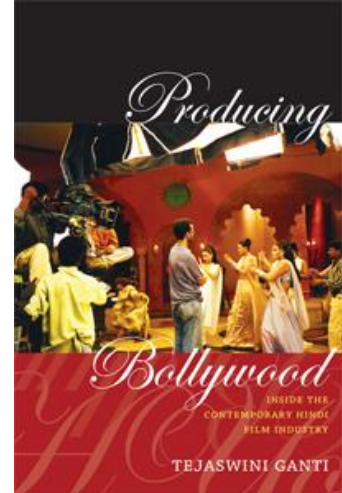


Tejaswini Ganti, **Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 440 pp., \$99.95 (hardcover), \$22.75 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Ritesh Mehta
University of Southern California

In *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*, the first truly comprehensive ethnographic account of the Mumbai-based film industry, Tejaswini Ganti crafts an ode to an India in deep transition, via the multifaceted lenses of a glamorized and iconic subsection of its Hindi-language filmmakers and actors. Her central argument is about the vicissitudes of the discourse-driven practices—oft hypocritical, even as enveloped by momentous socioeconomic and sociopolitical change—of an industry that, in the scope of this book, churned out Hindi films from the mid-1990s to the end of 2010. Said vicissitudes are unpacked in extensive, if not overly long, ethnographic portraits about an India and a darling Indian industry and pastime that strike this native reader as resoundingly typical—a compliment, no doubt, since the term “typical” is hard to pin down. Which Indian context does one begin with?



Ganti might disagree that she has painted a portrait about India per se, and it’s possible she hasn’t. But in her depiction of the sheer Indianness and Mumbai-ness of the ways of the Hindi film industry—this from a citizen of Mumbai who considers himself to be in a similar socioeconomic class as many of its filmmaker-informants and who grew up enjoying, discussing, and reading about the pivotal films whose industrial opining the author diligently lays out—Ganti takes the more and less acquainted among us through a quasi-historical museum tour of tropes that display the befuddling contradictions of India.

For instance, in Chapter 1, the author demonstrates various shades of the trope “nationalism” with regard to Hindi cinema, from when Gandhi called cinema a “locus of sinful technology” in the 1920s, to the 1950s when it was regarded as “culturally vacuous” compared to heritage art forms, such as classical music and dance, and on to the late 1990s when it was officially accorded “virtuous” industry status. In Chapter 3, Ganti presents the multiple aspects of talking about and “performing” respectability, a familiar Indian “anxiety” that takes on gender (“girls from good families” who get their break “just by chance,” compared to males who can legitimately be labeled as “strugglers”) and class (the growing importance of formal education among the “filmi” class) dimensions. “Respectability” as a trope is penetrating when read alongside Chapter 5 and 6’s humorous, perceptive accounts about the “informality,” “immediacy,” “flexibility,” and “improvisatory” industry structure and work culture. Yet the term is also insightfully contradictory when read in the light of Chapter 2’s trope, “coolness,” its entanglement with social class, and Hindi films’ own journey from the “antithesis” (1980s) to the “arrival of ‘cool’” (mid-2000s).

Copyright © 2012 (Ritesh Mehta, creativelives@yahoo.com). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Ganti goes on to explain in Chapter 7 how uncertainty and risk are diversely managed by the industry via superstition-based commencement rituals called "mahurats," the wooing of distributors by fetching established male stars, and the recent, widely-held subscription that corporatization will be the panacea for all uncertainty. Finally, in Chapters 8 and 9, the author turns to the facets of "audience-making": for instance, how some filmmakers continue to crave "universal hits," films that appeal to multiple wide spectra, such as "servants to aunties." Ganti's argument in this context is robust: She insists that "the change in attitudes" toward universal hits is "less about the widening social chasm between different categories of audiences than about the changing conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition in the film industry" (p. 353).

Ganti readily admits that she hasn't captured, for instance, whether actual cinema-going audiences categorize movies as their distributors do, that is, as "universal hits" or "multiplex"-suited pleasures (p. 357). Rather, and fittingly, the India she describes lies in the imagination and opining (read: non-scientific, non-representative) of a powerful and privileged few who want to (and can) make and sell movies in what has remained in large part a family-based industry. Taste and class, superstition and education, material desires and corporate blessings are what shift and ultimately produce Bollywood—that's Ganti's thesis. Irrespective of the "reality" of entertainment on screen or of profits in distributor's registers (as opposed to box office, I learned), the products, audiences, and work cultures of the industry are artifacts of whimsy, itself drenched in "distinction" and "disdain," technology, and "uncertainty."

Throughout her book, then, Ganti is able to charmingly excavate often unfortunately hidden or socially glossed over characteristics of practices and discourse of industry members about their business, their audiences, their films, their society, and their country. (What is noticeably underemphasized, however, is discourses on craft and authorship.) In the remaining space, I'd like to address one question: How does *Producing Bollywood* measure as an ethnographic study?

In terms of ethnographic methodology, Ganti makes her bigger points by relying more on interview evidence than on evidence from participant observation. Going in, I expected it to be the other way around. However, the breadth of her access is so astonishing and enviable and the volume of data so impressive that her strategy to rely on interview evidence to drive her points home makes good sense. What's more, the constant between the two sources across her ethnographic visits was interviews; participant observation was largely restricted to 1996. The author also shows sufficient reflexivity and honesty about how her socioeconomic background, gender, and status as a researcher from a New York university obtained her access for interviews and procured her stints as an assistant director and personal assistant on a variety of sets. Besides, examining the quality of her ethnographic anecdotes, it is evident that she had garnered her interviewees' trust in addition to having clear, solid research questions. In these ways, her study has exemplary methodology.

A potential area of methodological weakness, however, is Ganti's contribution to theory. Large portions of her keenly labeled subsections might come across, for some, as an overly descriptive report of the structural functioning of the industry as revealed by simple analysis. Critics of such bent might go on

to fault her extensive portraits as only minimally interpretive, as stopping short of a theory about an industry's discourse and practice. Such a line of criticism, however, is myopic. For one, Ganti's ethnographic work has tremendous "interpretive validity" (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 265) in that she cogently arrives at meanings that matter to a particular group of filmmakers in the context of a spate of neoliberalism-induced change. Equally important, her "grounded" (Lichterman, 2005, p. 268) and richly meaningful categories or tropes are the basis for a stance about the industry—and a country, as I have suggested—where contradictions play out in an all too particular manner in the arenas of production, distribution, and reception. Therefore, her central theme of "discourses of disdain" working itself in and through "sentiments of distinction" is exactly the kind of theory that is in ethnography's purview to produce. To use Clifford's (1988) terminology, Ganti's work has many of the shades and combinations of "experiential" and "interpretive authority" (pp. 35–38).

At the same time, her ethnography might be seen as lacking in what Clifford would call "polyphonic" or "dialogic" authority (ibid., p. 46). Or as some in the increasingly influential subarea of production studies would put it, Ganti ignores the voices and material contributions of "invisible," below-the-line labor (Mayer, 2011). Her interviewees are the big shots of the industry; we don't see Bollywood through the eyes of its costume designers, extras, editors, lyricists, box office vendors, poster artists, or what have you. Each of these "subcultures" can be said to "produce" the industry too, with its own practices of disdain and distinction, or "identity and identification" (ibid, p. 3). In other words, Ganti might well be charged with highlighting, albeit thoroughly, only some imaginaries.

To be fair, however, what Ganti has accumulated with her unprecedented access is substantial in itself (if not overwhelming) to merit her circumscription. The segment of the industry she focuses on is locally and globally iconic; it is thus sufficient and interesting to attend to discourse and practice within this segment. Besides, in another sense, her account is some sort of polyphonic in that it includes voices of not only privileged filmmakers but also of distributors and theater owners, actors and industry analysts (and an art director). Moreover, previous ethnographic accounts have concentrated on both the less privileged in India (e.g., Mankekar [2002] on lower middle class women's responses to famous TV serials, or Shah [2012] on discourses of scarcity amidst rural alienation and farmers' suicide) and her film industry (e.g., Wilkinson-Weber [2006] on Bollywood's costume makers); it is instructive, then, to focus on the elite and discover what conspicuously absent or tangential references reveal about the less privileged. This is precisely what Ganti achieves via Chapter 4's delightfully playful narrative depiction of a quotidian day on a Hindi film set, a departure of writing style that—to make a separate point—lucidly demonstrates an ethnographer's authority to whip up a generality in order to describe "thickly" (Geertz, 1973).

With her landmark study, Ganti has paved the way for differently focused, full-length ethnographic production studies of the Hindi film industry, not only in terms of below-the-line identification with production (Mayer, 2011) or industrial self-reflexive representational practice (Caldwell, 2008) but also with regard to collective authorship (Mann, 2009), group production process (Mould, 2009), or organizational conflict (Ettema, 1982). What Ganti accomplishes in this work, however, must be appreciated for its singular uniqueness: She single-handedly obtained access and authoritatively documented the walk and talk of a symbolic synecdoche of a "walking elephant" nation (what some have called India during her gradual socioeconomic and sociopolitical transformation in the past two decades),

thereby handing to future travelers and ethnographers a confident map from which to traverse the less explored alleyways of Film City, Mumbai, or the manifold locations where Hindi cinema is produced, cherished, and imagined.

References

- Caldwell, J. T. (2008). *Production culture: Industrial self-reflexivity and critical practice in film and television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of cultures: Twentieth century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ettema, J. (1982). The organizational context of creativity: A case from public television. In J. Ettema & R. Whitney (Eds.), *Individuals in mass media organizations: Creativity and constraints* (pp. 91–106). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lichterman, P. (2005). *Elusive togetherness: Church groups trying to bridge America's divisions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mankekar, P. (2002). Epic contests: Television and religious identity in India. In F. D. Ginsberg, L. Abu-Lughod, & B. Larkin (Eds.), *Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain* (pp. 134–151). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mann, D. (2009). It's not TV, it's brand management TV: The collective author(s) of the Lost franchise. In V. Mayer, M. J. Banks, & J. T. Caldwell (Eds.), *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries* (pp. 99–114). New York: Routledge
- Mayer, V. (2011). *Below the line: Producers and production studies in the new television economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mould, O. (2009). Lights, camera, but where's the action? Actor-network theory and the production of Robert Connolly's Three Dollars. In V. Mayer, M. J. Banks, & J. T. Caldwell (Eds.), *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries* (pp. 203–213). New York: Routledge
- Shah, E. (2012). A life wasted making dust: Affective histories of dearth, death, debt and farmers' suicides in India. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(5), 1159–1179.
- Wilkinson-Weber, C. M. (2006). The dressman's line: Transforming the work of costumers in popular Hindi film. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 79(4), 581–609.