

Le Giornate del Muto Cinema and the encounter with Indian silent cinema

Sarah Rahman Niazi

The history of silent cinema is a history of traces. Depending on your location, those traces are sometimes visible, faint and at other times invisible. In the context of Indian cinema, scholars have lamented at the loss/ absence of an important visual culture. Even though film making as a practice became part of the Indian entertainment circuit as early as 1912, the preservation and archiving of film, was a late initiative.¹ It is in this light that *Giornate Del Cinema Muto* has played an important role in bringing silent cinema to audiences. In 1994, the festival hosted the first ever complete retrospective of Indian silent films in collaboration with the National Film Archive of India, Pune. It is this moment in the history of cinema that has been a powerful trope and point to reference in my evolution as a film scholar. The retrospective culminated in the book *Light of Asia*, edited by Suresh Chabria which has been a significant repository of material on silent cinema in India. It is then not a surprise that I found myself at the 36th *Giornate* in October 2017. The experience at the *Giornate* prompted some methodological questions, interventions and thoughts.

Looking for the trace of cinema

the analysts gaze would be able to move, as does that of an anatomist, from visible traces on a surface to invisible ones inside the body of texts. Indexical and inferential, this approach goes in depth and also traverses intertextu(r)al sites of absent presence, riding on the crest of a visible invisibility.

Giuliana Bruno²

How does one study film when the object of study is ephemeral/ fragmented/ absent? As a film scholar working on Indian silent cinema, the methodological challenges have been immense. Bruno's *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* is an illustrative paradigm that has guided me in the encounter with textual loss wherein I was confronted with a scenario in which the primary film

¹ The National Film Archive of India (NFAI) was set up as late as 1964.

² Giuliana Bruno, "Mapping Out Discourse: An Introduction" in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, 1993.

texts are lost; records of performances are lost; and documents or records of any kind to throw light on the functioning of the studios and different modes of the organization of work are unavailable. My work on women's work in early Indian cinema relies heavily on the archive. But one where the film stock was a peripheral part of the narrative. I mobilise diverse sources and evidences to construct a field of knowledge about performers and their work in the film industry. Film memorabilia like journals, advertisements, posters, publicity material, lobby cards, gramophone recordings, autobiographies and memoirs became an important source to piece together the puzzle. In some sense, the nature and character of the film archive has expanded to include material outside the film stock. It prompted an awareness to the selective appropriation of material and the fallacies of institutional neglect and apathy. My research looks at the archive acts both as a repository of cinema history and a reminder of exclusions. The archive cannot offer direct access to the past and any reading of its contents will necessarily be a reinterpretation. Thus, despite reservations concerning the reliability of the archive and its tendencies to mislead and manipulate, the archive provides fragmentary sources to the past. The archive can also be a dangerously seductive place and the need is to allow the contents of the archive to express themselves without mediation. My work is informed by an intuitive response to found material as a search for traces and clues in the face of a huge loss.³

So far, my encounter with silent cinema was a private isolated affair, limited to forays in archives and dingy dusty libraries. This was to change incredibly as I came to Pordenone for a week-long festival dedicated to silent films. Watching films with a live orchestra was unique, I had read and imagined it so many times, I could hardly believe that I was sitting in the Teatro Verdi and surrounded by silent cinema aficionados and enthusiasts from all over the world. My research experience of watching extant Indian silent films on a Steenbeck in a dingy NFAI room seem rather pale in comparison. The exhibition of silent films and the formats within which films become available to audiences and researchers today is worth thinking through. While in the case of many silent films from India, the reels are fragmented, dispersed and often in poor conditions, a real concerted effort by archives and film institutions is needed. Recently,

³ The field of investigation as a vast territory of 'clues' where the boundaries are blurred. The work of micro-historians like Carlo Ginzburg has been inspirational in its emphatic accentuation of the microscopic through the intensive reduction of scale or the scope of observation. This prompts an analytical procedure that revealingly foregrounds a previously unobserved scheme of documentary material which mobilised alongside Clifford Geertz' notion of 'thick description', has helped me to dynamically structure the material. See, Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, 3-30 and Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

for the London Film Festival Archive Gala, noted music composer and sitar player Anoushka Shankar composed the score for Himanshu Rai's *Shiraz* (d. Franz Osten, 1928), this Indo-German collaboration is perhaps one of the few surviving Indian films in the world and has been meticulously restored by the British Film Institute (BFI). *Giornate* made me appreciate the process of film exhibition a lot more, something that I had taken for granted or rather not paid enough attention to due to my extreme reliance on film ephemera. Watching films which were curated and programmed thematically to produce a certain engagement with the film text, encouraged questions on the context of production and distribution of these films. Thus, it was not a surprise that the films programmed under *Nasty Women* by Maggie Hennenfeld and Laura Horak invoked the desire to see images of Indian women on screen.⁴

Some *Nasty Women*

The films under the *Nasty Women* programme brought to light some of the crucial debates around women's presence and mobility in the public sphere. The excitement generated by the presence of women in the public sphere was activating a series of discourses in the early 20th century. The metropolises had become important spaces where public life acquired new cultural, social and technological dimensions. The cities were dotted with sites and sights of modernity like motorcars, trains, trams, telephones, industrial sites like mills, film studios, but also the glamorous spectacle of fashion and modern lifestyles could be spotted on the city streets. Women were taking an active part in the processes of production, consumption and exchange. However, access to the city and the use of urban space by women was not always easy. Their ways and movements in the street remained structurally organised and socially oriented along boundaries (invisible or otherwise), redirecting and restricting their forays through the metropolis.⁵ Despite impressive reforms in the social sphere, the publicness and professionalism of women was marked with moral distress. In other words, the presence of

⁴ If I can be presumptuous to equate my experience to Dadasaheb Phalke's wish to see Indian Gods on screen. As the story goes, Phalke was inspired to make his first silent film *Raja Harishchandra* in 1912 after watching an American silent *The Life of Christ*. See, Ashish Rajadhakshya, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 25-26, 1987.

⁵ Anke Gleber has made these observations in the case of European women's spatial experience of the city. This comment, however, is equally applicable to women's experience in Indian cities, where women's mobility was part of a social debate and the restrictions were perhaps sharper and more incontrovertible. See Gleber, "Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City" in Katharina Von Ankum ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1997. Also see Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London" in *Representations*, No. 62, (Spring, 1998), University of California Press, 1-30, accessed on 27/03/2018 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902937>

working women, unchaperoned in the public sphere came to be seen as symptomatic of their ‘loose’ character. These become sharply visible in some of the films in the *Nasty Women* programme. The relevance of the films in the contemporary political scene cannot be undermined. It was refreshing to see how fluid gender was, how stereotypes were being challenged even when others were being reinforced. *The Night Rider* (d. Jay Hunt, 1920) starring Texas Guinan who played a heroic cowgirl in many of her films is reminiscent of Indian star from the silent period, Mary Ann Evans, popularly known as the Fearless Nadia.⁶



(Image: Wikipedia.org)

According to Dorothee Wenner, Nadia was “one who wielded revolvers to the accompaniment of rousing music, then raced along the top of rushing trains, beat up men and played with lions. Nadia was smart, self-confident, and so funny into the bargain that it was...impossible to distinguish between what was real in the life of the actress, and what belonged to the world of fiction according to oriental standards.”⁷

⁶ Neepa Majumdar in her work describes the Wadia Movietone star Fearless Nadia as representing the low brow spectrum of stardom, “In the hierarchies of star discourses, the popularity of actors associated with low-brow genres was registered almost exclusively in the unofficial star discourse that was marked by silence”. In her time, Nadia was scandalously absent from most of the contemporary journals. Her persona was then ‘recovered’ in the 1970s through a series of networks. The work on Nadia has read her image variously as a “virangana” and as a “radical feminist actress”. See Neepa Majumdar, Rosie Thomas & Dorothee Wenner.

⁷ See “Prologue”, ix.

The affective regime of speed and physical action was best embodied within the generic corpus of urban films. The urban film visualised the human body in thrilling new coordinates where the actresses' body was cast in roles that enabled them to adopt gestures and perform movements that exceeded or significantly diverged from prevailing codes of gendered social behavior. The extreme test and inversion of masculine/ feminine codes of behavior was in the western style 'stunt' films. The poesis of the action film also lies in the use of a new kind of feminine form- agile and modern, that was staged as an eroticized fetish and whose appeal was fully monetized and exploited by the studios.⁸ The *Nasty Women* series represented the actresses in exciting new scenarios that exceeded the normative registers of decorum and modesty like the Leontine/ Betty and Rosalie/ Jane films. The woman's body was embroiled in a heady fantasy of carnal voyeurism through a visual vocabulary that oscillates between the comedic and the destructive. Comedienne characters like Leontine/ Betty, Rosaline, Cunegonde, Bridget and Tilly celebrate the anarchic, transgressive with gleeful abandon and provide alternative frame of gendered references to contemporary audiences.

Pola Negri and her Indian contemporary



(Image: National Film Archive of India)

After returning from Pordenone, I was overjoyed to find an image of Pola Negri in the Indian film archive, a promotion still for American film 'A Woman Commands' which shows her reading the Indian film journal *Filmland*, 1932. This is a testament to the transnational

⁸ Valentina Vitali, "Women in Action Films in the 1920's and 1930's" in *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008, 56-118.

flows of early cinematic culture. The Pola Negri films at the *Giornate* were a revelation to my eyes. The three films screened at the festival highlighted Negri's range of performative skill and characterisation. Her stardom carefully crafted by her, the studios she worked with and publicity machinery was reminiscent of the Indian star Sulochana. No account of early Indian cinema is complete without the reference to Sulochana also known as Ruby Meyers. Sulochana was sexy, provocative, fashionable and embedded within the transnational order of stardom. Many of the contemporary film journals described Sulochana as the "Indian Greta Garbo". The modern woman seemed to have emerged most spectacularly in her films like *Cinema Queen* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1925), *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927) and *Indira B.A* (d. R.S Choudhary, 1929). It is unfortunate that none of Sulochana's film survive, however, there remains a plethora of stills and other film publicity material for film buffs to admire.



Sulochana (Images: filmkailm.com)

The search for lost Indian silent films is perhaps more real than the mythic El Dorado. And the search is an on-going effort. Hope that *Giornate* will repeat its 1994 feat once again!

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