Tuning into the Radio in Experimental Films from India

Gauri Nori, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

Abstract

In India, the nexus between the film, music and radio industry ensured that every film included several songs, which in turn were broadcast on the radio. By aligning their commercial interests, the broadcast media endorsed each other and propagated the same content. Kamal Swaroop's *Om Dar B Dar* (1985) and Vipin Vijay's *Hawa Mahal* (2003) subversively employed this repetitive audio-visual excess produced by the mass-media industries to trace the impact of economic liberalisation and the uneasy transition of India into a capitalist society. In both films, the radio is used as a metonym to critique the aural experience in broadcast media. Whereas commercial cinema emphasises the visual, in these experimental films the acousmatic nature of the radio (as an unseen sound) helps to concentrate the focus on the auralscape. By inverting the conventions of commercial cinema and exploring different permutations, Swaroop and Vijay disrupt any possibility of synchrony between the audio and the visual track. This article intends to listen for the ways in which both films upend the hierarchies that plague film sound, allowing instead for a reduced mode of listening as theorised by Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion.

Introduction

Although the sense of hearing is first activated in the womb and vision becomes possible only after birth, in the evolution of the cinematic medium, this order was reversed. Films remained 'silent' for more than three decades and when sound was finally synced to the visuals, it was regarded as a mere accompaniment. Now, after a century of filmmaking, we cannot imagine a film without sound and yet the audience continues to pay more attention to visual storytelling than to auralscape. While it is profitable for conventional films to preserve this status quo, avant-garde and experimental filmmakers have sought to explore the possibilities of the medium (both visual and aural, often separately) by challenging these preconceptions of the cinematic audience. For instance, Mani Kaul, a pioneering avant-garde filmmaker, sought to formulate

a visual design that was deeply entrenched in the musical tenets of *Dhrupad* (one of the oldest styles of Hindustani classical music).[1] The next generation of experimental filmmakers in India was more aware of the hegemony of 'classical' aesthetics and instead focused their investigations on the persuasiveness of popular culture propelled by mass medias.[2] Kamal Swaroop's fictional film *Om Dar B Dar* (1985) incorporates numerous radio tropes including film songs along with their *farmaishes*,[3] snippets of film dialogue and advertisement jingles to evoke the emptiness that lies at the core of capitalistic excess. Similarly, Vipin Vijay's film essay *Hawa Mahal* (2004) tunes into various histories, memories and events that are associated with the radio. More importantly, Vijay's film interrogates the evolution of broadcast media like the radio and film in the way that each incorporates the conventions of the other. Through the trope of the radio, both films critique the hierarchies and limitations of the aural experience in commercial cinema. Adopting Pierre Schaeffer's understanding of acousmatic sounds and reduced mode of listening, along with Michel Chion's theory of film sound, this paper seeks to listen for ways in which both films effectively address the lacuna of aural studies of cinema.

Film studies has primarily been concerned with the visual aspects of cinema and has rarely articulated an analysis of sound design.[4] One reason for this may be that the human mind tends to spontaneously fuse the audio and visual content when they are played together, making it difficult for us to concentrate solely on the aural track of the film. Swaroop and Vijay sought to prevent this synchresis[5] by creating a disjunction between the audio and the visual. Their films also address the emphasis on the verbal and the musical in commercial film sound. Most films tend to depend on the dialogue to convey the story while music is often used to cover up the visual flaws, drowning out any possibility of creatively using ambient sounds. Instead, the cinematic experiments of Swaroop and Vijay creatively reuse the audio-visual excess produced by commercial mass-medias to produce a critique of it. Furthermore, conventional cinema encourages either a

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[1] Mani Kaul, *Uncloven space: Mani Kaul in conversation with Udayan Vajpeyi*, trans. by Gurvinder Singh (Quiver: New Delhi, 2013).

[2] Shai Heredia, 'In conversation with Kamal Swaroop', in *The Cinema of Prayoga: Indian Experimental Film and Video 1913-2006*, ed. by Brad Butler and Karen Mirza (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), pp. 101-106.

[3] Traditionally, in live music performances, *farmaish* were requests made by patrons for songs they wished the artist to perform. Subsequently, radio listeners were encouraged to send in their requests via postcards. The RJ would often read out the sender's name and address before playing the film song that was requested.

[4] For examples of studies having theorized aspects of film sound extensively, see James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer. *Hearing the movies: music and sound in film history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Brian Kane. *Sound unseen: Acousmatic sound in theory and practice* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014).

[5] 'Synchresis' is a term coined by Chion, who combined the words synchronism and synthesis, to suggest the forging of an immediate relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time.

'causal listening' which seeks to connect the sound to its source or a 'semantic listening' which allows languages to be decoded. Alternatively Schaeffer and Chion have sought to adopt and analyse what they have called a 'reduced mode of listening', which "focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning".[6] The term 'reduced listening' was first coined by Schaeffer (2004 [1966]) who, inspired by Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reductions, sought to build an awareness about and subsequently reduce our dependency on causal and semantic listening.[7] To encourage this reduced mode of listening, Swaroop and Vijay highlight acousmatic sounds, like that of the radio, where the source of the sound is hidden from the spectator's sight, making the soundtrack independent from the visuals. By inverting the conventions of cinema, their films become an exercise in film phenomenology, pushing their audiences to question their cinematic conditioning.

From Classical Music to Popular Film Songs on the Radio

During the silent film era, American studios established their monopoly over the Indian market through the construction of cinema theatres that only screened foreign films.[8] Within this context, the advent of sound challenged this monopoly and contributed immensely to the development of the Indian film industry because Indian audiences wanted to 'hear' films made in their own languages.[9] India has always had a strong oral tradition and songs were vital to any kind of performance including religious ceremonies, folk drama and staged theatre. Recognising this commercial potential, the music industry hired musicians to produce box-set gramophone recordings of popular theatrical musical dramas. The musicians in these recordings became prominent celebrities overnight. Stephen Putnam Hughes demonstrates how the Tamil film industry appropriated this celebrity status of the musical stars and borrowed the heritage of classical music to gain popularity amongst the Indian upper classes.[10] With the rise of the talking films, the Indian film studios collaborated with the music industry to produce filmed versions of the box set recordings. While the actors of silent cinema required considerable training to adapt to the advancement in technology, musicians were already used to having their voices recorded. Hence,

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[6] Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 29.

[7] Pierre Schaeffer, 'Acousmatics', in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 76–81.

[8] Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-34*, (London: British Film Institute, 1985), p. 144.

[9] Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry,1913-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[10] Stephen Putnam Hughes, 'Music in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Drama, Gramophone, and the Beginnings of Tamil Cinema', *The Journal of Asian Studies.* 66.1 (2007), 3-34 (p. 25).

early sound films of the 1930's were almost entirely composed of songs. In this way, traditional live musical performances were commodified into gramophone recordings which in turn were incorporated into cinema in the form of film songs.

Gregory Booth's study of the evolution of the Hindi film song industry shed light on the immense competition that existed between lyricists and musicians, who were constantly expected to produce songs that could fit into any narrative. Booth suggests that the aim to make songs fit outside of their initial filmic setting was so that they could: 'live an independent existence and take on personalized emotional meanings that might supersede or simply ignore their dramatic context'.[11] This independence of the film songs from their role in the cinematic narrative also proved useful when they were played on the radio which became more widely available from the 1950's onwards. Bhaskar Chandavarkar also found that repetition was a key factor to the success of film songs.[12] The lyricists tended to use a small set of words over and over, each time adding another connotation that would broaden its definition. Chandavarkar further observed that the form of the film song required that the first two lines called the *mukhda* or refrain be repeated after each of the 3-4 *antharas* (three-line verses) and the last words of each line had to rhyme. This constant repetition within the song with the addition of a catchy melody made it possible to commit the lyrics to memory. Unlike classical music, the repetitive formula of the film song also allowed for repeated broadcasting on the radio. Since radio was present in a large number of home, the songs reached a much larger audience. The radio could also be consumed less attentively and so it became the constant background score to household chores or social gatherings. If the song was popular among radio-listening audiences then the film could be guaranteed success at the box office, suggesting a direct correlation between the radio and the film audience. This nexus between the radio and the film industry further established the popularity of Hindi film songs.

In 1953, the newly appointed minister of the Information and Broadcasting Division (IB), Dr. B. V. Keskar, made the unpopular decision of banning film songs from being broadcast on the All India Radio (AIR). Film songs were deemed unworthy because of their innuendo-ridden lyrics and incorporation of Western melodies. Instead, Keskar envisioned the radio as a tool to spread awareness of and an appreciation for Indian classical music. According to David Lelyveld, this decision reflected a desire, on the part of the government, to compensate for the neglect that Indian music faced during the British colonisation as well as a move to clampdown on musicians of the erstwhile Muslim rulers who, in Keskar's view, had diluted the religious force of *Carnatic* music by creating the

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[11] Gregory D. Booth, *Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 31.
[12] Bhaskar Chandavarkar, 'The Power of the Popular Film Song', *Cinema in India* 4.2 (1990), 20-25. (pp. 23-24).

more secular variant *Hindustani*.[13] Lelyveld identified that Hindi film songs often mimicked the *Hindustani* rhythms, thereby fuelling the perception that this ban was an attempt by the subdominant Hindu upper class to (re)assert its ideology.[14] The new government also took complete control of the market by nationalising all industries and levying heavy taxes on the private radio and film studios. In her article 'Re-embodying the Classical', Shikha Jhingan identifies how the industry officials pushed back against this 'highbrow' attitude of the state, arguing instead that films finally made 'classical' music available to the common man.[15] As it turned out, the radio audiences summarily rejected Keskar's 'educational' impetus and switched over to a station that catered to their film song requests, the privately-owned Radio Ceylon. The shift in popularity from public to private radio stations was so pronounced that AIR's ban lasted only five years (1953-1957) before it was once again forced to play the week's most popular film songs. The immense popularity and the social impact of film songs could no longer be denied.

Previously, classical musicians depended on the patronage of the wealthy, performing mostly to private audiences, and were expected to perform any *farmaish* requested. The tradition of the *farmaish* continued with the patrons of the radio sending their requests via postcards on which most often only the first line of the film song was written. The radio jockeys would then announce the name of the sender and the place from where it was posted. This democratisation of the *farmaish* allowed everyone to have a few seconds of relative fame. Privately-owned radio companies also favoured following the countdown system or song requests format because it enabled them to play advertisements between two songs. Here, broadcasting classical music presented an additional practical problem: the compositions were not of fixed length and each piece was unique to the person rendering it. Unlike set compositions in Western Classical music, Indian Classical music encouraged a more fluid approach where the interpreter of the piece, considered a maestro, would spontaneously meditate on a *raaga* (melodic mode). AIR's solution to this problem was to commission renowned musicians such as Pt. Ravi Shankar and Ustad Amjad Ali Khan to compose short and light *Hindustani* pieces that were primarily aimed at displaying artistry.[16] This approach proved popular among radio audiences, and from adhering to the time limitations of gramophone recordings to composing light classical

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[13] Carnatic is a system of music associated with the southern part of the Indian sub-continent while *Hindustani* music is considered a North Indian musical style. *Carnatic* was developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth century during Bhakti movement, while *Hindustani* synthesizes Vedic chants with Persian Musiqu-e-Assil traditions.

[14] David Lelyveld, 'Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio', *Social Text* 39 (1994), 111-127 (p.117).

[15] Shikha Jhingan, 'Re-embodying the "Classical" The Bombay Film Song in the 1950s', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies,* 2.2 (2011), 157-179 (p. 160).

[16] B. N. Goswami, *Broadcasting: New Patron of Hindustani Music* (New Delhi: Sharada Publishing House, 1996) p. 20.

compositions for the radio, classical musicians were ultimately forced to cater to populist demands.

In the 1960's and 1970's, filmakers like Satyajit Ray sough to counter the commercial impetus of the entertainment industries that threatened the space in which classical arts could flourish. Ray's *Jalsagar* (The Music Room 1958) was one of the first films to feature performances of renowned artists of Indian classical music, including Ustad Vilayat Khan who composed the film's score. The narrative follows a former landlord losing everything in one last chance to host a grand soirée. To convey the society's sudden shift from tradition to modernity, Ray includes various audio metaphors such as the grating noise of the young neighbour's electrical generator that interrupts the feudal protagonist's enjoyment of the sombre classical notes of the *surbahar* (a plucked string instrument played by the renowned Ustad Imrat Khan). While Western audiences were enthralled by the refinement that the classical performances offered, Indian audiences found it tedious and Ray was criticised for indulging in bourgeois nostalgia.[17] By contrast, avant-garde filmmakers of the time, such as Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, sought to apply the tenets of classical music to the cinematic medium. Having studied the way *Dhrupad* emphasises each note, Kaul's camera would force his audience to meditate on a single shot and by doing so achieved a non-representational mode of cinema. Additionally, Shahani aspired to synthesise the various elements of sound in cinema including the musical, verbal and ambient sounds as observed in the tradition of *Khayal Gayki* music.[18] However, these avant-garde auteurs were accused of indulging in elitist experiments and were criticised by both the commercial industry and ironically, by Satyajit Ray.[19] Learning from these experiences, Kaul and Shahani's successors chose instead to interrogate the persuasiveness of popular aesthetics.

The Trope of the Radio in Experimental Films

By the end of the 1980s Rajiv Gandhi had set in motion the liberalisation of the economy and soon foreign goods flooded the market. After years of being denied access to these items, Indian consumers enthusiastically started going after them. Kamal Swaroop, once Kaul's assistant, recognised that at the heart of this consumerism was a never-ending desire for more and dealt with these pressing issues of modernity in his films. In *Om Dar B Dar*, Swaroop traces the India's society shift from Gandhi's model of *swadeshi* (self-reliance) and *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) to a model of heady capitalist consumption through the

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[17] Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye: The Biography Of A Master Film-Maker*, (London: IB Tauris, 2004) p. 113.
[18] Kumar Shahani, 'Notes for an Aesthetic of Cinema Sound', *Framework. The journal of Cinema and Media,* 30-31 (1986), p. 91.
[19] Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films*, (New York: Hyperion, 1994) p. 105.

life of a small-town family. The film loosely follows the adolescent adventures of the protagonist Om (played by Aditya Lakhia and Manish Gupta) whom, the spectator learns, has a special ability to hold his breath for hours under water. He runs away from home after misplacing diamonds that were given to his father for safekeeping, only to be trapped by priests who use his talent to advertise a water-resistant electronic watch. Through surrealist imagery, witty metaphors and Dadaist style, Swaroop exposes the fallacy of capitalism that offers material products as a solution to spiritual problems.

As its title suggests, *Om Dar B Dar* highlights the life and struggles of those who are close to Om, all of whom are tragically trapped in their petty desires. In doing so, the film evokes themes of small-town aspirations and the uneasy shift from the neo-modernity of the independence movement to the capitalist modernity ushered in by the opening up of India's economy. The protagonist's sister, Gayatri (Gopi Desai) desires independence but is only able to achieve it superficially. As she boldly goes to the movies on her own, she attracts the attention of Jagdish (Lalit Tiwari). Jagdish is introduced as a private tutor who hails from Jhumri Telaiya, a small city that radio audiences would immediately recognise as the place from which the greatest number of film song requests were sent: Rameshwar Prasad Barnwal, a mica-mining tycoon from Jhumri Telaiya, sent numerous postcard requests to radio stations, leading to the city's name being announced on the radio and generating enthusiasm from a large number of its residents.[20] This episode established Jhumri Telaiya's reputation in the popular imagination across the country and while residents from other towns tried to compete with Jhumri Telaiya's fame by sending as many post-cards, many urban audiences assumed it was a fictional place that symbolised small town aspirations. In the film, Jagdish portrays a typical radio fan, whom film scholar Aswin Punathambekar has characterised as being the median between a rowdy character and a *rasika* (aesthete).[21] From the film dialogue, it is evident that Jagdish identifies with the tragic-fatalist lover more than the macho hero of popular Hindi cinema. By revealing the way in which these characters consume popular culture, Swaroop reminds his audience of its pitfalls: Jagdish's mediocrity stems from his limited exposure to Hindi cinema while Gayatri's curtailed aspirations epitomises the empty promise of the capitalist consumer culture.

Kamal Swaroop used the excess of sounds and images produced by commercial cinema and radio to reveal its inherent banality. This kind of experimentation opposes popular aesthetics by using its raw materials to

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[20] Sanchari Pal, 'Of Music, Mica and Mithai: The Fascinating Story of How Jhumri Telaiya Became a Legend', in *The Better India,* https://www.thebetterindia.com/91535/jhumri-telaiya-koderma-jharkhand-mica-radio-kalakand/ [accessed 7 December 2018].

[21] Aswin Punathambekar, 'Between Rowdies and Rasikas: Rethinking Fan Activity', in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* ed. by Jonathan Gray, Sandvoss Cornel, and C. Lee Harrington, 2nd edn (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 198-209 (p. 198).

produce a radically subversive alternative. Although sound is more abstract than images, conventional filmmakers tend to solidify the aural track by synching it to the corresponding visuals in their films. In critiquing the limitations of sound design in conventional cinema, Chion experimented with creating a wholly different musical genre. His practice of musique concrète liberated mundane recorded sounds from their concrete causal connections to compose highly abstract pieces that necessitate a reduced mode of listening. Similarly, *Om Dar B Dar* can also be read as Swaroop's objection to commercial films, whether aimed at entertaining or advertising, for creating a surplus of repetitive audio and visual materials. His riposte was to take this excess and recycle it in order to understand it.[22] The film is replete with the surplus created by mass medias including film songs, radio *farmaishes*, over-the-top film dialogues and advertisement jingles, so as to reveal how persuasive their illusion is. The film continuously parodies the marketing of religious miracles and capitalist commodities. Just as the *farmaish* shows were often named after their brand sponsors such as *Binaca Geetmala* and *Colgate Cibaca Sangeetmala*, the film repeatedly alludes to the *Promise* toothpaste brand that became very popular in India (and was second only to Colgate in terms of the market share) because it claimed to include clove oil which is traditionally used to treat dental ailments. While this parodies the oral hygiene product placements that used to take place on the radio, the choice of brand conveys Swaroop's insight into the rise of capitalism in a society that is still deeply attached to traditional values.

Jagdish and Gayatri's romance is advanced primarily through the radio and, accordingly, the film is continuously punctuated by a radio jockey (RJ) announcing the request for their favourite song *Babloo from Babylon*. The way in which the radio *farmaish* expresses exactly what the characters are thinking and feeling is aimed at representing a near-telepathic connection between the characters. Chion observed that on-the-air sounds that are electronically transmitted via acousmatic devices such as the radio do not need to adhere to the 'natural' laws of propagation in cinema and, especially in the case of broadcast music, offer filmmakers the freedom to transcend the limitations of the onscreen and offscreen space.[23] Since the radio is often heard but rarely seen in the film, the RJ takes on the role of the omnipresent and omnipotent narrator of the film. After their encounter at the movies, the RJ notes that Jagdish changed his address from Jhumri Telaiya to Ajmer, in an obvious attempt to have his name read-out alongside Gayatri and Om. The lovers seem to be convinced that they are soulmates simply by requesting the same song and hearing their names together on the radio. Here Vebhuti Duggal's investigation of the *farmaish* phenomenon

[22] Kamal Swaarop, 'Kamal (Om) Dar B Dar's Googlies and Life in General', *Deep Focus*, 2.1 (1989), 12-20 (p. 16).
[23] Michel Chion, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 77.

provides insights into the relationship between the RJs and their audience. [24] The audience not only forms a personal connection with generic songs but, through the *farmaish,* also hopes to gain public acknowledgment from the RJ. The *farmaishes* most often came from small cities and towns and would be ornamented or written in verse as if addressed to a lover who lives in a faraway city. The mostly urban RJ had to rally together this large dispersed audience while simultaneously bestowing on each individual *farmaish* the recognition that they sought. As a result, tAt a result, through this practice, radio as a form produced a peculiar intimacy in anonymity.

While their physical courtship is constantly being frustrated by Om and his father (L. Shastri), the lovers use the radio for their private communication, albeit broadcasting it throughout the country. For instance, when Jagdish pretends to teach Gayatri to ride a bicycle, Om abruptly throws it off a cliff, presumably embarrassed by their silly courtship rituals. As proof that Gayatri took the hint, the next time the song request is read out, Om's name is left out. This conveys to Jagdish that Gayatri is finally comfortable being alone together with him. Although this means of communicating their love is seemingly ludicrous, the conservative norms of Indian society forces lovers to find circuitous ways of being together. In the scene when they finally consummate their love, their gender roles are comically inverted, with Gayatri taking the lead and Jagdish looking distraught by the end of their physical union. When he bursts into the room, Gayatri's father finds her sleeping alone, and she curtly tells him to turn off the radio, indicating to the viewer that the charade of romance is over. The intention of this over-the-top tragic parody is to liberate the viewer from the superficial tropes and conventions of popular cinema. Swaroop clearly equates the lover's film-fuelled fantasy with the naïve faith that consumers have when they buy into the capitalist promise. Both bubbles will burst, only leading to further alienation. Jagdish is not seen again until the last few minutes of the film when the spectator discovers that Gayatri has a child who she claims is a 'paying-guest'. Jagdish feebly tries to assure her that he continued to send song requests to the radio when he was in Dubai. Simultaneously, we hear the rest of their song on the radio that plaintively bemoans the cost of progress.

As it were, the lovers must advertise their love in the same way that the film songs were aired on the radio to advertise and maintain the popularity of Hindi cinema therefore adhering to the growing consumer culture of the time. To mirror the circuitous flirtation of the couple, the film chooses to substitute the directness of dialogues with the radio *farmaishes*. While conventional cinema adheres strictly to synchrony, experimental filmmakers like Swaroop found that synchresis could take place between audio and visual elements that are not directly connected to one another. Chion argued that the illusion of synchresis between these audio-visual counterpoints challenges conventions of film sound.

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[24] Vebhuti Duggal, 'Imagining Sound through the Pharmaish: Radios and Request-postcards in North India, c. 1955–1975', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 9.1 (2018), 1-23 (pp. 16-18).

Even though a synchresis occurs, the disjunction between audio and visual elements remind the audience of the manipulation involved in combining the audio with the visual.[25] By replacing the dialogues with sound bites from the radio, the fallacy of the romantic relationship and the capitalist society that it represents is exposed. In this way, Swaroop's film disturbs the complacency of its audience and necessitates a more attentive mode of listening to the film.

Although radio is usually consumed as a form of distraction, in the film, the characters pay so much attention to it that all other sounds are drowned out. By giving the radio more prominence, the film works to decentre the emphasis on comprehending its narrative through the visuals and diegetic dialogues, as typically found in conventional cinema. Since the radio is heard but not seen, the synchresis between the radio and the mind of the characters is made possible. However, the outlandishness of the song reminds the viewer of the inherent disparateness between the sound and the image. The song itself is not romantic and the lyrics are seemingly nonsensical at first but soon we realise that it epitomises the futility of their relationship as reiterated in the refrain, 'Hero, zero, pass or fail'. The prominence given to English words is not only reminiscent of the British colonisation but also points to the rise of American capitalism that once again made English the language of commerce.[26] While it is obvious to the spectator that their favourite song is a parody of Hindi film songs, it is charged with tremendous personal significance for the lovers. Yet the absurd lyrics of the song disrupts the viewer's expectations of a romantic duet. This moment of disorientation is crucial since it thwarts the process of synchresis, encouraging reduced listening instead. The reputation of the film for being impenetrable may be justified if one focused only on the visual aspects of the film (by doing so the narrative becomes highly confusing), but the audio track provided by the radio announcements, jingles and the songs clearly conveys the film's thematic focus. When we put all the pieces of the song together, we realise it encapsulates the tragedy of the character's trapped existence. Through such audio-visual counterpoints the film employs the excess that mass media produces to simultaneously critique it.

Examining the nature of different media in India and tracing their trajectories over the last century – their birth, evolution and eventual decline – is also a constant theme in Vipin Vijay's film essays. *Hawa Mahal (2004)* focuses on the radio*, Videogame (2006)* examines the shift from celluloid to digital filmmaking while *Chitrasurtam (2010)* explores the internet's virtual realms. The films investigate what is particular to a medium while also making universal connections between different media. In doing so, they force viewers to put aside their conventional expectations of a documentary, and instead allow them to participate in its carefully curated sensory experience actively. Far from tracing

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[25] Chion, p. 63.
[26] Harish Trivedi, 'From Bollywood to Hollywood: The Globalization of Hindi Cinema', *The Postcolonial and the Global*, ed. by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C Hawley (Bristol-Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 200-210 (p. 201).

a linear history of the radio in India, Vijay's *Hawa Mahal* (named after a popular AIR program) plays with the fluidity that the acousmatic radio offers, resulting in a film that has a stream-of-consciousness style rather than adhering to a fixed narrative. Vijay invites us to appreciate the inner workings of the radio by taking us through the process of production as well as reception while continuously interrogating our relationship with sound. From its very beginning, the film reminds us that, unlike our eyes, we cannot close our ears. Vijay addresses the imbalance of sound's secondary status in conventional cinema by syncing the visuals to the audio track. This means that if a sound is distorted in the film, so is the visual. At various times, we hear the audio track of the film trying to focus on a sound, as one would when tuning the radio to a particular channel, and simultaneously we are shown the shift from a blurry image to the object in complete focus. In this way the film becomes the means for the audience to experience the way sound is modulated tangibly.

While the popular film songs broadcast on the radio were consumed as a type of distraction, *Hawa Mahal* compels its audience to be attentive to every aspect of its aural composition. Like Chion's Musique Concrète, it highlights ambient sounds rather than verbal or musical cues, manipulates the visuals as per the aural distortions, and incorporates 'unusable' or unpleasant sounds such that the audience's attention is continuously drawn to the soundtrack. By focusing on the sound design, the film upends the visual bias of cinema to produce an aesthetics of sound as an evanescent material. Vijay further breaks down the illusion of synchresis by distorting the film's dialogues / narration, making it seem like the voices are coming from a distance or by choosing not to show the source of the sound. This distortion and disembodiment of the voice and sounds is also an obvious allusion to the experience of listening to the radio. At one point, we witness the recording of a Bengali radio play where the actors manipulate their voice, filling it with the required emotion but without their facial expressions changing. The radio audience would hear their melodramatic dialogue delivery and automatically imagine it visually but by observing the actual process of recording this play, the film's audience is made to see through their theatrics. Similarly, the film pays homage to the famous radio prank in which Orson Welles's narration of H. G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds* caused panic amongst listeners who believed that a real alien invasion was taking place. In this way, we are made to acknowledge that sound can be as powerful and persuasive as the visual.

Hawa Mahal also makes us acutely aware of the hierarchy of sounds in cinema. While dialogues and songs are given prominence in conventional cinema, Vijay includes several 'unusable' sounds that often erroneously occur during recording and playback. Unpleasant sounds such as shifting from one radio frequency to the next, ambient noise, echoes, delays, and feedback would normally be cleaned and edited out of film soundtracks. By incorporating them into the sound design, the film also plays the role of an audio archive.

In the same way, Vijay saved the pieces of celluloid that were thrown away at the editing table from his 1999 short film shot and reused them in his next

film *Videogame* (2004). Shots that were considered NG (not good) takes for one film became the means of interrogating media obsolescence in another film. Although both audio and images have the capacity to record and preserve the past, there is clearly a bias in what is allowed to survive. The fact that most of early silent cinema is lost while the few fragments that have survived are not being adequately preserved is evidence of such hierarchy. The film cautions us against deleting things that are not useful to us at a specific moment as there may be no trace or memory of that moment in the future. Accordingly, in his films, Vijay seeks to create a palimpsest of sounds and visuals that encapsulate the experience of media that have become outdated even before their possibilities have been fully explored. When something new comes about, it pushes the old out. The film uses the metaphor of a football field turned into a mall. As a man walks through the aisles of the mall, he recollects the victories that he shared with teammates on the erstwhile field, while his son watches a football match on the screens of TV waiting to be sold. All media eventually become outdated and all that remains is fragments of their existence.

The film is not merely an archive of memories associated with the radio in India, it also is a critique of its limitations. The film recounts the story of Janaki, one of the first singers to have her songs recorded by the Gramophone Company. She was brutally stabbed 56 times by her jealous lover and, from then on women were discouraged from singing on the radio. To compensate for the loss of female vocalists, recording companies employed young boys like Master Madan who became immensely popular but also tragically died at the age of 14. Although several of his records exist, no photograph of him has survived. Just as human life is transient, the evolution of technology will at some point make the radio obsolete. In investigating the nature of these recording devices, Vijay finds that like our memories, any kind of recording will always be incomplete. Many people share the common memories of distractedly listening to the radio while doing household chores. There are many shots of the radio providing company for women of different ages, alone inside their homes. This is one of the few moments in the film that includes popular film songs, but the feeling is of stifling claustrophobia rather than of nostalgia. The scene goes on to draw a direct connection between the loneliness of these women and the alienation that the one may feel in modern day discotheques where party-goers might be dancing alone in a room full of strangers. Vijay seems to suggest that while mass media like radio, film and television cater to a large group of people, they cannot offer them a sense of community.

Conclusion

In Swaroop's *Om Dar B Dar,* the radio becomes a metonym for mass media that promote endless consumption. The tragedy of the lovers' dependence on mediocre *farmaishes*, nonsensical film songs and advertisement jingles becomes

the cautionary tale against the buying into the capitalistic promise. By revealing the mechanics behind its illusion, Swaroop hopes to disabuse his audience of the persuasiveness of the consumer culture. The film demonstrates how everything has been turned into an advertisement – the lovers advertise their love for each other on the radio which in turn promotes songs for the film industry that commodifies culture. Keskar's failed attempt to restrict the airing of film songs on the radio proved that any attempt to subdue the industry will be met with equal resistance and will eventually backfire. Not only is the film industry responsible for curbing the potential of cinema by encouraging the constant production of formulaic narratives, it has also limited the role of the radio to broadcasting popular film songs. The powerful nexus between the radio and film industry makes it almost impossible for independent and community owned radios to sustain themselves. Although media activists have worked hard to democratise the airwaves, the dominance of public and commercial radio drowns out any alternative.[27] Therefore, by staging the parody of both radio and cinema, Swaroop exposes the hegemony of the industry just as his experimental film liberates the viewer from the conventional mode of filmmaking.

With the rise of music television channels like MTV (and of personal, cd and mp3 players and more recently music streaming apps), the radio was gradually displaced as the primary source for the consumption of freshly released music. Before the potential of the radio was fully understood, newer technology had taken over. Vipin Vijay's *Hawa Mahal*, investigates this phenomenon of media obsolescence caused the rapid change in technology using the specific instance of the radio. Instead of transforming the medium, the newer digital technologies are limited to mimicking the structures and processes of the previous technology. No media exists in isolation, as media scholars like Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have observed, and during the remediation process the new media borrows conventions of the 'old' while at the same time the old media incorporates aspects of the 'new'.[28] Unlike the narratives of popular cinema that often pay homage to the ubiquitous presence of the radio, Vijay's film essay does not indulge in the nostalgic yearning for the past. Tracing the evolution of the radio in India and examining the nature of recorded sound allows Vijay to expose the structures of hierarchy within film and radio production.

While various Western cultures have tended to emphasise the primacy of the written word as the vehicle for communication following the democratization of printing technology, in India the oral tradition of chanting and singing has always held greater sway over the public. This crucial difference between cultures is perhaps one of the keys to understanding why it was inevitable for films in India to include songs. Furthermore, William O. Beeman observes that since cinema

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[27] Vinod Pavarala and Kanchan K. Malik, *Other Voices: The Struggle for Community Radio in India*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2007), p. 106.
[28] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 48.

was a western import, the songs used in Indian films were freed "from the bonds of both the classical and folk tradition".[29] Although the broadcast media made classical music more accessible to the general public, the nexus between the music, film and radio industries limited the scope of the aural dimension. Instead of exploring new possibilities, each broadcast media simply carries forward the conventions of the older medium. To counter this hegemony, Swaroop and Vijay use the trope of the radio to expose the prevalence of the visual over the audio and the verbal over the musical in commercial cinemas. Their cinematic experiments challenged the illusion of synchresis and freed the aural track from its confines to the visual as theorised by Schaeffer and Chion. Hence, their films require multiple attempts of reduced listening to recognise the various formal experiments at work. Each time one watches these films, a new aspect of the auralscape is revealed and yet another preconception of sound design in cinema is dismantled.

[29] William O. Beeman, 'The Use of Music in Popular Film: East and West', *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter*, 4.2 (1988), 8-13 (p. 11).