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Editorial

Since the centenary of Indian cinema is a milestone that cannot be ignored, our choice of theme for this issue was pretty much unavoidable. What we did take care to avoid, though, was treading the beaten path. We have slipped behind the scenes and sneaked towards the fringes, chosen the seedy over the glamorous, the fans over the superstar, the little-known over the celebrated, the background score over the hit song. The cover image blatantly advertises our intention—to intrigue, startle and amuse you as much as to enlighten you.

Filmmaker Ashim Ahluwalia, a self-confessed hardcore fan of trash and sleaze, reminds us that C movies are a legitimate part of our ‘filmic’ past. His article, an excerpt from a forthcoming book, offers a vivid picture of the subterranean world of exploitation cinema. Ahluwalia provocatively argues that C-grade cinema—and not our so-called art cinema or parallel cinema—is the only truly experimental Indian film form.

To find out what Mrs Solomon and Robert Master are up to, you will have to read Debashree Mukherjee’s brief history of film practice extrapolated from Priya Paul’s vast collection of film memorabilia. Concentrating largely on B movies, Mukherjee locates the Bombay film industry as a work site and gives us a glimpse of the innumerable skilled specialists—many of them obscure and unsung—who contribute to the collective enterprise that is filmmaking.

In keeping with the unusual nature of this issue we have an unorthodox piece: a fake interview by a fake journalist. Far from it being an untrammelled flight of the imagination, the ‘interview’ constructed by Rashmi Sawhney consists of meticulously excavated chunks of research adroitly welded together to sculpt the figure of Fatma Begum, India’s first woman filmmaker, and offer a speculative history of her life and times.

Gautam Pemmaraju takes us beyond the archetypal dishoom-dishoom sound of the hero-villain fights in mainstream Hindi cinema as he examines how sound effects contribute to the composite soundtrack. Through his interviews with a galaxy of sound professionals and filmmakers who have worked on landmark Hindi films, he provides an insight into effects-production and aesthetics in the era of analogue sound, and the changes they underwent with the advent of digital technology.

If you believe that the life of the scholar lacks the ‘thrills, spills and chills’ that the big screen offers, you might change your mind after reading Lawrence Liang’s description of an academic exercise that morphed into a comedy of errors. While following fans of the south Indian film-star Rajinikanth, Liang gets swept away by what can only be described as a ‘filmi’ turn of events.

Permit us, too, a bit of dialoguebaazi: This is a magical, engrossing, unique and inimitable homage to Indian cinema.

C.K. Meena
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Going Underground:
Notes on an Uncontrolled Cinema

Ashim Ahluwalia
All photographs courtesy the author

Call them cheap, trashy, pornographic, underground—C movies are a legitimate part of our filmic past, argues Ashim Ahluwalia. During his decade-long love affair with Indian-made exploitation cinema, he has found it to be not only deranged and scandalous but also accidentally lyrical and avant-gardist. Saluting its rejection of established conventions, standards and categories, he provocatively states that C-grade cinema is the one truly experimental Indian film form. In this excerpt from a forthcoming book, Ahluwalia describes how the C movie unwittingly breaks the patriarchal order and contains stylistic elements that lend themselves to radical filmmaking.
Writing History in the Dark

Fatma Begum in conversation with Ms Kitty

Rashmi Sawhney

Fatma Begum has lived a life away from the arc lights for several years now, so when this first lady of Indian cinema, who’s never given a media interview, agreed to speak to me on 3 May 2013, I promptly made my way to her once-impressive but now crumbling residence in Dhanraj Mahal, where she lives with her daughter Zubeida. Clad in an olive-green chiffon saree, Fatma looked every bit the begum I’d imagined her to be. After supping on the best Hyderabadi kebabs and qubani ka meetha I’ve ever had, we settled down on huge, heavily-cushioned sofa chairs, sipping chai, to have a chat about her life and films.
Out of Sight: Archiving Hidden Histories of Practice

Debashree Mukherjee

Our understanding of Indian cinema would remain incomplete until we acknowledged its supporting cast of hairdressers, poster painters, costume designers, still photographers, makeup artists and numerous other specialists invisible to the public eye. In January 2013, Debashree Mukherjee curated an exhibition of Hindi film memorabilia titled ‘Maya Mahal’, which featured artefacts from the private collection of Priya Paul, Chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels. In this essay, Mukherjee uses examples from the collection to point to hidden histories of work and practice, and to give us a fragmented view of low-budget films, lost genres and the wage-workers who mark each film with their individual skills.
‘Loud’ is the word that most easily springs to mind when one describes the soundtrack of the archetypal Hindi film. The main purpose of sound is to heighten the melodrama, to imbue the hero with a mythic aura through blood-and-thunder dialogue. What, then, is the role of sound effects in the composite soundtrack and how are they conceived? Drawing from conversations with several sound professionals and filmmakers, Gautam Pemmaraju gives us an insider’s view of effects production and aesthetics during the analogue era of sound production in Hindi cinema. From the age of the talkies he takes us through the dubbing era to the digital age, when technology brought about a radically different tone, texture and timbre to contemporary sounds.
Following Fans: The Curious Case of the Man from Japan

Lawrence Liang

All photographs courtesy the author
A scholarly pursuit of the fan club phenomenon led Lawrence Liang to the streets of Bangalore, in 2005, where a mighty army of fans of the film-star Rajinikanth was preparing to celebrate the release of his latest film Chandramukhi. As cinema conquered reality, Liang found it increasingly difficult to retain his autonomy and maintain a professional distance. On an impulse, he decided to abandon the notebook and embrace the new role that had been suddenly thrust upon him—a move hovering on the brink of perilous discovery, as he was to soon find out.
About IFA

India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) is one of the country’s leading independent arts funders, championing the cause of arts philanthropy and advocating the importance of the arts in public life. In the last decade and a half we have substantially enriched India’s cultural landscape and infused passion and professionalism into the business of arts philanthropy.

IFA was set up in 1993 to focus on urgent but unattended needs in specific areas of the arts. Since we began we have committed eighteen crore rupees (approximately three-and-a-quarter million US dollars) to projects located in almost every corner of the country.

Our support has gone out to independent research and teaching institutions, cultural and development organisations, scholars and artists. Musicians and choreographers, writers and visual artists, filmmakers and film scholars, architects and conservationists, sociologists and art historians, craftspersons and folk performers have been among the beneficiaries of our support.

Today we fund cutting edge artistic practice, support initiatives to bring the arts into the classroom, assist in institution development and infrastructure creation, fund research in the arts, help in the preservation and transmission of valuable cultural knowledge, and create public platforms for the dissemination and advocacy of the arts. We also act as a source of information and expertise to those in the arts community and beyond.

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