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Bollywood and the Culture Industry: A Critique of How Stereotyping in Bollywood has led to Mass Commercialisation of Key Cultural elements in India

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the Frankfurt School, led by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, addressed the growing uniformity in art and cultural forms as the result of what they called the mechanisations of the 'culture industry' in contemporary Western societies, that is, the penetration of industrial mass-production methods into the realms of culture and art. The basic kernel of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the cultural industries lies in the latter's systematic fabrication of modes of behaviour whereby the profit-seeking, technology-driven Western capitalist ethic extends beyond material mass consumption to include cultural items and even people's perceptions of what is 'good' and what is 'smart'. In this essay the author goes back to the 'culture industry' thesis to explore the ways in which popular Hindi cinema, a pivotal form of mass media and culture in the country, has through the decades commodified and blatantly commercialised crucial elements of the Indian cultural ethos, and through repeated and specific stereotyping has managed to standardise aspects of Indian life and culture into normative ideologies that come to dominate day-to-day existence. Whether through stereotypical representation of cultural identities, mass packaging of 'star' images or standardisation of cultural items like weddings, an element of culture that is foundational to the very fabric of the Indian society, mainstream Hindi cinema has in some unique way re-normalised traditions in the garb of the 'new' and the 'smart', and successfully created and maintained this illusion to the extent that some of it has slowly but steadily taken on the form of specific realities dominating human existence. It is this same growingly uniform representation of cultural forms leading to illusions that in turn lead to the emergence of a dominant reality, that is reminiscent of the theoretical framework of the culture industry, and it is in the light of this theory that the paper will try to critique and analyse the role of Bollywood cinema.

What parades...in the culture industry, as the incessantly new...remains the disguise for an eternal sameness (Adorno, 1991:99-100).

It was the Frankfurt School in the early twentieth century, led by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, that chiefly addressed the growing uniformity in art and cultural forms as the result of what they called the mechanisations of the 'culture industry' in contemporary Western societies, that is, the penetration of industrial mass-production methods into the realms of culture and art. This essay seeks to critique certain crucial aspects of contemporary Bollywood cinema in terms of the culture industry thesis and endeavour to prove that the core thesis of the Frankfurt School still holds true in the twenty-first century as the world is everyday ridden with newer technologies, and as the rampant movement of people around the world continually produces unstable, decentred identities.

It is necessary to note at the outset what the authors meant by their use of the term 'culture industry'. In *The Culture Industry* (1991), Adorno states, "...In all its branches products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan...the culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above" (Adorno, 1991:98). The basic kernel of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the cultural industries lies in the latter's systematic fabrication of modes of behaviour whereby the profit-seeking, technology-driven Western capitalist ethic extends beyond material mass consumption to include cultural items and even people's perceptions of what is 'good' and what is 'smart'.

The media and advertisement industries are instrumental in this domination of capitalism over human social life such that concepts of 'leisure' and 'relaxation', that earlier lay outside the sphere of the material, have now been rendered into commodities garnering enormous profits for the industries (Scanell, 2007:48). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industries make use of their two pivotal vehicles, technology and media, to create a false sense

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of freedom amongst individuals, who within the spirit of capitalism become consumers, a veil of illusion that compels the individual to play by the so-called rules laid down by the manipulative media, failing which they would be cast outside the mainstream. Thus, "...the recognition of brand names has taken the place of choice, when at the same time the totality forces everyone who wishes to survive into consciously going along with the process" (Adorno, 1991:85). The individual is deceived into believing that he or she is at liberty to choose rationally from amidst a plethora of choices laid out objectively for him or her, whereas, the choices in reality have been reduced, and individual preferences minimised. This liquidation of opposition essentially characterises the culture industry, the very existence of which is established on the principles of mass production and mass consumption. The rational decision made by the individual consumer is in essence the path carefully framed by the agents of the culture industry (Adorno, 1991:85, Scanell, 2007:48), one of which is cinema.

Now, the Bollywood film industry in India has gradually carved out a niche for itself as one of the biggest film industries in the world, to the extent that it currently competes healthily with the American film industry, in vying for audience attention around the world. And one of the chief reasons why Bollywood cinema has become crucial to the Indian way of living is the way it has come to permeate the daily life and culture of the Indian society. The growing abundance of cinematic images across the landscape of the country, on posters and hoardings, magazines, on the television and the Internet, has rendered Hindi commercial cinema almost an integral part of the Indian popular culture and imagination, "part of its habit and speech, dress and manners, background and foreground" (Dwyer and Patel, 2002:8). And it is precisely in this context that the thesis of the culture industry becomes relevant. Popular Hindi cinema over the past two decades has continually used Hindu wedding rituals to represent the ideal of a traditional Hindu social and cultural life amidst contemporary notions of individuality. It was *Hum Apke Hain Kaun...!* (Who Am I to You? HAHK, 1994) that set the trend for the so-called 'Great Indian Wedding'—the stereotypical Hindu wedding ceremony accompanied by all the spectacle and grandeur that one would commonly associate with tinsel town. But the point to be noted here is that whereas wedding rituals in a vastly diverse country like India vary distinctly from region to region, the films essentially portrayed a form of wedding the rituals of which have been traditionally followed by the 'Punjabi' and Northern states of India. And with the widespread promotion of this 'North Indian' wedding in popular Bollywood cinema, wedding rituals across the country began to undergo a noticeable transformation, as different states, for example those of Bengal and Southern India, started emulating the '*filmi*' weddings by including amongst their own rituals what were customarily North Indian traditions of '*sagai*' or the exchange of rings, '*sangeet*' or the song and dance marking the festivity surrounding the wedding, and the '*mehndi*' or the ceremonial application of a skin dye made from *henna* on the bride's hands. Marriage rituals apart from those in Northern India thus began losing their distinctive identity in their efforts to imitate the elaborate weddings in the films, and weddings in India currently stand threatened by the possibility of standardisation, their uniqueness gradually giving in to uniformity.

Not only within the geographical parameters of the country, but even amidst the vast Indian diaspora, the wedding sequences in Hindi cinema have found tremendous favour thus further strengthening the growing stereotype and the notion that this particular style represents as a whole the typical 'Indian' wedding (Ganti, 2004:42-43).

It is in this growing uniformity of the Hindu wedding and in the fact that cinema, has perpetuated into the lives and minds of its viewers the illusion that the '*filmi*' wedding is really the right kind of wedding, that the 'culture industry' debate makes itself relevant.

The rampant representation of the Indian diaspora following the success of *DDLJ* is another tool that the Bollywood film industry uses to reach out to audiences across the national boundaries, especially those of Indian origin settled overseas. The release of *DDLJ* coincided exactly with the liberalisation policies of 1991, and as India opened its doors to the world market, Bollywood clung on to what quite eagerly presented itself as a colossal source of income—the massive diasporic community around the world. Hindi cinema now began to tell a stereotypical story of what Ganti calls, "frequently transnational families" (Ganti, 2004: 39).

During the Nehruvian nation-building period, in the 1950s and 1960s, commercial Hindi cinema rarely doled out prominent roles to the Non-Resident Indian (NRI), and when they did, the portrayal ensured that the NRI, who had supposedly given up his 'Indianness', was belittled when compared to his traditional 'Indian' counterpart. This derogatory representation transformed in the 1990s as the NRI became the thematic focus (Ganti, 2004:43). The pivotal theme recurrently running through some of the major films released in and post the 1990s has been the diasporic imaginary, and the desperate attempts of a frustrated first-generation diaspora to foster the 'Indian' morality within the second-generation that has had little or no attachment with the 'Indian' homeland (Mishra, 2002:236-237). Time and again these films portrayed the transnational Indian as "more traditional and culturally authentic than their counterparts in India" (Ganti, 2004: 43), thus laying the ground for a stereotypical image of the Indian diaspora in the mind of the

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Indian living in India (Mishra, 2002:250), and promoting an ideal of the homeland to the Indian audience overseas. While critics like Banaji (2006) have questioned the repeated stereotyping of the Indian immigrant as one clinging to Indian traditions, popular Bollywood continues to construct the diasporic Indian identity as one that exalts over the homeland, ensuring that the so-called 'Indian' values of female chastity and coyness, patriarchal authority and conformity, arranged marriages and familial values play into the audience imagination, Indian (Ganti, 2004:42-43) and otherwise.

One must mention here that the packaged product that the films dish out for the audience is helped on extensively by the presence of the film stars. Few scholars have researched the importance of the star-image in Hindi cinema, Rajinder Dudrah being one of them. Dudrah undertakes a socio-cultural analysis of the image of Shahrukh Khan, whom he describes as the "literal and metaphorical embodiment of an actor-cum-star who is able to perform most successfully the anxieties, hopes and fantasies of urban India and its related South Asian diasporas" (Dudrah, 2006:85).

Dudrah looks at Khan's transnational appeal as the ambassador of the 'global moment' to both urban India and the diaspora (Dudrah, 2006:87), that came in tandem with the entry of Indian markets and in turn of Bollywood into the world market scenario. Here was an urban contemporary hero who blended with ease the conformist Indian and the more liberal Western values, at the same time winning the hearts of the heroine and the audience through his vulnerability. Following the unprecedented audience appreciation for *DDLJ*, Khan's persona became what Dudrah calls, "the preferred mediator between the homeland and its diaspora" (Dudrah, 2006:86), as the actor was cast in a series of films, all of which went on to do well at the box-office both at home and overseas, and in almost all Khan played roles similar to the one in *DDLJ*. Indeed the stereotyping of the star's image went to the extent of his characters possessing the same names of 'Raj' and 'Rahul' repeatedly, and the star even developed his signature style of delivering his dialogues and throwing out his hands in a very 'Khan' specific manner.

Khan's appearance outside of cinema in numerous stage performances across the world, the constant focus on his personal life in various television channels and the print media (Gahlot, 2007:16-20), and the explosion of social networking sites like Twitter where celebrities are found to be so-called 'connecting' with their fans, Shahrukh Khan being one of the leading Bollywood superstars to tweet, have all added to his star persona, making his public image both tantalisingly endearing and extraordinarily remote to the ordinary man (Ellis, 1982:98).

This packaging of the 'star' is inherent to the success of the 'culture industry', "Its ideology above all makes use of the star-system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation" (Adorno, 1991:101). The narcissistic element that drives the viewer into identifying with the 'star' can be the subject of speculation in an altogether separate essay (Mulvey, 1989:16-18). Film actors in all media formats are purposely presented as 'ideal' beings. Technology helps to balance out whatever discrepancies in appearance these personalities may suffer, since these widely popular stars cannot afford to publicise unkempt hair or freckled faces. This 'perfected' appearance of the stars both outside the narrative of the film and within, alongside the film roles that they portray, help to construct their affable images, to the extent that film stars often are faced with an identity crisis as they struggle to locate their true selves within the much-hyped public self (Rojek, 2001:11).

The consumerist culture industry not only exploits these celebrities materially by commodifying them physically but also takes advantage of the cultural items that take on newer shapes because of them, for instance the ideals of Indian cultural and moral codes and the Hindu wedding which this essay discusses. As the 'star' is seen performing in the wedding scenes, so the audience feels drawn to the diktats of their beloved screen idol! Whereas promotional tactics such as printing of advertisements in newspapers had been in vogue since the release of the first Indian feature film in 1913 (Dwyer and Patel, 2002:101), the media today has indeed found various other means of promoting films and stars. The latter come to constitute a major element in the processes of distribution and marketing in the film industry (McDonald, 2000:5), and nearly all important stars today endorse commercial products that are often tied together with the sponsorship of films. For instance, over the past two decades Shahrukh has endorsed some of the leading brands both in domestic and world market such as Pepsi, Airtel, Videocon, Hyundai, Nerolac Paints, Tag Heuer, D' decor, Omega, to name a few (Gahlot, 2007:30-31), currently emerging a much sought after brand in himself, at a net worth of over half a billion American dollars (*The Los Angeles Times*, 2011).

If following John Ellis, a star is one "whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances" (Ellis, 1982:91), then the star's image, disparately put across via the television commercials and other media formats, feeds into his overall public image, the crux of which lies in the characters essayed by him in films. Moreover, these products frequently sponsor and in turn get publicity through the films starred in by the brand ambassador. Thus behind the construction and commodification of the star stands the overwhelming interest of one dominating entrepreneurial class that manifests itself diversely in the capitalist inclinations of the media corporations

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and advertisement agencies and the overall “ruthless unity” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997:123) of the culture industry.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here the work of another renowned social theorist, Walter Benjamin, who displays awareness of the artificial construction of the star-image when he says that the film responds to the shrivelling ‘aura’ of the actor by building up a ‘personality’ outside the studio (Benjamin, 1936:9). The ‘aura’ for Benjamin is the authority of the original that fails to manifest itself in the replicated object in an age of mechanical and technological reproducibility. Benjamin, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, consider the advent of new technology as potentially revolutionary (Nava and Nava, 1999:508), but like Adorno and Horkheimer, he notes the capacity of technology to reproduce art and points out that “The presence of the original is a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin, 1936:3). Even the screen actor loses authenticity as the audience, rather than identifying with the individual, identifies with the camera whose angles at will are what finally present the actor to the viewer (Benjamin, 1936:7-8). As mentioned already, Adorno and Horkheimer from the very beginning recognise the potential of technology in an age of Enlightenment, whose ideal was to dispel myths to replace them with reality. According to them, Enlightenment betrayed this very aim by constructing further illusions to shroud the real, and it is this regression into ideology that finds its typical expression in films and radio (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: xvi), that is, technology. Similarly, Benjamin too basically concerns himself with technology begetting the plurality of cultural products and the tendency within contemporary masses to overcome everyday reality by accepting its reproduction (Benjamin, 1936:4).

However, while Bollywood cinema by repeated stereotyping undoubtedly helps to normalise certain dominant ideologies, one wonders at the degree of applicability here of the perception of cinema perpetuating the illusion of everyday life.

Films, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, through their mimetic aesthetic, create the illusion that real life is but an extension of the escapist tendencies of the film. “...the movie-goer...sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left (because the latter is intent upon reproducing the world of everyday perceptions)” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997:126). Just as the Marxist thesis, that provides the root for the Frankfurt School’s critical paradigm, enumerates the instrumentality of religion in maintaining status quo (Giddens, 1971:215), similarly, for Adorno and Horkheimer, films serve the capitalist interests by engaging the viewer in an illusion about life— just as the realist aesthetic of Hollywood cinema finally climaxes with escapism, so in life of which Hollywood cinema claims to be a mimetic representation, one would find happiness.

In situating the same argument within the context of Bollywood films, one can raise a question regarding Bollywood’s claim to realism. If Adorno and Horkheimer, in what has often been labelled an ‘elitist’ perception of the cinematic aesthetic of Hollywood (Jay, 1984:119), criticise the commercial banality of Hollywood cinema, then this essay takes the liberty of arguing that the same logic of banality is in fact much more relevant in Hindi popular cinema. The fundamental distinction between cinema in Bollywood and Hollywood lies in the former’s lack of realism as opposed to the latter. Bollywood cinema gains its popularity through its larger than life nature, one of the chief instruments of which is the reliance on music and dance. Dwyer and Patel note, “Music is what has preserved the Hindi film industry, markings its difference from Hollywood” (Dwyer and Patel, 2002:36). Escapism in Bollywood cinema takes a completely different and more prominent shape than in Hollywood, and while Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of Hollywood films hinges on their apparent mimesis of the real lived conditions, I argue that Bollywood cinema’s claim to fame actually lies in its distance from reality. Yet the thesis appears even more relevant here as the films in fact take up certain aspects of Indian life and embody them in their own perception of the real, usually serving the interests of the wealthy profit-mongers, and these versions of reality are then naturalised, taking on the curious status of becoming realities in their own (Mishra, 2002: 250), both material and non-material. The examples of the standardisation of the Hindu wedding, the construction of the Indian diasporic identity, and the manipulation of the star image often leading to the split between the star’s public and private self (Rojek, 2001:11), fall in with this line of thought.

Hence while critics such as Martin Brady criticise Adorno and Horkheimer’s fundamental lack of familiarity with cinema other than that of Hollywood (Brady, 2001: 162), one might justifiably argue that some forms of cinema can be even farther than American cinema, from the real conditions of living, and can construct illusions that in turn pervade reality. Bollywood is one gigantic example of such format of cinema.

This idea of mediated illusions becoming realities is best illustrated in Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s notion of the ‘thingification’ of culture in what they call the ‘global culture industry’, that has replaced the ‘culture industry’ in the modern world (Lash and Lury, 2007:7). ‘Thingification’ occurs when cultural items represented by the media invade daily life in the form of physical objects or information, such as when movies become computer games and cartoon characters become collectibles or costumes (Lash and Lury, 2007: 7-8). This happens in Bollywood when expensive wedding costumes within the film format are replicated by fashion industries and donned by common men. In 2011 the

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science-fiction *Ra.One* was released in India accompanied with extensive video game versions of the film, digital comic books and other merchandise such as action figures of the superhero Ra.One (Bollywood Mantra, 2011).

Now, one question inevitably raised on discussing the culture industry debate is the consumer's role in it all. Interestingly, although the thesis critiques the culture industries' homogenisation of individuality, it does not perceive consumers as blindly manipulated agents in this system of mass deception. As Deborah Cook points out, consumers here are believed to possess a duplicitous consciousness in which they become complicit with the tactics of the culture industry leading to a form of self-deception (Cook, 1996:68-69). Adorno himself clarifies this, "The consciousness of the consumers is split between the prescribed fun which is supplied to them....and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings.....People are not only....falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification...they force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them" (Adorno, 1991: 103). Several film scholars (Dwyer, 2000; Mishra, 2002; Banaji, 2006) over the past decades have delved into how film representations act as a site of negotiation, where the viewer interprets subjectively the stereotypes conveyed to them by the films. Alberoni's opus on the powerless elite where the audience has the final word in the construction of the star (Alberoni, 1972:93-94) also supports the role of the viewer as an active agent of consumption. It is then safe to presume that the culture industry in Bollywood thrives on the fragile hope that the audience's desire to be smart and sophisticated will forever surpass their resistance against superficiality. There of course come times when the audience no longer responds to the identical products churned out by the films, and it is then that a fresh stereotype surfaces to penetrate into Indian life and culture.

One might therefore conclude that Bollywood cinema that plays a central role in shaping and influencing the popular imagination and entertaining millions of people across the globe, blatantly commercialises crucial aspects of the cultural ethos of the Indian society. And in doing so it gains both cultural significance and material profit thereby validating Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical framework on the workings of the 'culture industry' in contemporary societies.

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Bio-note

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