

INTRODUCTION

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Visions, voices, echoes, misrepresentations, stereotypes, fluidities, borders, screens, or contrasts (and all the in-between options) emerge as subtitles linked to the study of cultural representations of India and its diasporas. The conceptual images of roots and routes, icebergs, tapestries, visual memories, local festivals outside India such as La Tomatina, or characters and celebrities visiting India (or even retiring in an Indian hotel or stepping outside an Indian screen) articulate contemporary representations that renegotiate the past and future of how India is considered and how it is recreated in the present. This special issue, devoted to “Cultural Representations of India and Indian Diasporas on Screen,” includes fourteen research papers, two interviews, four pieces of creative writing and three reviews that aim to assess and revisit portrayals of India and its diasporas on screen through different genres. This volume is articulated with an interplanetary vocation (Spivak, Moreno-Álvarez) that unveils previous and future conceptualisations of the many Indias that are contained in such a heterogeneous and changing nation and in its history and narration. Moreno-Álvarez links “interplanetary” to “empathetic universals whose embodiment, spatiality and intersubjectivity is constituted in relation to others, where being human is being con-human” (85). It is our intention to look at India and its diasporas throughout different forms, perspectives, testimonies and with the con-human promise of a new screen that will foster a new and multiple representation of India. By so doing, these pages ignite a vocation to listen to first testimonies from producers, film-directors, writers, and scholars who portray their own image and understanding in texts where empathy and conviviality (Menon, Suárez-Lafuente) may emerge as key to evaluate and consider the cultural representations of India and Indian Diasporas on screen. Artistic, social, gender and political discourses in Indian cultural representations on screen are read, analysed and promoted in this issue. There are references (and articles) pointing to mainstream cinematographic practices like Bollywood, but this is not our core motivation. Instead, contributors offer different interdisciplinary perspectives in order to understand and see beyond the worldwide success of this mode of Indian cinema.

Accordingly, famous Indian filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray or Aparna Sen and popular films like *Maqbool* will be studied alongside much more contemporary (and unknown) titles like *Asuran*, *Behind the Bhangra Boys* or *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, to investigate and add different and recurrent agendas. Filmmakers and testimonies from the Indian diaspora will also be analysed and some contributions will present confronting views on the same feature (titles are not mentioned to avoid spoilers).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.83.01>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 83; November 2021, pp. 11-17; ISSN: e-2530-8335



Two sections with interviews and creative pieces are also included, where the reader will find motivational words as well as first-person testimonies from directors, producers, playwrights, poets and journalists. This issue presents three reviews on two interdisciplinary volumes on India Studies and a note on one film festival held before the COVID-19 pandemics struck the world (and we became even more dependent on screens and the mediated images they offer).

The volume starts with Carmen Escobedo de Tapia's article, which contextualises historically cinema in India and studies the strong link shared by history, nation and narration, in the arrival of cinematographic narrative forms and mechanisms to the country. She documents more than one hundred years of filmmaking, pointing out creative influences, contemporary topics, and the economics, politics and creativity that intertwine in moviemaking. The author manages to tackle what is within, beyond and besides cinema and how it has narrated the history of the many nations of India in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dolores Herrero, in the next contribution, departs from the previous historical framework to highlight the necessary vindications that, in terms of anti-casteism and diversity, are not included in mainstream Indian Cinemas. Her paper embraces how social inclusion can be made visible and is represented and stimulated from cinema. By studying the film *Asuran* (2019), she investigates contemporary Dalit cinema to guess the "Aesthet(h)ics" of such a cinema, meaning that there is a new aesthetics that demands and promotes and ethical consideration that calls for ethical responsibility. This theoretical label can be extremely helpful to study the subversion of characters, productions, and directors, as Herrero proves in her stimulating reading of *Asuran* and its anti-caste agenda. The conceptualisation is extremely useful to continue adding layers (or deciphering) in cinema about the cultural (mis)representations of recurrent topics for India studies such as caste, gender, sexualities or religious hegemonies. Nation-building, ideological concerns and colonialism are a constant in current post/decolonial debates and sociological India studies. Binayak Roy & Om Prakash Dwivedi study Satyajit Ray's films to assess his representation of power relations using vernacular languages (Bengali) and the

* Jorge Diego-Sánchez wants to express that part of the work gathered in this issue has been possible thanks to the Project "Narrating Resilience, Achieving Happiness? Toward a Cultural Narratology" (PID2020-113190GB-C22) (granted by MICINN. IP Ana María Fraile-Marcos, Universidad de Salamanca). On his side, Juan Ignacio-Oliva acknowledges the support of the Research Project "Rhizomatic Communities: Myths of Belonging in the Indian Ocean World" [PGC2018-095648-B-I00] (Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, IP Felicity Hand, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). He is also indebted to the Project "Aesthetics, Ethics and Strategies of the New Migratory Cartographies and Transcultural Identities in Twenty-First-Century Literature(s) in English" [PID2019-109582GB-IOO], granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (IP José Manuel Estévez-Saa, Universidade da Coruña). Both Diego-Sánchez and Oliva want to express their gratitude to Ratnakara Research Group, led by Felicity Hand at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and the importance of the network sheltered by Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary India Studies (aeii.org).



historical particularities of a state (Bengal and the Bengal Famine). They develop a close reading of the anticolonial project of Ray in *Shatranj ke Khilari* (*The Chess Players*, 1980) and *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973). They study the historical and linguistic complexities of the region and illustrate the dynamics through which the British Raj made use of those differences in terms of urban/non-urban areas, economic means of production and access to education. They categorise these two films as part of a “post 1970” filmmaking that Ray exerted in response to the betrayal of the Nehruvian dream and thus of Ray’s own values.

Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez contributes with an article that talks to Roy & Dwivedi’s paper to add a new layer. She surveys the ways in which the real story of the Royal Oudh Family was told through journalist chronicles and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Real Durwan” (1999). If the previous paper described the life stories of the Royal Oudh Family presented by Satyajit Ray, here Moreno-Álvarez revolves on the notion that build the concept of ‘a real representation.’ Her article is extremely pertinent for this volume because she compares a literary and a journalist representation to decipher and analyse the nuances through which the traumatic experiences of Partition have been told. She navigates throughout these two notions of reality alongside the line “Believe Me / Do not Believe Me,” detailing that emotions can be ignored, misused or incorporated in a narrative or cultural representation to understand different levels of history (and its essentialisation). Her contribution enriches and opens new questions in respect to the field of New Historicism and Postcolonial Studies, recalling what western journalists and readers did not acknowledge in the cultural representations and chronicles of the times. With the constant possibility of a cinematographic adaptation of Lahiri’s short story composite *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) (where the story is included), Moreno-Álvarez’s engaging article emerges as pioneering because it pinpoints and discusses on the nuances through which India has displayed its own history and which real-false stories have been told. It is in this sense that Anwesha Dutta Ain’s paper labels Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955) and *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*, 1991) as cinematographic fictional narratives that are subtexts of fictional ethnography, allowing thus to recognise the ethnographic particularities of the non-urban areas described in the 1955 film and the urban particularities of Kolkata in the 1991 feature. Dutta Ain studies Ray’s dialogues and cinematography to highlight the importance of cinema in documenting life, times, and symbolism of specific times. Then, as in Moreno-Álvarez poignant lines, it is how and why we believe it (or not) that the spectators and researchers should pay attention to.

The particularities of Bengal and its own history of Anglo-Indian identities (and stereotypes) are theorised in the next article, where Felicity Hand studies the cinema of Aparna Sen and her (re)creation of alterity. Hand presents and explores Sen’s cinema to illustrate Sen’s personal allegiance when illustrating different Indian identities. She studies *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002) and *15 Park Avenue* (2005) to assess Sen’s portrayal of disability, ageing and communalism. Hand highlights the particularities of the three women who star in the films to offer a deep analysis on religion, caste, and sickness to allow the reader/spectator to understand Sen’s commitment with *othered* figures. Hand’s contribution is a perfect



corollary for the preceding articles as she illustrates the history, stories, agenda and regional particularities of India and the many multiples Indias contained in such cinematographic mediations.

Characters on a cinema screen look bigger than the spectators and some film versions or adaptations overtake and transmute literary classics to reconstruct and arbitrate its messages and personalities. Therefore, some cinematic images of India are understood as biased realities. Rosa García-Periago departs from this power and expands Hand's reading about alterity in respect to how female sexuality has been portrayed in Indian cinemas. She documents the adaptation of Lady Macbeth and her sexual desire in *Maqbool* (2003) and *Veeram* (2017) to offer nuances on the implications of being a married Indian woman. García-Periago examines these adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to consider the transformations of the source text in these two films that transmute specific topics and representations to fit the demands of the Indian audience and understand Shakespeare's classic. She traces these two Indian Lady Macbeths explaining the different aspects through which Indian cinemas have conceptualised women sexual desire and its interconnection (or not) with evil. Her contribution guides readers and spectators to know more about Indian traditions of cinematographic representation but also about historical and ethical particularities that let us think (and act and adapt) beyond the screen of cinemas. Thea Buckley enriches the discussion on adaptations with her work on *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), a Malayalam-language film that displays the generational tensions of a family on a colonial tea plantation in the South of India. The movie is a mashup of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Biblical *Book of Job*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that, as Buckley points out, allows the director to transgress on themes of national division that can be traced to Partition while adding a social evaluation on caste differentiation and indigenous populations within India. This is a new seam in the multiple quilts through which India can be defined, thus letting spectators, readers and researchers to know and revolve more on the multiple darns, threads and frays through which the multiples Indias –inside India– are displayed.

Hegemonies and normativities are shown, questioned or challenged through narratives and cultural representations. Portrayals of gender and sexual orientations on screen may dissent or either inherit some of the preestablished hegemonic discourses. Regiane Ramos & Jairo Adrián-Hernández study the interference and control of religious discourses in LGBTIQ+ identities in Sukhdeep Singh's documentary *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all God's Creation)* (2020). They explain that Singh's feature challenges previous taxonomies on gender identities and sexual orientation in the specific queer Sikh community of Delhi and propose an intersectional study that informs their reading on the testimonies gathered in the film. The possibility of a joyful activism and the collection and portrayal of a community in the diaspora, in this case a Sikh community in Eastern Canada, is examined in Rohini Bannerjee's article on another documentary, Nancy Ackerman's *Behind the Bhangra Boys* (2019). Bannerjee accounts for the social responsibility shared in the diaspora to illuminate a territory and come to terms, for instance, with the unceded territories of Mi'kma'ki, otherwise known as Nova Scotia. Both articles



decipher the cultural representation of two Sikh communities and add a comparison on how diaspora, sexual orientations and gender identities are shown in public life, stressing the necessity to assess and value cultural representations on screen to understand traditions, histories and personal stories of individuals, communities and possibilities such as a joyful activism. The particularities of diaspora are later specified by Shilpa Bhat, who studies a particular song in a Bollywood film (*Naam* 1986) to digress on the power given to nostalgia, memory and music in the creation and recreation of identity. Bhat offers an insight on music as a source of nostalgia that engages with the importance of Bannerjee's reading of Ackerman's feature to also foster a joyful activism. Understanding history throughout particular stories facilitate complementary and opposing views about a specific event.

The cultural representations of the trauma of the Partition of India in 1947 proliferate in Indian arts to reconceptualise how political and economic powers get hold of readings or portrayals of the event and its political and economic consequences. The ARTICLES section of this issue finishes with two contributions on Partition and its cinematographic representations. Elena Oliete-Aldea studies Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) throughout a transdisciplinary and transtextual approach that allows us to understand the particularities and nuances of films about the Raj and the specific particularities that nostalgic representations open. Oliete-Aldea magnificently links the tradition of heritage film about the Raj to the twenty-first conjuncture of a political, humanitarian, and economic crisis. She circumscribes Chadha's film as a revision of India's Partition in a global and local scenario that leads us to question future cultural representations on the topic. Accordingly, Sandeep Ain also talks about Chadha's film adding questions on the relevance of the incorporation of Chadha's personal elements in the narrative. The article talks to Oliete-Aldea and initiates a dialogue that enriches, because he adds different films and literary texts that complement and question, as in the first article of the section, the kaleidoscopic image of India on screen. Finally, as a sort of addendum, Amit Ranjan Biswas adds his own testimony and motivation as film director and screenplay writer of *Bridge* (2016), emphasising the alchemy of cinema and its therapeutic qualities.

Testimonies of those who represent are important to familiarise with their particularities and willingness. The section INTERVIEWS adds two conversations. The first one is led by Regiane Ramos & Jairo Adrián-Hernández with the director Sukhdeep Singh. It is extremely important to hear the specific words because they enrich and contextualise in first person the research (and contextualisation) previously made by Ramos & Adrián-Hernández. The particularities in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity and religion that Singh shares illuminate some of the questions posed in the previous section. Also, his words invoke the possibility of transformation and the necessity to reassess how ethical a society is. The dialogue between producer Paramita Bannerjee and Mónica Fernández Jiménez displays the complexities of making an independent film in a particular setting of Bengal. The motivations, artistic choices and in-between journeys inform spectator and readers about the complexities of making a film, documentary, short, shooting a videoclip, or simply choosing the nuances and perspectives to represent cultural ethos and/or aesthetics.



What happens when someone switches off (or on) the light that accompanies a screening, the writing of a film or the start of a streaming in/about/from a specific place? This question is answered in the section CREATION with four testimonies. Firstly, poet and scholar Zinia Mitra shares a poem on one character in Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*. Then, Aritra Basu's play "A Final Showdown against Streaming Giants" presents different Indian directors discussing (and strategizing!) on (against!) the Video on Demand streaming sector. The section closes with two poems based in the city of Kolkata and specifically a particular Southern area. Diego-Sánchez's poem "Bhavani Cinema" interpellates a local cinema that shows and has seen many lives, representations, roots and routes of multiple Indias (or at least some of them, experienced by the co-editors). Juan Ignacio Oliva's translation into English adds slowness, beauty and deepness to share the whirlwind energy of the place and the spaces it gathers through images, films and stories. On the other hand, the lines of Oliva's poem "Kalighat" act as perfect corollary for this volume: routes and roots of stories, dwellings, wanderings and the metaphorical process of experiencing Indian culture(s) barefeet, with well-trodden shoes or stepping on new boots. The whimsical tone opens a connection with the histories and stories that have permeated the place he details, and that so continue. Diego-Sánchez translates these lines into English, adding a solemn tone, almost premonitory, to round up the journey both embarked, sailed and ventured together in this issue.

The volume ends with the section *Reviews* that includes one about a film festival and two about two interdisciplinary volumes on multiple India(s), so that the reader and spectator can continue switching on and off different lights that open up new and old cultural representations of India and its diasporas on screen. Finally, the editors want to acknowledge the reviewers of this issue, who have generously shared their time, expertise and feedback to the articles that you will read (and some others who await to be read in future publications). Thank you for sharing this journey that now continues with you, reader. You are the one turning lights off so that new footlights can be switched on.



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