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Film and Fashion: Media Signification and Consumer Subjectivity in Kathmandu

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To claim that mass media entertainment industries are intimately tied to various forms of consumer promotion is hardly new or, for that matter, these days even very surprising. Yet very few people are aware of the extent to which commercial media entertainment products are involved in the promotion of other consumer goods. For example in a fascinating article on the early Hollywood film industry, Charles Eckert (1978) documents how American film executives in the 1920s were astonished to find that wherever American films went abroad, there soon followed a sudden spurt in demand for American consumer goods.

Not surprisingly American corporate executives also found this to be an intriguing phenomenon and by the 1930s the major American film studios had constructed elaborate ties with the rest of corporate America. Eckert describes the "almost incestuous hegemony that characterized Hollywood's relations with vast reaches of the American economy by the mid-1930s" (1978:4) such that soon American commercial films had "the effect of a direct sales agency" both at home and abroad (1978:5). As they still do today, film companies had special liaison offices that negotiated commercial tie-ins for everything from furniture, to clothing, to automobiles. These modern consumer product promotions became so lucrative for both film makers and commodity producers that by the mid 1930s studios told their directors to scrap ideas for historical films because they were unfit for showcasing modern consumer goods (Eckert 1978:7). Eckert describes how Hollywood quickly discovered that big name actors were not the only commodities with "star potential": commodities associated with famous actors had as much market appeal and more profit potential. Indeed it soon became exceedingly difficult to distinguish the "star appeal" of, for example, fashions, from the actor who actually wore the fashions.

In this short paper I want to consider this relationship between commercial entertainment and

commodity promotion, or between film and fashion, but from the other end of the economic equation--that is, consumers--and from the "other end of the world"--Kathmandu, a place at least romantically situated about as far away from Hollywood as you could get. If commercial media products like films do indeed promote demand for the privileged objects depicted in them, the question is why? Based on what I have been able to construct of a history of modern fashion practice in Kathmandu, this paper aims at offering some theoretical insights into this question of the links between commercial media signification and the development of modern consumer subjectivities.

A brief history of "demoralizing effects"

At least in this century the matter of mass media as a potentially disruptive social force in Kathmandu has a peculiar kind of "always already" quality. For example as far back as 1901--when cinema was a novelty anywhere, not to mention in the middle of the Himalayas--public film exhibitions were held on Kathmandu's parade ground as part of the celebrations marking Dev Sham Sher Rana's installment as Prime Minister (P.S. Rana 1978). Yet the fact that Dev Sham Sher was deposed by his brother after only three months in office, and that the state officially banned public cinema exhibitions for the next fifty years, suggests that Nepali ruling elites very quickly assessed the potentially adverse social impacts of commercial cinema. Along these lines, following an interview with Rana prime minister Juddha Sham Sher in the 1930s, a *National Geographic* reporter enthused:

The Prime Minister is modern and enlightened in his outlook and anxious to introduce any new invention which may benefit his country, but prohibits importation of certain Western creations. Foremost among these is the cinema. He believes that to show vivid scenes of intimate occidental life has a

demoralizing effect on the spectators (Chetwode 1935:328).

Surely at a time when the South Asian subcontinent was seething with political discontent, the particular "demoralizing affect" that all Rana rulers feared most from cinema was the emergence of a public awareness of the outside world no longer dictated, or "mediated," by the Nepali elite. Not surprisingly, in the early 1950s when the Ranas finally decamped, Nepal's new popular government threw open the nation's doors to foreign imports, including films. In the next two decades five movie theaters opened in Kathmandu screening mostly Hindi films, and the occasional Nepali or English production.

Along with cinema, the 1950s saw another new form of representation in Kathmandu, ethnography. The Ranas had been as suspicious of anthropologists as they had been of cinema, but after 1950 the "culturally pristine" Kathmandu valley became a happy hunting grounds for social scientists, and a veritable "laboratory" for the new post-war paradigm of international development (Fujikura 1996). But again even in the early ethnographic literature on Kathmandu Newars--material often cited as the ethnographic benchmark against which to gauge culture change--we find mention of links between commercial cinema and new kinds of fashion consciousness. For example already in the 1950s Gopal Singh Nepali could cite the "introduction of the cinema [as] one of the contributory factors for bringing about a new trend in the style of dress in Nepal" (1955:68). Likewise the people that my co-workers and I have spoken with in recent years have almost unanimously pointed to the film industry (whether approvingly or otherwise) as the source of Kathmandu's fashion inspiration. My point is that the cosmopolitan debate over links between commercial cinema and changing socio-cultural practices has been a surprisingly consistent theme in the ostensibly remote and isolated mountain backwater of Kathmandu for close to 100 years.

Media signification and "disco fever"

But what do we make of these claims that film viewing can promote new kinds of social consciousness, and in particular, new kinds of consumer consciousness and consumer practice? Is this evidence for the standard assumption of "transference" in media theory which assumes the essential identity of the cinematic "text" and its consumer "reader"?¹ My own view is that media do have a role in creating consumer subjectivities but that media "effects" are considerably more subtle than most theories of "audience" construction would suggest (Liechty forthcoming). Here

¹ See Rodowick (1988) for a critical review of text/reader, spectacle/ spectator, subject/object relations in media theory.

I offer some ethnographic insights into these subtleties of commercial mediation, and some pieces of a theoretical structure to account for them. In particular I'm interested in the arrival of western youth fashions in Kathmandu, and how interest among Kathmandu's young people in this new kind of foreign fashion corresponds, on the one hand, with the arrival of flocks of Western young people into Kathmandu in the late 1960s, and on the other with, the arrival of Western youth-market films in the late 1970s.

By the late 1960s, Kathmandu emerged as the ultimate destination for a generation of newly mobile Western youth at the dawn of the era of global mass tourism, the city was already well into its post-1950 experience of rapid socio-cultural transformation in the face of sudden and extensive ties to cultural worlds beyond its borders (Liechty 1994, 1996). India, as the region's dominant power, quickly became Nepal's primary point of popular cultural reference, and the Hindi films playing in Kathmandu's cinema halls helped cement Indian claims to regional leadership in cultural modernization.

For example, one man I spoke with in Kathmandu had moved to the city as a college student from his hometown of Biratnagar on the Nepali plains near the Indian border. Having grown up next door to a cinema hall in Biratnagar, Hari was an avid movie fan and, as a boy, studiously followed the fashions depicted in Bombay Hindi films. He described how (in the '60s) other young people in Kathmandu were also into Indian fashions, but the experience of going to the cinema hall was different from what it had been on the plains. In Kathmandu Hari encountered the wealthy descendants of the old Rana ruling class. According to Hari:

[W]hen I went to see a movie here . . . Well, at that time only the Rana people were doing the fashion, because they had good money. And so they would come with all this fashion to see this lousy cinema hall. Because there was no other entertainment, and the public thing, you know. They were coming all this fashion this and that, and they were staying up in the balcony, and we were seeing them from below. Oooooo! [looks up with a face of fawning admiration]. And they were claiming that they were not copying fashion from Bombay [like we were]. "We are copying this fashion from Paris !" [they said].

Ironically at this time Kathmandu cinema halls were places where one could see two kinds of fashion: one in front on the screen and on the bodies of some of the cinema-goers in the main gallery who followed Bombay fashions, and the other above and behind on the bodies of the wealthy Rana socialites who, ensconced in their pricey balcony seats and Euro-fashions, literally looked down on those below. Thus in the mid 1960s middle-class young people in Kathmandu had a kind of visual access to both Bombay fashions and Euro-american fashions. But of those interested in and able to indulge

in fashion, the overwhelming preference was for the Indian fashion scene that they knew primarily through celluloid representations.

But all of this began to change, Hari explained, when, in his words, "the jeans came." From Hari's point of view, the late 1960s were less remarkable for being the time when tens of thousands of Western young people suddenly descended on the Kathmandu valley, than as the time when blue jeans first appeared on the city streets. Up to that point Western tourists in Kathmandu had been very few in number, mostly late middle-aged and wealthy, and safely sequestered in a handful of relatively posh hotels.² Yet with the arrival of younger tourists, including the so-called hippies, foreigners began to hit the streets where they elicited a whole new sector of "budget-class" tourist businesses which in turn began to spread tourist dollars to a much wider segment of the local economy.³ As Hari went on to explain:

From that time people had money and afterward there was no [one] class to do the fashion. Everybody can do the fashion. Everybody can wear jeans.

Before this people worried about their dress only during some festivals, or some marriage ceremonies. They needed the very good, or very clean clothes. But they didn't know what is the terri-cotton, what is the gabardine, what is the really good quality cloth.

But it is from that period, when the jeans came, that they got fashion. And movies, that was one of the things. Like in Indian movies, they are doing, like the hero always wearing the fashionable things, and they are giving the fashions here for the middle class, and the lower middle. Like what Amitab Bhachan is wearing, the youngsters over here, they want to do here.

So first was the Hindi [cinema] and still it's effecting. For everything from talk, to manner, the way [strikes several chic poses] and like this. Otherwise [before cinema] it was completely village-type, these people here. At that time the tourists were appreciating this place very much, the Kathmandu Valley.

Thus "when the jeans came" the increasing amounts of tourist-related cash-flow made it possible for many more people in the city to "do fashion." Yet ironically the fashion that most young people were interested in doing was not so much the fashion of the "jeans" culture, as the fashion of the Indian cinema. By most accounts, aside from introducing blue jeans, Western tourists in Kathmandu during the 1970s did not have a very wide impact on popular styles in the city. Very few Nepalis entered into the "freak" lifestyle or fashions

² See Peissel (1966) for an account of the early hotel trade in Kathmandu.

³ See Liechty (1996) for more on the development of budget tourism.

associated with the young tourists. Of those who did, many were actually young people from Darjeeling, already very cosmopolitan, who had come to Kathmandu precisely because of its youth tourist scene.

By chance one of my early visits to Kathmandu--in the late 1970s--coincided with what people identified as the first significant non-South Asian youth fashion wave. By the late 1970s Kathmandu had played host to droves of Western youth for a full decade, but aside from a few elites and other marginal types, most fashion-minded people in Kathmandu took their cues from the styles portrayed in Hindi films. Yet when I arrived flowing hair, disco shirts, and bell-bottom pants were de rigueur for many student-aged young men in Kathmandu. I remember shoe-makers sitting on street corners whittling enormous platform shoes out of blocks of wood, trying to keep up with demand for the new disco fashion footwear. In short, "Saturday Night Fever" had struck Kathmandu and was in the process of proving itself to be one of the first truly global consumer epidemics.

What is significant about Kathmandu's "disco fashion wave" is that, as I mentioned, it was the first Western fashion trend in the city, and that it was directly tied to the arrival of video film technology. With "video parlors" sprouting like mushrooms in the late 1970s (Liechty 1994:134-137), for the first time a broad cross-section of Kathmandu residents had access to Western films. By all accounts the initial demand for these Western films--along with Indian and East Asian ("Kung-Fu") films also available on video--was enormous. People with money to invest in video players and screens made fortunes showing video films 24 hours a day as Kathmandu citizens went on a kind of viewing frenzy. Rather than the two or three Hindi films a month in the local cinema halls, people could now choose from a vast and constantly changing selection of video films from around the world. Kathmandu residents recall that for most of a year schools, government offices, and private businesses were disrupted as people flocked to see what seemed to be an unlimited supply of video films.

The point that I want to stress is that when video arrived Kathmandu residents had seen waves of young Western tourists but it was only with general access to Western mass media that the first Western youth fashions took hold. What this suggests is that the meaning and allure of modern fashion is intimately tied to the mode of its presentation and representation. Fashion becomes meaningful--and thereby potentially attractive and usable--primarily in the mediated texts and contexts (here cinematic productions) in which it is represented. Commercial media render fashions meaningful by situating them in image worlds in which to imagine both the fashioned self and others.

By the late 1970s people in Kathmandu had seen at least a decade of Western youth fashions--ranging from the "mod" to the hippie-esque--that were, from the

Nepali perspective, no more inherently bizarre than the disco fashions of John Travolta. Yet what disco films provided, that resident Westerners did not, was an entire sphere of signification within which a certain fashion package fit. Clothing became the material signifier for a whole range of referents from disco music (also commoditized) and youth identities, to particular styles of sexuality, gender display, and freedom. With disco films (and disco cassettes) came a new imaginary space (which took its place alongside those produced by Indian films and their associated fashion commodities) in which people could experiment with other ways of being.

Conclusion

When I speak of media as producing "spheres of signification" that surround filmed commodities, and "imaginary spaces" where people almost literally "try on" new identities, I mean to suggest that what mass media produce are not types of consumer subjectivity, but modes of consumer subjectivity. Media produce not new consumer beings, but new ways of being consumers. As I have argued elsewhere (Liechty forthcoming) we don't have to view Kathmandu's "video boom" of the late 1970s as marking the sudden co-option of Nepali youth by the forces of global capitalism. Disco fever did not render young Nepalis any less Nepali although it did provide an opportunity for them to imagine Nepaliness and youthfulness in different ways: ways which were--not insignificantly--highly commodified (Liechty 1995). Ultimately this is more a story of the spread of global capitalism as cultural process, than "Westernization" or some kind of global cultural homogenization.

At the heart of these new global capitalist cultural processes lies the power of commercial media and their ability to embed commodities in layers of signification that ultimately fill out a kind of consumer imaginary, or what I have called elsewhere a "consumer sphere" (Liechty forthcoming). The story of disco films and disco fashions in Kathmandu hints at ways in which commercial media construct spheres of signification around commodities (here "fashions"). These are complex spheres of meaning that bring together a range of identities, ideas, behaviors, and commodities--for example youth, freedom, dance, fashions, and music--that are conflated such that together they form an imaginary unity. Western clothing styles themselves, though frequently worn by young tourists on Kathmandu streets, did not "capture the imaginations" of local young people nearly to the extent that cinematic representations of these same fashions were able to do. Although earlier fashion practice in the city had been inspired by Indian cinema, Kathmandu's "disco wave" provides a particularly clear illustration of the power of commercial media by showing how the mere presence of consumer goods (on the bodies of local elites and tourists) is not enough to inspire consumer

desire; commodities require signification and media are crucial channels for modern consumer signification.

Rather than simply assuming the transference of a commodity's mediated "text" onto the consumer "reader," the consumer sphere stands between product and consumer. In the consumer sphere the power and resources of commercial signification collide with the power and resources of consumer agents who enter the sphere to pursue their own local socio-cultural historical projects. In this way we don't have to see the relationship between commercial representation and consumer as that between a subject and an object. Instead we can conceptualize the consumer sphere as the space in which multiple agencies engage each other, sometimes in complicity--as when local class formations adopt consumerism as their mode of class practice (Liechty 1994)--or in resistance--as when consumers critique the new fashion system as being predatory and immoral (Liechty 1994). In fact the consumer sphere model helps us conceptualize how both resistance and complicity are perhaps always essentially simultaneous subject positions when it comes to relations to global capitalism. Subjectivity or identity is not a unitary state, but is comprised of multiple and even contradictory epistemic logics, or ways of being.

The model of consumer signification and subjectivity that I'm proposing helps us understand the dynamics of meaning in the global consumer sphere by theorizing that the meaning of goods does not reside in the goods themselves. Instead their meanings are first constructed in the privileged commercial domain of the consumer sphere where goods bask in the mediated auras of value and desire that media are able to assemble. But their ultimate meanings are derived in the interactions of individuals and groups who, in the course of living out local cultural projects and trajectories, enter this mediated consumer sphere and consume these goods in complex mixtures of choice and social necessity. By locating the global in the local consumer sphere, we can begin to see how powerful transnational meanings and messages enter local cultural systems, even while being selectively adapted to local cultural projects as individual consumers bring local cultural resources to bear on their interactions with globalized commodities and their meanings. If we locate this negotiation in local consumer spheres we have a better chance of theorizing the interactions of local agency and global commercial co-option. We can begin to see how in the global cultural economy what is shared is not a common cultural experience, but a increasingly common experience of cultural processes that now inflect day to day lives around the world.

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Potala (Photograph by Daniel Miller)

