

# Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit

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Published in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, volume 4, number 1, 2003 (april). Pp. 40-62.

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## Introduction

This paper looks at the circulation of Hong Kong martial arts and action films in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, and seeks to examine the relationship between the cinema's public and its designated industrial status in India. Andhra Pradesh houses the Telugu film industry, the second largest (after Hindi) in India and also, important for this paper, the largest domestic market for Hong Kong films.

As with the rest of India and perhaps many other parts of the world, the success of Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973), released across the state between 1976 and the early 1980s, is where the story begins. Within a few years a new generation of male Telugu film stars began to perform their own stunts in action sequences which were clearly modelled on Hong Kong films. Notable among these are Chiranjeevi, Suman and Arjun. Indeed, even the more senior N.T. Rama Rao, who started his career in the late 1940s but was still very popular in the late 1970s, had to bow to this trend when he played the role of a martial arts expert in *Yugapurushudu* (K. Bapaiah, 1978). In other responses, the Telugu industry tried to invent a local martial arts tradition in turn mobilized to fight feudal oppression (for example *Sivudu, Sivudu, Sivudu*, A. Kodandarami Reddy, 1983). In the wake of the popularity of female action stars from Hong Kong, the Telugu female vigilante film emerged as a distinct genre in the 1990s. *Twin Dragons* (Tsui Hark, Ringo Lam, 1992) was remade as *Hello Brother* (E.V.V. Satyanarayana, 1994). More recently, *Bhadrachalam* (Shankar, 2001) a full-fledged Telugu martial arts film, was hugely successful leading to rumours that many more may be in the pipeline.



Figure 1 (Left). Vijayashanthi in *Police Lockup* (Kodi Ramakrishna, 1993), one of the Telugu female vigilante films.

Figure 2 (Above). Srihari in *Bhadrachalam* (Source: *Vaaritha*, December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001). Arrival of the martial arts genre in Telugu or the final salute to Hong Kong cinema?

Till the mid-1990s, Hong Kong films circulated in English version among audiences who barely knew the language. At present English and Telugu versions circulate simultaneously. I will examine the industrial and reception contexts within which Hong Kong films circulate in India, using Andhra Pradesh as a case in point. I will ask how these two contexts, the industrial and the spectatorial/textual, might be related and what this relationship might in turn tell us about what Miriam Hansen (1991) called the 'social dimension' of cinema. My central concern will be to examine what the particular careers of Hong Kong films here can tell us about the public status of the cinema in India. My analysis is largely based on fieldwork and interviews conducted

in the cities of Madanapalle and Tirupathi (Chittor district, Rayalaseema region), Vijayawada (Krishna district, coastal Andhra) and Hyderabad (the capital city of the state, Telangana region).

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## Section 1: The contexts of reception

My study comes amidst a widespread feeling that the heyday of Hong Kong films in India is over and that it is unlikely that the recovery of the film industry in Hong Kong will make a significant difference to the situation. The popularity of Hong Kong films in India rests on cheaply made, badly produced martial arts and action movies, often the pre-Hollywood star vehicles of Hong Kong stars. Neither John Woo nor Chow Yun Fat are known outside metropolitan centres and no film of Stephen Chow has ever been released. And Michelle Yeoh is still known as Michelle Khan.

In financial terms, the Indian market is 'just a bonus', to quote a distribution executive in Hong Kong. According to Wellington Fung, the former CEO of Media Asia Distribution, Hong Kong, the volume of film exports to India is about half a million US dollars a year. The Indian market is not only miniscule but it is also 'closed to Hong Kong films' (Interview, Wellington Fung, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2002, Hong Kong). Most Indian buyers insist only on films by some select stars like Jackie Chan and Jet Li, or 'world class' big budget films. But they are rarely willing to pay more than US \$ 15,000 to 30,000 per film. (Compare this with the fact that the Taiwanese market would fetch about \$ 50,000 for the same film). Contrast the low financial worth of the market with the cultural presence of Hong Kong films.

### Hong Kong films and popular literature:



Figure 3. *Learn Kung fu: For self defense, confidence and bravery*, by Ambapudi.



Figure 4. *King of Nanchaku* (1982) by G. Raju



Figure 5. *Sequence of Kungfu* (1982) by R.K. Prasad

Hong Kong films became a valuable resource for a popular print literature in Telugu that has ranged from self-help books to detective novels (figures 3-5). As elsewhere, here too the interest in martial arts is inextricably linked with that of Hong Kong films. Why martial arts, mediated by the Hong Kong action films, became attractive in other parts of the world with colonial histories and among marginal groups and how these forms were integrated into existing popular cultural productions are areas worthy of investigation. For obvious reasons I will not subject martial arts schools to a detailed analysis. Instead I will focus on audience formations around Hong Kong cinema.



Figure 6. A karate academy in Madanapalle, housed in a local school.

It is useful to note Ashish Rajadhyaksha's formulation of the cultural role of the cinema:

*The cultural role of the neighbourhood movie theatre as a prominent institution of the new public sphere in this time (1940s-50s) is crucially accounted for by the fact that a ticket-buying spectator automatically assumed certain rights that were symbolically pretty crucial to the emerging State... These rights – the right to enter a movie theatre, to act as its privileged addressee, to further assert that right through, for example, various kinds of fan activity both inside and outside the movie theatre – went alongside a host of political rights that defined the 'describable and enumerable' aspects of the population, like for example the right to vote, the right to receive welfare, the right to have a postal address and a bank account. Film historians through this period repeatedly assert how in many parts of India the cinema was perhaps the first instance in Indian civilisation where the 'national public' could gather in one place that was not divided along caste difference.*

*It is not important that these rights were not necessarily enforced on the ground. It is important instead to recognise that spectators were, and continue to be, symbolically and narratively aware of these rights, aware of their political underpinnings, and do various things – things that constitute the famous 'active' and vocal Indian film spectator – that we must understand as a further assertion of these rights in the movie theatre.*

**(Rajadhyaksha, 2002: 106)**

Rajadhyaksha suggests that this role is disproportionate to the cinema's backward industrial status and low economic worth over the last five decades. The larger issue, of which the Hong Kong films' predicament is only a small part, is the inability of the film industry to translate the crucial socio-cultural importance of the cinema into economic terms and the consequent failure to bridge the huge gap that exists between cinema as a cultural phenomenon and cinema as an industry. The question before me is how the cultural dimension is related to the (low) level of industrialization of cinema.

Hong Kong (and other non-local) films enter a space which has historically played a major *social* role. While this role has been closely linked to the kind of films produced by the local industry, I will suggest that notwithstanding the 'foreignness' of Hong Kong cinema, its films in fact becomes available for a certain kind of audience engagement, and indeed lend themselves to various profoundly local interventions associated with distribution and exhibition interests.

Elaborating elsewhere on these interests, I have argued elsewhere that fans' associations (of film stars) draw attention to the founding democratic promise of the cinema: the right of *everyone* to access public places in a situation where caste status often determined who could or could not enter such places (Srinivas 2000). Further, it must be added that such fans' associations are closely linked to the politics of linguistic identity, especially as they emerge and form a ubiquitous presence in Andhra Pradesh and the other southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and increasingly even in Kerala. There are therefore no fans' associations dedicated to Hong Kong stars as, indeed, there are rarely any for even Hindi film stars in Andhra Pradesh . It

would therefore be wrong to expect to find, for instance, a Jackie Chan fans' association in Madanapalle.

On the other hand, I would draw attention to the phenomenon of the mushrooming of schools and 'institutes' offering training in East Asian martial arts, many of which are linked to Hong Kong films and its stars in a rather direct way, and which may play a role that evokes the actions of organised fan associations. Let me cite a few examples to provide a sense of this relationship. Khaja Khan, a school dropout in Madanapalle, says he was inspired by a Jet Li film to learn karate, which he has been doing for the past seven years. He writes martial arts stories and watches videos of martial arts films (Interview, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2001). Gopi Naidu runs a Taekwondo school in Tirupathi the publicity campaign of which quite explicitly invokes martial arts film and, in fact, shares wall space with film publicity (figure 7). On occasion, he has had himself photographed with a body tattoo (figure 8) which, even though it does not imitate any star in particular, nevertheless demonstrates similarities between the mastery of martial art and what I characterize as fan response (discussed below). He can invoke cinema and film audiences even as he claims respectability for Taekwondo by claiming state recognition and funding of it (Interview, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2001).



Figure 7. Advertisement for Gopi Naidu's martial arts academy shares wall space with the latest film publicity.



Figure 8. Gopi Naidu.

Sheik Ismail, a karate teacher in Madanapalle, has tried to recreate the freeze frames of martial arts film through photography, acting out the genre's 'highlights' in practice sessions. (This is also evident in the publicity for Gopi Naidu's school, see figure 12). Many years later, a scroll presented by his students to honour him retains this link with cinema: it is decorated with pictures of Bruce Lee.



Figure 9 (Above). Martial Arts instructor Sheik Ismail (right) in his youth.

Most of the names of such neighbourhood schools and institutes claim larger constituencies through liberal usage of words like 'International' and 'Universal', strongly evoking the vocabulary of excess amongst fan's associations; neither claim to be anything less than 'Townwide' organizations.



Figure 10. Visiting card of the President of an association of the relatively minor star, Jagapathi Babu. The photograph is of the star.

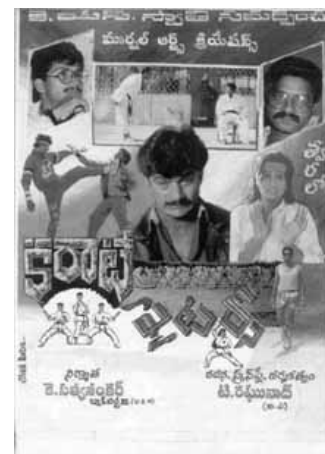


Figure 11. Visiting card of P.S. Ananda Rao who claims that he has established his own unique martial arts style.



Figure 12. Gopi Naidu's visiting card with an inset of his own picture.

I will rest my case with the Dragon Fist Martial Arts Academy. Not only is the academy named after a Jackie Chan film (*Dragon Fist*, Lo Wei, 1978) but its 'complete entertainment magazine' *Martial Arts* features Hong Kong and Indian action film stars on its cover (figure 13). The school also has a library of martial arts detective novels and its chief instructor, Satya Shankar made a failed attempt at producing a film called *Karate Fighters* (figure 15)



The Dragon Fist collection. Figure 13 (Left) Cover of *Martial Arts* featuring Suman. Figure 14 (Centre) Jackie Chan. Figure 15 (Right): Advertisement for *Karate Fighters* in the same magazine.



Figure 16: Inside Dragon Fist's office. The space also houses their library and a finance company run by Satya Shankar (centre). Satya Shankar's son (left) has a black belt and aspires for a career in films.

Setting aside for the moment the paradigm of 'cultural influence', I will suggest that the obvious linkage between Hong Kong martial arts films and martial arts academies in India needs to be traced via histories of *audience* activity here, an activity associated with an *audience in action*, characterized by such commonplace excesses as 'throwing money at the screen, going into trances during devotional films' (Rajadhyaksha 2002) and, of course, rioting in cinema halls.

## Commonplace Excesses



Figure 17. Theatre in Tirupathi screening the Balakrishna vehicle, *Narasimhanaidu* (B. Gopal, 2001). Fans' associations' cloth banners surround the hoarding by the theatre owner.



Figure 18. 50<sup>th</sup> Day celebrations of Chiranjeevi's *Alluda Majaka* (E.V.V. Satyanarayana, 1995). The photograph was sent to the star.

Sampathi Ramana's many careers illustrate the complex relationship of the viewer with cinema. He is a 34-year old house painter in Madanapalle town, an important organizer of the Balija caste, an active member of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that currently leads the national coalition government. He is also an active member of the fans association of the Telugu film star Chiranjeevi who belongs to his caste. For the last 13 years he has been a karate instructor. Five years ago he established his own karate school: Okinawan Goju-Ryu Universal Martial Arts. Classes are held, among other places, in the compound of Jyothi Talkies which screens martial arts and sex films. Ramana was inspired to learn karate after watching the films of Bruce Lee and Arjun (who featured in Telugu action films). He watches all Hong Kong martial arts and action films released in the town and often takes his students to watch (and learn from) these films (Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2001).

Being a caste organizer, Ramana's decision to work with the Chiranjeevi fans' association is obvious. But what is not obvious is why he should be member of any fans' association, or why there should be fans' associations at all. While temporary answers may be found in the fact that with fan activity we are dealing with a degree of organization that is unique to the southern Indian states, even such answers are not available when we look at the martial arts schools, patronized by and run by those who have no great stakes in films of any kind. Does the Okinawan Goju-Ryu Universal Martial Arts school tell us anything about Hong Kong cinema's viewership here? I am now making the claim that a 'fan response' to Hong Kong cinema exists even in the absence of organised fans' associations.

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## Section II: The 'Fan Response' – Cinema as Industry and Cinema as Public Sphere

One of the aspects of the organised fan's response is the cinema's recognition of what he understands as the rights of the spectator. These rights include, for example, the acknowledgement and addressing of a range of expectations, a process that narratively translates into the right of the spectator to be present in the cinema hall and to make certain demands on how the film should proceed. Not surprisingly, most star vehicles, being prime exemplars of popular cinema in Telugu, tend to be predictable – you know what you will see even before you see it. In other words, even the first viewing of such films feels like a repeat viewing. By acknowledging your foreknowledge, the narrative recognizes your expectations of the film. This is of course what the 'cult film' does and genre films too may be understood in this manner. Hong Kong films that are popular in India too eminently fit this description. I will take this for granted since the specificity of the fan response lies elsewhere.

A second aspect is one of recognising a set of unstable linkages inherent to what Miriam Hansen outlines in her discussion of the cinema as an 'alternative' public sphere. Hansen argues that in early cinema in the USA, which over the period 1907-1917 was replaced by classical narrative cinema, 'the meanings transacted were contingent on *local* conditions and constellations, leaving reception at the mercy of relatively *unpredictable*, aleatory processes' (1991: 94, original emphases). The Hollywood mode of production attempted to change this state of affairs by putting in place a spectator position that was predictable, viewing conditions that were standardized, etc. In early cinema, 'film-spectator relations were characterized by a *social* dimension' which 'encouraged the display of collectivity' (1991: 94, original emphasis). The social dimension, much diminished, remained only a 'countercurrent' in classical cinema and has to be traced in the 'margin that remains between the *ideal* of spectatorship operative in production [of films] and the social and cultural forms of reception' (1991: 90, original emphasis). The crucial difference according to Hansen is that early cinema 'provided the *formal* conditions for an alternative public sphere, a *structural* possibility of articulating experience in a communicative, relatively autonomous form' (1991: 90, original emphases). As conditions of exhibition stabilized and the production of the cinema became more standardized, the social dimension – from sing-alongs to other displays of audience collectivity – were rendered excessive, because they were not a part of the economics of cinema. 'Personalized' film viewing became the norm.

Implicit in Hansen's argument is the broad Habermasian outline of the career of the 'public': its creation at a certain point in the industrialization of culture and its disappearance (or transformation into the 'mass') due to the very logic of industrialization (see Habermas 1989). It needs to be noted that the task of making the cinema a stable product whose consumption can be fully accounted for at the site of production, will always remain unfinished due to the inherently destabilizing effects of cinema's libidinal economy. So no absolute distinction can be ever made between the Hollywood mode of production and film industries that appear to exist outside of its norms. Nevertheless, the Hollywood mode continues to be a useful counterpoint for the study of other contexts like ours where the film industry is characterized by what Rajadhyaksha calls the 'resistance to industrialization'.

The paradox of the Habermasian public sphere is that, as a *consequence* of the industrialization of culture, it is threatened by the very *development* of industrialization. As a result the paradox leads to a dead-end in its very inability to conceive of the public sphere in the contemporary period. Further, while the retrospective characterisation of the public sphere has sometimes had the utility of facilitating a critique of existing cultural institutions, even in Hansen's work the public sphere has tended to become an object of nostalgia. This, in spite of the fact that she identifies nostalgia as a problem with Habermas. Here, in order to work around the Habermasian paradox and to avoid the retroactive and nostalgic conception of the public sphere, I would propose that the contest witnessed in the field of culture is not merely between stages of industrialization. It is also a contest between the utopian dimension of industrialism as against its economic logic. The logic of capitalism ensures that the utopian dimension of industrialism is never actualized and, in fact, works actively against its realization. This process of promise and denial might be separated by a time lag, which it seems to me is implied by Hansen. The fundamental point of Hansen's analysis is the possibility of conflict between the utopian and the industrial dimensions of cinema which are both at work at any given moment in its history.

Let me now return to my claim of viewing martial arts schools as kind of fan response. To begin with, it must be noted that an important feature of any kind of fan response is to form groups, and that such a tendency arguably stems from the perception of film-viewing itself as a *collective* experience. Further, that this tendency in turn finds concrete definition through invoking other, more defined, more authoritative, modes of group formation. Some of the extended groups relevant to this paper are those formed around class, caste and gender definitions. In the instance of Ramana, we are after all dealing with various sites of the urban lumpen proletariat's socio-political struggle. As a site for such political socialization, the martial arts school is as good an institution as any other. However, the difference between a martial arts school run and patronized by martial arts *film* enthusiasts and another whose members may not share this enthusiasm may, it appears, be summarised as follows: the first is *also* inevitably linked to *fan clubs, caste organizations, political parties* and *gangs*. It is of course with hindsight, and after tracing these linkages, that one may note the difference between two kinds of martial arts schools even though both have their beginnings within the same historical

context of the popularity of Bruce Lee's films. If one common feature of the interconnected groups mentioned above is the class-caste-gender composition, then the other is cinema (the act and process of *film viewing*, to be more precise). This cinematic public is a collective that is perpetually in search for other collectives.

The fan response may be more precisely identified as a tendency among film viewers to continuously constitute groups in an attempt to *recreate* the film viewing experience. No doubt this has the libidinal implications that Freud locates within group-formation (Freud 1921). At the socio-political level, the recreation of the viewing experience draws attention to the *utopian* dimension of the cinema – one concretised by the democratic promise of the cinema hall – never realized but remaining an excess that the industry will try to channelize, account for, harness in various ways. Unlike the context that Hansen (1991: 7) studies, something more than 'which discourses of experience will be articulated in public and which remain private' is at stake here. What I have called the 'fan response' quite often finds direct expression in a conventionally defined domain of politics in southern India. As such, it does not necessitate a further, more laboured demonstration of its status as a public activity, since I suggest that it forges close linkages with the larger dynamics of a local political mobilization. The cinema's role in such mobilization has to be acknowledged in all its implications, for cinema does mobilize large numbers of people as consumers. It is indeed true that, especially in India, the mobilizations around the cinema do not easily or always translate into profit for the film industry. As such, there is always the problematic possibility that market-driven definitions of the industry create a fictitious contradiction between the economics of the industry and its consumer/viewer. In the instance of the cinema, the public sphere itself needs to be conceived as a domain where the consumption of film becomes an occasion for a range of performances that are broadly *political* in nature. The excesses that I have suggested as characteristic of the fan responses need to be understood as having to do with the *performative aspects* of the public sphere. The process often involves the invocation of the cinema in spaces far beyond the boundaries of the film industry. Like Gopi Naidu in body tattoo, the performative aspects of fan activity elude and are excessive of the avowed 'purpose' for the staging of the performance.

With reference to the question of cinema and industrialization in India, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the film industry in India continues to be pre-capitalist in a number of ways. Madhava Prasad argues that in the Hindi film industry is characterized by a 'heterogeneous mode of manufacture' and contends that

*while the Hollywood production process is structured around the primary operation of transforming a given raw material, the story/scenario into a film; in the production process most familiar in Bombay, the separate development of the components of the film text render this process relatively unimportant. Indeed it could be said that the story occupies a place on par with that of the rest of the components, rather than the pre-eminent position it enjoys in the Hollywood mode*

*(Prasad, 1998: 43)*

A similar situation also prevails in India's other film industries. Furthermore, the film industry has, through most of its post-independence history, failed to generate a surplus and survives largely because of it attracts investment from a range of speculators (most recently the criminal underworld). I will examine one moment in the recent past when the film industry benefited from speculative investments. But before that, one more reason why it makes sense to study the circulation of Hong Kong films in India.

David Bordwell's (2000) account of Hong Kong cinema, which I mention here in preference to the work of Hong Kong-based film historians and critics only because he has done the work of surveying existing literature, sounds disturbingly familiar to someone familiar with the discussions on Indian cinema. From 'plagiarism' to set action and melodrama sequences that are merely strung together (called 'items' by the Indian film industry), from pre-sale of films to the pressure on the cinema to be socially responsible, there are a number of parallels that can be identified between the two Asian industries. While a detailed comparative analysis will have to be deferred for another occasion, I will point out here that the Hong Kong film industry too, despite its superior technical and financial inputs in comparison to its Indian counterpart, has not achieved Hollywood's level of industrialization. Producer-distributor Raymond Wong of Mandarin

Entertainment (Holdings) Ltd., among others in the industry, feels that the Hong Kong industry has relied on stars, rather than on scripts (Interview, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2002, Hong Kong). His perception allows a reading of the crisis in the Hong Kong industry as being a consequence of the failure to industrialize. I suggest that Hong Kong films in India raise interesting questions of what this failure might mean in cultural terms. Quite obviously neither the Hong Kong nor Indian film industries can match up to Hollywood because, like everything else which originated in the 'west', the film industry too exists as an aberration in non-western spaces. The issue is not whether the film industries in the non-west are truly capitalist but rather the kind of capitalism that operates here. I would like to ask what industrialization might mean with reference to the Indian film industries where Hollywood style assembly-line production is not in evidence. As with the non-existent Jackie Chan fans' association, we will have to ask other questions if we are to identify the processes of industrialization.

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### Section III: The B-Circuit

(This section is based on interviews with industry representatives. Numerous details have been provided upon the promise of anonymity. Some sources will therefore remain unnamed. Notwithstanding this attempt at secrecy, much of what I say in this section is common knowledge to those familiar with the workings of the film industry).

In this section I will show how the industrial contexts within which Hong Kong films circulate in India create an institutional framework that tends to destabilize the film as a fully-fledged, integrated and economically as well as narratively coherent product. Additionally, I will show how the film industry itself actively engages with what I have called the fan response by taking into account ways in which film becomes available for 'displays of collectivity' without necessarily translating the social dimension of cinema into economic terms. Such industrially driven actions are meant precisely to overcome the *economic* contradiction between industrial interest and reception, and to enable instead the equally significant *cultural* and *political linkage* between the two spheres.

'B-circuit' is the label I give to that segment of distribution and exhibition sectors that is characterized by low levels of investment. Further, this segment is characterized by repeated interventions by both distributors and exhibitors which result in the de-standardization of a film's status as an industrial product. I am aware that such a generalised definition risks being all-inclusive, especially because even the more economically established A-circuit is not free from such intervention, even when the economic investment is relatively large.

In qualitative terms, the B-circuit is the 'final frontier' of the film industry – beyond this there is no market. Films reach this segment after their run in the more profitable distribution and exhibition circuit is fully, truly over, after they have literally been run into the ground. So that what we get here is the local industry's equivalent of what the Indian market is to the Hong Kong film industry ('just a bonus'). Typically the B-circuit distributor acquires either cheap new films (including Telugu versions of non-Telugu films) or reruns.

In geographical terms the B distributor is generally confined to territories consisting primarily of non-metropolitan centres. Most cinema halls available to such distributors are run down and have low ticket prices (around ten rupees for the highest seats). The margins are so low that it is not economically viable for major players to operate at this level. I will confine my discussion here to those distributors and exhibitors that are relevant to the circulation of Hong Kong films.

The beginnings of the B-circuit in Andhra Pradesh lie in an interesting moment of both of regression from and resistance to industrialization in the 1980s. The sharp increase in production costs and escalating risk had, between the late 1970s and early 1980s, led to the withdrawal or scaling down of several established distribution companies which, until then, had enjoyed state-wide distribution networks. An additional factor,

the new entertainment tax regime from the mid-1980s, which imposed a flat tax on films regardless of the actual number of tickets sold, had only added to the risks involved. Among the companies that cut down or transformed their operations was the Poorna Pictures Private Limited, discussed later in this essay.

In this time, the pre-sale of films was founded on the high valuation of the economic worth of some major stars – something that was in itself a consequence of, and measured by, the impressive growth of fans' associations. A range of smaller new investors entered the distribution business, seeking to capitalise on the success of select star vehicles. This resulted in the fragmentation of distribution territories into smaller units, as producers sought to sell films at relatively high cost to minor players bidding for single territories. Over the next decade, the number of territories grew from three or five to ten. It made eminent sense to the smaller distributors, increasingly referred to as 'buyers', to offset their risk by finding even smaller distributors, or sub-distributors, who bought rights for a part of the territory. Some sub-distributors even bought rights for a single town. A range of investors entered the film industry as sub-distributors. There was a high rate of attrition here but sub-distributors did succeed in pumping large amounts of money into the film industry, leading to an increase in film production.

The reason for describing this as a moment of regression is not merely because it resulted in the fragmentation of the distribution sector, but also because the economic conditions that caused it were a direct fallout of the increasing importance of stars, male stars in particular. The industry now proceeded under the assumption that the huge popularity of film stars, indexed by the growth in fans' associations, was adequate for ensuring the success of films. By the mid-1990s there was a full-blown crisis in the industry with all major stars failing repeatedly at the box-office. The 1980s and early 90s provide evidence that industry did not always manage to translate star popularity into profit, at least not in a manner that yielded any long-term capitalization of resources. Instead star casting became the means by which the risk of future losses was passed on to the now fragmented distribution sector. While small distributors did exist before the 1980s, this decade saw rise of literally hundreds of new distribution offices, most with a 'library' of under 10-20 films, many of whom have subsequently closed down.

Before I go any further, a clarification on the distributors and exhibitors who constitute the A-circuit. Despite the fragmentation of the distribution sector, there are major distributors like Mayuri and Suresh whose parent companies also own studios and undertake film production. Suresh also undertakes the local distribution of Columbia Pictures. Mayuri controls cinema halls in practically every city in the state. Other players in this circuit include those who distribute new Telugu and Hindi films in individual territories. In this exhibition sector, the A-circuit consists of centrally located, well-maintained and usually air-conditioned cinema halls in large towns and cities where new Telugu, Hindi and English films are released. The industry itself categorizes cinema halls by location, facilities offered etc. I will add that the 'management' (of the cinema hall as well as of the audience) is a major distinguishing feature of the A-circuit. I return to the question of management below. Finally, apart from the relatively high financial stakes involved, it should be mentioned that at this level the status of films as finished products is not generally tampered with.

On the other hand, of immediate interest to the distribution of Hong Kong films is a particular kind of distributor who deals in imported films. Most distributors who deal in imported films also deal in films dubbed from other Indian languages, low budget Hindi films, re-runs of Telugu films and Indian as well as imported soft porn films. There are a number of combinations and specializations but an important feature of this sector is the relatively low amount they are willing to invest in a film. This entire category of distributor came into existence in the early to mid-1980s, partly for the reasons stated earlier, and partly due to the decanalization of film import which permitted NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) to import films. In fact, the NRI importer, the B-circuit and Hong Kong films are closely related to each other, as we shall see below.

Indo-Overseas Films, Chennai, was established by an NRI who was an exporter of seafood. Prior to 1984, the company distributed Hindi films. In 1984 it began to distribute films imported by the state-owned National Film Development Corporation. In 1990 it began importing films directly, as the government relaxed import regulations. At present the company is the largest distributor of Hong Kong films in India and has to date imported close to 200 films. It claims to be the sole Indian distributor for Golden Harvest. Most sub-

distributors of Hong Kong films I met said that their entry into the business was a consequence of Indian importer-distributors like Indo-Overseas Films who, unlike local representatives of American distribution companies, were willing to sell rights to sub-distributors. Sreesaila Babu of Raghavendra Film Distributors, for example, dealt in re-issues of Telugu films before 1983. Now 60% of his films are English ones and he also deals in Hindi films.

There have been other importers and distributors of Hong Kong films operating in the southern states. Metro Films Corporation, Chennai (established in 1983) has imported 125-150 films, including Hong Kong films (number unknown). In the year 1994-95 it stopped importing films, apparently due to censor trouble. The company now produces Tamil films. It is not clear if the methods of distribution employed by the company were similar to Indo-Overseas. Poorna Pictures Private Limited, Vijayawada, has released a number of Hong Kong films in Andhra Pradesh. This is the oldest distribution company in the state and also owns cinema halls in Vijayawada and Visakhapatnam. Unlike most existing distributors Poorna never buys films outright and only distributes on a percentage basis. At present it distributes films in Hindi and English (including films released by American companies), having largely exited from Telugu .

What, I shall now ask, happens to films when they circulate in what I have called the B-circuit? Let me track the process from Indo-Overseas Films downwards. Films from Hong Kong are bought in package deals of about ten. Some films are never released in Indian theatres and are bought only because they are a part of the package. Once in India (and after the film is certified by the censor board) a preview is organized for distributors. Generally 40-60 prints are made of major Hong Kong films and publicity prepared from transparencies provided by the Hong Kong based distributor. Indo-Overseas also dubs some films into Indian languages (generally Tamil and Telugu and occasionally Hindi) and offers the distributors a choice of languages in their chosen territories. Smaller distributors may themselves have the films dubbed after buying the rights for a particular territory. English and Indian language versions might be shown in A-circuit cinema halls before they enter the B-circuit. Since the late 1980s a number of Jackie Chan films began their career in the best of urban cinema halls before they travelled to the provinces. Other films, particularly those featuring lesser stars, end up directly in the B-circuit. Most re-releases remain more or less confined to the B-circuit.

Indo-Overseas may opt for distributing the film either on their own, or working with lesser players on a percentage basis, or opting for outright sale. Often there is a combination of all three: they distribute the film themselves in a few territories like Chennai city, jointly with smaller players elsewhere and sell out their rights in yet other areas. It is useful to distinguish between the release of a film in the A-circuit (by say, Indo-Overseas) and its journey to the B-circuit. The point at which the importer more or less loses control is when the film is sold or released through smaller distributors in the B-circuit. This is not to say that the company is unaware of what is happening at the lower rungs of distribution but it has no stakes in trying to discipline this segment, particularly when rights are reissued (ie. after five years of release). Anything that helps films is good for the business.

As these films make the transition, on a number of occasions films have had their names changed. There is nothing underhand about it since the Hong Kong based distributors are aware of such changes and are not particularly worried about it. Hong Kong films have been released under different titles in different parts of the world in the past. Further, the new title sometimes figures on the censor certificate or the film print itself. S. Subramanian of Indo-Overseas says that title changes are an attempt at adding novelty rather than cheating the viewers. He points out that in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, titles of Hindi films too are changed. There is only a thin line between value addition and deliberate obfuscation, especially before the mid-1990s when only the English versions circulated among audiences most of whom knew little or no English. A name change may not be obvious from film publicity or even the film print, unless close attention is paid to small print.



Figure 19. VCD version of *Twice Deadly* aka *Taichi*.



Figure 20. *The Fighter* (details unknown).

A film whose name has been changed upon import may acquire yet another name when its rights are re-issued. An interesting example is the film *Shaolin vs Lama* (Lee Tso Nam, 1983) which circulated under the title the *Death Fighter* when it was released by Poorna (figure 21). It then became *Top Fighter* when Sree Suchitra Films bought the re-issue. Suchitra also described the relatively unknown star of the film as 'Faster than Jet Li and Jackie Chan', keeping the 'Faster than' in small print, thereby giving the impression that the two stars feature in the film (figure 29).

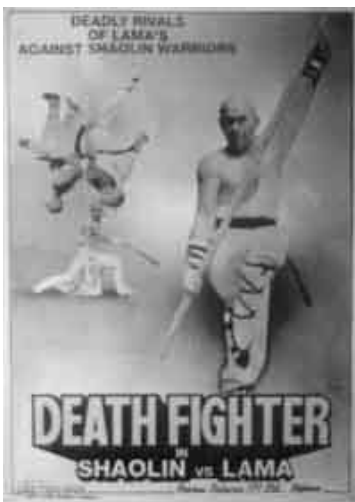


Figure 21. *Death Fighter*/*Shaolin vs Lama*.

The most dramatic name change I have come across was one attributed to Narasimha Rao, a distributor who operates without even an office (Interview: 24<sup>th</sup> January 2002, Vijayawada). When Raghavendra Film Distributors carried out a massive publicity campaign for the release of Jackie Chan's *Who am I?* (Benny Chan Muk Sing, Jackie Chan, 1998) this distributor, who had acquired the re-issued rights of the star's *Thunderbolt* (Gordan Chan, 1995), now released it under the title of *I am I*, thereby cashing in on the publicity for the other film (figure 23). It is not clear whether or not he fooled the viewers into believing that this was a new film or indeed a sequel to *Who am I?* The distributor has also released a film called *Dangerous Guy* ('original' title *Drunken Master II*, Lau Kar-leung, 1994) coinciding with the release of *Mr. Nice Guy*, (Samo Hung, 1997).



Figures 22-23. Publicity for the 'new' films of Jackie Chan

Some of the most innovative interventions by both Indo-Overseas and B-circuit players occur in the process of finding local equivalents for what they see are highlights of a Hong Kong film. The title is of course the most obvious innovation and the need for catchy titles has only increased with the dubbing of Hong Kong films into Indian languages since the mid-1990s. The Jackie Chan starrer *The Armour of God* (Jackie Chan, 1987), was for example re-released in 2001 in English as well as in dubbed versions. The Telugu version is called *Veeraputrudu* ('Son of Hero').



Figure 24. The hoarding for Telugu version of *The Armour of God*, *Veeraputrudu* stands besides one for the Telugu film *Deviputrudu* ('Son of Goddess', Kodi Ramakrishna, 2001) in Vijayawada.

The larger problem before these distributors is to add what the film industry terms 'nativity' (local colour). How, we need to now ask, is the Hong Kong film translated into something that is 'familiar' even as its main characteristics and special attraction, its spectacular action sequences, are not lost sight of? Distributors realized fairly soon that stars were an important part of the popularity of Hong Kong films, not least because stars were central to local popular cinema. Stars were the anchors of the foreign language film, which was doubly strange because unlike other English films, the actors did not look like English speakers. But the distributors faced a problem – it was not possible to locally build the careers of stars due to the random manner in which films reached them. In films by Jackie Chan or Jet Li, these stars were inevitably the focus of publicity, but what of other films featuring unfamiliar stars? The further difficulty was that low returns

made major publicity campaigns unviable. Distributors therefore often relied on the familiarity of a handful of stars, the list not always coinciding with Hong Kong's own favourites. Low investment also meant that most publicity aimed at local (ie. Telugu speaking) audiences and had to be improvised from a set of photo-cards supplied by the importer. Under the given circumstances entire genealogies of popular Hong Kong stars were prepared to pass off unfamiliar stars as relatives, teachers etc. of recognizable stars. Sree Suchitra Films, Vijayawada, passed off a female action star as Bruce Lee's daughter (long before the 'real' daughter began her career). Sticking closer to facts, the distributor claimed that 'Fat Samo Hung' was Jackie Chan's 'guru'. Some years later Indo-Overseas caught on and claimed that director Ringo Lam too was Jackie Chan's guru (figure 26). This also came at a time when several sons of major erstwhile stars were aspiring for stardom, making this guru and disciple vocabulary common to publicity campaigns. Recall here the description, "faster than Jet Li and Jackie Chan." A somewhat tame invocation, in comparison, of popular Hong Kong stars was made in the Telugu version of a Jet Li version (possibly *Last Hero in China* a.k.a. *Claws of Steel*, Wong Jing, 1993) which was simply called *Tiger Jet Li*.



Figure 25. Publicity design for *Spanish Connection*: collage of black and white photographs filled in with watercolours.



Figure 26. Advertisement in the Telugu newspaper *Vaartha* (27<sup>th</sup> April 2001) for *Kapala Dweepam* (Ringo Lam, English title in India *Red Temple*, details not known). Caption reads: "Another action blockbuster directed by Jackie Chan's guru Ringo Lam."

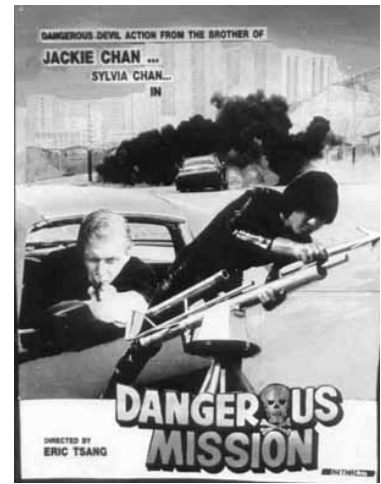


Figure 27. "Dangerous Devil action from the brother of Jackie Chan..." in *Dangerous Mission* (details unknown)

Yet other innovations include 'introducing' heroines. In one such instance the publicity suggested that the Hollywood star Kim Basinger starred in *The Armour of God* (Figure 28).





Figure 29 (Above). Ramesh Reddy of Sree Suchitra Films who was responsible for much of the innovative publicity. Notice the caption, "Faster than..." in the background.

Figure 28 (Left). Layout artist's collage of *Operation Condor/The Armour of God II*, a "super action thriller." Hollywood actress Kim Basinger in the inset. Silhouetted image too is not from the film.

In the last five years or so, however, there has been a decrease in the levels of local intervention in publicity design. 'Matter publicity' (ie. narrative or descriptive additions to film titles on posters) which characterized the publicity of foreign films, has all but disappeared.



Figure 30. P. Prasad Babu, Kanthi Pictures, Tirupathi: samples of pickles, also marketed by the company, in the foreground and matter publicity in the background

Instead, the B-circuit increasingly relies on the publicity campaigns for English versions of films to sell dubbed versions, which are now released simultaneously. There are of course exceptions. In Madanapalle town an orchestra in procession through the main thoroughfares of the town publicizes *all* new releases, regardless of language (figure 31). The practice is believed to be four to five decades old.



Figure 31: Jyothi in 1962. The publicity campaign is about to begin.



Figure 32: Jyothi in 2001. Last day of *Romeo Must Die*. Next week's release is a soft-porn film titled *Save Me*.

With the dubbing of Hong Kong films into Indian languages a new dimension was added to the question of nativity. The characters not only spoke *in* Telugu but they also spoke *like* characters in Telugu films; indeed, Hong Kong films were brought closer to Telugu films than ever before. To mention a remarkable example, Alan Tam, who supported Jackie Chan in *The Armour of God* becomes in *Veeraputrudu* something of a comic sidekick of the hero – a familiar enough figure in Telugu films. Tam is not recognized as a star here so he could become the butt of ridicule in the Telugu version. Producers and technicians involved in the making of dubbed versions take pride in adding nativity.

Indeed, dubbing raises some fundamental questions about the ways in which foreign films circulate in India. I will elaborate this with the help of insights provided by R.K. Bhagawan, a key figure in the distribution of Hong Kong films in Andhra Pradesh.

Bhagawan began his career as a B-circuit distributor of action films, but over the last decade or so he has produced Telugu dubbed versions of Hong Kong as well as Indian films. Perhaps as a tribute to Bruce Lee, he named the Telugu version of a Kannada film *Enter the Dragon* (Anand P. Raju, 1999?). He also released *Jackie Chan* (Thriller Manju, 1999?. Name unchanged from the Kannada original). In the recent past he has been buying re-issue rights of Hong Kong action films and dubbing them into Telugu. His regularly chooses, in his words, 'flop films with quality.' He feels that these films inevitably do not do well in their first release because viewers fail to understand the plot, typically due to language problems. While Bhagawan himself sees the problem as one of intelligibility, I think the issue at hand is considerably larger. Is he suggesting that the original is characterized by a lack, which he will go on to supply?

The high degree of local intervention – whether at the level of the importer or the lower rungs of distribution – is no doubt facilitated by the fact that none of the players concerned have any stakes in maintaining the integrity of the original. Interestingly, Telugu films circulate more or less intact precisely because there are any number of agencies – from producers to film critics to fans associations – who are likely to respond to attempts at altering the original. Most crucially, according to a number of distributors, the *viewer knows his Telugu cinema* so it is neither necessary nor indeed possible to make alterations. What is absent with reference to Hong Kong films is not just the producer's agent ensuring fidelity to the original but also the gaze of the knowledgeable viewer. What may seem to be a high degree of freedom on the part of the distributors might well be an anxiety caused by the presumed absence of the discerning spectator. Evidently, familiarizing the import by finding local equivalents and thereby adding 'nativity', is a way of constructing the category of the

knowledgeable spectator, a necessary component to the assembly of the fiction.

Bhagawan's choice of films sheds light on the modes of intervention witnessed in the B-circuit and the ways in which the film is transformed as it goes down the rungs of distribution. The original does not have stars, or at least the kind of stars we want, its titles are all wrong, it does not have a comedy track or a heroine or even at times a story. All this will have to be supplied locally. This is not to suggest that the Hong Kong film is perceived to be inferior or of low quality. On the contrary, its distinction is never in question; what is an issue in the B-circuit is its *adequacy*. The B-circuit moreover does not attempt to train viewers to either become or approximate to the 'inscribed viewer' of the Hong Kong film but rather to transform the object to suit existing spectatorial practices. In other words, rather than discipline unruly audiences and their excessive responses to the cinema, it modifies films to match up to a set of expectations that are treated as more or less given. The creator of *I am I* and *Dangerous Guy* claims, not surprisingly since he belongs to a section of the film industry that is accustomed to filling the gaps in the original, that his films were the better films and that the new Jackie Chan films were a major let down. He was 'replying' to these bad films by releasing his authentic Jackie Chan films. It is as if the star had tried to cheat the viewers and, in classic fan behaviour, being a true loyalist he was only righting the wrong.

Two more points about B-circuit distributors. A range of practices of clearly questionable legality are in evidence here including the distribution of uncensored films, the splicing of sexually explicit sequences in censored films, the circulation of 'condemned prints' (damaged prints that are unworthy of exhibition), the distribution of films long after the rights have lapsed, etc. Although seemingly chaotic, this segment is in fact very efficiently organized. Not only has it fed films to the most far-flung cinema halls, but it has also exploited films to the fullest extent possible under the given circumstances. With specific reference to Hong Kong films, this segment of distribution is responsible for introducing these films to small town and rural audiences. Further, most players who deal in imported films do not participate in pre-sale deals and unlike their A-circuit counterparts who bid for new films, they *see* the films (either at previews or on video or even in regular screens during the first release) before agreeing to distributing them.

Finally, the Hong Kong film that travels in the B-circuit is marked by a time lag. This is not merely because it reaches here months or even years after its first release in major urban cinema halls. It is also because of the widespread perception that the kind of Hong Kong films that are popular among audiences cultivated by the B-circuit are no longer made. There is an all round recognition that the quintessential Hong Kong film is a thing of the past, an object of nostalgia. Telugu dubbed versions (whose English versions may have been released years ago) exhibit an acute awareness of the state of affairs: most titles echo the 'folklore film', a Telugu genre of the purely fabricated fantasy sometimes with resemblances to the mythological and popular especially in the 1940s-60s. Interestingly, Telugu versions of even Hollywood films have such titles at times. Compare for example the two films released by Bhagawan, *Tarzan Veerudu* (or 'Heroic Tarzan') (from *Tarzan, The Ape-Man*, John Derek, 1981) and *China Veerudu* (or 'Hero from China') (from *Master*, Tsui Hark, 1992).

In the rest of the paper I will examine exhibition focussing on question of discipline and industrial aspirations of the film industry. At the level of exhibition, the distinction between A- and B-circuits becomes very clear. There are obvious markers – the condition of cinema halls, the levels of comfort, and the investment in technology – separating the two circuits. Historically speaking, badly maintained cinema halls are the rule rather than the exception and, as I have discussed elsewhere (Srinivas 2000), for over half a century film journals have served as forums for airing grievances of viewers about the conditions of film seeing and the demands for reform in this area. It would therefore be more correct to say that the A-circuit as we know it today came into prominence in the 1970s with the growing spread of air-conditioning in newly constructed new cinema halls aimed at urban middle class audiences. The process is directly aimed at excluding the lower class audiences through increasing admission rates and reducing the number of seats in the lower stalls. The uniformly high prices in multiplexes (not yet inaugurated in Andhra Pradesh but already popular in Delhi, Mumbai and Pune) would be the logical culmination of this process.

If the B-circuit is understood as the site where the status of 'film as product' is jeopardized, the B-cinema hall

would, correspondingly be one which is not only badly maintained (poor sound and projection, uncomfortable seats, not starting films on time) but also where one can expect to see sexually explicit sequences spliced in and other forms of tampering with films. Evidently, audiences here are more or less left to their own devices, and are free to indulge in all modes of excesses. How does the A-circuit cinema hall avoid this state of affairs in a context where the ‘heterogeneous mode’, in Prasad’s sense quoted earlier, characterizes film production? Under these prevailing conditions, segments of the exhibition sector actually take on the burden of industrialization, which translates to mean the creation of standardized and stable conditions of reception. ‘Management’ – or the efficient organisation of exhibition spaces – is here a key concept for the industry, since it now includes a variety of practices that produce such conditions. At the very outset management involves maximization of revenue, not only from ticket sales but from also paid parking spaces, food and drink sales etc. But ‘management’ here also extends to cultural practices involving ‘disciplining’ viewers in rather direct ways. For example, Navrang theatre, Vijayawada (now closed), had a management that ensured that the viewers were guaranteed a high level of comfort, which had over the years included the catching and public beating of black marketeers, and asking noisy viewers to leave the cinema hall.



Figure 33. Alankar, Vijayawada: cinema halls as real estate



Figure 34. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in Urvasi.



Figure 35. Urvasi-Menaka-Rambha complex, Vijayawada: Photographs of pickpockets displayed on the premises.

Scores of other cinema halls across the state are known to have used violent means to ensure audience discipline. Srikrishna, Madanapalle, was the first air-conditioned cinema hall in what was then still a small town (figure 36). Today, it adopts a variety of methods to ensure proper conduct at the hall. Not only are there separate queues for men and women (common enough in many part of the state) but male and female viewers are segregated *inside* the auditorium (a practice abandoned around the 1970s in most other cinema halls). This, I am told, is to ensure that women feel safe. A fan organizer complained that, over the years, fan activity has suffered in this town because managements of air-conditioned cinema halls do not allow viewers to whistle and cheer in peace during the screening. Of course an exception is made during the first week of a film’s release, when it is generally understood that fans are free to be noisy but this is clearly a compromise – for the rest of the time fans are going to be subjected to discipline. Srikrishna can quite rightly claim to have redefined the concept of theatre management in this town.



Figure 36. A-circuit cinema hall as feudal space? M. Venugopal Naidu, the proprietor of Srikrishna in the lobby of the theatre.



Figures 37-38 B-circuit as decay: outside and inside IS Mahal, Tirupathi, which still screens English films but not for the middle class audience which it once attracted.

However, the situation is culturally somewhat more complex than it appears on surface. The A-circuit has to be understood as much in terms of an industrial *aspiration* as in purely economic or geographic terms. Existing industry categories (A, B, and C cinema halls) account for Srikrishna, which is no doubt an ‘A’ category cinema hall. But other cinema halls, which clearly belong elsewhere and can be disqualified on many counts from belonging to the A-circuit, too attempt to recreate the conditions prevalent in the A-circuit. Jyothi theatre, Madanapalle, screens a variety of imported films, ranging from Hong Kong martial arts films to soft-porn films. In 2001, the theatre still had hard wooden benches in the front stall and no air-conditioning. However, the owners have plans to renovate and make it an A-category cinema hall. The distinctive feature of Jyothi is that it is efficiently managed. I was told that customer discipline is ensured during all shows – unruly behaviour is not tolerated, particularly when sexually explicit films are being illegally screened. In fact, during the screening of soft-porn films viewers are expected to arrive on time – ticket counters are closed when the film starts – and expected to remain in the cinema hall till the screening is over. The gates are locked when the film begins. Whistling is not allowed. It is not the pornographic film alone that is responsible for the state of affairs. Venkateswara theatre in Tirupathi, which specializes in soft-porn films, does not make any attempt at disciplining the audiences. Further, by maintaining clear distinctions between pornographic and other films, Jyothi continues to attract the action film fan. According to the owner of Venkateswara, even when his theatre announces a martial arts film, ‘the audience come for something else’.

It is not as if the film industry in India has reconciled to pre-industrial status. On the contrary, in the light of the industry’s resistance to industrialization, and as if to compensate for it, a variety of alternatives are attempted by various sectors, and in this perhaps exhibition continues to be the most important site for experimentation. For example, distributors regularly install idols of goddesses in cinema halls screening devotional films thereby recognizing that going into a trance is a legitimate response to such films but also facilitating such trances.



Figure 39. An idol in Puttana Chitra Mandira, Bangalore. Cinema hall management personnel and distributor also in the picture.

While the film industry in general and the B-circuit in particular acknowledge and actively encourage fan responses, one should also add that it does so at considerable risk. The risk is of dealing with a range of viewer expectations and demands on terms that place the industry at a disadvantage. When forced to confront the excesses of audience response to the cinema, a section of the industry (the A-circuit) standardizes viewer response by taking recourse to crudely authoritarian methods. But for the most part, the B-circuit response of indulgence is the rule and ‘reform’ through authoritarian or pedagogic means the exception. Even as the film industry seeks to refashion itself as an ‘industry’ (corporate financing, assembly line production, integrated

distribution and exhibition circuits, to name a few means of achieving such a status) it creates conditions of reception that approximate to an industrialized cinema.

The popularity of Hong Kong action films has mainly rested on their availability in the B-circuit. Increasingly, the B-circuit is focussing on other kinds of films, soft-porn films and dubbed versions of Hollywood films in particular. There are indications that an increasing number of erotic films made in Hong Kong are entering the market, as if to replace the industry's martial arts action films. However, it is likely that Hong Kong action films still have a substantial life (or afterlife) in India, as is witnessed by the release of Telugu versions when rights come up for re-issue. As for the Hong Kong action film, is there something intrinsic to the martial arts and action films that account for their phenomenal career in the B-circuit? Surely. The linkages between these (and other 'low') genres and B-circuits across the globe are no doubt being investigated by other scholars even as I write this.

[Acknowledgements: This paper is an outcome of the SEPHIS post-doctoral project titled "Democracy and Spectatorship in India: Telugu Popular Cinema and Hong Kong Action Film." I am grateful to a number of people in India and Hong Kong, some of whom I have cited in the paper. I would like to thank in particular B. Mohan Rao (Poorna Pictures), Ramesh Reddy (Sree Suchitra Films), Sreesaila Babu (Raghavendra Films), R. Sobhan (Jyothi Talkies), Feroz Ilias and S. Subramanian (Indo-Overseas Films), Raymond Wong and Chui Yi Leung (Mandarin Films), Wellington Fung, R.K. Bhagawan, Gopi Naidu, S. Ismail, Sampathi Ramana and Satya Shankar. My friends Jagannath, Balasubramaniam and Srinivasulu put me in touch with some of the interviewees in Madanapalle and Tirupathi. G.L.N. Reddy, my collaborator in the SEPHIS project, collected some of the material used here. The CSCS Media Archive digitized the visual material. Parts of this paper were presented at the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University. A more recent version was presented at CSCS. Much of this paper is a direct consequence of discussions with Ashish Rajadhyaksha.]

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