Keyword

Modernity

Manishita Dass

Writing a short keyword piece on ‘modernity’ can be a foolhardy venture, given the numerous debates and connotations swirling around it. The term can refer to a historical epoch (though there is no consensus on when it began or ended); a condition arising out of processes of modernisation and the workings of global capital; a cluster of institutions and technologies; a set of norms and practices; an orientation of the self; a discourse of self-legitimation; an aspiration or a fantasy; an incomplete social and intellectual project; an intersection of the material changes wrought by processes of modernisation and the subjective experience of such changes; and a dialectic between the explosive energy of the new and forces that seek to contain it. The one thing common to these different notions of modernity is a sense of transformational rupture and disorienting change.

Always notoriously imprecise, the conceptual contours of the term ‘modernity’ have become even blurrier under increased critical scrutiny and with the global turn across disciplines since the 1990s. Postcolonial critiques of the Eurocentric teleology and value-laden universalist assumptions embedded in dominant (read western) understandings of the modern have led to methods stressing difference and heterogeneity rather than the homogenising force of modernisation; to a pluralisation of the term into a range of ‘alternative’ or regionally specific ‘modernities’ across the world; and to a proliferation of prefixes pertaining to nation, region, subject positions and cultural politics (e.g., ‘colonial modernity’, ‘liberal modernity’, ‘regional modernity’, ‘subaltern modernity’, ‘the Bengali modern’, etc.). Instead of being taken for granted as a stable analytic category with a set of universally applicable meanings, ‘modernity’ is now widely seen as a contested category, or what anthropologists call a ‘native category’ (Ferguson, 2006, p. 177) – a term shared by heterogeneous groups but prone to changing colour on the ground, as it moves from one socio-cultural context to another and performs different kinds of cultural work in the hands of different social actors.

However, as Timothy Mitchell points out, an emphasis on different historical trajectories shaping ‘alternative’ or ‘divergent’ versions of modernity does not necessarily dislodge the idea of an ‘underlying and fundamentally singular modernity’ originating in the imagined space of the west (Mitchell, 2000, p. xii). Nor does it dispel the whiff of belatedness or derivativeness clinging to manifestations of the modern elsewhere. How, then, does one write a post-Eurocentric account of non-western modernity that manages to make sense of its specificity – its distinctiveness, newness and connections with the past – as well as of Europe’s role in its history? Attempts to solve

Manishita Dass, Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom.
E-mail: Manishita.Dass@rhul.ac.uk
this lingering problem have ranged from treating modernity as ‘white Europe’s identity discourse’ (Pratt, 2002, pp. 27–28), as not so much a stage of history as its staging (Mitchell, 2000, pp. 1–27), as ‘a translational process’ in the peripheries of the world system that ‘assumed Europe into existence’ (Chakrabarty, 2008, pp. xiv, xviii), or as ‘historically a global and conjunctural phenomenon — not a virus that spreads from one place to another’ (Subrahmanyam, 1998, pp. 99–100) – to using ‘colonial modernity’ as a ‘speculative framework’ for grasping the inextricability of the modern and the colonial (Barlow, 1997, p. 6), and emphasising the contemporaneity or ‘coeval’ nature of all modernities, as well as the existence of difference and unevenness, within a shared context ‘provided by global capital and its requirements’ (Harootunian, 2000, pp. 62–63).

Such efforts to decentre modernity (to which scholars working in South Asian studies and Indian film studies have made a significant contribution) have not yet had much of an impact on the disciplinary imagination of Anglo–American Film Studies, though the relationship between cinema and modernity has emerged as a central issue in film history and theory since the 1990s, largely through an exciting body of scholarship on early cinema. In the Euro–American context, the term ‘early cinema’ has come to refer primarily to the cinema between 1895 and 1917 (before the emergence of classical Hollywood cinema as a dominant mode of cinematic storytelling) – not just to films but also to the film industry, media inter-texts and practices of exhibition and spectatorship. Archive-based research at the intersection of cinema studies and cultural history, informed by the work of German social theorists (especially Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Simmel), has not only challenged teleological notions of early cinema as ‘primitive’ cinema but also drawn attention to its role in mediating modernity in the historical context of urbanisation, mass consumption, the commercialisation of leisure and the technological transformation of everyday life in early twentieth-century Europe and America. The cinema emerges, in this account, as both a catalyst and a consequence of a culture of speed, sensation, consumerism and extreme fragmentation (Charney, 1995; Singer, 2001); as a crash course in navigating the perils, pleasures and shock effects of modernity (e.g., Gunning, 2006; Whissel, 2008); and, in Miriam Hansen’s influential formulation about Hollywood cinema, as a form of ‘vernacular modernism’ offering a crucial ‘cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated’ (Hansen, 1999, p. 69).

Such revisionist approaches to early cinema have situated film in the broader sphere of cultural history and expanded the definition of modernism but are still limited by their tendency to take certain localised experiences of modernity, modernism and the cinema (e.g., a convergence between cinematic experience and everyday life in terms of speed or sensation or consumerism) to be universal or to assume the portability of theoretical models and periodising categories (e.g., ‘early cinema’ or ‘vernacular modernism’) rooted in these experiences. As recent scholarship on cinema and modernity in the so-called peripheries of the world system has shown (e.g., Bao, 2015; Gerow, 2010; Lopez, 2000; Navitski, 2017; Zhang, 2005), our understanding of modernity and its relationship to cinema will remain rather provincial if we assume that these instances of Euro–American modernity can speak for the entire world – or conversely, that we can grasp the relationship between cinema and modernity in Europe and the
United States without considering the central role of the peripheries (as markets and imagined spaces) in the constitution of metropolitan modernity.

What might the relationship between cinema and modernity – or modernity itself – look like from South Asian vantage points? Modernity in South Asia – whether understood as an experience, a condition, or a discourse – was, of course, neither unique nor monolithic. An inherently heterogeneous and uneven formation, it was shaped and reshaped by the intersection of colonialism, capitalism and transnational flows (of media, ideas and objects) with locally and regionally specific economic, political, social and cultural forces (including those of anti-colonial nationalisms) – and as such, is neither wholly separate from nor entirely graspable within, the logics of Euro-American modernity. It was at these intersections that national and regional identities were forged and traditions (re)invented, anti-colonial nationalisms took shape and cinema emerged as an influential mass medium in nineteenth and early twentieth-century South Asia. The story of cinema in South Asia is thus inextricably bound up with the challenges and contradictions of colonial modernity, which cast the modern simultaneously as an ever-elusive object of desire and a constant source of anxiety on account of its perceived origins in the west and generated a widespread preoccupation with fashioning a different and authentic modernity (one not synonymous with mere westernisation) and preserving tradition. From its very inception, Indian cinema has not only been caught up in the dialectic of ambivalence that characterised Indian engagements with modernity but was also shaped by it (Dass, 2015).

Scholarship on cinema and film cultures in colonial South Asia has explored facets of this complex story through what might be described as ‘mid-level analytical concepts’ (Thomas, 2011) – categories rooted in the empirical and the contextual, and relating to localised formations, phenomena and discourses associated with the modern, as opposed to the sweeping abstraction of modernity as a whole. These include the conflict and reconciliation of traditional form and modern technology in the mythological genre (Kapur, 1987; Rajadhyaksha, 1987); the contradictory terms of the cinematic narration of modernity and nationhood in Bombay Talkies productions of the 1930s–1940s (Vasudevan, 1995); the gendered workings of stardom (Majumdar, 2009); the discursive construction of a cinematic public sphere in colonial India (Dass, 2015); the diversity of the media ecology from which cinema emerged in India (Mahadevan, 2015); the intermedial reworking of the melodramatic mode in Indian cinema (Kapse, 2009); and the material practices and sites of film production in colonial Bombay (Mukherjee, 2020). Rather than providing a grand narrative of modernity, these studies offer substantive insights – into specific, localised and often circuitous trajectories of ideas, institutions, practices and forms associated with the modern – that can reorient theoretical paradigms about cinema and modernity beyond their current geographical, cultural and temporal biases. Many of these studies, for instance, point to the inadequacies of the ‘modernity thesis’ or the template of ‘vernacular modernism’ (which takes for granted Hollywood’s centrality as a global vernacular) in addressing the complexities, heterogeneity, regional differences and different historical moments of colonial modernity, or the knotty relationship between decolonising nation-states and the modern in the South Asian context (e.g., Majumdar, Dass and Mukherjee).

Of course, modernity is not just a matter of historical concern for scholars of South Asian cinema and media, given the diachronic effects of colonial formations, and the continuing salience of the term ‘modern’ on the ground in the postcolonial period.
This is reflected, for instance, in popular Indian cinema’s ongoing preoccupation with the conflict between modernity and tradition in the post-independence period, as Madhava Prasad pointed out in his discussion of popular Indian cinema’s depiction of desire (1993), or in the centrality of ‘modernity’ as a term in Ravi Sundaram’s book on the illicit circuits of contemporary Delhi’s media-saturated urbanism (2009). The narrative of South Asian modernity remains ‘constitutively unsettled’ (Sen, 2017, p. 15) and thus relevant, not just for film scholars working on the colonial period but for those interested in contemporary South Asian media landscapes as well (as even a cursory survey of book and article titles or abstracts will indicate). While scholarship on more recent mediations of modernity in South Asia still remains worryingly India-centric (partly because of infrastructural or archival reasons but nonetheless with troubling epistemic consequences, with certain Indian cities de facto emerging as emblematic sites of the modern in the region), works such as Mark Liechty’s *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (2003), Zakir Hossain Raju’s *Bangladesh Cinema and National Identity: In Search of the Modern?* (2014) and the anthology, *Love, War & Other Longings: Essays on Cinema in Pakistan* (2020), signal a welcome widening of the focus beyond India.

This raises a number of methodological and theoretical questions: How do we bring regional formations of modernity into focus? How do we periodise and historicise different moments of South Asian modernity in relation to film and other media? How do the forgotten or neglected pasts of modernity continue to inform its present and alternative futures? How do the meanings of modernity continue to be negotiated and contested in films and other media texts, and in discourses around media and spectatorship? How do we relate the emergence of new institutional forms and practices of mediated modernity to what might be described as the ‘poetics of modernity’ (to borrow a term from Aparna Dharwadker’s work on Indian theatre) or the styles, forms, tropes and modes that try to grasp the new and often put the present in dialogue with the past? How do we trace the historical contingencies and contestations through which film and other media became intertwined with the mutations of modernity? The collective challenge is to take neither cinema nor modernity as given phenomena but to bring to light how their meanings and cultural significance are shaped through locally specific conflicts tied to class, caste, gender, region and cultural politics, and to use these accounts to open up theoretical discussions of cinema and modernity to a wider range of possibilities and nuances.

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Key Readings

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