

## Trip to Moon: Science, fiction, films and media-installations

**Madhuja Mukherjee**

Once upon a time D G Phalke, apparently and arguably, made India's 'first' feature length film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), although, by then, film circulation and production were viable business undertakings in the Indian sub-continent.<sup>1</sup> In his seminal essay on the "Phalke Era", Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1987) draws attention to the wider networks of film production and visual practices,<sup>2</sup> and analyses the ways in which the idea of a parallel modernity transpired through D G Phalke's mythological films. The frame in Phalke's films, Rajadhyaksha contended, drew from cultures of photography in India, and Raja Ravi Varma's style of painting (a delightful combination of the Academy and 'Oriental' styles),<sup>3</sup> as well as from the mode of address of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pat paintings, and Marathi Theatre. Thus, Phalke's mythological films were as much a modern enterprise, and an appropriation and application of the technology in circulation,<sup>4</sup> alongside fantasies about being 'modern', as they were rooted in the political-cultural perspectives of naturalistic retelling of mythic stories.<sup>5</sup>



Image 1: Apu and Aparna watching a mythological film in *Apur Sansar* (1959) [snapshot].



Despite the commonplace criticism regarding mythological films,<sup>6</sup> Sean Cubitt writes a spectacular commentary on Phalke's (international) endeavours and opines that:<sup>7</sup>

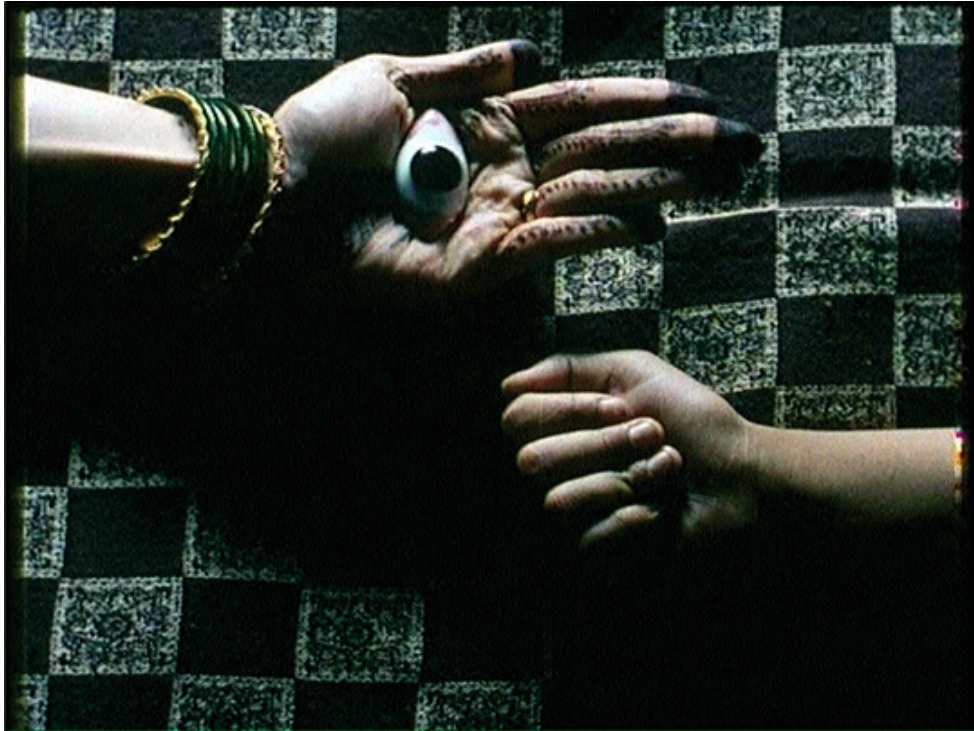
The function of suture in Phalke is then to realise the conditions for a mythic subject, capable of entering the closed world of colonisation from outside, and of intervening to create the radical historical leap of independence. What seeks assimilation into real time is the other time of the miraculous. If this time is, on the one hand, for both [Georges] Méliès and Phalke, the past – pre-colonial India for Phalke, the founding legacy of the Robert-Houdin for Méliès – it is also a reflection on modernist mastery over 'other existing temporalities' (Sakai 1989: 106), *in both cases not a hybridisation but a dialectic of technology and magic, technology and tradition.* [Italics added].

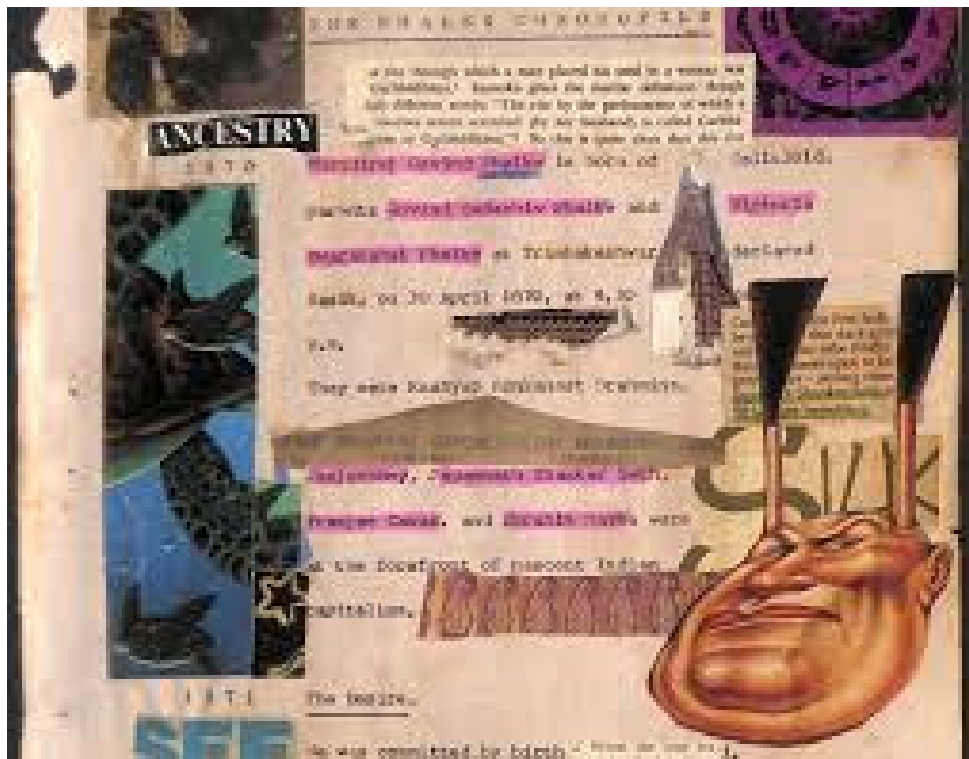
This dynamics between magic, technology, mythology, and “our modernity” alert us about the possible approaches through which cinema histories and popular cultures in India maybe revisited.<sup>8</sup>



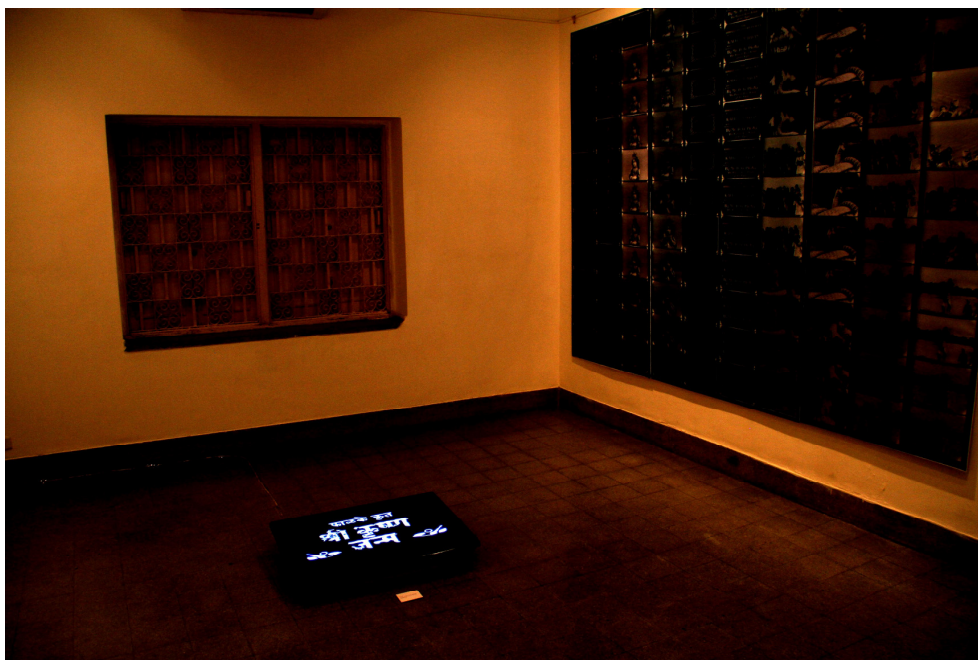


Images 2-3: Milies and Phalke's films, and the magic and myth of cinema. [snaphost].





Images 4-5: Amit Dutta's *Kshya Tra Ghya* (2004), and Kamal Swaroop's book (2013), revived the magical fields of cinema. [cropped DVD cover and a page from the volume, respectively].







Images 6-7: “Fantasmatic Bodies” -- from the multi-media installation titled ‘Silent Forms’, by the author, held at Studio 21 Kolkata, during November 2013.

### I. Magic

In a manner of speaking, the enchantment fabricated on the screen, – produced through early mythological and action films -- is as much about the magic of cinematic medium and form, the elusive mystic of moving images and figures, as it was about the excitement around making of films, and channelization of technological skill and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, mythological films – the flying fairies, for instance – were also about special effects; essentially, ‘someone’ had to do ‘something’ ‘somewhere’, to achieve the visual effects. Effectively, it was a science and a technique, and accordingly, entailed the entire paraphernalia of film production including creation of costumes, set designs (and model making); make up, tricks of camera (multiple exposers, for example), editing and creation of soundtrack. The production and popularity of the mythological films during the 1920s-30s, therefore, was deeply connected to a nationalist fervour, and, in actuality, was associated with a modernist zeal.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the vitality of mythological films were also linked with action and adventure genres,<sup>11</sup> as well as Arabian nights stories,<sup>12</sup> and broadly speaking, early cinema was intricately coupled with wider debates on technology, physicality, movement, and alternative views of modernity.<sup>13</sup> In many such films ‘flying’ – Gods flying, alternately planes flying,



or Fearless Nadia jumping over a train, and so on – was central to the narratives, and were associated with the fascinations about a new and a possible world.<sup>14</sup>



Images 8-9: *Sant Tukaram* (1936) and *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936). [snapshots].

While the growth of the 'studio Socials' of the 1940s has been, by and large, studied in the light of the socio-political scenario,<sup>15</sup> a variety of other genres, including action, adventure, mythological films, jostled with their more reputable counterparts,<sup>16</sup> as well as with other media genres (for instance gramophone music and theatre),<sup>17</sup> to construct



a complicated map of Indian cinemas and media ecologies.<sup>18</sup> In Indian contexts, certain genres like 'action' have been read in the light of low budget productions, and / or in relation to B-circuit movies, while films situated in contemporary settings, which achieved a reality effect and elaborated on social reform, gained a currency both with the popular press and thereafter within the academia.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, while the social melodramas, and its variants, have been analyzed as the dominant mode of Indian cinemas, recent researches have drawn attention to the productive overlaps of manifold high and low brow modes, including Muslim socials, Noir, horror, thrillers, crime films and so on.<sup>20</sup>









Images 10-13: *Mahal* (1949) and *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), *Madhumati* (1958), and *CID* (1956) – Horror/ Noir/ Thriller and many other tropes. [snapshots].

## II. Movement

In his influential book length study, *Ideology of Hindi Film*, Madhava Prasad (1998) examines the problematic linkages between the transformations within the film industry and the on-going struggle over the formation of the post-independence nation-state. Describing the Hindi films of 1960s as “feudal family romances”, Prasad demonstrates how Indian cinema of the 1960s (and 1970s) was entrenched in the tussles over the newly formed (“secular”, “democratic”) republic vis-à-vis the continuation of pre-modern social codes and moral order. Prasad particularly discusses films such as *An Evening in Paris* (d. Sakti Samanta, 1967) and *Sangam* (d. Raj Kapoor, 1964) to illustrate in what ways political-historical crises were dealt with at the structural and ideological levels. More recently, Ranjani Mazumdar (2011),<sup>21</sup> has revisited the texts and the contexts, and has elaborated on the industrial infrastructure and the manner in which the arrival of colour, widespread circulation of travel imagery (particularly in newspapers and [film] magazines such as *Filmfare*), advertisements of railway and air tourism, and the rapid rise in aviation – or the growth of “capitalist



development in the periphery” (Prasad: 1998, 55) so to speak – accelerated the creation of a specific a kind of cinematic tourism, which, I propose, became indicative of the “desire for modernity”,<sup>22</sup> and Bombay cinema of the 1960s.

Valentina Vitali (2010) in her monograph *Hindi Action Cinema* analyses industrial infrastructure since the 1920s unto the 1970s. In a focused study of the ‘action’ genre she examines the case of Sharda Film Company, Bombay, and their prime star Master Vithal; as well as the rise of the genre during the 1930s (as an ‘industrial’ aspiration of sorts), to its (temporary) waning during the 1950s, and its re-emergence in the 1960s, through certain low-budget films featuring Dara Singh. In the introduction to her book, Vitali (2010, xxx) suggests that during this period: “film exhibition sector [was] rooted in localized [...] and pre-industrial financial circuits; [...] emergence of a suburban, working population no longer primarily employed in the cotton mills; and an increasingly fragmented film-production sector...”.<sup>23</sup> She further elaborates on what led to the persistence and growth of low-budget action movies during the 1960s and explains the political situation and evolvment of indigenous capital, which enabled the expansion of small-scale industries (intertwined with migration of labour in and around the big cities). Vitali demonstrates how the monopolistic control of the exhibitors was gradually diminished during the 1960s, at the time the Government relaxed its controls over the construction of new movie-theatres, which resulted in the construction of a larger and porous networks of movie-theatres both in urban (fringe) areas and suburban spaces.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the expanded market ensured the overall growth of the film industry, both in terms of the production of blockbusters movies and low budget flicks.





Images 14-15. Dara Singh in low-budget thriller *Hum sab chor Hain* aka *Criminals* (1973) and in the big-budget action-movie *Mard* (1985). [snapshots].

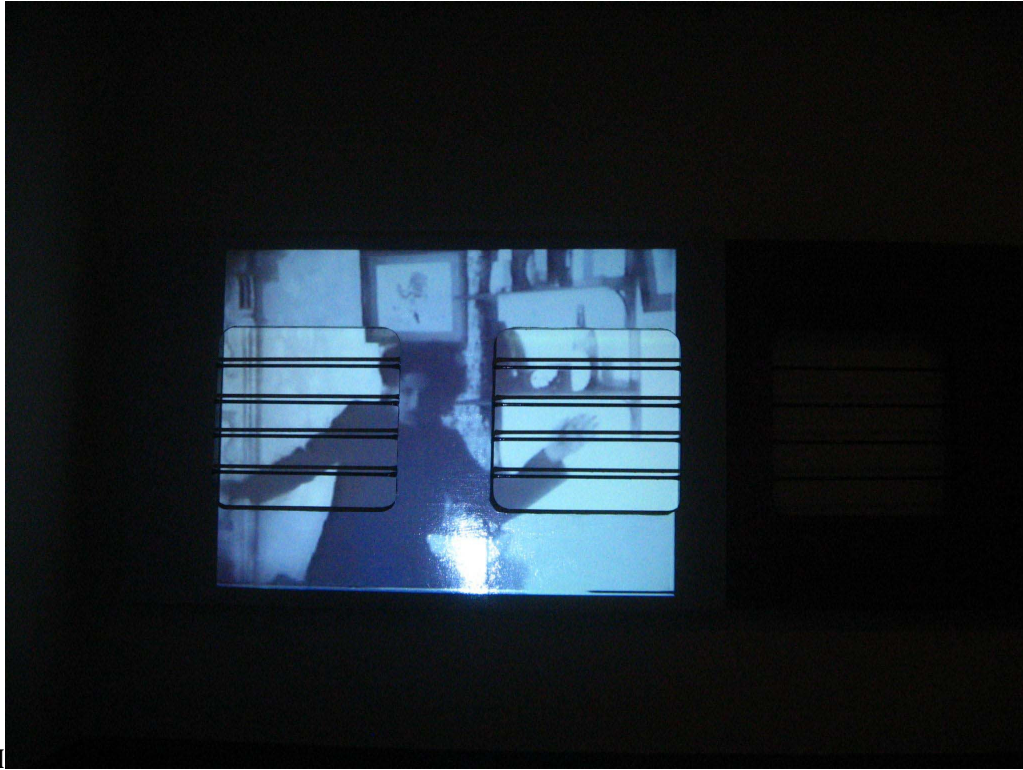


Image 16. “Toofan Mail” -- from the multi-media installation titled ‘Silent Forms’, by the author, held at Studio 21 Kolkata, during November 2013.

### III. Gesture

Referring back to Vitali’s work, Rashmi Sawhney (2014), in her article titled “an evening on mars, love on the moon” deliberates on the massive production, and wide circulation, of the cheaply made science fiction (SF) films during the 1960s.<sup>25</sup> Sawhney exemplifies how certain SF films were remarkable in their imaginations of the other worlds, the ‘Other’ or aliens, and the perils of the modern and technological innovations. Truly, by the 1950s Hollywood SF films became a potent expression of post war conditions. Christine Cornea in her book *Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality* (2007) elaborates on how this was effectively the ‘golden era’, although it also marked the release of a number of “trashy” features like *Destination Moon* (d. Irving Pichel, 1950), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (d. Robert Wise, 1951) etc. Besides, there were variations like the *Invaders from Mars* (1953), along with the genre defining Japanese film *Godzilla* (1954). Not unanticipated, therefore, are the making of spin-offs and Bombay versions of Hollywood SF films. Nonetheless, a thorough study of the tropes shows the curious cases of activated genre mutations,<sup>26</sup> varied thematic concerns, and the economy of practice and production of such films.





Sawhney suggests that many of the Indian small budget and B-circuit action/ adventure/ crime thrillers/ SF films were possibly pitted against what Mazumdar (2011) discusses as the 'travel and tourism' films,<sup>27</sup> shot in international locations – those which took a different route to explore the complicated aspirations of modernity. Sawhney (2014, 124) further adds that the period:

represents one such unique conjuncture, where the relationship between technological innovation and national development was far from settled, resulting in an unusual eruption of the SF imagination in the 'other' of the mainstream Bombay film industry, the B-film circuit.

Additionally, Sawhney (2014, 127) emphasizes that: "The crafts of trick photography, optical illusion, animation, matte effects and so on, that had most effectively been deployed in mythologicals and fantasy films found new use in SF, [...]". Sawhney elaborates on the economy of labour and technical skills, which developed around SF films -- growing on the margins of respectable Bombay studios (although the movement of cast and crew remained perennial).<sup>28</sup> As a matter of fact, both Mazumdar (2011), and thereafter Sawhney (2014, 130), point out how:

newspapers in the 1960s were full of discussions on space travel, the risks and benefits of science and technology, UFO sightings, extraterrestrial life, atomic energy, satellites, and so on. [...] The SF films of this decade draw upon outer space as an extended cinematic location, *not with an exacting documentary impetus, but with an imaginative force that was more interested in a ground zero location, devoid of history or identity.* [Italics added].

In actual fact, research demonstrates in what ways India was invested in science and technological growth during the 1960s (with Indira Gandhi taking up the responsibility of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry of India). For instance, the Film and Television Institute of India was established in 1960, together with institution of a large number of Institutes of Technology. Moreover, India launched its space programme in 1962; Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) was founded in 1969, while India's first satellite (Aryabhata) was launched into space in 1975.







Image 17-18. Technology and cinema/ Reel and reality: Mother India (1957) instating the 'Dam' [snapshot], & Budhni Majhiyan, with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, inaugurating the Damodar Valley Dam on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1959 {published in The Statesman}.

Besides, I wish to accentuate the broader political conditions and the inter-national



predicaments produced through the continued Cold War and Vietnam War (1955-75), in conjunction with the famed 'Race for the Space'. For instance, the Russian Sputnik (1) was launched in 1957, Laika (the dog) had been propelled into space (in 1957) and never returned, the first impact on the moon was made in 1959; as well, the first (blurry) photos of the moon's surface began to circulate around this time. Nevertheless, sooner than later, Beilka and Strelka (astro-dogs) orbited around (Sputnik 5, in 1960), and returned home safely. Likewise, USA buckled up, and hurriedly sent Ham, the astro-chimp, to do the orbits in 1961; howbeit, meanwhile, Yuri Gararin (of the USSR) became the first human to travel through space (in Vostok 1), in the same year. Clearly, in view of the troubled political circumstances on the earth, the mythical 'moon landing' became crucial for the two "first" worlds, and J K Kennedy's speech (in 1962) – "We choose to go to moon" – became symptomatic of that tension. Correlating USA's political crisis and Hollywood, Christine Cornea (2007) discusses how the popularity of B-SF films declined at this time, precisely because the real tussle over trips to moon was as much thrilling. In an obscure manner, yet, the 1967 Hindi movie *Chand pe charayee* (Trip to Moon, d. T P Sundaram) imagined a successful, albeit, adventurous landing by Anand (Dara Singh) and others -- some two years prior to the historic and controversial moon landing by Neil Armstrong et al (Apollo XI, USA, 1969).





Images 19-20. Dara Singh makes a 'Trip to Moon' [snapshots].



#### IV. Time

While, one needs to connect international political contests with those of the decolonizing worlds, among other things it is apparent that, cinema became a site – literally and figuratively -- for many artistic and technological explorations.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, from the Indian standpoint, such scientific endeavours were often narrativised and manifested on screen through imageries and themes of disquiet, apprehension, aversion, or “disavowal” (Prasad, 1998) – culminating into, as I contend, a comic mode. Certainly, SF films in India were not altogether new, nonetheless, during 1960s these resurfaced on the scene with a new vigour, innovative ideas, images, plotlines, and experimentations; rejuvenated possibly by a steady flow of Soviet literature, the work of progressive internationalists, as well as circulation of American movies, music, colourful magazines, and so on.

I have discussed elsewhere (2017) how the Bengali film *Abatar* (d. P. Atorthy, 1941), presented a multipart narrative, borrowing heavily from reputable texts such as Rabindranath Tagore’s *Muktadhara* (1922), and combined it with stories from mythologies (those of Gods and Goddesses like Vishnu and Lakshmi), as well as popular (theatrical and) comic tropes. Moreover, such elements were generously mixed with plots of futurist films, and some documentary footage. Hence, the scenes with Jantraraj, a foreign scientist, who is plotting against the people, is juxtaposed with documentary footage of Second World War and bombing. Meanwhile, the Gods too suffer in this wretched earth, as there is an attempt to rape Lakshmi because, Vishnu, reborn as a treacherous person, has sold her off to the bad King to acquire new marvels such as a car (and later he also steals to buy a gramophone record player). In the end, however, problems are resolved, and the blinded King recognizes his follies, while the Gods, who have return to heaven, appear on a large TV-like screen to address their devotees.

By the 1960s in fact, “Science-fiction comedies” appeared like a robust genre, and the Tamil film *Kalai Arasi* (/ Queen of Arts, d. Kasilingam, 1963), starring none other than M G Ramachandran and P Bhanumati, recount the tale of aliens visiting the earth and seizing its most precious performers. There were, in actual fact, a number of Hindi films, namely *Dr Shaitan* (d. Shree Ram, 1960), *Rocket Girl* (Nanabhai Bhatt, 1962), *Mr X in Bombay* (d. Shantilal Soni, 1964), *Professor X* (d. Rajesh Nanda, 1966), *Wahan Ke Log* (/The Aliens, Ansari, 1967), etc., which enunciated India’s oblique reactions to the Space



Race, and its own investments in scientific experiments and new technologies, set against the erosion of Nehruvian euphoria, rise of Indira Gandhi, as well as many passages of Hollywood B and SF movies, and its countless para-texts. Truly, the Indian SF films of the period, generated remarkable imaginations, and addressed the “obsessive interest in travel, outer space, aliens, UFOs, rockets, communication technologies, atomic energy, invisibility and disappearance” (Sawhney, 2014, 122), as well as these tackled the ‘bad’ intentions of the scientists and their failures, which transpired as Frankenstein of sorts on the filmic space. By and larger, SF films, across the globe, have been marked with various kinds of genre fluidities, and often comprise elements of Horror and Noir, themes of time travel as well as futurist plotlines, ideas about space and attacks by the aliens. Moreover, while on one hand, by the 1970s, it developed into a blockbuster mould in Hollywood;<sup>30</sup> on the other, it evolved into a powerful and critical framework resulting in films such as *Alphaville* (d. Godard, 1965), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (d. Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Solaris* (d. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) etc.

Besides, in India, there were ‘quickie’ versions of James Bond/ Spy movies (following films like *Dr. No* [1962], *From Russia With Love* [1963] etc.), or the variations of big monsters films (such as Godzilla and the good-hearted King-Kong movies), which portrayed a twisted engagement with the emergent techno-driven world comprising Jet-travel, gadgets (transmitters, TV sets, cameras, guns, automated objects etc.), Bomb, as well as “sex, drugs and rock-roll”. Yet, many such Indian SF films were produced strategically differently from the colossal productions such as *Mughal-e-Azam* (d. K Asif, 1960), *Ganga Jumna* (d. Nitin Bose, 1961), *Bandini* (d. Bimal Roy), *Sangam, Guide* (d. Vijay Anand, 1965), *Waqt* (d. Yash Chopra), *Upkar* (d. Manoj Kumar) etc.; although, I wish to highlight the fact that, the Noirish style of the 1950s,<sup>31</sup> had merged with crime thrillers/ horrors during the 1960s, and well established directors such as Raj Khosla made *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), Raja Nawathe created *Gumnam* (1965), while Vijay Anand made *Teesri Manzil* (1966). Indeed, the easy availability of colour film technology played a significant role in the production of big budget novo crime thrillers.



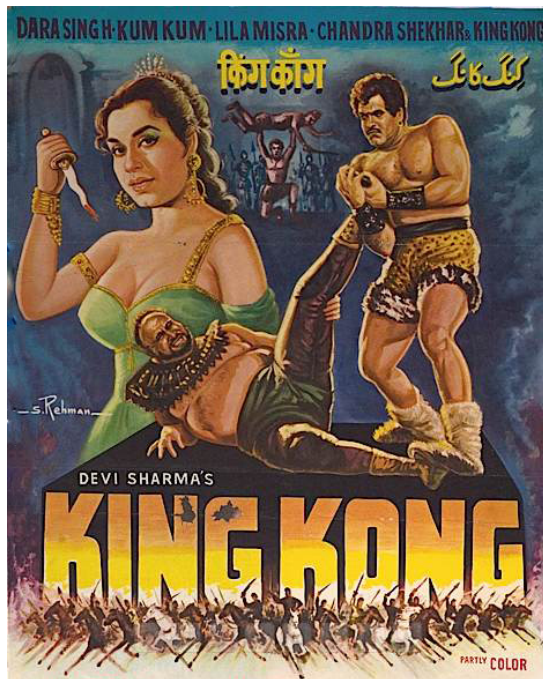




Images 21-22. *Teesri Manzil* (1966) and *Gumnam* (1965), respectively. [snapshots]

Even so, as opposed to the more technically adept thrillers, the SF films in question were often executed through what maybe best described as a “*Jugaad*” mode of production and economy<sup>32</sup> – basically by performing some sort of a hack as it were, or applying

certain makeshift approaches to deliver the product with limited resources. Sawhney also draws attention to the industrial economy and shows how cinematographers like Russi Billimoria and Babubhai Mistry traversed multiple circuits and worked in both big budget movies, as well as low budget features, which were produced at the edge of the Bombay industry, with low production values (in terms of technologies, technique, cast and crew), and those which circulated in the cinemas located in working class and suburban territories. Even so, alongside technicians, actors like Helen, Mumtaz, Kum Kum, Tabassum and others, as well as Dara Singh (reinvented as a father figure in Manmohan Desai's *Mard*), graduated into bigger productions and had long lasting careers.





Images 23-25. Dara Singh in *King Kong* (1962), *Tarzan and King Kong* (1965), and in TV series *Ramayana* (1987-88).

## V. Space

My involvement with 'Science-Fiction' (SF) grows from multiple encounters of viewing popular films in theatres, and research on visual cultures, as well as through more pointed study of the film industry histories, media forms and practice. Moreover, I imagine that, my engagements with the art of publicity material,<sup>33</sup> along with my work experiences in production design and filmmaking,<sup>34</sup> activated the collaborative art/science interface project (with Avik Mukhopadhyay), and the multi-media installation titled '*Moon Walk*' (September 2019) created under the rubric of Five Million Incidents Programme to commemorate 60 years of Goethe-Institut / Max-Mueller in India (2019-2020). In addition, my on-going film/art project with Mukhopadhyay toward his *stop-motion model animation* film *Transformer Room* (2018), and my graphic-novel (*The Dog Star*), motivated manifold deliberations. Both the animation (short) and the proposed graphic-novel are official adaptations of Nabarun Bhattacharya's classic *Lubdhak*, a SF novella dealing with the situation of stray dogs in a modernizing world.<sup>35</sup>

The novella begins with a suggestion that an apocalypse is awaiting, while sooner than





later, random killings of street dogs begin. However, gradually the story reveals that there is “plan” or a ‘program’. The strategy is to take all mongrels and curs to Pinjrapole – a place for old dogs (and cows) – and then, starve them to death. Functioning through multiple indexes, *Lubdhak* informs us about a multipart political history of state violence – of genocide, of erasures of political dissent, as well as subjects of anthropogenic and larger ecological crises. In time, the novel asks whether the dogs will endure the subjugation? Will there be some kind retaliation? Also, who can help the dogs? Why is Sirius – the Dog Star – shining so brightly up in the sky? Is there a message? Who will bring it? And, who can interpret it? Moreover, what is the message? Finally -- what will happen in the end? In reality, with *Lubdhak*, Bhattacharya weaves a powerful and a vivid political tale, and reinvents the Bengali SF genre – widely known as “Kalpa Bigyan”.<sup>36</sup>

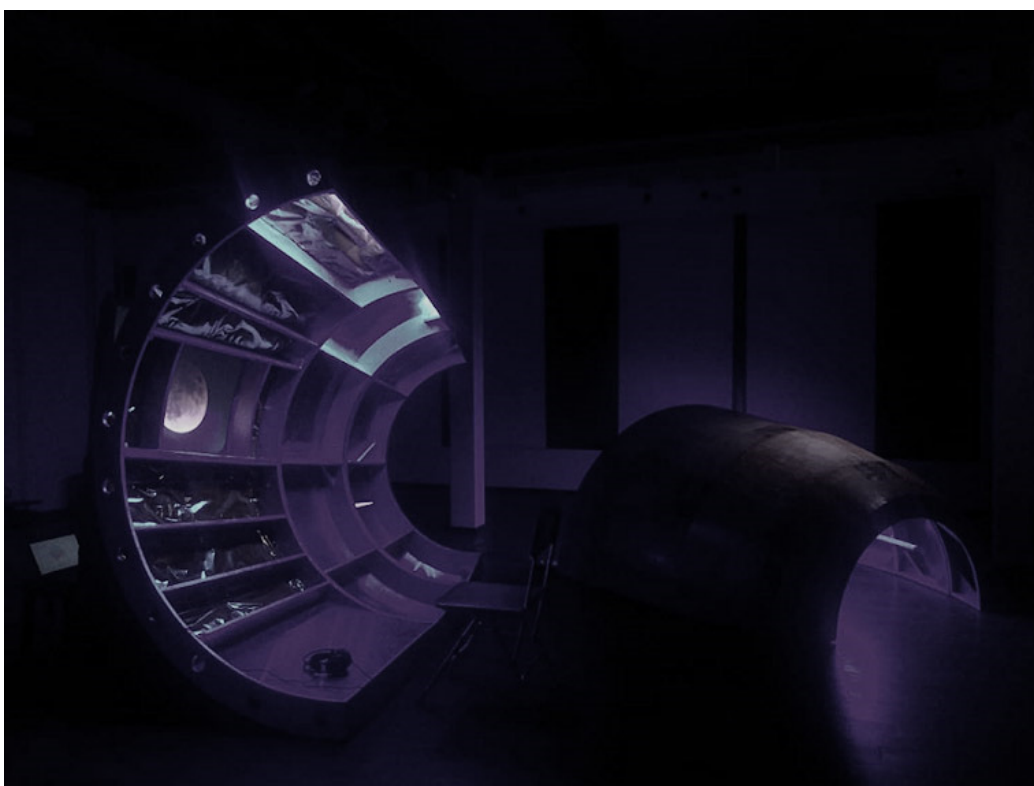
In due course, the *Moon Walk* art-installation became a context to explore the manifold fantasies around moon, inclusive of, but not limited to, the fascinations around science (particularly through the 1960s), and the various fictive tales – religious myths, romantic sagas as well as SF narratives in film and literature, and other popular forms. Imaginings with regard to the ‘moon’ and ‘moon landing’ consequently, became both a metaphor and a place to arrive at, and evolved through varied registers. The installation comprised an actual size replica of Apollo XI moonship, albeit, it was chopped into two equal halves, and flung onto the floor. The structure was partly like a cheaply made film set, somewhat unfinished and left unattended, and partly, it was made to look like popular SF visualizations. Wood, metal, paint, foam sheet, silver acrylic, and LED lights were used to create the structure.

















Images 26-34. The making and the site of the multi-media installation titled "Moon Walk" (2019), presented at the main theatre, Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata.





The easy availability of images, videos and sound bytes on the NASA website, and its free download options, became a useful resource, and an impetus to reimagine the meaning of moon landing, and the many failures which lace such historical drives. For example, the 1969 'moon landing' was preceded and followed by several failed attempts. In effect, since the 1950s Soviet Luna missions continued to flop unto the 1960s (even though Zond experienced "partial successes"). Similarly, USA's Pioneer mission, as well as Ranger crashed until some physical impact was made on the moon and photos were released. Only the Surveyor(s) seemed to have made substantial forays during the late 1960s. On September 1959 – the "first" lunar impact was made; and, during October 1959 "first" images of the "far side of the moon" were released, which was followed by failure, repeated disappointments, and more, through the next ten years, and thereafter. Eventually, therefore, the accomplishment of the manned lunar lander 'Eagle' (of Apollo XI mission), and the 'walking' of humans on the "Sea of Tranquility", became a potent setting for numerous SF tales. My project, however, was as much about the mass exhilaration, as it was about the political discourse and crises of modern science -- as experienced in decolonizing worlds.

For instance, on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1969, for the 'first' time in the history of scientific experimentations, twelve men landed on the "near side of the moon". Armstrong had whispered: "that's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind". Indeed, ultimately the "Eagle" had landed successfully. Later, Armstrong contemplated that: "mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand". Yet, the mystery of moon, of its near and far sides, of dark moons, new moons, and moonlit nights, as uttered through love poems, and songs of love, blur human footprints and scientific investments. Endless ideations of the full and half moons, and of hands held in prayer toward the dark and the new moon, persist despite the fact that, a few good men had walked on the moon. Effectively, numerous chronicles circle our socio-cultural orbits, and travel thousands of imaginary light years. In the process they convey to us stories about the endless illusory trips to the moon, attempts which have failed, and would fail in the future, as well as about multiple cinematic trips to the outer worlds. Fictions about the moon put across the world wide beliefs, imageries, and the love lores, as well as the accounts of continued political strife. Perhaps the "far side of the moon" is just a song or a facet of the moon, which is never in sight, and will never be. It is a liminal space between the seen, unseen and the imaginary. Technically it contains more craters,



more marks, and ruggedness than the side that exudes bountiful moonlight -- a light that enlightens on our darkest longings.





Images 35-36. *chaudhvin ka chand* (1860), and *Sapnay* (1997) [snapshots].

Our multi-media installation, therefore, became a setting and a site to enquire about many such problematic subjects and meaning. Opening on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2019, the 'curtain-raiser' programme included the screening (followed by a discussion) of a short film, *Weltraumschiff 1 Startet* (d. Anton Kutter, 1937), which is described as "Retro-Futurist" German film that was abandoned and lost during the Second World War, and have been more recently recovered -- partially -- from the coffers of the archives. The film is celebrated as an early and pioneering 'special effects' movie, the screening of which was followed by an inaugural 'adda' (steered by the eminent artist Hiran Mitra on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2019), where in we shared our ideas and fantasies about 'moon landing' and 'moon walking'.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, while Rashmi Sawhney made a presentation provoking multifarious conversations around "Cine-Moon Orbits" on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, on 27<sup>th</sup> September a volatile 'adda' erupted on what the editors of the popular science-fiction /fantasy webzine *Kalpabiswa* termed as '*Banglalir Chandra-abhiyaan*'.<sup>38</sup> In the process they produced a road map for popular Bengali SF literature, inclusive of the comics.<sup>39</sup>

**'MOON WALK'**  
a media-installation  
by  
**MADHUJA with AVIK**  
realized within the framework of  
Five Million Incidents, 2019-2020  
supported by Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata  
in collaboration with Rags Media Collective

**23rd Sept. to 28th Sept., 2019**  
10am-6.30pm  
at Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata

**Special programme**  
**25th September 6pm**  
"Cine-Moon Orbits"  
a talk by Dr. Rashmi Sawhney  
moderator: Ipsita Barua

**JOIN US!  
ALL ARE WELCOME**

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**DARASINGH'S TRIP TO MOON**

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**Special programme**  
**27th September 6pm**  
"Bangalir Chandra Abhiyaan"  
or our quest for the moon &  
the magical world of 'Kalpabiswa'

**Speakers: Riju Ganguly, Dip Ghosh, Debajyoti Guha,  
and others**

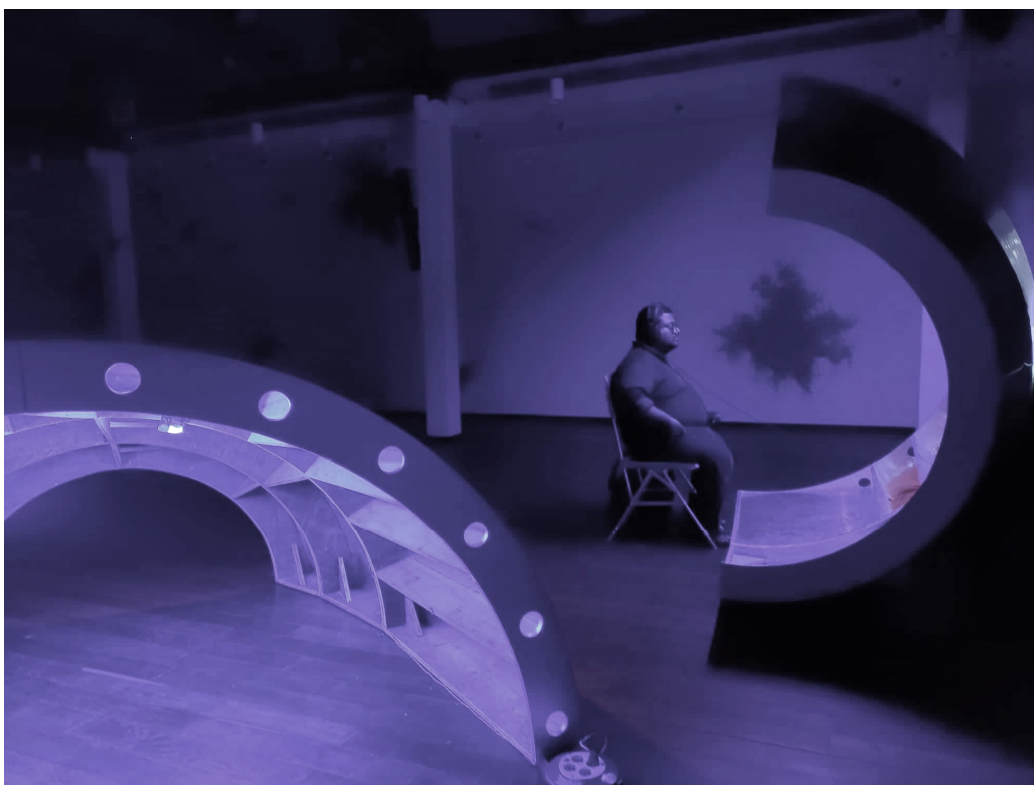
**JOIN US!  
ALL ARE WELCOME**

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Images 37-43. Posters, images from the presentations, of the lobby space, a close-shot of the video-window and of interactions, respectively.



## VI. Meaning

One may conclude by referring back to the video that played, and was visible from the window created within the structure of the makeshift moonship. The 28 minutes 'Moon Walk' video (playing in loop) began with shots of Melies' classic *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), which were juxtaposed with the voice of Dhritiman Chatterjee suggesting that the most significant incident of the 1960s was the 'Vietnam War' (in the landmark film *Pratidwandi* [Satyajit Ray, 1970]). These shots were thereafter connected with shots from the mock battle scene in *Pierrot le Fou* (d. JL Godard, 1965), which was followed by certain footage of spacecraft launching (interlaced with J K Kennedy's voice, declaring "We choose to go to moon"). Consequently, shots of bombing in Vietnam recorded from fighter planes, as well as those recorded and televised during Iraq War, were sutured with stimulated shots of actual moon landing (available on NASA website, with free downloadable options). The video ended on a quirky, playful and provocative note as scenes from *Trip to Moon* (1967), and those of Dara Singh et al landing on the moon (set) were intercut with images of Neil Armstrong and others floating on the moon's surface. The interlude of the song "*Chanda re, chanda re...*" (from the film *Sapnay*) was used alongside the visuals to create a sense of unease, and to fabricate a sensorial world in which popular science, cinema, perceptions and narratives come together to hint at a longer and byzantine history of socio-cultural interface. In addition, a GoPro camera was fixed at the site of installation; and, the visual feed from it was streamed continuously, in the exterior lobby space, to underscore a shooting process, the camera-eye and the 'sight' of a gun. The method also highlighted how SFs and documentations are possibly constructed, and enabled us to reflect upon the production of cinematic/historical spaces. Moreover, 'Moon Walk' alluded the long drawn as well as present interfaces of science, fictions and films, and spotlighted the space of further conversations.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Govil, Nitin and E. Hoyt. "Thieves of Bombay: United Artists, Colonial Copyright, and Film Piracy in the 1920s." *BioScope* 5, no. 1 (2014): 5-27.

<sup>2</sup> In Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 'The Phalke Era, Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 14-15 (1987): 47-78.

<sup>3</sup> See: Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.



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- <sup>4</sup> Also see: Geeta Kapur *When Was Modernism, Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practices in India*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Also see: Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 'India's Silent Cinema: A "Viewers View" ' in *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema, 1912-1934*. Ed. Suresh Chabria and Paolo Cherchi Usai. Pune: National Film Archive of India (1994): 25-40.
- <sup>6</sup> See a critique of this: Vasudevan, Ravi. "Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture." In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. Ed. Ravi Vasudevan. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2002) 99-120. □
- <sup>7</sup> From: "Phalke and Méliès: The Invention of Space and Time in Early Cinema" by Sean Cubitt □ Draft ( the version of the article published in *Wide Angle*, "Digitality and the Memory of Cinema", v.21, n.1, (2001): 114-130; a revised version appears in book *The Cinema Effect* (MIT Press, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> See: Chatterjee, Partha. *Our Modernity*, Rotterdam/Dakar: Sephis & Codesria, 1997.
- <sup>9</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "To speak or not to speak: Publicity, Public Opinion, and Transition into Talkies (Calcutta, 1931-35)" in *Indian Sound Culture, Indian Sound Citizenship*. Ed. Laura Brueck, Jacob Smith, Neil Verma, Michigan: University of Michigan Press (2020): 268-296.
- <sup>10</sup> Also see: Vasudevan, Ravi. "Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema", *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts, Cultural Histories, and Contemporary Contexts*, 1, nos. 2-3 (2005): 237-257.
- <sup>11</sup> See: Kapse, Anupama. "Around the World in Eighty Minutes: Douglas Fairbanks and Indian Stunt Films". In *Silent Cinema and the Politics of Space*. Ed. Ed. J. Bean, A. Kapse and L. Horak. Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> See: Kaushik Bhaumik introduction to The Script of Gul-e-Bakavali (Kohinoor, 1924). *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 3, no. 2 (2012): 175-207.
- <sup>13</sup> See: Thomas, Rosie. "Not quite (pearl) white: Fearless Nadia, queen of the stunts". In *Bollyworld: Popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*. Ed. Raminder Kaur & Ajay K. Sinha. London: SAGE, (2005): 35-69.
- <sup>14</sup> See: Vasudevan, Ravi. "Registers of action: melodrama and film genre in 1930s India". *Screen*, 58, no. 1, (2017): 64-72.
- <sup>15</sup> Also see: Vasudevan, Ravi. "The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema: Notes on Film History, Narrative and performance in the 1950s". *Screen*, 30 no. 3 ((1989): 29-50.
- <sup>16</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Rethinking popular cinema in Bengal (1930s-1950s): of literariness, comic mode, mythological and other avatars", *South Asian History and Culture*, 8:2 ((2017): 122-142.
- <sup>17</sup> See: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "The Architecture of Songs and Music: Soundmarks of Bollywood, a Popular Form and Its Emergent Texts." *Screen Sound Journal* 3 (2012): 9-34.
- <sup>18</sup> See: Prasad, Madhava, M. "Film History as Cultural History", *Journal of Moving Image*, 13 (2015): 13-29.
- <sup>19</sup> See: Mukherjee, Madhuja (Ed). *Aural Films, Oral Cultures, Essays on Cinema from the Early Sound Era*. Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, Kolkata, 2012 and Mukherjee, Debashree. "Creating Cinema's Reading Publics: The Emergence of Film Journalism in Bombay." In *No limits*:





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*media studies from India*, Ed. Ravi Sundaram, Delhi: Oxford University Press, (2013): R., 165-198.

<sup>20</sup> See: Vasudevan, Ravi. "Film Genres, the Muslim Social, and Discourses of Identity c. 1935–1945" *BioScope* 6 no. 1 (2015): 27–43; Dwyer, Rachel. "Bombay Gothic: 60 years of Mahal" in *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood: The Many Lives of Hindi Cinema*, Ed. R. Dwyer and Jerry Pinto, Delhi: Oxford University Press ((2011): 130-155; Mukherjee, Madhuja. "That figure in the dark: Of melodrama, noir and multiplicity during 1950s" in *Indian Film Culture/ Indian Cinema*, Ed. Gautam Kaul, Codex (Federation of Film Societies of India): Kolkata (2016): 116-136.

<sup>21</sup> Mazumdar, Ranjani. "Aviation, Tourism and Dreaming in 1960s Bombay Cinema". *BioScope* 2 no. 2 (2011): 129–155.

<sup>22</sup> Prasad, Madhava, M. "Cinema and Desire for Modernity" *Journal for Arts & Ideas*, 25-26 (1993): 71-86.

<sup>23</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "The Public in the Cities: Detouring through Cinemas of Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore (1920s-1930s)". In *South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters*. Ed.s Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De, University of Washington Press: Seattle (2020): 119-139.

<sup>24</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Not so regal show-houses of Calcutta: Sub-cinemas, sub-cultures and sub-terrains of the city" In *Strangely Beloved: Writings on Calcutta*, Ed. Nilanjana Gupta, Rainlight/Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi (2014):146-154.

<sup>25</sup> Sawhney, Rashmi. "An evening on Mars, love on the moon: 1960s science fiction films from Bombay", *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, 6, no. 2, (2015): 121-146.

<sup>26</sup> Also see: Prasad, Madhava, M. "Genre Mixing as Creative Fabrication". *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 2 no. 1 (2011): 69–81.

<sup>27</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Photoshop Landscapes: Digital Mediations and Bollywood Cities" *Journal of the Moving Image* 8 (2009): 50-72.

<sup>28</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. Ed. *Voices of the Talking Stars, The Women of Indian Cinema and Beyond*. New Delhi/ Kolkata: Sage/ Stree, 2017, and specifically Mukherjee, Debashree. *Bombay Hustle, Making Movies in a Colonial City*, Columbia University Press, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Also see: Hansen, Miriam. "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity*, 6.2 (1999): 59-77.

<sup>30</sup> Also see: Johnstone, Keith. *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*, Berg Publishers, 2011; and a more film based study in Rickman, Gregg, *The Science Fiction Film Reader*, Limelight Editions, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Mixed Genres and Multiple Authorship: Of Hindi-melodrama and Film-noir of the 1950s" in *Stage and Screen, Representations and Self-Discoveries*, Chinmoy Guha and Sinjini Bandyopadhyay Ed. Kolkata: Das Gupta Co. (P) Ltd, 245-272.

<sup>32</sup> Also see: Rai, Amit. *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India*. Durham/ London: Duke University, Press, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> See Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Flaneuse, Viewership, Cinematic Spaces: The Site/Sight of Theatres, Engendered Structures and Alternative Art Projects." *Media Fields Journal* 7, 2013. Here: <http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/flaneuse-viewership-cinematic/>; and Mukherjee, Madhuja. "Framing the Couple: Intimacy, Hindi Cinema and Film Publicity (1950s-60s)". *Tasveer Ghar, A Digital Archive of South Asia Visual Popular Culture*, 2019, Here: <http://www.tasveergharindia.net/essay/framing-film-publicity>.



<sup>34</sup> Especially through the experience of working in Indian mainstream and European Art house productions such as *Ekti Nadir Naam* (d. Anup Singh, 2001), as Asst. Director, Costume Designer; and as Writer, Production Designer for *Ekti Tarar Khonje* (d. Avik Mukhopadhyay, 2010); also as Writer for *Qissa* (d. Anup Singh, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> See: <https://indiaifa.org/grants-projects/avik-mukhopadhyay.html>

<sup>36</sup> Also see: Mukherjee, Madhuja. "View of a City: An immersive history of Kolkata via camera-eye", *South Asian History and Culture*, 10. 4 (2019): 443-469.

<sup>37</sup> See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbjq3FF6Te4>

<sup>38</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAP3P\\_6329E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAP3P_6329E)

<sup>39</sup> See: Cappello, Daniela. "Comics and Science Fiction in West Bengal." *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasiensforschung* 5, 2019.



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Madhuja Mukherjee is based in Kolkata, India, and works via multiple media. She extends her research into art practice, curatorial-work, writing and filmmaking. She studied Literature (1992) and Cinema (1996) at the University, and her Ph.D (2008) involves research on formation of the studios and industrial forms. Madhuja has published extensively, and has (co)edited two volumes: 'Popular Cinema in Bengal' (Routledge, 2020), and 'Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India' (Routledge, 2021). She studies sound technologies (see 'Aural Films, Oral Cultures', 2012), and questions of women, work and industrial contexts (see the award-winning anthology 'Voices of the Talking Stars', 2017). Her graphic-novel 'Kangal Malsat' (2013) was described as the "first in Bengali" by the press. Madhuja is the writer of the Bengali thriller *Ekti Tarar Khonje* (2010), (co)writer of the critically acclaimed film *Qissa* (2013), and the director of the experimental film *Carnival* (2012). She is also the 'artistic director' of TENT Little Cinema International Festival (2014-18)/ TENT Biennale Kolkata 2020; and, Professor of Film Studies at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

