

Traveling Showmen, Makeshift Cinemas: The *Bioscopewallah* and Early Cinema History in India

Sudhir Mahadevan

University of Washington at Seattle

Abstract

This article offers an archeology of vintage, obsolete, pirate and “junk” media forms related to the cinema in India, with the *Bioscopewallah* or traveling picture showman at the center of such an archeology. The article traces the origins of the Bioscope to nineteenth century European entertainment in Calcutta, and follows its numerous subsequent reinventions, as it weaves in and out of the European and Indian worlds, private, commercial and state initiatives, and plays a central role in movie exhibition in early twentieth century Bengal. It concludes by mapping itinerant cinema’s place within India’s contemporary media ecologies. Linking technology and commerce to each other on the ground of seemingly vestigial artifacts from an earlier era, it argues that the obviation of obsolescence, as an historically contingent and geographically variable survival tactic, is critical to the logic of media history in India.

Keywords

Motion picture exhibition, Bioscope, *Bioscopewallah*, traveling cinema, Indian cinema, obsolescence, media history, mass media, Calcutta entertainment history

A considerable proportion of film exhibition in India occurs in itinerant form and in makeshift—and often temporary—establishments rather than in permanent theaters.¹ Many of these are traveling showmen—familarly known as *bioscopewallahs*—who transform the spaces of everyday life into theatrical space, exhibiting moving-images through a combination of often vintage, “obsolete” projection equipment and film scraps disposed of by established studios. These instances compel rather basic historical questions—where did these projectors come from, and how have these methods persisted and remained viable into the present? What genealogies of movie exhibition can we construct, relying it would seem at first glance, only on the “memory of living men”, the projectionists, and the workings of their hands on their apparatuses?²

In answering these questions, I offer a rudimentary media archeology of vintage, obsolete, pirate, and “junk” media forms related to the cinema. Some versions of the bioscope in existence today in India are remnants not of the early twentieth century cinematographic apparatuses, but also of the mid-nineteenth century optical instruments that undergirded practices of European visual entertainment in cities such as Calcutta (Kolkata).³ From an initial consideration of the screen practices that comprised the circuits of nineteenth century European entertainment, I follow the bioscope in its numerous mutations, as it weaves in

BioScope
1(1) 27–47
© Screen South Asia Trust 2010
SAGE Publications
Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, Singapore,
Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/097492760900100106
<http://bioscope.sagepub.com>



and out of the European and Indian worlds, private, commercial, and state initiatives, into the early cinema period and beyond. Drawing on sources of institutional history, I describe the patterns of early film exhibition in Bengal that shaped the viability of itinerant movie exhibition in the early twentieth century, before mapping its place within India's contemporary media ecologies.⁴ In linking technology and commerce to each other and to institutional history on the ground of seemingly vestigial artefacts, I argue in my conclusion that the obviation of obsolescence as an historically contingent and geographically variable survival tactic is critical to the logics of media history in India, and for mapping the relation of ancillary exhibition practices to the film industry as well as the state.

There is however no unbroken line that carries the vintage projector from past to present. Following Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, in their description of the genealogical method, proposed that, "the events that restore a thing to life are not the same that gave rise to it in the first place." (Deleuze, 1977, p. 195, cited in Patton, 2000, p. 97). As a preliminary substantiation of this observation, the density and variety of expertise, mechanical knowledge and scales of enterprise are worth noting here. Showmen such as Mohammed Salim in Kolkata and Feroze and Hanif Bhai in Ahmedabad retrofit their hand-cranked silent-era projectors⁵ for sound, with additional roll mechanisms, second-hand optical readers and photocells, and hand-made speaker boxes. Lenses meant for the astrological reading of palms that cost two rupees, and light bulbs originally meant for use in auto-rickshaws, replace their more expensive first-hand counterparts and suffice just as well. The projector is installed in a large wooden box fashioned with peepholes for individualized viewing, which is carted from locality to locality, catering variably to children and adults alike, itself an inescapably politicized aspect of movie exhibition, I will argue. (Biswas, 2004; Lakhani, 2006; Steinberg, 2007). Such methods take on the dimensions of an "autographic" art, an art of the signature (like painting), defined by action (the projectionist's hand) and "a certain telos", to borrow D.N. Rodowick's words. The work concludes when the projectionist stops cranking the projector and the film ceases to unwind before the lens. The *dispositif* or entire arrangement, incorporating within itself the live performance and transforming the quotidian spaces of thoroughfare into theatrical space, also undermines distinctions between film as a semiological and textual fact and the cinema in all of its institutional, logistical and spatial dimensions. At the same time, the bioscope showing also retains, however compromised, a spatial, and temporal separation between production (of the movie) and its performance (as a screening) that otherwise characterizes the "allographic" or two-stage arts, such as music and the cinema (Rodowick, 2007, pp. 14–15).

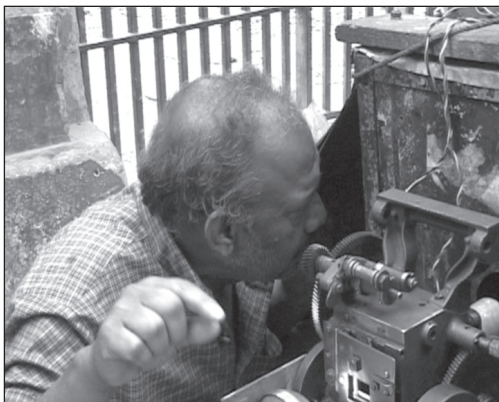
In a slight variant on Salim's practice, Sikandar Gul Muhammed Khan, aka Raja Filmwala, transforms the ground level and first floor of his living quarters in the slums of Mumbai into a cinema hall and projection booth, respectively, while the third level remains his living quarters. As with the previous examples, Raja's "films" comprise "scrap" or junk reels discarded by film studios, which are picked up from the *raddiwala* (garbage/rag-picker) or even from bangle-makers,⁶ and purchased by the kilo more cheaply (Rs 10) than any pirate economy could imagine as a start-up cost of acquiring a print. These are selectively edited and strung together to create a movie-collage of scenes, songs, and dances for the purposes of entertainment cheaper than the cheapest movie ticket. All these showmen escape licensing regimes and entertainment taxes, operating below and invisible to the lowest category of movie theaters in the Indian state's regulatory and classificatory schemes (Grimaud, 2002). Others such as Rau Waghmare, a *bioscopewallah* on the outskirts of Pune, work with even older instruments, exhibiting movie-related still images of Bombay film stars spun on a roll that is also hand-cranked by the operator and viewed through peepholes (Kadam, 2007).

The showmen's own assessments of their future are marked by references to transformations in India's media ecologies. Feroze and Hanif Bhai recall how they survived the challenge to their own livelihoods from television programs such as the televised *Ramayan* and *Chitrahaar*,⁷ but express skepticism at the possibility

of now surviving the onslaught of DVDs and VCDs. This is not, however, a battle between old and new media. Rather, the vintage apparatus of the peripatetic showman whirrs and hums as an object that contains within it, shards of both the past and the future. It binds other media forms in shared affinities with the cinema. Photographers in the Indian fairgrounds today continue to use mid-nineteenth century processing cameras, manual shutters and paper negatives, but nevertheless, can produce an image in a matter of minutes, fulfilling the rather contemporary desire for rapid-access photography even while stymieing pressures of automation.⁸ Likewise, the *bioscopewallah* offers a kind of film-on-demand in the craft mode of production, conflating media in the age of pre and late-capitalism and rendering speculations on the death of film in the age of digital media either supremely outdated or supremely premature.

I propose that we see the bioscope as a nomination for mobile and dynamic practices of movie exhibition that are nevertheless de and re-territorialized in historically specific assemblages (or combinations) of men, machines, expertise, entrepreneurial and institutional forces, and cultural preferences. On the one hand, the contemporary itinerant showman triggers romantic visions of magical “first encounters” with the cinema and of its origins, or at the very least, a sense that such exhibition practices are antique and linked nostalgically to childhood memories.⁹ In this sense, the itinerant moving-picture show stands as an ideal-typical and virtualized, global form, and quite literally so.¹⁰ On the other hand, this virtuality has a causal function in a genealogy. Not prone to any transitive logic, or amenable to a linear succession in time, the bioscopic assemblage is incarnated and re-invented in diverse historical contexts by *bricoleurs* many times, as I will enumerate. As products of multiple determinations, the assemblages of itinerant and makeshift exhibition practices are marked by the quality of an emergent temporality of media, always contingent, unstable, partial and situated, in tension with the ideal-typical character of its global form.¹¹ From this perspective, the apparatuses of the *bioscopewallah*, however long standing, cannot lay claim even to the stability of a material archive. They serve instead, at best, as provisional mnemonic devices for historians.

In an interview, Tim Steinberg, who made *Salim Baba*, the beautifully shot and scored short documentary on Salim (see Images 1 and 2), offers thoughts that confirm that these practices trump notions of linear historical sequence, progress and chronology, complicating any reflexive sense that they testify to “the lost past of cinematic virginity” (Armitage, 2008, p. 41).



Images 1 and 2. Salim and his son conduct film showings for children in the neighborhoods of Kolkata, with a refurbished and retrofitted movie projector ensconced in a rolling wooden cart.

Source: Tim Steinberg’s “Salim Baba” (USA: HBO, 2007).

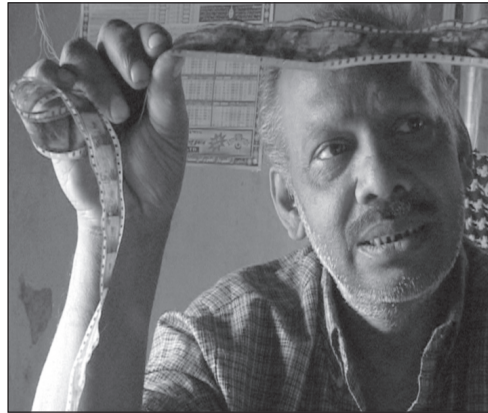


Image 3. Salim holds up a strip of film that may comprise his exhibition program, and examines it against the light. These scraps of film are often procured from *raddiwallahs* [scrap dealers] or bangle-makers who melt discarded reels to produce bangles.

We had all of these ideas of the death of cinema, and he's going to have some great Buster Keaton or John Ford one-reel film that's been waiting since the teens. We had these fantasies that he was the living link to the age of Lumiere and the origins of cinema—how cinematic technology was distributed through the colonial paths. When we got there and we tried to talk to him about Satyajit Ray and the history of cinema, he was very practical. He was like, "I remember those movies vaguely from years ago; they were in black and white. I think I have one black-and-white film left; the rest I just threw away." What he had was from 1989. He was like, "The kids don't want to see that!" He has to make living. So we all had to recalibrate. He kind of humbled us. (Steinberg, 2008) (see Image 3)

In what follows, I will excavate these "colonial paths", to offer a fuller account of the history of early motion picture exhibition practices and the extent to which those circumstances resonate—and persist—in changed circumstances, in the present.

"Europe Shops", Phantasmagoria Shows and the *Bioscopewallah*

From 1840, English tradesmen in Calcutta (now Kolkata) were importing a plethora of objects that were alluring combinations, to borrow Simon Schaffer's words, of "languorous oriental baubles and honest utilitarian labor" (Schaffer, 1996, p. 57). One of the earliest notices from Thacker, Spink and Company in the *Bengal Hurkaru* announced the arrival in Calcutta of daguerreotype cameras, described as "the new art of sun drawing", photogenic boxes "for copying objects by means of the sun", books and periodicals, printed images, water-colors, maps, and optical toys (optical views of the Egyptian pyramids, touted as an "interesting toy for children").¹² There was no lag between Britain and India in the arrival of these new products, apart from a temporal one caused by the logistics of transportation, which was still further shortened by the 1864 opening of the Suez Canal. This alacrity was also a result of the already established organic trade links of India-based

BioScope, 1, 1 (2010): 27–47

private European traders with Britain.¹³ European consumer culture in Calcutta aspired to the latest fads and trends in England. “Europe shops” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emporia of all conceivable luxury goods, hawked and displayed cheese, imported wines and meat, printed images of scenes from England, the latest magazines, and other assorted goods, the same cornucopia that would include camera obscuras and eventually daguerreotypes and magic lanterns.¹⁴

It is no surprise that every manner of optical amusement available to London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to be found in Calcutta as well: some of the contraptions of today’s bioscope shows are enduringly viable remains of those that constituted the nineteenth century amusements. In the city’s venerable Sans Souci Theatre, Messrs C. and J. Trood from London advertised in early 1845 a packed program showing off the new “oxy-hydrogen” microscope followed by a “Biscenascope” showing with the help of Drummond’s light, which was followed in turn by “MAGNIFICENT Transparent Dissolving Views!” (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, February 19, 1841) (see Image 4).

<p>as we have good reasons to believe that it is the strength of only sound but not in those of the authorities at home or in the liberal from us that there is an error in the State of affairs, at any rate, most of the improvements in the arts, may spring from us, and be expected from us, whose occupation is to be the construction of oil and supply additional at multiplying in value, or it follows that as the largest in representing likewise will be the greatest undertaking because the experiment, we may be the chance of a temple.</p> <p>being there exists a large deal with the oversight of regular here in, as in, in the case, rather in under the direct control of the system, according to no middle man. Yes, head of Engineer Officers, in State Proceedings, we are of every more than there is nevertheless in England. Witness in lately strength is nearly in that which exists here, where also there is nearly fanaticism before us, we permitted to the one first at work which involves the truthly restricted in to lay out here area a plain ally. Had the d at Madras, or were 7 person suppose that we W, and indeed, actually not prospect of obtaining information, we maintain witness have been added here at the map will con- of Fort St. George, there for it when an increase, of Officers. Messrs especially favorable line could be the effect of public advantage be e and backwaters in here are those who would be claims on any ad- p, especially with the Tim oblige to meet us person " His Excellency,"</p>	<p>Polytechnic Exhibition. Unprecedented Attraction—Brilliant Travellers. Sans-Souci Theatre.</p> <p>Messrs. C. and J. Trood of the Royal Polytechnic Institution and Adelaide Gallery London, have the honor to announce to the nobility, gentry, and inhabitants of Calcutta, their intention of giving an Evening Exhibition on THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1841, when will be displayed the stupendous powers of their apparatus.</p> <p>OXY-HYDROGEN MICROSCOPE by means of 100 beautiful objects—living and dead—magnified 60 millions of times.</p> <p>After which will be the PAGE MICROSCOPE, the richness of the lights and shadows of this instrument cannot be imagined.</p> <p>To be followed by the COMIC OR LAUGHTER PRO- YOKING BISCENASCOPE,</p> <p>Drummond's "Wonderful Light." Will illuminate the Theatre with dazzling Brilliance with One Jet Only!</p> <p>This "New and Extraordinary Light" might be said to vie in intensity with the sun at noon—day!!</p> <p>MAGNIFICENT Transparent Dissolving Views!!</p> <p>Which will be presented in the following order:— Sun-set after Sunset. The New Royal Exchange. Shades, 3rd Fall of the Chinese St. Mark, Venice Cliff, English Village Scene—Winter. Drope Harbor. Hymen Broom. Ditto Ditto Ditto—Summer. Gossamer—the Sacred Source Hales of Nestle Abbey— of the Ganges. Carnival, with the Old Royal Valley of Sweet Waters, Exchange. Constantinople. Ditto, as it appeared during Backarach, on the Rhine. the Box. Potsdam and Broom of Rains after the Fire. Chateau, Constantinople. His Royal Highness Prince Last Interview of Louis Albert by the Founder XVth with his family. the case of the New Royal Portraits—Prince Albert. Exchange (containing many Rap. the most parti- cular portraits). Lord Palmerston. The above Views are replete with extraordinary beauty and interest, executed by those celebrated artists, Smith and Ames, of the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London, on glass, in transparent oils; and will be presented by the aid of the Oxy-Hydrogen Light, and powerful Lenses upon a screen covering a surface of 20 feet square; and later after several various parts of the world a snow fall to be highly interesting.</p> <p>— Advertiser.</p> <p>Boxes, 5 Rs. Stalls, 4 Rs. Pit, 2 Rs. Children half price. Tickets to be had at Messrs. Wilson's and Bodley's, Hulse, Sanders and Co.'s, Pillitter, & Co., and at the Theatre. Begins at 7, and commences at 8 o'clock precisely. ES For farther particulars program.</p>	<p>as they will look on- ing a mark of the good of those, with whom he there is generally a g- certy in these Moha- not characterise similar own indolence with. a good deal of private heging afterwards, of leader, and "can't help work; but, in the Mo- the results of honest g feeling. The impulse in piece feels as much de- cipient in receiving. T- costly—but it is more v-</p> <p>Our Bombay friends we wish we could say: zens. In a paragraph from the <i>Bombay Tim</i> is in circulation for the to meet the expenses in the gardens of the A. Also, for the glory and of British India, then Horticultural Society, ed there to promote a placed a rapid river be Gardens of the Camps</p> <p>It must be admitted not only originally tool join, the led in matter Society was established we except the Asiatic S exclusively oriental— name; and now our is side of India are to re- to propose this beauti- the dulce—moonlight i and Horticultural Soc them all manner of we have no Agricultural dens for a public prom cannot, therefore, follo have set us by agitating in those beautiful nig' says.</p> <p>The moonlight scene i</p> <p>It appears from an day from a Singapore Commerce there, has a taln for the Sitala a</p>
---	---	--

Image 4. *The Bengal Hurkaru*, February 19, 1841.

The terms, which overlapped, indicated recent innovations in the technology of magic lantern entertainment. “Dissolving views”, perfected in 1818, enabled audiences to see one image “dissolve” into the subsequent one with the aid of a metallic shutter that closed upon one image while at the same time opening another image up for projection. The Biscenascope was a further improvement on the method of presenting dissolving views, since it involved a magic lantern with at least two optical units, each with its own lens and light source so that as one image was to be replaced with the other, the light sources could be correspondingly dimmed and brightened, creating again a sense of continuity across images. Oxy-hydrogen and Drummond’s light were references to limelight, a form of illumination that transformed the possibilities of visual entertainment. This made the dissolves between images much smoother, enabling, with its brighter and steadier light,

the projection of microscopic views of the sub-visible world and becoming the key method of illuminating buildings until the arrival of electricity. All of these improvements were ultimately proto-cinematic, nascent illusions of movement that incorporated a narrative development in time and space. The more loosely applied name for such theatrical and spectacular presentations of the magic lantern was the phantasmagoria show (Altick, 1978, pp. 219–20).¹⁵ The Troods' show in Calcutta, therefore, condensed a variety of recent technological breakthroughs in visual entertainment into one show.

The Sans Souci show's content included 21 views, of which five were clearly meant to present a sense of continuity in time and space: "Cornhill, with the old Royal Exchange", the Exchange up in flames, the ruins of the Exchange after the fire, Prince Albert laying the foundation stone ("embracing many excellent portraits"), and the new Royal Exchange. The solitary "local" view was "Gungatree—the sacred source of the Ganges," sharing its place in the line-up of slides with views of Constantinople and the Rhine, "Last Interview of Louis XVI with family," Dieppe Harbour, and Byron's Dream.

The tickets could not have been cheap in 1845, at Rs 5 for the boxes, Rs 4 for the stalls, and Rs 2 for the "pits", possibly affordable only by the poorer soldiery. These could be purchased at prominent European hotels in Calcutta. The *Bengal Hurkaru* reviewed one of these shows:

The apparatus, which is on the principle of an enormous triple magic lantern, lit by the Drummond or Limelight was placed behind the governor-general's box and threw its pictures upon a screen occupying the whole front of the stage. In many instances, these pictures, which were beautifully executed and brilliantly colored, covered the entire surface of the screen, and had a most illusive effect, which was much heightened by the performance of appropriate music during the period of their exhibition. In most cases, the melting of one scene into another was perfection itself, and seemed like the effect of magic.... A series of folk dancers provided much amusement. Not the least interesting part of the exhibition was the very curious and beautiful Chinese fire-works the formation of which was certainly a Chinese puzzle to the spectators; even as regards their appearance only, they must be seen to be understood.

....This exhibition will assuredly become a very popular one.... It is pleasant to be enabled to say that there was no row last night, nor was any advantage taken of the twilight which prevailed for the perpetration of practical or other jokes, but all went off in a most orderly and decorous manner. (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, September 13, 1845, p. 303)

The review illuminates the variety entertainment format, the novelty of watching images projected on a screen, the remarkable illusion of watching images dissolve into one another, as well as a hint of the social composition of the audience, suggesting that the dimmed lights may have been occasion for rowdy behavior by those in the "pits". These shows continued into the 1850s with one commercial photographer, J.W. Newland, coming to prominence and receiving favorable reviews in the local press (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, February 12, 1851).

Along with the vast variety of photographic goods now advertised for sale in the Calcutta newspapers, retailers also advertised phantasmagoria lanterns, complete with sets of dissolving views, moveable slides, astronomical slide sets, and the "lucernal microscope" (also with a slide set for projection) (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, June 23, 1845). Some instruments such as the "panoramic machine or print examiner" advertised by prominent booksellers Thacker, Spink and Company, were described in detail:

This is an entirely new invention for the purpose of showing off small pictures, sketches, drawings or paintings. When a series of Views are exhibited, they are tacked on to a piece of calico to any length, and wound round two rollers, which are inserted horizontally inside the machine. On looking through the lens at the back the view is reflected, magnified in front with such vividness and the perspective so perfectly thrown out that it appears as if the real object

were looked at. By turning a handle at the back the views may be moved so as to be seen from end to end. Single Prints and Paintings may also be put in for inspection. Persons fond of drawing and painting will find an endless source of amusement in this instrument, while for families where there are juveniles, its attractions are immense. They are made to accommodate pictures, 6 inches, 9 inches and 12 inches in height and are very handsome in appearance. (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, March 15, 1853) (see Image 5)

Y. MARCH 15, 1853.

Panoramic Machine, or Print Examiner.

THIS is an entirely new invention for the purpose of showing off small Pictures, Sketches, Drawings, or Paintings. When a Series of Views are exhibited, they are tacked on to a piece of calico to any length, and wound round two rollers, which are inserted horizontally inside the Machine. On looking through the lens at the back the view is reflected, magnified in front with such vividness, and the perspective so perfectly thrown out, that it appears as if the real object were looked at. By turning a handle at the back the views may be moved, so as to be seen from end to end. Single Prints and Paintings may also be put in for inspection. Persons fond of Drawing and Painting will find an endless source of amusement in this Instrument; whilst for families, where there are juveniles, its attractions are immense. They are made to accommodate Pictures, 6 inches, 9 inches, and 12 inches in height, and are very handsome in appearance.

Price, including a Roll of Views:—

For Pictures 6 inches in height	Rs. 75
" 9 " " 	Rs. 85
" 12 " " 	Rs. 100

(347). THACKER, SPINK & CO.

Image 5. *The Bengal Hurkaru*, March 15, 1853.

While similar to a Zoetrope or a Praxinoscope in its employment of a roll-mechanism as the image holder (in this case a piece of cloth),¹⁶ the advertised contraption differed from the other two since it included a magnifying lens and a viewfinder fitted on a box that held the roll of images inside.

These methods of optical entertainment had Bengali variants, including the much older “mechanical pictures”, which referred not to two-dimensional images, but to three-dimensional figures mechanized into motion, as in the waxworks and mechanical automata which were all the rage in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England. An indignant letter writer in Calcutta (Kolkata) demanded that definitions of obscenity be expanded beyond print and images to include what he witnessed outside the home of a wealthy Bengali: automated figures of gods and goddesses that are, to this day, part of the attractions of the annual Durga and Kali Puja:

[A] range of figures as large as life extending each side of the road to the distance of a quarter of a mile. Very many of these figures were fitted with wires, and set in motion by men, and witnessed by thousands of men, women and children. Their obscenity was exhibited not in print or engravings but in action. A respectable native observed to the writer that to see these figures in motion was as sweet as honey. There is a large fair held annually between thirty and forty miles from Calcutta. All around the enclosure where the fair is held are placed figures that are suggestive of everything that can pollute the mind. (*The Bengal Hurkaru*, July 28, 1855)

The panoramic machine advertised by Thacker and Company found its equivalent in pats or the scroll paintings that were accompanied by the oral narration of the *patua* as the images painted with gouache

and fruit dyes illustrating the narrative were progressively unrolled. Variants of the apparatus can still be found in India today, as revealed by Prashant Kadam in his documentary on Rau Waghmare, the traveling *bioscopewallah* (see Image 6). Waghmare's bioscope is remarkably similar to the Panoramic Examiner of an earlier century: an octagonal tin box with viewfinders all around, a handle for hand-cranking the roll mechanism, and the roll mechanism itself within the box for holding photographs—this time views of Bombay's teeming urban life, as well as images of major film stars, marking yet another space (along with music CDs and cassettes, billboards, pirated VCDs, and DVDs) for the transformation of Bombay's cinema into new media and renewed content (see Images 7 and 8). In its similarities to the Thacker panoramic examiner, Waghmare's apparatus encapsulates the diverse strands of screen practices, of European and indigenous pedigree, that preceded the cinema—the mechanical pictures, magic lanterns, phantasmagorias, scroll paintings, the chromolithographed image, dissolving dioramas, panoramas, Parsi theater, and photography, and amplifies our sense of the “multi-directional intersections” of media within which the cinema serves, as Tom Gunning put it, as one “switching point” among others (Gunning, 2002, p. 17).



Images 6 and 7. On the outskirts of Pune, Rau Waghmare's livelihood depends on a viewing device similar to Thacker, Spink and Company's Panoramic Examiner, and catering to children. See Prashant Kadam, *The Bioscopewallah*, 2007.

Source: www.visualcultures.com.



Image 8. Waghmare's Bioscope translates Bombay and its cinema into new media and renewed content.

Source: Prashant Kadam, *The Bioscopewallah*, 2007.

Early Cinema and the Emergence of Traveling Showmen

Early accounts in India, as elsewhere, framed the cinema as the latest stage of a preceding set of screen practices, such as the magic lantern. The *Times of India's* review of the first motion picture screening at Bombay's Watson's Hotel on July 7, 1896 is well known as an "advanced stage" of "the art of photography and the magic lantern...something like seven or eight hundred photographs being thrown on the screen within the space of a minute" (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980, p. 5). The first mention of the cinema in the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India* in 1896 was also premised on a refutation of an argument that the magic lantern was in its "decadence" or decline. "The latest phase of the lantern at home is the moving picture," wrote the editor.¹⁷ He then went on to describe Lumière's *L'Arrivée d'un train en la Gare de la Ciotat*, and *Le Débarquement du Congrès de Photographie à Lyon*, although it is not clear where he may have seen these movies and when. The description was followed by a review of his experience watching Edison's kinesiograph in Calcutta. The kinesiograph scenes described resemble scenes from the Edwin Porter photographed *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) made for Edison, although the journal issue itself is dated July 1896.¹⁸ I reproduce an extended section of the article, for it captures I think, a template of "first encounters" with the cinema that is reproduced, over and over again in contemporary documentary and fictionalized accounts, including in Tim Steinberg's work and elsewhere: the conspicuous work of the "decrepit" apparatus that hums to life, the bewitching nature of the images that apparatus nevertheless affords, the visual pleasure interrupted and then resumed by the operator's tasks of hand-cranking and reloading the film, and the "performance" of man and machine that binds all this together.¹⁹

I had an opportunity last cold weather of viewing Edison's Kinesiograph in Calcutta. It was certainly extraordinary because it depicted what I have just been describing. But the pictures were too small and the duration of the scene too short, to altogether satisfy me. Looking down through an object glass into a breast-high box one was first conscious of a whirring sound, then a sparkling light, and presently a picture about 2 in. square appeared. It was a supposed scene at a fire: a fireman in glistening helmet clammers up a very short ladder, and limp female forms appear above him and are handed down over his shoulder one after the other with a rapidity only more startling than the decorous adjustment of their garments. Having caught the hang of it, I was about to settle down comfortably to a good view when the whirring suddenly ceased, out when the lamp, and I appealed to the showman. There's nothing gone wrong – that's all he said. Oh! That's all is it? It looks very indistinct, and the movements are too rapid to be grasped with advantage. Mayn't I have it all over again? The operator was very obliging, and I had a second performance. When I had taken breath I began to ask questions. There was an absence of smoke, bustle, crowd, &c., about the fire which was more suggestive of a carefully planned performance in a well-lighted studio than a scene taken at a real fire – and then I bethought me of a description I had read of Edison's works where there was a studio for acting of these pieces. Be this as it may, the scene was stirring enough in all conscience, and I gathered that it took a continuous chain or band of 1400 celluloid positives to represent it. This band ran under an illuminated screen below which was an electric lamp – and to bring out the scene required a special camera invented by Edison. But the large moving pictures I have described is, I take it, an advance on this Kinesiograph idea of Edison's – and a very remarkable advance it seemingly is. Seeing that all kinds of scenes from life and from Nature may be so reproduced, no one will care to aver that the lantern is showing signs of a decrepit age.²⁰

I will return to this account later in this article. By the 1920s the lanterns were, indeed, far from in decline. The deputy instructor of visual instruction of Bombay presidency testified before the government-constituted Cinematograph Committee that his department had been utilizing lantern slide shows for educational purposes from around 1910 and that the department owned 110 lantern apparatuses. Asked if the cinema would

be useful for educational purposes, he argued that the cinema would be a useful “adjunct” to the lantern slide show especially where still image slides would be unable to give a “concrete idea” of the movements of glaciers, earthquakes, and volcanoes.²¹

Traveling cinema shows became the most viable method for Indians in the commercial film enterprise as well. Focusing on British early film history, Michael Chanan has argued that the cinema produced a distinct kind of commodity compared to the photograph or the gramophone. With the cinema, the apparatus and film did not pass directly into the hands of the customer, unlike the mass consumption of photography predicated on the individual purchase of the hand camera (Chanan, 1980, p. 27). However, the impact of the Kodak hand camera in transforming the retail cultures of photography in Bengal, and displacing the supremacy of the photo-studio, was minimal at best.²² As for the cinema, the inability of film producers and exhibitors in Bengal to marshal resources to build and exploit urban theatrical venues, resulted in a more dispersed and localized set of practices that ensured the continuing viability of the traveling cinema show. Put negatively, neither the cinema nor photography in India hewed entirely to the contours of a rationalized consumer culture and commodity production. The apparatus of the cinema may not have passed into the hands of the consumer in Bengal. But far longer than in Britain and the United States, the commodity-logics of itinerant movie-exhibition in India were predicated on a ceaseless revivification of the material base of the cinematic apparatus—the recycling of second-hand kinoscopes and projectors as well as the resort to pirated and “junk films” that had already undergone extensive exhibition and were often deemed unfit for consumption by an anxious colonial state. Such practices, crucially, took the cinema to its scattered audiences, rather than building theaters and expecting the masses to flock to the cinema. It is in this last respect that the cinema’s emergence in Bengal departed from Britain or the US, and emulated the personalized retail patterns of consumer culture of the early industrial era as outlined by Jean-Christophe Agnew and others (Agnew, 1993).

Bengal was, paradoxically, both proximate and distant from the European metropolis. While having unimpeded and rapid access to the machines of mechanical reproduction—print, photography, cinema—as a major colonial port city, other factors nevertheless conspired to ensure that early cinema history in Calcutta and beyond would neither mirror its European counterparts, nor be so divergent as to be unrecognizable when viewed from European vantage points.

Where did early cinema equipment come from? The advent of ready-to-use, factory-produced, and mass manufactured photographic materials in the 1880s had ushered in a direct engagement with the colonial market by foreign manufacturers who appointed agents or opened branches in India. Many of these, in addition to more established photographic supply firms, updated their inventories to supply motion picture equipment as well. By 1907, for instance, the French firm Pathé had opened its own office in Calcutta for supplying film titles as well as equipment. This established an early dominance in the film import and supply business that would last till the World War I years.²³ Other companies in Calcutta that supplied equipment included The Coronation Bioscope Electric Company, which claimed in an advertisement in 1915 to be “the largest dealers in cinema machines, films of every description viz. exclusive, feature, dramatic, comic, present war topicals, etc. Sole agent for Kinetophone (Talking Motion Pictures) for India, Burma, Ceylon.”²⁴

Nevertheless, before 1910, access to apparatus for interested Indians often occurred through less institutionally organized routes. Mail-order catalogs, second-hand purchase from traveling foreign showmen, and borrowed equipment characterized their entry. Hiralal Sen (1866–1917), one of the first Indian filmmakers, may have purchased his first “cinematograph” projector from John Range and Sons, London, for Rs 5,000 (Banerjee, 1990, p. 294). Sen saw the earliest motion picture exhibitions in Calcutta by Professor Stevenson, a traveling showman, and may have made his first film with equipment borrowed from Professor Stevenson (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen, 1994, p. 210). When Sen’s company folded in 1911 under competition from

Madan Theaters, he sold his cameras to the men who started the Aurora Cinema Company, another Calcutta-based film producing firm in 1911 (Banerjee, 1990, p. 294).²⁵

Exhibition venues in the first decade were diverse. Films were incorporated into variety shows in bazaars and fairgrounds, sandwiched between theatrical productions, snake dances, and opera shows. Hiralal Sen had screened his early films at the homes of wealthy landlords in Bengal, at the All India Industrial Exhibition of 1900, and at private societies and clubs such as The Dalhousie Institute. Later, as he turned to commercial exhibition, he screened his shorts during the intermissions of staged Bengali plays before moving to screening films as exclusive programs (Banerjee, 1990, p. 293). Other film exhibitors announced that they could hold screenings at “weddings, garden parties, or other entertainments, at moderate charges” (Ray Choudhury, 1992, p. 119, fn. 14). Magic shows were equally important in Bombay and in Calcutta as venues (Ray Choudhury, 1992, p. 103; Garga, 1996, p. 12). The Lumière screenings at Bombay’s Watson’s Hotel in 1896 were therefore the exception, not the norm, in being stand-alone shows comprising only the cinema as their main attraction.

It is however the persistence of these diverse venues, and their dispersal into wider non-urban domains into the 1930’s and beyond, that separates Bengal from Britain or the US and even from Bombay, which developed a robust urban film culture by the 1920s.²⁶ Between 1922 and 1927, Bengal had many more touring cinemas than Bombay for each of the five years, with 36 touring cinemas in Bengal in 1927, compared to only five in Bombay.²⁷ In 1927, permanent cinemas amounted to approximately 275 (including seasonal cinemas, but excluding Burmese permanent and seasonal cinemas).²⁸ In comparison, licensed traveling cinemas amounted to 354 in number (again excluding Burma).²⁹

How had this come about? Until the advent of sound, 90 percent of all films screened in India were of foreign origin. For Indian film producers, by the 1920s, re-investment of profits from film exhibition into film production served as a major source of capital, the other source being indigenous merchant communities investing in film from other lines of trade. However, acquiring capital for initiating film production, and access to exhibition venues, were barriers to entry for those without easy access to start-up funds from other enterprises.³⁰ Bengal and Bombay underwent somewhat different trajectories in this regard. Bombay in the nineteenth century was central to the cotton and opium trades in which a number of indigenous merchant communities—the Bhatias, Parsis, Gujarati merchants as well as the immigrant Baghdadi Jews—played important roles, including during the cotton boom of the 1860s, spurred on by events related to the American Civil War. These merchants played a significant role in investing in the film business subsequent to the wartime boom of the World War I years that also marked the entry of indigenous capital into the circuits of imperial trade and commerce. In Bengal, on the other hand, European agency houses controlled major trade and manufacture, although not without exceptions. By the time of World War I, educated Bengalis, enthused by what one historian calls a “strident technocratic nationalism”, had ventured into advanced lines of manufacture (newspapers, pharmaceuticals, electric bulbs, consumer goods such as hair oil and cosmetics) and indeed into film (Goswami, 1992, pp. 249–50).³¹ Nevertheless, they were often dependent on imperial, institutional sources for capital that proved unavailable. The imperial banks would only lend to Europeans and by the second decade of the twentieth century, with the steady onslaught of foreign films whose costs were already paid for in the foreign home markets, and the comparatively high cost of Indian film production, Indian film companies found it difficult to make a profit that would enable them to stay in the business. The disparities in the tariffs of imported exposed films ready for exhibition and tariffs for raw film stock ensured that an Indian film was about 10 times as expensive to produce as importing a foreign one.³² The Indian firms such as Madan Theaters, that dominated the film business in the pre-1931 (sound) era, were those that not only had access to the supply networks for foreign films, but

also possessed enough theaters to be able to set the terms for hiring other producers' films and the terms for renting out their own productions to outside exhibitors.

Faced with the difficulty of recouping the costs of production through exhibition venues in Calcutta, competing with the vast varieties of the French, British, and American films that dominated Indian screens, and unable to avail of institutional sources of financing and capital, film producers and exhibitors chose the option of touring cinemas, setting in place the distinctive character of film exhibition in Bengal. S.N. Guha of the Bengal Educational Film Company observed that while tents were expensive, canopies and open-air exhibition were the predominant locations for touring cinemas. The cinema could be as cheap or as expensive as resources would permit, as the following exchange reveals:

Chairman: What about the poverty of the people? Do you think they can afford it?

S.N. Guha: This is a country where one can feed thousands of people, where rich European countries can't. We will make them sit on the grass and see it in the open air. We will make it cheaper.³³

With the primary barrier to entry into the film business being capital accumulation, itinerant cinema exhibitors in turn became one of the key consumers of "junk" films (films deemed unfit for exhibition because degraded or damaged), since they could not afford the expensive first-run or new prints for exhibition. In 1910, an American consul general assessing the market for American producers suggested that the used films dealer would do well in India (Thompson, 1985, p. 48). Where did the junk films come from? London was at the center of the film trade until World War I, an entrepôt for film reels to be shipped to the rest of the world. Imperialism itself provided the infrastructure for London's supremacy as well as for lubricating the networks for pirated films, of which the junk film was perhaps the most degraded version. As a *Moving Picture World* article put it, looking back in 1919 at London's centrality in the pre-war years:

London, with a well-oiled organization, established primarily for the purpose of carrying on trade in all lines with the many English colonies which in turn were local distribution centers, was the logical city in which to sell anything intended for the foreign trade by the 'job lot' process. (Thompson, 1985, p. 31)

The law firm of Messrs. Craige, Blunt, and Caroe wrote in response to a solicitation from the US Consul in India that the absence of a copyright agreement or treaty between the UK and the US meant that the many second-hand, recycled prints of American films coming in via the UK would have to be registered in the UK and in India.³⁴ Pirated prints originated, we might add, precisely at the point in the itinerary of the film print where legitimate rights were conferred. As one Indian entrepreneur put it:

Some exhibitor in the foreign countries having made a legitimate arrangement to exhibit a motion picture by contract with the original suppliers or their Agents, thus obtains possession of a film. While this film is in his possession he causes to be made a photographic duplicate of the film in his possession. The copies or reprints from the wrongfully made film are placed on the market and sold. Such unauthorized copies are called pirated films.³⁵

Pirated prints served as a measure of the tensions between an empire, its colony, and its global competitors such as the US. The indeterminate "nationality" of internationally circulating pirated films testified to the problem of reconciling territory with trade, of empire "as a static point of production" versus empire as a "mobile space of British enterprise", in Priya Jaikumar's perfect characterization (Jaikumar, 2006, p. 50).

The use of worn-out or deteriorated junk prints on the other hand, marked the intersection of illicit circulation and state regulation within India, embodied in the discursive realization of audiences by exhibitors and

government officials alike. ICC interviewers linked the quality of the film experience to that of junk films and in turn directed attention to public health concerns. They issued recommendations to “re-censor” films on “medical grounds” either because the damage in the film was so great or the use of old machinery with inexperienced projectionists resulted in the “flicker” effect that was harmful for the eyes. The discussion revealed the extent to which the state sought to regulate the cinema, as well as, the assumptions regarding audiences and tastes.³⁶ One official wondered if additional legislation might be needed to control the use of old machines, beyond the licensing system already in place. Distributors’ responses, however, revealed that policing the use of junk films faced a far more intractable problem, that of identifying a junk film as such: “I know traveling showmen who purchase condemned films from our stocks. Of course we are not selling. They purchased condemned stock and they show it by cutting pieces here and there.”³⁷

The infantilization of audiences by the state in these discussions is noteworthy, especially in light of the importance of children for the contemporary itinerant bioscope show. Indeed, by the 1940s, reports on the need for visual education posited homologies between technology, demographics, territory, and developmental infrastructure. In 1938 for instance, a committee appointed to explore visual education in the Central Provinces proposed four schemes—two for rural and two for urban areas. Rural, motorized roads would be served by mobile cinema vans targeting adults. Rural, non-motorized roads would be served by magic lantern and film slides mostly for children but also adults; 16 mm films would be employed for middle and high-school children in “Anglo-vernacular” schools in urban areas, while urban commercial theaters would be enlisted for educational films for adults, on a compulsory basis.³⁸ Given that until 1994 the post-independence Indian state made it compulsory to screen educational shorts before the main feature in commercial theaters, the legacy of such initiatives was far-reaching (Roy, 2007, p. 34). These elements of the longer history of itinerant practices insert the contemporary *bioscopewallah*’s materials into a labile history. Salim’s screening program is likewise customized to locality, as he screens songs or trailers depending on local preferences. The demographics of itinerant or traveling exhibition practices ensure that the cinematic or proto-cinematic apparatus veers between adult optical curiosity or toy, an apparatus of commercial entertainment, a pedagogical tool for children or a bit of all of these, depending on context and period.

The scarcity of permanent movie theaters has been a persistent backdrop to the history of movie exhibition. The colonial government did make attempts at government subventions, such as providing loans for the construction of movie theaters, primarily conceived for utilizing the cinema as a tool for public education. Theater construction remained marginal, however, to the post-independence Indian government’s developmental, “nation-building” objectives. A moratorium on “non-essential building” in the 1950s restricted the construction of new movie theaters, a circumstance effects of which remain with us today (Govil, 2005, p. 426). Given the size of its annual movie-going public, and despite being the largest film industry in the world in terms of the number of films produced each year (approximately 800), India has one of the lowest ratios of screens to population—13 screens per one million people.³⁹ Available figures suggest that not only has there been an increase of touring cinemas ‘every year’ from 1950 to 1986, the proportion of traveling cinemas to the total number of cinemas in India has also increased.⁴⁰ The most recent developments, such as the multiplexes that are designed to coordinate with high budget releases and rationalize the release of prints across screens in such a way as to maximize capacity utilization, also reshape urban life as an aspiration toward a globalized consumer culture, this time with support from the post-economic liberalization Indian state. This is a point worth making, for just as the traveling cinemas of the early twentieth century remind us that the film experience was hardly tethered to urban spaces, the multiplex “deploys new forms of differentiation between urban and rural spaces within India” (Govil, 2005, p. 457), recalling official attempts in the pre-independence period that I cited above. Smaller cities have become the target of multiplex and mall developers. Related

digital cinema initiatives have been particularly targeted at theaters in smaller towns, as a way of short-circuiting the exhibition time-lag that results not just in severely degraded celluloid prints reaching the lowest class theaters in the exhibition food-chain, but also in pirated DVDs and VCDs. Multiplexes also update colonial homologies technologically but without a substantive change in the hierarchies that tie media consumption to the management of populations. They offer a rationale for imagining digital film delivery methods (in short, “new media” formats) for exhibitors in the smaller towns that would render decrepit and pirated media obsolete. Thus, the relation between film-as-commodity and the exhibition contexts within which it realizes value, through a recouping of its production costs, depends on conspicuous but unstable relations between licit, illicit and decrepit prints, each category of which demarcates distinct sets of assemblages.

Obviating Obsolescence: The Logics of Media History in South Asia

Analogies between present and past do not always square up. In scale and method, showmen such as Salim Baba and Raja Filmwala cannot be seen as comparable to the present-day traveling tent-show exhibitor (the more obvious successor to the traveling cinema of the early twentieth century), who, easily enumerable and licensed by the state, can rapidly rustle up the infrastructure for serving many hundreds if not thousands of spectators by drawing on local workmen and contractors at every stop.⁴¹ By contrast, the *Bioscopewallah* is an instance of the working of a logic I will call the obviation of obsolescence. I use that word not as if it were a state of being, immanent to and inevitable in the process of technological change, nor so that it serves as old-fashioned ethnographic fodder for theories of slow-moving societies where cultural inertia transforms vestigial modes into aesthetic practices. Instead, I suggest we see obsolescence as a historically variable and geographically varied strategy for film exhibition, one conceived as a calculated and deliberate mode of commodity-production and consumption.

Giles Slade observes that the strategies of advertising, branding, packaging, and planned obsolescence (whether through technological innovation or stylistic product updates as in the case of automobiles) were ways of tackling the problem of the overproduction of commodities by ensuring a process of repetitive consumption through the invention of disposability (Slade, 2006). The description of the Kinetoscope, while no doubt attesting to what Neil Harris has famously called the “operational aesthetic” (Harris, 1981, p. 57) or a technical fascination with how machines worked, also puts on frontal display the repetitive consumption instigated by this “film performance” and by the sheer precariousness of the apparatus itself: “Mayn’t I have it all over again? The operator was very obliging, and I had a second performance.”⁴²

Seen as a tactic, planned obsolescence is central to the history of early cinema as well, with ramifications. The authors of a recent volume on the economics of film argue that the evolution of a system of film rentals or exchanges rather than outright sales, the international expansion of film distribution networks, and the creation of second-hand markets, ensured a working system that would carry a film print from the first release to eventual detritus, finding audiences at every stage of its life. Meanwhile, a steady stream of new films would draw more audiences to the theaters under the lure of novelty, even as the existing ones would be managed through the hierarchical chain of exhibition practices (Sedgwick and Pokorny, 2005, pp. 13–14). Such a schematization highlights a paradoxical economy of thrift (every print must be utilized, production must keep pace with consumption, especially given that the natural life of a reel of film rarely keeps pace with its itinerary through the exhibition cycle) and excess (in repetitive consumption practices and the integration of disposability—albeit a managed one—into the film print’s itinerary).

Raja Filmwala's tactics mark a radical departure from this economy. Even as he incorporates repetitive consumption into the screening cycles of a normal day of business, his practice depends on circumventing obsolescence. Not having the luxury of acquiring access to the legitimate chains of the film enterprise, he extracts value from the film reel even in its death throes, discarding the unusable portions of the scraps purchased from the *raddiwallah*, and fashioning the usable ones into a concatenation of action sequence, song and dance, and drama.⁴³ As Grimaud notes, in order to avoid entertainment taxes that would be charged even from a C-class theater, as well as to escape the legal action he would face for conducting film screenings in his residential dwelling, Raja Filmwala charges the very minimum possible for a ticket—10 paisa for every 10 minutes of screening that is followed by a brief enforced break. This runs for a total of 14 hours of screening time a day but avoids the semblance of a regular 3-hour film screening. The result is that not only is this a movie-going experience consumed in fragments (Grimaud notes the constant movement and hustle of people in and out of the tiny hall) but Raja also makes far more money than he would if he were to hold a regular 3-hour screening. In a perfect corollary to the re-animated film scraps, what would normally be a 3-hour screening is itself extended into 14 hours of projection, and thus magnified in overall value even if the price of admission is kept absurdly low. Grimaud reminds us that Raja's pricing strategy "has no equivalent in the legal sphere" and that in the process, Raja earns "repeat audiences", a much valued demographic for established film producers as well. Waghmare, Salim Baba, Hanif Bhai and others replicate the pragmatic calculus that predicates every show on such one-to-one transactional values.

At the same time, the behemoth film industries in India themselves offer an inescapable frame of reference for the *bioscopewallah*, including their use of words such as "house-full" to describe a good day of business (Steinberg, 2007). The screening "program" mimics the circulation of films in and through Indian permanent theaters—snippets of Jurassic Park dubbed in Hindi, Gujarati mythologicals, longstanding box-office successes such as Sholay and the more recent fare featuring stars such as Govinda and Shah Rukh Khan (Steinberg, 2007). Given the social hierarchies and exclusions enacted in permanent movie theaters (Srinivas, 2000), perhaps the traveling and makeshift cinema shows, open in principle to anyone willing to fork out the low ticket price, enact literally tokenistic and piecemeal departures from such hierarchies. Perhaps too, as an assemblage, we can think of ancillary exhibition practices as akin to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of minor literature, defined not as being written in a minor language, but as minority constructions within the major language (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 16) of the commercial film industry. Ravi Sundaram's discussion of urban techno-cultures in Delhi and Bangalore as forms of "recycled modernity", in stark contrast to the elite cyber cultures of IT corporations, offers a descriptive vocabulary that particularly resonates with the material presented here. Relying on used or junk hardware foraged from long-standing single-commodity markets for computer parts, as well as pirated software, the urban techno-culture draws its energies from a culture of innovation as a survival strategy, ad-hoc discovery and informally acquired technological knowledge. As with the practices discussed in this article, this techno-culture has no discrete spaces of its own and no self-defined oppositional political stance. It also has scant regard, Sundaram writes, for the modernist premium on originality. Moreover, unlike the grand technological plans of the erstwhile Nehruvian developmental state (recall my discussion earlier of emergent temporalities), it is not future oriented. Crucially, it takes place in the quotidian domains of the everyday and is characterized by the striking retreat of the state from this domain, a feature that finds its corollary in the invisibility of makeshift cinema for the state's classificatory gaze (Sundaram, 2001). Elsewhere, Sundaram has argued similarly for two layers in the contemporary media landscape—that of elite media empires, and "a dynamic, informal and often illegal media space of urban India, which has, for all practical purposes, retailed the new cultural constellation to the mass of citizens" (Sundaram, 2005, p. 57). Inserted into the folds of a wider set of contemporaneous developments

and arguments regarding the politics and logic of media transformations in South Asia, junk prints, vintage and obsolete projectors, and makeshift cinemas enable us to outline micropolitical and varying scales of film enterprise provoked by differential access to the mainstays of the film business, that has characterized the history of the cinema in India. Beyond this, the *bioscopewallah* provokes a closer examination of the practices that preceded the emergence of the cinema in India, a media archeology that is far more historiographically inclusive than has hitherto been the case. As Brian Larkin has argued, different epistemic structures, different “genealogies” (Larkin, 2008, pp. 79, 81) of practices mark the ontology of the cinema as highly contingent upon location. Indeed, the genealogies I have offered here sought to theorize not just in time (the distinction between “early cinema” and “late cinema”) but also as Larkin proposed, across space by foregrounding provisional distinctions between Bengal and Bombay, between urban, small town, and rural spaces, and by situating developments in Bengal as a consequence of its status as a node in a contingent network of locations. Freed from the ethnographic present, the material infrastructures of modern film exhibition practices yield insight into the early film history as well as their own moment.

Notes

1. A spate of recent documentary films and a limited number of newspaper reports and academic studies, have taken up these instances as subject matter. For films, see Lakhani (2006), Steinberg (2007), Kadam (2007), and Gaulke (2006). For various commentaries on the traveling showman, I direct the reader to Armitage (2008), Biswas (2004), Grimaud (2002), and Steinberg (2008). I draw on these films and essays in this article and cite them as I proceed further.
2. The phrase belongs to Bronislaw Manilowski. See Cohn (1987, p. 55).
3. We must expand our imagination of the “screen practices” that predated the cinema in India, beyond the constellation of indigenous—albeit hybrid—forms that informed some of the key genres, iconography, and imaginations of what the cinema was to substantiate in early twentieth century South Asia. I direct the reader to the scholarship on Parsi commercial theater, the chromolithographic printed image, the scroll paintings and mass picture production of Bengal, and their links to early Indian cinema. See Kapur (1989), Kapur (1993), Rajadhyaksha (1986), Pinney (2004), and Guha-Thakurta (1992).
4. My arguments primarily pertain to Calcutta and Bengal province, the focus of my research thus far. There were significant differences between Bengal and Bombay provinces, between Calcutta and Bombay cities that we ought to take seriously toward more nuanced, regionally differentiated histories of early cinema in India. I elaborate on this later in the article.
5. The projector in one of these instances (Kolkata) is of uncertain and probably more recent provenance than its improbable attribution as a 105-year-old Japanese movie projector in a news report (Biswas, 2004). The other projector however (Ahmedabad) carries the metal-embossed rooster trademark of the Pathé film company that situates its provenance in the early twentieth century.
6. Bangle-makers too rely on discarded film stock for the melted celluloid that is used for producing bangles.
7. The *Ramayana* was a 78-episode televised adaptation of the Indian religious epic of the same name, aired between January 1987 and July 1988 on India’s state-run—and at the time, only—TV network, Doordarshan. *Chitrahaar* is a film song program, which began airing in 1982, also on Doordarshan. Both programs were spectacularly successful in the decade prior to the advent of satellite and cable television in the 1990s.
8. See here the film by David MacDougall on photography in Mussoorie (MacDougall, 1991) as well as his essay on the subject (MacDougall, 2006).
9. In Steinberg’s film (2007) Salim recalls his father’s exhortation—we saw these things as children; now you see it too.
10. For instances beyond South Asia, see Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *The Electric Princess House* and Chen Kaige’s *Zhanxiu Village*, both short films in the omnibus collection *Chacun son Cinema* (Angelopoulos et al., 2007). This point about the “global” is relevant for us especially given that early motion picture exhibition practices in Bengal were shaped

by access to the flows of apparatus and films from Europe and lack of access to certain forms of capital withheld by the colonial state, itself eager to peddle its fantasies of global-imperial, British-led, trade and finance networks.

11. For a discussion of the virtual dimension of assemblages and their causal function in genealogical accounts, see Paul Patton on Deleuze and Guattari (Patton 2000, pp. 44–45). I find Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier’s discussion of “global assemblages” or the “actual global” extremely useful in transcending paradigms of circulation that veer unproductively between the abstractions of the global and the local conceived in reductively spatial terms. Instead, Ong and Collier, drawing on work by Deleuze and Guattari and Bruno Latour, juxtapose global forms, understood as abstractable, dynamic, immutable mobiles, with an understanding of assemblages as multiply determined, unstable configurations of elements. Ong and Collier expressly note that assemblages are not to be counter-posed as locality would be to the global, instead arguing that assemblages are irreducible to a single logic (Ong and Collier, 2007, pp. 3–21). From this perspective the task is not to come up with a grand narrative of the globalization of early cinema, but to look quite specifically at the circulation of global forms and the process of their de- and re-territorialization within unstably situated assemblages.
12. *Bengal Hurkaru*, January 25, 1841.
13. Thacker, Spink and Company, the Calcutta firm responsible for the first known instance of importing a daguerreotype camera in 1840, were not just booksellers but also served as an agency house, providing banking and insurance services for the resident European population.
14. For a superb account of the consumption of printed images in late eighteenth/ early nineteenth century, see Eaton (2003).
15. Although phantasmagoria also referred to the magic lantern projection adapted for rear projection and including a moveable carriage for the slides so the images projected could increase or diminish in size.
16. The zoetrope and praxinoscope however, used a cylinder, whereas this roll-holding mechanism was more akin to a panorama that unrolled from one spindle to another. Many thanks to Antonia Lant for this clarification.
17. *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, July 1896, pp. 110–11.
18. The journal was published from Calcutta. The editor mentions watching Edison’s Kinetoscope “last cold weather” which would ostensibly mean 1895, the year before the Lumière’s first screenings in Bombay. Equally remarkable is the fact that the description so closely aligns with the 1903 Edison/Porter film. Were there earlier “kinetoscoped” versions of the Porter film? This is certainly probable given that Edison employed Porter and had overseen the development of the Kinetoscope in his laboratory. Given however that journals frequently went into press much later than the date of the issue itself, it is quite possible that the editor’s viewing occurred at a much later date.
19. As I will argue in my conclusion, the repetitive nature of hand-cranking the apparatus, of proffering repeat “performances”, is crucial to the logic of commodity production at stake here. The lengthy description, however, also reminds us, pace Bruno Latour, of the co-implicated and equal status of performer and machine as “actants” in a network whose efficacy depends on its being “black-boxed”, precisely through the repeat performances of man *and* machine, as a transparent transmitter of facts about its own nature as an entertainment apparatus, obliterating the distance between reality and its representation. We are witness in this account to the provisional and tentative process of that black-boxing, a process made palpable in this account and shot through with a varied cast of additional actants in subsequent examples I will offer. The most obvious benefit of Latour’s work is in compelling us to pay attention to the specificity of media technologies as a way of avoiding, in the worst case, solely culturalist accounts of the lives of “arriviste” and “emergent” media in non-Western locations. For more on Actor-Network Theory, see (Latour, 2007). For additional perspectives on black-boxing see (Gooding et al., 1988, pp. 3–5).
20. *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, July 1896, pp. 110–11.
21. *Evidence. Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*, vol.1, 28–29 [henceforth ICCE]. The Cinematograph Committee was set up to “assess film censorship, audience demographics, and the possibility of creating regulatory preferences for ‘Empire films’ in India similar to Britain’s Quota Act [of 1927].” Running into one 300-page report and five volumes of testimony (marked in these footnotes as Evidence) of approximately 700 pages each, it remains the most exhaustive source of information about the pre-sound era of motion pictures in India, albeit heavily conditioned by the imperatives of a colonial government seeking to find ways to ensure that India would become one of

- many successful colonial and dominion markets for the ailing British film industry. For a fuller account of the committee, see Jaikumar (2003).
22. A description of photographic culture will take me too far afield. For a detailed commercial and technological history of photography in the nineteenth century, see Mahadevan (2009).
 23. A 1908 advertisement reveals that Pathé was also selling phonograph discs and boasted its own “head office and wholesale firm” in Calcutta for discs and “talking machines” (gramophones). Pathé’s background in the gramophone industry, and its early ability to appoint subsidiary agents in distant markets would also explain its lead-start, of all the foreign film companies that would eventually come to India, in cornering the market for the supply of film titles (Ray Choudhury, 1991, p. 14).
 24. *The Statesman*, January 16, 1915, p. 4.
 25. In Madras (now Chennai), a similar picture emerges. In 1905, S. Vincent in Madras purchased films and projection equipment from a French touring cinema operator who had fallen ill and wished to return to Europe, and upgraded to a “chronomegophone” in 1909, which allowed for the synchronization of gramophone records with the film. His contemporary Venkiah ordered a chronophone set in 1909 that included a projector, a program of 12 or so single-reel shorts (300 to 400 feet) and synchronized gramophone recordings on large 18 and 24 inch plates, the whole package costing an astronomical Rs 300,000 (Hughes, 1996, pp. 41–43).
 26. See Bhaumik (2002) for an excellent and detailed account of the emergence of the cinema in Bombay.
 27. *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee*. Henceforth, *ICCR*, Tables 6 and 7, p. 182.
 28. *ICCR*, p. 179.
 29. *ICCR*, p. 182.
 30. This was cited repeatedly as a problem by those testifying before the Cinematograph Committee. See *ICCE*, vol. 2, pp. 668, 675, 688, 695, 762, 869.
 31. As we learn from the Cinematograph Committee reports, firms such as the Eastern Films Syndicate had been formed with capital infusion from the hair oils business run by one of the partners. An earlier version of the firm had failed when a partner’s jute profits had fallen from the falling world prices. *ICCE*, vol. 2. 692.
 32. Priya Jaikumar (2006, 262, fn. 48) notes that “the consensus was that an 8000-foot film cost approximately Rs 2000 to import, including Rs 300 in customs tax. A film of similar length in India cost about Rs 20,000 to produce. The cost of renting these films varied proportionately for the exhibitor”.
 33. *ICCE*, vol. 2, p. 619. See also pages 609, 772.
 34. *ICCE*, vol. 4, p. 406.
 35. *ICCE*, vol. 4, p. 405.
 36. *ICCE*, vol. 1. pp. 105–11.
 37. *Ibid.* 106.
 38. Government of the Central Provinces and Berar. *Report of the Visual Education Committee*. Nagpur: Government Printing Press, 1938. Government of India Information Department. India Office Records (British Library).
 39. Compared for instance to the UK (30 screens per million) and the US (117 screens per million). For an estimated five billion strong annual movie going audience, India has 12,900 movie screens (Ganti, 2004, p. 25).
 40. The percentage of touring cinemas to the total number of cinemas in India breaks down as follows. 1950 – 26%, 1960–61–29%, 1970–71–35%, 1980–81– 38%, 1985–86–37.5%. The figures from which the above calculations are made, are available in Manjunath Pendakur’s book (2003, p. 18).
 41. See here Uli Gaulke’s documentary *Comrades in Dreams* (2006), and its depiction of a young traveling film exhibitor in Maharashtra (juxtaposed with his counterparts in North Korea, the US and Burkina Faso), for an instance of precisely such sophistication.
 42. *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, July 1896, pp. 110–11.
 43. This logic can yoke aesthetic criteria to artisanal practice as well. In Megha Lakhani’s film, Feroze and Hanif Bhai describe how they fashion the items in their screening program through a process of economical editing that trims irrelevant scenes and frames from the scraps. Bemoaning the loss of quality in “today’s films” they argue that “every scene was useful” in earlier movies, unlike today, when all the scenes are so “wasteful” (Lakhani, 2006).

References

- Agnew, Jean-Christophe. (1993). Coming up for air: Consumer culture in historical perspective. In John Brewer, & Roy Porter (Eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (pp. 19–39). London, New York: Routledge.
- Altick, Richard Daniel. (1978). *The shows of London*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Armitage, Kay. (2008). Traveling Projectionist Films. *Film International*, 6(4), 41–43.
- Banerjee, Samik. (1990). The early years of Calcutta cinema. In Sukanta Chaudhuri (Ed.), *Calcutta, the Living City* (pp. 293–301). Calcutta, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barnouw, Erik, & Subrahmanyam Krishnaswamy. (1980). *Indian film*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bhaumik, K. (2002). The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913–1936. Unpublished DPhil thesis Oxford University.
- Biswas, Soutik. (2004, January). Calcutta cart keeps film rolling. Last updated: January, 12, Monday, 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3389067.stm
- Chan, Michael. (1980). *The dream that kicks: The prehistory and early years of cinema in Britain*. London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cohn, Bernard S. (1987). *An Anthropologist among the historians and other Essays*. Delhi, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1977). Nomad Thought. In David B. Allison (Ed.), *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary styles of interpretation* (p. 274). New York: Dell Pub. Co.
- Deleuze, Gilles, & Félix Guattari. (1986). *Kafka: Toward a minor literature. Theory and history of literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Eaton, Natasha. (2003). Excess in the city? The consumption of imported prints in colonial Calcutta, C.1780–C.1795. *Journal of Material Culture*, 8(1), 45–74.
- Ganti, Tejaswini. (2004). *Bollywood: A guidebook to popular hindi cinema*, Routledge Film Guidebooks. New York: Routledge.
- Garga, B. D. (1996). *So Many Cinemas: The Motion Picture in India*. Mumbai, India: Eminence Designs.
- Gooding, David, T. J. Pinch, & Simon Schaffer. (1988). *The uses of experiment: Studies in the natural sciences*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire], New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goswami, Omkar. (1992). *Sahibs, babus, and banias: Changes in industrial control in eastern India, 1918–50*. In Rajat Kanta Ray (Ed.), *Entrepreneurship and Industry in India, 1800–1947* (pp. 228–59). Delhi, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Govil, Nitin. (2005). Something to declare: Trading culture, trafficking hollywood and textual travel. Unpublished PhD thesis, New York University.
- Grimaud, E. (2002). La Projection Morcelée: Fragments De Films, Intermédiaires Et Public Dans Un Cinéma De Bombay (A Fragmented Projection: Film Scraps, Middlemen and the Public in a Cinema Hall of Bombay). *L'Homme*, 164 (October–December), 81–104.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. (1992). *The Making of a new "Indian" art: Artists, aesthetics, and nationalism in Bengal, C. 1850–1920*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gunning, Tom. (2002). Bodies in motion: The Pas De Deux of the ideal and the material at the Fin-De-Siecle. In Francois Albera, Marta Braun, & Andre Gaudreault (Eds), *Arret Sur Image, Fragmentation Du Temps/Stop Motion, Fragmentation of Time* (pp. 17–30). Nadir: Editions Payot Lausanne.
- Harris, Neil. (1981). *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*. Phoenix ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hughes, Stephen. (1996). Is there anyone out there? Exhibition and the formation of silent film audiences in South India. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Chicago.
- Jaikumar, Priya. (2003). More than morality: The Indian cinematograph committee interviews (1927). *The Moving Image* 3(1), 83–109.
- . (2006). *Cinema at the end of empire: A politics of transition in Britain and India*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

- Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, July 1896, pp. 110–111, Calcutta. Printed by Thaker, Spink and Company, Calcutta.
- Kapur, Anuradha. (1993). The Representation of Gods and heroes: Parsi mythological drama of the early twentieth century, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 23/24, 85–107.
- Kapur, Geeta. (1989). Ravi Varma: Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth Century Indian Painter. *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 17–18, 59–80.
- Larkin, Brian. (2008). *Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. (2007). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacDougall, David. (2006). *The corporeal image: Film, ethnography, and the senses*, pp. 147–75. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Mahadevan, Sudhir. (2009). The traffic in technologies: Early cinema and visual culture in Bengal, 1840–1920. Unpublished PhD thesis, New York University.
- Ong, Aihwa, & Stephen J. Collier. (2005). *Global assemblages: Technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
- Patton, Paul. (2000). *Deleuze and the Political. (Thinking the Political)*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Pendakur, Manjunath. (2003). *Indian popular cinema: Industry, ideology, and consciousness*. Hampton Press Communication Series. Popular Culture. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Pinney, Christopher. (2004). *'Photos of the Gods': The printed image and political struggle in India*. London: Reaktion.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. (1986). Neo-Traditionalism: Film as popular art in India. *Framework*, 32(33), 20–67.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, & Paul Willemen. (1994). *Encyclopaedia of Indian cinema*. London, New Delhi: British Film Institute; Oxford University Press.
- Ray Choudhury, Ranabir. (1992). *Early Calcutta advertisements, 1875–1925: [A Selection from The Statesman]*.
- Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, (1928), Vols 1, 2 and 4. Government of India Central Publication Branch, Calcutta (Kolkata).
- Rodowick, David Norman. (2007). *The virtual life of film*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Roy, Srirupa. (2007). *Beyond belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism*, politics, history, and culture. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schaffer, Simon. (1996). Babbage's dancer and the impresarios of mechanism. In Francis Spufford, & Jennifer S. Uglow (Eds). *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention* (pp. 52–80). London: Faber.
- Sedgwick, John, & Michael Pokorny. (2005). *An economic history of film*, Routledge Explorations in Economic History. London, New York: Routledge.
- Slade, Giles. (2006). *Made to break: Technology and obsolescence in America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Srinivas, S.V. (2000). Is there a public in the cinema hall? *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 42, online edition, <http://www.frameworkonline.com/42index.htm>
- Steinberg, Tim. (2008). *Salim Baba* (Interview). January 22, 2008. http://www.thereeler.com/sundance_features/tim_sternberg_salim_baba.php
- Sundaram, Ravi. (2001). Recycling modernity: pirate electronic cultures in India. *Sarai Reader 1: The Public Domain* (pp. 93–99). New Delhi: Sarai/CSDS/Society for Old and New Media.
- . (2005). Media globalization: An Indian perspective. *Global media and communication*, 1, 55–58.
- Thompson, Kristin. (1985). *Exporting entertainment: America in the world film market 1907–34*. London: BFI Publishing.

Films Cited

- Angelopoulos, Theodoros et al. (2007). "Chacun Son Cinéma Ou Ce Petit Coup Au Coeur Quand La Lumière S'éteint Et Que Le Film Commence." 100 min. France.
- Gaulke, Uli. (2006). "Comrades in Dreams". 100 min. Germany.
- Kadam, Prashant. (2007). "The Bioscopewallah". 13 min. India: Prashant Kadam.
- Lakhani, Megha. (2006). "Prakash Traveling Cinema". 14 min. India: National Institute of Design.
- MacDougall, David, & Judith MacDougall. (1991). "Photo Wallahs an Encounter with Photography in Mussoorie, a North Indian Hill Station". 59 min. USA: University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning.
- Steinberg, Tim. (2007). "Salim Baba". 15 min. USA: HBO.

