

"The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king": Intertextuality in *Om Shanti Om*

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THE BOLLYWOOD HINDI FILM *Om Shanti Om* (2007) constructs its intertextual identity and debuts in the best postmodern fashion, with irony, parody, pastiche, irreverence, and double entendre of the tongue-in-cheek variety.¹ The exercise of intertextuality can become intricate, given a context such as *OSO*, which keeps oscillating between reality, illusion, and a formidable corpus of cinematic texts. In the process, the extensive range of intertextual devices and the role of self-reflexivity in the construction of *OSO*'s intertextual identity come to be foregrounded. *OSO*'s narrative structure, because of its intertextuality, makes a visible break from conventional Bollywood cinema in a remarkable way. Mackey's observation on the contemporary nature of such activity in understanding the success of *OSO* is a useful pointer in this regard.²

The story of *OSO* starts "thirty years ago," in line with plots that employ the technique of flashback, usually for suspense, with Om Prakash, or Omi (played by actor Shah Rukh Khan), who is a junior artiste in Bollywood, in love with the famous actress Shanti Priya (played by newcomer Deepika Padukone). It comes as a shock to Omi to learn that Shanti is secretly married to film producer Mukesh Mehra (Arjun Rampal), who subsequently murders her, because he does not want the news of their marriage to become public, fearing this might

adversely affect Shanti's career. Omi, unable to rescue his beloved heroine from the fire that kills her, also dies, only to be reincarnated as Om Kapoor, or OK (also played by Shah Rukh Khan), a Bollywood superstar; now, armed with money and power, he is in a position of strength from which to execute his revenge on Mukesh, who has reinvented himself as "Mike," after a stint in Hollywood. Deepika Padukone reappears as Sandy (though not a reincarnation of Shanti Priya) and helps OK, along with Omi's mother and his friend Pappu, to carry his plan through. The movie ends with the revelation that not Sandy, but the ghost of Shanti Priya (also played by Deepika Padukone), has made OK's revenge possible. OK's plan to avenge Shanti Priya's death through the making of a film called *Om Shanti Om (OSO)* creates the better part of the self-reflexivity in the movie.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a term that describes the processes of cross-referencing by a text that relies overtly on other texts—whether they are past texts, contemporary texts, or textual conventions—in its composition. The term is most famously associated with Julia Kristeva, in her recapitulation of Bakhtin's concept of the novel's dialogic nature. "By introducing the status of the word as a minimal structural unit, Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them" (Kristeva 65).

However, because her position suggests

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Photo 1: Shanti Priya (Deepika Padukone, left) and Mukesh Mehra (Arjun Rampal) in *Om Shanti Om* (2007).

that all writing is intertextual, the problem of redundancy in defining intertextuality is simultaneously posed. Even if an attempt is made to narrow the concept to such overt interaction between texts as is involved in plagiarism, epigraphs, allusion, or pastiche, the term still seems to lack a critical rigor.

One way of confronting this problem is to delimit the term with, for instance, the recognition that intertextuality implies “attitude”—typically of the later text toward the earlier. Parody is an obvious case in point. Ridicule through imitation is the function of parody, but intertextuality can and does extend attitude to include reverence, affirmation, skepticism, and rebuttal.

Although it is possible to trace intertextuality as far back as Shakespeare or even Aristotle, whose definition of mimesis was a response to Plato’s discussion of the concept, intertextuality, as deployed in the argument of this article, and as evinced by *OSO*, is a deliberate proceeding marked by self-consciousness in representation. In the making of this case for intertextuality, a postmodern identity is also conferred on it, given that one of the most integral features and techniques of postmodernism is self-reflexivity, which usually involves breaking the reader/viewer’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” The self-awareness posited in this activity, moreover, effectively addresses ques-

tions of value in imitation and the ostensible superiority of original writing.

Intertextuality in *OSO* consists of references to previous films through such tropes as names (of movies, of actors) as well as plots—of movies such as *Karz* (1980), for example. The first impression left on the viewer by such interaction is the thrill of recognition because no other Bollywood movie until now has borrowed so diversely or eclectically or with utter disdain of ontological borders.

The effectiveness of intertextuality lies in a fine balance of economy in expression that is not ruined by the reader/viewer’s incomprehension. By involving the reader/spectator actively in the process of discovering meaning, intertextual works of art extend the spectrum of interpretive activity by teasing, challenging, and shaping their readers/viewers’ responses.

Intertextuality has come of sophisticated age in Indian cinema as represented by the Bombay Film Industry, popularly known as Bollywood, through *OSO*. Remarkable about the intertextual identity of *OSO* is the way it flaunts itself, given the context of Bollywood cinema. In a milieu where plots are borrowed and altered in consideration of originality with a justifiable eye on the box office, an open acknowledgement of earlier sources, as well as their imaginative assimilation in its plot, makes *OSO* a bolder venture than such intertextual attempts as, for

instance, Ram Gopal Varma's supposed remake of Ramesh Sippy's legendary Hindi film *Sholay* (1975), titled *Ram Gopal Varma Ki Aag* (2007). Interestingly, Varma wanted to retain the word "Sholay" (which, like the word "aag," means "fire" in Hindi) in his title, but a Delhi High Court judgment ordered the name to be changed because it infringed on Sippy's trademark.³

One can claim that with *OSO*, however, Bollywood has marked a new self-reflectively intertextual milestone in a way much more emphatic than the incidental forays made by *Rangeela* (1995) or the Bollywood remakes in recent years, from *Devdas* (remake, 2002; original, 1955) to *Umrao Jaan* (remake, 2006; original, 1981) and *Don* (remake, 2006; original, 1978).

The uneasy coexistence of intertextual debt with copyright issues on the one hand and the artistic criterion of originality on the other renders the intertextual process fraught with both risk and challenge. There are other dangers as well, such as audience reaction. What if a literal-minded audience overlooks the self-reflexivity? Going, however, by the response of cinemagoers in the country, it does appear as though the risk taken by *OSO* has paid off; not only has the movie been a success, but has survived controversy as well.⁴

The Intertextual Identity of *Om Shanti Om*

What makes up the intertextuality of *OSO*? As suggested in the previous section, movie titles, character names, character stereotypes, plots, and film stars (the last signifying an ontological border-crossing) all come together to create the déjà vu effect. The name "Shanti Priya," for instance, is a throwback to Bollywood actress Hema Malini, whose rise to stardom in the 1970s was no less phenomenal than her occupying prima donna status in Hindi cinema for decades to come. Or when Pappu tells Omi, for instance, that names can make stars and that a "Kapoor" after his name would take him places, the name that comes most readily to the knowing filmgoer is that of Raj Kapoor. Producer, director, actor, and patriarch

of the Hindi film industry, Raj Kapoor's career spanned five influential decades. *Aag* (1948), *Barsaat* (1949), *Awara* (1951), *Shri 420* (1955), *Sangam* (1964), and *Bobby* (1973) are some of his best-known films. *Awara* and *Shri 420* in particular became very popular in the USSR, which he visited in 1954.

The title of *OSO* comes from a famous song featured in the Bollywood movie *Karz*. The plot of *OSO*, based on reincarnation, also comes from the movie *Karz*. To leave the audience in no doubt over its link with *Karz*, *OSO* begins with a car entering RC Studios, and we see a poster for *Karz* on one side. This is followed by the supposed shooting of the song "Om Shanti Om" featured in *Karz*. Watching this from among a crowd of cheering spectators inside the studio is junior artiste Omi.

Self-reflexivity is intertwined with intertextuality in *OSO* with this move itself, for *Karz* is not only the movie to which *OSO* owes its plotline; the word "karz" in Hindi in fact means "debt." This poises *OSO* on the first of several diegetic borders that emerge in the movie, because not only is its story-world obliged to a film titled *Karz*; "indebtedness" is also a serendipitous way of looking at it as a film. This makes a larger point about intertextuality: that it can take the shape of indebtedness (so that the response it evokes ranges from attention to reverence), completion (implying that the urtext, or original text, was partial or incomplete), rewriting (to revise an existing story or idea), or ironic mocking (implying that the urtext was naïve, simplistic, or simply foolish). Intertextuality may not be innocent. *OSO* shifts across all these positions. Its nostalgic recall of 1970s Bollywood is fond, but its implied comment on the genre of films that seem to qualify for awards is definitely sardonic, as we find in the Filmfare awards function, which figures later in this article.

The illusion of the movie and the reality of its making are thus conflated in the word "karz." This process is extended when Omi throws himself into the reality of the illusion while watching the shooting of the song "Om Shanti Om" in *Karz*, by imagining and imposing his identity

on that of Rishi Kapoor, the hero of *Karz*, just as the lyrics of the song reach the refrain “om shanti om.” When the song ends, Omi is back in the audience, next to the same woman with whom he had fought a while ago over the jacket that the actor Rishi Kapoor had merrily whirled into the audience while dancing to the song. Omi sarcastically asks the woman what her problem is and whether she is the director of the film, and as it happens, the actress playing the part of this woman is just that: she is Farah Khan, the director of *OSO*. Thus, within five minutes of the movie’s beginning, we have extra-diegetic information padding the plot.

In the next twenty minutes of the film, Bollywood history and filmmaking intrude repeatedly into the story-world of *OSO*, marking its intertextuality as postmodern. Omi is a junior artiste wanting to make it big in the movies; his friend Pappu master assures him that he has everything going his way except his name. If he had a “Kumar,” a “Kapoor,” or a “Khanna” for a surname, he would become a star overnight. This is surely an allusion to the names of the famous actors/stars of the 1950s and 60s through the 70s: of the innumerable names that come to mind are Dilip Kumar, Raaj Kumar, Rajendra Kumar, Manoj Kumar; Raj Kapoor, Shammi Kapoor, Shashi Kapoor, Randhir Kapoor, Rishi Kapoor, and finally, Rajesh Khanna, the epitome of the superstar, unerringly spoofed in the Rajesh Kapoor of *OSO*, whom we first see at the premiere of the film *Dreamy Girl*. Rajesh Kapoor imitates Rajesh Khanna’s unmistakable style of flicking his hair back, which in turn is imitated repeatedly by Omi and Pappu—lest we fail to make the connection. Thus, Bollywood gives the lie to Shakespeare’s rhetorical question, “What’s in a name?”

We also see a young star-aspirant who commutes all the way from a remote suburb called Virar confessing to Omi and Pappu that his name is Govind Ahuja. The two have a good laugh at him and ask him to change his name. The only alternative that he can think of is “Govinda,” which does not impress them much, just enough to encourage him to give it a try.⁵

And as mentioned earlier, it is tempting to

trace the name of Shanti Priya, the star who captures Omi’s heart, to the real-life Bollywood actress Hema Malini, the dream girl who ruled Bollywood for decades, beginning with her first film *Sapnon ka Saudagar* (1968) (meaning “The Peddler of Dreams”). Referred to in the industry as the “dream girl,” Hema Malini also starred in a Bollywood film titled *Dream Girl* (1977). At the risk of overinterpretation, it is possible to see another link between the real Hema Malini and the fictional Shanti Priya in the double names they both sport, especially when one notes that in neither case is the second name a surname.

Apart from names of cine stars, we have the names of films teasing us with real-life references: besides the fictional *Dreamy Girl*, featured in the story-world of *OSO* are the fictional *Dhoom 5*, *Phir Bhi Dil Hai NRI*, *Main Bhi Hoon Na*, and *Return of the Khiladi*. These last four titles are set within the context of the Filmfare awards for the best actor, and all these titles veer in comical fashion from real-life originals: *Dhoom 5* is a presumed sequel for the “real” *Dhoom* (2004) and *Dhoom 2* (2006), and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* (“The Heart Is Still Indian”) is not only the title of a Bollywood movie made in 2000, but is also itself a line from a popular song from another Bollywood movie, *Shri 420* (1955). The fictional title *Main Bhi Hoon Na* (translating approximately as “I Am Also There”) is a take on the real 2004 Bollywood film *Main Hoon Na* (translating as “I Am There”). Incidentally, *Main Hoon Na* was also directed by Farah Khan, the director of *OSO*. And later on, the director of the inside *OSO*, we are told specifically, is called “F Khan,” not coincidentally, given that the director of the primary *OSO* is Farah Khan.

Shanti Priya and Ek Chutki Sindoor

During *OSO*, at the premiere of *Dreamy Girl*, the audience, including Omi, Pappu, and Shanti Priya (“in and as *Dreamy Girl*”) watch the heroine of the movie declaim with fervor,

“Ek chutki sindoor ki keemat tum kya jaano
Ramesh babu? Ishwar ka aashirwaad hota

hai ek chutki sindoor! Suhaagan ke sar ka
taj hota hai ek chutki sindoor! Har aurat ka
khwaab hota hai, ek chutki sindoor!"

Shanti Priya's lines translate as, "What would
you know of the value of *ek chutki sindoor*,
Ramesh babu? *Ek chutki sindoor* is the blessing
of God! *Ek chutki sindoor* is the crowning glory
of a married woman! *Ek chutki sindoor* is the
dream of every woman!"

Ek chutki sindoor literally means "a pinch of
sindoor," "sindoor" being the red powder that
a married Indian woman wears on her hairline
to announce her social status as wife. Pushpa,
the character played by Shanti Priya in the film
Dreamy Girl, tells Ramesh babu that (being
a man) he cannot appreciate the importance
of sindoor in a woman's life. Her passionate
speech shows the social significance of mar-
riage in giving respectability to a woman, within
the Indian context.

The different rubrics of title (*Dreamy Girl*),
name ("Pushpa"), and stereotype (marriage
as the ultimate dream of every woman, sym-
bolized by *ek chutki sindoor*) coalesce in the
scenes we are shown as part of the premiere
of *Dreamy Girl*. This sequence is overlaid with
interrupting intertexts that tread skillfully
between extra-diegetic elements, such as the
caricature of film stars like Dev Anand and

Manoj Kumar, and references to other diegetic
sources such as the Bollywood films *Dream
Girl* and *Amar Prem* (1971), the latter of which
had lead roles played by the 1970s superstar
Rajesh Khanna and actress Sharmila Tagore,
whose name in the film is "Pushpa." Although
the implication of the former movie in the title
Dreamy Girl is self-evident, the presence of
Amar Prem requires more alert attentiveness on
the part of the audience. There are, of course,
helpful cues to make the link: not only is Shanti
Priya, the heroine of *Dreamy Girl*, made up to
resemble the actress Sharmila Tagore, she is
lazily addressed as "Pushpa" by a male voice
that uncannily resembles Rajesh Khanna's in
Amar Prem. So we have intertextual names not
only within the primary diegetic world of *OSO*,
the movie we are watching, but also in nested
worlds within it.

Pushpa, in the movie *Dreamy Girl*, claims the
sindoor as invaluable for a woman. The wife as
custodian of the family honor is a theme that
is familiar to Indian audiences, like the "Maa
ka dil"—"a mother's heart" (always knows)—
stereotype that also figures in *OSO* (more about
this later).

Noteworthy about the stereotype of the hon-
orable wife, symbolized in *ek chutki sindoor*, is
that it spills over from the movie *Dreamy Girl*



Photo 2: Shanti Priya
(Deepika Padukone) and
Omi Prakash (Shah Rukh
Khan) attend the premiere
of *Dreamy Girl* in *Om
Shanti Om* (2007).

into the real life of its heroine, Shanti Priya. (The spillover marks an internal ontological divide: spills out of *Dreamy Girl*, but inside the primary *OSO*.) Shanti Priya is secretly married to Mukesh Mehra, a terribly ambitious film producer, who wants to keep the marriage secret on two counts.

The ostensible count is that Shanti Priya's currently successful career would suffer a setback if the audience were to find out she was married (hereby casting a glance at supposedly real-world popular opinion of Indian cine-goers concerning film stars), but a more important reason is that he has contracted a matrimonial alliance with the daughter of a rich man, in a bid to further his career from the dowry he will receive. The ontological spillover assumes tragic overtones when her insistence on being publicly acknowledged as the wife of Mukesh Mehra by sporting *ek chutki sindoor*, and proclaiming her married status to the world, leads to Shanti Priya's murder by her unscrupulous husband.

The spillover from reel to "real" ("real" for the characters in the world of *OSO*) does not stop here. Failing to rescue Shanti Priya from being murdered, Omi himself dies in the fire lit to kill her and is reincarnated as OK. In his reincarnated life, a chance visit to the locale of the murder reminds him of his previous life, and a chance meeting with Mukesh Mehra makes him determined to take revenge. OK's plans for exposing Mukesh come incredibly close to a similar scene in the movie *Karz*, as indeed OK's friend from his past life, Pappu master, points out to him.

Stereotypes and Intertextuality

Intertextual stereotypes, it appears, also multitask: the tragic overtones of *ek chutki sindoor* are briefly but hilariously resurrected in the second half of *OSO*, when OK and Pappu, auditioning several girls for the role of heroine in the movie they are getting Mike to produce (also called *Om Shanti Om*), rest their decision regarding the actress on the same lines delivered by Shanti Priya as Pushpa in *Dreamy Girl*, about the "keemat" (value) of *ek chutki sindoor*.

Several potential heroines are auditioned and fall miserably short of Shanti Priya's sterling performance (successful, one suspects, also because in real life, too, she yearned to display this symbol of marriage), but this resurrection also makes a point about context, which is arguably the cornerstone of intertextuality. One wannabe heroine asks, "What is this *ek chutki keemat*?" suggesting that what was revered by the 1970s cultural standards may not be intelligible to a girl of the twenty-first century. Her acting is hampered by her inability (apart from a possible histrionic inadequacy) to relate to a value that is fast disappearing in urban or at least metropolitan India today. Intertextuality, here, highlights dated-ness.

Another stereotype well exploited by *OSO* is that of the mother, "who always knows." The mother (there is also a poster of the famous film *Mother India* [1957] featured in *OSO*) in Bollywood cinema is an icon who, like the wife, is beyond analysis. In her sacrifices, her endurance, and her love for her children, she is a stereotype guaranteed to win audience approval. Thus, the line about a mother's heart having privileged knowledge is not simply a line from any one specific movie or even a group of movies, but from a whole age that thought about movies and their projection of roles in a certain way.

Such a Bollywood mother is Omi's mother—as, indeed, she, Omi, and Pappu all recognize, given that she was an aspiring actress as well who almost made a hit film, but whose real-life motherhood (when she became pregnant with Omi) confined her to the station of a junior artiste. She plays her role of mother in the film's real life with gusto, though, so much so that when she recognizes her son in his succeeding life, we are not surprised that it is her "mother's heart" that makes this recognition possible. It is familiar ground for the audience, and it is also amusing, especially when we consider that Omi, now reborn as OK, is unable to recognize her, or that Pappu, Omi's friend, is unable to recognize OK as Omi, despite the fact that OK looks like Omi (both roles are played by Shah Rukh Khan).

And this is one of *OSO*'s many punch lines:

before identifying OK as his reincarnated friend Omi, Pappu tells Omi's mother that OK might look like Omi, but he is not Omi. The mother proves him wrong. Irony and comedy compete in the creation of this turn in the plot.

Self-Reflexive and Intertextual: Metacinema

The stereotype of the mother raises in turn the issue of role-playing, which partakes of self-reflexivity as well as intertextuality. In the world of *OSO*, there are professional actors who play roles, whether Shanti Priya or OK. But there are also people who play roles outside the context of film shooting, such as Sandy (also played by Deepika Padukone; Sandy happens to be a fan of OK), who acts as the ghost of Shanti Priya in the elaborate trap laid by OK to reveal Mike/Mukesh's crime. Role-playing is a recognized and highly qualified activity in *OSO*, and it contributes to the self-reflexivity that marks the movie.

Margaret Mackey unearths a curious phenomenon in modern-day engagement with stories, what she calls a "strong element of contemporary culture," namely, "the kind of border play around texts in which stepping in and out of the diegetic world is a prime activity" (3). Applied to *OSO*, it is also a way of gauging how filmic texts and viewers forge narrative contracts in new ways. Contemporary culture is marked by the presence of satellite texts, companion texts to films on the making of those films.⁶ An intertextual movie such as *OSO* cashes in most imaginatively on working the satellite texts into its all-encompassing frame. Within this frame, diegetic borders appear and disappear; part of this viewer's pleasure, at least, lies in identifying these and finding her way into the right ontological space at each threshold. Thus, *OSO* has taken a huge leap in redefining the terms of engagement for the audience with a film.

One persistent, if fairly obvious, diegetic border presented in *OSO* is that of a movie-within-movie. Because the plot of *OSO* requires its setting to be mostly studios and shooting

locations, we are never totally out of the "film-making" mode. Thus, space becomes a vital marker of threshold in *OSO*, and ontological fault lines are "always already."

The self-reflexive trope that puts the plot together is the making of a movie inside this movie. In what is a *mise-en-abyme*, we are watching a movie called *OSO* that is, for the greater part, about the making of a movie called *OSO*. This embedded story generates many self-reflexive threads that challenge the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief. In the first half of the primary *OSO*, Mukesh Mehra sets out to produce the greatest of all films, *OSO* (the movie within this movie). However, it remains unmade, owing to the "accident" of its sets catching fire and its heroine "disappearing"—this is the official version that Mukesh Mehra sets out to spread, having murdered his wife. In the second half of the primary *OSO*, the movie *OSO* is revived in the plot through the recall of his past life by OK and the coincidental reappearance of Mukesh as Mike, along with OK's desire to complete the "circle of life," as he calls his desire for revenge.

One of the most brilliant moves of *OSO* toward postmodern art-life intersections is in the premiere scene where Shanti Priya, sitting in a balcony as a part of the audience, watches herself play Pushpa in *Dreamy Girl*, declaiming the virtues of *ek chutki sindoor*. We see her completely absorbed in the scene, and we discover as the movie unfolds that she lets her "real" life (as Shanti) be influenced by her "reel" life (as Pushpa, who in turn resembles Pushpa in *Amar Prem*) to such an extent that it literally becomes a matter of life and death for her to sport the sindoor on her hairline. The usual direction of influence, from life to art, or even from art to art (which is the premise of intertextuality), is upturned in this reverse direction of influence from art to "life"—"life" as defined within a work of art (here the primary *OSO*, that is, one ontological level below "life" as the audience knows it). The nuances involved in working out this network of life-art intersections testify to the complex sophistication of intertextuality.

Another self-reflexive strain presents itself in

the recurring address—ostensibly to the audience of the movie (us), though there is also a text-internal listener in all but one of the following cases—that “the film is still not over.” This line is situated across five different contexts:

(1) First, after the premiere of *Dreamy Girl*, Omi delivers a speech in a pretend film awards function attended by Pappu and some urchins, wherein he observes that “like our films, in our lives too, things end happily,” and if they have not, it means that the picture is not over and it is not “the end” yet. (2) OK repeats this speech from his past life. (3) OK, planning to trap Mike through his film, assures Pappu that all will go well, for the movie is not yet over. (4) When Mike decides to return to Hollywood in the middle of the shooting, a panicking OK advances the date of the Music Launch to keep Mike back. But he is torn by anxiety: will Mike attend or not? This time it is his (Omi’s) mother who asserts confidently that Mike will come because the picture is still not over. (5) In the best self-reflexive tradition, after the *deus ex machina* resolution of *OSO*, the lights go out, and a voice tells us not to go away because the picture is still not over, for the credits feature the cast and crew of *OSO*, who come to make their bow to the audience.

An instance of the recurring diegetic border in *OSO* may be located in the fire scene in the shooting of a movie featuring Shanti Priya within the primary *OSO*. The fire staged for shooting purposes becomes “real” (i.e., “real” in the world of the primary *OSO*, but of course for us, watching *OSO*, everything is illusion, depending on how frequently we can be reminded of it), and the actor playing the hero refuses to go to her rescue (predictably, Omi rescues her).

The said actor, however, is adjured by others on the set to emulate Sunil Dutt, the (real-life) Bollywood actor who, while shooting a film, braved a fire that broke out on the sets to rescue the leading lady of the film, the actress Nargis. The love story of Sunil Dutt and Nargis that culminated in their marriage is one of the most romantic stories of Bollywood. The actor playing alongside Shanti Priya, however, refuses to risk his life for her because, as he

says, unlike Dutt, he is already married. To recapitulate, the romance of Nargis and Sunil Dutt belongs to the world of the audience watching the primary *OSO* but is alluded to by fictional characters within *OSO*, who with this allusion make inroads into our ontological space.

Siting Intertextuality: Filmfare Awards in *Om Shanti Om*

The Filmfare awards function is a perfect example of the overlap of reality and illusion through intertextual allusion. The Filmfare awards are part of the institution of Bollywood, and they find their way naturally into the story of *OSO*.

So far, it is still possible for the spectator to willingly suspend her disbelief. After all, *OSO* is a story about a Bollywood wannabe/hero, and it is but natural to bring to it a feature from real life that would convey just that touch of authenticity. On a different note, it also leaves the audience with the obligation, as Eco suggests in his essay, to “know not only other movies but all the mass media gossip about movies” (402). Actress Shabana Azmi’s presence in the Filmfare function (as Shabana Azmi, the Bollywood actress), to protest against the removal of a slum in order to hold the function, can draw an appreciative chuckle only from an audience who knows about the actress’s crusading activism. Similarly, Amitabh Bachchan asking, “Om Kapoor Who?” would carry double entendre only to an audience that has heard gossip of the supposed rivalry between Amitabh Bachchan and Shah Rukh Khan, both Bollywood actor-stars.

At what point, then, does the inclusion of real-world details become an invasion that threatens to break the slender thread by which the illusion of the film holds?

This question keeps threatening the viewer of *OSO*, and nowhere more trenchantly than in the Filmfare awards scene, where names of the best actor nominees are announced in vintage Bollywood tradition. Here the film titles become significant. The best actor nominee from the fictional film *Dhoom 5* (a possible—but as yet unmade—sequel to real-life films *Dhoom* and

Dhoom 2) is Abhishek Bachchan, who starred in the real-life *Dhoom*, just as OK's nominations for best actor come from his two movies, *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* and *Main Hoon Na*.

Several factors compete for attention at this juncture. The first is the fact that in the two real-life Bollywood films from which the aforementioned titles in *OSO* have been borrowed, *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* and *Main Hoon Na*, the hero is played by actor Shah Rukh Khan. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, the director of *Main Hoon Na* is Farah Khan, the director of *OSO*.

But there is more than just a matching-game involved for the spectator here. In the two scenes clipped from the respective films featuring OK, we are bemused to find that the sequence in both films is identical, from the romantic backdrop to the romancing couple who run, slow-motion, toward each other to the line delivered by the hero: "Rahul, naam to suna hoga" ("Rahul, [you] must have heard my name").

The point of "you must have heard my name" is the crowning achievement of a cascading effect of echoes starting from the title and moving on to the hero and finally to the hero's name, but the utter similarity between both films that foregrounds the unashamedly parasitic relationship between the two films points to a formula for success that depends on not changing even the name of the character—or conversely, a formula that can work even without the most minimal changes. That the formula is repeated with not the slightest variation is to imply an audience that is hardwired in its demands. Furthermore, no demands are made on the filmmaker by such a viewership. And the best actor award (OK wins it) goes to the man who does the same thing in movie after movie.

On the other hand, the filmmaker of *OSO*—Farah Khan—certainly takes a risk by incorporating these very formulae and breaking the audience's involvement in the story by showing how it takes to formulae that are clichéd and unvaried. The laughter is extended to the critics as well for nominating two films that for all practical purposes are one and the same film. OK's two films vary only on one count: the hero-

ine is different. However, both heroines wear a saree, and both blush adorably when the hero puts his arm around them.

The question that *OSO* prompts here (as a first step to many more questions about plotlines, audience, and successful film hits) is "what is the difference between the two films?" As just shown, there is virtually none. Are they, then, intertextual with reference to each other? Do we have here a flipside of intertextuality? What happens when the borrowing is so close as to collapse the identity of two films into one? That they are nevertheless perceived as two films worthy of separate consideration is an ironic perspective. This sequence thus carries with it the question, what redeems intertextual processes from being seen as mere replicas, lacking originality?

There are many answers. One, already stated, is that intertextual processes typically carry with them an attitude toward the earlier utterance. They are not mere replicas. They may parody, they may satirize, or they may merely laugh. But rarely are they naïve copies. In fact, we have the premise of intertextuality taken to its logical consequence when we have duplicate texts, films as in this case; but intertextual processes themselves are marked by a sophistication characterized by self-awareness, so that there is no attempt to disguise the borrowing, whereas films placing a high premium on originality would take care to make at least cosmetic changes to their borrowings.

Intertextual films flaunt their sources—and their creativity in transforming these sources—by situating them within new contexts. In this respect, *OSO* is a Bollywood milestone.

The Filmfare awards scene also asks another question besides what makes for a successful film: what makes a successful star? Pappu's claim, raised at the outset in this article, is that names play a significant role in the creation of a star. This is borne out by OK's surname, "Kapoor." Being the son of superstar Rajesh Kapoor, moreover, his success as a film star is assured. The trivializing of success is another parodic move in the intertextual enterprise that is *OSO*.

Intertextuality and Suspense

In Salman Rushdie's self-reflexive novel *Midnight's Children*, his protagonist-narrator Saleem Sinai chafes against his listener Padma's insistence on "what-happened-next" as a structuring principle that calls for a naïvely linear storytelling technique. There are so many stories to tell, he says, and they all run into each other. Saleem Sinai's comment on India as impossible to narrate without digression is applicable to Bollywood as well, and any viewer looking for a straightforward uninterrupted story in *OSO* has missed the point the movie makes. Literalness has to be left behind.

Because "what happens next" is not the issue here, suspense, an important pivot of any plot worked on revenge, can become a casualty. The intertextual presences in *OSO*, especially those of *Karz*, preclude the possibility of suspense for the audience because the ending is predictable from at least the beginning of the second half, when Omi incarnates as OK. And of course, there is the implicit echo of *Hamlet*, which forms the title of this article. Shakespeare is a looming presence over the revenge plot of *OSO*, in its decision to expose the villain through a pretend-performance.

So it is not the story that the audience goes

looking for in the primary *OSO*, but what *OSO* has made of its intertextual sources. The audience's questions are still directed to plot and structure; but "how" events are structured, rather than "what" comes after an event, is the question.

So far, I have discussed the entry points of various texts in *OSO* and their effect on the audience. Given the sheer number and variety of these intertexts (whose rubrics range from "title" to "genre"), it is admirable that *OSO* does not compromise coherence. Many features knit *OSO* together, including its storyline, rooted in the twin emotions of love and revenge; however, what holds the film together, in the final analysis, is not so much its melodramatic plot as the spirit of nostalgia, which is the shape that intertextuality takes for the main part.

Levels Up: From Film inside Film to Audience outside Film

Returning to a question raised earlier in the article, what happens to intertextuality when the borrowing is so close as to collapse the identity of two films, or two texts, into one? This scenario is visualized imaginatively by J. L. Borges in his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." The story is about a twentieth-century



Photo 3: Actor Shah Rukh Khan shows off his six-pack abs he ostensibly worked for in this advertisement for *Om Shanti Om* (2007).

writer called Pierre Menard who decides to write some pages of Cervantes' novel, but without copying it. Although this paradoxical endeavor does succeed, Menard's work (even though it echoes its original line by line) is changed because of—among other things—the intervening centuries between Cervantes and Menard. As Borges says, Menard has enriched the art of reading by means of “deliberate anachronism” and “erroneous attribution” (71).

Context, thus, is a major determinant of intertextuality. This is what *OSO* enables us viewers of the twenty-first century to realize about the Bollywood of the 1970s. *OSO* not only locates the audience within the movie, but also persuades the audience to introspect over cinematic conventions and its own demands in this direction.

Is *OSO* one of a kind? Hopefully not, as a recent film, *DevD* (released in February 2009), shows. The movie is based on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas*, first published in 1917, in Bengali. The story has captured the imagination of filmmakers in Bollywood as well as regional cinema, in an unending fashion (this article cites perhaps the two most famous Bollywood attempts, in the earlier section titled “Intertextuality”). *Devdas* is a rich man's son, in love with Paro, who also loves him, but after her marriage is arranged to someone else, he takes to drink and befriends a prostitute called Chandramukhi. The melodramatic story ends with the death of *Devdas*. But *DevD* is not just another remake. In *DevD*, *Devdas* has transformed beyond recognition because of the ruthless excising of all the romance from the original story. He is a junkie who is unabashedly self-centered, and Paro in *DevD* is not the coy maiden of the earlier film but a woman who is sexually progressive. His Chandramukhi is Chanda, a part-time streetwalker who helps this *Devdas* find fulfillment in his relationship with her, thus giving an optimistic ending to the old story.⁷

It would be going against the grain of the spirit of intertextuality to speak of conclusions, but the article has to end: with a reference to a scene that straddles three ontological worlds,

right up to the audience, a scene that was one of the highlights for advertising this movie and for bringing the audience into the cinema hall in the first place.

As this article has tried to show, intertextual references in *OSO* violate ontological boundaries with insouciance, sometimes referring to real life, sometimes to other films, and thereby continually blurring the line between reality and illusion. The best case in point is arguably the scene where a flippant OK suggests to his director that he redeem his film (being shot within the primary world of *OSO*) with a dream sequence because the film in question has a deglamourized plot and is likely to be a commercial failure—hence the dream sequence, where the crippled hero overcomes all limitations and dances merrily with adoring women (all things are possible in a dream). OK's dream sequence for a film within *OSO* ascends one ontological level into the world of the primary *OSO* and becomes the dream sequence that we, the audience, have probably looked out for while buying tickets for this movie, given that Shah Rukh Khan's avatar with his six-pack abs has been part of the promos of *Om Shanti Om*.

NOTES

1. “*Om Shanti Om* has opened to an earth shattering 95–100% response smashing records all over. The film was released on around 600 single screens and set new first day highs on nearly 500 of these 600 screens” (Ahmed). The *Hindu Business Line*, a business daily, reported on 22 November 2007, “Eros International has grossed over \$19 million worldwide for Shah Rukh Khan's *Om Shanti Om* in its first week making it the most successful opening in Indian cinema history, according to the company. *Om Shanti Om* released across 1,400 plus screens globally, the film grossed \$1.5 million at the UK box office and over \$2 million in North America in its first week (*Om Shanti Om* grosses over \$19 m”).

2. In her study of diegetic border-crossing, Mackey identifies the following key features of postmodernism “as manifested in contemporary living”: “indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, irony, hybridization, and an emphasis on performance and participation” (3). Mackey's article presents the persuasive argument that storytelling has changed in recent times by moving closer to the self-referential margins of the text and that crossing the textual borders is a demand made by most texts of their readers.

Texts include media as well. Her argument could play a role in explaining the structure and success of *OSO*.

3. The outcome being that film director Ram Gopal Varma filed an affidavit in the Delhi High Court stating that he would rename his movie *Ram Gopal Varma ki Aag* ("Sholay Remake").

4. Among the many film stars of Bollywood whom Farah Khan, the director of *OSO*, spoofs, one thespian, Manoj Kumar, took offense over his portrayal and threatened to sue Shah Rukh Khan and Farah Khan for their disrespectful representation of him. The two apologized to Manoj Kumar and asked his pardon, assuring him that they had not meant to humiliate him (Deshpande).

5. Govind Ahuja, who adapted his name to "Govinda" when he entered films as an actor, was born in Virar. His acting career began in 1986, and he entered politics in 2004.

6. At the time this article's writing, a book has been launched called *The Making of Om Shanti Om*, written by a co-writer of the movie, Mushtaq Sheikh. The book is seen as a response to the resounding success of the movie *OSO* and makes Mackey's point about satellite texts eloquently.

7. According to a *New York Times* reviewer, "[t]raditionally, the story of Devdas finds the eponymous character, a legendary lover, becoming so despaired at the loss of his true love that he begins to veer down a perilous path of self-destruction. Alternately, this version of the story paints Devdas as a self-pitying hypocrite whose will is so weak that he cannot even summon the fortitude to stand up for himself" (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/451513/Dev-D/overview>).

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