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THE FICTIONS OF SCIENCE AND CINEMA IN INDIA
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INTERIOR OF HABA’S SHACK—NIGHT
The Alien sees Haba huddled in sleep on a mat. The Alien’s eyes now turn glowing red …
The red in his eyes turns violet, enabling him to look into Haba’s brain, and sink into his subconscious.

HABA’S DREAM
Haba is dreaming, and the Alien becomes part of his dreams. We see Haba and the Alien happy, and playing hide-and-seek in a strange black-and-white world of geometrical forms.

INTERIOR OF HABA’S SHACK—NIGHT
The light in the Alien’s eyes now dims, and with another high-pitched laugh, he is gone from the bamboo grove.

PADDY FIELD—NIGHT
The Alien now arrives at the paddy field. The wide open spaces seem to excite him, and he dances around for a while.
Then he notices the withering crop, and examines a paddy plant.
His eyes turn yellow, and he goes whirling about in the field while all the paddy around him ripens and stands aspiring in the moonlight.
Standing on the tip of a ripe paddy plant, the Alien looks up at the sky.

NIGHT SKY WITH MOON
He sees the nearly full moon in the sky, and seems fascinated by it.

PADDY FIELD—NIGHT
The Alien turns on his telescopic green eyelights.

NIGHT SKY WITH MOON
The moon is brought up close for inspection, so that its gigantic orb marked with craters and mountains and valleys now fills a good half of the sky.
Inspection over, the Alien pushes the moon back into place.

PADDY FIELD—NIGHT
The Alien now jumps off the plant, and flits back laughing to the spaceship.
FADE OUT.

(The Alien, Satyajit Ray in Robinson 1989: 289–90)
One would be forgiven for thinking that the polychromatic-eyed alien would later go flying across the moon with the boy, Haba, on a bicycle, and indeed this intriguing similarity to another well-known extra-terrestrial associated with the Hollywood director Stephen Spielberg, more than a decade later, is part of the irresolvable controversy around this script. Written in 1967 by Satyajit Ray, the script for The Alien was to be produced by the Hollywood production company Columbia Pictures. The plot was partly based on Ray’s story of 1962, Bankubabur Bandhu (Mr Banku’s Friend), and focused on an extra-terrestrial called Mr Ang who arrives in a spaceship that lands in a pond in rural Bengal. Through dreams, the Alien establishes psychic contact with a poor village boy named Haba (meaning ‘moron’) and along with the boy plays a number of pranks on the village resident. The alien in Ray’s script is playful and kind with a special fondness for children, similar to E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, also produced by Columbia, which was to appear in 1982, and Jadu, the alien in the Indian film Koi … Mil Gaya (Someone … is Encountered, Rakesh Roshan), which would be released in 2004. Intended to be a high-profile venture, the collaboration between Ray and Columbia never did see the light of day, yet the script was circulated around Hollywood in the late 1960s to much interest. Peter Sellers was to play a wealthy Marwari industrialist Bajoria in the film, and Marlon Brando was to star as an American engineer who drilled bore-wells under Bajoria’s instructions. Due to several disappointments, however, Ray became disillusioned by the transnational enterprise.

The script by Ray, first, destabilizes Hollywood claims of originality and priority, and second, undermines assumptions about a lack of interest in science fiction shown by early Indian filmmakers or indeed among the middle-class in general for Ray was part of a science fiction club set up in Calcutta. The suggestion is that Spielberg’s film E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial was inspired by Ray’s script that was circulating in Hollywood when Spielberg began in his career as a director in the late 1960s. Spielberg of course denied this allegation whilst Ray maintained in his biography that E.T. ‘would not have been possible without my script of The Alien being available throughout America in mimeographed copies’ (Robinson 1989: 295). The alien was intended as a friendly being that, as Ray elaborates, would be:

small and acceptable to children and possessed of certain superhuman powers—not physical strength but other kinds of power, particular types of vision, and that it takes an interest in earthly things … The appearance of my Alien was much more interesting though. Mine didn’t have any eyes … was almost weightless and the gait was different … And it had a sense of humour, a sense of fun, a mischievous quality.

(ibid.: 294)

Indeed, friend and counsel Arthur C. Clarke had also noted the ‘striking similarities’ between Ray’s Alien and Spielberg’s E.T., and in 1983 after seeing Spielberg’s film, telephoned Ray from Colombo to advise him not to take it lying down. However, Ray was not to pursue the matter any further.

This remarkable series of non-events could be seen as a broken vision of something that could have been but never was, an exceptional story in the footnotes of Indian film history in terms of its attempts to negotiate the outer-worldly terrain of cine-science fiction.1 This relegation could not have been further from the truth, however, for science fiction stories, if not film, were circulating on the subcontinent from the colonial era, and this too in vernacular culture as opposed to the avant-garde circles in which Ray’s auteur films were to circulate. Yet Indian science fiction has only come to widespread attention in recent, post-liberal decades. The assumption is that the recourse to science fiction is a latter-day development, some even declaring at the turn of this millennium that it does not exist in the country. Ziauddin Sardar
and Sean Cubitt note, for instance, that: ‘Science fiction is a time machine that goes nowhere, for wherever it goes, it materializes the same conjunctions of the space-time continuum; the conundrums of Western civilization’ (Sardar and Cubitt 2002: 1). They go on to declare: ‘It does not exist in India or other places with extensive film industries’ (ibid.: 2). Partly this oversight is due to a preoccupation with Western science fiction, correlate with its association with empire and its use of technologies to execute imperial designs and expansion in imaginary time-spaces, to the neglect of other trends and trajectories to do with science fiction. As such, unlike other literary genres, science fiction’s suitability for the colonial and postcolonial contexts has been put under question (Reid 2005). In recent decades, Indian writers have also taken on the genre of science fiction, and written against its imperial prerogative, notably in novels but also as disseminated through comics, television and cinema (see Hopkinson and Mehan 2004; Basu 2006), but there were earlier antecedents in cinema as well as in the literature. In this chapter, I consider in particular how the fictions of science took root in cinema on the sub-continent, noting their changing representative modes, plots and contexts from the colonial era to the post-liberal present.

Speculation

Science fiction conjures up the Janus of modernity replete with its utopian and dystopian imaginaries. While venturing into a future world, the futurist tales are simultaneously propelled by contemporary concerns, issues about technical mastery, scientific control, and aspirations to do with racial, national and/or global power. In its Western avatar, science fiction has been described by Darko Suvin as being:

\[\text{distinguished by the narrative dominance of a fictional novelty (novum, innovation) validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a ‘mental experiment’ based on cognitive logic.}\]

(Suvin 1978, emphasis in the original)

This relatively limited definition of science fiction as opposed to the more generic term for futurist tales, speculative fiction, or the more supernatural, science fantasy, prioritizes a rationalist framework based on modernist scientific logic. However, as Richard Reynolds (1994: 16) notes, the science that is portrayed even in science fiction may well have a mystical rather than rational character. Moreover, the definition of science fiction has only partial relevance in India.

Speculative fiction is my preferred term for it, being less prescriptive and a more suitable overarching term. As it has developed in India, it could be seen as essentially of two kinds, sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping. One stream draws upon the amazing potential of modern science and technology for inspiration in the Suvinian tradition outlined above. This is very much in a utopian vein with its optimistic faith in modernist science and the future and, as noted above, may also be imbued with a mystical character. Another strand of fictionalized science draws upon mythologies and other archaic repertoires as in the \textit{shastra} as a source of proto science fantasy, which variously influenced writers for its marvels and menaces, although not always including a fascination with scientific principles in the modernist sense. Central to this current are fantasies that depict another world characterized by a fusion of myths, magic and amazing possibilities which lay the premises for what may be described as an arcane novum entailing a cross-pollination of archaic sources and modernist influence.

Rosie Thomas notes the popularity of the tale \textit{The Arabian Nights}, in the transnational culture of the bazaar, circus and film, the latter with tales that present an alluring mix of magic and
The Arabian Nights was present at the birth of cinema in Europe, America and India: Ali Baba (Hiralal Sen, 1903), a film version of a Calcutta stage sensation, was probably India’s first feature. By the mid 1920s, two fantasy films, Gul-e-Bakavali (K. Rathod, 1924) and Princess Budur (J.J. Madan, 1922), had become major Indian hits. But it was Hollywood’s Thief of Bagdad (Raoul Walsh, 1924), billed as ‘An Arabian Nights Fantasy’, a hybrid spun from the tales of Aladdin, the Ebony Horse and Princess Budur, that set the Indian box office alight, inspiring a spate of Indian films in the late 1920s. With the coming of the talkies in 1931, ‘Arabian Nights’ (or ‘Oriental’) films, using writers and actors from Parsee theatre, became wildly popular. (ibid.)

The magical potential of cinema through its rendering of special effects to conjure up other worlds underlines the development of Indian cinema amongst other regions, but, as I elaborate below, these other worlds were not just the picturized delights of a mystical Arabia.

Even though it was the realist films of the Lumière brothers that were first shown in Bombay’s Watson’s Theatre in 1896, it is the ‘cinematic fabulism’ of Georges Méliès’s films that draws immediate comparison with its birth on the subcontinent (Pinney 1997: 190). Méliès was interested in the art of conjuring and illusionistic techniques. Once while he was filming a scene, the camera got stuck and, on processing the film, he noticed how objects appeared, disappeared and then transformed into other objects. Méliès became aware of how objects, people, time and space could be manipulated and distorted to create surreal special effects. From then on, he pioneered double exposures, split screens, dissolves and other filmic illusions, most famously canvassed in his film A Trip to the Moon, produced in 1902, which was inspired by stories about the moon by the science fiction writers Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (Ezra 2000: 199–126).

Cinema stood on the axis of the traditional and the modern: the magic of cinema became a vehicle for enlivening earlier cultural repositories, but it was also a medium imbricated in the modern in terms of the global movement of technology and capital. The seminal filmmaker Dhundiraj Govind (Dadasaheb) Phalke, reveled in the magical possibilities of cinema to produce mythological films that enchanted audiences, not just with the techno-scientific apparatus of reproducing moving images, but also what it pertained to represent, the divine attributes and conduct of gods, and the magic, mystery and miracles associated with arcane objects, holy men or spirited creatures and demonic figures as is evident in his early films Raja Harishchandra (1913) and Kalya Mardan (1919). These depictions were not just mere representations alluding to entities outside of film, but presentations themselves that enlivened historical, mythological and divine characters in a field of moving imagery. Using techniques similar to Méliès, Phalke showed magical scenes such as gods appearing and disappearing, beings flying atop clouds, while decapitated demon heads rejoined their wandering bodies. Similar to Tom Gunning’s description of the reception of early cinema in the West, the films enhanced the ‘aesthetics of astonishment which goes beyond a scientific interest in the reproduction of motion’ (Gunning 1995: 119). This aesthetics catalyzed what I call the ‘split sense of conviction’ in both medium and message whilst being aware of the artifice and novelty of the media. Movies offered a fantastic medium for mythic cinema to explore and represent the already known yet supernatural potentials of fabulous figures, encounters, transformations and miracles par excellence. From this perspective, speculative fiction is profoundly embedded through the filmic form in the way
Indian cinema presented the magical and otherworldly while also transgressing realist canons of diegetic space, time, continuity and narrative that defined classical cinema as it went on to be developed in the West.

Mythic cinema of this order was to be eclipsed by the popularity of ‘realist’ social melodrama that came to prominence in India in the late 1930s, enabled by the affective qualities of sound recordings interleaved with captivating visuals. The combination of realism and melodrama points to a piquant conundrum: while this filmic form pertained to represent a socially relevant theme in the film narrative, it also diverged from the dominant canon of realism set by Western cinema. Inspired by vernacular traditions such as re-enactments of ancient epics and dramas, and folk and Parsi theater, song and dance became integral to even the ‘realist’ Indian film in its fabulously conjoined sequences that canvassed a voyage into the social psyche. By the 1970s in particular, when film genres such as the social drama and the stunt film waned in popularity, realist transgressions manifest themselves as a masala filmic convention that borrow from various genres and which now defines popular cinema throughout the subcontinent. With what could be described as a masala aesthetic of a ‘chronotopic delirium’ (Pinney 1997: 191), registers of realism associated with Western films are routinely hacked apart with an irrepressible navigation of romance, song and dance and its performative tourism, superlative action sequences, ridiculous slapstick comedy and variously in several films, divine interventions and/or the imaginaries of science to create their own heterogeneous and culturally responsive realities. It could be argued that film enabled the possibilities of recreating an otherworldly ‘wonderscape’: cinematic scenes that encapsulated and encouraged a sense of wonder in an accentuated suspension of disbelief. Sometimes wonderscapes defined the spirit of the film in terms of the ‘devotional,’ the mythological,’ the Arabianesque fantasy, or as I elaborate below, speculative fiction; at other times it entered in measured doses by way of delicious action and delirious dance sequences, devices which themselves attached to the aforementioned genres. Here, my main attention turns towards speculative fiction that engages with the imaginative potential of modernist science (as opposed to scientific developments such as trains or other techno-scientific gadgets that fast became a part of mundane, albeit middle-class, life). This type of film nowadays manifests itself as what I refer to as the speculative fiction masala, hereafter SFM. The SFM is characterized by imaginaries of science, modernist and/or arcane, which propel the narrative whilst availing itself of the masala aesthetic that came to fruition in the decades following the advent of sound in the 1930s.

**Early adventures in science**

Interest in speculative fiction in India was expressed in vernacular literary circles from the late nineteenth century, notably with the serial publication of ‘Aascharya Vrittant’ (A Strange Tale), by Ambika Datt Vyas in the Hindi literary magazine Piyush Pravah from 1884–88. This tale relates the adventures of Gopinath traveling underneath the earth in a manner similar to Jules Verne’s story *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, a novel that was first published in 1864 in which explorers venture into a subterranean world of prehistoric creatures. At the turn of the twentieth century Babu Keshav Prasad Singh, also inspired by Verne’s work, published his adventure story ‘Chandra Lok Ki Yatra’ (A Journey to the Moon) in another literary magazine, Saraswati. Saraswati, along with the magazines Panaag and Dharmyug, continued to publish stories in the science fiction genre. Added to this were pulp fiction such as the utopian novel *Baisave Sadi* (The Twenty-Second Century, 1924) by Rahul Sankritiyaya, which posed lyrical scenes about future worlds (Mishra and Gore 2011), and Urdu outlets such as *Neeli Duniya* (Blue World), *Kali Duniya* (Black World) and *Khofnaq Jazira* (Terrible Island). From the available evidence, these stories did not make their...
way onto stage or screen, but intrigue in the possibilities of technology in action thrillers had filtered into popular films such as those produced by Wadia Movietones, examples of which we turn to below.

By the mid-1940s Indian scientists had come together to establish science institutions and organizations, seeing this channel as a conduit to development and making up for lost years under a repressive and regressive colonial policy when it came to instructing the populace about scientific research and technology (Prakash 1999). How did this attraction to modern science manifest itself in the fictions of the times? Remarkably, in the 1940s writers were propelled by the intriguing prospects of atomic science which had captured the imagination after the horrific debut of the atom bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the wartime acts were condemned by humanitarians and nationalists, atomic research also spawned an interest in the other-worldliness of scientific possibilities. In the daily Bombay Chronicle the Indian columnist Mu Kappa wrote about a fictional encounter with a scientist inspired by ‘that explosion in Alamogordo’ in New Mexico, when scientists first tested the atom bomb in July 1945. In this tale, entitled ‘Pure Science Fiction,’ a scientist disintegrated while checking some rocket fuel for the ‘artificial moon.’ Mu Kappa describes an interview with ‘the disintegrated man in the counterfactual realm of the Ultramental.’ The scientist had conducted a series of experiments with the aid of a ‘Japanese theory,’ and discovered that argon at high pressure was a powerful explosive that can transport people on ‘inter-stellar journeys.’ The reporter tries to take down notes of the details, but realizes that this is impossible for whatever happens in the realm of the Ultramental defies the memory’s ability for recollection.

Fusing events in the lived world with an imaginary scenario set in a parallel world, Mu Kappa wove a story that encapsulates the wonders of science and its ‘mysteries’ yet to be unraveled. Whereas in reality argon is inert, the fiction enables the author to overcome the weight and inertia of materiality to explore its possibilities, just as one might have felt when the potential of the highly unstable element of uranium was realized around the turn of the twentieth century. This futurist tale was not based on an ‘American theory’ which infatuated some other authors, but one developed by a fictional Tokyo-based scientist. In this imagined techno-cultural geography that exemplifies what may be described as a case of ‘willful misrecognition,’ a humiliated Japan was accorded its eminent position as the site for a reworked modernity, glorified perhaps as some Indian nationalists would have it for earlier defying Western powers. This fiction of science enabled a re-envisioning of what actually transpired in contemporaneous reality, where Japan became victim to the brutality of techno-science as it was formulated in the West with the development of the atom bomb.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, a number of American-produced films were showcased in India’s metropolitan centers. Even though it was largely the English-educated elites who frequented the film shows, this is not to assume that others did not come for the cheaper seats down in the stalls to appreciate its action-packed dramas or in less expensive auditoria to the north of the city such as the City Lights Theatre in Matunga, central Bombay. Here, the US science fiction serial about Earth’s fight with the Martians, The Purple Monster Strikes, produced by Republic Film, was translated as Jang-e-Atom Bomb (Atom Bomb War) for screening in August 1947, not long after Independence. This film was only tangentially about the atom bomb. Nonetheless, the futuristic notions attached to the technology, and the fact that this epic battle was fought between denizens of different planets was seen in the same light as an incredible development in global warfare on Earth. A war between planets necessarily required phenomenal technology which, at the time, only atomic science came close to promising.

In 1947 Basant Pictures, an Indian film company that was an offshoot of Wadia Movietone, released a Hindi version of an ‘atom bomb drama,’ a variation on American productions that
had been shown in the city from 1946. Wadia Movietone had been set up in 1933 by the brothers Jamsheed (J.B.H.) and Homi Wadia, who were renowned for their interest in global culture, emblems of modernity, and for ‘Indianizing’ American films. Atom Bomb is a film that seems to have escaped the radar of film history, however, for it no longer exists, the storyline is unknown, and contemporaneous reviews are rare. However, we do have a couple of tantalizing posters available to us (see Figures 13.1 and 13.2).

Like the other films in the Wadias’ stable, Atom Bomb reveals in the wonders of technology. The title of the film refers not only to the nuclear device but is likely to be also a metaphor for the heroic figure played by the legendary stuntman John Cawas, who was frequently paired with the Wadias’ super-heroine, Fearless Nadia. In some of their other films, villains were conceived as a ‘caricature of arch modernity’ (Thomas 2007: 296), as with Sayani when he played the ‘mysterious Signal X’ surrounded by items of technological excess in Miss Frontier Mail (1936, Homi Wadia) or the mad scientists seeking the ‘elixir of life’ in Toofani Tarzan (1937) (Thomas 2005: 33–35). One of the poster images for Atom Bomb shows a mustachioed scientist leaning smugly over a laboratory experiment, holding a piece of paper, presumably having cracked the ‘atomic secret’ (Figure 13.1). At the top of the poster is an image of the heroine, Sona Chatterjee, under which are three men in a brawl, and foregrounded with a large headshot of the hero, looking aslant at the scene. Behind Cawas is an explosive burst of red and yellow flames and rays surrounding a spooky grey figure which, as Roy Wadia (J.B.H.’s grandson) describes, is ‘a silhouette of John Cawas himself, his trademark pose of fists and arms outstretched, and his bouffant hairstyle.’ Its spectral outline suggests a deformed physique coming out towards the viewer, pointing to an atomic figure but also an eerie reminder of the numerous shadows cast in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the fierce blast of the bomb. Another poster shows a similar pose of Chatterjee, but this time a full shot of Cawas in a shredded shirt foregrounding men fighting next to a careering car (Figure 13.2). The film’s title is depicted with cracked lettering, as if they too, like the hero, showed the marks of an atomic explosion. From the evocative mélange, we can presume that the film had its dose of romance, action, intrigue and suspense with a dabbling in the science of the atom.

Cinematographically, the 1950s was a particularly abundant period not simply for the fact that it encapsulated the ‘golden age of cinema,’ as Indian film historians are wont to recall, but also for the development of B movies that were successful yet spurned by the literati and have now slipped outside of the archives of film history. Thomas observes that two kinds of movies predominated in the 1950s and 1960s—stunt and fantasy films—and that these were ‘long-forgotten films that were blithely ignored by the elite of their day, never made it into any history
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Figure 13.2 Film poster, Atom Bomb, 1947, dir. Homi Wadia
Courtesy of Rosie Thomas. Reprinted by permission of Wadia Movietone.

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book, and which are now, for the most part, impossible to see’ (Thomas 2010: 1). Fantasy films depicted ‘magical worlds in which the impossible happens, of super-human bodies pushed to their extremes,’ and ‘were spun around magical and wondrous happenings in a quasi-Arabian Islamicate setting, most drawing loosely on oral and literary traditions of the Arabian Nights’ (ibid.). There was another genre as well that revealed in wonderscapes, not as predominantly but definitely one that made a mark in terms of exploring fantastical terrains which often overlapped with the stunt films, and this was speculative fiction masala.

In an enquiry on SFM, it is regional cinema particularly in the south and to the east in Bengal that is worthy of attention alongside Bombay based Hindi film. Among the earliest was the Tamil film Kuzhandhaigal Kanda Kudiyarasu (Republic of Children, B.R. Panthulu, 1960). The film relates the story of a blundering scientist played by Sivaji Ganesan, who takes children to an unknown planet where the children establish a democratic republic. While this film painted a utopian vision of extra-terrestrial worlds, another pointed to its lurking evils. The Hindi film Rocket Tarzan (B.J. Patel, 1963), was set in Arcadian lunar landscapes and involved a robotic humanoid that terrorized human beings. The Tamil film Kalai Arasi (Queen of Arts, A. Kasilingam, 1963), relates the story of humanoid aliens who kidnap a girl, Vaani (P. Bhanumathi), in order to learn the performing arts from her. Even though the aliens had mastered science, they were woefully behind in the arts. She is rescued by the hero Mohan, a poor farmer played by none other than M.G. Ramachandran (M.G.R.), the almost mythical south Indian actor later turned politician. A Malayalam-language film in the SFM genre is Kantha Rathrikal (Dark Nights, Mahesh, 1967). Based on Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 novel The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, a doctor invents a new medicine that creates a split personality, flipping between mundane respectability and a horrific alter ego.

Wahan ke Lag (The Aliens, or literally People from Out There, N.A. Ansari, 1967) is a Hindi-language SFM that focuses on a story about aliens, this time terrorizing residents in Delhi and posing as diamond thieves. The film’s trailer announced: ‘Here they come with a bang,’ as flying saucers hover around Delhi. It is ‘a picture packed with action, high tension, drama and latest scientific devices,’ which entails ‘a fight unto death between flying saucers and fighter planes.’ Wrapping actual footage of India’s border conflicts with China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965, respectively, the film dabbles in a tale about extra-terrestrial beings and technologies heavily informed by a patriotic theme. The ruthless aliens have an earthing ally in the form of Anil (played by the actor himself) who is supported by a syndicate of female agents. They have made a pact to control the world by developing a super-laser ray. Rakesh is a man from the CID whose mission is to vanquish them. Indian and international scientists are held hostage on the space-ships. Eventually, as the Indian army try to battle with the aliens, Rakesh overcomes the villain who turns out to be exacting a grand fraud on Delhi residents, and brings the spaceship back to Earth to meet with army officials to a patriotic refrain: ‘Hindustan zindabad!’ (Long live India!). The patriotic vein is replete throughout much of SFM in a story that, however much it revels in the extraordinary, is always brought down to earth in terms of a familiar moral universe to do with socially endorsed conduct, and the importance of family and nation (see Thomas 1985: 159).

It was not until 1987, with the phenomenal success of Mr India (Shekhar Kapur, 1987), that SFM was brought to a wider audience. Here, the unlikely hero Raju (Anil Kapoor) falls upon a secret formula of invisibility developed by his father, a scientist, who was later murdered by a villainous scientist who wanted the invention for the arch villain Mogambo (Amrish Puri). With the invisibility device Raju is able to play both the bumbling landlord where force of circumstances compel him to rent out a room to a reporter played by Sridevi, and also a formidable invisible man with a booming voice who declares his patriotic mission for social justice. Again children play a prominent part here: they are orphaned, live with Raju in his bungalow...
at the sea and help him overcome the villain. Mogambo lives on a futuristic island colony with his army of supporters and henchmen, and nurtures designs to devastate and then control India. He is a villain with none other than nefarious uses for technology. At one point he bellows ‘I’ll blow up India,’ and towards the end of the film he sets off the trigger to release what appear to be four nuclear missiles in order to decimate the subcontinent. The film essentially presents a drama between the use of techno-science in the hands of selfless and patriotic figures such as Raju and those with selfish and megalomaniac ambitions for control such as Mogambo.

Relatively less successful was the Indianized film of the Hollywood phenomenon Superman (B. Gupta, 1987), which features Ashok Kumar as Shekhar, the Jonathan Kent figure, and Puneet ‘Duryodhan’ Issar as Superman. Dharmendra plays the role of Jor-El, the Kryptonian scientist father of Superman. The crime lord here is named Verma who, in a paean to both science fantasy and contemporaneous concerns about real estate, has a plan to unleash natural disasters on India so as to buy all the abandoned land.

The international success of Hollywood’s filming of the DC Comics caped superhero Superman also made sporadic entries through the delirium of song-and-dance sequences in Indian cinema. Dariya-Dil (Scared Heart, K. Ravi Shankar, 1988), for instance, while not technically an SFM as its plot revolves around a relatively mundane story about family politics and wealth, showed the hero (Jatinder) and his lover (Kimi Katkar) dressed in superhero outfits, one as Superman, the other as Superwoman, flying over what was then called Bombay and dancing to the tune of ‘Tu mera Superman’ (You are my Superman) in a libidinal philandering of international icons of innovation, popularity and power.

In the aftermath of the phenomenal Hollywood production Back to the Future (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), the filmic potential of the time machine captured the imagination of several Indian filmmakers who utilized the device to explore a plethora of time-spaces set in India. Aditya 369 (Singeetam Srinivasa Rao, 1991) is a Telugu film that recounts the story of Professor Ramdas’ attempts to build a time machine. His daughter and her fiancé get trapped in the machine and find themselves in starkly contrasting time-spaces, including the era of the sixteenth-century Vijayanagar kingdom’s emperor Krishnadeva Raya, as well as being catapulted into the future aftermath of a nuclear war.

In post-liberal India, time machines or time travel have become seminal devices to create an ecology of either dystopias or fantastic techno-utopias for Indian cities. Even with utopian futures, however, there is invariably something problematic that underlines the protagonists’ (and by extension the spectators’) attachment to the present era. Love Story 2050 (Harry Baweja, 2008) focuses on Karan Malhotra (Harman Baweja), who falls in love with Sana (Priyanka Chopra). A time machine is invented by Karan’s uncle. Sana is killed in an unfortunate accident, but had expressed her wish to go to Mumbai in 2050, which she had also keyed into the time machine. Karan goes there to find her, along with his uncle, and is catapulted into a Mumbai with flying cars, sky rails, robots and two-hundred-storey buildings. In this futurescape Sana is reincarnated as Zeisha, an arrogant rock star who has no memory of her past life. At one point Karan is taken away by her guards and he drops Sana’s diary, which Zeisha finds and begins to read, triggering an avalanche of emotion-soaked memories. The demi-god villain Dr Hoshi learns about the time machine and wants it for himself. In his attempt to capture the couple and the machine, he crashes into a truck carrying nuclear material and dies. The couple manage to return to 2008 and, in fitting popular film familial convention, end up getting married.

The theme of aliens and amazing technologies tied to stories that transgressed the linear congruity of time and space retained their appeal throughout. Patalghar (The Underground Chamber, Abhijit Choudhury, 2003) is a Bengali film that relates the story of a scientist, Aghar Sen (Soumitra Chatterjee), who lived one hundred and fifty years ago in a village called
Nischintipur. While coming across a rat-disposal machine, he accidentally invents a device that emits sound waves which can induce people to sleep. Vik (Biplab Chatterjee), an alien exiled from planet Nyapcha, lands with his space shuttle on the outskirts of the village. He tries to steal the machine but Aghar puts him to sleep. With Aghar’s death, knowledge of the device is also lost. However, in the present day Dr Bhootnath Nondy (Joy Sengupta) finds Aghar’s diary mentioning the device. Others, too, get to know about it, and try to seek the machine, including gang leader Begum (Mita Vasisht). To reach Aghar’s laboratory where the device is kept, mysterious rhymes mentioned in his diary have to be solved. A lawyer reports to the boy Kartik, who lives with his uncle, that he is the only legal heir of Aghar Sen’s property. In the meantime Vik wakes up and starts looking for the device again. Finally Bhootnath, who had befriended Kartik, discovers the path to the entrance of Patalghar and rediscovers the machine. The gangsters die in a fight with Vik, and the alien is put back to sleep again by the machine. In the end, amid bucolic chaos and havoc, the machine is destroyed.

The super-modern

While the superhero is very much a contemporary phenomenon in Indian cinema, there is a very fine line between heroic figures onscreen and those who could be seen as manifestly in possession of superhuman skills. For instance, John Cawas could always be trusted to vanquish the villains with his deft acrobatics, Amitabh Bachchan’s angry young persona could fend off a litany of gangsters with a mere flick of the wrist, and the south Indian actor Rajnikaanth is so invincible that even criticism bounces off him. Some of these heroes may also assume other identities or mask their diegetic characters with suitable costuming. As with the Nietzschean Übermensch, these figures, through sheer willpower, determination and with the force of the moral universe behind them, can bend people, material and even circumstances around them. Thus, throughout popular Indian cinema history, heroism already bordered on the larger than life, a fantasy that was not beyond belief, but rather vindicated audience expectations in their exalted adoration of celluloid stars. In the post-liberal SFM, these already extraordinary attributes are given further outlandish characteristics through the make-believe powers of science. However, the orientation in contemporary examples is not simply towards the domestic or the national, but also the international: and this, too, not just with reference to India’s diasporic settlements, but in a parallel cinematic vein to India’s bid for geopolitical superpower status.

Post-1990s market forces and neoliberal economics have made Indian cities a breeding ground for fantasies of omnipotence expressed throughout its vernacular culture and aided by a rise of transnational collaborations. Superheroes, plots and media for their dissemination have proliferated at an unprecedented rate to varying degrees of box office success in the last two decades. Computer digitization has greatly enabled the enhancement and enchantment of illusion in the reproduction of fantastic scenarios and feats. Here there is a palpable move from celluloid to digital time and space, a chronotope where the effects of photochemical reactions are transplanted by those to do with electronic media or VFX (visual effects). Digitization augments the special effects capacity of film to portray stupendous scenarios, bodies and feats with roller-coaster twists and turns.

Koi … Mil Gaya (Rakesh Roshan, 2003) resurrects Ray’s story about the benign alien with a penchant for children’s company. In the film, space scientist Dr Sanjay Susra Mehra (Rakesh Roshan), develops a computer from which he dispatches sound waves to outer space in order to attract extra-terrestrial life. One evening after sending out waves based on the pattern of Om, the sound is reciprocated, to much excitement. Mehra visits a space research center to relay his discovery. Instead, the transnational coterie of scientific experts dismisses his claims as
‘daydreams.’ Mehra demonstrates a different relationship to the individualistic obsessions of scientific research. The scientists’ cynicism contrasts with Mehra’s faith-imbued and emotionally driven pursuit of knowledge of life beyond this Earth. On his way home in his car with his wife, a spacecraft descends that sends the shocked scientist off the road to his death. His pregnant wife Sonia (Rekha) survives, but the fetus is harmed and the baby Rohit (later played by Hritik Roshan), is born intellectually challenged. When he is older, along with his friend Nisha (Preity Zinta) they find the computer and summon the aliens. The extraterrestrials arrive but leave in haste, leaving one alien behind, an endearing, doe-eyed being called Jadu (meaning Magic). Jadu is sympathetic towards the kind boy and enhances his intellectual and physical powers with his ability of psychokinesis. Eventually the police capture Jadu but Rohit summons the other aliens to rescue him so that Jadu can flee the Earth. When he does so, Rohit is returned to his intellectually challenged disposition, which comes as a saving grace when it comes to a trial for his prosecution. Later Jadu returns the favor and restores Rohit’s powers.

In the much-hyped sequel, _Krrish_, three years later Krishna (Hritik Roshan), who is the son of Rohit and is endowed with his stupendous powers, falls in love with Priya (Priyanka Chopra) and follows her to Singapore. In a disaster during which a circus tent is set on fire, he is compelled to don a mask and cape to hide his real identity, and takes on the persona of the mysterious Krrish. Krishna’s father Rohit had built a machine that could see into the future to prevent war and to prepare against natural disasters, but he was apparently killed in a laboratory accident. Rohit had been used for his superpowers by a villain, Dr Siddhant Arya (Nasureedin Shah), and his mother Sonia vowed never to let others know about her grandson’s inherited superpowers. After a series of misunderstandings, Priya introduces Krishna to a man who formerly worked for Siddhant and who tells him that the arch-villain had tried to kill Rohit and avail himself of the machine for his megalomaniac ideas so that he could become a god. However, Rohit had to be kept alive because the password was contained in his retina and heartbeat. Eventually, Siddhant manages to rebuild the machine. On operating it, he sees Krrish killing him on the hyper-visionary screen. Siddhant attempts to kill Krrish but, as predicted by the machine, he is the one who loses the battle that ensues between superhero and villain. Krrish/Krishna is then reunited with his long-lost father and they all return to his grandmother in India.

Whereas Mr India’s superhero status was part-time and expressed through invisibility aided by an apparently straightforward gadget, Krrish’s masked superheroism comes by way of something that is deeply innate and yet peculiarly superficial: first, Krrish’s superheroism derives from an intrinsic psychic, intellectual and physical power transferred by aliens brought to Earth by the sacred sound Om; and second, it comes by way of the externality of surface in VFX representations of the superhero’s physique and prowess with a narcissistic display of muscular masculinity and incredible prowess. The conjunction is one that defines the Hindu revivalism that accompanies post-liberal vectors of globalization (Mazzarella 2003). While drawing upon indigenous themes that situate the modernity of science in arcane precedents, film scenes demonstrate libidinal delight in slow-tracking on the sinews of striking brawn, or fast-tracking to the hyper-movement of vertiginous leaps, sprints and acrobatics. Through such performative spectacle, Krrish has merited the status of the first home-grown superhero figure in Indian cinema. His appearance cross-pollinates the look of Batman and Neo from _The Matrix_ to produce another avatar. As I have written elsewhere, this is not simply an imitative reproduction for Indian audiences; it entails ‘transcreation’—or a transnational and translational instantiation of the superhero embedded in familial and vernacular conventions of Indian film and society (Kaur 2012). Commonly, while Indian superheroism plays with scientific powers and technologies of various sorts, it is grounded in ideas that stem from Indian mythology. While apparent in the
invocation of indigenous philosophies to embrace techno-science during the colonial era (Pra-kash 1999), this trend first saw an appearance in superhero comic books from the late 1980s such as the ones produced by the Delhi-based Raj Comics, with its stock superheroes including the muscular snake-like psychic Nagraj, the ‘atomic wonderman’ Parmanu, and later the super-heroine Shakti—a nurse by day but who turns into the wild-haired and powerful Shakti when she hears of a woman in trouble (Kaur 2012). Comic book superheroes were to be succeeded by those that were televised that also blended Indological ideas with modern tropes of superheroism, as with Shaktimaan, Aryamaan, Hatim and Captain Vyom from the 1990s.7

Cinematic transpositions of the archaic and modern are becoming more and more evident in the normalization of a Hindu revivalist ethic. It is vividly displayed in Rudraksh (The Seed, Mani Shankar, 2004). Here, ideas from the ancient epic Ramayana and Indian sages have led to a secret bestowed on the contemporary era:

that unlocks the passage to the darkest corners of the human mind, a secret that gives the wielder power beyond his wildest dreams, that takes him into the mystic world of the quantum domain where the mere thought can make the impossible happen.

(From the trailer for Rudraksh)

This secret invokes ideas about anti-gravity and transmigrational matter and is ‘a multi-dimensional hologram in the form of a seed’—a seed that transcends time-space such that we have a tale about a modern-day Ravan in Mumbai. It is this seed that forms the key to the conundrum of the arcane novum of the film.

Another prominent theme that has resurrected itself recently with much aplomb is that of humanoid robots. Robots make a brief appearance in Mr India on Mogambo’s futurist colony in homage to the android C-3PO in Star Wars, and there is another earlier manifestation which features as the main source of terror in Rocket Tarzan. A film which plays on the double-bind of man’s techno-scientific inventions is Robot (first released in Tamil as Enthiran, S. Shankar, 2010). In a nod to earlier filmic conventions of actors playing double roles, the plot centers on a struggle between good and bad science: it revolves around a good Indian scientist, Dr Vaseegran (Rajnikanth), and his creation, an android robot named Chitti (also played by the same actor). After inception, the robot was upgraded to have emotions but he ends up falling in love with the scientist’s fiancée Sana (Ashwarya Rai). In a fit of rage Vaseegaran dismantles Chitti and throws him onto a landfill site. The rival scientist Dr Bohra (Danny Dengzongpa), retrieves and reprograms him. Chitti is manipulated by Bohra to become a Frankenstein-like figure on speed, who goes on to kill his new creator Bohra, and wreak havoc in the city with an army of other robots, only later to be deactivated by the good scientist.9 While technology can provide great boons and thrills, it is also acknowledged that it can go out of control and needs to be tamed and perhaps dismantled altogether to suit the dictates of the film’s moral universe as to how science should be used, where Nehruvian ideas about science for the social good clash with the privatized ethic of scientific entrepreneurship. At the end of the film, which is set in 2030, students go round a museum, where they see the head of the robot and ask why he had to be dismantled. There is a serious yet tongue-in-cheek response, as the robot’s head comes to life and replies ‘because I started to think.’

The theme of ordinary people with astounding powers is a further twist to the theme of superhumanity. Bharatan (Anil Das, 2007) is a Malayalam film that relates the tale of an odd man with incredible talents called Bharatan (Biju Menon). Despite his extraordinary scientific inventions, he has other psychiatric problems and is much misunderstood by the village as a social misfit. Bharatan invents several amazing devices including future energy systems, but forgets about them. Then he develops a device that enables him to overcome amnesia for the inventions that he had developed.
There are many more SFM tales to recount but space does not permit. What is clear is that flows of globalization demonstrate a variegated complex that lies somewhere between appropriation, hybridization and innovation with respect to these films. Globalization was marked in the colonial era, continued into the post-Independence era in restrained tones, and has been vigorously catalyzed by developments in film and other media technologies in contemporary post-liberal India. While there are some obvious signs of imitation of Hollywood films, in other cases we get a sense of a symbiotic relationship, and in yet further cases, elements of originality. The spectral fonts of inspiration may reside in East or West, or they may come together in synergetic transcreations such that particular regional developments act as triggers for developing new kinds of encultured protagonists and stories elsewhere.

Final cuts

The speculative fiction masala films revel in extraordinary and fantastic devices, time-space variability and extra-terrestrials with bountiful knowledge of science, androids that are the fruits of successful science on Earth or super-powerful beings that transcend earthly qualities. Even if the tales paint scenes of other worlds, they remain ensconced in this world with their staple ingredient of characters: hero, heroine, family members, villains and their henchmen, and other lackeys constituting a moral universe that is periodically transgressed for their libidinal pleasures only to contract again by the film’s dénouement.

Science provides a powerful ‘magic wand,’ where the unimaginable is made imaginable with recourse to approximate theories about time, space, the cosmos, inventions, energy, genes, the psyche and so forth. Science promises power, and its mastery and control is at a premium in the perennial battle between good and evil, a struggle that is emblematic of national aspirations for power against anything that threatens its integrity and prosperity. The scientific principles embedded within the SFM narratives are ones which least challenge the intellect, and are more about providing a novel and sensational twist to a wonderscape, a novum or an arcane novum as the case may be. They inspire the imagination with innovative gadgetry, characters, capabilities and scenarios, and in that sense represent an exalted version of modernity, a hypermodernity, that reflects a global awareness while drawing upon a distinct cultural heritage. These trends have reached a fillip in this post-liberal era of a brilliant, bold and brave new India replete with its inherent contradictions and trenchant hierarchies, but they were also anticipated during the colonial period as signs of subterranean globalization that remained hidden in the vernacular vaults of popular culture.

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Notes

1 My use of the term ‘Indian film’ reveals reservations about the changing contours of geography and the problems of essentialism (see Willemen 1999: 9).
4 Wadia Movietone was headed by J.B.H. Wadia, while his brother Homi Wadia led Basant Pictures, although both continued to work on each other’s productions.
5 Personal correspondence, 19 September 2011.
6 www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzmKvS6en0 (accessed 10 September 2010).
7 Additional to these there were Indian characters with superhuman powers created for Western comics. India served as the repository of an alternative otherworld drenched in Orientalist ideas (Said 1979; Inden 2001). These include Bombaby the Screen Goddess, an avatar of the goddess of Mumbai; Black Box aka Commcast, an Indian cyberpath who ‘can psychically process data’; and Paras Gavaskar or Indra, a mutant superhero from the New X-Men (Basu 2006).


9 Another notable film is R.A. One (Random Access. Version 1, Anubhav Sinha, 2011), which stars Shah Rukh Khan, who plays an ordinary family man who is also a superhero, thus combining the mundane with the tremendous in one fell swoop.

Bibliography


