

B & C Circuit

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If we exclude the immense body of non-academic writing in magazines like *Midi Minuit Fantastique* and fanzines, which have championed B and exploitation films since the early 1960s, in Europe and the USA historiographic attention to cheaply produced, quickly circulated films dates back to the mid-1970s, when cinema emerged as an area of radical debates about industrial cultural production as an agent of historical change. Pioneering work in this field, however, remained mostly wedded to auteurism (Vitali, 2016). By the time auteurism was gradually shelved, in the late 1980s, in favour of a (post-)structuralist approach capable of accounting for cheap films' modes of existence as dimensions of historically specific public spheres, much of the radical politics that had characterised early debates on cinema had begun to dwindle while Film Studies became an academic discipline. As it is, in Anglophone academia today scholarship on exploitation, B or 'trash' cinema remains at worst infused with degrees of vacuous populism, at best stuck in vague notions of transgression. Little seems to have changed since Andrew Sarris' reductive claim that there are ways of 'looking fondly at any given B picture. One is the way of the trivia hound, the other is the way of the treasure hunter' (Sarris, 1974, p. 49).

Attention to B and C circuit cinema happened at a different time in South Asia. Bhriqupati Singh and S. V. Srinivas were the first to examine the B and C circuit films in India, Singh in the context of an event at SARAI-CSDS on cinema and the city, Delhi (2000–2001); Srinivas (2003) in a seminal essay on the permutations of Hong Kong action films in Andhra Pradesh. A few years later there followed my own work on Dara Singh (2008), Kartik Nair (2012), myself and Aditi Sen's (2011) on the Ramsay Brothers and cheaper Hindi horror, Lotte Hoek (2014) on pornography in Bangladeshi action films, Avijit Ghosh on Bhojpuri cinema (2010), Krzysztof Lipka-Chudzik on Bond-inspired Hindi thrillers (2011), to name but a few.

This list begs the question: what kind of film inhabits the B and C circuits of South Asian cinemas? Ranging from films made for non-metropolitan markets and cheaply produced spin-offs of Hindi and/or foreign mainstream productions to pornography and films past their 'sell by' date, the object of the B and the C circuits is hard to pin down. In South Asia as elsewhere, what constitutes a B or C circuit film changes depending on film-industrial contingencies that, quite specific to the individual

national and regional cinemas, also change significantly, within these territories, over time. *King Kong* (1962), starring wrestler Dara Singh, may look today like a B circuit film, but we can establish with some accuracy whether it actually was one only if we trace precisely in which cinemas it was screened, for how long and with which censor certificate. Contrary to what most histories of American B-movies suggest, very little of a film's A, B or C nature depends on its generic ingredients. Not even pornography can be taken as a guarantee of industrial marginalisation, precisely because, as Hoek (2010) has argued, exhibition practices, let alone audience responses, are highly unstable, especially in a vertically non-integrated industry such as Bangladeshi cinema, as that of many other countries.

Babubhai Mistri's decision to monetise Dara Singh's popularity was not intended to produce fodder for the B circuit. The wrestler was cast as a paying proposition and, as it turned out, not only in the short term. A decade later greater investment into the same (or similar) generic ingredients led to action films as a staple of the Hindi A circuit and to some of India's most globally exported films. By this time *King Kong* could possibly be seen only in non-metropolitan B circuit cinemas, if at all. For this, today it retains the potential of resurfacing as part of a 'trash' cinema retrospective, the stuff of middle-class under-30s with access to the internet.

The permutations of *King Kong* suggest that a better way to approach the question 'What kind of film inhabits the B and C circuits?' would be to apply more systematically the criteria by which, in each of the three sectors of exhibition, distribution and production, we may identify a B or C circuit film: the location and type of the exhibition venue on first release; the same on subsequent runs and for how long; the mode and geographic scope of distribution; the level of investment and in which aspects of the film; production factors such as language, nudity and other censorship- and time-sensitive ingredients, but also, and perhaps more crucially, working conditions for actors and crew, as researched by Hossain (1997). Pornography screened in a venue or at a time normally devoted to family fare is an infinitely more audacious object than the same material screened in the appropriate matinee cinema. This is to say that it is only through consideration of criteria such as these, over a sustained period, that we can begin to attend to the question of whether some B and C circuit cinema can be thought of as transgressive. Yet, because film historiography has tended to focus on production—taking its cue, misleadingly, from a film-industrial formation (Hollywood 1930s–1950s) that was quite uniquely centred on that sector—research on the distribution and exhibition of whole range of films has lagged behind, leaving huge gaps in the history of many national cinemas, including outside South Asia. Here lies the importance of the research carried out on the B and C circuit in South Asian cinemas since 2000.

The object of Bhriyupati Singh and S. V. Srinivas' essays shares characteristics with both the American B-movie and the European or American exploitation film. The two scholars' approach, however, is distinctive, characterised by an attention to the social topography of cheap films that, in the early 2000s, was mostly absent in American and European scholarship, as it is, to a large extent, also today. They defined the B circuit in India as 'that segment of distribution and exhibition sectors that is characterised by low levels of investments [and] repeated interventions by both distributors and exhibitors, which result in the de-standardization of a film's status as an industrial product. ... cheap new films ... or re-runs' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 49), and the C circuit as 'foreign or

indigenous soft-porn usually screened in the morning slot' (Singh, 2008, p. 250), generally of neighbourhood, suburban or run-down cinemas. Crucially, whereas European and American scholarship largely confined itself to the films and their production, Singh and Srinivas readjusted the aim, to focus on exhibition, distribution and the paracinematic practices that accompany B and C circuit films. They paid heed to the circuit itself, understood as extended area of action. Such focus on the space that constitutes the film event, on 'the public status of the cinema in India' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 41) was, from the start, a priority for both scholars, not only because 'inasmuch as people produce cinema, a cinema can produce them' (Singh, 2003), but critically because "'fan response" quite often finds direct expression in a conventionally defined domain of politics in southern India. ... The cinema's substantial role in such public acts of mobilization has to be acknowledged in all its implications' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 47).

Attention to the B and C circuit in India coincided with the consolidation of the Hindu right within the mainstream of Indian politics, a development that prompted seminal interventions also in other areas of South Asian film studies. In this context, Srinivas, following Rajadhyaksha and pointing to the industry's failure 'to bridge the huge gap that exists between cinema as a cultural phenomenon and cinema as an industry' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 42), ploughed that 'gap', in the process reopening up urgent questions—about hegemony, the cinema-effect, the film industry's imbrication with other businesses and practices and, vitally, the audience conceived as addressees actively claiming rights, '*symbolically and narratively*' (Rajadhyaksha, 2002, p. 106), to these practices as to politics.

Considerations thus often missing in European and American historiography of cheap films, such as class, caste, locality, gender, linguistic identity and the cinema's ability to disrupt accepted boundaries within these social markers thus feature prominently in South Asian scholarship on the B and C circuit, because both Singh and Srinivas decentred the agenda thrice over: they focused on the industry's more open 'final frontier' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 49), toppled the customary hierarchy of sectors as inherited from Hollywood historiography and, through the lenses of Delhi (Singh) and Andhra Pradesh (Srinivas), moved at a critical distance from Hindi big-budget films, the default focus of much scholarship on cinema in South Asia.


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