

THE SOCIAL PRACTICE OF CINEMA AND VIDEO-VIEWING IN KATHMANDU

Mark Liechty

Introduction

A study of popular music conducted in Kathmandu in the mid-1970s concluded that "Nepal is still largely a pre-mass media society in which people perform to entertain themselves" (Anderson and Mitchell 1978:256). Yet only fifteen years later Kathmandu had unmistakably entered the mass media age. With the widespread availability of audio cassette players, a booming local cassette recording industry, and direct links to the major pirate cassette mills of Singapore and Bangkok, by the early 1990s the valley was awash in commercially recorded music ranging from Hindi film songs, Nepali pop, and traditional Newar folk music, to Elvis, Stan Getz, Beastie Boys, and King Sunny Adé. Along with this flood of commercial music, film hoardings touting the latest Hindi and Nepali cinematic offerings cluttered the city's skyline, and hundreds of video cassette rental shops provided a steady stream of mass-mediated entertainment from around the world for Kathmandu's middle-class¹ homes. In the 1990s many people in Kathmandu increasingly interpret their lives, locations, and systems of value through the ever-expanding frames of reference offered them in television and print media, cinema, international music, and the new realm of commodities from around the world.²

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1. Although elsewhere (Liechty n.d.) I develop a more practice- and discourse-oriented definition of class generally, and middle class in particular, in this paper "middle class" is defined according to income levels (indexed by ownership of certain consumer goods, most notably VCRs), education levels, and family occupation (salaried "tertiary" labor: business, professions, civil service, etc.).
 2. Research for this article was carried out in the Kathmandu valley between 1988 and 1991. My remarks here are based on over 200 open-ended, tape-recorded interviews—conducted by four Nepali co-workers (see acknowledgements) and myself—with a cross-section of urban residents, plus interviews with film makers, actors, cinema hall owners, and other film industry personnel. Also relevant to this paper is "participant observation" in the form of attending dozens of Hindi and Nepali film and

In this article I sketch the outlines of what might be called the history and sociology of mass media consumption in Kathmandu. Focusing on electronic visual mass media—commercial cinema and video—I explore the changing class and gender dynamics of electronic media consumption in the city. I am concerned with questions such as: Who watches what? In what settings? Why? and How have these patterns developed over time?

As in many peripheral (in geographic and/or economic terms) areas of the globe, in Kathmandu private entrepreneurs used relatively low-capital video technology to bring a global array of cinematic (as opposed to televisual) media products to urban markets before the Nepali state was able to establish television broadcasting.³ Thus the fact that in this article I pay less attention to television than to cinema or video is due in part to television's relatively recent arrival on the Kathmandu scene.⁴ But just as important is the fact that at the time when the research for this article was conducted (1988-1991), video viewing still comprised a larger part of people's media diet than TV viewing.⁵ With the arrival of satellite television in late 1991 that equation began to change and although I am not aware of recent consumer studies that compare television with video viewing, the steep drop in the number of video rental shops in Kathmandu between 1991 and 1996 suggests that urban Nepali consumers no longer treat their television sets—once referred to as "screens"—merely as appendages of their VCRs.

Considering the Nepali government's late arrival on the mass media scene, one might argue that electronic visual entertainment in Nepal has been less "mediated" by state interests than by commercial forces.⁶ In this

video-film screenings in local cinema and video halls. Generalizations and conclusions are based on this qualitative data.

3. As a place where video predates television, Kathmandu provides an important contrastive case to Conrad Kottak's study of television viewership in Brazil (1990). Kottak proposes five stages of viewership from the introduction of television (stage one), to the eventual arrival of VCR technology (stage five). My aim is not to dispute Kottak's stages, but simply to point out that in Kathmandu, stage five predates stage one! Contrasts between the cases of Brazil and Nepal underline the importance of rooting media studies in local historical and ethnographic contexts.
4. Whereas the first commercial cinema hall opened in the early 1950s, and video viewing was wide spread by the late 1970s, it was only in December 1985 that Nepal Television (NTV) began regular broadcasting.
5. This is an impression shared by other researchers, e.g., Baral 1990:67-68.
6. In the 1970s Anderson and Mitchell spoke of film as "a state-regulated industry" with "firm and consistent" policies on importation (1978:250-

regard Nepal's experience may be less like India or Brazil, where an important media technology—television—has been controlled by the state since the early 1960s, and more like the United States where commercial interests reign supreme in almost all mass media markets. However, the majority of mass media products in Nepal are foreign, mostly from India but also from East Asia, Europe, and North America. In this article I explore the experience of cinema and video viewing in a society where video pre-dates television, where (at least until recently) cinematic modes of narrative development and representation were more popular than the conventions typically associated with television, where state control of mass media is relatively low, and where most of the media products consumed are foreign. Even while participating in some of the archetypically *modern* technologies and transnational commercial processes of the twentieth century, Kathmandu's experience cannot be easily subsumed under some uniform cultural "master narrative" of modernity.

The first two sections of the article lay out a brief history of cinema in Kathmandu from the total censorship of the late Rana era, to a "golden age" of cinema-going in the 1960s and '70s, to the "video boom" and the spread of video technology into middle-class homes in the early 1980s. The third section details the contemporary divide in Kathmandu between lower-class cinema hall patrons, and middle-class home video consumers. I discuss how cinema-goers describe their experience in terms of pleasure and group affect, before in section four turning to a discussion of how middle-class video viewers locate their experience as media consumers in a rhetoric of justification stressing utility and moral/educational value. In sections four and five I turn also to issues of gender difference in middle-class viewing practices and tastes in film. I stress that a rhetoric of "realism" serves not only to distance the middle class from those below, but also—by having men deny women access to more "realistic" non-South Asian films—to reproduce male gender privilege within the middle

1). Yet even while the Panchayat government took an active role in keeping out just about everything but run-of-the-mill Indian commercial releases, it is important to make the distinction between "state-regulated" and state-produced media. The Nepali government took some interest in film production but even this was minimal. Between the early 1950s and 1990 48 Nepali language films were made (in Nepal and elsewhere), of which only 13 were produced or co-produced by the Nepali government (*Kāmanā* # 50 [2047 v.s.]:25-57). With hundreds of Indian and non-South Asian films being shown in Kathmandu every year, the Nepali government was producing only about three films per decade.

class. I conclude with a discussion of how a rhetoric of "realism" helps the middle class to "naturalize" its own class values and practices in a new mediated epistemological mode.

I. Cinema in Kathmandu

In an article published in *National Geographic* in 1935 Penelope Chetwode paints a romantic picture of Kathmandu as the capital of a "sequestered kingdom" with a "curious mixture of new and old." Alongside ancient, exotic, and fantastically ornamented temples and palaces one finds "severely practical barracks, schools, colleges, hospitals, and prisons built in the 'European style'" as well as "immense 'modern' palaces" designed by European architects. Speaking of the then-reigning Rana autocrat Juddha Shamsheer, Chetwode enthuses:

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).

Indeed Juddha Shamsheer, like his brother Chandra Shamsheer before him (see Landon 1928ii:2), was both "anxious" to introduce Western disciplinary technologies ("barracks, schools, colleges, hospitals, and prisons"), and "anxious" about maintaining tight control over foreign representations, and representations of foreigners.⁷ Recognizing that their own authority depended on the maintenance of British power in India, the Rana elite kept tight control over all information about, and representations of, the world beyond the Kathmandu valley. Their efforts ranged from all but prohibiting the movement of Nepalis or foreigners in and out of the valley, to banning or tightly controlling books and newspapers. The particular "demoralizing effect" that Juddha Shamsheer feared most from cinema was the emergence of an awareness of the outside world no longer dictated, or "mediated," by the Nepali elite.

Juddha Shamsheer almost certainly had film-viewing experiences, both in Kathmandu and while traveling abroad, long before he constructed Nepal's first cinema hall around 1943 (Joshi 2045 v.s.:35).⁸ But Juddha's

7. For a more detailed discussion of this anxiety, which I call "selective exclusion," see Liechty 1997.

8. In fact Rana elites had probably been viewing cinema in Kathmandu from as early as the turn of the twentieth century. P. S. Rana (1978:109) notes

cinema, built on the grounds of his palace, was a private hall reserved for the viewing pleasures of the Rana and Royal elites alone. By the time the first public cinema was opened in Kathmandu during the final chaotic years of the regime, the Ranas were already going the way of the British in India. Around 1949 the *Janaseva* ("Public Service") cinema opened on a prime spot in Kathmandu's New Road commercial district (Baniya 2045 v.s.:51). The Rana government kept tight control over the *Janaseva's* public cinematic offerings apparently favoring conservative, pious, Hindi religious films ("theologicals") over more racy fare. The *Janaseva's* first publicly shown film was entitled *Rambibaha* or "Ram's Wedding." Prayag Raj Joshi writes that:

In the Janaseva hall when "Ram's Wedding" was being shown the audience thought that Lord Ram himself had actually come to the hall. Even people with balcony tickets crowded to the front of the hall hoping to get the direct blessing [*darśan*] of Lord Ram (2045 v.s.:37).

Joshi recalled how cinema-goers threw rice, coins, and flowers at the screen as they would have at a temple image of Ram.

For decades prior to the *Janaseva* hall's opening Kathmandu residents had heard tales of the cinema from people returning from business trips or pilgrimages to India, and were eager to experience these forbidden cinematic wonders themselves. For young and old cinema became one of India's primary attractions. One elderly Nepali gentleman from a long-established Newar trading family recalled how as a boy (in the 1930s) he would eagerly await the return of trading parties from India. Three or four times a year family members would return from the south and "The first thing they would talk about was the films they had seen in India." He and his cousins were enthralled by the stories of how in India one could see horses running, people fighting, vehicles driving—all "on a piece of cloth." "I was amazed! How could all these things be happening on a piece of cloth?!"

But cinema-viewing was only one of a host of social, political, and economic liberties denied to citizens by the Nepali government. Thus with the end of the Rana regime in 1951, people in Kathmandu reacted to

that during the celebrations marking Dev Shamsheer's ascension to the position of Prime Minister in 1901, public film exhibitions were held on Kathmandu's Thundi Khel parade ground. Surely Dev's decision to show films to the masses only contributed to his reputation as a dangerous liberal. Dev Shamsheer was deposed by his brother Chandra after only three months in office.

a century of repression and isolation by establishing a democratic polity and flinging open the borders to more or less unregulated traffic of people and goods. A number of private cinema halls sprang up and by the mid 1970s the valley boasted five film venues (Anderson & Mitchell 1978:250) screening mostly Hindi films and the occasional Nepali or English production.

In the memories of many city residents the 1970s were something of a "golden era" for cinema-going in Kathmandu. Members of middle- and upper middle-class families recall their childhoods when going to the cinema was a major social event. One Newar businessman described how the whole family—including cousins, aunts, and uncles—would attend the cinema together on Saturdays. Everything was organized, people were sent to buy tickets, others prepared food. On special occasions, such as when his father wrapped up a particularly profitable business venture, his family would celebrate during mid-week by going to see a movie. Another man, the son of a high-ranking Chetri civil servant, described how "when I was a kid" in the mid 1970s, going to the cinema "was like going to a party!"

If you were going to a film, it was like going to the theatre! People got all dressed up, and they would go and have a show. Even my family, my mother dressed up, and my father, and we'd get in a car and go see a film.

Others too described how in earlier days it was common to see cinema court yards crowded with the cars of wealthy moviegoers. The most common film fare in the 1960s and `70s was Hindi cinema, but many Kathmandu residents recall that during these years, more so than in the 1990s, English language films were also occasionally featured in local halls.

In the 1960s and `70s Kathmandu's cinema halls hosted the full gamut of local society from rickshaw pullers to top government officials. The same young man who described moving-going as "like a party" went on to explain how:

At that time everybody in the city used to go to the movie theatre at the same time, from the top to the bottom of the society. But now it's very uncommon for people of different economic backgrounds to come together like that.

But even then, people weren't actually all sitting together, were they?

No, but they were all consuming the same thing, the same product and there were indirect relations. I mean, they felt each other's presence. And they also, like, how were people sitting down below reacting to

films? Normally—I don't know how they do it now—but from the balcony there was absolutely no reaction. But from the lower section there was whistling and clapping when the hero comes and fights. There was just a lot of reaction, but none from the balcony.

During these decades Kathmandu's cinema halls were like microcosms of the local class universe. Upper and lower classes occupied high and low spaces in the theatre where, even while separated, "they felt each other's presence." In this setting the price of one's ticket was inversely proportional to the bodily affect that one displayed. While those below whistled and clapped those above displayed their class distinction in the classic mode of self-control (cf. Elias 1978). Yet, as this man pointed out, even while upholding class difference, the cinema hall at this time was a place where all of local society shared a common consumer space, and a common consumer object. All of this changed dramatically with the arrival of video technology in the late 1970s and the video boom of the early 1980s.

II. The Video Boom

In the late 1970s there was a massive surge in video consumption in Kathmandu. In 1978 government trade regulations shifted allowing people to import (and own) video technology for the first time.⁹ One acquaintance reported the rumor that members of the royal family were the first to acquire import privileges and made huge profits during the first year. Whatever the case, Todd Lewis, who personally "observed the coming of the video boom to Kathmandu," reports that almost overnight 150 VCRs hit the local market. "Entrepreneurs opened up video salons that were packed night and day for almost ten months" (1984:580). In the rush to stake claims in this entertainment gold mine, those with cash or convertible resources invested up to 100,000 rupees in video equipment. During the first few months of the video boom, by packing fifty or more people in a room, at up to fifteen rupees per head, for up to seven or eight shows a day, Kathmandu's video entrepreneurs could earn 30,000 rupees or more (several times the average annual income) in a single week.

The video salons or "parlors" were little more than converted store rooms and living spaces in private homes. The original parlors were famed for being cramped, dark, smelly, hot, unventilated rooms where people sat on straw mats. Electric fans, if present, were more likely to be

9. I have been unable to find the official documentation pertaining to this shift in import regulations.

keeping the VCR, rather than patrons, from burning up! With time some entrepreneurs tried to capture a more upscale clientele by offering more comfortable seating, snacks, and limited admission, for a price.

With dozens and dozens of video parlors each offering a different film, Kathmandu residents could suddenly choose from an enormous selection of media products. No longer limited to the slow-to-change offerings of the cinema halls, film fans could select from dozens of Hindi films, and for the first time, a wide variety of English language and East Asian films. Clint Eastwood, John Travolta, and Bruce Lee took their places alongside Hindi film stars in the estimation of Kathmandu youth. Those who were school boys at the time remember cutting class to watch video films. Stories abound of the embarrassment that ensued when the lights went up at the end of a video session to reveal teachers, parents, neighbors, and relatives who had also been watching the same (sometimes questionable) film!

Young people in particular had an almost unlimited appetite for films. One young man who grew up in the heart of the old city where most of the parlors were located (a Newar then in his teens and the son of a prosperous merchant) remembered that:

At the beginning, when [video] first came, I used to watch every day!
At that time you could watch three films for 25 rupees, all night long.
Sometimes I'd watch all day, sometimes all night. Anyway, I used to watch a lot!

Businessmen and office workers also recall how they would take three hour "lunch breaks" to watch films in the middle of the day. Many people pointed out to me that in Kathmandu video technology made film viewing a truly mass phenomenon. Although cinema halls had long been popular, since the video parlors were literally in private homes, for the first time everyone—from infants to grandmothers—was watching an international smorgasbord of commercial cinema.

From the outset one popular dish in this cinematic banquet was the "blue," or pornographic film.¹⁰ Yet ultimately it was a political—rather than moral—threat that spurred government efforts to regain some of the control over media consumption that it had lost with the coming of video. The Hindi film *Krānti* (revolution) hit the Kathmandu video scene sometime during 1979 or 1980. This big-budget allegorical depiction of the Indian struggle for independence from the British caught the attention

10. For more on the history and consumption of pornographic media in Kathmandu, see Liechty n.d.

of the Nepali government who saw it as a threat to the country's partyless "Panchayat Democracy." Since the then-banned Nepali Congress party had close ties to the Indian nationalist movement, leaders of Nepal's "Panchayati Raj" banned the exhibition of *Krānti*. In the short run the ban did little more than to increase the demand for the film. People with *Krānti* cassettes charged up to 2,500 rupees for three hours, and accompanied their cassettes to secret screenings to make sure that no copies were made. But eventually the *Krānti* incident led to a government crackdown on public video showing. A series of nebulous regulations, taxes, and licensing procedures were established such that running a video parlor soon became far more complicated and far less profitable. For a few years small private video halls flourished at Kathmandu's exhibition grounds (Brikhuti Mandap) where their offerings could be controlled by the government. These too eventually succumbed to a government regulation that only Nepali films could be shown on the premises.

Video parlors continued to operate more or less clandestinely through the early 1980s (and a few, mostly specializing in pornography, continue in the 1990s), but what government regulation had weakened, lessening of demand has nearly ended. Through the 1980s more and more middle-class families acquired VCRs allowing them to screen their own choice of films with far more comfort and convenience. Indeed as more and more VCRs entered private homes for private use, the next video-related "boom" (an echo of the first) swept the valley. Through the mid- and late-1980s video cassette rental shops opened up, their numbers increasing exponentially. At first confined mostly to the New Road commercial district, shops began appearing to the north in the Chetrapati and Thamel areas, before showing up in almost every residential area across the Kathmandu valley. By the early 1990s supply seems to have met (or exceeded) demand as some of the once-thriving cassette rental shops either folded up or were forced to diversify.

III. Hall vs. Home: Class Distinction and Technology

As a result of Kathmandu's "video boom" and the subsequent arrival of VCRs into middle-class homes, by the early 1990s, according to one informant, most middle-class adults had not set foot in a movie hall for close to a decade. Once regular patrons of cinema halls featuring Hindi films, most businessmen, civil servants, professionals, and their families now stayed at home to watch the same Hindi films (plus a variety of others). Unlike the large numbers of seasonal and permanent laborers who make up the urban working poor, members of the urban middle class are

far more likely to have access to a VCR—either their own or that of a relative or neighbor. In most middle-class neighborhoods, VCRs are so common that access is not a problem. "Before I used to go to the cinema a lot, but now everyone has a *deck*,¹¹ so why go?" asked a married Newar man in his mid-30s. Viewing the same trend from another perspective, a Nepali film producer lamented, "Classy people don't go to the theatre anymore."

Except for viewing Nepali feature films (which are not available on video cassette), for most middle-class city residents there is indeed almost no reason to go to a commercial cinema hall. Practically all Hindi films, as well as films from outside the sub-continent, are readily available in local video shops often on (or even before) their official release date. Kathmandu is an important node in the South Asian pirate video cassette distribution network; couriers vie with each other to get prints of the latest Bombay films onto the international market. Kathmandu's larger cassette merchants have banks of VCRs capable of high-speed dubbing ready to crank out copies of Hindi films so that hundreds of local fans can enjoy the latest offerings, often on the same day that the film is released in Indian cinemas. Major American films show up in Kathmandu shops long before they are officially released on video and sometimes even before their US cinematic release (as in the case of *Batman* in 1989). "Why should I go to the hall?" asked the 24 year old wife of a Newar businessman:

All the new ones come to our house too. They're brought from India and, like, if it's released today [in India] we can see it today immediately.

Kathmandu's commercial cinema halls run mostly popular Hindi films. Of the hundreds of Hindi films produced each year, only the more successful productions reach Kathmandu, usually arriving some months after their Indian release. Thus contrary to the experience of most video film viewers in the West, when a popular film arrives in Kathmandu theatres most middle-class cinema buffs have already seen it, perhaps many times, on video. One 18 year old Chetri girl explained:

A while ago some friends asked me to go see [the very popular Hindi film] *Dil* in the *hall* but I'd already seen it three or four times here at home so I didn't go.

11. Asterisks designate English words used in statements otherwise made in Nepali and presented here in translation.

Furthermore, by the time a Hindi film arrives in Kathmandu people are already familiar with the film's songs from listening to Nepali and Indian radio, and have probably read about the film in Hindi film magazines available on every street corner. In another peculiarly South Asian twist, a few people mentioned that they will go see a Hindi film in the theatre if, after seeing the video many times, they decide they really like the songs and action.¹²

Thus for middle-class viewers there are at least *some* occasions when they might see a Hindi film at the cinema. Many people who almost never watched Hindi films in theatres admitted that the excitement of the "big *screen*" experience could not be reproduced at home. Others complained that the video prints available in Kathmandu are sometimes in such poor quality, or so cluttered with on-screen advertising, that it is difficult to enjoy the film. But even so, most preferred home to hall. One 22 year old Newar woman, married to a factory manager, noted that:

There's a big difference between seeing a film in the *hall* or on *video* big *screen* or little. But still I prefer watching at home. Once you've gone to the *hall* you just have to sit there and watch. But with the *video*, you can select and choose how you want to watch.

Being able to control the viewing experience is one important reason for preferring home to hall.

Yet beyond the common assertions that cinema halls are too stuffy, hot, crowded, noisy, and generally uncomfortable, potential middle-class cinema patrons complain that going to the movies is simply inconvenient. Because the halls have no system of advanced ticket booking anyone who goes to the cinema has to stand in long lines, only to be jostled by all kinds of "unruly riffraff." Moreover, aside from on Saturdays when halls are truly mobbed, it is difficult to fit a trip to the cinema into a middle-class working schedule. Office workers who might consider catching a 6:00 PM show know that by the time the film ends at 9:00 there will be no taxis, not to mention buses, available. For those Kathmandu residents whose lives are structured around office or business hours, the inconvenience associated with cinema-going is more than enough to keep them at home in front of their own VCRs.

The exception to this rule is in the case of Nepali feature films. Time and again women and men said that they, in the words of one 25 year old Newar woman, "never go to the cinema hall except to see Nepali films."

12. The same is true of middle-class film fans in India (see Akela 1991).

Nepali films are simply unavailable on video cassette; film producers know full well that any video pirating of their work would spell financial disaster in an already limited consumer market. To protect their investments, Nepali film producers vigilantly guard their prints against any reproduction guaranteeing that anyone who wants to see a Nepali language production *must* catch the film during its sometimes brief run in the commercial halls.

It is not surprising then that in the early 1990s Kathmandu's cinema halls often had a distinctly different atmosphere on those occasions when a Nepali feature film replaced the standard Hindi fare. When Nepali films were showing, cinema-goers tended to be better dressed, there tended to be more women in the audience, and the average age of those present tended to be somewhat older. In particular Nepali films brought out groups of well-dressed married Newar and Brahman-Chetri women, often with children, who would come for one of the late morning or early afternoon shows. But these shows also brought out far more of the smartly-dressed teenage and young-adult men and women who would normally not set foot in a commercial theatre.

As I discuss in more detail below, even though middle-class people in Kathmandu often disparage Nepali language productions as being, for some, "not as good as Hindi films," or for others, "just as bad as Hindi films," these same people will often go out of their way to see a Nepali production. For example when a well-educated Nepali journalist in his late 30s mentioned that the only time he goes to the cinema is to see Nepali films, I asked "Why?"

Like if I go see a Nepali movie, well, I'll see it for certain reasons. One could be, well, it's Nepali! I want to know how these films are coming along. And then another reason could be, "Hey, come on, let's go see this for a change." Or it might be that I want to go see how the hero or heroine in my neighborhood has acted!

In other words Nepali films attract middle-class men and women to the cinema halls for many more reasons than simple entertainment. In a local market dominated by the Hindi film industry for the past fifty years, Nepali audiences are interested in local productions for their novelty appeal, but also for their "Nepaliness" and how they compare with Indian standards.

If most of middle-class Kathmandu only goes to the cinema to see Nepali films, who then makes up the audience for the much more

common Hindi films?¹³ In the words of the same Nepali film producer who bemoaned the lack of "classy people" in local theatres, since the arrival of video, "The audience is basically the lower strata and I notice that now almost no one over 30 goes to the cinema any more." He confirmed my own impression that the large majority of those people who attend Hindi film shows in Kathmandu are lower-class teenage males. Because of over-population and economic deterioration in much of rural Nepal, the Kathmandu valley—one of very few significant urban centers in the hill region—attracts thousands of people from the hills, the Tarai, and even from India, in search of permanent or seasonal employment. These people fill the swelling squatter settlements (Gallagher 1991; Yami & Mikesell 1990) and tenement houses around Kathmandu as they seek work as day laborers, domestics, construction-, garment-, or carpet-industry workers, office peons, and street vendors. Along with a large student population from rural Nepal, this is the group—mostly young, male, and with little by way of financial resources—that makes up the bulk of those who attend commercial screenings of Hindi films.

For landless and/or low-caste Nepalis in the hill regions labor migration has been a necessary domestic strategy for centuries (Shrestha 1990). Young men leave their villages headed for employment in India and sometimes Kathmandu. For example one young man that I interviewed was from a low occupational caste group in a rural area to the north-west of Kathmandu. When I met him Shiva was working as a vendor, selling Chinese costume jewelry, hair ornaments, and tiger balm from a wicker basket on the crowded sidewalk next to Kathmandu's Rani Pokhari. Then in his mid 20s, Shiva had first come to Kathmandu as a teenager and worked for a short time before going on to India where he lived for five years. With some savings he came back to Kathmandu where, with some village friends, he got into the business of buying Chinese goods from Tibetan traders and then selling them direct to the public. Shiva told me that on a good day he could make up to 100 rupees profit. When I asked him if he planned to save money to return to his village, Shiva replied, "No."

How come?

Because in the village, even if you have money, there's nothing to buy that you really want; there's nothing enjoyable to buy. Plus in the

13. According to one film industry insider that I interviewed, in 1991 cinema halls in Kathmandu screened one Nepali film for every six Hindi films.

village, it's always work, troubles, and misery [*duḥkha*]. There you can find nothing enjoyable [*ramāilo*] to do.

For Shiva and many others from rural backgrounds living in the city, one of Kathmandu's main attractions—what made it an "enjoyable" place—was the cinema. Having lived in India Shiva not only learned to understand and speak Hindi, but had become very fond of Hindi films. Two or three times a month he packed up his goods and took in a Hindi film with a group of friends from the village with whom he shared a rented room. The Hindi film star Govinda was Shiva's favorite actor "because he can sing, dance, fight, and do everything very well." He especially liked the "*action*" and "*dañdañ-duñduñ*" (rowdy, thrilling, chaotic) type of films. Shiva's experiences are similar to those described in Phanindreshwar Paudel's study (1990) of Nepali menial laborers working in Bombay. Paudel notes that the only "specifically urban characteristic" of these men's lives as city residents was "viewing the cinema" (1990:64). Films were the only thing they spent money on outside of their family's basic needs. For people like Shiva and the men described by Paudel, marginalized by virtue of their places of origin and economic status, cinema-going is one way of being a part *of* the city, not just being *in* the city.

Indeed for the past few decades one of Kathmandu's primary points of attraction has been the cinema. Stories abound of being drawn to the city to watch films: stories of astonishment, delight, even terror. One man—a Chetri originally from east Nepal, in his early 40s, and now a teacher in Kathmandu—reminisced about his first film-going experience:

The first time I saw a film I was 8 years old. I'd gone to my uncle's house in Kathmandu. It was my first one and I've remembered it ever since. In fact I still do. I remember how in this movie there was one scene with a big tiger. I was so frightened that I wanted to get up and run away! But my uncle grabbed me and said, "Don't worry, it will stay on the screen. It's not going to come out." So I stayed but some others in the hall actually got up and ran out!¹⁴

People coming from this condition, like me, we *heard* about cinema, we *heard* about cars. When we were young, people would come to the village and talk about this and that. From this we had a strong desire to see these things for ourselves. Like bicycles, the first time I saw one, some guy had ridden it home from work [to my uncle's] and there it was. I had heard that bicycles had two wheels and went

14. Nacify (1989:52) records a similar film-going incident in Iran.

whizzing along, but when I saw it that night, how wonderful it was! I was amazed at how it could go without falling down.

This kind of *curiosity* was the same I had for cinema, cars, and all kinds of other things. In the hills we heard lots of things because there were lots of soldiers who had been in the British Army and they told lots of stories. And others, after the rice is harvested, would go to the plains and come back with goods and stories. From these people we'd get a long detailed description of every film that they saw. For this reason, we kids as soon as we got to a town, we'd go straight for the cinema!

When I asked him if he could describe what it is that attracts rural people to the cinema, he went on to explain that:

In cinema we see things we've never seen before. For example, in our society, where people come from the hills to the city, they see a woman dancing on the screen without many clothes. This you could never see in the village! [I was thinking] "What is this? Where am I? What is happening?" This is what is going through peoples' heads when they see this stuff. It's like another world. They don't know if they're dreaming or not. So for these reasons also people like to stay in the city. Like for me, when I saw my first film, I still remember only the really strange or amazing scenes—the rest I've all forgotten!

For this man, and likely for other arrivals from rural Nepal, the cinema—like the city itself—is like a bizarre dream, "like another world." Along with cars, bicycles, and other marvels such as electric lights, the cinema is part of what makes the city modern. But unlike these other things the cinema is also a place to revel in the dreams of modernity, to play at the borders between "dreaming or not."

For many recent arrivals in the city, attending the cinema is almost unavoidable, like a fact of life. For example when one young man (a 20 year old Brahman student from east Nepal) mentioned that he liked Hindi films, I asked how he had gotten interested. He answered in a tone that suggested my question was silly and naive:

Actually, it's mostly just a matter of the environment of Kathmandu. I mean it's not like someone has to come and force you to go! [Cinemas] are all over the place. Signs are everywhere on the street. So why not go? After the first time I just kept going by myself.

Another young man, also a 20 year old student, but from north of Kathmandu, had a similar answer as to how he had gotten interested in Hindi films.

Look, it's not a question of who got me into this. It's a fact that in Kathmandu there are so many *halls* that one is automatically interested in films if one lives here. That's the environment, I got interested by myself.

For these people the cinema is a fundamental part of the urban environment. Halls and hoardings are everywhere you look and interest is "automatic." No one has to "force you to go."

But the automatic attractions and pleasures of cinema-going are about more than exploring the frontiers of "another world." For people who frequent Hindi film shows in Kathmandu there are also pleasures near at hand: the pleasures of the group, of being surrounded by hundreds of others with whom you share an experience. When I asked one young man, a Brahman student from central Nepal in his early 20s, why he enjoyed going to Hindi films he replied:

There is much enjoyment in doing something like this in a big group. The people watching there with you are part of the attraction. Like if you're watching a social [*samajik*] film, then you are there crying along with *everyone* in the *hall*. This way of doing is *most* enjoyable! And then when the good part comes we all clap our hands, or shout at the slow parts.¹⁵

Another young man echoed these sentiments saying:

Once you get inside [the cinema] you are sitting there with hundreds of people, all arm to arm. There is real feeling/emotion [*bhāvāna*] in the *hall*! When there is a funny part, everyone laughs. When sad, everyone cries. There is strong emotion there, not like other places. It is like going to a fair [*melā*]; there is real satisfaction [*santuṣṭi*].

For the often rural-born, poor, working-class patrons of Hindi films the "satisfaction" and "enjoyment" of cinema going derives largely from the experience of shared emotions, of laughing, crying, and shouting in the company of hundreds of others who you know, in that instant, perfectly share your own strong feelings of pathos, fear, joy, and anger. The "real satisfaction" of cinema lies in people affirming one another's understandings and experiences of pleasure.

In a very real sense this is "mass entertainment": the mass-as-entertainment, the pursuit of entertainment in mass settings, or the

15. Nacify's account (1989:41) of cinema going in Iran during the 1950s describes a similarly raucous atmosphere of cat-calling, running commentary, cheering, booing, etc. See also Thomas (1985:128-30) who describes this atmosphere as the South Asian norm.

necessity of the mass in order to be entertained. For many of Kathmandu's cinema hall patrons it is precisely the experience of being *en masse* that brings pleasure. The cinema brings together those who delight in the experience of oneness with the group, those who celebrate the experience of losing themselves not so much in the mediated images before them as in the social body around them.

Perhaps not surprisingly many of the experiences that regular cinema attenders crave are precisely what many in Kathmandu's middle class find abhorrent. The crowds, the noise, the group affect that is supremely satisfying to some is supremely distasteful to others. Even ensconced in their higher-priced balcony seating (as they were in earlier decades) the "upper" classes feel the affront of the "mass audience" below whose powerful emotional synergy threatens to drag them "down" into the social strata they wish to escape. Significantly cinematic entertainment for the middle class is not a "mass" experience. Whether watching video films alone or with small groups of family or friends, these people shun the mass emotions of the cinema hall in favor of the more individualistic freedoms and conveniences of home viewing. In a sense the "move" from lower- to middle-class conditions of entertainment is the shift from *inclusion* to *exclusion*; while Hindi film viewers in the cinema halls seek the inclusive pleasures of oneness, middle-class video viewers seek the exclusive pleasures of separation, individuation, and freedom—*from* "the masses."¹⁶

The shift from the cinema audience of the 1960s and '70s (where different social strata shared a mutual, if somewhat uneasy viewing experience) to the audience of the 1980s and '90s (dominated by the lower social strata) was brought about largely by the introduction of a new modern consumer technology: the VCR. Although its effects are perhaps more dramatic than other consumer goods, the VCR is little different from a host of other modern commodities that—through the social practices that revolve around them—serve to isolate and individuate the middle class even while the middle class uses these goods as marks of distinction. In the case of the VCR (and its companion, television) the arrival of this single commodity into the home guarantees a continuous flow of commodities, both in the form of video films, and eventually, as in

16. The middle-class freedoms of consumerism—in which material privilege provides access to the "open" market—are freedoms predicated on the denial of, or limited access to, commodity markets by those without economic means. Thus in a sense the freedoms *of* consumerism are freedoms *from* the masses.

Kathmandu, televised commercial images and messages. A consumer strategy at once allows the middle class to distinguish itself from the mass; begins to transform the middle class into a group of "free," individuated, isolated consumers; transforms the middle-class home into a consumer space; and eventually reproduces itself as young people are socialized in a class ethos in which the work of class production is consumer consumption. In a very real sense commodity consumption is about class production, the production of a class of "free" and individuated consumers.

IV. Film preference: gender, class, age

Like any other film industry, Hindi productions span the gamut from those aimed at the international film festival circuit, to splashy big-budget extravaganzas, to "B-grade" action pictures, to back-room pornography. Not surprisingly then, most people in Kathmandu had very definite ideas about film categories and film quality. Middle-class viewers in particular divided films into many different genres: "*art*," "social," "*action*," "*love*," and "*blue*," (not to mention a range of Western and East Asian films).¹⁷ In this section I explore how stated film preferences correspond to categories of gender and age within the middle class.

So far in this article I have implied that people from the lower and middle classes watch essentially the same films, only in different settings, whether hall or home. Yet cinema owners know that a middle-class audience will only be lured into the theatre when a real block-buster arrives, and even among block-busters it is only those that appeal to middle-class young people (those with time to go to the halls) that might attract "classy" viewers. Much more likely to draw a crowd—even if of a lower class—is a certain kind of thrilling, action packed Hindi film that features excitement, romance, music, and spectacle all in one cinematic package. Hindi film stars like Govinda who, in the words of Shiva (the street merchant introduced above), "can sing, dance, fight, and do everything very well," are the heroes that play well to the average cinema-goer in Kathmandu. Thus middle-class film fans can point to the standard fare in the local halls and complain that the films shown are vulgar and deplorable.

What then are middle-class Hindi film fans watching on their VCRs, and who are these viewers? For the most part middle-class Hindi film

17. For more technical discussions of genre in South Asian cinema, see Thomas (1985:120), and Vasudevan (1989:30).

viewers are women, both young and middle-aged, who watch video films at home. As I discuss in more detail later in this article, middle-class men and boys also watch these films though they rarely express a preference for them, and when they do, it is with more or less elaborate qualifications.

The entrance of VCRs into middle-class homes in Kathmandu is only one of many factors that are at work in radically changing the nature of women's domestic experience. With increased education levels among women, increased cash flow in middle-class families, easily available low-cost domestic menial labor, improved transportation, and the arrival of various mediated entertainments (radio, video, television) into the home, young and middle-aged women live lives far removed (in terms of ease and luxury) from even their own mothers. While changing middle-class domestic lifestyle deserves an entire study in and of itself, here I consider only one facet of that experience: the experience of video film viewing at home.

For many women in middle-class homes—where husbands are at work and children at school during much of the day—video viewing has become a regular feature of their daily routines. If not everyday then several times during the week one of the family's young men will be commandeered to go to the video shop to pick up a new Hindi film. People listen for word of new arrivals and are willing to pay a premium for a copy of the "latest" Hindi film. While the family may watch a film together in the evening, just as often groups of women watch together during the slow hours of the early afternoon.¹⁸

One young woman, an 18 year old Chetri who had just acquired her high school diploma and was preparing to attend Kathmandu's all-women college, described the film-viewing patterns around her home. After noting that she watches three or four video films per week she explained that these days she doesn't even go to the cinema hall to watch Nepali films. "Why bother?" she asked. "I can see and hear the song sequences on the 'Gitanjali' program on [Nepal] TV* and if I want to hear the dialogue, I can go buy the *cassette.*" As for seeing Hindi films in the theatre, she observed, "There's always a big crowd there and why go if I can watch them here regularly?" Speaking for herself and the other women in the

18. In her study of "audio-visual culture" among South Asian families in London, Marie Gillespie (1989) describes a similar situation in which women (young and old) have a "generally greater engagement with popular Hindi videos" than do boys and men (1989:229). See also Gillespie 1995.

household, she went on to explain how video viewing fit into the daily routine:

After 11:00 when we're finished with the morning clean up and other jobs one of my "*didis*" will come over and invite me to see a film so I just go and watch. We just watch them for entertainment, to pass the time. Otherwise I just take a nap.

So after eating in the morning, we start a video at maybe 11:00 or 12:00 and the time passes quickly. By the time the video is finished it's already time for **tiffin**! After having tea I might listen to some songs on the **radio** before getting ready for the evening meal.

What struck me about these (and related) comments was how video viewing helps to stem the boredom of day-to-day existence in many urban middle-class homes. Unlike women in rural farming areas for whom there is a never ending supply of work to be done, or lower-class women in the city who either must work outside the home or cannot afford servants, the lives of urban middle-class women can often be ones of more or less house-bound monotony.¹⁹ Women in joint families may have each other for company but with the arrival of the VCR, what they share is often video viewing during which "time passes quickly."²⁰ Video technology thus serves as both a marker of middle-class homes, and—in the creation of daily routines—a focal point around which middle-class experience is constructed.

Turning to the matter of women's film preferences, while not all middle-class women agreed on what films were best, all had discriminating tastes that served to separate their ideas of acceptability from others'. For these women all Hindi films are *not* created equal. For example one Newar woman in her 40s compared the experience of going to the cinema hall now, as opposed to twenty years ago. "At that time," she said:

no matter what film was in the hall we'd just say, "Let's go and see a movie!" But now people are interested in some certain kind of film, like social, or **art**, or whatever. But before, any film that was shown, people would go see it.

19. This is often the case in multi-generational, extended family households though of course this pattern does not hold for educated middle-class women who work outside the home, and for middle-class, single-family households in which both parents work.

20. Compare with Fuglesang's account of women and video-viewing in urban, middle-class Kenyan homes (1994).

The way that women talk about film preference is important for what it says about how people in Kathmandu articulate their class values, or taste. I was particularly struck by the way that women used words such as "realism" and "realistic" (sometimes in English) to distinguish the kinds of Hindi films that they preferred from others. Different women disagreed on which Hindi film genre was most realistic, but most explained their own preference in terms of a particular genre's degree of realism. For example, one young woman, a 20 year old unmarried Newar college student, described her favorite films in this way:

I like the *love story* films mostly, and the social type also. There are also the *fight* type films, but I don't really like those. I mean it never actually happens like that in society. They show things like smuggling, and all that, in a very exaggerated way, and it's not realistic [*bāstabik*] at all. It's this kind of unrealistic film that I don't like.

This basic three-part division of Hindi films into the categories of "*love*," "social," and "*fight*" films was, with a few minor variations, a very common system of classification among middle-class Hindi film viewers. Significantly, what separates the films this young woman likes—"*love*" and "social"—from the "*fight*" films that she dislikes, is realism. Similarly, another young woman, a 24 year old Newar married and living with her in-laws, explained that:

I like the more realistic films, ones that are similar to my own experience. Sometimes they show impossible films, things that could never happen, or *bore-type* very slow films, these also I don't like.

Indeed many women echoed the opinion that good films were ones that showed scenes "similar to [their] own experience." One woman defended her preference for "social" and "familial" (*ghar pārivārik*) films by arguing:

Because they're similar to our own situation and environment. There are so many similar [*milne*] things that you can see! They show things that really happen [*bhayeko kurā*] that especially accord with life. Like wives being abused [*helā garnu*] by their mothers-in-law and things like that.

Is that like your experience?

Well no, but, like the other day I saw a film where the mother-in-law discriminates against the daughter-in-law and it's true that in society we find this kind of thing going on.

Thus films that are "real" or "similar" to women's lives are ones that include scenes that "show true things that . . . go with life" even if women do not actually share in the experiences depicted. To be realistic a film should be plausible and touch on issues in women's lives.

Of course not everyone agrees on what is "realistic." For example younger women were more likely to include "*love stories*" among realistic films whereas older, usually married women were more likely to lump the Hindi "*love*" films into the same broad category that went by a range of disparaging names from "*hāwā*" ("airy" or "empty"), to "today's *teenagers* films," to "*hāhu*" (rambunctious, delinquent), to "*formula* films." One thing that younger and older women agreed upon was the general characterization of Nepali language films as "social" and thus relatively realistic, and free from gratuitous "*fights*."²¹ Said one woman of Nepali films:

They're of the more social, sad [*duḥkha*], or religious variety, not this *hāwā* type with nothing but *fights*. Usually it's the boys who like the *fights*, not the girls. They give me a headache.

In the opinion of many women it is "the boys"—most often those who frequent the cinema halls—that "like the *fights*." These boys, like these films, need to be avoided. What gives pleasure to some, gives headaches to others.

One of the most important corollaries of middle-class women's preference for films that are realistic is the idea that *these* are films from which one can *learn something of value*. Women repeatedly backed up their insistence that good films were realistic films with the explanation that *if* films dealt with "things that really happen" (*bhayeko kurā*) *then* people can learn from them. Speaking for herself and her husband, one 35 year old teacher explained that:

We don't like all these "*fight*" films. We look for something practical, like the social films, so we can learn something. To make a movie good it should be oriented to increase a person's knowledge. It should be practical and realistic. It shouldn't be just baseless.

Another woman explained why she liked social films that show *duḥkha* or "sadness." "In these films," she said, "you can learn about what to do if something happens. We learn, like, if this happens, that should be done,

21. Which is not to say that many of the most recent Nepali films do not have plenty of violence.

and so on like that." One other woman explained that a good film can teach about morality. "It should be *real*" she maintained:

In a good film there are lots of events, both moral and immoral, and we can learn something from this. Also, if people are doing bad things, and they see the punishment in the films, they may not have the courage to do it again.

All in all good films are films that are "real," films from which one "can learn something." For these women a "good film," in its realistic portrayal of life, is both practical for the self, and capable of instilling a proper sense of morality in others.

The fact that these women often explain their film preferences in terms of practical gains or being able to "learn from film" is similar to the kinds of attitudes described by several other media researchers. For example Conrad Kottak notes that the Brazilian informants in his study "again and again made the point that TV brings knowledge (*conhecimento*) of the outside world." Kottak stresses that "Regular [TV] viewers have more general knowledge and can recognize and interpret more information from outside—both images and ideas" (1990:142). It is interesting simply to note that people in other relatively newly-mediated societies also tend to conceive of commercial media as a channel for "bring[ing] knowledge."

Janice Radway's work on women and romance novel reading in the United States (1984, 1991) offers another comparative perspective. There are several important parallels between these two groups of female media consumers. First, both groups tend to rationalize their consumer practices in terms of acquiring practical knowledge (Radway 1991:480). Second, it is likely that some female middle-class Hindi film viewers in Kathmandu share in vicarious pleasures and self-fulfillments (through their experiences with Hindi "*love stories*" in particular) similar to those Radway describes (1991:478-479). For example, the remarks of one woman, the 24 year old wife of a small business owner, seem to indicate an active fantasy construction in which self becomes tied up in the narrative conventions of the "*love story*." Asked why she preferred Hindi films, the woman replied,

Because sometimes there are events that are similar to my own experience. I especially like the stories in *love stories*. Maybe because I also had *love* before. In the films there are all these *love stories* and [I ask myself] "Why doesn't this happen in my life?" So I told my husband that I saw this kind of film and I said "Why don't you

do this?" I explained how the *love story* goes and asked him why he doesn't do like that with me. So, that's why I like the *love stories*.

This woman is probably not so different from Radway's romance readers in that she can lose herself in the vicarious pleasures of the loving attention of the hero, even while (literally) buying into a mediated, commercialized, patriarchal representation of femininity. Even though she identifies problems with her condition as a woman, her desires for change seem limited to convincing her husband to "do like" the Hindi film heroes.²²

The subject of men's viewership of Hindi films can be dealt with more briefly than that of women's largely because men were far less likely to claim a preference for Hindi films. When they did talk about watching a Hindi film men tended to downplay its importance. This is not to say that middle-class men do not watch Hindi films. In fact in most homes where families watch videos together, the standard fare is Hindi film. Because Hindi films are deemed suitable for general consumption by young and old, female and male, and because video viewing is often a family activity, unless they actively shun them, all family members including men are likely to get a steady diet. Though men frequently watch Hindi films, they rarely claim to prefer them over other media products.

One of the few educated urban young men that acknowledged a taste for Hindi films did so only by going to some lengths to qualify his interests. An 18 year old graduate of one of the city's top high schools, he had this to say about Hindi films:

Well, I like the recent ones, but not *that* much. I mean, like the *love stories*, they're OK. Actually it's the songs, they're the most entertaining part, that's what brings real pleasure [*ānanda*]. So, when I hear that a film has good songs, well, I'll try to see it.

Similarly, another young man (a 20 year old college student from Kathmandu) admitted that he likes Hindi movies, "but really only after *English* films. I guess I like the *love tragedies* the best." As for many of their male peers, for these young men any interest in Hindi film had to be couched in layers of qualification.

Adult middle-class men also sometimes spoke of watching Hindi films although they too seemed often to be more skeptical or choosy than

22. One key difference between Radway's readers and these Nepali women is class position. While Radway's research group was essentially "working class" (1984:50-58), the women who consume Hindi video films are arguably middle-class in the context of Kathmandu.

women. Most of the men in their 30s or 40s that my co-workers and I spoke with noted that they had grown up watching Hindi films. Some continued by pointing out that now they are more selective than before. One man, a college-educated Brahman business man in his mid 40s, made this point clearly:

I was always watching Hindi movies since my childhood. It was part of my life and I can speak very good Hindi *due* to those movies. That means I am very influenced with that culture.

But now I am choosing. Like if there is a good artist, a good director.... Now there are two kinds of movies: there are art movies, and there are commercial movies. Nowadays I would like to see the art movies.

Like many of the women quoted above this man divides genres and states preferences though his distinctions are more blunt. Hindi films come in two varieties: "art" (which he "would like to see") and "commercial" which includes everything (and everyone) else. For him art and commerce are antithetical. Whereas "art movies"—refined and tasteful by their very nature—are his kind of film, "commercial movies" are for those incapable of discerning the quality of art.

Rather than divide current Hindi films into good and bad, many middle-class men were inclined to simply dismiss them all. Instead of searching out Hindi films that they might like, these people (usually relying on their children to make selections at the video shop) tended to look at what was playing on the family VCR and reject it as stupid or offensive, often in comparison with films from their childhood when "things were better." One man, a Newar office worker in his 40s, complained that whereas films used to be of the more "social" or "religious" (*dhārmik*) types, now films have nothing but "singing and dancing" and "*hāhu garne*" (ruffian-like behavior). "Today's films," he complained:

have nothing to do with reality. I can't understand the themes in these new films, the reasons why they do things, or what is happening. They're too unreal.

Unlike many middle-class women who used the criteria of realism to distinguish good Hindi films from bad, this man, like many other middle-class men, was more inclined to discard the entire Hindi film industry as "too unreal." The following section on English film viewing points to some of the reasons for this male rhetorical rejection of Hindi cinema.

V. English film viewing

While most middle-class women in Kathmandu, young and adult, stated a preference for Hindi films of one kind or another, middle-class men, especially young men, frequently claimed "English" films as their favorites. In this preference there was a remarkably stark contrast between urban teenage and young adult males and their age mates from rural backgrounds also living in the city. With few exceptions place of birth (or at least place of primary and secondary education) correlated closely with film preference for young men: urban/English, rural/Hindi and Nepali. Urban, educated, middle-class young men were avid consumers of "English" films, a broad category that included essentially all locally-available non-South Asian films, often including East Asian martial arts action pictures, as well as assorted Western music videos, pornography, and sports videos.

For many middle-class young men, watching videos is part of their daily routines. Typically these young men are in an educational limbo zone waiting to either take (of re-take) some exam, or to pass on to the next level of study. Even those people currently enrolled in some level of post-secondary education have vast amounts of time on their hands since many choose not to attend classes but instead cram from textbooks prior to exams. In the mean time middle-class attitudes toward any manual or menial labor guarantee that these young men will be un- or under-employed. A few volunteer in various social service organizations while others, with sufficient motivation and cash, enroll in private schools and institutes to receive training in foreign languages or computer science. But for the most part young men from middle-class families have plenty of time to kill.²³

Videos are often the time-killers of choice. For many of the young men my co-workers and I interviewed, one or more English videos a day was a typical rate of consumption. Parents often told the same story, though usually as a complaint. Walking in Kathmandu's New Road commercial district—home of the city's most popular video rental shops—a common site was young men on multi-gear "mountain bikes" with stacks of video tapes strapped to their fender racks.

23. See Liechty 1995 and 1996a for discussions of male youth culture in Kathmandu.

Hanging out in a downtown ice cream shop, a 17 year old Rai student noted that he had *sokh* for watching English films or, in other words, he had a kind of passionate interest in these films.²⁴

How often do you watch?

I watch a lot. I'd say daily I watch videos. I see them at a close friend's house or sometimes I'll rent one and take it home.

Do you watch with family or alone?

It depends on the film. Like if we've got a *blue* film, we'll never watch it in front of the family, only with a group of friends. But if it's social, or historical, I mean like some kind of subject or theme film, we'll watch it with the family.

Indeed for most young men, watching English films called for careful planning so as to avoid letting parents see certain films. A 19 year old Brahman student explained, "If I'm home alone and I don't think anyone will come, I bring home a cassette and call my friends. Otherwise I go to a friend's house." A Sherpa teenager in a downtown shop explained that:

If it's a good picture we watch together with the family, if there aren't any indecent [*asli*] scenes. But if it has "that kind" of scene then we have to arrange a time, like when mother and father have gone to the office, or have gone out.

With more and more single family homes in the suburban areas, and more and more working mothers, it is usually not difficult for at least one out of a group of friends to have a safe spot to watch even the most risquJ "*English*" films.

24. The Nepali word *sokh* is often translated as "hobby," "pleasure," or "luxury" though these words do not very effectively convey its meaning. In Kathmandu people often talk about an "X-doing *sokh*" that might include something as hobby-like as stamp collecting but just as often is about some desired way of being, either now or as a future goal. For example young people spoke of having a "film-acting *sokh*"—a desire to some day act in films—or a "guitar-studying *sokh*," or even a "*sokhf* or becoming a doctor." These are less "hobbies" or "luxuries" than desires or longed-for identities. To a much greater extent than for a "hobby," calling something a *sokh* is a way of indicating a kind of innate inclination tied to a person's individual nature. Compare Nita Kumar (1988), or Joseph Alter (1992) who translates "*shauk*" (sic) as "hobby" or "infatuation." Alter notes that for some people the term implies a kind of frivolous, narcissistic attitude, a lifestyle of desires-out-of-control (1992:327-328).

When it came to the subject of genre preference within the broad category of "English" films, most young men's interests clustered around a few general types. Most identified "action" as among their favorite types, though some separated "military action" from "martial arts" and other varieties of action films. Some preferred "cowboy" films and others singled out English "love stories" like "Pretty Woman." Still others cited English music videos as their favorites, and some even favored locally-available Western sports videos that featured weight-lifting and boxing competitions.

When it came to the question of *why* young men preferred "English" films to others, a more consistent series of answers emerged. One was very pragmatic and harkens back to my earlier discussion of "learning from films"; several young men pointed out that one could learn English language from watching English films. One of the school boys quoted above went on to explain his (and his friends') preference for "English" films by pointing out that:

Usually now, in this *modern age*, we need *English*. To improve our *English* we try to watch as many *English* films as we possibly can.

Another student from a well-known Kathmandu high school elaborated on this theme:

The thing is that we Nepalis all want to learn English. We have that desire [*rahar*]. By the influence of this desire, it seems to me that every time we watch an English film, we can learn at least a few new words! And in our Nepali society, we are bending toward the *European* civilization, I mean the willingness to do this is increasing. By this I mean if a man sees, rather than just hearing or reading, it's much more effective. There's more change that comes from seeing. So I like to see English films often.

For this young man watching English films was about more than just learning the English language. In an elegant manner he argues that by *seeing*, not just "hearing or reading" about, "the *European* civilization" one can learn more than just language. Compared with books or radio, "There's more change that comes from seeing."

The second, and most common, reason young men gave for why they preferred watching "English" films to others had to do with realism. Again, like the middle-class women described above who favored some Hindi films over other Hindi films because they were "more real," for men also, the degree of realism determined a film's value. The difference was

that while women's standards rejected certain Hindi films as unrealistic, many middle-class young men gave all South Asian films a low ranking in their statements of preference. For these men "English" films excelled all others because of their superior realism.

One young man, a 27 year old Gurung resident of one of Kathmandu's northern suburbs, had a rather sophisticated mathematical ranking system based on a film's realism percentage. In discussing South Asian films he mentioned having little interest in either Hindi or Nepali films but when pressed acknowledged that there were some Hindi films that were better than others. Among Hindi films, he said, "I like to see the social [*sāmājīk*] films because there's reality in them. I don't mean 100 percent real, maybe about 75 percent." "English" films on the other hand were the most real. He recalled the first such film he had seen:

I remember, it was called "Good, Bad, and Ugly"—a cowboy film. I liked it a lot because everything in that film looks so real [*sācikai jastai dekincha*].

Since that time he has preferred the English "action" films "because, like I said, everything seems real and they spend a lot of money making them." A 16 year old Chetri high school student from Kathmandu's pricey Maharajganj suburb voiced a similar set of criteria for movie preference. After stating that his favorite films are "kung-fu" films such as "Blood Fight" he went on to explain:

I like these English films because when you watch them they're so real. Like when they kill someone, it looks exactly real. I mean that's why I usually like these English films.

For these two young men what makes "English" films enjoyable, and preferable to other films, is that everything "looks exactly real." While the best Hindi films might be about 75 percent real, "English" films were pushing the 100 percent mark.

How it could be that the violent "action" of "cowboy" and "kung-fu" films could look "exactly real" to young Nepali men whose own experiences of reality must surely be very different, is a matter I will consider in this article's conclusion. At this point however it is important to recall that even while many middle-class young men identify "English" films as their favorites, and indeed consume large amounts of these films, this does not mean that they are not also watching Hindi and Nepali films. Indeed I sensed that most young men tended to segregate South Asian from "English" films in the manner of apples from oranges; both were enjoyable but for different reasons. For example an 18

year old Brahman student, after claiming a preference for "English" films, explained that South Asian films were not in danger of being superseded by products from outside the subcontinent. Speaking of the two broad film categories, he explained:

Both of them have their own styles and separate existences. They're both going to be popular. People will watch both.

Young men might chose to align themselves with "English" films but this is not to say that they *necessarily* abandon all interest in South Asian films based on new non-South Asian evaluative criteria.

The question then remains, Why do young middle-class men consistently claim "English" films as their favorites? Part of the answer is that, for young men, watching "English" films is an important means of establishing and maintaining privilege in terms of class distinction. As for women, the rhetoric of "learning from film" and film "realism" helps to position middle-class viewers above others who are unable to understand the "value" of certain films (even, supposedly, if they had the financial resources needed to consume them).

But beyond the role of English film viewing in helping to produce class distinction, male film preferences are also tied to the production of gender distinction. English film viewing *within* Kathmandu's middle-class is perhaps most important for how it mirrors, and helps to reproduce, gender privilege. The role of "English" films in helping to structure gender difference in the daily routines of middle-class Kathmandu families came through most clearly in the comments women made about their experiences with these non-South Asian films. Women that my co-workers and I spoke with confirmed my strong impression that, in the domestic setting, males were far heavier consumers of electronic media than females. Women might find special times for video viewing during the day, but young men in the family—unemployed and usually minimally occupied with school work—usually dominated the television and VCR. Compared with married and unmarried women, young men are often given few responsibilities and have more time for mediated entertainment.

But beyond simply having more time for viewing media, males in the household typically act as censors, or gate-keepers, determining who can watch what in the family. In the course of my research it soon became clear that men determined if and when women can watch "English"

films.²⁵ In describing her experiences with "*English*" films one 24 year old married Newar woman complained:

They don't let us watch so who knows about that? I'd like to also watch that [English] kind of film but what can I do with my desire [*icchā*]? Only the boys are sitting there and they won't let us in. They say it's like Hindi but that we shouldn't watch. [They say] "Only those who are very brave can watch this but your hearts are weak!"

Unmarried women complain of the same prohibition. One young Chetri high school girl described why her brothers watched English films but she had not.

My brothers? Well, they're boys so they can watch everything. Like they bring the English films here and watch them with their other friends. But we girls aren't allowed to go in and watch them. In fact whenever there's an English film, they won't let us see them.

While these women implied that men in their households keep them from ever seeing "*English*" films, more typical were homes where men allowed women to see a few, carefully selected, films. In the words of a married Brahman woman in her mid 30s:

It's said that in the English films there are some scenes that are not good. So we watch the English films only after the men have watched them and say that they are OK. My husband's younger brother, he was educated abroad and watches a lot of English movies but we don't watch that much.

In other families it is not simply "the men" who control women's access to "*English*" films, but parents-in-law in particular. Said another married Newar woman in her early 20s:

Once in a while I get the chance to see an "*English*" film. If the film isn't of that bad kind—the kind that make you feel uneasy when watching it—then that's the kind we like to see. Since the *TV* and *deck* are in my parents-in-law's room, we only watch the kinds of film that are suitable for the whole family.

The kinds of films that are likely to get past a family's male censors are those without "that bad kind" of scene. For example women often spoke of having seen children's cartoons and slap-stick comedy films like "Home

25. With the arrival of satellite television in the early 1990s it is likely that women have increasing access to various media products without the supervision of men.

Alone." In 1991 several women spoke of having seen an English "*love story*" film about "ghosts" (*bhut*). Probably the American film "Ghost" (no one could remember the title), one woman described the film like this:

In this film the boy dies but his spirit [*ātmā*] protects the girl. Who knows, it could be true and we just haven't seen it. I mean, true or not, because it's a *love story*, that's why I liked it.

Another woman described an English film about a "*robot*" that she had seen. "When I saw this film," she said "I felt that there was nothing in the world that humans couldn't do."

For the most part women—even if they have "the desire" to see English films—shy away from them in order to avoid the "uneasy" feeling that comes when watching "that bad kind" of film. Just as it is socially suspect (and potentially damaging to her reputation) for a woman to move about in public spaces unaccompanied by a male relative (or at least a senior woman),²⁶ it is also seen as dangerous for a woman (or women) to view English films without men present. In mixed company women risk not only feeling "uneasy" at viewing sexually explicit scenes, they also risk losing social prestige by being associated with that type of behavior. Indeed for most women the "uneasy" feeling comes less from embarrassment or shyness than from fear of being labelled as loose or vulgar. Explained one female college student, "If we girls want to watch English movies, we have to be a lot more careful than the boys."

If men tend to rank English films as more realistic than South Asian films, it seems as though that "reality" is too much for the women in their own households. Even though middle-class women and men share in a class defining rhetoric of realism, men claim the ultimate privilege of consuming "reality" (or the privilege of consuming the ultimate reality) for themselves. Like the Rana patriarchs described at the beginning of this article, middle-class men seem to fear that the "vivid scenes of intimate occidental life" might have a "demoralizing effect" on *their* women. If there is power in realism, certain groups, whether classes or genders, will seek to limit its circulation.

Conclusion: The "realization" of the middle class

In this article I have focused on the sociological dimensions of film and video viewing in Kathmandu. By sketching out a brief history of cinematic entertainment—from elite sumptuary practice in the late Rana

26. For a discussion of women's freedom in public spaces, see Liechty 1996b.

period, to a "golden age" in the 1960s and '70s, to the arrival of video in middle-class homes in the 1980s—I have suggested ways in which media and media technology are integrated into class cultural politics. The story of the shift from a dictatorial mode of class privilege (banning commoners' access to cinema) under the Ranas, to the contemporary democratic mode of class privilege (in which the middle class exercises its consumer freedoms in choosing to watch cinema in the privacy of their homes) is only one instance of the far-reaching change in the practice and rhetoric of class dominance that has accompanied modernization in Kathmandu.

I have also pointed to ways in which the middle class states its preference for certain types of media products and in so doing couches its social privilege in the rhetoric of taste. By stating a preference for films that are realistic, and from which one can learn something, the middle class can distance itself from those below them both physically (by staying out of the cinema halls) and morally (by labeling certain films vulgar and useless). Middle-class film fans often couch their own preferences in a rhetoric of utility, practicality, and educational value which renders the choices of others frivolous and base.

To conclude this article I would like to consider in more detail the middle-class fixation on some notion of "realism," or realistic portrayal in film. Why do middle-class viewers insist that "reality" is what makes a good film good? How is it that middle-class teenage boys in Kathmandu can view "spaghetti westerns" and incredibly violent and bloody "kung-fu" action pictures, and then announce that what they see looks "exactly *real*"? How do these commercial fantasy worlds begin to "look just like reality"?

First of all I should say that I reject the proposition that Nepalis lack the critical ability to distinguish reality from fiction. Most of the Nepali intellectuals I spoke with had concluded that people in Kathmandu, and especially young people, "can't separate the true from the false," or "They take all those things shown [in films] for dramatic purposes as normal life, as real." In contrast to these views I hold that (to paraphrase Sudhir Kakar [1989:28]) no sane Nepali believes that films depict the world realistically, even if they (like the rest of us) might enjoy indulging in fantasy. For example people I spoke with in Kathmandu knew full well that to make a film look realistic required a lot of money, which was part of the reason why non-South Asian films looked more real. Even when middle-class viewers in Kathmandu said that some film looked "exactly

real," I do not feel that they were mistaking realism for reality, either their own, or someone else's.

But what is "realism"? At the most basic level one could make a crude distinction between a non-realistic mode of representation (in which the meaning of an image lies outside of it in its symbolic reference to some real or ideal world), and a realistic mode (in which meaning purports to reside in the image itself). For example a religious icon symbolically points to a greater external reality, while a police "mug shot" carries the burden of reality in and of itself. In semiotic terms, non-realist modes of signification privilege the *signified*, while realist modes privilege the actual *referent* or medium of representation (Abercrombie et al. 1992:118-119). While non-realistic modes of representation refer to symbolic meanings beyond the image at hand, realism is self-referential.

This self-referencing quality of realism is important because it helps to analytically distinguish *realism* as an effect, from *reality* as lived experience. In film, realism is an effect produced by a variety of cinematic and narrative techniques that knit together a range of spatial and temporal fictions into a mutually-referencing whole. But in addition to simply assembling images in narrative sequence, "The illusion of a single space-time continuum . . . is created by the many converging codes of representation: linear perspective, camera ubiquity, camera movement, eyeline matching, continuity editing, and so on" (Williams 1989:65). In short, film realism is an effect produced by the skillful inter-referencing and inter-locking of a host of pictorial/narrative sequences and representational codes to create a unified diegetic field. In this way a cinematic production is "realistic" to the extent that a spectator acknowledges its *plausibility* (its self-referential coherence), rather than its identity with her or his lived reality.

Although some theorists portray realism as a condition in which "fictions . . . do not present themselves as fictions" (Abercrombie et al. 1992:121), I hold that the project of media realism is not to claim to represent reality (that is, deny its own fictitiousness), but to construct a sense of plausibility. For example, a science fiction film can be "realistic" not because we think the action has happened, but that it *could* happen. (Even the most surreal content can be made realistic if it is organized into a tightly inter-referencing whole.) The power of film realism lies not in convincing people that filmic representations are *real*, but that they are *possible*. What realism constructs as "true" is not some representation of "reality," but a representation of plausibility.

What *kind* of plausibility is created in cinematic realism? A systematic ideological critique of the "cinematic apparatus" is far beyond the parameters of this article,²⁷ yet it is important to recognize how cinematic representations privilege certain constructions of plausibility over others. As a visual enterprise media realism privileges the eye, privileges the material as real, and privileges the communication of meaning and value in the visual domain. In the visual/material mode objects are made to bear a heavy burden of representation. Commercial films typically deploy an array of objects (fashions, vehicles, and other consumer goods) to index character traits and life styles. Furthermore, narrative conventions in cinema privilege modes of cause and effect that construct individuals (rather than groups or institutions) as actors who through time live out stories for which they are individually rewarded or punished. Indeed Haque claims that Indian commercial cinema—with its fixation on the hero/heroine/villain—converts "all political, sociological and economic dilemmas into personal dramas" that are "inevitably" resolved via "individual solutions" (1992:60). In South Asia (as elsewhere) cinematic realism has the power to construct (imagine) the individuality (and individual agency) of the hero, or star, in a way that the eye cannot. The simultaneous privileging of consumer materiality and a moral economy based on individual agency, achievement, and punishment are only two instances of how cinema realism is part of a discursive technology that has played a fundamental role in representing and naturalizing bourgeois sensibilities and values (cf. Kellner 1990, Susman 1984, Tagg 1988). Arguably what film realism helps to make plausible is less some new concrete image of reality, than a set of new understandings in the realms of being and knowing.

I believe that what middle-class media consumers in Kathmandu identify as realistic, and the lessons they consciously seek to learn from those films, have to do with these new epistemic understandings. These are people interested in seeing and learning other modes of plausibility, or new worlds of possibility, that can be harnessed to their own goals of producing distinctive practice. When people demand that films be "practical and realistic," and that films teach "what to do when something happens," they have begun to experiment with new understandings of themselves and their social lives.

27. See Rodowick 1988 for an introduction to "criticism and ideology in contemporary film theory."

This shift in orientation toward media is related to what media researchers have called the "cultivation effect" (Gerbner, et. al., 1994), a process by which "The more time people spend watching television, the more they perceive the real world as being similar to that of television" (Kottak 1990:52). This somewhat counter-intuitive "effect" is one in which, rather than seeing the images depicted in media as more and more "real," people begin to understand their own lived experience as essentially more and more "like in the movies," that is, more and more mediated by/filtered through the structurizing, ideological lens of media. Media become the interpretive frames within which one makes sense of everyday life, rather than vice versa.

At the most basic level this "realizing" effect relates to the now well-established point that people use shared media experiences to construct group identities (Caughey 1984, Lipsitz 1990, Meyrowitz 1985). As Dyuti Baral (1990) notes, the programs that middle-class school children in Kathmandu watched the night before are often the basis for conversations the following day. But more significantly, shared media experiences do not so much dictate what people will think about, but rather they begin to shape the dimensions of what is considered possible, or thinkable. As George Custen (1987) argues, when groups of people watch the same movie, rather than talking about the movie itself, people use the shared movie experience to talk about their own everyday experiences. Film becomes one source of frames, or mirrors, that people can use to evaluate or interpret their lives. This is, I believe, at the heart of the "cultivation effect." As people's daily lives become more and more deeply invested in media consumption, the narratives, narrative logics, and images of media serve more and more as interpretive resources for life, ways to make sense out of life, and eventually methods to interpret and even represent life. This is the power of media realism: not to make media images real, but to make lived-reality an increasingly mediated experience.

Why then this middle-class investment in a rhetoric of realism? Part of the answer lies in how talk of realism signals taste. Stressing the learning-from, and self-help dimensions of their own film viewing practice allows the middle class to claim a utilitarian justification beyond simple escapist, frivolous entertainment or pleasure. But middle-class investment in realism is about more than justification. The middle-class emphasis on realism is part of a dual process in which they are at once "realizing" their own lives, and attempting to "naturalize" a certain middle-class culture of "reality." By "realizing" their lives, I refer to the "cultivation effect" in which middle-class lives begin to follow more and

more closely the ideological and experiential contours of a mediated realism. At the same time, as their lives become more and more "realized," members of the middle class seek to elevate their new, partially mediated, lifestyle—their new culture of realism—to a privileged position. Middle-class "realization" is about "naturalizing" the cultural practice and values of the middle class: the material and "realist" logics of consumerism, labor, democracy, personal freedom, and responsibility. In a sense the middle-class project is the project of realism, an effort to naturalize a set of class values built upon certain visual/material systems of value, and certain narrative understandings of causation privileging an ideology of achievement and personal responsibility. In this article I have tried to show how media help to produce and reproduce relations of class and gender dominance by privileging and naturalizing an ideologically charged epistemic mode from which others can be excluded.

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