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RESISTANCE TO WESTERN POPULAR AND POP-CULTURE IN INDIA

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The essay is designed to present the phenomena of popular culture, its difference from pop culture, both products of modern West, and their impact on film and advertisement media in India. First, the discussion focuses on the Critical School which proposed the initial thesis of commodification of culture with a resultant “lowering” of standards to appeal to “the masses”, and an appeal to the “average” tastes. In the essay an argument is presented that pop culture is a “critique” of popular culture and is an elitist position attempting to shock popular mores and media content. Given this setting, it is argued that while India has followed both the globalizing popular and pop cultures, neither are adequate to encompass Indian media, specifically their film content.

Keywords: commodification, cosmic passion, pop culture, popular culture, sexuality.

Introduction

There are debates by historians, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, “intellectuals”, mass media researchers, and even occasional self-proclaimed philosophers, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Horkheimer, Adorno 2007; Adorno 1981), concerning the nature of culture, popular culture and pop culture. And cinema is one major aspect of culture, yet its understanding is equally diffused, specifically when intersected by broad political or even

ideological claims. It is, therefore, beneficial to make some sense of the plethora of “views” by distinguishing among the various meanings of culture, not to speak of the background of each culture – civilization. A somewhat protracted introduction is needed to sort out the confusion. It is deemed that popular culture consists of the “mainstream” ideas, attitudes, images, rituals, propagated by various media, from print, through arts to manners. This supposition is being promoted by globalization – a modern Western push toward a “homogeneous

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world order". And the latter means a way of providing whatever "the people want". Popular usually means what has been and continues to be generally accepted arts, appreciated by most people, whether it would be "nature scenes" or two step dances, even folk music (country tunes), indeed, in Soviet Union it was "people's art" wherein some "talented" collective farmer was good at wood carvings of "normal" people's daily scenes. Pop culture has a connotation of "mass appeal" paraded by various media, including advertisements, film, television and "underground" movements that would become seen as radically subversive of common decency. One difference between popular and pop culture is that the latter regards the former as "dumbed down" and intellectually mediocre, having no daring to make a critical statement regarding the mores of society. In this sense, it might correlate to "high culture" that belongs to the "elite minority", despising the popular culture's banality. Popular was and is regarded to be a general "taste" of the lower and middle classes, in contrast to the sophisticated upper class, whose "taste" provides a standard for "official culture". Yet one immediate difference appears between high and pop cultures. The former does not engage in sensationalism, while the latter has to be sensational and shocking, a demonstration what is not to be seen in a polite, middle class, average, mediocre family.

The important change came after World War II when meaning of popular culture began to converge with mass culture, media culture, image culture, and above all, consumer culture – images, stories, shows, films, music, dance and even painting, began to be regarded as "products for mass consumption". It can be said that popular culture was compelled to turn toward mass culture for "anonymous" audiences and not for "regular folks", such as country music, or kitsch art. Yet the general popular culture became a part of "production" for the sake of consumers. This trend was named "culture industry" by the members of the Critical School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and

some of their contemporary followers such as Zygmunt Bauman) who suggested that popular culture is a factory, producing standardized commodities – films, radio, magazines – used to manipulate the population into passive acceptance of the political status quo and the market system. In short, there is a consumption of superficial pleasures that blocks thinking, reflection, critical questioning of social norms, and, by consuming the mass produced "culture" a financial support of the very system that is designed to continue by "dumbed down" public. Popular culture industry produces something that is completely unnecessary for the public, produces "false needs" that create a "facade" in every average home of being cultured. Yet it is also the case that the mass cultural products are cheap and inferior and equally comprise an abolition of individualism – everyone wears the same gaudy style, buys the same plastic Mary and Baby for Christmas – and comprising a homogeneous rules of taste "from above", abolishing the distinction between "market societies", and "national States". Jürgen Habermas (1978) was concerned about its communicative incompetence, since in its homogeneous mass understanding, there are no critical challenges. This kind of popular culture and its industry is still quite pervasive and conservative, with mass outlets around the globe, such as *Walmart*, selling cheapest plastic "art" made in China. Indeed, *Walmart* could be renamed *China Mart*. The same can be said of cinema – appealing to dull senses that see only surfaces, and indeed the cinema is produced to appeal to surfaces – superficial – global convergence of Hollywood and Bollywood.

The mostly undiscussed aspect of the Critical School is its positive aspect. It is of note that the critique of popular culture, as low, even dehumanizing, dumb, controlling, manipulating, does not offer any point of "reflection" from which to show the failings or inadequacies of production of popular culture. After all, the contemporary political critics of Critical School claim that popular culture would not

be popular if people did not enjoy it. In short, there is nothing wrong with it, specifically in light of postmodern claims that all cultures are equivalent and need no standards by which they could be evaluated. Critical School points out that to detach society from mass produced culture, one needs classical art that would both reveal another possibility, and the banality of global cultural industry and its attendant popular politics that appeal only to emotions, slogans, and popular stars. This is significant for the understanding of the challenge to the pop culture and postmodern influx into India. Yet while Critical School is dissatisfied with popular culture industry, it has not paid attention to pop culture and its self-proclaimed criticism of high and popular culture. This criticism can be seen in terms of parading and/or flaunting the parts “forbidden” by “normal” people. In principle, it is not art but showing as much as possible of parts that are below the waist. Thus one begins with gyrating hips, twisting, grinding and bumping asses, “alluring” poses, holding on to the crotch and making movements of having sex, indeed, stripping to naked skin. There is no discourse apart from a statement “everything is sex”, or “let’s get it on”. Pop culture is not limited to paintings, music or dance, and above all cinema, since the same pop stars appear on bill boards, in magazines, in secret lives of these stars and, finally, in being highly paid prostitutes: sex for sale and sex sells everything.

Finally, pop culture is highly dramatized and accentuated contrivance of bare bodyness; it does not refer to anything “original” and thus it has led to the grand theories of “simulacra”. This means that everything is an arbitrary contrivance, that there is no difference between pop culture’s images and any other reality. After all, the images not only advertise, but the very commodities consumers “consume” are coextensive with the styles of the pop stars – every girl must look like the latest Madonna or Lady Gaga, and every guy must wear baggy rapper pants. The rapper beats are the beats in every car, heard from every mall, and “walked” down the street.

Indeed, pop culture is not representative of anything because it is a mass media culture. In this sense it has a horizontal, self-referential process: one image, style, body contortion, beat, refers to other images, to other contortions, all leading to the contrivance of the “latest” and equally boring contrivance – boring since the “fans” are already tired of the one they have loved, and are looking for something else, and the something else will not outlast its own fame. Thus self-reference does not point beyond itself, but is a way of proliferating pop culture as the sole “reality” present across all media. What gives pop culture intellectual credibility is modern invention of psychological accounts of all human behavior and self-understanding. Such accounts purport to show that human actions, purposes, high “ideals” are driven by forces, functioning “below the waist”. The libido, the phallic signifier, the biological drive to propagate appear in a sublimated form as culture. In brief, paintings, music, dance, and even rituals, are expressions of suppressed sex. In this sense, the pop culture “theorists” can happily proclaim that gyrating hips, exhibition of all the parts that are at the background of all culture, is plain naked truth. And the naked is nothing more than a bundle of desires for coupling with anything that will fulfill momentary desires – without personalities, passions, “getting to know you” – that are at base indifferent – marketable commodities. Yet the significance of pop culture is that it has become popular culture and cinema became adherent to its requirements. Indeed, the images of what was once popular culture – the cinema personalities – become reinterpreted in terms of the language of pop culture: sexuality, brutality and banality. As Jonas Mekas (*pers. comm.*) once told me, after Stanley Kubrick, there is no need for avant-garde.

India

Contemporary pop culture is everywhere and is based on globalization which is coextensive

with a creation of “universal” and daily shifting styles, based on the shallowest common denominator: appeal to masses whose tastes are purely libidinal. The rhetoric of pop culture is immediate gratification of narrowly defined individualism. This part of the essay is designed to disclose the emerging Indian middle class, premised on global requirement of technical skills that are equally coextensive with mass advertisement of pop images, using pop stars. The pop culture will be contrasted with the underlying dimensions of Indian tradition without which the images and sounds of pop culture would become truly shallow. This tradition is also globalized in various ways, including dance, music, myths and yoga. No doubt the interpretation of these features of Indian tradition are diminished, nonetheless they offer a depth that is constantly alluring and foreboding. Our task, at this level, is to decipher how Indian tradition can absorb pop culture in its own unique way, while offering its own images to the West and the westernized as “exotic and troubling”, in a sense of being a reminder of what is profound, and what has been lost. We shall bring to the fore what comprises Indian tradition and what was “born” from its very disruption both by colonialism and neo colonial politics. This means that an understanding of cultural creations, such as cinema,¹ cannot be given without a broader context – in many cases a civilization as a context. Thus, the next step is a brief opening of the context of India.

The so called religious traditions of India pay scant attention to doctrines and beliefs; their emphasis is on “orthopraxy – correct practice”. The focus is on performance, what person does rather than what he believes to be some scriptural “truth”. It can be said that even divinities are assistants in practice and thus subordinate to the actions of humans. In this sense, doctrines are

not some primary texts to be followed but are added as secondary level interpretations of the meaning of actions. The use of terms, such as *Dharma* in any religious sense showed up only in the last few centuries. Indeed, the notion of Hinduism as religion was generated by English literature on India during colonial period, abstracting it from its multiple contexts of activity. It is well known that in India one can believe in contradictory theses without losing the primacy of activity, and the latter is done for its own sake. After all, believing in some doctrine does not mean anything, since one’s *Karma*, action, will become one’s true character. The emphasis on action opens up the ability to play and interact with all sorts of images, divinities, theories, symbolic designs – including the most profound *Dharma* – law without being swept up in any of them as the sole doctrine to follow. Hence no statement or narrative is entirely right or wrong, and incompatible explanations can coexist. What is most disconcerting is the elimination of the richness of multiple actions-interactions. This means that a particular position is meaningless, since its sense arises both from action and interaction with other positions. This can be extended to make certain that even a position cannot be followed, since in its interaction with others it will change and cannot be repeated. This must be emphasized: Indian individuality is not some separate atom, but precisely this unique intersection and recreation of a variety of trends.

In the epic text *Mahabharata*, playful divinity Krishna is an example of such an orthopraxy who weaves *Dharma* (law) against *Adharma* (anti-law) during a war between the bad Kauravas and the good Pandavas, depicted in the epic, to bring about the victory of the Pandavas, the adherents to *Dharma*, but also its violators. Indeed, Krishna is a weaving paradox whose activities do not aim at achieving an absolute victory of doctrinal *Dharma* only its imbalance with and against *Adharma* – a precarious play on the brink of unsuspected novelties. The same can be said of the multiple faiths, sects, traditions that play with each other, intersect and transform

¹ There are some important research articles written by Lithuanian authors of film industries of Lithuania, Central and Eastern Europe (Staniulytė 2016; Mitkus, Nedzinskaitė-Mitkė 2016) and of the United States (Nikiforova 2015).

one another, comprising a tapestry whose treads do not form geometric patterns – not unlike the cosmic sculptures of Khajuraho, replete with erotic interactions of most diverse creatures, including humans. Different strands are so fused that it is unclear which one borrowed what from others and when. Some local story or legend may become renown in a region, then become incorporated into Indian tradition by associating it with some major deity of that tradition, and disseminated throughout the subcontinent, endearingly referred to as Mother India. At the same time, the rituals associated with the “main” deity become attributed to a local divinity. With this understanding, it is worth mentioning that neither linear continuum nor circular “eternal return of the same” is valid – although any one may become an aspect that is interwoven as a partial metaphor in the tradition. Strictly speaking, India does not have a directional history, but many stories which, in their telling will become attached to some event and given significance across centuries, only to be “forgotten”. One could call this multiplicity a creative encounter that is at the base of Indian tolerance, use of ambiguities and contradictions without, in a most fascinating way, ceasing to be India. It is capable of capturing and reinterpreting the old in an effort to come to terms with the new and to reinterpret it without rejecting “the other”. We know that in more recent times “the other” was colonialism, and we know the many ways that Indian tradition has woven its novelties into its own fabric, leading to self-interpretation that currently is an intricate part of that tradition, and yet as only one part, which has played a major role to create a tension within Mother India. The split into two separate “nationalities” is one indication of this tension that haunts the border of two “religions”: Hinduism and Islam.

It is almost a truism that traditions have and constantly appeal to “eminent texts”, whether it is done explicitly, or accepted as “evident”. These texts are regarded as “classical”, comprising cultural standards for millenia. Thus Europe has its Greek classics that are part of a philosophical and

scientific tradition, including its political institutions; the Middle East has its Hebraic, Christian, and Islamic “holy scripts” which are identical with every aspect of life – they are doctrines with absolute requirements, and are dramatically patriarchal. It is the only civilization that requires destruction of others. India has its own eminent texts, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which are very distinct in character: they have no doctrines and human life is premised on action. Since Indian tradition is hardly interested in doctrines, it is also the case that the two eminent texts are the pervading reason for this lack of interest. In order to understand the previously mentioned tension and split of India, it is necessary to disclose a specific reading of those texts as part of colonialism’s efforts to absorb India into its own sphere of understanding, i.e. to split the texts such that one aspect would become a doctrine and thus more easily associated with colonial purposes. Yet it is also the case that another aspect not only resists, but is also a background which does not yield to pop culture. It has been purported that the eminent texts have two fully developed interpretive contexts, and hence two theories. We must point out that eminent texts of a tradition also constitute the basic theories of that tradition. What is radical about Indian tradition is its demonstration that the presumably oppressed or “lower” aspect is found to be an inextricable and integral part of the oppressing or higher tradition. Indeed, I hope to show that it is the “transcendental” condition for the possibility of the entire Indian tradition. This is to say, while the oppressive aspect, elevated by colonialism to religion, and constantly maintained itself as the “transcendental” ground, in actuality the reverse is the case, and the eminent text, *Mahabharata*, comprises an overwhelming evidence for this.

One central claim referring to this eminent text is that of Vedantism: the eternal presence of the absolute (Purusha) that lies behind and beyond all phenomena. Here one regards *Mahabharata* as a tracing of liberation (Mukti) from *maya*. This liberation forms its own unifying context that attempts to subsume everything

under itself. At the first level, it is a theory of transcendence, of going beyond the merely phenomenal to reach the ultimate one. At this transcendent level there is formed a circle of texts each mutually supporting the others, and each becoming a part of the whole. The latter is centered in one text of Mahabharata, the *Bhagavad Gita*, as the eminent text. It purportedly unifies the entire story and has no contradictions. (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan – different views in Hinduism are complementary and not contradictory). This text is regarded as the jewel and center of the entire Indian tradition and it teaches the way that all parts are connected to form a transcendent unifying circle. One can readily see its importance in the titles written as commentaries about the original. One such is *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is*, by His Divine Grace, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Regardless of the impossibility to use terms such “as It Is” in the previously mentioned multiple context, what is relevant for our investigation are the terms that form this circle. Lord Krishna as the supreme personality of Godhead, supreme cause of all causes, and a supreme object of worship; Arjuna, who glimpses the supreme, transcendent unlimited cosmic form of Krishna, the Vishvarupa, is made to realize the inconsequentiality of his actions; Bhakti, as a pure devotional service; Purushotaman, the supreme soul/being; Satcitananda, that is equally Brahman. They are also coextensive with Dharma, law, that is permanent and transcends the phenomenal vicissitudes; Jnana, pure knowledge that is liberated from the *mayaic*, *lilaic*, *practic*, *kamic* (maternal) immersion in the polluted world. Other aspects could be added, including yogic practices of purification to reach and merge into the transcendent. All that had to be pointed out as the Vedantic unifying circle are the mutually affirming texts of transcendence – and equally affirming of the notion of “transcendence” of colonial morality and mind. Unifying empire under one regal ruler, law, morality and order.

A note aside should be added for understanding of one of the hermeneutics: reading texts in

their contexts. What one notices in reading the commentary text, the *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is*, is the emphasis on law and duty, on purity and devotion, on submission and obedience, and on pure “objectivity” of the transcendent terms. This unifying circle seems to be coextensive with the British imperial context and hence the proclaimed Vedantic tradition may well be read from the context of colonialism. The question that could be raised is this: is the reading of *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is*, even by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, constitutes a hermeneutic of suppression of the genuine *Bhagavad Gita* of Mother India? This will enter subsequently in the discussion of the films by Deepa Mehta.

Meanwhile, let us turn to another matter; from our brief delimitation of the Vedantic unifying circle as transcendent and beyond any materiality, there appeared hints of multiplicity that breaks up the one, and pollution of the pure terms, such as Krishna. After all, his Vishvarupa, the cosmic form, is *Maya*, a magic designed to get Arjuna to commit himself to war, and thus to engage in karma, activity and *mayaic* attachment. Given that this transcendent unifying circle cannot escape the attachments, the move is made to reach beyond the transcendent, to the ultimate ground that is neither this nor that, neither one nor many, and thus is purely transcendental condition for all else. Algis Mickunas and Rekha Menon (2015) argue that all the characterizations of the one and the many must be detracted from the transcendental; it has nothing that one could recognize, and hence it would be impossible to say that IT is hidden by the world of *maya*, *shakti*, *kama*, *lila*, or even *mahākāla*. To use common parlance, the transcendental ground is ineffable. Indeed, it is not only not this or not that, but *neti neti* – neither this nor that. It will be the political ground of the efforts to suppress classical cinema, specifically since the latter challenges the notion of the absolute position of the Vedantic, appearing in the form of Hindu fundamentalist politics. What does this move toward the “ineffable” accomplish and what claims does it want to make? It wants to say that the transcendental source is

bereft of any aspects, even those of the transcendent unifying circle, and that it is the ground of all – it creates the highest figures and the cosmic aspects of *maya*, *shakti*, *lila*, *kama*, *kali* – all of which are feminine. And this is the moment of truth: the transcendental, as the condition of all, borrows the conditions from another source in order to claim to be the very transcendental condition.

The moment of truth, the torpedo fish effect, reveals the effort by one aspect of a tradition to form an all-encompassing universality by complete suppression of the other, i.e. by proclaiming that the other is completely outside, cannot touch or reach the Vedantic transcendental, and yet by a reversed move, it also claims that the multiplicity and the cosmic dimensions are its own creations and powers. This reversal shows that the conditions of the very possibility of the transcendental are the cosmic, such that the feminine-maternal cosmic domains of *maya*, *shakti*, etc., are the transcendental conditions for the possibility of all events, entities, and encounters. But what is obvious, is that these conditions are pracritic, maternal. The unavoidable reversal of the Vedantic transcendental move grants also the unavoidability of the maternal as the transcendental. What does this mean: the efforts to suppress the maternal tradition, Mother India, had to use constantly the means and powers of the maternal as the very conditions for the suppression. This is to say, such efforts were and are within the maternal circle as the all-pervasive, inescapable, transcendental. While striving to encompass the cosmos by positing total transcendence over the cosmic, the Vedantic transcendental posture becomes completely absorbed in the excessive cosmic powers on which it is premised. Hence the maternal dimensions of Maya, Lila, Shakti, Kama, Kala, form multiple strands and dimensions that has always been the ultimate transcendental and founded both the Vedantic transcending and transcendental moves. In brief, the maternal excess is what allows the transcendental Vedantism to struggle as a power against other powers. The liberation from the cosmic

makes sense only because the simplicity of the absolute is constantly overdetermined by the maternal, the plus-ultra. The latter is not a denial of an absence that can be made present once Maya is unveiled, but what is stubbornly co-present, even in the active play of Brahman itself. It is also the Shakti of Shiva without which Shiva is *sava*, a dead corpse; s/he exists only through her. After all, Shiva's tapas cannot abolish Kama, and he is compelled to vivify Kama, and return to the passionate world to continue his cosmic dance.

Self-initiation

Mickunas and Joseph J. Pilotta (2014) argue that in cultures there are principles which constitute a ground of self creation in such a depth, that their denial constitutes their affirmation. Such principles, disclosed in philosophy as “self-inclusion, are involved in the following depictions present in the text Mahabharata. Thus, perhaps now it is possible to flow one more time with the eminent classical text Mahabharata and, on the grounds of the maternal transcendental, to note more precisely the inextricable inherence of this maternal in all events, such that it needs no extrinsic legitimation, as shall be seen in selected films. This also refocuses the eminent text on another aspect apart from *Bhagavad Gita*: it is the disrobing of the main figure – Draupadi – that concentrates all events and reveals the maternal as borrowed power and yet as the genuine transcendental condition for the Hindu tradition. The poet Vyasa, sets a tone for the interrogative hermeneutics, suggesting that the entire texts can be understood if it is to be regarded as an answer to a question: not what or why, but how did it all come about? Here we encounter a unique text: while the king is expecting a birth of a son, a daughter, Draupadi is born in full blossom from her own fire (*agni*), and thus is self-birthing, and gives no deference to any of the patriarchal figures. She is the *irresistible kama* for whose hand numerous warriors strife; she mocks them and plays with their passions, and

thus she is *lila*; she has power over their desires and thus she is *shakti*; she promises and withholds, and thus she is *maya*. What is to be noted is that the Shatrya – the warrior cast, as the very essence of patriarchy – are not effects of her as a cause of their actions. They too are swayed by these maternal dimensions in ways that they do not recognize. She marries five brothers. Thus the question “why” will not do; these all pervasive dimensions are how all things are and happen, whether human or transcendent. They are not external causes but the maternal given in the “all”.

The patriarchal side is, nonetheless, the upholder of the transcendent domain, including Dharma, the law. Yet due to her *kamic* – erotic, *lilaic* – playful, etc. presence, and because they too are immersed in the passions, the warriors break their laws, ending in a dice game where finally Arjuna, one of her five husbands, having lost everything, wages Draupadi. Instead of being her protectors as demanded by law, they degrade her in a passionate strife for pride and power. The strife is between two clans, the good and noble Pandava and the ignoble Kaurava. Both clans desired Draupadi, but she marries – as mentioned – five brothers of the Pandava clan. Since Arjuna loses her in a dice game, she belongs to the Kaurava brothers and they demand that she be disrobed in public, her sari unwound. Yet no matter how much the sari is unwound, it continues to be inexhaustible by virtue of the presence of Krishna who upholds the Dharma. At this moment it would seem that Krishna, as the transcending presence, is on the side of other transcending terms, including Dharma, yet the same Krishna, during the battle, advises the breaking of laws in order to win the battle as a way of enhancing the maternal power. The battle, called the Great War, is between the two mentioned clans over Draupadi. Representing the maternal cosmic dimensions. Krishna's actions thus are subject to her pervasive presence. He too is engaged in the activities that are *mayaic*, *lilaic*, *kamic*. It would make no sense, within the Vedantic context, to convince Arjuna to go into battle if the destiny of life were to transcend all

worldly engagements. And he convinces Arjuna not by revealing his total purity, absolute distance without power, attraction, or passion, but as Vishvarupa, as terrifying and awe-inspiring cosmic presence. This is what compels Arjuna to join the blood feud to join the maternal.

Meanwhile, back in the royal hall where the disrobing is taking place Draupadi's sole voice silences the patriarchal assembly. She speaks of law, *Dharma* and its breaking, *Adharma*. She is, thus in charge of both, the ground of both, and her voice is the power over the Vedantic unifying circle – indeed to such an extent that she demonstrates the pervasiveness of the cosmic dimensions that cannot be set aside. The patriarchal assembly knows well that it too is caught and cannot escape the maternal transcendental. In brief, the disrobing scene is the central revelation of the entire Mahabharata of the maternal as the transcendental. And thus this is how things came about. The epic is the tracing of the maternal all the way to the Vedantic transcendental and its self-abolition as the ultimate *maya*, i.e. an effort to hide emptiness by the denial of the very power that does the revealing and the hiding. Here the maternal multiplicity reveals the failure of suppression while pushing it to the ultimate limit – the suppression without qualifications of the maternal. The more one wanted to extricate from this cosmic transcendental domain, the more one got entangled in it. Thus the above mentioned Great War was not for the negation of the maternal, but in fact submersion in it completely. The war was for the sake of Mother India.

Some examples of colonial fury against Mother India, against the cosmic dimensions that she embodies, can be extracted from the ways that Indian classicism was treated – i.e. the way that it was reduced to pornography and blatant sex. This means that pop culture, as a proliferation of bare bodyness, was already available in the interpretation of Indian tradition by colonial rulers and their Indian servants. One example is that of 18th century, Telugu classical poets, Muddupalani, whose work included all the *rasa*, the cosmic passions, so present in the

eminent texts. As Susie Tharu and Ke Lalita, in their text on Indian women writers point out, after the publication of her poetry in 1910, there appeared a “moral judgment” by British political authorities that the poems are a danger to moral health of Indian subjects (Tharu, Lalita 1993a, 1993b). Thus, in 1911 police commissioner Arthur Cunningham, had all the copies seized and destroyed, and even the publisher and editor of the text, Bangalore Nagarathnamma, was charged by the government for producing an obscene text. Just as the films by Mehta were accused of illicit sexuality and immoral pornography by adherents to neo colonial thinking, so was judged Muddupalani’s work, despite the presence in both of the entire Mother India context. It is the case that there were protracted and heated arguments for or against the permission of Muddupalani’s poetry to be published and made available for public reading. Some were suggesting that parts of her poetry could be published, but other parts, the “obscene and disgusting” ones should be left out, lest they offend the sensibilities of her majesty’s Indian subjects. That, of course, would be a travesty, since it would violate a classical text’s integrity and, according to some Indian intellectuals, very well versed in Indian tradition, that some of the passages, deemed objectionable by colonial rulers, could hardly jar Indian feelings or sentiments. It would be the same as saying that Draupadi’s marriage to five brothers should be expunged from Mahabharata. Perhaps the most interesting point in the judgment by colonial rulers of Muddupalani’s work is the assumption that without the British and its Indian servants, the population would immediately do nothing else but have sex orgies. Wonder of wonders – how did India survive before being “saved” by the British missionaries?

Just as in case of Mehta’s films, Muddupalani’s (and many other Indian artists’ works) poetry contains *rasas*, the pervading passions, from joy to anger, that are not sexual but what makes the world “magical” and enchanted, a world that no sexual prohibitions could abolish. This is the disturbing presence of Kama, Maya, Shakti and Lila

whose force could not be escaped. All efforts to forbid it, all anger against it, are to no avail, since the very efforts are involved in such passions. It would be similar to efforts to reduce the solar outlay of energy to a specific location and then to forbid it to radiate.

We can now trace the case of Mother India that stretches through colonialism into contemporary neocolonial political attitudes, promoting the Vedantic/British patriarchal transcendence with all of the moralistic and “puritan” demands, including attacks on arts that are “polluting” and thus to be rejected. Hence this tradition is founded on eminent texts that reveals a tension between a doctrinal, unitary claims that want to be exclusive, and yet commanding, a sort of trans-cosmic “other”, and a multi-layered, plural and mutually transforming, never pure and hence accommodating to the *Dharmic* and *Adharmic* factors. In a case of India, it appears that the multiple tradition, with preeminence on orthopraxy, is the basis for the “pure other” who nonetheless is but one thread in the vast tapestry of Mother India. This is to say, the same and the other is not a strict division, since one cannot be alone. This position or, better yet, non-position, undercuts all the debates whether community is fundamental, or whether the individual should have priority. It is neither the one nor the other, but also both. What will become equally important is the ambivalence of gender divisions and strict definitions. If Western theories of gender distinguish between rational and emotional, attributing the former to male and the latter to female members of society, in India’s eminent texts, such as Mahabharata, the feminine, with all of her multiple dimensions, inhabits as well the masculine, and does so graphically. Men too are swayed by *kama*, *shakti*, *lila*, *maya*. That is why Mother India, present in the eminent texts, appears in Deepa’s films and why this appearance is so troubling to neo and postcolonial fundamentalist politics.

Draupadi is the narrative of the maternal plural as cosmic and not as ontological or metaphysical circle of transcendence. Draupadi, as a

pervasive narrative of Mahabharata, reverses the Vedantic circle yet in another way. She demonstrates that the transcendent domain, into which the singular dissolves and vanishes, makes no sense, to the extent that the Vedantic transcendental is regarded as neither one nor many, and hence the singular, as one among the many cannot dissolve into the “one”. In turn, if one sheds all the material parts and hence dissolves into the cosmic dimensions, then indeed there was never a given permanent self to be achieved by purification. Purification means, then, that if every living aspect of one’s being is discarded all the way to the “pure”, then there is nothing left and all that one was has dissolved into the maternal domain. This seems to be a reading of the Vedantic text wherein all the transcending terms and images are constantly interested to dissolve themselves, including those of whom they are in charge, back into the maternal. Indeed, the Vedantic ultimate, the transcendental, beyond the beyonds, is posited as one more *mayaic* aspect to attract and to inspire devotion and commitment. And it is Draupadi, in all of her dimensionality, that attracts, enlivens, and dissolves in *her kali, kama, lila, Shakti, maya*, in which she too is immersed and dissolved. In this sense we cannot take her as a representation of a female, but as a multifaceted trace of Mother India. After all, toward the end of the epic she too is told, that “it is not for you that these events are happening”. This shows that the suppressed circle has inevitably possessed the requisite functions without which the suppressing could not function even within its own circle. The latter is constantly overdetermined by an excess which it cannot contain, and indeed from which it cannot extricate.

Given this context, we can turn to Bollywood as a major producer of both popular and pop culture, where colonial emphasis on morality has yielded the reduction of Indian erotic cosmos to sexuality. Yet such reduction is challenged by the use of this very sexuality in order to both mock it and to show other dimensions of Indian tradition. For this purpose the films of Mehta will be explicated at levels usually untouched

by numerous commentators. We must take care not to interpret these cultural creations in terms of psychological, libidinal, or even religious terms, since none fit Indian tradition – even today, despite the fact that modern theories of polymorphous perversion and erotic excess was discovered in Indian arts – at least interpreted by Western psychiatry in those terms. This is to say, the “polymorphous” is not regarded by psychiatry as erotic, but as libidinal drive whose limitation by culture leads to sublimations in the form of art, ritual, and even religion. Hence, any artistic creation that *has kama* and its *agni* is immediately seen – by psychiatry – as deferred sexual gratification. There is no classical understanding that is in the background of Indian art. Meanwhile, we shall adhere to the classical orthopraxy circle disclosed above that frames the tradition as its own transcendental condition. Otherwise, we would return to the Vedantic transcendental doctrine that lends itself to colonial reading and justification of what was suppressed and prostituted. The Western film industry too has basically reduced itself to vulgar sexuality and even its brutalization, and offers no hope of accessing the erotic fire that flickers in Mehta’s films. The brief investigation into their content reveals the Indian classicism that provides a “standard” from which to evaluate popular and pop culture and the way the latter is reintroduced reflectively, by Western and Indian critics, into her films in order to cover over the meaning and the message. What angers the Vedantic-Brahmanic fundamentalists is the fact that they lost India and themselves and have become redundant to its rebirth. They too have mounted the modern Western “tiger of success” and cannot see through the pop culture as a superficial sexual veneer. And thus their anger at films that demand a disclosure of India’s depth, the piercing of sexual *maya*, adorned with shopping mall gaudy colors that are attempting to hide the passion by body poses next to motorcycles. Indeed, many of Bollywood’s mass-produced films are leaning toward this gaudiness and parading of body parts as if to say:

look at my *kama* while actually saying “Buy my body parts”. This is to say, such leanings intimate a self-colonization that is imported from the modern West as the “liberated” life, a “free” life, but all the while becoming enslaved to what was the most demeaning gesture by colonial powers: suppression of India as a place of cosmic passion. Indeed, we can call this colonial gesture of suppression as a way of making India “modern” and this means mounting of a tiger from which one cannot get off – a mad tiger that consumes itself and all that it encounters – with increasing speed. How the world laments if India’s “supercharged progress” has slowed down and India is now “in search of a dream”, in search of the mad rush to catch up to the moral lessons of the West how to live the “good life” (Menon 2010: 67). Included in Mehta’s films is a depiction of the good life – bored middle class men, either masturbating or attempting to resist the temptations of impure life, demanding a presence of a woman in bed in order to demonstrate that he is not affected by the “polluted” passion of a woman.

To emphasize this “madness” one must disclose another aspect of India, an aspect that infuriated Hindu “fundamentalists”, meaning those members of Indian society that were completely colonized – i.e. those who have assumed a Western mode of moralizing and who became neo-colonials. The films of Mehta were interpreted in British fashion and given a moral veneer completely alien to Indian tradition, a tradition which was exhibited by Mehta’s films that dared defy pop cultural superficiality and therefore provoked such backlash. The backlash could not be interpreted in any other way than in terms of the reduction of the entire Indian tradition, specifically its *kamīc* fire as a woman, to mere sexuality, and thus divisible into “normal” and “lesbian”. And one major thesis of this essay is that the provocation came from India, the authentic India of Mahabharata, of the presence of all the cosmic play of *kali*, *shakti*, *lila*, *maya*, *kama*, that was suppressed and made into dancing prostitutes, pop cultural starlets, and accepted in these images as the shameful Indian tradition.

Imagine Draupadi, the heroine and main figure of Mahabharata, as some sort of harlot. Yet this is how she is seen by the interpreters of Indian tradition in terms of the pop cultural context. This “degradation” will be challenged in subsequent pages that are designed to disclose a complete “missing of the point” in Mehta’s films, and the judgments of those who interpret such films in neocolonial terms. From what has been already said above, it ought to be obvious that there is a need to reevaluate pop culture in terms of the all-pervasive presence of Indian tradition, of Mother India. Mehta’s films are a clear case of classical tradition offering a critique of pop culture and its psychiatric and most modern “theories”.

One aspect of Mehta’s films is a social history of India, almost forgotten by the audiences. Her films depict the elemental forces of nature: earth, fire and water, comprising as well a radical critique of Indian society and the depiction of women in that society in the 20th century. They depict the loss of *kama* and the way that Mother India was disrupted by colonialism and the insanity of modern Western imposition of globalization. In this context it becomes obvious what colonialism destroyed and what it “birthed”. *Kama*, the cosmic force of eros, was replaced by consumable exotic images, pushed to the limit of becoming insane, becoming the momentary sexual spasm as the purpose of life – immediate gratification. The latter is being accepted by Indian educated persons in the form of another modern Western invention: “postmodernism”, whose main “theories” are replete with nothing else apart from bodies as “desire machines”. This is to say, the rush to modernize initiates the destruction of a cosmic tradition and replaces it with the insanity of relentless proliferation of “sexed bodies”, paraded not only in Bollywood images, but also in images where “modern” Indian young ladies advertise themselves for “marital consumption”, and where the young men demand a “modern woman” with “traditional Indian values”. Here is a mix of pop culture and Mother India – it is the woman who must remain Indian. In a

complicated way, Mehta's films depict this tension between India and its insane rush to accept Western modernism in the form of neo colonialism, a self-imposition of colonialism, in all of its various interpretations, from moralizing to dogmatic religiosity, and the uniqueness of India that no efforts by colonialism and its neo colonial supplicants could completely destroy.

In her films, there is a deliberate public provocation, depicting the "rape" of Mother India as a contemporary reality, as a reduction of *kama* and her innocent and playful sister *lila*, to an insane monster, specifically in a sudden emergence of "religious" dogmas, replacing the traditional notion of karma as an achievement by action and not a submission to a doctrine. At the beginning of Mehta's film *Earth*, there is a powerful presence of *kama*, an all pervasive innocence and shyness, poetics, the triangle of love, unaware of what is coming. But what develops out of this innocence is depicted in what happens to the three figures: Dil Navaz, Hassan, and Shanta. In the film there is a story of love between Shanta and Hassan, India and her son, but there is also Navaz who declares that only love – the traditional *kamic* passion of India – can protect him from the surge of hate toward Hindu. Navaz becomes a modern man, doctrinaire, ideological, not because of some religious commitment, but because of the territorial partition of Mother India into two distinct nations, because of the sense that Mother India has rejected one of her sons. It is of no significance that Navaz was "passionate" for the new nation – Pakistan – he was driven insane by the very modern notion of being "rejected" by a tradition that was his "mother home" where cosmic passion enveloped everyone, and where doctrines where of secondary significance. He now must live a life of modern nation with its "territorial" imperative and become a narrow adherent to a dogma, requiring mad hatred of those who are different – as did Hindu who also developed a doctrine that was part of colonialism and modernization. Karma is no longer relevant – doctrines are to be followed. But this

is not Mother India – the latter must be understood in the classical context depicted above for Mehta's films to make sense.

When we look at her films, it is clear that this weaving and interweaving of multiple strands, each allowing the others to be strands of different color in the constantly enacted fabric of Mother India is being fragmented, torn asunder and its *kama* that inspired such wonders as Taj Mahal, was surpassed or "transcended" in favor of cold and hate filled brutality. What comes after this brutalizing is insanity, blood bath, where the sons become separate and opposing "subjects" despising each other. After all, Hassan is loved by Shanta, and his death spells the end of a tradition; past is murdered, dead, Kama and playful Lila, are dead, abandoned for the mad rush of modern life, with all its strife and senselessness. Indeed, such a death of Mother India is emphasized at the end of the film where Shanta is abducted and made into a prostitute – made into a member of pop culture. The latter is regarded as "reality" and thus it loses the character of being a *maya*, a way of covering over the constant requirement of women to be "Indian", even if they are treated and treat themselves as available "on the market". This must be made clear, since *maya* is not an easy dimension to abolish – if at all. First, if pop culture with its libidinal "desires" is to be regarded as reality, then it is obvious that one has not abolished *maya*, since one is completely enmeshed in attachments to this world of power, greed, gratification, and thus is stuck. Second, the claims that psychiatric, "scientific" language gives us the way things "are in themselves", is itself a depiction of attachments, desires for gratification, pervaded with all sorts "objective" observations of sexuality that do not escape such sexuality and its attractions, but comprise its "voyeuristic" aspect. One is still with *maya*. In this sense, the regard that pop culture has stripped all the "illusions" and opened us to "reality" is but one more *maya*, covering over the classical Indian tradition. And here we encounter the Mother India that women must maintain, and at the same time the Mother India must attire herself in the garb of

pop cultural prostitution. Such is the message of Mehta's *Earth*.

Yet the story does not end there: it is repeated in *Fire* with seemingly different theme and players. Seen superficially, the film depicts a normal Indian family story, and yet there appears a transgression of the polite canons provided by society, a transgression that transforms the film from family story into the story of current India, or the way Mother India became raped and made to be a prostitute. At one level, *Fire* depicts an India in postcolonial terms, seeking self-identity and exhibiting it in pop cultural terms as unabashed, vital sexuality. Here we find bodies, abandoned and forgotten, yearning for passion, for self, for lost India that seems to lurk in the background. The center of the film consists of two women – Radha and Sita – both forgotten wives in Indian family. This forgetfulness, nonetheless, is depicted as simmering with *kundalini* fire that can break out, explode and reveal the *maya* of neocolonial and pop cultural India. While forgotten in their families, Radha and Sita disclose their fire in each other's embrace. It is obvious that pop culture would immediately designate them both as lesbian, as liberated women, and the entire film reduced to porn. Indeed, the "pure Hindus", veiled in modern and pop cultural *maya* could not see anything else. Rejected and forgotten by modern India, Radha and Sita comprise Mother India, a rediscovery of the *kamic* fire that dominates the eminent texts, Ramayana and Mahabharata. After all, Sita is the heroine of Ramayana, while *kamic* fire, the playful *lila*, the cosmic *shakti*, pervade the presence of Mahabharata's heroine Draupadi. This means that the two film characters reveal the presence and continuity of Mother India, reasserting itself despite the pop cultural, sexual interpretations of their *Fire*. Radha depicts an India stuck between two worlds, without passion, required to withhold her fire, and yet fully aware of the attraction she must possess; this is obvious in the case of her husband's demands to be present when he wants to resist the force of *kamic* fire in order to remain "pure", moral in neocolonial terms, and

detached in modern scientific terms. Not unlike Shanta, Mother India has become a servant to a world that is insane, a world without passion, and without India. While Sita, much younger, is also a servant, she is searching for herself and discovers that she is the *kamic* fire, and not a sexed lesbian. Both women by themselves are incomplete, since neither can exhibit the fire in their postcolonial, pop cultural setting – unless they would close themselves off from the world and engage in masturbation. Only together can they be fire with fire, open passion of all the cosmic – women's – dimensions: *kama*, *shakti*, *lila*, *maya*, *kali*. But how so *maya*, one might ask? Their "play of passion" their *kamic lila*, as the reapsurgence of Mother India, is immediately veiled by neocolonials, by pop cultural veneer of lesbian sexuality, deviance and immorality, and in this sense the very "critics" of Mehta's *Fire* fall prey to the pop cultural level of perception: they are caught in *maya*, and cannot be open to the cosmos present in and through Radha and Sita, to the *kundalini* fire smoldering in all the divine, human, demonic, liquid and solid figures of Khajuraho. This background depth is what comprises the inadequacies and, it could be said, redundancies of pop culture – specifically when it is laced with all sorts of psycho-babble; Mehta's *Fire* cannot be contained in any "psychology".

It is also important to note that Sita, not having experienced the tragedy of India's separation, not only rediscovers the Mother India with Radha, but is also a hybrid that India is today, rushing toward the insanity of modern West, rushing to catch up to its once masters, and at the same time wanting to be India. Sita is an embodiment of this ambiguity, and yet it is also a powerful indication that she is a hope of reapsurgent Mother India. It is significant that Sita asks Radha to oil her hair – a simple Indian custom – but in the context of *Fire*, Sita discovers herself and India with all her "exotic" presence and realization that what was lost with Shanta, when Mother India was reduced to a prostitute and pop cultural presence, can live again. Anyone can decipher in the scene of oiling the hair, an

intersection of the entire current India – a place between a hope of rebirth that is tensed against the madness of the West. What is most important in this scene is that no words are spoken – and need not be spoken if the meaning of this process is to be caught. The scene is a discovery in a common daily procedure of identity – very different from Western identity of “efficiently functioning Indian male” who offers to buy a “suitable bride”, purely a pop cultural image. The silence of this oiling of hair “speaks” the language of Khajuraho, a silent language inscribed in impassioned stone where mutual *kamic* looks caress each other, benevolent and noble, respectfully playful, pervading mountains and rivers, animals and flowers. Sita sits in front of a mirror and looks into the eyes of Radha – most intimate encounter, followed by other intimate encounters that do not add to this first anything else but variations of the *kamic lila* – nothing else needs to be said, and what else has been so far said by Hindu political conservatives, calling these scenes lesbian, is nothing else but a surrendering of India to pop culture. The oiling of hair is a “blessing” of Sita that allows her to literally be touched by the *Fire* of India, be an interstice between the old and the new, and thus to reveal the inadequacies of the pop culture initiated by neo colonial men. It is glaringly evident that in Mehta’s films, both tradition and modernism are represented by women. While men appear as “added on” even if inevitable figures, prop up figures (apart from Hassan in *Earth*, and Narayan in *Water*), in the main they are there to defile India, to block all efforts of India to rediscover herself, her real exoticism, in contrast to the insanity of men. In *Fire*, men have nothing to say, and they are there to fill space and pretend that something is happening.

Mehta seems to repeat a message in all of her works that India is not the men, that the men in fact are destroying the magnetic India, the women of India, who are pushed to become prostitutes, posture and display themselves as any pop cultural starlet of tabloids and advertisements or “Internet brides”. Of course the West is still leading the way in this enterprise: “find your

God’s chosen mate on the Internet”. In the film *Earth*, Mother India is prostituted, while in the film *Fire* the men fail, and finally Radha and Sita leave together and carry with them the *kamic agni* of Mother India. It is to be insisted that their finding each other was not a sexual need but the very demand of *kama*, where one does not seek the body of the other, but desire of the other that desires, that composes mutual and open presence to each other in a way that also discloses the passionate magic of the world, forgotten and suppressed by colonial power and accepted by neo and postcolonial men.

It is quite interesting that “flaunting all you got” in the West is no longer seen as prostitution, despite the fact that it is done for a price, leading to the globalizing pop cultural popularity where the Indian seekers to join global “history” readily engage in proliferating such popularity, while claiming that Indian women, who engage in this popularity, are promoting prostitution and immoral corruption of Indian tradition. It is equally interesting that the depiction of the sensuous dimensions of Mother India by women is deemed to be an insult to Indian tradition. In this sense, there is an acceptance of Western pop culture as purely sexual, and at the same time there is a rejection of the “more” in this sexuality that is Indian. It is obvious, then, that there is no way that Mother India can be reduced to pop culture and its “sexy” imagery. After all, being “sexy” is not the same time as being sensuous, playful, and erotic.

Conclusions

Given this broad context, it is possible to open the entire film industry, including that of India with its creations of such classics as *Kama Sutra* (with immediate pop cultural interpretation as a cinema of multiple sex positions), depicting classical yoga, is tensed between the brutalization of sexed bodies and the immediately suppressed *kama/eros*, where passion seeks passion in most universal terms. The tension in

neocolonial India between the fundamentalists, who have accepted both, colonial title of “fundamentalism”, and the interpretation of Hinduism in terms of colonial morality, are a hindrance to the efforts to depict India in its traditional conception of cosmic play of *kama/eros* and energies that create and consume all events in and out of their fire. In other words, the colonial moral dress, imposed by British Empire and neocolonial fundamentalism, hides the cosmic attire of India. The films and stories depict this tension.

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PASIPRIEŠINIMAS POPULIARIAJAI VAKARŲ IR POPKULTŪRAI INDIJOJE

Algis MICKŪNAS

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomi du modernųjų Vakarų fenomenai – populiarioji kultūra ir popkultūra, jų skirtumai bei šių kultūrų įtaka Indijos kino ir reklamos medijoms. Pirma, čia vadovaujamasi kritine mokykla, pasiūliusia pirminę kultūros suprekinimo tezę, kuria remiantis buvo „nuleista žemyn“ standartų kartelė, siekiant įtikti „masėms“ ir „vidutiniam“ skoniui. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad popkultūra yra populiariosios kultūros „kritika“ ir elitinė pozicija, kuria siekiama sukrėsti populiariąsias masės ir medijų turinį. Tuo remiantis teigiama, kad kol Indijoje sekama globaliųjų populiariųjų ir popkultūromis, tol nėra pagrindo tikėtis iš esmės pakoreguoti Indijos medijų, būtent filmų, turinį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: suprekinimas, kosminė aistra, popkultūra, populiarioji kultūra, seksualumas.