

CONFIGURING THE DEMOS: CINEMA, THE GLOBAL DIGITAL ECONOMY, AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

An international conference organized by the Cluster of Excellence “The Formation of Normative Orders” and Department of Theatre, Cinema and Media Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt.

According to political theorist Claude Lefort, power in a monarchy is invested in the body of the king, while in a democracy, power is an empty space: The empty space of the office, filled by a succession of office holders taking turns according to the rhythms of electoral politics, but also the public space in which the demos, the people as the source of power, manifests itself and takes shape.

Cinema, the “democratic emblem” (Alain Badiou), is one such space in which the demos configures itself, on screen and in the audience. It is a form of public poetry (Martha Nussbaum), dramatizing the conflicts and articulating the promises, but also the pathologies of modern democratic polities.

But how does democracy relate to cinema in a moment of the supposed crisis of democracy?

With a focus on three case studies of relatively new players in the global cultural economy, all of which combine the emergence of a popular cinema with the consolidation of liberal democracy – India, Nigeria and South Korea –, this conference explores how cinema, and particularly popular cinema, configures the demos in modern democracies by articulating and dramatizing the conflicts and crises of democratic polities, while developing a significant appeal beyond the geographical and political boundaries of these polities thanks to digital distribution networks.

Conference organizers: Vinzenz Hediger, Josefine Hetterich, department of theater, film and media studies, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

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NORMATIVE ORDERS

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GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

100 Jahre UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

Configuring the Demos

Cinema, the Global Digital Economy, and the Crisis of Democracy

International Conference
June 20–22, 2019

Aula der Städelschule
Dürerstraße 10, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Thursday, June 20

09:00 am — 09:45 am Introduction

Vinzenz Hediger, Josefine Hetterich (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)
WHICH CINEMA? WHICH DEMOCRACY? WHICH CRISIS? AN ILLUSTRATED INTRODUCTION

10:00 am — 01:00 pm Panel 1 (Chair: Johannes Voelz)

Hyginus Ekwuazi, University of Ibadan
NOLLYWOOD: THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE STORY-TELLING SPACE AND THE NARRATIVIZATION OF DEMOCRACY

Studies of Nollywood cinema have so far mapped the world’s second largest film industry in opposition to Hollywood and Bollywood and have focused on stories, style, technology and audiences. This contribution raises a different set of questions: How has Nollywood, as it were, democratized the story-telling space by turning anyone with a story and a camera into a potential filmmaker? How has the practice of democracy been turned into content on the Nollywood screen? How does the creation and dissemination of such content on the Nollywood screen [and Nollywood filmmaking, generally] respond to the absence/presence of state policies, legislations and aids?

Hyginus Ekwuazi is professor of Broadcasting and Film in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan. He was the founding rector of the National Film Institute in Jos, Nigeria’s national film school, and served as the managing director of the Nigerian Film Corporation in the 1990s.

Friday, June 21

10:00 am — 12:00 noon Panel 3 (Chair: Vinzenz Hediger)

Jinhee Choi, King’s College, London
DIRECTING GIRLS: KOREAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND WOMEN FILMMAKERS

Historical epics and films based on real life figures or periods like Roaring Currents (2014; General Lee of Joseon Dynasty), Ode to my Father (2014; post-war Korean history), Assassination (2015; colonial Korea) and The Attorney (2013; the early career as an attorney of the former president Rho) have recently been successful with audiences in South Korea. Their success tends to hide both the diversity and precarious nature of the Korean film industry as a whole. By focusing on the indie film scene, with particular focus on women directors’ debut films that feature a “girl” as the female lead—A Girl at My Door (July Jung, 2014), The World of Us (Yoon Ga-eun, 2016) and Microhabitat (Jeon Go-woon, 2018)—I will discuss both the current status of the Korean film industry as a whole, as well as the role of women directors and the image of girls within their work.

Jinhee Choi is Reader in Film Studies at King’s College London. She is the author of The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs (Wesleyan University Press, 2010) and is currently completing her monograph, tentatively titled, Forever Girls: Girlhood and contemporary Korean cinema.

Onookome Okome, University of Alberta
WHOSE DEMOS IS CIRCULATING IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS?

Until recently, Nollywood existed on its terms and was defined by what one might refer to as the “popular temperament” of a group of upwardly mobile men and women in Lagos, Nigeria. But can a cinema defined as “popular” articulate the demos in a distinct and readable manner? In other words, can popular cinema truly articulate the demos as its center of narrative concern? Can the character of the

Saturday, June 22

10:00 am — 12:00 noon Panel 5 (Chair: Daniel Fairfax)

Bishnupriya Gosh, University of California Santa Barbara
THE IMPROPER POLITICS OF AFFECTIVE CINEMA: WHEN KASHMIR CROSSES INDIA

Cinema is a key player in the affective-performative dimension of the Indian democracy. Following Jacques Rancière, I argue that an illegible “part” of the demos crosses into the sensible in the cinema (Dissensus, 2010). Nowhere is this more evident than popular cinema’s consistent engagement with Kashmir, which is the national fragment that recursively shows up where Indian democracy “fails” in spectacular ways. Kashmir is where the Indian democracy never was; and yet, the location invokes the phantom will of the demos as an aspirational horizon. Past the pristine beauty of Kashmir as location in post-independence Bombay cinema, in the last four decades, a number of films have sought to make sensible what controlled figurations (expungable terrorist/insurgent or the managed loyal minority) cannot. It is at this affective register that the cinema enacts an improper politics.

Bishnupriya Ghosh is professor of Global Studies English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she teaches postcolonial theory and global media studies. Her publications include Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular (Duke University Press 2011).

Ji-yoon An, Universität Duisburg-Essen
POLITICS OF THE UNDEAD AND THE AFTERLIFE IN NEOLIBERAL SOUTH KOREA

In correlation with the latest watershed in Korea’s political history in the winter of 2016–17 when millions of citizens protested against the incumbent president, the Korean film industry in the late 2010s released a surge of narratives on past political movements of the 1980s. This paper, however, looks beyond these politically-charged narratives, focusing instead on the blockbusters that appear apolitical. I examine how the zombie-flick Train to Busan (dir. Yeon Sang-ho, 2016) articulates and dramatizes the contemporary society’s core issues related to neo-liberalism, which are at the centre of its political crisis. I ask how cinema’s reimagining of the issues plaguing Korean society and its diegetic solutions are reflective of, and in turn also perhaps exert an influence on, the Korean public’s attitude towards its crisis of neo-liberal democracy.

Ji-yoon An is Acting Professor of Korean Studies at University of Duisburg-Essen and Visiting Assistant Professor in Korean Studies at University of Tübingen, Germany.

Ravi Vasudevan, CSDS Delhi
CINEMA AND DEMOCRACY: THE INDIAN CASE

In India’s General Election of 2019, cinematic biopics of premier Narendra Modi were part of a media blitz aiming to saturate the political sensorium. Such a will to dominate serves to dramatize the stakes involved in the relationship of cinema, media and democracy, but it also simplifies. Film cultures channel a complex social and political archipelago, based on diverse linguistic traditions, film and musical genres. From the 1980s, video engaged dispersed publics in a novel spectrum of practices. This paper will explore the cinema historically and in the contemporary to understand its power to stage public discourse and political contest, even as it is reinvented in radically decentred sites of film experience.

Ravi Vasudevan directs the media and urban studies programme Sarai at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi and teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

modern demos—culturally plural and politically diverse—be contained in popular narratives that open up questions of class and commercialism in neoliberal global economy?

Onookome Okome is professor of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. He specializes in Anglophone African Literature, especially Nigerian literature, African popular culture and the “arts of the everyday”, including in particular Nollywood films.

01:00 pm — 04:00 pm Panel 4 (Chair: Josefine Hetterich)

Hieyoon Kim, University of Wisconsin, Madison
ON 1987: WHEN THE DAY COMES: SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA IN THE ERA OF RE-DEMOCRATIZATION

The recent resurgence of democratic activism in South Korea in 2016/17 has generated a new spate of popular Korean films based on one of the country’s most trying eras, the 1980s. While the film industry’s interest in the period of military rule had already resulted in several productions since the early 2000s, the recent films distinguish themselves by pertaining to the contemporary social transformations that brought about the Candlelight Movement. Rather than focusing on the lives of political authorities or activist leaders, these newer films show how common people—the demos—come to recognize themselves as historical actors. A close reading of 1987: When the Day Comes in the context of re-democratization, this paper searches for alternative historiographies and argues that the mainstream film culture in South Korea tends to shut down historical thought.

Hieyoon Kim is a scholar of modern Korean history and culture and teaches in the department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Madison, Wisconsin. Her research focuses on how media develops in and transforms political uncertainty.

Steve Choe, San Francisco State University
POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND THE POLITICS OF MELODRAMA IN KOREAN CINEMA

How does cinema reflect upon and critiques the democratization process in South Korea since the 1980s? Films such as Black Republic (1990), Peppermint Candy (2000), and 1987 (2017), depict the trials and travails of pro-democratic activists and the exercise of violent oppression by authoritarian dictatorship. Korea’s compressed modernization process cannot be understood without considering how civil society emerged in the context of military rule, traditional Confucian values, anti-communist ideology, and regional politics. In their appeal to the audience sentiment, Korean films about democratization work within the affective and ethical constraints set out by the melodramatic mode in their mobilization of concepts of outrage, sympathy, and justice.

Steve Choe is Associate Professor in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. His areas of research and teaching include film theory, philosophy, and the cinemas of Germany and Korea.

01:00 pm — 02:30 pm Round Table

02:30 pm — 04:30 pm Panel 2 (Chair: Sonia Campanini)

Bhaskar Sarkar, University, California Santa Barbara
UNCIVIL ENERGIES, PIRATICAL PUBLICS: CINEMA AND POLITICS IN MANIPUR’S BORDERLANDS

What is the nature of the kratos when the demos, expanded to include vast communities of the disenfranchised, asserts to wrest political agency for itself, and in what forms does such hard-earned agency become legible? The people of Manipur, a frontier region bordering Myanmar caught between a repressive State and some 30 militant factions fighting for power, are a case in point. Here, a ban on Bollywood by one of the underground groups led to the emergence of an entire local video-cinema, using the affordances of the transborder grey economies, and providing an outlet for local enterprise, creativity, and political expression.

Bhaskar Sarkar is associate professor and chair of cinema and media studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His publications include Mourning the Nation. Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition (Duke UP 2009).

Añulika Agina, Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos
PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF NIGERIAN POPULAR CINEMA’S ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICS

For decades and at great personal expense and risk, Nigerian filmmakers have taken on the burden of representing the socio-political conflicts of the Nigerian state in ways that permit a re-imagination and re-negotiation of nationhood. Political critiques like Oloibiri (2015), 76 (2016) and 4th Republic (2019) open up unofficial discursive spaces, whose impact remain under-explored. The paper questions the politics of representation to make room for the “politics of impact”. How can the representation of political upheaval be understood as having an impact when electoral violence is rife and resource allocation is politicized?

Añulika Agina teaches communication and cultural analysis at the Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos. Her research interests include film and social change as well as cinema-going audiences. She is co-editor of African Film Cultures (2017)

Tor Iorapuu, University of Jos
FILM, DEMOCRACY AND THE POST-MILITARY NIGERIA

The explosion of the Nigerian Film Industry during the last three decades, and particularly after the end of the last dictatorship on May 29, 1999, has helped to reduce unemployment and create wealth for individuals and improve exchange earnings for the country. To this extent, the government is quite excited and has created financial facilities to assist the growth of the film industry. However, the pursuit of fame, money and stardom, while socially appropriate, does not translate to enhancing basic democratic principles and social justice issues. It is therefore necessary to interrogate the dominant focus and social relevance of most Nigerian films in Nigerian democracy.

Tor Joe Iorapuu is a Professor in the department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos, and a social and political activist. A playwright and actor, he has also appeared in Nigerian telemovies and soap operas like Supple Blues, Riddles and Hopes produced by the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

S.V. Srinivas, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru
WHAT COMES AFTER CINEMA?

Cinema in India does not merely open a window on the evolution of mass politics and on the emergence of an inclusive society. It is also intimately linked to the emergence of modern political subjects and their mobilisation. The film star turned politician emerges as the most disturbing contribution of the cinema to public life in India. The most successful star politicians were authoritarian and presided over regimes that blatantly violated the law. Their films, which too are authoritarian, therefore offer an excellent vantage point for testing claims on cinema’s democratic credentials and usefulness for understanding the state of democracy. The question, then, is this: Is the star politician a pointer to an imperfect—or damaged—democracy, or a functioning one?

S.V. Srinivas is professor of cinema studies in the School of Liberal Studies at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. A long-term fellow of the Center for the Study of Culture and Society, his research explores the complex linkages between popular culture and mass politics.

05:00 pm — 06:00 pm Presentation 1

Madhusree Dutta, Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne
BODILY IMPERSONATION AND MATERIAL RECYCLING IN CINEMA CITY

Bombay, ever since the period of early industrialization and expansion of commerce in India in the late nineteenth century, has been projected as a primary urban site for the accumulation and distribution of fortunes through speedy transactions of capital and opportunities. Production of images, in such a space, makes a sort of manifesto for the city as well as renders a justification for its mercurial ways.

Madhusree Dutta is a filmmaker, curator and author. Her works are mostly based on the city of Bombay / Mumbai, India. She is currently the Artistic Director of Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne, Germany.

04:30 pm — 05:30 pm Presentation 2

Didi Cheeka, Lagos Film Society
FROM POST-WAR (1967-1970) CINEMA TO NEW NOLLYWOOD: CINEMA, MEMORY, AND THE DECAY OF DEMOCRACY

What can cinema reveal about historical amnesia and the decay of formal democracy? What processes of recall are triggered when we encounter films from a historical period? Investigating these questions, this presentation, on the political history of Nigerian cinema, seeks to offer a point of convergence between memory, cinema, and the struggle for democracy...

Didi Cheeka is an off-Nollywood filmmaker and critic and the co-founder and director of the Lagos Film Society. He is the initiator of Reclaiming History, Unveiling Memory - an archive project aimed at reanimating Nigeria’s abandoned national film and sound archives.