Making Tracks: Salma Monani

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“70mm is Big!” Rethinking Cinema, Otherness, and Ecological Relations

by **Salma Monani**

Going to the movies during my childhood in the mid-1970s and early 1980s in India was a rare and occasional outing. Theaters, unlike the multiplexes of today, had one huge “Cinerama” screen, affectionately called “70mm.” These were so deliciously huge that South Indian restaurants served up their famously enormous “70mm” *dosa* in honor of the big screen—so big that the crispy crepe roll overflowed into your neighbor’s space at the table. Before I knew that 70mm referred to the special film stock used for theater projections, and not to the screen itself, I was always delighted that tiny millimeters could suggest something so large.

However, we visited theaters infrequently, and rarely overindulged in enormous *dosas*! Neither was television a part of our daily routine: we acquired our first black and white television in 1980, and the government’s state sanctioned programs generated limited air time. So, despite the novelty of cinema, or perhaps *because* of the novelty, I really wasn’t much of a film buff growing up: I have very few memories of films that captured my imagination, though I do remember my first theater experience, which was Joe Camp’s 1974 Hollywood success, *Benji*. I think I was about four or five years old at the time—Hollywood films always took a few years to come to India—and I spent the time sitting on my mother’s lap looking away from the screen. I still remember the anguish I experienced as *Benji*, the dog who was the star of the film, couldn’t be understood by his humans and found himself locked up in a jail cell. However, that experience marked only a small blip in my early childhood memories.

At the time, it wasn't movies that captivated me but the everyday world of multiple senses that I encountered much more frequently. I remember the earthy taste and smell of the world after the first rains of the monsoons and the general sense of celebration that permeated the clean air. I have vivid memories of a giant Peepal tree that fell with a tremendous creak and crack in a monsoon storm, and the sight of big ants that streamed out from its fallen trunk as it was cut up for firewood. There were also the various visiting vendors who came to our Calcutta neighborhood looking for a few rupees to perform with their dancing cobras, or bears, or monkeys, and I remember lovingly stroking the simultaneously soft and brittle *shikar*-animal skins in my grandparents' homes. There was something in all of these multisensory encounters that both fascinated me and nagged at me.

In retrospect, it was this fascination and yet the inability to articulate how this world of embodied, entangled nature-culture relations bothered me that prodded me towards the fortuitous intellectual choices that I've made over my academic career, and that now place cinema within their intersectional center. My serendipitous decision to sign up for an environmental geology class during my first year as an undergraduate in the US was the formal start of this academic career. Hoping to simply satisfy those much-needed distribution credits required to graduate, I found that the class, with its required field trips, harkened back to my childhood love of and curiosity with material, multisensory encounters between humans and nature. As a science of deep and long time, of microscopic and macroscopic scales so spectacularly grand, geology afforded me a similar sense of wonder and intrigue. Yet its discourse, like the experiences of my childhood that nagged at me, also troubled me—and it wasn't until two master's degrees later (an MS in geology and an MA in creative writing, the latter intended to communicate the wonder of geology to non-geologists) and the start of my PhD in science and technical communication that I clearly articulated these quandaries to myself.

In our framing of the world—scientific or otherwise—certain narratives are privileged. As a result, other narratives have been shunted off to the margins. This brings me to my early movie experience: like that little stray dog Benji, there are voices, feelings, insights expressed by others (both human and more-than-human) that we summarily dismiss, lock up, or sideline. What would it mean to pay attention to these "other" perspectives and understandings?

While the "other" is a term that grates on me, it nonetheless captures historical and systemic modes of marginalization, which are tightly wound up in how societies perceive

issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and species. In seeking to unravel the politics of "otherness" in environmentalism, my dissertation, which began as an exploration of the geologic rhetoric of scientists on both sides of the drilling/biodiversity controversy of the **Arctic National Wildlife Refuge**, soon shifted gears, drawing attention instead to the presence of Indigenous communities caught up in the debate. In doing so, I also found myself inexorably drawn to cinematic representations of the debate and the politics of film as a medium that shapes our sense of this world. I found myself asking: How does cinema "other?" Why? And what understandings of ecological entanglements does it afford?

There was little to no ecocinema scholarship to speak of at the time I first found myself fascinated by these questions, but through a variety of deliberate efforts at networking I was able to connect with other scholars across the humanities who were also asking intriguing questions about cinema as an environmental medium. Our collaborative efforts not only created an active and growing Ecomedia Studies community, but also deepened my curiosity in cinema as a space for challenging concepts of "otherness" in ways that help us to re-think our ecological relations.

Returning to the present, this is the intellectual pursuit that frames my current project on Indigenous ecocinema as ecological practice at the RCC. Specifically, I engage with the cinema of contemporary Indigenous filmmakers to draw attention to the eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics of communities that have long been sidelined, discriminated against, and often misrepresented in mainstream environmental discourse and action. In considering cinema as an aesthetic and ethically motivating medium, I also explore the idea of cinema as ecological experience.

Quite contrary to my earlier dismissal of film as distinct from the multisensory materialities of my childhood, I now see cinema as inextricably enmeshed in these materialities. As my colleague Adrian Ivakhiv writes, through moving images, cinema works to *move* us. Currently, my project asks: How does Indigenous cinema work to *move* us to re-think our relations with the world? What might it teach us about the blurred boundaries between us and what we conceive of as "other"? How does it complicate simple definitions of Indigeneity, ecology, and cinema?

In contemplating these questions, I find myself returning rather obliquely to my childhood delight—the paradox of 70mm. This also takes me forward: What if what we thought was big was really small, and what we imagined as small is big? In essence, how

might an openness to re-thinking our perceptions help rework our relations—to humans, technologies, and natural worlds in which we are inextricably enmeshed? The RCC, with its multidisciplinary and cross-cultural foci, provides the perfect place to keep such critical openness alive, giving time to contemplate, write, and engage with others in the environmental humanities who are similarly re-thinking our relations to the world.