Bollywood refers to Hindi-language cinema produced by the film industry in Mumbai, India. Although it encompasses a variety of genres, it is characterized by a distinctive narrative and visual aesthetic style influenced by traditional inputs, such as Hindu, Roman, and Greek mythology; classical Indian, folk, and nineteenth-century Parisian theater; as well as more contemporary influences, such as Hollywood and music television. In particular, a celebrated feature of the Bollywood aesthetic is the employment of music and dance as integral components of the narrative. Bollywood was formally accorded industry status by the Indian government in May 1998. Since the 1990s, Bollywood movies have exerted a direct influence on the steadily advancing upper and middle classes in India by espousing capitalism and consumerism as cinematic themes, as well as through techniques such as product placement. More significant, a lucrative consumer culture based on Bollywood movies and related paraphernalia has been developing both in India as well as globally.

Rajinder Dudrah notes that while the films are produced from this geographic center, the industry actually exhibits a much broader global scope in terms of activities such as distribution, subtitling, dubbing, music, and viewership. Bollywood cinema caters to audiences not just within India, but also diasporic audiences across Southeast Asia, East and South Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and North and South America. In addition, Bollywood cinema is popular among non-diasporic audiences in South Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

Bollywood also nurtures significant auxiliary industries, which in turn determine the successful performance of a film. For instance, the central role of song and dance sequences in a Bollywood film has led to the development of the successful Indian music industry largely oriented toward the production and distribution of Bollywood music, both in India as well as abroad. It has also influenced the nature of music television in India, with Bollywood song sequences forming an integral part of programming in channels such as MTV. Other supplementaries include film magazines, as well as video and DVD rental and sale operations.

Shakuntala Rao locates the historic origin of this cinematic form to colonial India, where its birth coincided with the Indian independence movement against British colonialism. Linguistic differences ensured limited foreign influence in the medium, resulting in a distinctively Indian cultural identity for Bollywood since its inception. Vijay Mishra notes that the major paradigmatic features of Bollywood cinema, such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, had been established by the 1930s and 1940s. In her analysis of thematic trends in postindependence Bollywood, R. Kaur contends that the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by nationalist, religious themes, as well as a focus on urban-rural migration, feudal oppression, and caste conflict. The 1970s witnessed a shift toward more urban themes and the depiction of class conflict, a trend that had, by the 1980s, developed into a focus on corruption and violence in society, as well as the pathos of urban life. Consequent to the economic liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, Bollywood cinema is acknowledged to have moved into another distinctive phase, both thematically in terms of the emphasis on the upper-middle class.
and the diaspora, motifs of global mobility and consumerism and capitalism, as well as a stylistic shift incorporating elements more favorable to the shifting audiences.

The thematic emphasis on the diaspora is a recognition of its significance as an important export market. Since the 1990s, the overseas market accounts for an increasingly large proportion of profits for the industry. In fact, a film that may have been written off as a revenue generator within the domestic market in India may often generate such high profits in the overseas markets as to be billed an overall box office success. Particularly in the United Kingdom, Bollywood films are regularly featured in the weekly box office rankings alongside Hollywood blockbusters.

Bollywood shares a contentious relationship with Hollywood. While initial criticism labeled Bollywood as an imitation of Hollywood, it is now recognized that the form of Bollywood cinema, as well as the size and scope of the industry, merits much greater and in-depth analysis. Bollywood, as a thriving business as well as a global cinematic form, offers a significant counter to the media hegemony imposed by Hollywood. This is particularly observable through Bollywood's engagement with an alternative modernity that is not Western, a characteristic that accounts for its popularity among non-diasporic audiences outside India. However, within India, Bollywood is also understood to have established a hegemonic relationship with regard to cinema in other Indian languages.

Since its inception, Bollywood has consistently offered an alternative to Western modernity; since the 1990s, it has become a vital element in mediating the audiences' experience of globalization and consumer culture. The motifs of globalization and consumerism are seamlessly integrated within the narrative format of Bollywood films, highlighting the inherent conflicts generated by these processes. Lakshmi Srinivas argues that within India, Bollywood conveys transnationalism, both directly to the new globally mobile middle class, as well as indirectly through second-hand transnationalism to urban viewers who lack such mobility. In addition, brand placement within the film as a marketing strategy is also aggressively pursued by multinational advertisers.

A significant element of the Bollywood experience has been its facilitation of the consumption of various identities. The strong nationalist theme in the cinema contributes to the construction and consumption of an idealized group identity within India, coterminous with its thematic shift toward globalization. Diaspora studies have noted a similar influence of Bollywood films among diasporic Indian settlements across various countries, with the films often serving as a tool in cultural reproduction of the diasporic Indian family. Bollywood also provides a “third space” for non-Indians to consume an identity constructed through the interplay of tradition and an alternative non-Western modernity.

See also:
Cinema, Culture Industries, Diaspora, Glocalization, Hollywood, Production of Culture, Transnational Capitalism

Further Readings

• Kaur, Ravinder “Viewing the West through Bollywood: A Celluloid Occident in the Making.” Contemporary South Asia 11, (no. 2).
• Rajadhyaksha, Ashish “The ‘Bollywoodization’ of Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena.” Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 4, (no. 1).

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