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# Crossover cinema: a conceptual and genealogical overview

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## Abstract

In this collection, the term crossover cinema is used to encapsulate an emerging form of cinema that crosses cultural borders at the stage of conceptualization and production and hence manifests a hybrid cinematic grammar at the textual level, as well as crossing over in terms of its distribution and reception. It argues for the importance of distinguishing between crossover cinema and transnational cinema. While the latter label has been important in enabling the recognition and consideration of the impact of post–World War II migration and globalization on film practice and scholarship, and while it constituted a significant advance on the term with which is so often conflated, world cinema, this chapter argues for a repositioning of the former term as more definitive of the contemporary cultural epoch. The extension of scope in this manner more accurately reflects the highly contingent ways in which global flows in both production and consumption have shaped cinema—not only in the locations of so-called Third Cinema but also in the West. Such a repositioning enables us to think of cross-culturally conceptualized cinema as lying beyond the exclusive art house category that often restricts (a) its reading by film scholars and critics; (b) its publicity discourses and availability in mainstream cinemas; and (c) its reception by various audience communities. There is also an appropriate political objective in the adoption of the term crossover to describe cross-culturally conceptualized cinema. This is because with an extended scope, it joins forces with the broader project of internationalizing cultural studies, that is, to keep the competing forces of cultural indigenization and capitalist internationalization from becoming synonymous with globalization (see Abbas and Erni 2005).

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# 1

# Crossover Cinema: A Genealogical and Conceptual Overview

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In this collection, the term *crossover cinema* is used to encapsulate an emerging form of cinema that crosses cultural borders at the stage of conceptualization and production and hence manifests a hybrid cinematic grammar at the textual level, as well as crossing over in terms of its distribution and reception. It argues for the importance of distinguishing between crossover cinema and transnational cinema. While the latter label has been important in enabling the recognition and consideration of the impact of post–World War II migration and globalization on film practice and scholarship, and while it constituted a significant advance on the term with which is so often conflated, *world cinema*, this chapter argues for a repositioning of the former term as more definitive of the contemporary cultural epoch. The extension of scope in this manner more accurately reflects the highly contingent ways in which global flows in both production and consumption have shaped cinema—not only in the locations of so-called Third Cinema but also in the West. Such a repositioning enables us to think of cross-culturally conceptualized cinema as lying beyond the exclusive art house category that often restricts (a) its reading by film scholars and critics; (b) its publicity discourses and availability in mainstream cinemas; and (c) its reception by various audience communities. There is also an appropriate political objective in the adoption of the term *crossover* to describe cross-culturally conceptualized cinema. This is because with an

extended scope, it joins forces with the broader project of internationalizing cultural studies, that is, to keep the competing forces of cultural indigenization and capitalist internationalization from becoming synonymous with globalization (see Abbas and Erni 2005).

In reviewing and reconceptualizing crossover cinema, this chapter attempts to locate it so that on the one hand, it is appropriately specific, while on the other hand emphasizing that it is both situated and global by virtue of its ability to transgress genre, audience, and cultural borders. Such an approach foregrounds the production contexts within which crossover cinema is generated and also argues that the notion of "crossing over" best describes the personal/poetic and political border crossings being constantly undertaken and negotiated by filmmakers with cross-cultural affiliations and influences, and thereby manifested in the hybrid content and form, as well as the distribution and reception, of the films themselves.

I will demonstrate that since the nature of global flows, and ways of defining and associating with home and host cultures, has been transformed in the wake of globalization, it has become imperative to examine the new breed of transnational creative practitioners and their cinematic practices as crossover rather than as simply understood through their national/ethnic origins or identities. Importantly, the potential of such cinema to cross over implies not simply another passing cinematic fad, but a major structural shift in global media industries on one level, while at another level it acknowledges new kinds of creative collaborations that are holistic and replete with the promise of awakening us to the essentialism that persists in certain cultural processes and products.

# Crossover Cinema: From Jargon to *Jagaran* (Hindi for "Awakening")

The aim of this anthology is not so much to be geographically representative, but to provide a glimpse of the kind of cinema (and ways of making meaning from its textual and extratextual elements) that is cross-culturally conceived, yet not relegated to the margins of mainstream public culture by virtue of its ability to cross over. Unlike "world cinema" or "transnational cinema," for instance, there is no argument to be made about the inclusion of crossover cinema in mainstream cinema culture. In reconceptualizing crossover cinema, I am appropriating a term that has so far had a very particular location, but also simultaneously a very unattached resonance. As a moniker hitherto applied to films associated with or emerging from the Indian subcontinent that are able to appeal to Western audiences, crossover cinema has a rather rooted history, albeit with little explication of its content or the setting out of its practice-based parameters. Similarly, Ranjit Keval Kumar's (2011) PhD thesis on crossover and makeover trends in new Indian cinema also acknowledges the muddling of the terms *Bollywood*, *Indian*, and *crossover* film and argues that crossover is an emerging genre in its own right. In a similar vein, American distributor Miramax attempted a model crossover hit in the 1990s by reediting Hong Kong films to create a balance between distinctiveness and accessibility (Dombrowski 2008). This shows a similar rooted yet outward tendency, drawing on the South Asian usage of the term, but again it remains ambiguously defined and poorly executed.

I argue that despite the above limitations, *crossover cinema* as a conceptual term and as an indicator of an emerging form is ripe for usage in the contemporary cinematic context. However, it must be emphasized that unlike the South Asian or Hong Kong use of the term, *crossover cinema* in this collection of chapters does not derive its primary point of difference from other kinds of cinemas through its crossover in audience terms alone. Instead, it is the site of cross-cultural conceptualization and production that is taken as the principal foundation and that then leads to

textual hybridity and wide-ranging audience appeal. This is not done to privilege an auteurist account of such cinema, but rather to highlight the process of creating a film that is not conventionally grounded in a single national/cultural/generic source.

The first usage of the term in South Asia can be traced back to the early years of the twenty-first century with the border-crossing popularity of films made by Indian diasporic directors (such as Gurinder Chadha's [2002] *Bend It Like Beckham* and Mira Nair's [2001] *Monsoon Wedding*) and English-language films by India-based filmmakers (like Nagesh Kukunoor's [2003] *Bollywood Calling* and Rahul Bose's [2001] *Everybody Says I'm Fine*). At the same time, the nation's most prolific commercial film industry, Mumbai-based Bollywood, borrowed the term soon after and began using it to describe its own global, neoliberal outreach. Not surprisingly, this led to widespread confusion and an opinion piece in the *Times of India* dubbed the trend "Crassover Cinema" (Nair 2003). However, ambivalence toward the term continues into the present within Indian film and media circles; Bollywood superstar Shahrukh Khan recently declared, "It disturbs me that all Indian filmmakers are chasing an elusive dream of crossover cinema" (cited in *Mid-Day* 2011).

The previous comment implies not that Indian filmmakers are chasing a supposed genre called crossover cinema, but rather that, according to Khan, their search for a Western audience may not come to fruition. In other words, there is a conflation of the term with a particular segment of the global audience, and a particular marketing strategy, and this has gone relatively unquestioned in film scholarship. For instance, when discussing the globalization of Bollywood, renowned film scholar Daya Kishan Thussu (2008, 106–7) distinguishes between diasporic and Indian films but still defines crossover primarily as Bollywood's attempted foray into traditional Hollywood territory. Such usage needs to be qualified. Bollywood has a long history of

transnational appeal in nations as diverse as Malaysia and the former Soviet Union (see Iordanova 2006), and the crossover cinema is by no means defined by its attempt to make it into Hollywood. Further, it is worth noting that such formulations implicitly defer to Hollywood as a media center; the global reach of Hollywood is hardly ever described as a crossover. What I am suggesting here is that being cross-cultural in terms of the text, the intertext and the extratext is intrinsic to a crossover film. Such a film does not assume a Western audience at the outset but rather is forged from multiple cultural affiliations and eventually appeals to a range of viewing communities among whom the Western audience is only one possibility.

What, then, exemplifies a crossover film? And, is it opening up cinematic and discursive spaces that are based on a cross-cultural, cross-platform paradigm? I would like to begin your journey through the anthology with the previous questions, while also offering the suggestion that Danny Boyle's (2008) *Slumdog Millionaire* is a possible, if arguably contested, template. Although *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000) was widely lauded as a crossover phenomenon after Miramax's initial unsuccessful attempts to generate a Hong Kong–based worldwide hit, it still only made it to the Best Foreign Film category of the Academy Awards. *Slumdog Millionaire*, on the other hand, literally crossed over to the main (nonforeign) group. This is not to suggest that the Academy Awards is an objective barometer of crossover success, or that it is transparently representative of the best of global cinema. However, it is crucial that the latter film's cross-cultural affiliations no longer rendered it foreign, and this is an important indicator of its crossover production, content, and appeal.

In her review of *Slumdog Millionaire*, which locates it in the viewership context of post–financial crisis America, Kavoori (2009) refers to the film as "a classic crossover text," adding that it uses "the specifics of Indian locale to speak to wider (global) concerns of personal responsibility

in a heartless world; the need for agency in an alienated society and perhaps most critically, the renewal of 'love' as a category for understanding the self" (260). Not only is this reading demonstrative of the situated knowledge theorized as being critical to a holistic consideration of crossover cinema, but it also shows that transnational appeal needs to be both globally and locally~~glocally~~ dispersed rather than invested in an elite Western milieu. This collection is merely the beginning of an endeavor to free up the term so that it can have multiple cinematic roots and routes. The word *crossover* refers to more than an arbitrary attempt to join discrete entities; in this context, the term indicates cross-cultural affinities that both travel and stay.

# Personal/Poetic and Political: Theorizing Crossover Cinematic Practice

In order to free up the term *crossover*, it is crucial that its usage in film theory and practice is understood as a manifestation of cross-cultural affinities that are not merely political but also personal/poetic. The aim of this and the following section, then, is to first articulate such a theoretical framework and, subsequently, enact all the dimensions of a conversation about crossover cinema that itself crosses over disciplinary and methodological boundaries.

In an essay titled "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora," diasporic Indian scholar R. Radhakrishnan (2003, 119) begins with a personal scenario in which his eleven-year-old son asks him whether he is Indian or American. Terming the scenario "both filial and pedagogic,"

Radhakrishnan tells his son that he is both (122) and embarks on a polemical journey about identity and the shifting contours of its relationship with ethnicity and location. Such an autobiographical, yet contextually relevant, beginning is an apt metaphor for this chapter due to both its personal particularity and its wider political implications. It also leads us to question the use of the personal/poetic anecdote as a springboard for reflections on the cross-cultural condition that otherwise adhere to conventional academic discourse.

The answer to the previous question lies in the nature of contemporary transnational formations, which, like Radhakrishnan's filial-pedagogic scenario, are both experiential and theoretical. For this reason, Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram (2001) recommend a process-oriented approach to acculturation research "where the focus is on understanding how immigrants living in hybrid cultures and diasporic locations are constantly negotiating their multiple, and often conflicting histories and subject positions" (3). Similarly, in the introduction to an edited volume titled *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (2003) call for a need to move beyond the construction and consolidation of cross-cultural identities to ask how these identities are "practised, lived, and experienced" (9). Therefore, as Radhakrishnan's story illustrates, I contend that for a well-rounded understanding of crossover cinematic practice, it is crucial to examine the ongoing performativity of the creative self.

In addition to considering the personal through its performativity, it is important to remember that the transnational selves that are performed display affiliations to two or more cultures or nations. The politics of these belongings are deeply intertwined with the performativity of the personal. Gina Wisker (2007) notes this entanglement of the personal and the political in her commentary on the identities of diasporic writers: "As they dialogue with the adoptive homeland, they change themselves, the new homeland, and their versions and memories of the other

homelands, and as they dialogue with the other homelands they renegotiate meaning in their minds and actions" (29).

Migrant scholar Ien Ang (2001) theorizes her own identity through a similar consideration of performativity and context when she notes, "If I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics" (51). While the postcolonial notion of "negotiated belonging" and the postmodern conceptualization of "performativity" help to adequately theorize the political and personal elements of crossover cinematic practice, respectively, they do not aid in moving beyond the two entities represented by the nation of origin and the adoptive homeland. The idea of "hybridity" theorized by Homi Bhabha (2004) as the "Third Space of enunciation" is useful in amalgamating the two entities, but it does not necessarily entail the formation of an identity and accompanying practice that transcends the sum of its parts. This idea is reinforced by Werbner (1997) who, in her introduction to a collection of essays on cultural hybridity, proposes "critical self-distancing from their own cultural discourses" as an alternative to Bhabha's "interruptive hybridity from the margins" (14). In other words, it is crucial, especially in light of a society that is not just postcolonial and marginal, but increasingly global and local, to employ a theory of resistance that both examines the discourses of constitutive cultures and is able to transcend these through distanciation or the creation of a mode of its own.

To articulate this mode, the remaining chapters of the first part of this collection (on conceptualization and production) include a reflective chapter on the poetic and political negotiations around making an Iranian-Australian coproduction by Granaz Moussavi, a film site interview on the advantages and disadvantages of occupying the diasporic space with Academy Award–nominated director Deepa Mehta, and an account by Noah Zweig of how the "pink tide" in Latin America could be linked to the emergence of particular kinds of crossover films. These

chapters, although varied in form and voice, also perform an enactment of the personal/poetic and political aspects of crossover cinematic practice, or a "both and" approach. By *poetics*, I mean not just the aesthetics of this kind of cinema, but the larger inventiveness of which the aesthetics forms a part. This is similar to David Bordwell's (2007) use of the term *poetics* when studying both film as art and the very evolution of such theorizing. While Moussavi, Mehta, and Zweig are primarily concerned with the creative process and the conditions of production, they also briefly reflect on the composition of the screen texts and the audiences for the films under consideration. These aspects of crossover cinema, however, are more fully explored in the two subsequent parts of the collection. What the above reflections demonstrate is merely the primal significance and flow-on effects of the conceptualization and production stage in the life cycle of the crossover film.

The previously mentioned "both and" approach is not new in the field of transnational and migration studies. It has been adopted by scholars such as Ann-Marie Fortier (1999, 42) who, in her study of the Italian émigré culture in Britain, concludes that cultural identity in migration is both deterritorialized and reterritorialized. In a similar vein, Wisker (2007) cites the example of British-Indian screenwriter and comic Meera Syal whose "satiric and comic voice steers a course between gentle mockery and farce, undercutting the Othering and ignorance which stereotyping feeds by dramatizing examples of Asian culture" (98–99). What I propose in this chapter, therefore, is also that textual readings of the hybridity of crossover film texts must pay close attention to the multiple cinematic affiliations of the filmmaker(s). The second part of this collection attempts such close textual/intertextual analysis through Peter Pugsley's account of contemporary Hong Kong cinema's adoption of a transnational aesthetic and narrative palette, Olivia Khoo's examination of the recent phenomenon of using Chinese actresses to perform an "accented English," Gertjan Willems and Kevin Smets's consideration of the emergence of diasporic and intercultural strands within Flemish

cinema, and Aisha Jamal's reading of a European crossover road movie made by migrant German filmmaker Fatih Akin. The politics of language, location, travel, and narrative style is therefore implicated in the analysis of crossover films in this section.

A holistic approach to studying crossover cinema also necessitates a reading of extratextual elements, such as the crossovers performed in relation to discourses of cross-cultural audience reception, digital distribution platforms, and global marketing strategies. This is of consequence not merely in terms of preexisting audience communities based on national, ethnic, class, or gender categories, but also with regard to the fragmentation and new viewership patterns brought about by postbroadcast television and the Internet. Therefore, in the final part of the collection, Adrian Mabbott Athique's contribution postulates the theoretical challenges of conceptualizing the crossover audience, Shakuntala Banaji's chapter shows what such a group may look like through qualitative interviews with international viewers of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Emanuelle Wessels examines the website of the crossover film *Control Room* as a medium for ongoing ethical viewer participation, and Sony Jalarajan Raj and Rohini Sreekumar read the historical and contemporary reception of Indian cinema in the Malaysian market as the enactment of a crossover. Again, the emphasis in this section is not on speculating on the kind of cross-cultural film that is likely to be a box-office and/or online success. Rather, the objective here is to begin to understand what interests spatially and temporally dispersed audiences in certain crossover texts, whether such discourses can be framed within an ethics and/or politics of viewership, and if the organizational and people-to-people networks underpinning cross-cultural reception need further attention.

The simultaneous yet contextual consideration of the personal/poetic and the political in each section of the collection aids in the generation of situated readings and practice. In their edited volume of essays by scholars with cross-cultural affiliations, Evans Braziel and Mannur (2003)

perform the crucial task of emphasizing the historical and cultural specificity of any new

becomings:

> Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself—religious, ethnic,
> gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from
> history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical
> moments are embodied and—as diaspora itself suggests—are scattered and
> regrouped into new points of becoming. (3)

Commenting on the representation of the black postcolonial subject in the "Third Cinemas" of the

Caribbean, Stuart Hall performs a similar theorization of diasporic identity and representation in his

specific Jamaican-British context. He suggests, "Perhaps instead of thinking about identity as an

already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think,

instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always

constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall 1996, 110). While Hall refers to identity itself

as a production, this volume takes the specific becomings embodied in crossover cinematic

practice, distribution, and reception as its focus. This is not done to emphasize cinematic practice

over identity formation but is a pragmatic choice as visual practice is a rendering of the processes

of performing, negotiating, and inventing cross-cultural identities that makes it possible to study

and theorize about the previously mentioned processes (and not just the products).

An example of a situated performing, negotiating, and inventing is evident in *Shooting

Water*, a memoir written by Indian-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's daughter Devyani

Saltzman (2006). It combines the writer's own tales of self-discovery during the filming of *Water*

(Mehta 2005) with observations on the wider sociopolitical situation in South Asia. Mehta's films

are similarly considered in my interview with her (in the first part of this volume) as embodying the

personal/poetic journey of the filmmaker and manifesting the turbulent politics prevalent at the time of their inception. Such an entangling of the personal/poetic and the political is discursively performed in the following section in that it produces cultural understandings that are situated (hence partial), yet with the depth and potential to cross over.

# *Firangs* and Slumdogs: Toward Crossover Conversations

In 2008, on reaching the midpoint of my PhD candidacy (on diasporic cinema and creative praxis) at the University of Adelaide, and after spending more than five years pursuing tertiary studies and media-related work in Australia, I decided to visit India during the nonholiday season—that is, the Indian monsoon and the Australian winter. What led to the specific time and nature of this journey? It came about for a combination of reasons—not teaching during the semester in question; feeling overwhelmed by the multiple theoretical underpinnings of my doctoral project; seeking visual inspiration for the documentary I was about to begin shooting; and most importantly, making sure that I was not growing apart from my family, my home, and my childhood version of India.

The last reason reminded me of Sri Lankan–Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje's (1984) temporary return journey to his homeland to come to grips with his family and nation, poetically documented in his memoir *Running in the Family*. Given the context of my reasons, I was slightly taken aback when my mother, habitually quick to comment on any changes in physical appearance, pointed out that I appeared *firang* (Hindi for "foreign"). She explained that it was obviously not my skin color or clothes and jewelry, but something in my accent and general demeanor that was not quite her lived understanding of being "Indian."

A visit to my youngest sister's boarding school (also my alma mater) and a brief conversation with her sixteen-year-old friends led them to conclude that I looked like an Australian tourist. Again, I was surprised because I made it a point to wear chic Indian fusion garb while in India—three-quarter black pants with a sleeveless ethnic tunic, silver necklace and earrings, and kohl-lined eyes. Perhaps it was the digital video camera always slung across my right shoulder, giving the impression I was constantly documenting moments and sights that were ordinary to all those around me. Both the observations of my mother and my sister's friends made me wonder if my "Indianness" had already been hyphenated, if not usurped by the act of living, studying, and working in Australia. I, like nearly twenty million people of Indian origin living in the diaspora, had not necessarily grown apart from India but acquired an additional layer of cultural identity and hence become cross-cultural in my personal/poetic and political affiliations. This newly acquired layer led me to foreground my old (yet not fixed) layer in some scenarios and relegate it to the background in others. I am, therefore, becoming different from my India-based family and friends even as I share my ~~originary~~ ancestral history and ongoing yet varying interest in Indian cultural and political events with them. Herein I see a cross-cultural identity at play: performing, negotiating, and inventing.

On my return to the Australian summer two months later, I interviewed members of the Indian diaspora in Adelaide for the documentary component of my doctorate, wrote the bulk of my thesis, and continued to work my way through familial and social becomings. It is perhaps no coincidence that my personal-political negotiations and poetic recreations, although ongoing, peaked at the same time as the release of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which, as explained earlier in this chapter, traverses national and cinematic boundaries. The release and success of the film renewed my confidence in the disciplinary, cultural, and creative significance of the project at

hand; in addition, it inspired me to consider a wider scholarly consideration of crossover cinema beyond the South Asian diaspora. Although Boyle's film does not strictly fit the definition of diasporic cinema, it provides a significant model of cross-cultural cinematic content and talent that has also successfully crossed over into the realm of the mainstream audience.

Perhaps the notion of a cinematic practice that crosses over in terms of culture, genre, and reception platforms need no longer be a novelty or an anomaly. It may be a phenomenon that is gaining wider acceptance in mainstream film culture, as well as film and cultural studies scholarship. It may also be an indication for film practitioners coveting transnational and mass audiences that there are means to achieve the same. With this crossover potential in mind, I continue to find myself talking about *Slumdog Millionaire* (and subsequent films of the kind, such as Argentinean filmmaker Gustavo Taretto's [2011] *Medianeras*, British director Michael Winterbottom's [2011] *Trishna*, and Swedish/British documentary *Searching for Sugar Man* directed by Mark Bendjelloul [2012]) with family and friends in Australia, in India, and in other parts of the world. While my reading of crossover cinematic practice is situated in specific Indian, Australian, and academic discourses, it somehow also transcends these locations so that our mutual film discourse becomes a crossover conversation itself, something to be celebrated (albeit critically).

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