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MUMBAI MIDDLEBROW

Ways of thinking about the middle ground in Hindi cinema

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The word 'middlebrow', associated with Victorian phrenology and cultural snobbery, is usually a derogatory term and may not seem useful as a way of understanding Hindi cinema, now usually known as Bollywood (Rajadhyaksha 2003; Vasudevan 2010). However, the social and economic changes of the last twenty-five years, which are producing India's growing new middle classes, a social group whose culture is closely linked to the cultural phenomenon of Bollywood (Dwyer 2000; 2014a), suggest that the term may usefully be deployed to look at the often ignored middle ground of Hindi cinema, which lies somewhere between the highbrow art cinema and lowbrow *masala* ('spicy', entertainment) films (Dwyer 2011a). I suggest that the term can be used for a certain type of contemporary Hindi cinema which can be traced back several decades, in parallel with the changes that have affected India's middle classes.

Defining the middlebrow

In academic discourse, commentators have turned to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'culture moyenne' (outlined, for example, in his study of photography), to describe the middlebrow as a cultural category that is imitative of legitimate, high culture, and makes art accessible in a popular form (Bourdieu 1996; 1999, 323). Beth Driscoll's study of middlebrow literature over the twenty-first century offers eight features of the category: middle-class, reverential, commercial, feminized, mediated, recreational, emotional and earnest (2014, 3). Sally Faulkner, on the other hand, defines middlebrow cinema as combining high production values, subject matter that is serious but not challenging and cultural references that are presented in an accessible form (2013, 8). The only use of the term to date in connection with

Indian cinema, to my knowledge, does not take into account these nuances and uses middlebrow as a synonym for small-town and middle-class (Chandra 2014).

This chapter defines the middlebrow as occupying the middle ground between the highbrow, the arts that elicit intellectual responses as they may be challenging and uncomfortable, and the lowbrow, or cultural texts that elicit emotional, basic or bodily responses. The middlebrow is also the area of culture that reflects middle-class self-improvement and auto-didacticism, associated with institutions like book clubs, reading groups, literary festivals and ticking off lists such as '10 best films', '100 best books' and 'films to see before you die'.[1]

Hindi cinema and its other brows

Popular, mainstream Hindi cinema used to be considered irredeemably lowbrow, a failed form of cinema, associated with the escapist fantasies of India's working classes who just longed to sit in comfort for three hours (Nandy 1981; 1995; 1998). Yet even a cursory look at some of the films made over India's century of cinema challenges this idea. Genres like melodrama, for all their spectacle and lack of realism, nonetheless show major artistic achievement in the areas of narrative complexity and aesthetics. Indeed, often within a Hindi melodrama, with its diffuse narrative and parallel tracks (to be discussed in further detail below), highbrow forms meet the lowbrow culture of the bazaar. However, anxiety about social status seems to have largely discouraged middle-class audiences from engaging with the form, who ridicule it instead in common parlance with tired epithets like 'bursting into song' and 'running around trees'. Some nonetheless enjoy these films as a 'guilty pleasure', especially the young, who revel in the lowbrow 'body genres' of action, comedy and pornography (or at least innuendo).

The study of Hindi cinema as an academic discipline, often in prestigious Western universities, where serious attention has often been focused on the lowest-brow films, was initially viewed with surprise by Indian scholars, who generally favoured the study of highbrow cinema, which Chidananda Das Gupta famously described as 'India's unpopular cinema' (2008, 4–6). This highbrow cinema is rarely made now, although Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus* was acclaimed on its release in 2013. Art cinema began in the 1950s in Bengal with the work of directors Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, and was then taken up from the late 1960s by avant-garde filmmakers such as Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani; at the same time, a number of films made in different Indian languages – Girish Kasaravalli in Kannada, Aravindan in Malayalam – have created an Indian version of global cinematic language. In fact, this art cinema touches many areas of the middlebrow, as it is often adapted from literature, it is realistic and it avoids including songs – or at least lip-synched songs. In the 1970s and 1980s, a new wave of art cinema that also overlapped with the middlebrow developed, known as 'parallel' cinema, which was either funded through the government's National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) or was independently made by producers such as Shyam Benegal, who could hire his own stars.

Middlebrow and the middle classes: class and language

Before analysing a number of middlebrow cinematic examples, I turn now to the wider contexts of cinema-going and class change. Indian society underwent great transformation in the 1990s, following economic liberalization. On the international stage, India has become a major global player. Internally, the country has seen the rise of new social formations to dominant positions, notably the new middle classes, who make and consume Hindi cinema. New media practices, coupled with these other social and economic changes, transformed Hindi cinema into what we now know as Bollywood. Film budgets grew massively, and although exact figures are difficult to calculate given unregulated operations on the black market, these paid for higher production values and new stars, which in turn allowed new genres to develop. Movie halls were refurbished and multiplexes (favoured by new middle-class audiences) were built, while the overseas market became a major revenue source, generating vastly increased box-office returns. In 1998, the Indian government gave the industry formal recognition and began to deploy it as a form of soft power (Athique 2012). The films associated with the new middle classes range from the lower-brow but big-budget comedies to the glossy romances, notably those produced by Yash Raj Films and Dharma Productions. Other middlebrow genres were established such as the historical and the biopic, while 'multiplex' cinema and 'indie' (usually called Hindie) cinemas also emerged (Dwyer 2011a; 2013a; 2014a).

In his analysis of French culture of the 1960s, Bourdieu proposes that cultural value is ascribed by social groups (1999). Transferring this insight to the case of highbrow Hindi (and other Indian) cinema, we see that value is conferred upon it by the old middle classes and local elites. Without mapping class onto taste too closely, we may nonetheless propose that the rise of the new middle classes in the 1990s triggered the development of a new middlebrow cinema on which theses classes conferred value (Dwyer 2011a). These are not stable or static categories, of course, and contain sub-cultures such as the youth, who watch lowbrow films ironically, or the nouveaux riches industrialists, whose tastes remain lowbrow as they may be slow to seek cultural legitimacy.

As Indian society has changed, so its media landscape has altered. Some of these changes are those seen in the rest of the world, such as the impact of the Internet, but India has also seen the accelerated spread of television, from a limited reach and only a small handful of channels in the 1980s, to a massive industry that is four times bigger than the film industry today. The spread of publishing in English and other languages has also been significant. While film and television coexist closely in India, the small screen offers mostly lower-brow fare, with highbrow genres such as documentaries rarely broadcast. Film, however, is the major cultural product consumed (as well as made) by the new middle classes, depicting their aspirations and fears, hopes and ideas for a new India (Dwyer 2014a).

In India, the definition of brows is further complicated by the postcolonial status of English and the global culture associated with it. While India has many

officially recognized languages, it does not have a national language, although Hindi is the official language of the Union, and is thus often regarded as such, with English as the co-official language, according to the Constitution. English in India is associated with education (nearly all university education in India is in English) and cultural capital, as it is the language of the elite and the cosmopolitan classes, and is thus a means of acquiring economic capital and access to global culture. Sometimes the cultural status of English may lead to it being regarded as higher brow – such as English-language fiction – because of this borrowed prestige. However, the English-language film, in particular Hollywood, is not as popular in India as it is in much of the rest of the world, despite the number of English-language speakers in the country. Rather, a range of English-language films, from highbrow to lowbrow, is watched, and English-language films, or versions of films, are produced in India in small numbers (*Finding Fanny* [Adajania 2014] was released as separate Hindi and English films). Hinglish (a mixture of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English) is also now widely used (Kothari and Snell 2011), while other language cinemas are associated with other brows, such as Bengali and Marathi, which are associated with middle to highbrows, and Bhojpuri, with the lowbrow. Hindi films use Urdu as a language of poetry and many aspiring middlebrows are admirers of Urdu poetry.

The history of the middlebrow in Hindi cinema

Although the current middlebrow cinema is closely associated with the new middle classes, middlebrow cinema is not new to India and earlier forms may be traced. While early silent Hindi cinema was largely about spectacle, the coming of sound in the 1930s allowed for more narrative films which dealt with social issues, especially about women, devotional films and literary adaptations, whose source material ranged from Shakespeare to modern fiction. There are many overlaps between these new genres and middle-class culture (Vasudevan 1995, 311).

The features of the Hindi sound film, including the mixing of genres (often combined in the 'social' film of the 1940s and 1950s, or the 'masala' film of the 1960s), where the fragmented narrative disrupted by thrills and spectacle often resulted in a mixture of address in a film, allowed them to appeal beyond the middle classes. Ravi Vasudevan notes that although the protagonist of the 'social' film is often middle-class, the deployment of the 'rhetoric of traditional morality and identity' addresses a lower-class audience (1995, 312). For example, Guru Dutt's films of the 1950s, though made within the mainstream, set an exceptional aesthetic standard for music, poetry, image and performance, but still include the lowbrow in the comedy track. In the classic *Pyaasa / Desirous*★ (Dutt 1957), the poet Vijay (Guru Dutt) moves between the comic lowbrow, mostly built around the story of a masseur (Johnny Walker), and the highbrow but money-obsessed world of publishing, with its poetry performances. The romance between Vijay and a street-walker is built on their love of poetry, and they both leave the materialistic world in which poetry – and humanity – becomes a commodity. The much-loved poet

Sahir Ludhianvi simplified the language of his Urdu poem 'Chakle' / 'Brothels' to use it as lyrics for the song 'Jinhe naaz hai Hind par' / 'Those who are proud of India' that features in the film, which again shows different forms of culture uniting audiences for a film, rather than dividing them.

A mainstream middlebrow cinema also evolved in the issue-based cinema of BR Chopra, and, during the 1960s, novels by Gulshan Nanda and other popular Hindi writers were adapted – often by the authors themselves – for films that frequently cast the first superstar of Hindi film, Rajesh Khanna. In the 1970s, Madhava Prasad (1998) suggests a segmentation of Hindi cinema took place, between 'state-sponsored realism', the 'middle-class cinema' and 'the aesthetic of mobilisation'. 'State-sponsored realism' includes art cinema, and its narrative content, as well its production and distribution practices, distinguish it from the mainstream, thus it is popularly known as 'festival cinema'. On the other hand, Prasad's 'middle-class cinema' approximates the middlebrow. This cinema, made by directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, generically mixes realism and melodrama, and deploys songs and stars but keeps their roles subordinate to the narrative. Mukherjee's films are thus mainstream if we consider consumption and reception, but also bridge the gap between realist cinema and popular mainstream cinema.

In the 1980s the rewards of transnational film circulation became more evident. On the one hand, the art films of Satyajit Ray circulated widely in the West and were seen to represent Indian cinema. On the other, screenwriter and Booker Prize-winning novelist Ruth Prawer Jhabvala worked with the masters of the middlebrow, Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, to make a series of international middlebrow hits that created a globally circulating image of India that focused on class, nostalgia and heritage in the face of a disorienting modernity and Westernization.[2]

The middlebrow in today's Bollywood

Returning to the domestic cinema, we might expect to see a growth in middlebrow in tandem with the rise of India's middle classes in the 1990s. This new domestic middlebrow cinema incorporates both the category of multiplex film and the indie cinema that is part of a youth culture that straddles art and middlebrow alternatives. Even art filmmakers have moved towards the middlebrow, raising social concerns through humour and entertainment, such as Shyam Benegal's *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008). Some mainstream Bollywood is also moving towards the middlebrow, through a combination of higher production values and accessible references to higher forms of culture in its romcoms about lifestyles and competence in knowing about consumerism and romance. These are typified by the big-budget mainstream movies of Yash Raj Films, which also engage with melodramatic moral dilemmas concerning love and family. For example, *Rab ne bana di jodi / A Couple Made by God*★ (Aditya Chopra 2008) uses a folk or fairy-tale motif of a woman not recognizing her husband in disguise so she can be 'adulterous' with him, and so fall in love with him once he learns how to be fashionable and dance to film music.

A style of film that developed in the mid-2000s became known as 'multiplex cinema', after the upmarket cinemas built in the country's new shopping malls (Athique and Hill 2010; Dwyer and Pinto 2011, Part Two). They are made on a smaller budget, though, often within the big Bollywood production houses. The films are more realistic in their locations, star performance styles and use of song, and often move closer to the art house (Wilinsky 2001). The group is only loosely defined, but would include the work of directors such as Vishal Bhardwaj, whose successful adaptations of Shakespeare, 'Macbeth', *Maqbool* (2003), 'Othello', *Omkara* (2006) and 'Hamlet' *Haider* (2014) feature major stars, big-budget production values and Bollywood music, but have social and political references, and thus their melodramatic elements are subsumed by realism.

This period also saw a rise in heritage films, in particular biopics and historicals (costume dramas), which also form the staple of British middlebrow. Cultural value was conferred on examples like the Indo-British production *Gandhi* (Attenborough 1982) through awards from BAFTA and the Oscars (Dwyer 2011b). In India, these films were aimed at the upper end of the new middle classes: those audiences who both possessed the economic capital to afford multiplex ticket prices and could enjoy the intertextual references to world cinema and Hollywood. The films often also refer closely to Bollywood, either as pastiche or tribute, rather than distancing themselves from it as a separate cinema, and in recent years, many of the multiplex filmmakers have begun to work in the major Bollywood studios.

This convergence in the middle, away from the ends of the cinematic continuum marked by the highbrow/art film and the lowbrow/mainstream film, is also typified by popular, performance-led films, which are also 'earnest' (Driscoll 2014, 3) in their focus on social issues, and whose deployment of restrained emotion and melodrama is still sufficient to encourage audience sympathy. These films may mock and distance themselves from the high and the low, but draw on both and show an awareness of them. They approve of, and indeed elicit, an emotional response from their audience; they reaffirm beliefs, rather than challenge, disrupt or make the audience feel uncomfortable. They also combine some aesthetic inventiveness, in genres such as literary adaptations, historical films and biopics, with accessible references to high culture like Shakespeare, music and poetry, and thus afford aspirant audiences a sense of acquiring cultural capital.

The upper middlebrow

The middlebrow is a vast category, and the term can be used in a derogatory way, thus the sub-category 'upper middlebrow', which is both part of this mainstream, yet distinct from it, is especially useful to analyse Bollywood film. William Deresiewicz (2012) describes this area of culture as one where 'sentimentality [is] hidden by a veil of cool. It is edgy, clever, knowing, stylish, and formally inventive'. The key difference between the middlebrow and the upper middlebrow is thus the shift from earnestness to knowingness. Upper-middlebrow Indian films are characterized by their narrative focus, which overwhelms the disruptive features of

the film. The films focus on characters that are goal-focused and rounded, and even though the films still contain elements of Bollywood, like the star, the songs and the fantasy sequences, these are mostly presented in an ironic manner.

For example, the films of Vidhu Vinod Chopra, a film director, producer and writer graduate from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), appear to be popular genre films, but, I would argue, are middlebrow because of their technical qualities, especially in the Bombay gangster-themed *Parinda / The Bird*★ (1989), the historical film *1942 A Love Story* (1993), the political thriller *Mission Kashmir* (1998) and the Rajasthani royal drama *Eklavya: the Royal Guard* (2007). In recent years, Chopra has also found massive success as a producer with films directed by Rajkumar Hirani. The first two of these, *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003) and *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), starred a character called Munna Bhai as a thug whose love for a higher-class woman afforded him upward social mobility, his emotional skills giving him success as he failed in his attempts at education. The next two films, starring Aamir Khan, have been among the biggest hits in the history of Hindi cinema. *3 Idiots* (2009) is about the middle-class conflict between a parental view of education as a means to finding a good job, versus the children's desire to follow a vocation to find self-fulfilment. His next film, the biggest ever hit in India, is *PK* (2014), in which an alien's logical scrutiny of contemporary India reveals the absurdity of many religious practices and beliefs. These films all share the big-budget Bollywood features of top stars and song sequences, but are also middlebrow in their invitation to the audience to think about issues that are central to middle-class lives.

The actor Khan has also emerged as the quintessential middlebrow star. Despite not being educated beyond school, his own reputation for reading and independent learning has been showcased in several films that have engaged with social issues, such as education in *Taare zamin par / Like Stars on Earth* (Khan and Gupte 2007). His ongoing television show, *Satyamev jayate / Truth Alone Conquers*★ (2012–), engages weekly with a social issue. He thus uses his star power to reach out to a wide audience, with the intention of mobilizing them to take action. This chapter will now analyse five examples to map in further detail this upper middlebrow.

Example 1: Aamir Khan and *PK* – challenging beliefs

In addition to its position as the biggest box-office success of all time in India, *PK* has also hit the news for attracting formal protests by hardline Hindu groups who objected to the film's questioning of religion (PTI 2013; Hoad 2015). Set in contemporary urban India, *PK* is the story of an alien (PK roughly means 'drunk', as people assume he is a drunk human) who searches for his stolen transmitter, which he needs to return to his planet. He is told that 'God only knows where it is', and thus sets off in search of God. His transmitter falls into the hands of a godman, who is associated with Jaggu, a journalist and lead of the film's romantic track, though her faith is only love, and she will reconcile her family to her Muslim Pakistani lover. The alien represents prelapsarian man – he is naked and tells no lies. He finds

the different approaches to God confusing, and ends up convincing everyone that there is a difference between the God who made man and the God that men make. Comic sequences ensue as he confuses the practices of one religion with another.

Khan has become entangled in controversy with Hindu groups before, albeit not on the grounds of religion, though his name marks him as a Muslim, so the field for conflict was already laid. A recent film *OMG – Oh My God!* (Shukla 2012) did not attract the same controversy, perhaps because it had a small budget and a star who is allied with Hindu nationalists, but also because the film, despite attacking the godmen, shows the conversion of a non-believer and the presence of Krishna in the world today.

The character Khan plays, PK, is not an atheist but an idiot savant who sees that organized religion is about the external, in particular dress and ritual, rather than belief or *seva*, devotional service, to others. In the Bhagavad Gita, suggested by Hindu nationalist leaders as a national text, Krishna himself shows there are three ways of approaching God. One is through knowledge and study ('jnana-yoga'), one through practice ('karmayoga') and one through loving devotion to God ('bhaktiyoga'). In other words, PK is a kind of Hindu – his favoured term for God is 'Bhagwan' – and he is certainly not a follower of one of the Abrahamic faiths. It is not the scenes where the innocent alien queries certain practices that led to the protests, but the one in which a stage performer, dressed as the God Shiva, pulls a rickshaw.

Some of the film's huge success lies in its simple approach to religion. All differences between communities can be resolved by arguing that God is one but with many names and people just need to love each other. This earnest and emotional response to this and other issues would appear preachy were the alien not a major star like Khan, armed with good gags and songs. The success of the film in India and overseas also suggests a desire for a simple solution to serious religious, social and political issues.

Example 2: Sanjay Leela Bhansali and *Black* – addressing social issues

Bhansali, who worked as an assistant to Vidhu Vinod Chopra, has directed perhaps the most Bollywood of all Bollywood films, *Devdas* (2002), as well as the much-acclaimed *Hum dil de chuke sanam / My Heart's Already Given*★ (1999) and *Saawariya / Beloved*★ (2007). However, although still marked by his extravagantly glamorous style and successful song and dance numbers, many of his films are about disability: the deaf and dumb in *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996) and *Black* (2005), and the quadriplegic in *Guzaarish / The Request*★ (2010). His *Goliyon ki raasleela Ram-Leela / A Play of Bullets, Ram Leela* (2013) was an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, set in the political context of rural, contemporary Gujarat, and he is now working on a historical drama. His films are middlebrow as they fuse popular Bollywood genres with social issues, and, through cinephilic references to art filmmakers, notably Satyajit Ray, betray middlebrow aspirations about accessing art cinema.

Black, for example, which was shot in Hindi and English, is based on the autobiography of Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1902), and had a number of similarities to the Oscar-winning film *The Miracle Worker* (Penn 1962). The film mixed elements of Bollywood, such as casting the top stars Amitabh Bachchan and Rani Mukerji, but had only one song. Mukherji plays a blind and deaf girl, Michelle McNally, who is taught to communicate by Debraj Sahai (Bachchan). The film refers to historical film, being set in the summer capital of the British Raj, Shimla, and uses the old Viceregal Lodge (now the Indian Institute of Advanced Study) as the McNally home, alongside several studio recreations of the town. The exoticism of Shimla is emphasized by its memorable snow scenes, which are filmed around the colonial buildings, and the stars' costumes are authentic rather than glitzy. The film was seen as pathbreaking and won eleven Filmfare Awards (India's top film award).

Example 3: Anurag Kashyap and *Gangs of Wasseypur* – knowing intertextuality

Kashyap began his film career as a scriptwriter for Ram Gopal Varma, and was mostly known for his writing as his first films ran into problems with the censors. His debut film, *Paanch / Five*★, is still not censored, while his film about the Bombay blasts of 1993, *Black Friday* (2004), was held up for a long time. His subsequent films have been controversial for their violence, language, sex and drugs: *No Smoking* (2007); *DevD* (2009); *Gulaal / Vermilion*★ (2009); *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2011); *Gangs of Wasseypur I and II* (2012); and *Ugly* (2014). Kashyap's *Bombay Velvet* (2015), scripted (in part) by Princeton historian Gyan Prakash, is a 'neo-noir', a historical drama about a notorious murder in Bombay.

Kashyap reframes the lowbrow through a highbrow cinephilic mode, eschewing mass popularity through his extreme violence, while creating an intense largely bourgeois fan base, who see his films as Scorsese-style indies. They certainly reach into the middlebrow, confusing categories with their engagement with issues of abuse and social problems in lowbrow genres with highbrow cinematic language. Kashyap's masterpiece is his *Gangs of Wasseypur*, a two-part film set in the coal-mining town of Dhanbad, now in Jharkhand. It deals with a feud between two Muslim families in the orbit of a corrupt (Hindu) politician, who develop a fierce rivalry that lasts throughout the twentieth century. The film does not engage with any serious political or social issues, but is packed with knowing intertextual references to other media (including television, music and films), and is relentlessly cool in its portrayal of a bleak time in a non-metropolitan city in one of the poorest parts of India.

Example 4: Vikramaditya Motwane and *Lootera / The Robber*★ (2013) – heritage film

Motwane was assistant director to Bhansali for his *Devdas*, and co-wrote *DevD* for Kashyap, as well as working as a choreographer and producer. His first film as a director, *Udaan / Flight*★ (2010), was told through the eyes of a child with

an abusive father – said to be based on Kashyap's life – and was acclaimed for taking a bold look at a neglected social issue and declared a super-hit for the production house, Anurag Kashyap's Films. Motwane's second film, *Lootera*, was co-produced by Phantom Films, which is co-owned by Kashyap and Motwane with, among others, Ekta Kapoor, and her mother, Shobha Kapoor, who is best known for massively popular television serials such as *Kyunki Saas bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (*Because a Mother-in-law was Once a Daughter-in-law*) (1999–), as well as several middlebrow films.

Lootera was released on 1,600 multiplex, rather than single, screens, which, as discussed, marked it as a middlebrow film in terms of its distribution. Despite its critical acclaim in reviews, and its many nominations for awards, it fared poorly at the box office, although the DVD box proclaims it as 'The most loved film of the year'. The film is what I am terming 'upper-middlebrow' in its narrative content too, and exhibits all the characteristics outlined by Driscoll above (2014, 3). It is a love story between Pakhi, played by Sonakshi Sinha, and Varun, by Ranveer Singh. These two major stars adopt a restrained performance style in this film, which contrasts with their usual star appearances. The film opens in 1953, where Varun is an archaeologist who is excavating a site on Pakhi's father's considerable estates in West Bengal. The interval is when they are about to marry but he runs away, as he is the 'lootera' (robber) of the title. In the second part of the film, Varun is on the run but takes refuge in Pakhi's house in the hills, where she is dying. He now sacrifices his freedom to care for her until she dies, but he is shot as he tries to escape after her death.

The film is very much in two parts, not just because of the interval, but also owing to the change in locations and shooting styles. The first half is more like a Bhansali film, with a mise-en-scène that is reminiscent of a British heritage film, in this case about the Raj, set in the 1950s Bengal of the zamindars (landowners). The film shows the elegance of the zamindari class – also displayed in Ray's *Jalsaghar / The Music Room* (1958) – as both guardians of culture, but also decadent and economically unproductive, and whose feudal nature means they cannot adapt to the modern world.

Unlike Ray's film, this first part does not focus on highbrow culture, but is a historical or costume drama that adopts the formal style of the heritage film, which, as a number of chapters in this volume demonstrate, is a classic middlebrow genre. Pakhi's association with the old world justifies the inclusion of traditional performances of the Jatra, and the Chau, which stresses the period authenticity often associated with heritage. These period details are thrown into relief by the fact that *Lootera*'s zamindars are shown to have adapted to some of the technology of the modern world: they install electricity, listen to Western classical music on the gramophone, learn about painting (see Figure 3.1), speak English and their home is furnished with Western products. The past is also underlined by the presence of the archaeologists, although they bring in the new world by playing Hindi film music on the radio (notably 'Taqdeer se' / 'From Fate', from Guru Dutt's *Baazi / The Gamble*★ [1951]), which perhaps metaphorically excavates the past of Bengal.

FIGURE 3.1 Pakhi Roy Chaudhary (Sonakshi Sinha), a writer, and Varun Shrivastav (Ranveer Singh), an archaeologist, romance while sharing their love of the arts, including painting. *Lootera* (Motwane 2013)

Varun and Pakhi also both know poetry by Baba Nagarjuna (1911–98), a Hindi and Maithili poet, who was both popular and recognized by the government as a leading figure. The film thus displays the Bengal that is seen in India as central to its intellectual history: Bengal as the home of great figures such as Tagore; as its academic centre; and with its elegant and traditional, though very anglicized, culture. Pakhi and Varun, however, are shown to be both inside and outside this culture: while Pakhi has studied at Tagore's Shantiniketan, knows Bengali culture and dresses in an upper-class Bengali style, Varun is clearly unfamiliar with Bengali and is baffled by a popular Bengali film.

However, in part two, this sunny and warm life is ended by independent India's introduction of the West Bengal Land Reforms Act (1955), popularly known as the Land Ceiling Act, which confiscated landowners' wealth. Varun is shown to be a thief, rather than a government archaeologist, who has conned the landowner out of his belongings. Film form is also deployed in this second half to stress difference. For example, the setting shifts to the bleak snowy location of Dalhousie – a former British hill station – as the tragedy unfolds.[3] By using this two-part structure, Motwane thus offers both a film that is middlebrow owing to its adoption of transnational heritage aesthetics, and a film that is self-reflective about its status as such owing to the shift in stylistic tone in part two. If middlebrow heritage aesthetics were appropriate to portray the anglicized old India of the zamindars, a bleaker realist aesthetic is more appropriate to portray the new.

Example 5: Karan Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee, Anurag Kashyap and *Bombay Talkies* – self-reflectivity

A convergence of these various middlebrows can be seen in *Bombay Talkies*, a film made for the centenary of Indian cinema in 2013, which features short films by four leading directors. Each short refers closely to other films and each raises a key issue.

Karan Johar became famous for his big-budget family romances, which defined Bollywood in the 1990s and 2000s. He is now also a chat-show host, media celebrity and major producer. Johar's film, the first in the compilation, 'Ajeeb dastan hai yeh' / 'This is a Strange Story' (the title of a song from the film *Dil apna aur preet parai / My Heart is Mine But My Love Someone Else's*★ [Sahu 1960]), features mainstream to middlebrow actress Rani Mukherji, who plays a wife who finds that the problems in her marriage are caused by her husband being gay (see Figure 3.2). Johar, whose infamous trial by the controversial AIB in 2014 focused on his being gay, a widely assumed but unconfirmed view, has produced films which have raised the issue of homosexuality, mostly through humour in *Kal ho na ho / Tomorrow May Never Come*★ (Advani 2003) and *Dostana / Bromance* (Mansukhani 2008). Other films with gay characters exist, but there is little to challenge the heteronormativity of Bollywood, which is hardly surprising in the mainstream cinema of a country where homosexual acts are illegal. Johar's 'This is a Strange Story' uses old Hindi film songs associated with camp and queer readings in a knowing way, including the title song itself.

The second film, Akhtar's 'Sheila ki jawani' / 'Sheila's Youth', also deploys old Hindi songs knowingly, as it is named after a famous 'item' song,[4] 'Sheila's Youth', performed by leading star Katrina Kaif who appears in this film. It features a boy who wants to be a Bollywood dancer, rather than do things that boys are supposedly meant to do like play sports. When his parents refuse to pay for his sister to go on a school trip as they want to spend the money on his education, his sister dresses him up for a paying performance where he raises the money for her. The issue of choice, especially around gender norms, is again played out in this film, which is resolved happily, and, like Johar's, this short film self-reflectively plays tribute to the magic of the star and the Hindi film song.

In a similarly self-reflective way, the third director Banerjee's film, 'Star', is an art film, adapted from Satyajit Ray's short story 'Patol Babu, Film Star' (Ray 2012), in which the indie star, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, plays a failed actor who is asked by

FIGURE 3.2 The breakdown of the marriage of Gayatri (Rani Mukerji) and Dev (Randeep Hooda) in 'This is a Strange Story', *Bombay Talkies* (Johar 2013)

chance to be an extra in a film where all he has to do is bump into the hero. The film is a reflection on the minor figure of the 'extra' in the industry and what this work means to him and to his relationship with his daughter.

Finally, Kashyap, who has also moved from a position as the angry young man of cinema to a more comfortable mainstream position as a major producer himself, and one who is close to the big production houses, now makes upper-middlebrow films in the style of Scorsese and American television serials; that is, films that are cinematic and engaging but do not challenge the audience's sensibility. His *Bombay Talkies* short film 'Murabba' / 'Pickle' has a son take a jar of pickle to Bombay to give half to superstar Amitabh Bachchan and bring the rest home to restore his father's health. The son does this but on the way home the remaining pickle is destroyed so he lies to his father. His father recognizes this, having done the same favour for his own father, when he took a jar of honey to Dilip Kumar. The film reflects on the other end of stardom to that of 'Star', showing generations of fandom and devotion.

Bombay Talkies ends with a song with a host of stars for its final tribute to the film industry. This demonstrates again the characteristics of an upper-middlebrow film, as it engages with issues such as alternative sexualities, celebrity culture and the wider cinephilia, but makes the audience feel comfortable rather than challenged. This film thus brings together directors from the mainstream and the Hindie to show that there is convergence between the film-makers and producers, as well as convergence within the texts of the films themselves, although each film is made in the style associated with the director rather than in a homogeneous manner.

Conclusion

As is well known, the term 'middlebrow' has been used to critique culturally aspiring classes. In India, the elite has been hostile to the country's new middle classes for many reasons including issues of language ('Hindi-medium types' is a scornful term, as is 'vern' or 'vernacular') and a perceived lack of cosmopolitanism ('dehatis', meaning 'hicks'). Yet the new middle classes are socially confident and, as they seek to claim the virtues of being middle class, they may also wish to promote their own forms of culture. This class confidence may allow the use of the term 'middlebrow' to mean a particular democratization of high culture as a form of emerging middle-class culture. The middlebrow cinema attracts the middle classes to cinema, introducing enough high culture and other forms of cultural capital to keep them interested, but making them feel good rather than threatened. Middlebrow Indian cinema thus emerges as a critical part of what I have argued elsewhere is the powerful imaginary that cinema is for the new India (2014a).

The term is not widely used in India, nor is there an obvious Hindi equivalent – at least meaning more than just 'middling', which is conveyed by 'madhyam' – although English is of course used widely for critical terms. If the term becomes accepted, then it allows cinema in India to be viewed as inherently low to middlebrow. Yet the filmmakers and films analysed in the five examples above have developed a new way of

thinking about cinema, with the explicit aim of reforming the Hindi film industry and educating their audiences in cinephilia, which is itself a middlebrow project. Cinema itself thus becomes part of the idea of widening one's education through its portrayal of history, language, lyric poetry, music and dress.

Identifying and naming an Indian middlebrow cinema allow us to see a new form of Indian culture, with roots in global as well as vernacular cultures. This cinema distinguishes itself from different forms of Bollywood film, and is tied closely to the new middle classes and youth culture. I contend that an upper end of this middlebrow exists, and that in this area of culture some of the most important social changes are worked through. This middlebrow Indian cinema has a distinctive Indian taste although one that may bridge other cultures, taking some of the pleasures and vulgarity of the lowbrow but mixing it with the highbrow, although avoiding what to Indian audiences are its inaccessible and pretentious elements. It is thus challenging without being disturbing.

The growth of this upper-middlebrow segment in mainstream Hindi cinema is striking as it is attracting some of the biggest audiences for its films, which bring stories of self-improvement through issue-based narratives that are also a form of entertainment. The upper-middlebrow films that are located within the Bollywood circuit's films query, first, petit-bourgeois views on religion, so *PK* challenges godmen, the religious media and organized religion along with an anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Second, many of Bhansali's films ask for consideration of the disabled and look admiringly at non-metropolitan life. Kashyap's films, meanwhile, speak against abuse, especially of children, as in *That Girl with the Yellow Boots* and *DevD*, while also promoting sexual and romantic relationships between consenting adults. *Lootera*, on the other hand, shows self-awareness regarding any glamorization of the past. All these films smooth over these issues with melodramatic resolutions that are aided by the soundtrack and other elements of music. Their huge popularity may suggest that India's new middle classes, in particular their upper segment, are expanding rapidly.

Such films from the mainstream are perhaps converging in the category of upper middlebrow with other films that may be closer to the highbrow, such as those of Vishal Bharadwaj. Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus*, with its challenging narrative and image track, is an art film that is far removed from Bollywood, and may have found that its new audiences were located in this upper middlebrow. Films that appeal to global audiences but are not highbrow, such as *Lunchbox* (Batra 2013), are also part of this upper middlebrow if we consider production (one of the producers is Anurag Kashyap), and find similar audiences in India. It seems that some of the most creative changes in Hindi cinema today are taking place around these upper-middlebrow films, which shows that change is taking place in the middle rather than at the margins, where different styles of filmmaking and different audiences are converging. It may also reveal that the new middle classes, who have been too easily dismissed as socially conservative and lacking aesthetic taste, are forming the audience for these films and thus revealing their greater cultural self-confidence.

Using the category of middlebrow allows us to re-examine these films to see not just the links between these new forms of cinema and the new middle classes, but also, by focusing on aspirational elements, how these new groups are creating a cinema that draws on other forms of culture such as the novel, or other kinds of foreign cinema such as the heritage film, to make a new form of culture where these forms converge. These middlebrow films stage key issues that are important to these classes, from lifestyle issues such as appearance and behaviour to moral and social dilemmas, and thus combine entertainment with addressing wider concerns that are so important in contemporary India.

Notes

1 For lists of Indian films, see, for example, Dwyer 2005.
2 David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984) was part of this trend but did not involve Jhabvala, Merchant or Ivory.
3 This second half partly adapts O. Henry's short story of 1907, 'The Last Leaf'.
4 A spectacular song and dance routine in a Hindi film which is usually irrelevant to the story.

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