggest the fraud behind the unstoppable image of his enterprise. In the wake of the scandal, Guru’s ability to keep stock prices rising falters. The threat of public disgrace follows from the loss of investor confidence. After a heart attack that leaves him partially paralyzed and unable to speak clearly, the job of rescuing his health and responding to the government’s charges of fraud and tax evasion is taken up briefly but forcefully by Guru’s wife. Yet, just before the verdict, Guru himself stands to address the court and delivers the film’s explicit message, quoted in my epigraph, about a new vision of India’s future as a First World economy. Applause from the people attending the hearing leave the court officials no choice but to minimize the damage to this representative of India’s global reputation. In the last scene, Guru is back on stage in front of 30,000 shareholders announcing expansion of the business beyond India to become one of the biggest corporations in the world. The film’s ending thus deftly conflates the ‘shareholders’ of corporations with the ‘people’ of the nation.

Andy Webster in The New York Times review of 15 January 2007 called Guru ‘an epic paean to can-do spirit and Mumbai capitalism’. In South Africa, Devan Nair in the Sunday Times (21 January 2007) noted that Guru’s speech before the court ‘summed up the direction in which Bollywood is heading. Fed up with being described as “second-rate” and “niched”, it needs more filmmakers like Ratnam who are not afraid to try to be the best’. Such fulsome praise was somewhat subverted by a careful review by Abhishek Bandekar, writing online for efilmcritic.com. He explains that the film is a lightly veiled biography of Indian business tycoon Dhirubhai Ambani and he gives the actual names of people and places alluded to in the film. Although the review is full of commendations, Bandekar is clearly disappointed by the ending:

When Guru is asked to explain his actions and his company’s discrepancies in front of the Thapar Commission, a government enquiry board, you expect the film to end on a bittersweet note like Quiz Show, but it ends a la Scent Of A Woman. Gurukant Desai is inexplicably sanitized and turned into a clean winner. The fall from grace never occurs, robbing the film of its tragedy and cutting Gurukant Desai short of becoming Charles Foster Kane.
The many references to Hollywood films in this review suggest that Bandekar is writing from a Western perspective and is concerned, as many Western critics are, with using classical Hollywood films as a standard. But instead of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1942) – America’s once neglected and now most celebrated film of all time – *Guru* is more closely related to Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* films (*Wall Street* (1987) and the sequel *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010)) in which Michael Douglas’s unscrupulous character is still the most charming and ultimately the smartest of business tycoons. *Guru*’s larger than life protagonist also overwhelms our understanding of whether or not his actions were indeed unethical or merely illegal according to a system that *Guru* suggests is corrupt and outdated. Consequently, Guru is able to create the economic future he has embraced from the beginning. In retrospect, one sees that Ratnam’s *Guru* represents with uncanny prescience the kind of corporation – and nation – that is too big to fail.

Like many recent Bollywood films, *Guru* revises and dissolves the historical complexities of Indian national identity in order for us to see in the supposedly humble and thus representative villager’s success (in contrast to the collective victory of the village cricketers in *Lagaan*) the potential for ambitious individuals rather than the state to lead the way to India’s emergence as a global player. While this emphasis on the individual makes Guru similar to Hollywood protagonists, it is important to note that he is not the alienated underdog or egomaniacal Rambo of Hollywood invention. The film insists on Guru’s loyalty and attachment to Gupta and his daughter even after they stop speaking to each other. Guru’s wife becomes his partner in business as well as family, and Guru’s friend from Turkey, who becomes the operations manager at one of his factories, is so depressed by the thought that he has unwittingly given Guru’s enemies damaging evidence that he attempts suicide and is saved by Guru’s personal attention and affectionate forgiveness. Finally, we get the personal testimony of one of Guru’s shareholders as Guru is taken through the crowds into the hearing room. It is through this man’s investments in Guru’s company that he has paid the dowry for his three daughters. Thus, while the film in one way reduces the image of the nation to a single representative character, that character appears as exemplary of Indian cultural values, emotionally and visually reinforced through the song and dance sequence celebrating Guru’s children’s birth and the ceremony of funeral rites for Gupta’s daughter. Thus, Bollywood films provide the structures of feeling that support a sense of community that is something less than the presumed ‘universal’ appeal of Hollywood fare but certainly more powerful among transnational audiences. For Bollywood appeals to its viewers’ desire for national or cultural belonging in an otherwise fragmented, if not oppressive, world of profits and losses.

**Conclusion**

In contrasting the Indian nationalist reception of *Slumdog Millionaire* to the transnational appeal of Bollywood films, I have tried to understand the problem of cinematic representation and national identity in the age of globalization. Both *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Guru* depend upon the cross-cultural appeal of the rags to riches story, and within the context of transnational corporations and global media industries, both films aptly reflect the facts of today’s material culture, modernity and technology and the loss or redefinition of traditional familial or cultural bonds. The differences between the films, however, suggest the ways in which global media create competing sets of imagined worlds for diverse audiences. The framework of the game show in *Slumdog* (a good example itself of cultural globalization), like the stadium scenes in *Guru*, introduces each protagonist as a representative of any man seeking to fulfil his dreams. But the game show structure
reinforces the idea that Jamal’s desires are a matter of fate (as the intertitle at the end of the movie states) or luck, and so the violence that follows and the implied failure of Indian society to change or improve the lives of the poor is of less concern for the viewer than the working out of how Jamal knows the answers to the questions. For Western viewers, this narrative structure presents no problems because in typical Hollywood fashion, our concern is only for the individual protagonist. As Jones notes, ‘Because those in charge of making the film do not have to live with the afflictions shown, they do not seem to feel the natural desire to make one’s home a better place, as their home is on another continent . . . . The typical Euro-American film focuses solely on individual protagonist, and thus after his or her needs or desires are sated the film is effectively over’ (2010, 35–36). Thus, the Bollywood-style song and dance at the end, which would have been used in a Bollywood film to suggest the reconciliation of the past and present and to reinforce a sense of cultural belonging, is here detached from the narrative. Instead, it accompanies the credit sequence to create a feel good tune for movie goers as they exit the theatre. In contrast, the last scene of Guru begins with a close up of Guru (as if we were travelling back in time to the beginning of the film) as he speaks of the dream that has motivated him from childhood. The camera slowly pans outwards to reveal a huge audience of shareholders who are gathered to applaud not only Guru’s success but also their collective prosperity and bright prospects for the future. Their applause, of course, is supposed to prompt the movie audience’s sense of well-being too, but in this case, the happy ending is not only for the protagonist but also for the idea of India’s future success in the global economy. Such an idea undoubtedly affects a viewer more profoundly than the sensationalism and clichéd boy-wins-girl ending of Slumdog.

By noticing the different ways in which Bollywood’s narratives and modes of address construct a fluid and exemplary ideal of ‘Indianness’, I have argued that they challenge certain assumptions of Hollywood cinema – especially Hollywood’s focus on the individual’s psychological development or personal fulfilment to the exclusion of social change or the renewal of cultural bonds. My point has not been to present one type of cinema as superior aesthetically or to suggest that one or the other type of cinema is better able to represent the ‘real India’ to global audiences. Instead, this small survey of Bollywood films is meant to reveal how local our own frames of reference may be for understanding the potential role of cinema in the age of globalization.

As a critic of cultural globalization, Appadurai has described how images of the world produced by media provide ‘large and complicated repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapes . . . in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed’ (1996, 35). These images, narratives and sources of cultural identity become elements for people to script possible lives for themselves and fantasies about others. In the films that I have chosen to discuss in this article, the issues of terrorism, the diaspora and the shift from struggles with the state to the market (politics to economics) in the construction of national identity reflect global concerns and processes. If the reality of life in India and for Indians in the diaspora is quite different from that portrayed in Bollywood films, these narratives of Indians as exemplary citizens of the world retain their appeal and become as Appadurai suggests, ‘prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement’ (36) for diverse audiences. As the processes of globalization continue to complicate our local understanding of national and cultural identity, understanding how Bollywood and other local, regional and transnational cinemas are creating imagined communities out of diverse and transnational audiences can help us rethink our approaches to cinema and the world that global media is constantly reinventing.
Notes
4. Ibid.

Notes on contributor
Patricia O’Neill has written several essays on British literature and an article entitled “Globalization meets Localization: Spike Lee’s ‘The 25th Hour’”, Cineaction 64 (2004) 2–7. She is currently creating a digital archive of the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali.

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