

# Bollywood is selfish & hermetic, it needs to improve

By Sanjay Lafont

What is it about Paris? The common mistake is to believe that Paris's culture and image simply endures and the myriad love stories within are but reflections of that urban myth – but those who know better know that the myth is one that must be sustained and nurtured. The film *Paris je t'aime* is such an effort, one that should be seen as a cause rather than an effect of the Parisian myth. The most common remark made by viewers after *Paris* was, "What a great film! Why can't we make films like that in India?" inevitably followed by a dismissive shrug meaning, "The fact is, we just can't." The fact is we can. Let me get one thing straight first: I love Bollywood (or the Mumbai Film Industry, for those who take themselves too seriously). Love it in the same way I love Paris the city, for its reality and its fantasy, rationally and irrationally.

Paris is a collection of narratively and stylistically different films made by a score of directors and crew and actors from different nations, including our own adopted NRI filmmaker Gurinder Chaddha. It wasn't handed out to a bunch of French directors and crew and actors, and therein lies the trick: by giving itself to the world, Paris has taken in the world. By contrast, Bollywood is still a terrifyingly selfish, hermetic industry. For example we have half a dozen male superheroes who lord it over the box office, followed by a herd of half-baked boys (approximately 99.9% of all leading men are related to the industry); we have an equal number of female bombshells to play damsel, followed by a gaggle of insecure girls clad in a few square centimetres of cloth (there

is a kind of democracy here: hotness supercedes the gene pool). The fundamental problem is not nepotism/favoritism, however, but cinematic philosophy. Everything else, including the above -isms, stems from the prevailing cinematic philosophy. Even if we fixed the -isms it would be merely cosmetic, since the basic cinematic philosophy would remain.

The fundamental mistake being made is the idea that Bollywood

is simply chauvinistic – it would be a criminal suffocation of one of the major creative sources.

Cinema is about the exploration of possibilities. The creation of a cinematic work is about opening up the field of possibilities as wide as possible, not about restricting it to a perceived permutation of elements and running the work through the formula machine. *Paris* is a film that exemplifies the philosophy of a Cinema

from their India, the India they know and live, and maybe that's what some producers don't want to recognise in their quest for the elusive hit. Bollywood's attempts to force a pan-Indian definition on an India that is increasingly and healthily growing into a sum of equal parts is as gross as its prevailing cinematic philosophy of making the maximum amount of money with the minimum amount of (original) work, of bending the structures of a medium that is

actresses – not necessarily to replace the current system, but to make its place either within or alongside it. A new soul can't speak with an old voice, and we know that most of Bollywood is still out of synch with the way India is developing. Some filmmakers are attempting new ways of cinematic expression, but too few.

The more Indian cultures become corporatised, globalised, urbanised, etc., the more valiant and ferocious our efforts must be to carry Bollywood forward, to make it one of the guiding lights of our way of life rather than a nostalgic museum piece, a cinematic Taj Mahal. There is a dynamic place for Bollywood in our future, one in which we embrace a Cinema of Possibilities as an open bazaar of wonder rather than a black market run by DVD thieves and petty power/money dynamics. To hark back to one of the original titans of our cinema, who himself openly assimilated elements and influences from foreign cinema and yet created his own stories with his own voice, Raj Kapoor called us 'the dream merchants'. The only way merchants can prosper further is by trading with each other as much as with their clients. We must re-open a Spice Route of cinema, and one day even Paris may come to us for a helping of dreams of love with the words, "Bombay, je t'aime..."

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is a fixed mode of filmmaking, that there is only 'the Bollywood way' and any other way that deviates from that path becomes by definition un-Indian. People conveniently forget that cinema is the world's biggest and most visible bazaar: styles, techniques, technology, trends, moods, even actors and directors and producers, everything that feeds into film is constantly traded across cultures because it strengthens the art and refreshes it. For Bollywood to close its doors to the outside influences would be more than

of Possibilities, regardless of whatever flaws there might be in the work. Bollywood, ironically, often rips off entire foreign films or full sequences within and 'Indianises' them. Doesn't that already smack of 'un-Indian' influences? Numerous young talents I know have stories to tell that are dismissed as 'non-commercial' or 'un-Indian' by 'those who know better', and find themselves forced to re-shape them into 'commercial, pan-Indian, marketable' stories. These stories are original, and come

fundamentally artistic to a raw and unsympathetic business model.

This can change. Must it? Will it? That is not for someone like me to decide. All I see is that everyone I know walks into a Bollywood film and adjusts their standards down in order to enjoy the film. Why should that be? The pace of development of technical talent is undeniable, but must be equally matched by the development of authentic and new ideas and forms, new voices and expressions, new actors and

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