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Unstable Celluloid: Film Projection and the Cinema Audience in Bangladesh

Lotte Hoek

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Abstract

This article tracks the exhibition of a single Bangladeshi action film through the cinema halls of different provincial towns in Bangladesh. The ethnographic case shows that film projection undermines the narrative coherence of a film by changing its form from one screening to the next. Unstable celluloid refers to such practices of including, excising or re-editing during the screening of a film. Audiences can urge such changes and once changed, a single film can gather many different audience responses, effectively creating unstable celluloid, or a de-standardized film product. On the basis of this case, I argue that the study of cinema audiences and film reception in South Asia needs to pay closer attention to the relationship between empirical audience and practices of exhibition.

Keywords

Cinema, Bangladesh, audience studies, film projection, pornography

Introduction

The sudden appearance on screen of a naked female body quietened the crowded cinema hall. The image appeared suddenly, apparently unrelated to the narrative of the action film screening in the cinema hall of the small Sylheti town set amidst Bangladeshi tea plantations. I too held my breath, tension enveloping the jam-packed hall. Excitement spread amongst the spectators, erupting from the erotic scene on screen. I tensed up with the combined visceral impact of a heightened awareness of my own white female body amongst the male spectators, my bodily response to the sexually explicit imagery and the excitement at finally seeing the fabled short Bangladeshi porn reel. The image developed into a short scene displaying cunnilingus. The collective of film spectators watched in complete silence. The scene disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. As the narrative of the action film resumed, the tension in the hall released itself in voluble cheers, laughter, and whistling. While before the appearance of this scene the audience had booed the projectionist, now appreciative applause erupted from the spectators. By running the short sexually explicit sequence, the projectionist had made good on the promises of offering the forbidden spectacle that producers of Bangladeshi action films use to draw spectators to the otherwise increasingly empty cinema halls.

Rather than a fluke appearance, the insertion of illegal sexually explicit sequences (called “cut-pieces”) into films is common in Bangladesh.¹ In this article, I will argue that the study of cinema audiences and film reception in South Asia needs to pay closer attention to the relationship between empirical audience and

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practices of exhibition. If ethnographic research shows that film projection does not guarantee the replicability of a film but actively undermines its narrative coherence from one screening to the next, then little can authoritatively be said about how audiences receive a particular film. While the common emphasis in audience studies on the intersectional identities of individual film spectators can illuminate reading strategies of audience members, the assumptions about the replicability of films in exhibition underlying this approach are empirically unjustified. Such an approach therefore cannot think of “unstable celluloid” films changing haphazardly at every screening, and is hard pushed to elucidate the collective and visceral aspects of cinema viewing.

The ethnographic case I will present here is the exhibition of a single Bangladeshi film, that I call *Mintu the Murderer*, in the cinema halls of different provincial towns.² Rather than situating my audience research with one group of people or within one particular town, my reception study was structured by the circulation of the film that I had been following from its early production stages (Hoek, 2008). This had certain disadvantages. It was difficult to build relationships with individual spectators or to see how they valued other films. However, my methodological approach underscored the importance of exhibition practices for film viewing, as well as the instability of films themselves. This urged me to rethink the nature of audience responses as an effect of exhibition and to investigate the collective aspects of cinema viewing. Therefore, my focus here is on the audience as a collective of empirical spectators in a theater and I will not provide data from audience interviews. As I will argue below, audience interviews are singularly incapable of approaching the collective experience of cinema viewing that is structured by projection. This article, therefore, advocates a methodological approach that maps the affect of collectives rather than the discourse of individuals and thus, equally values absence and presence.

With this ethnographic case, I will argue three points. Firstly, I will argue that the form of a single film can be transformed under the pressure of audience demands, censorship regulations, projectionists’ practice, theater management, and producers’ interests. This suggests that audience intervention does not only take place at the level of interpretation but also at the level of cinema projection. Secondly, I will argue that as *Mintu the Murderer* changed shape through the inclusion and exclusion of cut-pieces, so did the audience’s response to the movie. The immediate collective response to certain generic scenes differed depending on the inclusion or exclusion of cut-pieces. This observation leads to my third argument, which is that an emphasis on the relationship between exhibition practices and collective audience responses urges a rethinking of common assumptions in audience studies focusing on South Asia, amongst which are the value of audience interviews and the nature of “popular” cinema in South Asia.

Audience Studies and the Cut-Piece Film

In the study of South Asian popular culture, insights from the “active audience” debates in media studies have been corroborated by ethnographic research amongst cinema audiences (During, 1993; Hall, 1993; Fiske, 2002). Indian audiences have been shown to read films to negotiate textually inscribed messages according to class, gender, ethnicity, and religion. In her study of film fans in Madurai, Sara Dickey argues that “much of the meaning derived from Tamil cinema has to do with the socially, culturally, and economically subordinate position of the urban poor, who form the great majority of its audiences” (Dickey, 2001, pp. 212–213). Lakshmi Srinivas similarly describes the relation between viewers and the screen as a cultural one, where local perceptions allow viewers to reconstruct a movie’s meaning: “In India . . . viewers shout out comments to the screen, talk to characters, give them advice and take sides. Audiences take over a scene and reconstruct

its meaning and impact” (Srinivas, 2002, p. 170). Steve Derné argues that socio-cultural factors of a spectator’s family background determine film viewing (Derné, 2000). Although it is undoubtedly important, there is more that can be said about cinema audiences than viewers’ complex intersectional identity.

Two immediate problems can be discerned in these approaches to the Indian audiences. Firstly, these accounts of *reading* practices are strongly cerebral. When Linda Williams’ “body genres” (Williams, 1991) such as action films or pornography are displayed, the recourse to interview techniques that ask informants for meaning and readings may stand to lose the visceral aspect of film reception, what Vivian Sobchack calls the “carnal sensuality of the film experience” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 56). Secondly, the focus on this cerebral interaction between spectators and film texts, effaces the material conditions of cultural practices. Mediating quite literally between auteur and audience, material conditions such as film distribution and projection play an important role in the cinematic experience in Bangladesh.

The appearance of cut-pieces in Bangladeshi action films requires an approach to the study of cinema audiences that circumvents these problems of the visceral and infrastructural. In regard to the first, recent approaches in the study of visual culture that highlight the ways in which visual aesthetics mobilize the body may provide a starting point for understanding the relationship of audiences to images beyond reading practices (Meyer, 2008; Pinney, 2004). Here aesthetics is conceptualized as a bodily engagement with form and imagery. Certain genres, like horror or porn, exacerbate this bodily engagement that the visual encourages (Williams, 1991). Cut-pieces elicit spectator attention with sequences that have a strong visceral appeal and appear suddenly.³

The unpredictable nature of the cut-piece requires a rethinking of the infrastructure that makes a film visible and that is projection. Projection is integral to cinema (Hughes, 2003; Larkin, 2008) but only a few film scholars pay it much attention. This is unwarranted. As Stephen Hughes argues, “[o]nce exhibition is taken as a necessary part of film history, we must rethink how we construct Indian cinema as an object of study”. This does not confine itself to India. Miriam Hansen suggests that spectatorship necessarily depends on the way in which cinema is presented (Hansen, 1991). Hansen argues that for early American cinema:

exhibition practices lent the show the immediacy and singularity of a one-time performance, as opposed to an event that was repeated in more or less the same fashion everywhere and whenever the films were shown. Hence the meanings transacted were contingent upon *local* conditions and constellations, leaving reception at the mercy of relatively *unpredictable* aleatory processes. (p. 94, emphasis in original)

The contingent nature of film exhibition has an impact on the ways in which the audience receives a film (Hansen, 1991, p. 93). Hansen’s focus on the situation of reception breaks through a stalemate in film studies in which the spectator is either imaginatively strapped to the narrative development of the film, and is thus merely an effect of ideology, or seen as a socially positioned reader of film texts, consuming movies on the basis of social determination. The Bangladeshi cut-piece film similarly creates unpredictable cinematic processes and requires the empirical investigation of film viewing and projection to understand spectatorship (Image 1).

Hansen argues that the drive against unstable forms of film was aimed against plebeian forms of expression and “toward the creation of a larger mass-cultural audience that submerged all social distinctions under the banner of middle-class values and standards of respectability” (Hansen, 1991, p. 96). The struggle over “obscene” cut-pieces in contemporary Bangladeshi cinema illustrates the ongoing debates within postcolonial Bangladesh over what is acceptable in the public sphere and what constitute appropriate public cultural forms. This struggle mobilizes journalists, filmmakers, actresses, state institutions such as the Censor Board and the Ministry of Information, cinema hall owners, projectionists and many others, in complex and at times contradictory ways (Hoek, 2008).



Image 1. Reels, Coils and Tins in the Projection Room

Credit: Paul James Gomes.

The “obscenity” debates have deep historical roots and recuperate forms and idioms from colonial South Asia and Pakistan (Ghosh, 2006; Gupta, 2001; Mohaiemen, 2006, p. 302). In the cinema, these colonial and postcolonial anxieties have translated into standardized notions about the susceptibility and unpredictability of cinema audiences. The darkened spaces for the mass co-presence of supposedly excitable and impressionable spectators with “inflammatory” imagery were thought to endanger the maintenance of peace, property, and propriety. In the study of South Asian cinema, the discursive construction of such an energetic public and the apparent threat emanating from young working class men in the cinema halls has been noted (Hughes, 2000). Any attempt at capturing the collective affect of cinema faces the danger of slipping into such idioms. While this should be avoided, the purely deconstructive move that is satisfied with outlining how such a public was discursively constructed throws out the baby with the bathwater (cf. Port, 2004). Detailed ethnography should capture the embodied, affective side of collective cinema spectatorship, without recuperating the colonial idiom.

In contemporary Bangladesh, the controversy over the cut-pieces takes place within wider “culture wars” and struggles over the public sphere. These include elaborate campaigns against obscenity carried out in newspapers, legislative reforms to curb satellite TV and reformulate censorship regulations, attempts to ban popular entertainment such as *jatra*, the bulldozing of slums and brothels (Kochanek, 2000), but also the concerted efforts to disavow Islamist activism (Chowdhury, 2006). Such diverse cultural struggles should be understood in the context of the increasingly untenable position of a small, urban, bourgeois elite that dominates the public and political forums in the country. In the run up to the 1971 independence of Bangladesh, a shared aesthetic community was envisioned by what Rounaq Jahan has called East-Pakistan’s

“vernacular” elite, consisting of Bengali students, intellectuals, and professionals (Jahan, 2001). Based on literary Bengali forms and a thoroughly aestheticized folklore (Samaddar, 2002, p. 112), this bourgeois project envisioned a democratic, secular, nationalist, and socialist independent Bangladesh (cf. Schendel, 2002). After independence, this project became quickly untenable (Maniruzzaman, 2003; Ziring, 1994). Demographic transformations followed economic reforms to foster industrialization at the expense of agricultural subsidies. This cultivated a new business elite and a growing urban proletariat (Kochanek, 2002; Feldman, 1993). Dhaka grew exponentially. Aid dependency and structural adjustment have had the contradictory effect of introducing new social groups into the public realm through NGO activities and export manufacture, while largely relegating these groups to the urban proletariat (Siddiqi, 2000; Jahan, 2002). The increased prominence of these new groups has occasioned a backlash at the aesthetic level through efforts to contain certain popular cultural forms, such as action films. These films sketch an image of Bangladesh, which explicitly counterpoise the rural and literary idylls of the bourgeoisie and expose sexually explicit imagery, in the form of cut-pieces, to the gaze of newly prominent plebeian groups in society. It is in this context that a distinction has come to be made between “healthy” (*shushthodhara*) and “obscene” or “vulgar” (*oshlil*) cinema.

Bangladeshi cinema is commonly labeled “obscene” when it includes cut-pieces. These short scenes feature sexually suggestive or explicit material not certified by the Bangladesh Film Censor Board. Cut-pieces last anywhere up to 10 minutes and can be rapidly spliced in or out of a celluloid film reel, even as that reel is being screened in a cinema hall. They appear in all genres of films. Only art films (generally shown from digital carriers, in cultural institutes or the only cineplex in Bangladesh) seem to be immune to cut-piece insertion. Bangladesh’s celluloid industry produces about 100 films a year, of which three quarters are low budget action movies. These are made as cut-piece films. The remaining quarter consists of folk and romance films. Although these are coded as “family” films, these too can become vehicles for the display of cut-pieces. An oft-heard lament is therefore that “one cannot bring one’s family” to the cinema halls, as cut-pieces may be inserted. Rural and urban cinema halls are equally likely to display cut-pieces, although the urban areas are more closely policed. Rather than a marginal phenomenon, the cut-piece is integral to contemporary Bangladeshi cinema.

The rise of the cut-piece is linked to changes in the media landscape since the 1980s. Film production in Bangladesh is organized through the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC), a public enterprise under the Ministry of Information. Although the film industry is protected through legislation banning foreign cinema from Bangladesh, the introduction of VHS quickly circumvented this legislation (Page and Crawley, 2001). This new competition was exacerbated by the development of cheap digital technologies and satellite television. Little has been able to effectively protect the film industry from piracy and satellite (Hoek, 2006). Instead, many film producers now rely on cut-pieces to provide the competitive edge to their low budget films. This makes cut-piece films reminiscent of American “exploitation” films, cheaply made films whose “primary subject was a ‘forbidden’ topic” (Schaefer, 1999, p. 5). Like the exploitation film, the cut-piece film is a cheaply made and is a socially deprecated cinematic form that displays a forbidden spectacle (here, sexual intercourse and female genitalia) and has come into being in the shadow of a strong industry. In the US, the consolidation of the Hollywood studio system produced exploitation cinema as a small independent genre (Schaefer, 1999, p. 8). This argument can be extended to South Asia to suggest that what Rajadhyaksha (2003) has called the “bollywoodization of Indian cinema” has had profound effects on film industries within the region. The consolidation of Bollywood as a dominant “cultural industry” (*ibid.*, p. 30), effectively penetrating Bangladesh and constituting new audiences there, has been an important factor in the transformation of the Bangladesh film industry (Hoek, 2008).

Hansen argues that the disappearance of early cinema's forms of spectatorship should be considered in the context of the film industry's "growth and stabilization" (Hansen, 1991, p. 98). Inversely, in the context of the destabilization of the film industry, as has happened in Bangladesh, we can expect a return to the importance of local, contingent exhibition practices. The cut-piece, as a cheap technique to draw audiences to the cinema halls in times of dire competition, has produced contingent forms of film projection. The ethnographic material presented here will bear this out. The sudden inclusion of a cut-piece amongst a film reel and the collective responses that such imagery yields can be considered parallel to Hansen's cinematic "formations". It suggests that if the study of cinema audiences is to speak to transformations in the public sphere or the workings of ideology in the media, practices of exhibition should be a prime focus.

The Exhibition of *Mintu the Murderer* in Feni

On the morning of Eid-ul-Fitr 2005, you could finish prayers and still make it to the first show at the Badol cinema hall in Feni. I had picked the south-eastern town to wait for the opening morning of *Mintu the Murderer*. Despite the early hour of the festive day, many had gathered. Before long, tickets to all 380 seats were sold out. While most patrons were trying to make their way up the narrow stairs into the auditorium, the film had already started. The auditorium filled fast. The women's cabin, consisting of nine chairs behind a narrow wooden railing, was packed. Beside myself, there was not a single woman in the cinema hall.

Over the excited laughter and chatter of the spectators, the film's dialogs were barely audible. The first 20 minutes of the film drowned in the combination of a struggling sound installation and the general murmur. Poised to finally see *Mintu the Murderer* in a theater, I strained to see and hear what appeared on the screen. Never mind audience *reading* strategies, even audience *hearing* strategies were severely tested by the exuberant co-presence of the film viewers and the struggling sound installation. When the young hero Salman Khan appeared on screen, the audience let out a cheer of collective recognition. In most of the screenings that I attended, Salman Khan drew vociferous appreciation. Whenever Salman's character defied unjust authority, the audience responded with clapping. Caught in the web of intrigue and violence, Salman had a number of characteristic scenes in which he defied villains with grand gestures. Cameraman Zainul had frequently shot Salman in slow-motion and from a low angle. When he walked in with his trench coat aflutter around his tight jeans, flexed his muscles in confrontation or snapped his fingers to order a Coke, the audience responded to these stylized gestures with clapping and calls of encouragement.

After the film's screening, my friend and chaperone Jewel and I talked to the hall's manager, Raju. "The Eid holidays are always good," he said, "we can oversell up to 600 tickets per show. But the rest of the year, business is very slow." While Raju explained the competition posed by the satellite dishes, someone entered the office from behind us. "Jewel *bhai*" the man said, vaguely ominously, "I knew it was you." Introducing himself as Mukul, he sat down next to Raju. "I recognised them," Mukul said to Raju, "I've seen them at a shooting." Turning to us he explained, "They were very worried, you see. But I vouched for you, told them I knew you." Confused Jewel asked who exactly he was, as we had never met him before. "Mukul, representative," he answered, "I work for Litu. Did you inform him of your visit to Feni?" I said we had talked to Litu, the producer of *Mintu the Murderer*. "The hall staff spotted you yesterday night", Mukul continued, "You traveled along the Station Road by rickshaw, right?" We concurred. "They weren't sure who you were exactly. And then you appeared for the morning show." Raju corroborated this story. "We immediately noticed you," Raju said, "we thought something was up." I clearly stood out and my presence was of direct concern to the cinema hall staff.

Mukul leaned back and let Raju talk about the exhibition business. “Well, the Feni audience likes these sorts of movies”, Raju said, “In Feni there are 100,000 rickshaw-wallahs from the North. They like to watch these sorts of films. Action films are for the working class.” He elaborated Feni’s strategic position— “It is a communication point for five *zelas*, many people travel through.” Mukul added that Feni was quite unlike Mymensingh. “Up towards Mymensingh it is all folk stories that do well, that’s where all the village stories come from,” he explained about the distribution business. I asked Mukul why Feni attracted action movies. He replied cryptically— “It has a history, doesn’t it?” Implicit in Mukul’s statement was the idea that Feni was a violent town. From the perspective of Dhaka-based bookers and representatives, the rest of the country was framed by stereotypes. While Mymensingh was associated with sweets and fairytales, in the public imagination Feni was associated with organized crime and poor labor migrants. This impacted film distribution by providing a regionalist and classist explanation of the attraction of *Mintu the Murderer* upon the Feni population.

During the afternoon show, this popularity was hard to deny. The screening proceeded as in the morning. During a dance sequence, the man in the seat next to Jewel whispered to him “here it comes, here it comes.” When the sequences ended mid-song, jeering and shouting ensued. As an action movie, *Mintu the Murderer* was already embedded within the public discourses about “obscenity”. The film’s director, crew, and cast were all associated with “obscene” filmmaking. The photosets supplied to the theaters enhanced this perception by foregrounding images of sparsely clad actresses. It fed into the air of the licentiousness that surrounded *Mintu the Murderer*. Rumors about a high dose of sexually explicit cut-pieces had spread rapidly, creating the buzz (*awaaz*) that producers tried to induce around their films. This resulted in extraordinary expectations from the movie.

The audience members who booed the projectionist did so at specific moments (see Image 2). In all the halls in which I saw *Mintu the Murderer* this happened when the film suddenly cut to another scene and after particular dialogs or close-ups. At these points the audience was likely to boo the projectionist when no cut-pieces appeared. Familiar with the generic qualities of the action movie, spectators knew that a sudden black screen could denote the absence of a cut-piece. Similarly, scenes ending in dialogs such as “Tonight we will celebrate” or a close up of an embrace could be used to lead into cut-pieces. Such moments were like hooks, onto which an additional scene could conveniently be hung, but without which the movie could proceed easily. Spectators recognized such hooks and knew that they could lead to submerged storylines within the movie or unrelated footage that could always be incorporated into action films. The exhibition of cinema on celluloid made the insertion of cut-piece possible. The celluloid could easily be cut with scissors and a new piece of footage attached with sellotape. Those cinema halls that used two projectors to screen their films, could load one of them with a cut-piece, and switch projectors at the moment of a hook, thus showing the cut-piece.

The day after Eid, we were invited to have lunch with the representative of *Mintu the Murderer*, Mukul. He ordered curried hilsa and complained about the food in Feni. During Eid representatives traveled with each of the 20 copies of *Mintu the Murderer*. He said, “We take care of the prints and the money. During the first Eid week, 60 percent of the income from ticket sales goes to the producer and 40 percent to the hall owner. In the second week, it is 55 versus 45 percent. I make sure that the money is distributed properly.” As he told us about film contracts, his colleague representative Mizan from Bilashi cinema hall arrived. He was holding a small film tin, wrapped in newspaper and bound together with elastic bands. “I managed it. That bastard, I recognized him immediately!” he told Mukul. They talked animatedly. “I spotted him yesterday,” continued Mukul, “but he caught me looking at him and disappeared.” Mukul ordered Mizan a plate of rice and they sat at the table behind ours, continuing to talk out of earshot.



Image 2. Rewinding the Reels

Credit: Paul James Gomes.

After Mizan left, Mukul rejoined us. “Kamruzzaman Babu,” he said, “He and five other journalists came to Feni to watch the films.” Kamruzzaman Babu was the cinema correspondent for the up-market *Prothom Alo* newspaper. He was notorious for the regular “Boycott Obscenity” column, in which he indicted cut-piece films. Cursing the journalist, Mukul said he had immediately warned Raju, the manager of Badol cinema hall. Babu had finally showed up at Bilashi. “Somehow they slipped through,” explained Mukul, “Mizan didn’t spot them until the film had already started. But he managed it.” I asked him what he meant by “managing” but Mukul didn’t divulge. “Listen, you know that we do bad films [*amra kharap chhobi kori*],” he offered by way of explanation, “I just have to mind the audience, make sure there are no journalists, no Censor Board people. That’s a lot harder than dealing with the crowds.” Jewel asked him how he knew who they were. “It’s obvious,” he said, “Sometimes we’re warned, mostly they just stand out. Like you two.”

“You didn’t see it yet?!” cried apprentice editor Karim when he saw us in the afternoon. Karim had been the junior editor on *Mintu the Murderer*. His family lived on the outskirts of Feni and Karim had returned from Dhaka to celebrate Eid. He was catching up with friends in the center of town. “There is a song sequence,” he informed us about the cut-pieces in *Mintu the Murderer*, “and of course a hot sequence with extras.” All the rushes and every piece of negative had gone through Karim’s hands as he performed the most dreary editing jobs. “We made a trailer for *Mintu the Murderer*,” continued Karim, “We put in all the hot action but Litu [the producer] didn’t like it. So he gave us stuff from his private collection to splice into it.” The sun had set over Feni and fairy lights illuminated the holiday crowds. Karim’s friends sat around and

listened to his tall tales from the film industry. He displayed his intimate acquaintance with popular heroines and reinforced the rumors about their immoral lifestyles. Karim's tales awarded him an effortless cool amongst his Feni-based BBA⁴ friends in fashionable jeans. Quizzing him about *Mintu the Murderer*, it was clear that his friends too constituted part of the audience for action cinema. They hardly conformed to the stereotyped *lungi*-clad rickshaw-wallahs sketched in Babu's columns.

Leaving to catch the night show of *Mintu the Murderer*, Jewel and I discussed the possibilities of seeing Karim's elusive scenes. Jewel doubted it. "Late night show, the day after Eid, there could be extra scenes", I said hopefully. Jewel was not convinced. When we arrived at the Badol cinema hall, most of the late night patrons had found their seats. The house was almost full but the holiday excitement of the previous day had dissipated. We watched *Mintu the Murderer*, identical to the versions we had seen the day before. Behind us, two policemen followed the battle of two gangsters on screen attentively. "Maybe they won't show us anything until those cops are gone", I whispered to Jewel. He laughed. "I doubt it," he replied, "just now one of them instructed the ushers to get rid of that white woman and show some cut-pieces!" As one of the few women, and white at that, I impacted the screening of the film. As Raju and Mukul had said, they had spotted me immediately and cautiously calibrated the screenings of *Mintu the Murderer* by watching who was in the audience. The police apparently felt I was inhibiting the display of cut-pieces. The veracity of this soon became clear.

The side actors Rosy and Shabazi had appeared on screen, dancing in a paddy field. "If anywhere, it will be here," I tried to persuade Jewel. "Enough," he said, "it won't come, let's go." Mukul had appeared twice during the show, asking us to come have dinner. As he appeared for a third time, Jewel agreed. "It will be more interesting than sitting through the end of *Mintu the Murderer* again", he reasoned with me. I gave in. As we descended down the narrow stone steps to street level, the sound of Rosy and Shabazi's paddy song followed us into the Feni night. It was eleven-thirty and the streets were completely still. Only the theater's sound system disturbed the dark night. The gatemen sat together on a bench outside the only gate that remained open. We squeezed through the narrow opening to join them. As we moved out, Mukul suddenly remembered a forgotten task. "One minute," he said as he turned and dashed up the stairs. Behind us the gate closed. Suddenly the paddy song stopped, midway. A new, unrecognizable sound came from inside the hall. "They are playing something else!" I cried in astonishment, "I can't believe it!" The gate was closed and there was no way to get back in. The audience was completely silent and whatever was being shown did not have a very loud soundtrack. Agitated I paced around the gates, trying to listen to what was happening inside. After no more than three minutes the paddy song came back on and the audience cheered loudly. "Let's go," said Mukul, as he appeared again through the gate. I gritted my teeth.

The next day, Badol's manager Raju laughed at my frustrations. "Of course we didn't show them as long as you were there," he said, "the producer didn't want it, too risky." Eid was the only profitable time of the year for the film industry. *Mintu the Murderer* was likely to reclaim its entire investment in ticket sales during that week. If the film was seized now, the possibility of recovering the investment would be much slimmer. By drawing attention to myself, I had also drawn attention to the cinema hall. Jewel asked Raju about the lightning speed operation of the night before. "We use two projectors," explained Raju, "we can run a cut-piece anywhere during the movie and quickly switch back if necessary." Raju confirmed what we had heard earlier. "Films won't run without cut-pieces," he said, "only films with cut-piece get a repeat audience. That's where the money is made." Although I had not seen the cut-pieces, the practices of film exhibition and its impact on audience response was laying itself bare before me (Image 3). My forced participant non-observation was yielding its own results and illuminating the contours of mobile forms of film exhibition and collective cinema consumption.



Image 3. Assistant to the Projectionist at Monika Cinema Hall
Credit: Paul James Gomes.

Technology, Film Form and the Cinematic Audience

Mintu the Murderer was different whenever it was screened. Embedded in censorship regulations that made certain footage illegal, the film had the potential to shape-shift according to context. Possessing reams of illegal footage, the film grew and shrank according to need and possibility. The hall management, the producer's representative, the projectionist and the audience combined with the technology to produce different forms of *Mintu the Murderer*. Each recombination resulted in a different emanation of the film. It can be compared to a Deleuzian assemblage, "a nonsubjectified machine assemblage with no intrinsic properties, only situational ones." (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 389). What Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to is the immanence of constellations that produce enunciations rather than significance. Clare

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Colebrook has suggested that for Deleuze, cinema is an exemplary technology in its power to reassemble because “what is *singular* in cinema ... is not what makes it the same in all its forms but what allows it to produce *new forms*...” (Colebrook, 2006, p. 15, emphasis in original). For Deleuze, cinema is a potent technology for the production of divergent assemblages, where “[a]ny repetition... is also the production of a difference” (Colebrook, 2006, p. 16). The exhibition of *Mintu the Murderer* provides an empirical account of this. Its repeated screening was less about reproducing and representing than it was about reassembling. The title *Mintu the Murderer* referred to a range of different recombinations, each unique in its constellation. What *Mintu the Murderer*’s shifting form illustrates has implications that carry beyond this single film.

Bangladeshi cut-piece films show an extreme form of a more general feature of films. Namely, that they are never stable and that screenings are rarely the same from one exhibition to another. Rick Altman has noted that “[r]ather than recognize the legitimate existence of multiple versions of a film ... critics have regularly made a fetish of locating the ‘original’ version” (Altman, 1992, p. 6). The stability of film form is an untenable ideal. Censorship regulations necessitate the excision of certain parts as a film moves between countries, foreign language dubbing transforms the dialogs and airplane versions take the edge off movies. At the level of the technology and materiality of cinema exhibition, difference creeps into films. The burning out of a scene, a broken reel, the wilful neglect of a scene before the interval, a disc that skips, all these kinks in the faultless display of a film are perhaps more the rule rather than the exception. Brian Larkin has argued that one pay attention to “the small, ubiquitous experience of breakdown as a condition of technological existence” (Larkin, 2004, p. 304). Against theories of technology that assume them to be either perfectly oiled or nonexistent altogether, Larkin sketches technological conditions in Nigeria to be in need of continuous attention and intervention. He makes technological breakdown the norm, not the exception. Of film prints arriving from abroad to be shown in Nigeria he writes: “they are often shown until they literally fall apart. All are scratched and heavily damaged, full of surprising and lengthy jump-cuts where film had stuck in the projector and burned” (ibid., p. 307). No film print is the same and each showing may exhibit a film slightly changed from the day before.

Such “failing” technology may produce pleasure rather than irritation. The pleasure of failing technological systems such as the old projection equipment and the cheap print of *Mintu the Murderer* lay in the possibilities it allowed for the audience to voice its opinion on the state of the theater, the shape of the movie and their collective presence in the hall. Rather than dismissing ragged film prints as inadequate and unacceptable to its audiences, Brian Larkin relies on Yuri Tsivian’s suggestion that such technological breakdowns might create meaning of its own (ibid., p. 308). Whereas for Larkin’s Nigerian audiences, such distortions seem to fuel fantasies of foreign lands of technological bliss and an acute awareness of a Nigerian lack, in Bangladeshi cinema halls, the faltering equipment and jagged visual edges suggest a possible submerged storyline and an ideal location for some sexual diversion. When *Mintu the Murderer*’s audience responded to the failure of the equipment in one of the Feni shows, this did not necessarily express discontent. The voluble commentary seemed to be an agreeable mass dialog amongst the spectators and the hall staff. Responding to such glitches, they urged the projectionist to show what lay behind. What is projected is not necessarily all that is on offer and audiences actively engage with the projectionist to run other reels and show different footage, producing different cinematic assemblages (Image 4). Active audience intervention therefore does not confine itself to wayward readings of particular scenes. As Stephen Hughes (2003) argues— “[o]nce films are considered from the perspective of exhibition we can no longer assume that the film text alone can provide the transcendental horizon for the study of cinema”.



Image 4. Unstable Celluloid

Credit: Paul James Gomes.

Each of the audience studies referred to at the beginning of this article, emphasizes reading practices of audiences, rather than engagement with film form that seems to be so important in the interaction between audiences and cinematic products in Bangladesh. Perhaps the Indian cinema industry is not marked by the same technological faltering that reigns in Bangladesh and therefore does not allow such audience participation? This seems unlikely. In his work on cinema in Andhra Pradesh, S.V. Srinivas describes an exceedingly familiar set of practices within what he terms the B-circuit. Within this circuit of film distribution and circulation he suggests that:

[a] range of practices of clearly questionable legality are in evidence here including the distribution of uncensored films, the splicing of sexually explicit sequences in censored films, the circulation of 'condemned prints' (damaged prints that are unworthy of exhibition), the distribution of films long after the rights have lapsed, etc. Although seemingly chaotic, this segment is in fact very efficiently organized. Not only has it fed films to the most far-flung cinema halls, but it has also exploited films to the fullest extent possible under the given circumstances. (Srinivas, 2003, pp. 55–56)

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Such practices are generally neglected in studies of Indian and Bangladeshi studies of the cinema audience. This can be understood as a result of a blinding focus on A-films and a preference for semiotic analysis in film studies combined with limited fieldwork. But Srinivas adds that “even the economically established A-circuit is not free from such intervention” (Srinivas, 2003, p. 49). The effect of such interventions is “the de-standardization of a film’s status as an industrial product” (ibid., p. 49). Srinivas’s description reflects exhibition practices in Bangladesh and perhaps South Asia at large. The lack of empirical research amongst contemporary cinema audiences in South Asia does not allow much comparative generalization. But the striking similarities between Bangladesh and Andhra Pradesh should alert scholars of cinema in South Asia to the possibilities that the blanket term “popular cinema” may hide a very diverse and theoretically challenging domain of cinematic practices (cf. Singh, 2003) (Image 5).



Image 5. Monika Cinema Hall in Khulna District

Credit: Paul James Gomes.

The de-standardization of movies allows audience participation within the cinema halls in a manner reminiscent of Hansen’s early film audiences. The dialogic possibilities of cinema are re-instated as non-filmic events, such as projection itself, become a focus for audience activities. In this segment of the film industry, the audiences of *Mintu the Murderer* were not merely talking and singing, interpreting movies according to class, caste, or gender. Instead, the unstable celluloid, or de-standardized film product, allowed different constellations to arise. The audience entered into a dialog with the projectionist. Projectionists and managers surveyed the audience to see what would be retained or excluded from a given film. The nature of the active audience was thus related to the possibilities offered by technology and circumstance of exhibition. To understand cinema audiences, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, practices of exhibition need to be investigated. It

requires a theoretical approach that can understand the collective without reducing it to a mass, and a methodology that does not only rely on presence and interviews but can also approach absence, silence and collective forms of affect.

Mintu the Murderer in North Bengal

Late November 2005, Jewel and I traveled to North Bengal. A rural and impoverished region, it was nonetheless a key area for cinema exhibition. In its fourth week, *Mintu the Murderer* was screening in the small towns of the North. We were heading for a theater at the very edge of the country, Modhuchhondo cinema hall in Bhurungamari, 394 kilometers from Dhaka.

On the final stretch to Bhurungamari, I received a call. Our friend at the Censor Board asked whether we had heard the news—*Mintu the Murderer* had been banned. A few days earlier, a print of *Mintu the Murderer* had been seized in Comilla on suspicion of containing uncertified material (“Film...Print Seized” 2005). “We watched the Comilla reels yesterday evening and the censor certificate was cancelled today.” I asked what they had found. “Jenny’s solo song. They’d never submitted it.” We had seen the song in a cinema hall in Jessore, where our excitement at seeing the previously hidden scene had not matched the general disinterest of the audience. “There was also a rape sequence and vulgar shots in another song. And they hadn’t taken out the scenes we had requested.” It seemed the Censor Board had gotten their hands on a version of *Mintu the Murderer* that was more elaborate than the censor-cut but not as explicit as the version we had heard outside Badol cinema hall in the Feni night. It seemed the end of the road for *Mintu the Murderer*. I asked what would happen next. “They’ll appeal,” said our friend, “and try to get a stay-order.” Hoping that the news had not reached Bhurungamari yet, we traveled on.

In the cinema hall at the edge of the country we were invited in as guests. There appeared to be no suspicion, merely interest into our straying into such distant lands. The Modhuchhondo cinema hall was small, set on the outskirts of the town, amidst golden fields. The sandy track leading up to the cinema hall traveled on for another kilometer and there ended in barbed wire. The winter sun filtered through the haze hanging over the field in which the border with India stretched invisibly.

At Modhuchhondo, *Mintu the Murderer* started with uncertified images of decapitations and dismemberment. The form of the film was roughly similar to the ones we had seen in Feni. But small difference had crept in. A few scenes were abbreviated, starting mid-dialog. Another scene had been creatively re-assembled. It was a chase scene, in which a girl runs away from her assailant. Eventually he captures her and throws her into a pile of leaves. At Modhuchhondo, the shots seemed oddly placed, with a shot of the girl being pushed to the ground spliced amidst two shots of her running. A little later the attempted rape suddenly jumped to her running again. Most likely, this scene had been used to add in cut-pieces of a more explicit rape scene or unrelated sexually explicit footage. The scene was clearly a hook, where a sexually explicit scene could be expected and easily spliced in. The fact that the shots were now re-assembled rather oddly suggested that once the cut-pieces had been taken out, the shots making up the sequence were put back randomly. The splicing practices had left their mark on the print, in the form of a topsy-turvy chase sequence.

About 20 minutes into the film, an usher appeared and whispered something to Jewel. As he left, Jewel could not contain his amusement. “Perhaps *memsaab* would prefer to step outside for a few minutes,” he giggled, “there will be some naked images appearing on screen shortly. The management thought you might feel uncomfortable.” Jewel laughed. “I told them you are very fond of nude images!” Although my presence had been registered, the screening had not been recalibrated on account of it.

The film suddenly cut to a bedroom sequence. I recognized the scene from the script, but its placing seemed random. The script described a clandestine encounter in a college hostel, in which the actor strokes the actress's body with suggestive foodstuffs. Editing apprentice Karim had told us about this scene in Feni. The first part of the scene had been added as a cut-piece to the Modhuchhondo screening. As the actress shed her clothes, we watched intently until it suddenly cut back to the main narrative. Like in the Feni night when I had paced the gates, the audience was silent. When minutes later, the hero single-handedly beat up a bunch of villains, the silence continued. Unlike the many other times I had seen this scene, it did not call forth any aural response. The mood in the hall had changed and the audience responded to the action sequences immediately following the cut-piece without enthusiastic clapping or calling. The insertion of the cut-piece had provided a different sort of attraction and undermined the appeal of the iconic action scenes: fighting and explicit defiance of authority. It was as if cut-pieces had temporarily destabilized the genre of the action film. With the inclusion of this short cut-piece the way the audience responded to the images on screen was transformed.

This tension did not remain. As the narrative unfolded, the action scenes once again garnered a collective response. The cut-piece's effect had been temporary. When a little later another cut-piece appeared, however, a similar pattern of abrupt silence, concentration, and slow release could be discerned. This cut-piece featured junior artists, or 'extra's', and featured a man licking a woman's naked buttocks, stomach and breasts. The entire sequence was watched silently. Immediately following this scene was a glamorous entrance of Salman Khan often good for exuberant responses. At Modhuchhondo, no one clapped or called his name. Not until another few sequences had passed, did the generic action and comedy sequences once again draw an aural response.

After the show we had tea with some of the hall staff. The tea stall was bathed in afternoon light and from the speakers came old Hindi film songs. We talked about the state of the industry and the changes taking place. Although business was not excellent at Bhurungamari, the hall was not threatened with closure. Viewers still came to Modhuchhondo for entertainment. When the projectionist descended from his booth, the manager asked: "Did you give them all?" "I ran two," he replied. They were talking about the cut-pieces. The projectionist had decided that two would suffice that afternoon. He controlled what his audience saw on any particular occasion. *Mintu the Murderer* had been taken on contract, rather than on percentage. The managers of the hall had paid for the film in full and now could screen it at their discretion. There was no representative that had traveled with the reels up to Bhurungamari. The otherwise all prevalent fear of journalists did not exist. Producers and film inspectors were absent. The administrative center of Dhaka seemed very far away. Here the projectionist decided. And his decision shaped the sequences of celluloid that ran through the projector. This in turn determined how the film was received, the sort of response that came from those gathered in the hall and in which register the audience read the film. It was the last time I saw *Mintu the Murderer* in a cinema hall.

Conclusion

Mintu the Murderer was a success. The producer reclaimed his investment within two weeks. The Eid crowds made the return on the meager investment almost inevitable. Empty halls were a greater threat to the theaters than to the producer. To boost their returns, theaters relied on the associations of "obscenity" that movies such as *Mintu the Murderer* evoked. The posters and photosets for the film ensured such associations and

guaranteed an audience for the film. Simultaneously, however, such displays invited commentary by journalists and increased vigilance by the Censor Board and its inspectors.

This constellation of needs and interests ensured a flexible form for *Mintu the Murderer*. Screened from celluloid, the movie was adaptable to the context in which it was shown. Depending on the demands of the audience, the needs of the cinema hall management, the leeway provided by local authorities, the interests of the producer, the judgment of the projectionist, and the location of the cinema hall itself, changes could be made to the narrative order of the film. Sexually explicit material could be spliced in and out within seconds and violent encounters could be reinserted after censorship had taken place. When thinking about active audiences and their appropriation of mass media, the possibility must be considered that dialogic opportunities do not arise with new digital technologies but are present in cinema halls screening films on celluloid. Studies must show how people and technology interlock.

If my first conclusion is that film form in Bangladesh is inherently heterogeneous, it follows that audience studies must take this flexible form into account. As the film shifted its shape in the course of circulation and exhibition, the responses garnered from the audience were transformed. With the inclusion or exclusion of certain scenes the ways in which the spectators reacted to the film changed. Without cut-pieces viewers responded vocally to iconic action sequences. With their inclusion, they no longer garnered much response, silence and tension marking the auditorium instead. This means that reading practices can only be meaningful for a particular screening, not for a particular film per se.

Action films like *Mintu the Murderer* are (re-)assembled to produce new emanations. Such transformations are not just accidental events in rural cinema halls. Rather, the instability of the film form is intrinsic to the nature of cinema in Bangladesh. This must inform the way in which audiences and film reception are studied, urge a focus on exhibition practices, and temper the inclination to reduce film studies to semiotic and textual analysis. “Unstable celluloid” means that approaches to cinema that either see films as unambiguous ideological cages or film spectators as nubile readers are inadequate due to their over-determined reliance on “knowable” cinema. The anthropology of media and detailed ethnography of collective presence is singly suited to bring out the way in which film form is less stable than textual analysis might assume and to investigate how media reception and audience reactions change with the transformation of film form over time and space.

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Notes

1. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is also the case in other regions of South Asia, although this is outside the scope of the present research.
2. Film titles and personal names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3. It is the unpredictable nature of cut-piece insertion and its uncertain link to the diegesis that makes cut-pieces like sequences of attractions (Gunning, 2006), much more so than the generic song-and-dance sequence (Gopalan, 2003, pp. 371–372).
4. BBA means Bachelor of Business Administration.

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