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Dil Se...

August 2011

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The 1998 Indian film *Dil Se...* has made a lasting impact on international cinema in several ways. Recent Indian cinema has become a source of entertainment for non-South Asian audiences and a curious cinematic resource for 'auteurs'. *Dil Se...* is indicative of the larger recent upsurge of interest in 'Bollywood' and its cinematography, musical content, politics, language and commercial success make it the perfect poster boy for the artistic merits of 'Bollywood'.

Master directors such as Wong Kar-Wai have been cited as borrowing heavily from the 'music video' genre and the term itself has repeatedly been thrown around in recent cultural criticism and film reviews to describe anything from Spike Jonze's résumé to the pointless visual candy of David Lynch's *Lost Highway*(1997). In *Dil Se ...* the striking use of colour, swift camera movement and absolutely perfect choreography (shot in wide-screen) in the opening song 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' redefines the term. Drawing upon an entrenched tradition of musical sequences in Indian films, director Mani Ratnam and cinematographer Santosh Sivan raise the bar and create pure visual beauty. The sequence also lives on as a music video playing on an infinite number of channels in South Asia, as is the standard practice in India's major film industry. Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*(2000) borrows heavily from the Hollywood tradition of musicals and offers an array of striking imagery but the cinematographic elegance of 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' with high production values and an operatic combination of costume, dance and music is difficult for a director and production team not bathed in a culture of musicals (such as von Trier's) to pull off on an epic scale.

Dil Se... music director A.R. Rahman is a master in India's rich 'pop' landscape of sounds, fusing Bhangra beats, catchy lyrics and dramatic composition. The prominence of the soundtrack (and its marketing mechanisms) and the high profile of Rahman are typical of 'Bollywood' films, but the near perfect poetic union of sound, image and choreography offer an alternative vision of cinema where the music carries its own content.

The problem with 'Bollywood' cinema has always been related to the aforementioned – the reliance on catchy musical sequences while sacrificing story and content. *Dil Se...* challenges this with a solid and bold script by Ratnam. Set around the celebration of India's 50 years of independence, Ratnam opens up a can of worms rarely touched upon.

Amar is a journalist who travels to the north east of India to report on 'terrorists' and rural communities for All India Radio. From the beginning of the film we see the alternative reality to the governments '50 years' propaganda. In his interviews the mostly rural villagers from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds express disdain at government corruption and emphasize how little has changed for the better in their lifetimes. This sets the stage for the larger story – Amar falls in love with Meghna, a beautiful, mysterious woman who turns out to be a 'terrorist' working with a group who want a separate state in the north east.

Ratnam's previous films *Roja*(1994) and *Bombay*(1995) also dealt with separatists and communal rioting but they were smaller budget Tamil-language films, whereas *Dil Se...* is a large budget Hindi-language production. Ratnam skillfully alludes to the problem of Kashmir, without ever overtly referencing it. He throws together a myriad of languages and calls into question the superiority of Hindi when a separatist spokesman asks Amar the journalist why he must speak in 'his language'. He cleverly blends Muslim and Hindu culture in a synthesis that almost goes unnoticed; for instance Meghna's life story reads straight out of snow-trenched, war-torn Kashmir and in one scene she wears a headscarf in a Muslim fashion; later in a desert sequence with Amar she prays in a Buddhist temple, and later she stands in for Amar's bride-to-be in a dreamy musical sequence that is a Hindu wedding.

Ratnam manages to raise questions about the definition of 'terrorist' as opposed to justified 'revolutionary'; he accentuates Muslim and Hindu cultural similarities* and uses a myriad of local languages (Amar's journalist companion acts as translator) in this 'Hindi' film.

The commercial success of *Dil Se...* in England, where it became the first 'Bollywood' film to hit the top ten in the box office chart, alludes to a changing cinematic landscape: 'Bollywood' films for South Asian and non-South Asian viewers; entertainment with the depth and vision of Ratnam; the musical weight of Rahman and the spectacular cinematography of Sivan; and the cinematic possibilities 'Bollywood' presents to filmmakers the world over.

**Note: many 'Bollywood' films aim to do this in part for commercial reasons*



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