

Anand Pandian, *Reel World: An Anthropology of Creation*

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. 360 pages. Hardback, \$99.95; paperback, \$26.95, e-book, \$26.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5957-9 (hardback); 978-0-8223-6000-1 (paperback)

In *Reel World*, anthropologist Anand Pandian takes us into the fascinating world of Tamil film production. Located in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Tamil film industry is one of India's many regional film industries that make commercial films in vernacular languages. Although it is less well known than the Bombay film industry, or "Bollywood," in recent years the Tamil film industry has produced a greater number of feature films annually than Bollywood.

The book grows out of short stints of ethnographic fieldwork on seventeen film projects at different stages of production. Fieldwork took the author to Chennai, the headquarters of the Tamil film industry, and to Madurai. He sat in on discussions of scripts, story sessions at producers' offices, was an observer on elaborate sets and at special effects studios, wandered around Chennai and its outlying areas with film crews, and followed them on location shoots to neighboring Karnataka state and to Switzerland, Malaysia and the deserts outside Dubai.

Reel World is a wonderful book—unconventional, experimental, even daring, and one that anyone interested in Indian cinema and filmmaking will want to read. Rather than examining cinema as "an archive of finished forms and tales" (18), Pandian's interest lies in the being and becoming of films, their "murky genesis" and the "story of that story" (23). A broader interest in "the ecology of creative process" (272) drives the study and the pursuit of elusive and fleeting creative moments in filmmaking makes for a compelling and engaging story.

Seventeen episodic chapters each take up a cinematic moment or "cinematic craft as an opening into a distinctive mode of experience" (7). While the author did not attach himself to any single film project from its inception to its completion, the organization of chapters loosely follows the natural history of a film moving from the preliminary stages of filmmaking to its reception in theaters. Chapters on the generating of stories and scripts (Dreams), pitching a story (Hope), building sets (Art)-and scouting locations (Space) are followed by cinematography (Light), direction (Time) and acting (Imagination) and then by "studiowork" such as editing, dubbing and visual effects (Wonder). The final chapter, titled "Fate," explores the reception of a film upon its release. The book concludes with reflections on the anthropology of the creative process.

Along the way readers encounter the delightfully colorful cast of characters behind the screen including a director who names himself after a character in a novel by Dostoevsky and looks down on Indian films (he wants to make dreams instead), another filmmaker whose intense inhabitation of "reel time" confounds those around him, and an art director who even as a child was intrigued by illusion and trickery. Pandian, a talented writer, vividly brings these individuals, their stories and his encounters in the field alive. We are given fascinating glimpses of how directors, art directors, cin-

ematographers and others experience or see films and the world around them. There are surprises for the ethnographer as well. For example, Pandian describes how as a “wonderstruck” observer at a visual effects studio (the chapter on Wonder), he found that the young men, “magicians” who do “the work of the gods” (240), were actually anonymous assembly line workers mired in the mundaneness of piecemeal tasks and deadlines. Typically, they labored without the filmic context for their work and did not even know the titles of the films their efforts would contribute to.

Part of the book’s distinctive approach is the author’s taking on the challenge of conveying the textures and sensations of film, its experimental qualities through the writing. At the outset, the reader is addressed “also a listener and a seer.” Each chapter begins with a “germinal episode of fieldwork” (219) and a black and white photograph, like a film frame. The experimentation characteristic of filmmaking is seen in the form of the text itself. For example, a chapter on Time is presented in two columns placed side by side: the actualities of filmmaking and the filmic scenes they result in, blurring past and cinematic present, while a chapter on Sound has paragraphs of wavy lines of text like the movement of music. Readers are asked to “[I]magine the page as a device like a diaphragm, a vibrating membrane meant to register on its physical surface something of the wavelike movements that compose the sonic world” (183).

Each chapter is composed like a montage of impressions and episodes which may account for the overlap between chapters: a chapter titled Rhythm is followed by Speed, both address editing. Pleasure could have lent itself to a discussion of Imagination, the chapter titled Hope perhaps unsurprisingly equally addresses uncertainty and fear, while Time also addresses Space and place and so on.

References to mood and play crop up in more than one chapter in encounters with filmmakers, but they are not the subject of chapters themselves, the same holds for uncertainty, luck and chance, which surface as themes throughout. Pandian observes that where the “juxtaposition of perspectives... evok(es) what is invisible... the most significant points often come precisely in the gaps between” (279). One is reminded of a quote from Kurosawa elsewhere in the book: “the movie exists in the space between two shots” (32).

Ethnography on filmmaking offers many challenges and the ups and downs of filmmaking, that “most contingent of activities” (xi) together with the ups and downs of fieldwork makes for a thrilling ride. Questions that have surfaced in countless ethnographies assume special significance where the ethnographer is among celebrities and performers for whom it is second nature to think of, and play to, an audience. At times, the author wonders whether filmmakers believe what they are telling him or “Was this guy just bullshitting me?” (112), and does it matter that people may not be telling him what they really feel?

What is refreshing about *Reel World* is that it does not present the “cinema as escape from reality” *mantra* that is often trotted out by film scholars, film industry insiders, and by some audiences when they feel the need to explain the draw of “commercial entertainers.” Rather cinema, along with other creative works, is seen to express a reality that is otherwise invisible. Cinema’s open-endedness, its environment of volatility and flux where “anything can happen at any time” (5), where “experiences always seem to turn on the challenge of the unexpected” (18) leads Pandian to ask “What if a medium like cinema could actually lead us back into the world and whatever prospects for survival it might still bear?” This is an ambitious project with a larger, grander,

even more philosophical role for cinema: cinema that is valuable to think with in the anthropocene.

Lakshmi Srinivas
University of Massachusetts