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Repetition with a Difference: A Response to Arjun Appadurai

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This is a response to Arjun Appadurai's article "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu: Repeat Viewing of Bollywood Films."[1] *Repetition as a concept is discussed here in relation to Deleuze, genre, remakes of older films, tradition, cultural regimentation, and individual desire.*

Keywords: Bollywood, repetition, difference, genre, remake, formula, desire

Arjun Appadurai's insights on the cultures of globalization have been influential ever since the publication of his landmark *Modernity at Large* (1996), in which Appadurai provided a theoretical agenda for an understanding of the impact of globalization in transforming popular imagination within everyday life.[2] In departing from an analysis centered on the nation-state, Appadurai's postnational approach identified five scapes that had resulted directly from globalization: ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. Some of these critical questions raised during the first flush of globalization have been developed further in the article on the experience of repetition and difference associated with the viewing culture of popular Mumbai cinema. The expanded presence of media forms identified as mediascapes seems the most relevant to the analysis provided here. Appadurai argues that popular cinematic culture in India permeates our social and cultural fabric via songs, stars, playback singing, dialogue, and so forth. In short, this is an audiovisual ecology generated through fragments of a cinematic universe, traveling across paper, video, audio, and internet surfaces. Spectators inhabit this amorphous, dense, and fragmented economy of cinema. Irrespective of whether we actually sit down to see a film, the cinematic presence is everywhere through an extraordinary visual and aural culture. The relationship between repetition and difference for Appadurai is not limited

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1 Arjun Appadurai, "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu: Repeat Viewing of Bollywood Films," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.1 (2019): 140–52.

2 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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to just the practice of repeat viewing but constitutes a much wider cultural template of experiences where recall and remembrance play vital roles. The key issue here is that the experience of repetition as difference is never just literal but a psychic disposition that results from certain encounters.

For Appadurai, the positing of a cultural identity in the contemporary world based on national territory can only end up in the creation of invented and rigid pasts. This is where Gilles Deleuze's ideas on repetition and difference appear provocative in the way assumptions about coherent identities constructed through notions of common experiences are punctured.[3] For Deleuze, it is important that we think of experience not as a priori but as something that is constituted by the very singularity of any encounter. Difference in the Deleuzian vision is released from its peculiar relationship to sameness because nothing is ever the same, but a repetition of the idea of the same experienced in new ways. Repetition is essentially seen here as an experience of time and memory and requires a coming together of the past, present, and future. It is the present that triggers the repetition, which is then poised to move into an imagined notion of the future. These ideas are drawn upon by Appadurai to situate the spectator of Hindi cinema in a unique constellation of sensations. A hit popular film, says Appadurai, does not just attract repeat viewers, it also provides many with a sense that they are watching the film a second time even if that isn't the case. The big hit is therefore linked to a constellation of sensations that allows spectators the pleasure of inhabiting a sense of time that is both past and present. The success of a film relies on this cohabitation of multiple units of time and not the ability to manipulate the notion of a "formula."

Appadurai uses this conceptual formulation about the Hindi film spectator as the corner stone toward an analysis of the nature of India's changing relationship with modernity, globalization, and religious fundamentalism. This delineation of a sensory connection that is simultaneously past and present is finally positioned against the regimented forms of repetition of the past lodged in the right-wing political vision of a figure like Narendra Modi. In Modi's vision, the historical memories associated with Nehruvian modernism must be bypassed by his new narrative of competition, digital technology, and smart cities. Modi wants India to be a force in a globalizing world, and yet at every stage there is invocation of repetition with the revival of a "Hindu past." Repetition here becomes blind mimicry, a form of regimentation that goes hand in hand with the repression of dissent. The film viewer, however, enters the space of cultural modernity through consumption, glamour, and thrill, and the play of repetition and difference here is associated with pleasurable encounter. Let me try to extend this discussion to include some elements that I see as fundamental to the experience of repetition as difference in both literature and cinema.

The viewing experience as we all know is also related to the buildup of a familiar pattern that we begin to recognize over a period of time. This is the constitutive force of genre where we witness a confluence of identifiable features that can help us classify and make distinctions among different types of cultural productions. The negotiation of different genres by writers and filmmakers is generally linked to vision, purpose, and motivation, but within the limits of certain boundaries. Over a period of time, patterns

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

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are recognizable for spectators and become significant for deviations, experiments, and departures. This can lead to dialogue or a clash between different films and literary texts. Take the case of the Gothic novel where repetition generally highlights a refusal of closure that is intrinsic to the form. The desire to invoke the sublime is repetitively suggested through the presence of the uncanny. Repetition is, therefore, linked here to an inability to conclude, leaving us with traces of the unimaginable. As can be seen in the case of literature, the cinematic too is an art of repetition, though far more explicitly organized through its mise-en-scene of recognizable props, locations, and mood. Genre in cinema implies a set of stylistic devices that can identify one set of films from another. The term *genre films* is used to classify films that bring together a series of familiar stories through a combination of repetitive and familiar codes, narrative structure, and plots. Genre is also about the different ways in which producers, audiences, distributors, and critics create, organize, and interpret a system of visual signs. A horror film will provide certain details that are recognizable in promos so audiences drawn to this genre are able to connect and wait expectantly for these films. As genre studies has established—repetition is the logic that helps build a tacit circuit of communication, and difference is the moment when an established and recognizable code is punctured to create new meanings. In the work of many filmmakers, we also see a desire to deliberately depart from the easily recognizable pattern in any genre formation. As Janet Staiger suggests in relation to Hollywood genres, spectators "see films against a hyposthesized pattern based on viewing other films. The process of comparison—which requires pattern—is crucial to communication and may contribute to the enjoyment of a text".[4]

Genres emerged first with the studio system in Hollywood and have been identified with every major industrially produced system of cinema. In the Indian context, the discussion of genre becomes complicated. Although the early studio era generated certain genres such as the mythological, the devotional, the historical, the stunt, costume, and fantasy films, by the 1940s a broad structure came into being that witnessed internal mutation and ultimately led to a supra genre known as the "social."[5] By the 1960s the cinema was identified as just a repetitive and escapist form of entertainment. Appadurai quite rightly observes how this pejorative comment used by critics is essentially meant to convey what is assumed to be the playing out of a familiar narrative. The two films that Appadurai discusses were made during the first flush of globalization in the 1990s. Through these films Appadurai tries to establish his conceptual hunch about the significance of experiencing cinema's first viewing as a second encounter. Let me try to expand the discussion of one of the films to locate the specific reasons for its success.

I have written elsewhere about *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*'s (DDLJ, Aditya Chopra, 1995)[6] success (both outside India and in the domestic market) and the way the film emerged as a trendsetter for lavishly mounted family films of the 1990s that

4 Janet Staiger, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," *Film Criticism* 22.1 (1997): 5–20.

5 Rosie Thomas, "Mythologies and Modern India," in *World Cinema Since 1945*, ed. William Luhr (New York: Ungar, 1987), 304.

6 *DDLJ: The Making of the Film,* directed by Saif Akhtar (three parts): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7pLRr2QROg, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC4fJTi58WY&t=104s, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvcuPdcyPW8.

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moved across the world.[7] In her reading of *DDLJ*, Patricia Uberoi has argued that "at every turning point in the film narrative, and with every existential crisis, the protagonists pause to remind themselves and each other of what it means to be Indian."[8] *DDLJ* has also been viewed as the first film of the 1990s in which a series of consumption practices began to coalesce around popular film culture, globally.[9]

Scholarly attention paid to the film has dealt primarily with issues related to nationhood and Indianness, locating the film as a symptom of the anxieties triggered by cultural globalization. Yet despite the seemingly conservative family values present in the film, *DDLJ* needs to be seen as an ambivalent text that struggles to come to terms with globalization by trying to maintain a dialogue with ideas of "tradition," modern cosmopolitanism, and a yearning for the fulfilment of individual desire. It is in this assemblage that we see the desire to imagine a cross-generational spectator position. There is no doubt that the leitmotif of repetition is a key feature of the film's pleasurable universe, but how exactly does this unfold?

DDLJ emerged almost like a remake of an imagined world of 1960s Mumbai cinema. It is this conversation with a popular sense of a bygone era of cinema that provided the film with its powerful transgenerational sweep and imagination for a globalizing India. The film draws its central premise from a tradition of romance films that were set in hill stations and coincided with Mumbai cinema's transition to color in the 1960s. These sixties narratives often saw families opposed to the romantic liaison of the youthful protagonists who had to go through intense opposition and crisis before they were legitimately accepted by both sides. Songs, travel, fashion, and scenic sites were the hallmark of these 1960s films. *DDLJ* takes the core elements of these films but changes the location of the romance to Europe, and the family conflicts unfold in the North Indian state of Punjab. The train, a recurring feature in the 1960s films, is replaced in *DDLJ* by the Eurail.

At Maratha Mandir, a single screen theater in Mumbai, the film has drawn repeat viewers for more than twenty years![10] The gestural world of the stars has been repeated in several films that followed. In one of the songs of the film, "Ruk Jaa" O dil deewane," Farha Khan the choreographer replicated the quirky style associated with Shammi Kapoor, the dancing star of the sixties. Kapoor had himself emulated Elvis Presley in his clothing and dancing style, and Shahrukh succeeded in creating the same kind of energetic performance in this nightclub sequence of *DDLJ*. In a three-part video created to celebrate twenty years since the first release of *DDLJ*, several people associated with the film seemed to invoke the cultural world of the sixties. This decade of travel, tourism, romance, and fashion clearly was the imaginary cine archive from which an ephemeral economy of traces was drawn upon. This is then perhaps the reason for *DDLJ*'s success. Appadurai argues that spectators are drawn to the practice of repeat viewing because the

7 Ranjani Mazumdar, "Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Films*, eds. Sabine Haeni, Sarah Barrow, and John White (London and New York: Routledge, 2014). 205–08.

8 Patricia Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32.2 (1987): 305–336.

9 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Bollywoodization of Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena," *Inter Asia Cultural Studies* 4.1 (2003): 25–39.

10 Jenisha Borah, *Maratha Mandir: An Exploration of Urban Memory through the Architectural Space of Film Exhibition.* Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, JNU, 2014.

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very first encounter with the film itself presents them with the feeling that it is a second viewing. He says, "It is the sensation of always (and already) seeing a film again (i.e., for the second or more time) that actually produces the motivation to actually see it again." *DDLJ* worked consistently to work through these different orders of time and memory.

Raj (Shahrukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol) belong to different class backgrounds. Raj is all set to leave for a holiday in Europe with his other rich friends. Simran is keen to go with her girlfriends but knows that her father will not permit her to. In a poignant scene, Simran begs her father to let her have just one month's freedom and following that she would do everything that he expects of her, including an arranged marriage in Punjab with someone she has never met. Simran says she wants to experience her dreams and aspirations in that one month of travel. The father is moved by the intensity of Simran's desire to travel with her friends and relents. It is this month-long travel across Europe that changes Simran and Raj's life.

The Europe segment of the film is a breezy collation of comic interludes, popular song sequences, and display of commodities, fashion, and transportation. The landscape is picturesque. Instead of the hill station of 1960s cinema, we are moving across typical tourist sites of Europe by Eurail, expensive cars, and by foot. Simran and Raj get separated from their friends and end up spending considerable time with each other. The journey from here on is centered on the development of a romance in which matters related to arranged marriages, sexual intimacy, and traditional values of the family are discussed by the two. It is in this landscape away from home that the two experience the full force and power of romantic desire. Following a drunken song sequence the couple end up spending the night in a hotel room without having sex. Boundaries are maintained and never crossed, but there is transgression hovering just around the corner yet contained in line with the demands of a typical Hindi film.

The constant yearning and projection of individual desire at one level and the powerful presence of social norms, rituals, and expectations about marriage on the other make *DDLJ* a complex narrative about the memories of a generation, desperate to reverse their own lost youth and absence of romance through their children. Yet at the heart of the film is also a utopian desire for reconciliation and belief in the values of the "Indian family." Contemporary subjectivities are thus drawn into the narrative and arranged for a final climax where all differences are ironed out and the "great Indian family" lives on with its commitment to marriage, rituals, and "cultural purity" as the hallmarks of their identity. The repetition of a pattern stemming from the 1960s romance film is played out to ensure this tussle between tradition and modernity, Indianness and westernization.

We take note of the repetition at work as also the differences that become pronounced, especially in the figure of the mother, Rajjo (Farida Jalal), who has made peace with her life, but there is lack of fulfilment written in her persona, expressed in conversations with her daughter. She first tells Simran that women don't have the right to expect their dreams to come true, they don't even have the right to dream. But when Rajjo sees her daughter with Raj, she begs them to run away. Rajjo is a critical figure in the film whose world is never fully explained and yet casts a shadow on the notion of the happy family. She is a conventional mother but with a difference. She tells Simran that she wants her dream to not get squashed like others.

This constant play with the reality of unfulfilled desires and yearning for fulfilment runs through *DDLJ*. This is a film of profound ambivalence, seeking a balance between

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tradition and modernity and creating a template for many such films in the future. It is this dialogue with a sixties imagination, restaged for a contemporary context with all its contradictions, that helps mediate the complex movement between repetition and difference. Popular Mumbai cinema's ability to introduce repetition and difference along with dreams of transcendence has always made it a powerful storehouse of our everyday conflicts. Yet the cinema that Appadurai is referring to is no longer what it used to be. We are now faced with a vast array of different kinds of films desperately trying to engage with spectators whose tastes are shaped by new global currents facilitated by a new online culture. Can this contemporary cinema offer us a new mode through which to understand what is going on in India today, or will Modi succeed in pushing through his repetitive logic of a Hindu past? Like Appadurai, we are all banking on the fact that Modi's formula may just turn out to be a flop not a hit, despite an election victory.

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