"Akira Kurosawa"

A Retrospective Prologue

akira kurosawa vittorio de sica, wyler hitchcock wajda, mizoguchi de palma,
wyler hitchcock wajda, brian de palma! akira kurosawa vittorio de sica . . .
—*CHINTU JI* (RANJIT KAPOOR, 2009)

The bikini is the most important thing since the atom bomb.
—DIANA VREELAND, 1946

Can true love materialize from a transactional affair? Let me turn to a certain Akira Kurosawa in order to broach my preoccupation with this capacious question, one that preoccupied a set of commercial Hindi films in a postwar, post-independence period of the long 1960s. By "Akira Kurosawa," I am referring to a song sequence (clip 1) from the unassuming Hindi comedy *Chintu Ji* (Mister Chintu, Ranjit Kapoor, 2009). The sequence offers a playful retrospective homage to a historic binary that crystallized over the period in question: between the spectacular audiovisual excess of the Bombay-based Hindi-language cinema on the one hand and the canonical acclaim of an auteur-driven world cinema on the other.

The lyrics of "Akira Kurosawa" at first seem to be the gibberish of an unintelligible, exoticized indigenous language. The song opens upon a stereotypically generic mise-en-scène of natives, replete with tom-toms, feathers, a teepee, and a white captive who has been tied up before a ridiculously outfitted chieftain

Note on transliteration: I have transliterated all Hindi dialogue and lyrics in a lowercase, italicized format. In lieu of diacritics, I have opted for phonetic English transliterations that indicate Hindi long vowels through their doubling (e.g., *aa, ii*). In instances where certain titles (e.g., *Chintu Ji*) have been published as romanized titles, or in instances of lyrics that include proper nouns from other languages (e.g., Akira Kurosawa), I opt for these transliterations. The former will be evident through their capitalization, the latter through their italicized, lowercase format. I have left diacritics in place in a few citations, which refer to secondary sources in languages other than English that have not been published with Romanized titles.

CLIP 1. "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence from *Chintu Ji* (2009).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.130.1

FIGURE 1. Still from *Chintu Ji* (2009): Rishi Kapoor as a generic chieftain in "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence.

(fig. 1). The music is percussive and upbeat, and it is joined by a twangy riff on a synthesizer that is followed by the chieftain's rhythmic chanting of apparently nonsensical syllables. On closer listen, they are in fact "*tarantino! vittorio! mizoguchi! coppola!*" A strappy leather-clad dancer gyrates before the camera against a bevy of white backup dancers and indigenous extras, and she sultrily croons in the voice of a playback singer: "*tarantino wilder capra, ozu bertolucci peckinpah, fellini visconti oshima, coppola, coppola!*" (fig. 2) A litany of canonical—and largely midcentury—world cinema auteurs' names continue as the ostensibly primitive gibberish of the song's chorus: "*akira kurosawa vittorio de sica, wyler hitchcock wajda, mizoguchi de palma, wyler hitchcock wajda, brian de palma! akira kurosawa vittorio de sica . . .* "

The sequence unfolds as a parody of the item number and the pejoratively termed "tribal" number, both of which are often categorized among the most blatantly commercial forms of song-dance sequences in contemporary Hindi films.
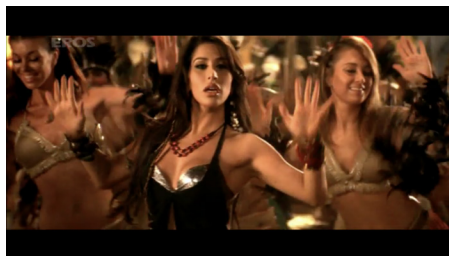
FIGURE 2. Still from *Chintu Ji* (2009):
Sophie Chaudry as generically "tribal"
dancer in "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence.

A tribal number is a production number[1] whose demeaning portrayals of indigenous people "is usually embarrassing as they frequently wear ridiculous clothes, usually fairly skimpy costumes, with Himachal hats that often look more like something one would wear to a children's party."[2] An item number is a fast-paced production number, typically featuring a cameo by an actress whose embodied sex appeal is highlighted through an eroticized focus on her dancing body and bare flesh.[3] Actor Rishi Kapoor plays himself as a film star in *Chintu Ji*, and he stars as the chieftain in the "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence, which occurs as a film shoot within the film. The star of the parodic tribal-cum-item number is dancer-actress Menaka[4] (played by actress Sophie Choudry, who lip-syncs to the voice of playback singer Anushka Manchanda). Later invoking the story of Pocahontas, the sequence spoofs the absurdity of Hollywood films' depictions of Native Americans as well.

Some accounts of the term *item number* surmise that it came from *item bomb*, as a derivation of *atom bomb*.[5] An item number is like an atom bomb inasmuch as it invokes a technologized mass spectacle of audiovisual excess. *Harper's Bazaar* fashion columnist Diana Vreeland notoriously tied the atomic age to a new age of global design with her 1946 declaration that "the bikini is the most important thing since the atom bomb."[6] The facetious aphorism stuck to Vreeland's celebrity after she jumped into the limelight as editor-in-chief of *Vogue* in the 1960s, as the explosive swimwear item remained an icon of unprecedented public displays of feminine sexuality and leisure.[7] Shortly after the end of World War II, the US had conducted nuclear tests in the Bikini Atoll, which was nothing short of an irrevocable catastrophe for the indigenous inhabitants and environments of the Marshall Islands.[8] From this namesake nuclear testing ground in the Pacific, the bikini wore an indelible imprint of the global Cold War. These twinned excesses—proliferating images of feminine sexuality and proliferating nuclear capabilities—have recurred as targets of regulation in ways that reify an uncritical acceptance of the far less spectacular non-excess against which they have been defined. That is, the display of feminine sexuality can become an object of scrutiny rather than the naturalization of heteropatriarchal structures that frame it as excess in the first place. And nuclear weapons can become an object of grave concern in ways that normalize everyday militarized infrastructures—including those of mere "tests"—against which nuclear weapons appear as an egregious excess.

In light of these stakes, *Sirens of Modernity* considers public debates over gender, excess, cinephilia, and the world via Bombay—or more specifically, via a set of Bombay films, film songs, and love lyrics over a "long" 1960s period, bookended by the 1955 Bandung Afro-Asian Conference and 1975 Indian Emergency. The film *Chintu Ji* emerged in a far more contemporary moment, following Bollywood's sweeping displacement of a realist tradition of art cinema as the default representative of Indian cinema in the world.[9] Yet, the "Akira Kurosawa" sequence—and the film as a whole—cannily cites a longer history of Hindi films' reflexivity vis-à-vis the world and world cinema. As expressed by director Ranjit Kapoor, who also wrote—or one might say compiled—the lyrics,[10] the "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence from *Chintu Ji* ultimately suggests that a polemical opposition between a realist, postwar art cinema and the excess-driven modes of popular Hindi cinema belies their historical simultaneity and overlapping aspirations. As we will see in the chapters that follow, films, film industry personnel, critics, and audiences across a range of filmmaking practices—including an array of commercial Hindi film ventures—converged in their espousal of ethical aspirations for cinema as a medium for representing, reaching, and connecting people and places who were underrepresented in the world.

The Cold War nuclear arms race fueled the development of increasingly long-distance rocket technologies, and the now-familiar opening image of *Chintu Ji* was beheld for the first time during this midcentury space age: a photograph of Earth as a planetary totality from the vantage point of outer space. As the camera ostensibly descends toward Earth, the distinct voice of actor Om Puri is audible in a cameo voice-over that introduces Hadbahedi, a fictional village in a corner of Himachal Pradesh in northern India. Immediately, a song sequence commences through a montage of establishing shots, and the lyrics describe the perfection of the idyllic village and its people. Its refrain insists that "*yahaan sab thiik hai*" (everything is okay here). But as declarations of the village's utopian character start to crack through some tentative admissions that it could benefit from basic infrastructural improvements, such as reliable electricity, the continued repetition of "everything is okay here" accrues a tinge of irony.

At its outset, *Chintu Ji* directly correlates a lack of technological prowess and media representation in the wider world to a lack of political visibility and voice. The film goes on to exaggerate and poke fun at the temperamental and selfish offscreen personalities of film stars and at their fans' faith that stars will heroically step in on their behalf—as they often do onscreen—when the state falls short, by representing the fans' collective aspirations and translating them into actionable political demands.[11] At a village meeting early in the film, one of the villagers casually remarks that if a film star had been born there, Hadbahedi would have been known and represented in the world. In response, an elderly woman steps forward and reveals that decades ago, she had served as the midwife who delivered the son of the late star Raj Kapoor, when his wife Krishna went into labor while passing

through Hadbahedi. The film's title *Chintu Ji* (Mr. Chintu) is the actual nickname of Raj Kapoor's real-life son Rishi Kapoor, a film star who plays himself as a third-generation film star in *Chintu Ji*.

The Hadbahedians' faith in Chintu Ji comes from an idealized belief that film stars, unlike politicians, are public figures whose acting is transparent, confined to the screen, and sanctioned by the patronage of their fans. In contrast, politicians are implied to be public figures who duplicitously don roles without exposing their acting as such, in order to gain votes through false pretenses that masquerade as truth. The situational comedy in *Chintu Ji* seems to arise from the audience's knowledge that Chintu Ji could not care less for the Hadbahedians, and that Chintu Ji humors them because he harbors political aspirations.[12] Yet, the film most zealously lampoons not the Hadbahedians' naivete, but Chintu Ji himself as an epitome of the ridiculously self-serving tendencies of the commercial film industry and its stars.

On the advice of his young public relations officer, Devika, Chintu Ji visits his birthplace in Hadbahedi with no other concern than amassing the villagers' votes. For this purpose, he puts on an act as a representative of the Hadbahedians' interests. Despite barely keeping his act together due to the constant eruptions of his insufferably temperamental personality, Chintu Ji nonetheless aims to deceive the Hadbahedians just long enough to win an upcoming election. In learning to eventually care for Hadbahedi despite the town's shortcomings, just as the Hadbahedians care for Chintu Ji despite his shortcomings, a reel star learns to concern himself with the interests of the real heroes: a collective of underrepresented fans. The Hadbahedians regard Chintu Ji as one of their own, despite their not-so-naïve suspicion that he is rather flawed. Playing the character of a third-generation film star who now eyes a political career, Chintu Ji does not bargain for the possibility that the cinephilic faith placed in him by the Hadbahedians would transform his relationship to them.

Crucially, Chintu Ji's own transformation occurs through a ghost of sorts from a cinematic past. The film nostalgically recalls a cinema of and for the people, epitomized for so many around the world by the tramp figures played by Chintu Ji's father, showman Raj Kapoor. An Uzbek foreign minister comes to visit Chintu Ji in Hadbahedi, and the minister mentions that Kseniya Ryabinkina, a now elderly Russian woman, wishes to visit India. Kseniya Ryabinkina had played the role of Marina in Raj Kapoor's 1970 film *Mera Naam Joker*—the very film in which Rishi Kapoor made his acting debut (figs. 3, 4, 5). The real Kseniya Ryabinkina journeyed to India from Russia to play herself in *Chintu Ji*, acting for the very first time since her role in *Mera Naam Joker* forty years earlier (fig. 6). Within the film, she reminds Chintu Ji of how inspired she was by his father, Raj Kapoor, not merely as an actor but above all as a human being. Chintu Ji's about-face happens through Kseniya's reminder of his father's legacy.

Prior to his change of heart, Chintu Ji exploits the Hadbahedians' love for him in two ways that emphasize the inseparability of popular media and representational

FIGURE 3. Still from *Mera Naam Joker* (1970): Raj Kapoor as Raj.

FIGURE 4. Still from *Mera Naam Joker*: Rishi Kapoor's film debut as the young Raj.

FIGURE 5. Still from *Mera Naam Joker*: Kseniya Ryabinkina as Marina.

FIGURE 6. Still from *Chintu Ji* (2009): Rishi Kapoor meets Kseniya Ryabinkina, who reminisces about Raj Kapoor.

politics: covertly as an aspiring politician and overtly as a film star. Thus, the Had-bahedians—as voters and as fans—are simultaneously duped by a power-hungry representative of the state on one side and a profit-seeking representative of a media industry on the other, as they coalesce in the figure of a callously selfish film star who aspires toward electoral politics. The "Akira Kurosawa" song sequence

takes place as a production number in the middle of the film, and it is motivated by a film shoot within the film starring Chintu Ji on location in Hadbahedi. The producer within the film is especially thrilled to take advantage of the villagers, who are willing to play extras and even host and feed the cast and crew without any charge.

The comedic elements of the "Akira Kurosawa" sequence and *Chintu Ji* as a whole defamiliarize several past and present conventions of Hindi and Hollywood commercial films. Moreover, the "Akira Kurosawa" sequence playfully stages a familiar opposition between an auterist world cinema (often reductively conflated with auteur Satyajit Ray with respect to Indian cinema)[13] and a song- and star-driven popular Hindi cinema in order to pay cinephilic homage to both. The sequence celebrates the audiovisual seductions of cinema, despite a host of formulaic clichés associated with its most crassly commercial forms—perhaps none more banal than that of the heterosexual marriage plot. At a climactic interlude during the number, Menaka kneels before the chieftain, cries, and points to the white captive, ostensibly requesting his release. To put a fine point on her plea, she produces a parchment drawing of figures to indicate that she is with child and that the captive is the unborn child's father. Aghast, the chieftain sighs before dramatically declaring, "Bonga Bonga! Satyajit Ray!" Like the titular Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray was celebrated in the West as an Asian postwar auteur. This particular gibberish—exceptional in the sequence as a spoken-masculine rather than sung-feminine utterance—is understood as an order to release the captive.

As an overtly commercial item number within the film, "Akira Kurosawa" positions the spectacular excess of feminine sexuality as the crux of both popular cinema's appeal and its divergence from the pretenses of art cinema. Alongside the conversion of master-auteur names into primitive gibberish, the rudimentary pictorial symbols on the parchment drawing extend an exaggerated (neo)colonial conceit of natives who lack intelligent language, whether spoken or written. For audiences who may not have realized that the earlier lyrics were in fact a string of auteur names, the declamatory "Satyajit Ray!" is nearly impossible to miss. After the extras comply with what is clearly an imperative to untie the white captive, all including the chieftain are shown to merrily dance together while a string of auteurs' names continue as the lyrics. Between the interlude and the conclusion of the four-minute sequence, the chieftain joins the couple's hands in an apparent blessing of their union; the couple goes off into a teepee; and they even manage to emerge posthaste with a baby in their arms.

As Menaka gyrates to a litany of world cinema auteurs' names throughout "Akira Kurosawa," the overall parodic subtext is that the eroticized, spectacular excess of the Hindi film song—here epitomized by the item number centered on feminine sex appeal—is so universally potent as to provincialize and render an entire masculine canon of world cinema as mere gibberish. But rather than

FIGURE 7. Still from *Chintu Ji* (2009): Rishi Kapoor attempts to humor a Bengali doctor's plodding readout of his screenplay.

exalting commercial cinema for its ostensible excess outright, *Chintu Ji* asks us to consider its merits *despite* its overtly profit-oriented formal strategies and exploitative labor practices. For *these* reasons, we are meant to understand the "Akira Kurosawa" sequence as absurd. And we are also meant to see that the most pretentious instances of art cinema are also absurd. An earlier scene, for example, portrays a stereotypically bookish Bengali doctor in Hadbahedi animatedly reading from a tome of a film script that he has written. Although the bedridden Chintu Ji attempts to humor the doctor's reading, the plodding, overwrought narration puts him to sleep almost immediately (fig. 7).

Slyly critiqued as most nonsensical, however, is the truism of such oppositions themselves: that Hindi cinema—even of an earlier generation—was somehow not world cinema, or that one would favor an outright dismissal of either art cinema or commercial cinema purely on the basis of their textual rather than socially embedded worlds. The oppositional setup in "Akira Kurosawa" between world cinema and commercial Hindi cinema ultimately comes undone in *Chintu Ji* around the memory of Raj Kapoor's popularity among audiences in the Soviet Union, which recalls the historical simultaneity of both cinemas' forays throughout the world. Satyajit Ray as a figure of (art) cinema in "Akira Kurosawa"—like Chintu Ji as a figure of (popular) cinema in *Chintu Ji*—is imbued with the potential of a medium that can join and shape collectivities anew through love/cinephilia. This love-as-cinephilia is posited in *Chintu Ji* as a force that transforms social relations through more equitably redistributing political power and material resources as those in power learn to become less self-serving and to genuinely care for and cede authority to their underserved constituents who seek to represent themselves.

Chintu Ji's stake is that of reclaiming a cinephilic history that does not let popular cinema off the hook in its political responsibility to its publics. The film ultimately poses a question that animates this book: In what ways was an earlier generation of world cinema and Hindi cinema more intertwined than opposed in their world-making ends, even if not always their means of exploring cinema's potential for shaping a more loving, egalitarian, collaboratively authored world in a nuclear age? More specifically, how might we seriously weigh the claim that popular Hindi cinema was uniquely disposed to shape such a world through its

very libidinal and scalar excess, as something that was commensurate with the excess of love that it could engender in turn? A mélange of films that may appear to be historical oddities—from low-budget comedies a bit like *Chintu Ji* to prestige productions, to failures, to remakes—reflexively asked this very question about cinephilia and the world over the 1960s. By attending to the historical contexts and gendered terms of the films' own arguments, I offer an answer that is worth considering, even if rarely straightforward with all its necessarily fraught qualifications.