

Understanding Bollywood Films (courtesy of Nadine Dable)

Influences:

- Sanskrit theatre (the nine traditional rasas, see below)
- Popular theatre (in particular Parsi theatre, which frequently combines both Indian and Western dramatic traditions)
- The great Sanskrit epics (*Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*)
- Western cinematic conventions

Censorship:

- initially, during British occupation, political censorship (with regard to independence movements)
- erotic scenes, in particular kissing

Typical/recurrent elements:

Hybridity: Indian films are supposed to address themselves to, and reflect, all (or as many as possible of) the 9 “rasas”, that is, moods, or emotions: *shringara* (love, beauty, devotion), *hasya* (joy, humour, sarcasm), *adbhuta* (wonder, curiosity, mystery), *shanta* (peace, calmness, relaxation), *raudra* (anger, irritation, stress), *veera* (courage, pride, confidence), *karuna* (sadness, compassion, pity, sympathy), *bhayanaka* (fear, anxiety, worry), *vibshata* (disgust, depression, self-pity). As a result – and also as a legacy of the heterogeneous influences which Bollywood films have absorbed), they are hybrid in terms of their filmic genres as well (romance, thriller, political thriller, action film, western, fantasy, musical, comedy etc. etc.). One of the most important of these elements is the musical – song and dance routines (solos, duets, group performances with “supporting” dancers and singers).

Characters: characters are often stereotypical (or “flat” in lit.crit. terms), for instance the strict patriarch, the scheming grandmother, the comedian etc.; the actors often use gestures, facial expressions etc. which seem exaggerated to western spectators. Some of these gestures are not easy to interpret as body language must be understood in the context of a given culture (examples: touching another person’s feet in order to express one’s respect for this person, shaking one’s thumb to express disapproval etc.). In terms of character constellations, one of the recurrent arrangements is that of the love triangle, another that of the conflict between two generations (and thus, by extension,

between tradition and modernisation). In this context, the notion of *parampara* is important, which denotes a succession of teachers and disciples in traditional Indian culture through which knowledge is transmitted across generations (and, by extension, the lifelong relationship between parents and children).

Intertextuality: Bollywood films often quote one another (as well as other, non-Bollywood filmic and dramatic genres, see above), and there are numerous remakes (or plagiarism, depending on your point of view). However, films also tend to use flashbacks (and occasionally flashforwards), so that certain important scenes, for instance in terms of character development, are shown more than once. Spectators are supposed to recognise these manifold allusions, which, of course, also occur in the music.

Didacticism: Unlike most western films, Bollywood films tend to be more overtly didactic, that is, their protagonists are shown to strive for a “right way of living”, or “proper conduct”, in accordance with the concept of *dharma*, that is, 'the way things are'.