Fantasy, Realism, and Other Mixed Delights: What Have Film Analysts Seen in Popular Indian Cinema?

Sara Dickey

Abstract: Much commentary on Indian cinema unreflectively equates film with fantasy. Writing in this vein may depict audiences as emotionally and cognitively undeveloped, while it represents those critics and viewers who prefer realism as sophisticated, rational, and mature. Those scholars of Indian cinema who examine fantasy and realism in depth, however, often draw different conclusions about both cinema and its consumers. Some note the close relationship between fantasy and reality, and thereby represent audiences as more savvy than do those who superficially link film with fantasy. Others analyze the privileging of cinematic realism as an element of socio-political ideology, or examine viewers' own application of realist criteria to films, thus further complicating the image of Indian cinema consumers as irrational and infantile. In continuing to pose these concepts as a dichotomy, however, cinema scholars reproduce some of the assumptions that underlie the standard usage in film criticism.

Keywords: active audience, escape, film criticism, film scholarship, pleasure

Indian movies are fantasies.[1] What could be a more commonplace claim, except perhaps the corollary that movie-goers are mesmerized or seduced by what they see and hear? Cinema is equated with fantasy in film reviews, censors' rulings, stories in popular and trade presses, interviews with filmmakers, viewer blogs, and scholarly articles. Often the observation is dismissive, and usually it is reflexive—that is, made automatically and without reflection. Conversely, cinematic realism is celebrated, particularly by elite critics and film personnel. Although consumers who flock to fantasy may be depicted as emotionally and cognitively underdeveloped, those who prefer realism are presented as sophisticated, rational, and mature.

Writing that explores fantasy and realism in some depth, however, often produces understandings of these concepts and of cinema's consumers that are at variance with common assumptions. In this article, I focus on English-language Indian cinema scholarship since the mid-1980s to examine the analysis of fantasy and realism. Setting this work in the context of popular and elite criticism,[2] I discuss the revealing but often incommensurate ways in which realism and fantasy are used by academic writers, and the lessons exposed through their analysis. Although scholars often aim to complicate the categories of fantasy and realism and to blur contrasts between them, we also write *with* these categories.

This article examines how two critical concepts have been dealt with in recent cinema literature, rather than reviewing that literature as a whole.[3] Several themes that characterize contemporary cinema writing underlie the analysis, however, and two of those themes are taken as given in this article. These include the fundamental observation that film is more than visual/literary texts, and includes aural and other sensory modes (Desai, Dudrah, and Rai 2005; Nakassis and Dean 2007; Roberge 1985); and similarly, the recognition that cinema is more than films, encompassing also the activities, goods, and information that circulate around films (Dickey 1993; Dwyer 2001; Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2009; Jacob 1998; Mishra 2002; M. S. S. Pandian 1992; Rajadhyaksha 2003; Vasudevan 1991).

Two other persistent themes in the literature include the need to justify cinema as a legitimate object of scholarly and societal interest, and the depiction of audiences as "active" rather than passive participants. Since both of these issues have echoes in the main themes of this essay, I review them briefly here.

Cinema, Viewers, and the Respectability of Subjects

Scholars' need to legitimize Indian cinema as a serious, socially and culturally relevant topic echoes a trend once common in cultural studies research, a trend that Nightingale explained as "linked in part to the newness of such texts as objects of serious academic scrutiny" (1996: 108). In India, cinema scholars have faced another obstacle: the denigration, by both critics and audiences, of Indian commercial film—a medium that has arguably been even more roundly stigmatized and dismissed than the subjects of initial cultural studies research (e.g., British television serials). Much of the early recuperative focus of Indian cinema scholarship arose from writers' recognition that popular films were dismissed by local and foreign commentators as unrealistic, escapist, and even ridiculous.

Indian cinema scholarship is carried out in the context of a long history of critical condescension, dismissal, and castigation. By at least the 1920s, urban, high-caste, middle- and upper-class prejudices against folk drama had been

transferred to mainstream Indian film. The spectacle, melodrama, and sometimes lewdness of cinema violated elite norms of propriety, as well as a scientistic philosophy of logic and empiricism influential among the "educated middle class" (Chakravarty 1989: 32). The history of formal and informal film criticism has been documented by a number of writers, including Thomas (1985), Rajadhyaksha (1986), Chakravarty (1989), Vasudevan (1991, 2001), Dickey (1993), M. S. S. Pandian (1996), Nandy (2003), Hughes (2005), Banaji (2006), Baskaran (2009), and Ram (2008). Their research demonstrates that for nearly a century, a sizeable percentage of formal and informal critics have, with remarkable consistency, represented viewers who flock to such vulgar entertainment as irrational, gullible, and infantile—in short, as both intellectually and emotionally immature. Although some critics have made exceptions for certain types of mainstream films—such as the Hindi "socials" of the 1940s and 1950s—and although formal film criticism has always included diverse views (Vasudevan 2000: 99), this dismissive perspective has arguably formed a dominant trend in film commentary. It persists today in many film reviews, in filmmakers' comments on their work and the industry, and in audiences' observations about their own viewing practices.

Not surprisingly, as film scholars sought to demonstrate the academic respectability of cinema, many also aimed to do the same for viewers. They have done so primarily by representing viewers as *active* consumers. Authors who take such a stance not only contest the image of passive viewers mesmerized by a dominant ideology (an image with roots in the Frankfurt School), they also attempt to dislodge the related image of the irrational viewer found in both formal and informal representations of audiences in the public sphere. The following examples of this approach illustrate its notable persistence, as well as the types of agency assigned to viewers:[4]

> *It is indeed true that the popular film culture has shaped the viewers' interests and the economy of pleasure in a certain way. However, even within that circumscribed cinema, the viewer has certain choices and options available to him or her. . . . The audiences for films clearly are not passive absorbers of meaning; instead, they are active creators of them . . . they reappropriate the narrative. (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992: 24, 71–72)*

> *The communication that takes place between audiences and creators of spectacle is an active negotiation . . . what is portrayed becomes a part of the public sphere, to be discussed, applied, and—as viewers themselves argue—manipulated back into their lives, potentially effecting change. (Dickey 1993: 175)*

> *By spontaneously shouting out responses to onscreen dialogue, audience members construct a parallel dialogue which elaborates the mean-*

ing of the film or may incorporate an engagement with the actor that is in between the frame of the narrative and film-making. (L. Srinivas 2002: 171)

Both social and psychic contestations are the very stuff of how audiences constitute their own relationship to changing film narratives, dance, and music; audio-visual technologies and theatre spaces; shifting aesthetic codes and values; and social norms in the moment of their dissolution and reconstitution. Active audiences are constantly renegotiating the terms of their pleasure. (Desai, Dudrah and Rai 2005: 79)

These authors emphasize the creative element of film consumption, evoking concepts of "reappropriation" and "reconstruction" of the material, and especially the idea of "negotiations" between filmmakers and audiences, temporally dispersed and indirect as those negotiations must be. Filmgoers are assumed to continue this "dialogue" with filmmakers and among themselves outside of the viewing arenas (see also Nagappan 2004: 190–91) as consumers continue to react to cinematic material and apply, reject, or remake it in their lives. It is also clear, however, that authors have different types and levels of participation in mind when they characterize consumers as active (see, e.g., Budha 2007), and of particular interest, that there are different types of politicization or agency either assumed or demonstrated in this activity. Thus, viewers can be portrayed as constructing meaning, creating change, resisting or reproducing hegemonic content, producing pleasure, addressing anxieties or inequities, influencing film content and narration, talking back to and editing films as they watch them, or experimenting with affect and identity.

In any case, most recent cinema writers invoke what Ramu Nagappan calls "savvy spectators" (2004: 177). Yet viewers who are seen as "negotiating" with filmmakers are not necessarily argued to be contesting the meaning of the visual and aural content they consume. Numerous authors have scrutinized historical and ethnographic evidence of fans' and filmgoers' interpretations of cinematic material, and given painstaking attention to variations in consumers' subjectivities based in class, caste, religion, gender, age, region, urban-rural residence, or education. Most have still concluded that consumers either ultimately acted in accord with dominant ideologies (e.g., of patriarchy, class, or political nationalism), or rejected the potential for resistance or rebellion offered by cinema (see, e.g., Derné 2000; Dickey 1993; M. S. S. Pandian 1992; Thiruchandran 1993). Contrary to some later critics' assumptions, arguing that the effect of the films is conservative is not the same as arguing that viewers are passive recipients of the films' imagery, or, as one of my critics recently put it, arguing that they have an "impaired psychology" (Rogers 2009: 84).

Other analysts, however, have observed more radical responses, or at least posited more resistive readings by viewers of commercial films. Writers like

Nagappan (2004) have emphasized the simultaneous distinct reactions that an individual viewer may have, and pointed out that any film has elements that allow it to be read in contradictory ways at any moment (see also Banaji 2006). Noting that "popular cinema presents not a single story or a single truth but multiple and conflicting ones" (2004: 175), Nagappan argues that viewers, who recognize narratives' non-coherence, fracturedness, and internal contradictions, expect and demand "a kind of vortex of possibilities in film" (177). Others observe that "discrepant notes" (Uberoi 1998: 209) in a film, and collisions between "text and spectator" (Ghosh 2000: 90), can be used to subvert the dominant message of a film or the filmmaker's intentions. Thus, they argue, viewers can make multiple meanings of a text, question its dominant messages, or play up the internal "loose threads" that threaten the stability of the final resolution, and use the film's material (along with the other audio, visual, and more covert "texts" available in their lives) to buttress or unravel the hierarchies that structure everyday life.

Fantasy

Perhaps we should be surprised to find this image of the querying, arguing, absorbing, recreating viewer alongside portrayals of film as fantasy. As noted earlier, a great deal of film writing equates Indian cinema with fantasy—more so than is true for other forms of popular culture in or out of India. Neither popular nor scholarly discussions of drama, or of fiction, or even of television serials deploy this term so frequently. One of the reasons for this is that specific elements of Indian films are literally meant to be read as a particular character's fantasy, as with some song sequences.[5] Yet when Indian film is described as a fantasy, the referent is usually the entire film.

Indian films have been designated as "fantasy" because of several typical features. These include non-linear narratives; exotic or non-"realistic" settings, behaviors, coincidences, or outcomes; apparent wish fulfillment through romance or consumption; imagined or generally unattainable possibilities rather than the mundanity of everyday life; and emotional excess. Not surprisingly, then, films are also often likened to dreams (Banaji 2006: 9; Mehta 2004: 349; Roberge 1985: 60–63; Valicha 1988: 33).[6] (More than fantasy, however, "dream" may connote a potentially attainable aspiration or ideal, as when Malhotra and Alagh (2004) depict films of the 1990s as "dreaming the nation.")

Uncritical references to film as fantasy and dream frequently posit viewers as residing in a realm of unreality and excessive desire. The need for fantasy—which authors often demonstrate by pointing to the wide consumption of film and its media—may be taken as proof of viewers' inability to deal with reality, a perspective that portrays viewers as less than fully rational, modern, or adult. This view is heard typically in popular opinion, and frequently in elite film criticism; depictions of gullible or irrational viewers seduced by the fan-

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tasies of the screen can also be found in academic writing (Ahmed 1992; Das Gupta 1991; Valicha 1988). Yet those scholarly writers who analyze cinematic fantasy usually see it as crucially tied to reality. Rather than being divorced from reality, it is intimately linked to it, drawing from and addressing reality in ways that are critical to the success of films as vehicles of pleasure, ideology, and personal or social scrutiny. Indeed, such discussions of fantasy often reveal beliefs about the functions of films. I offer four examples, drawn from scholars in different disciplines, which serve to introduce the range of relationships perceived between fantasy and reality in popular Indian cinema.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, one of the first to explore the mechanisms by which commercial Indian films act as fantasies, noted,

> *My major focus is on cinema as a prism that reflects dominant psychological concerns, certainly at the conscious level but especially the hidden, unconscious concerns of the . . . clientele of the Hindi films. Thus, I approach Hindi cinema as a collective fantasy, a group daydream. . . . Fantasy, the "stuff that dreams are made of," is the bridge between desire and reality, spanning the chasm between what is asked for and what is granted. (1981: 12, 14)*

In a later version of this essay, Kakar took care to distance himself from common understandings of fantasy, specifying that

> *I do not use "fantasy" in the ordinary sense of the word, with its popular connotations of whimsy, eccentricity, or triviality, but as another name for that world of imagination which is fueled by desire and which provides us with an alternative world where we can continue our long-standing quarrel with reality. (1989: 26–27)*

Kakar thus emphasizes unconscious, collective psychological concerns and the means by which fantasy arrays desire and imagination against the shortcomings of reality.

Ashis Nandy also writes about psychological functions of film, using the terminology of needs and anxieties rather than desires:[7]

> *The popular Indian film . . . has unknowingly taken upon itself the responsibility of expressing—perhaps also manipulating and containing—the fears and anxieties of the Indian self, threatened today by the conflicting demands of numerous life-styles and normative frames. The medium provides, as an organized fantasy, a partial defence against the deeper schisms produced by social change. (1989: 44)*

Nandy likens cinema to a Rorschach test (1989: 42) that functions to "exteriorize inner problems" (51).

Steve Derné draws from ethnographic research to argue that "filmgoing appears to be a liminal period of fantasy wish fulfillment" (2000: 61). Like Kakar and Nandy, he sees cinema as helping viewers achieve, within temporally and spatially finite limits, the desires that remain unfulfilled in their daily lives. Along with some other authors (e.g., Bhattacharya 2004; Dickey 1993), he emphasizes the importance of a set-aside space, and either the presence or absence of friends or family members, as encouraging the liminality of the experience.[8] Unlike many other authors, however, Derné has scrutinized the differences between what viewers wish to see in films and what they choose to do in their own lives. For example, though the young men he interviewed were drawn to the fantasies of romantic love and of rebellion against parental authority, they preferred to have their marriages arranged by elders. Derné's ethnographic methods allowed him to differentiate among the ways in which local categories of viewers—unmarried men, married men, young women—express desires through their responses to film fantasies.[9]

Ananya Jahanara Kabir returns us to the work of fantasy at a broader collective level, in this case that of the nation. She writes that "Bollywood should be seen as a fantasy machine, which has fed on, and fed further, the nation's collective desires, drawing on the libidinal economies of dominant and dominated groups within the nation's self-professedly secular, pluralist framework" (2005: 95). Kabir employs a mechanical metaphor to emphasize the large-scale production of fantasy and desires consumed by industry and audience alike in a feedback loop, all grounded within existing hegemonic ideologies. She complicates this image by adding,

> *We cannot ignore the correlation between political practices of marginalisation, domination and hegemony on the one hand, and the cultural practices of containment, incorporation and homogenisation on the other, often managed and engineered through pleasure. Yet it is cinematic pleasure itself, and its complicating, unpredictable trajectories, that can derail this straightforward equation. (2005: 95–96)*

All four authors cited above emphasize the visible projection of desires into a medium that, although most directly created by others, many would say is actually coproduced by viewers through a variety of processes, including market dynamics and filmmakers' intuition of viewers' desires (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992: 24; Gopalan 2002; Kakar 1989: 28), the control and release of anxiety brought about by social change or by everyday life in a hierarchically structured society, and the dissemination of and response to hegemonic ideologies.[10] Although they differ on the mechanisms by which the process takes place, these authors recognize a significant degree of organization in cine-

matic fantasy—as a collective or socio-political process, and as a patterned set of representations.

A final function of fantasy frequently raised is the role of vicarious experience in shaping viewers' understanding of their own lives and of others', and in creating aspirations for different lives. Lakshmi Srinivas provides one of the most recent examples in her exploration of the roles of "everyday fantasy" in cinematic representations of globalization. Srinivas argues that while films give all audiences "a framework for relating the distant and the immediate, the invisible and the visible and the global, the local and the national" (in press: 21), fantastic representations of globalization have different utilities for different viewers. For middle-class Indian residents, they make the foreign seem known and nearby, familiar and "Indian," while simultaneously validating an urban middle-class lifestyle. For non-resident Indians, they link transnational experiences with nostalgic, grounding images of India. Finally, for upwardly mobile lower-class Indian audiences, they introduce technologies and styles necessary to new class practices (27ff.). Srinivas argues that these fantasies "educate" the viewers by providing "a means, limited though it may be, to expand one's cultural repertoire" (35). Audiences use everyday fantasy both to ground and to expand their imaginations of themselves.

The work of the authors discussed in this section reveals that although the effectiveness of fantasy as an unexamined trope in much cinema writing relies on an implied disjuncture from reality, fantasy is hardly disconnected from reality. In each case, whether at the level of the individual, the social category, or the nation most broadly defined, fantasy "works" because it is rooted in and addresses the real (see Dickey 1993: 174). Without this interface, its functions—whether they be relieving or releasing stress, learning about other worlds or ways, absorbing political points of view—cannot be realized effectively, or experienced as satisfying. Thus each of these authors supports Shakuntala Banaji's contention that "fantasy is not an end-point but a process" (2006: 168). Here it is useful to recall Kakar's point that the reality that fantasy addresses includes not only empirical reality, but something wider and deeper:

> *When dogmatic rationalists dismiss Hindi films as unrealistic and complain that their plots strain credibility and their characters stretch the limits of the believable, this condescending judgment is usually based on a restricted vision of reality. To limit and reduce the real to that which can be demonstrated as factual is to exclude the domain of the psychologically real—all that is felt to be, enduringly, the actuality of one's inner life. (1989: 30)*

This "condescension" is also applied to the idea of escape, one of the derided products of fantasy. As with fantasy, authors who analyze the mecha-

nisms by which cinema constitutes an escape for its audience—not to be con-fused with those who dismiss cinema as escapism, thereby inherently blam-ing its consumers for a need to indulge in escape[11]—have frequently examined the ways the construction of that escape is tied to reality. Interestingly, those who look most closely at this process draw from research with audiences.

Pfleiderer (1985b), one of the first scholars to examine audience responses to Indian films, saw films as providing catharsis or escape for urban viewers in the late 1970s. Films might act much like a pilgrimage to provide therapeutic release, she argued, because both experiences involved "leaving [partici-pants'] normal, everyday lives behind . . . so that they may be able to surrender to a new way of life at a neutral place" (Pfleiderer 1985a: 82–83). Elsewhere I have argued that "in order to allow viewers to escape from the insecurities of real life, the concerns dealt with in movies must draw from those very insecu-rities so that the problems in movies can stand for the real ones in a recogniz-able way. . . . Spectacle works as escape partly because viewers are watching *themselves*—because they temporarily replace their real selves with the im-age they see" (Dickey 1993: 174, 175). Similarly, Steve Derné writes that Hindi films provide "an escape from the pressures, surveillance, and demands of the day-to-day world" (2000: 32) in part because films reverse "the realities of day-to-day life" (61). Nakassis and Dean sum up such approaches in this way: "For such authors, while 'popular' cinema *is* escapist in form and content, the au-dience is not duped by such movies, but uses them in an aesthetically sophis-ticated, time-tested, and familiar way that functionally deals with their real problems and emotional needs" (2007: 78).

Again, scholars may represent the cathartic escape that accompanies film-watching as either a conservative or a liberal force. Some writers suggest that films may simultaneously function as therapeutic release and engender effec-tive social critique. Nagappan (2004) fits in this category. So does Kabir (2003), who analyzes Mani Ratnam's film *Dil Se* (From the Heart, 1998), which centers on an ethnic minority militant from northeastern India and the male All India Radio executive who tries to "save" her. Kabir acknowledges that *Dil Se* is ex-oticizing and nationalist but, intriguingly, she also sees the film as potentially redemptive and therapeutic for the nation-state. Kabir contends that the film allows for the recognition of minority subjectivities and "the recuperative pos-sibilities of accommodating difference" (2003: 156). Furthermore, she argues that even though the film was not a popular hit within India, "the success of the soundtrack ensures that, on a subliminal level, its embedded messages circulate among the very audience that rejected the film" (2003: 156). Those authors who explore the mechanisms of cinema as escape, catharsis, or ther-apy use such concepts in productive ways that avoid simplistic representa-tions of viewers as emotionally or morally immature individuals unable to deal with reality.

Closely tied to these issues is the question of pleasure. Many authors argue that the pleasure of film-watching lies precisely in the experience of fantasy, and in the satisfactions of Indian cinema's anti-realist conventions.[12] Yet unlike fantasy and escape, pleasure is a relatively recent issue in cinema scholarship. In 1985, Rosie Thomas argued that, in Indian film critique, "what seems to be needed is an analysis which takes seriously both the films and the pleasures they offer, and which attempts to unravel their mode of operation" (120). The following year, Ashish Rajadhyaksha wrote what could have been the manifesto for the work that was to follow: "It is necessary to think of pleasures, in the plural, and to ask: which ones are involved, how are they organized, which are ruled out of order, under which conditions do which ones spark into being, which have an emancipatory thrust, which are consolations for defeat and impotence, which collude with enslavement, and so on" (1986: 22). The workings of pleasure have since become a central focus in Indian cinema scholarship. From an early need to legitimize pleasure—which, in its condensation of erotic, romantic, and material desires, could be seen to evoke much that is suspect in cinematic fantasy—media scholars have moved to the complex ways in which pleasure is created and in which it empowers and co-opts viewers.[13] As Kabir notes, while pleasure makes consumers susceptible to the hegemonic impacts of media, it can also "derail" that impact (2005: 96).

If pleasure can have unpredictable and ambivalent effects, audiences may also be ambivalent about the pleasures they experience (Dickey 1993: 6, 146). Desai, Dudrah, and Rai contend that "Bollywood's active audiences renegotiate pleasure by creating new, and more often than not, ambivalent articulations of pleasure" (2005: 79). Nagappan asks, "Why is moviegoing a guilty pleasure?" (2004: 167). As these authors suggest, pleasure both draws viewers to film media and distances them. Bhattacharya, who examines the ambivalence that diasporic Indian women in the United States feel about film-watching, writes that these viewers' "relationship with this cinema produced a pleasure that was treated as a diasporic secret," with "complex patterns of acknowledgement and disavowal emerging" (2004: 166, 175). Film-watchers' ambivalence echoes critics' and filmmakers' attitudes toward the fantasy of cinema and the escape and pleasure that it provides. To grasp fully such ambivalence, condescension, and even contempt, it is necessary to turn to the portrayal of realism in film criticism and scholarship.

Realism

For years, many formal critics and other viewers have called for realism as a respectable and socially uplifting mode of cinema, posing fantasy as infantile and socially destructive. As Patricia Uberoi has noted, "the deployment of the criterion of realism to discriminate the good from the bad in Indian cinema seems often to imply the rather patronizing assumption that the masses of

viewers, like primitives or children, are unable or unwilling (given their individual or collective psychological compulsions) to distinguish fantasy from reality, myth from truth" (2001: 335). It is thus both a moral and an aesthetic criterion. Realism—as opposed to reality—is fantasy's true flip side on the coin of cinema commentary.

Of all the concepts examined here, "realism" is the most multivalent and yet is used with the least precision. Although contemporary scholars frequently emphasize the anti-realist or non-realist conventions of Indian film, film writers have also explored the history of realism as a privileged concept in film criticism and commentary. Sumita Chakravarty notes that

> *of all the terms used by critics to characterize mainstream Indian cinema, realism defined in the negative or as a systematic absence has undoubtedly had the most currency. Conversely, the achievement of realism in a film becomes a mark of value, a sign of sincerity and truthfulness on the part of the filmmaker and of authenticity of the material presented. (1989: 31)*

As Chakravarty also observes, however, the term "realism" is highly ambiguous (1989: 47). One possible categorization of its usage in Indian cinema writing is as follows:[14]

1. Mimetic—do cinematic portrayals look, act, and/or sound like the represented setting, individuals, or community "really" would? (Chakravarty 1989; Nakassis and Dean 2007; M. S. S. Pandian 1996; Prasad 1998; Vasudevan 2001)[15]

2. Logical—do events unfold in a rational or linear manner? (Chakravarty 1989; Rajadhyaksha 2003; Ram 2008; Thomas 1985)

3. Resolutive—are the events or the outcome likely in "real life"? (Thomas 1985)

4. Social—do films portray "social evils" of the time accurately? (Chakravarty 1989: 34; Rajadhyaksha 2003)

5. Emotional—is affect subdued rather than melodramatic? (M. S. S. Pandian 1996; Vasudevan 2001)

6. Philosophical—does the film represent authentic Indian aesthetic, aural, story-telling, and philosophical styles/modes? (Chakravarty 1989)

7. Moral—are outcomes morally credible, or are ideals legitimate, given the rules of the film's moral universe? (Chakravarty 1989; Juluri 1999; Thomas 1985; Uberoi 2001)

Some of these types of realism are incompatible with one another; for example, mimetic and moral realism can easily conflict, and the application of philosophical realism can produce narratives that violate the conventions of logical realism (see also Chakravarty 1989: 47). Most of these realist modes

nonetheless deal with verisimilitude, a concept that is highly relative. Thomas (1985) observes that much "supercilious" criticism of Indian film has to do with a preference for physical verisimilitude over moral realism.

Scholars have generally explained the privileging of realism in Indian cinema history as part of the adoption of a Western scientific or epistemological rationalism by pre- and post-colonial Indian elites. Though some have argued that the rationalist logic of realism is "alien" to Indian philosophical systems (Chakravarty 1989: 34; Dasgupta 2006), its ascension as an elite Indian aesthetic has been explained in several complementary ways. It is described as a tool in the search for national identity or unity, providing a means by which "'Indian reality' could be revealed" (Chakravarty 1989: 34), post-colonial ambivalence about social and political change could be "articulated and diffused" (Chakravarty 1989: 31; see also Vasudevan 2000), and a progressive and rationalist Nehruvian vision of a modern social polity could be formulated (Basu 2008: 154–55; Prasad 1998: 160ff.). The celebration of a realist aesthetic has also been analyzed as a strategy of respectability enabling class and caste elites to enter the realm of cinema and attempt to assert agency over the industry, for reasons of both profit and consumption (M. S. S. Pandian 1996); and as a means of attempting to gain state support for cinema after independence (Rajadhyaksha 1993: 56).

Although middle-class critics, filmmakers, and viewers are most closely identified with demands for a realist style of cinema (see Ram 2008; Vasudevan 2001), other audience members' complex desires for realist representations have also been investigated. Nakassis and Dean (2007), in discussing young urban male viewers' preferences for "realist" film, portray realism as a libidinal-mimetic one, in which women would express erotic desire openly. These men's film preferences, however, also imply a moral realism that suggests that these viewers do not actually wish for a thoroughgoing realism at the level of resolution. In their responses to the Tamil film *7/G Rainbow Colony* (2004), young men applauded the heroine's explicit statements of desire for the hero and her initiation of a sexual relationship with him, but they believed that her violation of gender codes also made her ensuing death necessary (Nakassis and Dean 2007). They want films to represent certain "realistic" behaviors while upholding moral ideals. Perhaps, like the young male viewers Derné describes, they wish to see the realistic expression of desire but avoid its social consequences (here, even within the logic of the film).

Anand Pandian describes similar appreciation for mimetic realism among rural Tamil youth (2008: 126). He also identifies a more complex relationship between film and realism, with more far-reaching consequences. He notes that "in recent years Tamil cinema has come to provide for rural citizens an image of the very life they are already living in the present" (2008: 130). In this case,

*what is at stake in the reception of such cinema by rural Tamils is the
character of their own lives and practices rather than the narrative
meaning of the cinema to which they turn. . . . Cinema not only gener-
ates persuasive representations of the countryside, but also infiltrates
these places and their inhabitants themselves as an instrument of
imagination and interpretation. (2008: 132, 134)*

Whereas many scholars, including myself, have argued that the working of
spectacle is only a temporary replacement of one's self with the self perceived
on the screen, Pandian argues that viewers engage in a more thoroughgoing
replacement of themselves and their reality with what they see in cinema.
Pandian thus suggests that what is taken to be realism has the same framing
effect for rural viewers today that Chakravarty (1989: 34) argues it had for
elites after independence.

Kalpana Ram's 2008 critique of the call for realism, framed by her research
on south Indian goddess films, provides a useful standpoint for concluding
this essay. Ram uses Amman films[16]—a subgenre of the long-standing cate-
gory of "mythologicals"—to highlight the short-sightedness and even irra-
tionalism of middle-class rhetoric about the naïveté of film viewers. Viewers
of mythologicals, who worship the deity on screen as real, have long provided
the quintessential image of a gullible, irrational audience (see also Vasudevan
2000: 133).[17] Ram uses this audience's viewing experience to question many of
the basic categories and dichotomies of film analysis. She argues that film
categories such as realist modern versus mythological pre-modern are a
"legacy of modernity" that has "equipped middle class Indians with a dis-
course quite at odds with the palpable potency of the relationship between
audiences and the religious images on the screen. . . . From such a position, we
cannot even begin to even apprehend the power of such films" (2008: 48).
Whereas middle-class critics represent "the class distance between filmmaker
and viewers" as "a distance between those who know, at all times, how to cor-
rectly distinguish the difference between reality and illusion, and those who
confuse the two," Ram argues that "such a clear-eyed gaze" is "an unlikely de-
scription of any process of cultural production and indeed, of any conceivable
type of human subjectivity" (2008: 49).

Watching goddess films from the stance of a devotee instead, Ram argues,
can shift our understanding of spectatorship. The goal of Amman cinema, as
of Amman possessions, is "that of activating the power of the goddess"
(2008: 53). This inherently practical goal is not easily encompassed within the
typical views of film as fantasy, dreaming, or anxiety. Ram explores the "sen-
suous apprehension" of films, which combines the pleasures of aural, visual,
and kinesthetic inter-corporeal experience (54), and forms part of a fluid pat-
tern of devotional practices. Ram explains,

The cinematic representations of tending the Amman are no different from what worshippers do off-screen. Amman cinema explicitly incorporates these off-screen practices as part of its cinematic material. . . . These [quasi-ethnographic] sequences are located in a space quite outside the cinematic narrative but establish a vivid sense of continuity between not only the world outside and the world of film, but also between the style of "ethnographic realism" and the apparently fantastic style of Amman cinema. All are brought together by the project of activating the power of the Amman. (2008: 56)

Thus collapsing dichotomies of documentary and feature film, film and real life, the visual and the kinesthetic, and above all fantasy/illusion and realism/ rational comprehension, Ram argues that our understanding of viewers' experience, and of cinema in general, is thwarted by the misguided application of these categories and their ideological precepts.

Conclusion

The primary aims of this article have been to examine the meanings bundled into the terms "fantasy" and "realism" in Indian cinema writing. All film is artifice of a sort. What is interesting is how often, and how automatically, Indian film is identified as fantasy. Standard references to film as fantasy suggest that viewers prefer illusion to reality, and crave pleasures that feed their passions and desires rather than their minds or their struggles against adversity. Those analysts who look at fantasy carefully, however, investigate its meanings and mechanisms more seriously, often linking it right back to reality. In the often liminal space of consuming cinema—its sensations and its products—these analysts argue that viewers connect their consumption to individual, family, and national experiences and ideals.

It is worth remembering that this everyday "reality" is different from "realism." As this article has suggested, realism is as much a construction as is fantasy, with its own history, rules, modes, and conventions. Calls for realism often contain internal contradictions and inconsistencies, ironically so given the rationalist intent of those calls.

Realism is as much a construction as is fantasy, with its own history, rules, modes, and conventions. Calls for realism often contain internal contradictions and inconsistencies, ironically so given the rationalist intent of those calls.

As this article has argued, the disdain for popular cinema and fantasy, and the privileging of realism, are at least partially rooted in class- and caste-based attitudes. These attitudes may be shared by less elite viewers as well (though in both cases, attitudes and rhetoric are often at odds with behavior). To some extent these assumptions also subtly inform a substantial portion of Indian cinema analysis, my own included. Numerous ambivalences appear in this scholarship. The assumption

that Indian films were unrealistic and that foreign and elite Indian viewers and writers would be critical of Indian film style motivated much of the early effort to pose cinema as a legitimate topic for academic study. Continued application of the standard dichotomies between fantasy/reality and fantasy/realism reflects some of the same suppositions. The popular disparagement of illusion and the charge that viewers are irrationally overcome by film are also echoed by scholars who criticize other analysts for failing to see audiences as active, as valuing realism, or as using film to deal with everyday life. Anustup Basu notes that "the point, of course, is not to be simply for or against categories such as modernity, post-modernity, pastiche, or realism. It is to refrain from using them as *categorical essences* and championing and denigrating them as such" (2008: 157). In identifying the ideological assumptions condensed within the concepts of fantasy and realism, the deployment of these concepts in Indian film scholarship, and the ways in which cinema's consumers participate in the processes of fantasy and realism, we gain a clearer view of cinema, audience, and the discourse that constructs them/us.

Sara Dickey is Professor of Anthropology at Bowdoin College. She has carried out fieldwork in Madurai and Chennai since 1985. Her research interests include class identities and relations in urban India, Tamil film-watching and cinema production, and links between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu. She is the author of *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (1993) and co-editor of *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia* (2000).

Notes

[1] I thank Patrick Hogan, Susan Bell, and an anonymous reader for comments on this article. I also thank Guy Saldanha and numerous other Interlibrary Loan and NExpress librarians and staffers for helping me obtain sources.

[2] The work of cinema scholars is interesting in part because of the ways in which it contrasts with popular opinion and with non-academic film criticism. I make these contrasts, however, in full recognition of the often blurred and sometimes non-existent divisions among the categories of people who comment on cinema. Some scholars are critics, and vice versa; and all of us contribute occasionally to the realm of popular opinion. When I use the word "critic" without modification, I mean simply those who critique and/or criticize popular cinema. Otherwise, I have tried to be as precise as possible with regard to which types of critics or writers I refer to.

[3] Despite the recent proliferation of scholarship on Indian cinema, reviews of the field are rare. Shakuntala Banaji (2006: 1–19) provides the most thorough review I am aware of, using a somewhat different categorization of approaches than I do here. S.V. Srinivas (2001) criticizes a portion of the literature on Indian film and television audiences.

[4] Additional examples include M. S. S. Pandian 1992; Thiruchandran 1993: 264; Nagappan 2004: 190; Banaji 2006; Dudrah 2006; Budha 2007; Geetha, Rao, and Dhakshna 2009: 92 (also Mankekar 1999: 28–29 on television audiences).

[5] For different functions of song sequences, see, e.g., Ganti 2004: 80–81. Uberoi (2001: 336) and Hogan (2008: 169–76) identify a variety of complex referential effects that can occur within a film when certain segments are explicitly marked as fantasy and others as non-fantasy.

[6] Gopalan notes that the interval (intermission) inserted in Indian films "obviously upsets the image of the dream chamber" (2002: 21). For those who insist on the dream metaphor, the interval would have to be a period of waking up and coming to consciousness.

[7] Madhava Prasad criticizes Nandy for depicting "the masses" as having only needs, not desires, arguing that Nandy thereby reserves both desire and modernity for the middle class (1993: 83–85).

[8] As Bhattacharya (2004) reveals in her analysis of the "basement" as a metaphor for cherished film-watching rituals by diasporic Indian women in the United States, such liminal spaces can be found within homes as well as in theaters (see also L. Srinivas 2002).

[9] Although a systematic review of recent film literature reveals that ethnographic studies are somewhat more likely to reflect what Nandy calls "the robust commonsense and interpretive abilities of ordinary viewers" (2003: 81) than are textual studies, it also demonstrates that they certainly have no corner on this market. Such a review also belies Nandy's complaint that "there is little or no effort to supply an empirically grounded ethnography of the Indian film audience" (2003: 79). Conversely, we *do* lack analyses that combine sustained ethnographic research and close textual readings. The surprisingly rare examples of such studies include Banaji (2006) and Dudrah (2006).

[10] Kabir (2003) is exceptional in noting that filmmakers themselves are fantasizing when they shape their films.

[11] In contrast, when escape is offered to the upper classes—in Indian and in Western media alike—not only is escape desirable but the need for it is laudable, a sign that the hardworking modern urbanite has earned an escape from the stresses created by her or his success.

[12] See especially Gopalan (2002: 21, 180) on the pleasures created by the deferral of resolution.

[13] Examples of work on the sources and impacts of pleasure in Indian media include Prasad (1993), Mankekar (1999), Kasbekar (2000), Ghosh (2000), Dwyer (2001), Uberoi (2001), Bhattacharya (2004), Nagappan (2004), Kabir (2005), Banaji (2006), Virdi (2006), and Chinniah (2008).

[14] Kakar's psychological realism is left off this list because it is not one of the taken-for-granted/reflexive categories typically used in Indian cinema analysis (but see Banaji 2006: 2, 6).

[15] As Nakassis and Dean have argued, discussions of "reality" in cinematic representations ought to be predicated on "classifications of what is real and unreal, even if the contents of such classifications are themselves up for debate" (2007: 86). Other works that look closely at what "counts" as "real" to audiences include Uberoi (2001) and Juluri (2003).

[16] An *amman* (Tamil; Telugu *ammoru*) is a fierce, protective goddess typically associated with a specific locality.

[17] This was not always the case. Stephen Hughes examines responses to the first south Indian mythological films, which were welcomed by some supporters as forms of an indigenous modernity uniting devotionalism with realist technologies (2005: 208–13).

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