

Brigitte Schulze, *Humanist and Emotional Beginnings of a Nationalist Indian Cinema in Bombay: With Kracauer in the footsteps of Phalke*. Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2003. 419 pp.

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Brigitte Schulze's book departs substantively and methodologically from most existing accounts of the origins of Indian cinema in the early years of the twentieth century. Pivotal to those accounts is D. G. Phalke (1870–1944), the pioneering Indian filmmaker trained in the early years of his career as a lithographer and photographer.

An impulse to present Indian images on the cinematic screen motivated Phalke to take up filmmaking and produce *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a cinematic version of a much adapted story that can be reductively referred to as a religious narrative. The genre instantiated by Phalke's film itself came to be known at the time as the 'mythological' and almost all of Phalke's subsequent work was in that genre.

That impulse, combined with the nationalist zeitgeist of Phalke's cinematic practice has motivated mainly two kinds of readings of this man and his work. One is a nationalist elevation of Phalke as the father of an Indian cinema, wrought by one man valiantly against many odds at a time when American, British and French films dominated the screens in India, and presuming a pan-Indian nationalist audience for its popularity.

The other is a complex art-historical and film studies account of the way Phalke – like the religious iconography that dominated mass-picture production before him and after – invoked 'neo-traditional' subject matter precisely as a mark and consequence of colonial modernity. Schulze rejects both these readings. Surveying the wide-ranging assessments of Phalke, though not in any one single place in her book, Schulze argues that the nationalist reading is tautological, marking Phalke's work as the beginnings of a national cinema by dint of its popularity with an undefined mass of Indian spectators. As for the scholarly assessments, Schulze notes that the readings are too text-centric, relying on a theoretical armature from film studies that is ahistorical and universalizing (the cinematic 'gaze' invoked by the text), and contrary to an empirical and sociological unpacking of the contexts surrounding Phalke and his films (102–4).

Schulze argues that Phalke was a universal humanist, not a nationalist. She places him in a lineage of thinkers such as the Nobel-laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore, and M. K. (Mahatma) Gandhi for whom modernity was a moral-ethical question regarding truth, that 'received its moral legitimization from a transcendental and universal ethical space' (73). This differed significantly from the instrumental and rationalized political consciousness of major fire-brand nationalists of the day, including in Phalke's state of Maharashtra in Western India, for whom the public sphere was always explicitly marked by the priorities of nation-building, state-formation and regional, caste and religious divisions. These divisions would only heighten as the subcontinent moved towards its independence. Phalke by contrast was a fundamentally humanist and inclusive filmmaker, envisioning himself as a craftsman in search of a specifically cinematic and visual experience, and hoping that his films would find their place in an international film culture as *local* (i.e. from India) instantiations of that experience.

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Kracauer's approach to the cinema marks Schulze's arguments. For Phalke, the cinema seemed to offer an alternative public sphere in the sense Kracauer imagined it to be. This is a medium that addresses the subject at the level of mentalities, senses and affect, a cognitive and emotional address at once. The cinema was the space within which *Indianness* was

experienced more quietly as a form of private individually-controlled daily life against the intrusive pressures of the colonial state, 'as evanescent as a breath of wind' (34).

Furthermore, in its very materiality and indexical relation to physical reality, the cinema enables at once, as Kracauer might have put it, the erasure of history and – at least in the case of Phalke – its redemption in a more inclusive and humanist vision. Schulze notes: 'Raja Harishchandra differed in its basic rationality in the way it approached the world: it did not construct a mythical India, but it celebrated the photographic-artistic reproduction of what the filmmaker perceived as the outer and the inner beauty of the world and human beings striving to understand its truth' (180).

But there is an empirical dimension to Schulze's intervention as well. Marshalling a range of secondary scholarship on the history of Bombay city in the second chapter of the book, Schulze argues that dominant readings of Phalke assume an Indian mass audience when in fact the public sphere was heavily fractured- by wages, by spending power, by the spatial segregation of the city along class and caste lines in the wake of the plague of 1896 (the same year that the first film screenings were conducted by Lumières' traveling cameraman Maurice Sestier) that prompted intrusive state measures to reshape the city and to monitor public gatherings. She draws on existing urban histories and compares and contrasts available figures for wages and rents to argue that the very 'mass publics' that Phalke's presumed nationalist cinema seems to have invoked, could hardly have afforded the price of a movie ticket. Indeed, in advertising his film in a newspaper such as the *Bombay Chronicle*, founded and run by moderate nationalists for an English-literate audience, Phalke was fully aware of the nature of the audience for his cinema.

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It seems to me that Schulze's research highlights the disjuncture between the circuits of international film productions and cultures, and a nationalist, anti-colonial zeitgeist in India. Phalke seems to have been an interstitial figure between these two aspects, seeking a moral spectator at home, and an international validation abroad. Her empirical work is a reminder that the history of the intersection of consumer culture, visuality and nationalism ought to be theorized with care.

Theatre historians will especially appreciate the detailed analysis of theatrical traditions, the political and ideological contexts for aesthetic debates within Marathi theatre of the time, and specific nationalist appropriations and constructions of a popular theatre. Schulze is no stranger to broader debates on modernity both from South Asianists and beyond as she engages with scholars such as Miriam Hansen, Heide Schlüpmann, Charles Taylor, Partha Chatterjee and others. Her source material includes interviews with Phalke's descendants and actors as well as the screenplay and research by filmmaker Kamal Swaroop on Phalke's life (a film that was never made and has now achieved iconic status in its absence). She has also established that the surviving reels of *Raja Harishchandra* in the National Film Archives of India are not from the 1913 version but Phalke's second 1917 version, on the basis of the sets being the same in the second version and in Phalke's other 1917 film, *Lanka Dahan*, and on the basis of the footage of the construction of the sets in his 1917 documentary film *How Films Are Made* (270). She situates Phalke within the contexts of international film culture as much as within an intimate sociology of urban spaces. Her attention to Phalke's own intentions, his canny marketing of his film as the equivalent of the *film d'art* or *kunstfilm*, and his attempts to craft a moral-ethical pedagogy on the cinema as not a glimpse into the past but a new and potentially inclusive future, offers an enormously fresh perspective on film culture at the time – a perspective that is now being fleshed out by others in belated research on the pre-Phalke era of the cinema's life in India.