

BOLLYWOOD INDIAN CINEMA AND SWITZERLAND

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Museum für Gestaltung Zürich **Gestaltung** zürich

Switzerland is to present-day Bollywood as the East used to be to Hollywood: an earthly paradise. Bollywood is India's biggest dream factory and Switzerland is its preferred song and dance location. This film fantasy Switzerland has become a focus for the everyday longings of an Indian audience of millions, and the country has now established itself as a tourist destination for the Indian middle classes.

The exhibition *Bollywood. The Indian cinema and Switzerland* is based on a joint research project with the Seminar for Film Studies at the University of Zurich, funded by the Gebert Rütli Foundation. Clips from films, stills, photographs and figures of gods show how the emotional landscape that is «Switzerland» is set up in the Indian cinema – a landscape we think we know very well, yet in fact we can explore it in a completely new way here.

About 800 films are made every year in India. Bombay/Mumbai is not just one of the most important locations for Indian filmmaking, it has also given the world the expression Bollywood – Bollywood films convey a piece of cultural homeland to Indian communities in Asia, Africa, Europe and America. The name derives Hollywood, which produces about 200 films per year. In comparison with this, the Indian output seems positively gigantic. It means that India has the largest film industry in the world. This also affects the cinema's standing in everyday Indian life. The many cinemas are dominated by home-grown mainstream films and the private TV channels also show cinema-related programmes like the «Who wants to be a millionaire?» quiz, which is fronted by the film star Amitabh Bachchan and fed with questions on Indian film history.

INTRO

There is probably no film industry in the world that is as emotional as the Indian one. Hero and heroine dance in the eternal snows and sing about their love; the camera circles round them, then pulls in for close-ups. Unlike Western cinema practice, their love is never «consummated», but presented in the words of the songs and in hints, gestures, glances. And in a seductive language that is universal and comprehensible at first glance. *Hum aapke dil mein rehte hain* – «I am in your heart», is the name of a film made by Satish Kaushik in 1999. It shows the two stars Kajol and Anil Kapoor on their honeymoon in the most beautiful Swiss landscapes.

MASALA MOVIE INGREDIENTS

The notion that is covered by the headings hybrid or crossover in the West has long been taken for granted in the Bollywood cinema. Genre classifications of the kind the American cinema has followed for a long time only have limited validity here. Even though most of the Bollywood films made in the nineties were melodramas or comedies, they also contain other elements, and go back to theatrical traditions and Western cinematic fashions like comedy, action, violence, family dramas, love stories or political thrillers, as demonstrated by the film *Mrityudaata* – «The God of Death», 1997, for example.

For this reason Bollywood films are often compared with the typical Indian mixture of various spices that go into a curry. The films also contain a great deal of this «masala», and the mixture has to be right for the film to be a success with the public. Behind this cinema is the concept of the rasas, the nine emotions developed by Indian dramaturgy. Thus the formulaic stories are ultimately based on the right emotional mixture: on love, comedy, grief, rage, heroism, fear, disgust, on strangeness and tranquillity. But if this mixture is to work properly, there have to be rules. This is why the cinema industry came up with the concept of the formulaic film – rather like a recipe that allows new interpretations, and yet has to contain certain things if it is to remain successful.

Music and dance are the central criterion of success for Bollywood films. They can easily last three or more hours, and often contain at least five or six major song and dance scenes. Often the popularity of the film music, which will be on the market long before the film opens in cinemas, is a crucial factor in a film's success. The songs are seen and heard on the radio and TV, available on cassettes or CDs, and the words are published in little booklets. The stars mime to performances by singers, most of whom remain unknown. Exceptions are Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhosle and Mohammad Rafi, who have been lending their voices to a changing series of stars for decades.

The songs function as independent units within the film plot. It is often not clear whether they are intended to be dream sequences or cinematic reality: the stars' clothes change several times in the same song, and so do the landscapes they are set in. The musical numbers reflect the events on a lyrical plane: as a wishful notion, intermezzo and erotic fantasy – but always to satisfy the audience's curiosity as well, as they often deal explicitly with emotions that are only lived out subliminally in the film action. In the fifties and sixties the musical numbers made their impact through the poetic quality of the lyrics and artistic interpretation, but they appeal now because of the elaborately produced dance sequences. The stars need a certain level of talent to bring this off. But choreographers, like Saroj Kahn, for example, work very hard as well: the director hands over responsibility to the Dance Masters for the song and dance scenes. They develop their choreography from the basis that the composers and songwriters provide for them, and from the stars' abilities as dancers. They draw their inspiration from classical Indian dance forms as well as Hollywood musicals, Michael Jackson and MTV.

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF LOVE

Romantic love is a «divine» theme: in India it is very closely linked with Krishna and Radha. The story of the blue-skinned, flute-playing god's love for a milkmaid starts when he watches her bathing, steals her sari and thus faces her with a choice between decorous behaviour and divine love. Radha decides in favour of Krishna and thus for a life full of love, fulfilled in a heavenly landscape. The law of the good operates according to this formula: hero and heroine get to know and love each other, then marry and form a happy family. Good always triumphs over evil in the end: evil offers the attractions of short-lived pleasures, but they cannot last. Good and evil are easily recognized: «good girls» are kind, reticent, gentle and dress traditionally, but «bad girls» are sexy, shameless and dress in figure-hugging Western fashions. But both the worlds they come from are celebrated: traditional society and modern times, which have so many attractive consumer goods to offer ... The wedding scenes are the most lavish. But the right setting is important as well: love can only flourish against the background of a heavenly landscape of the kind where the gods were able to come together. Gentle hills, rippling streams and flowery meadows often provide the background for the song and dance scenes, in which the heroes and heroines proclaim their love.

SWITZERLAND AS A LOCATION

The director, producer and actor Raj Kapoor came to Switzerland for the first time in 1964, while looking for new and exotic settings for *Sangam*. After that it was the successful director Yash Chopra in particular who rediscovered Switzerland as a location. He opened up the doors for many Indian productions with the films he made here. He explains his obsession with Switzerland as a location like this: «I want to entertain the audience on a large scale. My films are intended to offer them romance, poetry and happy emotions – with flowers, mountains and lakes. Why should I offer the audience ugliness and mess when I can offer them a gift packed with beauty?»

Heavenly backdrops are essential for the song and dance scenes in particular. These were very often filmed in Switzerland in the nineties. Because the infrastructure is right. And because the mountains here are almost as beautiful as those in Kashmir – one of the longed-for places in Indian mythology, which is hardly available as a location any longer because of political problems. And in the meantime, Swiss towns and villages, shopping centres, hotels and airports have become part of the iconography of this modern paradise as well. The epicentre of this evacuated film production is the Bernese Oberland, with offshoots to Geneva and Lausanne, Lucerne and Zurich. Directors also appreciate the fact that they can carry out a shoot more concentratedly than in India: the stars are always contracted for a particular period, and away from Bombay/Mumbai they have hardly any chance to desert to other productions. And no audience is as discreet as the onlookers in Switzerland, which also helps to ease the filming process, which usually takes place from the spring onwards. The fact that the Indian shoots produced unique images is demonstrated the audio-visual show compiled by Martin Peer, bringing together material by Tina Ruisinger, Olf Becker and Christof Schürpf.

Nature does not become landscape until it is involved in an aesthetic act of presentation and perception – the mountain world is much more than just a backdrop in the Bollywood films, it is there to convey metaphysical values. The Western tradition of landscape presentation started in the 17th century with the discovery and rationalization of the mountain world, which had hitherto been associated with myth. The image of the mountains, based on awe-inspiring grandeur and a romantic view of nature, is also being deconstructed now: in Guido Baselgia's and Tobias Madörin's photographic work, for example. Monica Studer / Christoph van den Berg in their turn construct landscapes with their computers that do not relate to real mountains at all, and Regula Bearth produces a new, computed-aided reading of a legend located in the mountains.

TOURISM

The Indian middle classes also check out the Bollywood film's cinematic Switzerland in reality. Indian couples come to the mountains for their honeymoon, make a pilgrimage to the Jungfrauoch and sing the songs their favourite stars once sang before the camera, as Dorothee Wenner's short documentary film *Happy End in Switzerland* shows.

The Swiss in their turn respond to the Indian tourists who now make up the most rapidly expanding segment of Swiss tourism. Some hotels have tailored what they offer to this fact, and there are courses teaching how to deal with Indian tourists, who demand special standards.

In everyday India, clichés about Switzerland that are current all over the world overlap with the charming fantasy that the Indian audience of millions sees in it. This is shown by a selection of Indian commercials, and also by Ashima Narain's photographs. She has been on the trail of Switzerland in India.

RECEPTION AND ADVERTISING

It is not just the star system that works rather differently in the Indian cinema from the way it does in the west, film advertising is different too. The large-format film posters, painted in oil on canvas, are familiar. The posters, which can be anything up to 72 m² in size, are produced to a large extent by division of labour and in a hierarchically graded way, by the «painter artist» and the «second artist», who do the preliminary drawing, by the lettering painters, poster primers, square line-drawers, correction draughtsmen, down to the fabric sewers, oil-paint mixers and boilers, coverers of frames and sawers of plywood. The posters are based on photographs of the film stars, which are divided up into a grid, enlarged many times and then painted directly on to the primed canvas. Actually the boom in film posters is over now; the film industry is increasingly moving towards uniform marketing campaigns using photographic motifs, and to the poster industry is diversifying by producing portraits of politicians, for example.

In a smaller format, the stars are also celebrated in the countless postcards that can be bought on any street-corner. The bigger the pile, the more popular the star. Between these formats there are a whole range of advertising methods, the most frequently seen being film posters, lobby cards and star posters. The stars' names never appear on film posters – there's no need, because once they become famous, every child knows who they are.

IMPRINT

Exhibition

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Audio-visual show production: Martin Peer

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