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Towards a Decolonial Media Archaeology: The Absent Archive of Screenwriting History and the Obsolete *Munshi*

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Abstract

Much has been written about how Foucault's archaeology of the modern episteme, emerging from early 19th-century Europe, was curiously divorced from its context of colonialism. Media archaeology, as Foucault's legacy, has also remained rather geopolitically insular and race agnostic in its epistemological reverse engineering of media modernity. Using screenwriting history as a case study, this article demonstrates how bringing decolonial thinking and media archaeology together can challenge linear narratives of modernity/coloniality in media history. The article connects two seemingly disparate histories of archival absence and human obsolescence to reveal the construction of an elusive screenwriting modernity that has historically obscured parallel scripting practices and pre-existing scribal traditions.

Keywords

archive, Bollywood, decolonial thinking, media archaeology, screenwriting

Introduction

Decolonial thinkers from Latin America have argued that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive in their subjugation of alternative knowledge systems and cosmologies. The concept of 'modernity/coloniality' was first used by Aníbal Quijano and subsequently developed by Walter D. Mignolo. According to Quijano (2007), it is impossible to separate colonial domination from modernity since the latter is the very basis for an epistemic hierarchy that has historically privileged Western epistemologies over non-Western ones. Mignolo (2009) extended this argument by

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proposing 'epistemic de-linking' as a decolonial strategy wherein knowledge production from the Global South departs from Western universalist models of modernity, rationality and economic progress. Epistemes, in the Foucauldian sense, are unconscious rules that govern the conditions of possibility of knowledge in a particular era. At the heart of decolonial thinking therefore lies the excavation of subjugated knowledges through a reappraisal of dominant epistemic categories along the geopolitical vectors of knowledge.

'Epistemic thresholds' (Parikka, 2012: 33) operate as heuristic tools of historical inquiry in media archaeology as well. The task of the media archaeologist is an excavation of the hidden layers of media history along epistemic fault lines. Following the Foucauldian notion of archaeology, media archaeology serves both as a method for recovering forgotten media pasts and a critique of dominant linear narratives of technical progress. While some media archaeologists have highlighted the epistemological centrality of human physiology in rethinking media-historical narratives, other scholars have stressed mathematical processes as more telling of contemporary media environments. Both sets of scholars have, however, largely overlooked global power asymmetries in their media archaeological pursuits and appeared rather geopolitically insular and race agnostic in their epistemological reverse engineering.

Decolonial thinking foregrounds a geopolitics of knowledge rather than local exceptionalisms.¹ As Willems (2014: 8) has argued, media scholarship from the Global South should cease to be 'negative imprints' of the West and instead 'deal with the question of epistemology'. I argue in this article that decolonial media archaeology offers a conduit for such epistemological interventions in media histories. If media archaeology reveals the various epistemological conditions that have historically privileged certain media forms and practices at the expense of others, I argue that a decolonial media archaeology would investigate how coloniality/modernity may have informed many of those epistemological conditions. Any decolonial historical revisionism would have to take the *epistemic violence* of coloniality into account – a Foucauldian omission long pointed out by Spivak (1988) but largely overlooked in Foucault-inspired approaches to media archaeology.

Using screenwriting history as a case study, this article demonstrates how bringing decolonial thinking and media archaeology together can challenge linear narratives of modernity/coloniality in media history. Through an epistemology of the film script archive, the first half of the article shall explain why a study of the historical development of the screenplay form is not possible in Global South contexts. In the second half, my inquiry into the professional genealogy of the *munshi*, from the early modern court scribe to the screenwriter in talkie studios, will be an attempt to provincialize the Hollywood-centric discourse of screenwriting that often becomes an uncontested universal frame of reference.

The article shall finally connect these two seemingly disparate histories of archival absence and human obsolescence to reveal the construction of an elusive screenwriting modernity that has historically obscured parallel scripting practices and pre-existing scribal traditions.

The Archive Problem

Last year when I asked the veteran screenwriter and teacher Anjum Rajabali about the pedagogic value of an Indian screenwriting history, I was pleasantly surprised by his implicit reference to T. S. Eliot's (1932) seminal essay through which he described screenwriting history as an encounter of the tradition and the individual.

I tell my students that you have to position yourself as a person who is part of a tradition. The tradition and the individual – that is what is combining for you to do what you do. Within this tradition of storytelling is also the tradition of Indian screenwriting and its evolution, and we are somewhere along in this tradition. (Anjum Rajabali, personal communication, 2 January 2019)

While interviewing screenwriters from different generations of the Hindi film industry (or Bollywood as the world knows it), I sensed their deep reverence for tradition, even if their only way of navigating history was through entangled memories of first-hand experiences and received anecdotes. Nonetheless, such reverence for tradition and contestation in history among veteran screenwriters is curiously matched by archival apathy in Indian film cultures. It brought me back to a basic question around which I had started thinking about my research project: Why do we know so little about early screenwriting practices in a country as obsessed with cinema as India? The Hindi film industry alone produces more films than Hollywood each year. While not as commercially successful as Hindi films, regional cinemas in India are made in at least 20 other languages. Yet we lack any substantial historical knowledge of this 100-year-old practice despite textual production at such a massive scale for films.

Steven Maras (2009: 11) has defined the 'object problem' in screenwriting studies as 'the difficulty of both defining screenwriting as an object, and identifying an object for screenwriting'. Strangely, the 'object problem' has a deeper resonance with the archival absence of early Indian film scripts since the very object under academic scrutiny is missing. How does one write screenwriting history without film scripts? And how can Indian screenwriting scholarship graduate from complaints and caveats of archival constraints to a more critical understanding of the material absence of writing? Writing, as we traditionally understand, leaves a material trail. In literary studies, textual scholarship thrives and

survives on the accessibility of written material, whether in the form of popular printed books or rare handwritten manuscripts. The deconstructive appeal to investigate absences and silences *in* writing often presupposes that writing always already exists. Nonetheless, the Derridean notion of trace as ‘the mark of the absence of a presence’ (Spivak, 1976: xvii) becomes quite useful here if its project is turned outward to study the absences and silences *of* writing itself. In other words, if a form of writing does not exist, the conditions of its invisibilization bear its traces. As Lisa Gitelman (2014) has pointed out, the mnemonic function of writing is always extended to its material formats, beyond the act of writing itself.

Writing is mnemonic, the history of communication tells us; it is preservative. And so are printing and bookmaking. . . . If writing is preservative, these books preserved preservation. Their design, manufacture, and adoption worked to conserve patterns of inscription and expression. (2014: 22)

It can be argued that it is *binding*, and not merely writing, that preserves memory. During my interviews in Mumbai, I sensed a general appreciation of *bound scripts*² as pre-cinematic texts that facilitate the conception and production of a film. However, these documents have continued to be treated as blueprints of filmic production, and therefore are not conventionally understood to be worthy of preservation for a literary readership.³ As articulated by veteran screenwriter Kamlesh Pandey, the screenplay primarily has an intra-industrial circulation:

It is a different document for every person reading it. To the producer it is a story that he weighs for audience appeal, to the director it is a progression of images and scenes in a dance rhythm that he or she may or may not want to dance to, to the art director, it is a list of locations and sets, to the wardrobe people it is a list of costumes, to the prop man a list of props, to the actor a list of lines to learn, to the assistant director a schedule, to the transportation guy a list of cars, trucks, maps and times. (K. Pandey, personal communication, 24 June 2016)

We would think that a document as essential to the production of a film as the screenplay ought to be preserved as an artefact. But it is hardly the case in South Asia, and sometimes even in the West.⁴ Steven Price (2013) has pointed out a key difference between Hollywood and other film industries that underscores the indispensability of the archival condition in theorizing the generic form of screenwriting:

. . . the Hollywood continuity script was not only a form of screenwriting; it was also a method by which the studios kept a record of

the production, and therefore Hollywood studios were creating screenplay archives almost by default, dating in some cases as far back as the 1910s. Some of these, such as those of MGM and Warners, have been made available to scholars in major research centres. (2013: 20)

Returning to India, the archival absence of scripts from the early years is in fact compounded by serious apathy towards preserving primary film artefacts. While the National Film Archive of India (NFAI) does boast a digital collection of censor scripts from the mid-1950s till date, these scripts are primarily post-production transcripts sent to the film censors and are unable to tell us much about in-house screenwriting practices. In a country where very few silent films and early talkies have survived, it is not surprising that there is no substantial archive of early film scripts.⁵

The archival condition has direct bearing on the kind of historiography that is *not* possible in South Asia.⁶ The vast body of historical scholarship on screenwriting includes classical historiography of the practice in Hollywood (Staiger, 1976; Azlant, 1980; Hamilton, 1990; Stempel, 1991), revisionist histories⁷ through closer analysis (Maras, 2009; Price, 2013; Macdonald, 2013; Horton and Hoxter, 2014), and explorations of the practice through the locus of creative labour (Conor, 2013; Banks, 2015) as well as literature (Nannicelli, 2013). This body of scholarship is, however, circumscribed within 'Northern screenwriting practices', calling to attention the need for 'a theory of the screenplay in Southern media industries' (Arellano, 2016: 114). Broadly speaking, the mainstream history of screenwriting in the West is premised on the formal development of the screenplay. Maras (2009: 80–81) has referred to this predisposition of screenwriting historians as 'screenplay-centrism' – a condition materially facilitated by extensive archives.⁸

On the other hand, the absence of early Indian film scripts has so far been a deterrent for a historiography based on close archival scholarship. Stray archival finds such as the silent film script of *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924; see Dharamsey, 2012) or the continuity script fragments of *Savitri* (1937) in private collections do not support a sequential historiography of screenwriting; they only testify to the presence of bound scripts in early Bombay cinema and give us a sense of the practice within a particular studio at a particular time. Nonetheless, my intention so far has not been to present the situation as an entirely unyielding one. A great deal of attention has been paid to writing history '*along* the archival grain' (Stoler, 2002: 100), and how such historiography may provide rich conceptual dividends.⁹ The task here is to critically reconsider the idealized screenwriting archive against which we define our absences. It is worth investigating how dominant media practices shape archival imaginaries

and epistemic claims, and whether laments of archival absence stem from the doomed search for a screenwriting modernity wherein alternative practices are largely obscured.

Provincializing the Continuity Script

Around 1913–14, Thomas Ince had introduced a system of screenwriting in Hollywood studios that would allow studio proprietors to micro-manage every step of the production process. It was the ‘continuity script’ – a fully fleshed out plan for shooting a film. Janet Staiger (1979) has studied the continuity script as a studio document that streamlined the production of films in the assembly line mode, introducing unprecedented levels of corporate rigour and rationality into film production through documentation and execution.

The continuity script works because it is an external manifestation of a more fundamental structure inextricable from modern corporate business – the separation of the conception and production phases of work and the pyramid of divided labour. (Staiger, 1979: 23)

The scriptural economy¹⁰ of film production is understood to be an organizational bedrock along this reading of the continuity script as an ‘external manifestation’ of rational systems of the early 20th century. In her doctoral research on the diverse practices of modernization in colonial Bombay cinema, Debashree Mukherjee (2015: 126) also discusses the continuity script in Bombay Talkies ‘as a particular paper technology necessitated by a “scientific” model of rationalised production that privileged the production of paper’.

Bombay Talkies was a film studio founded in 1934 by Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani, an erudite Bengali couple who had originally met in London. The studio combined the technical prowess of an experienced German crew with the rising stardom of Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani to emerge as an extremely successful production house during the 1930s–40s. Due to their international approach towards filmmaking, the studio’s operations were carried out highly systematically using the continuity script. In fact, some of their extant continuity scripts can be accessed at the Dietze Family Archive¹¹ in Melbourne. In her dissertation, Mukherjee’s access to the invaluable Bombay Talkies papers allows her to launch a critique of an earlier thesis about the pre-capitalist nature of the Hindi film industry.¹² She argues that the absence of the ‘bound script’ has been ‘fetishized over the last few decades to characterise “Bollywood” as a culturally curious, messy, cottage industry’ (2015: 127) to the extent that the academic community has also taken the myth seriously. Mukherjee highlights Madhava Prasad’s misreading of

the ‘script’ as a written, coherent story instead of Staiger’s intended notion of the script as a blueprint – ‘an administrative and logistical tool to dictate production, and not a qualitative marker of creative integrity’ (2015: 129).

While Mukherjee’s critique of Prasad is well intentioned, her reading of the continuity script as a harbinger of ‘corporate modernity’ (2015: 80) in Bombay Talkies runs certain risks. How do we understand indigenous agency in transnational screenwriting histories when more enlightened film studios such as the Bombay Talkies become passive beneficiaries of technology developed by pioneers like Thomas Ince? At what point does the search for the continuity script become a search for a screenwriting modernity *à la* Hollywood? Most importantly, what kind of scriptural economies does such an investigation exclude and what kind of epistemic violence does it perpetuate? Ravi Vasudevan (2010: 140) has argued that early Bombay cinema’s connection with Iranian and other Southern film cultures calls attention to other ‘global trends of modernization than those circulated by Hollywood’. An epistemic de-linking from the perceived global hegemony of the continuity script therefore becomes essential for such South–South transnational interfaces to emerge as parallel constitutive forces of early screenwriting practices. In the following sections, I shall try to complicate the easy understanding of the continuity script as a marker of screenwriting modernity that emerged in the West and was diffused in South Asia through the transmission of prescriptive manuals (Sengupta, 2018: 121–2) and other discursive flows. This is not to undermine the transnational movement of ideas or the trailblazing practices of Bombay Talkies but to attain a deeper understanding of how ‘rational’ practices that travel to new cultures negotiate with pre-existing systems that tend to persist.

From Object to Practice

Thomas Elsaesser understands media archaeology to be ‘a response to various kinds of crises’ (2016a: 183) rather than a methodology or a discipline. Arguably, apart from ‘the crisis in history and causality’ (2016: 188), media archaeology in the Global South also addresses the crisis in the archives. While film historians working in the generous archives of the West arrived at media archaeology after a period of disenchantment with positivist histories of cinema, film scholars in South Asia have had little choice but to take recourse to parallel histories of the moving image in the absence of early films (see Mukherjee, 2013; Chatterjee, 2014). Likewise, the failure of an archival excavation of the screenwriting *object* has prompted in my research an archaeological inquiry into its *practice*. My arguments in the paper are significantly informed by the increased understanding of film history as a media

archaeological project of studying discontinuities, convergences and networks against the grain of teleological histories of industrial progress.

The activity of recovering this diversity and to account for such multiplicity, to trace these parallel histories and explore alternative trajectories, is what is meant by 'film history as media archaeology'. (Elsaesser, 2016b: 25)

It is important to briefly discuss how this proposed archaeology of screenwriting as a media practice rather than a media object departs from radical/German media archaeology. Radical media archaeology, for Wolfgang Ernst (2015: 18), is an excavation of 'the epistemological insights that can be derived from the close analysis of electro-mechanical media, electronic media, and finally computative machines'. In other words, pasts recorded with 'the coldness (lack of emotion or semantics) of the machine' (Parikka, 2013: 8) take precedence over historical narratives constructed by human beings. The criticism against this extreme form of media materialism is usually levelled at its anti-humanist approach. Scholars have expressed different reservations about this particular mode of media archaeology, in the tradition of Friedrich Kittler, which endorses a thorough erasure of any trace of anthropomorphism in media histories (Huhtamo, 2012: 16–17; Parikka, 2013: 11; Mattern, 2017: xxiv). A more blunt opinion about this hardware-focused and object-oriented approach has been its description as 'a media studies without people' (Peters, 2010: 5). The case against anti-humanism becomes doubly relevant in Global South contexts. A world lacking in inventors and pioneers is a breeding ground for anonymised media practices, and often the archaeological radicalism lies in piecing together the pasts and presents of human practices through ruins and fragments. Mindfully, my archaeological attempt here is inspired by more socio-cultural excavations of media (see Winthrop-Young et al., 2013), often referred to as 'cultural techniques'.¹³

In his media archaeology of Indian cinema, Sudhir Mahadevan (2015: 15) explains the contemporaneity of old and new media in South Asia as an 'obviation of obsolescence' – a condition markedly different from the planned obsolescence of media artefacts in the West. It is well known how sustainable practices of repair and recycling continue to shape new media consumption in the Global South (Sundaram, 1999; Rosner and Ames, 2014). However, most ironically, humans as well as nonhumans in the developing countries incur significant ecological costs when electronic waste is transported from the North to the South for dumping (Pellow 2007: 185–224). Also, in a context where the direct human costs of accelerated automation¹⁴ are certainly greater than in the Global North (Norton, 2017; Ilavarasan, 2018), I argue that decolonial media archaeology ought to depart from purely materialist approaches and radically

write the human back into media histories. In the following sections, I attempt to do this with a short history of the *munshi*'s scribal and screenwriting practices.

Munshi as a Topos

While film scripts from the early years are largely missing, even a cursory look at screenwriting credits during the 1930s–40s introduces us to the *munshi* – a scribal profession as old as the early 1600s. As per records,¹⁵ at least 12 screenwriters from 1932 to 1952 have *munshi* prefixed before their names. Munshi Ismail Faroque, Munshi Ashiq, Munshi Sefta, Munshi Zameer, Munshi Sagar Hussain, Munshi Ehsan Lucknowi, Munshi Sarfaraz, Munshi Arzoo Lucknowi, Munshi Dil, Munshi Sham, Munshi Khanjar and Munshi Abdul Baqui worked in different studios in Bombay, Calcutta and Pune during this period.

Who is a *munshi*? A considerable body of scholarship on early modern scribal professions in pre-colonial and colonial South Asia has largely located the *munshi* in two historical offices: i) the 17th–18th century Mughal court (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2004; Kinra, 2010, 2015), and ii) the 18th–19th century colonial language-learning institutions (Bayly, 1996; Ogborn, 2007). Apart from the pop-cultural imagination of the *munshi* as a scheming accountant and accomplice of the evil *zamindar* (landowner) in Hindi films, the *munshis* of the 20th century were arguably a part of the political and cultural decline of Urdu-speaking elites in North India (Robinson, 2007: 33–83). In the context of some of the broader concerns I have raised in this paper, it becomes important to trace the decline of the *munshi* from his venerated position as a court scribe to his *obsolete* status as a dialogue writer in film studios. A note of caution is due here though. My engagement with the early modern¹⁶ category of *munshi* is not a clarion call for a civilizational return to an essentially indigenous form of screenwriting but an attempt to provincialize the Hollywood-centric discourse of screenwriting. Erkki Huhtamo's (2011: 43) media archaeological notion of the *topos* as a 'temporary manifestation of a persisting cultural tradition' has helped me think about the transhistorical category of the *munshi* from the Mughal court and colonial language institutions to the film studio and online accounting software (see: <http://www.e-munshi.com/index.html>). In lieu of reading the continuity script as a modern tool of screenwriting that diffused into the subcontinent through an enlightened film studio, I suggest that a decolonial archaeology of screenwriting practice, through the topos of *munshi*, could help us reposition Indian screenwriting history against the archival determinisms of the continuity script.

I begin with a brief history of the early modern *munshi*. It was during the Mughal emperor Akbar's reign (1556–1605 AD) that Persian was formally declared the language of the court – a proclamation that was

‘accompanied by a reorganisation of the revenue department as well as the other administrative departments’ (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62). The original Hindavi system of accounting was gradually restructured through the acquisition of new rules and regulations from Iranian scribes. The introduction of Persian as the court language radically ‘streamlined and rationalized’ bureaucratic and administrative practices ‘to levels unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent and unsurpassed in all but a handful of states elsewhere in the world for some time to come’ (Kinra, 2015: 3). Due to Akbar’s secular educational policies, both noble Muslims and upper-caste Hindus undertook voracious training in Persian language and literature to secure the coveted administrative position of the *munshi* (secretary).

The word *munshi* comes from the Arabic verb *insha*, which means “‘to compose” a written document’ (Yule and Burnell, 1886: 444). According to a number of early modern manuals (also known as ‘mirrors for *munshis*’), the Mughal *munshi* was required to possess excellent penmanship (*khwush-nawisi*), scribal skills (*navisindagi*), accounting abilities (*siyaq*), draftsmanship (*insha*) and the ability to use coded language (*sukhan-i marmuz*) (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62; Kinra, 2015: 65). A true *munshi*’s job often went beyond the drudgeries of taking dictation and tallying accounts, and required him to ‘participate in the cultural life of the court, to be one of the elite literati who composed and recited poetry for special occasions and important public functions’ (Kinra, 2015: 38).

The whole nobility had been brought up to revere the art of *insha* or letter-writing as a tool of literacy and as a form of regulating proper social relations. ... Thus the *munshi* should be regarded as more than a secretary; he was an expert in diplomatics and social deportment. (Bayly, 1996: 76)

From the mid-18th century, the diplomatic expertise of *munshis* became an asset for the British East India Company, which had started colonizing different parts of the subcontinent. With their help, the British officials made ‘tenuous and ambivalent contact’ (Bayly, 1996: 74) with North Indian administrative systems that were predicated on extensive, hierarchized infrastructures of writing.¹⁷ The officials primarily interacted with *munshis* as language teachers who could train them in Persian. In fact, a well-known Persian-learning manual for British officers was titled *The Persian Moonshee* (1795), effectively reducing the *munshi* to a language-learning tool for colonial gain. Unlike manuals from the Mughal period that laid great emphasis on the intellectual and cultural growth of the *munshi* alongside his administrative tasks, the instrumentalism of orientalist language-learning endeavours such as *The Persian Moonshee* arguably resulted in an abstraction of human

subjectivity as the colonial gaze reified the *munshi*'s multilingual repertoire. Moreover, despite an initial interest in the *munshi* due to vigorous colonial investment in indigenous language acquisition, the scribe's public reputation started declining as the official language of colonial India was changed from Persian to English during the first half of the 19th century. By the end of the 19th century, British officials had already begun mocking the *munshi* as a cultural mercenary who always exaggerated the worth of his services.

Nobody could possibly place a higher value upon his own services than does the *erudite aboriginal* who sees us safely through the various languages of India. And nobody, of all the vast horde of creditors, is more particular about the timely settlement of his 'little bill'. (*The Times of India*, 1887: 5, emphasis added)

Over the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonial divide-and-rule policies created a new demarcation of scribes wherein linguistic knowledge was gradually communalized. The colonizer's ways of learning indigenous languages ironically led to a process of unlearning for the indigenous themselves as Persian and Urdu gradually came to be associated more rigidly with Muslims, and Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi with the Hindu community.¹⁸ While *munshi* continued to be 'a secular term used across board' (Sharma, 2015: 126), the number of Hindu *munshis* in the 20th century was certainly far fewer compared to the yesteryears of secular Mughal rule.¹⁹ The entry of these scribes into the world of cinema bore an unconscious colonial legacy of instrumentalism. Just as the British officials had appointed *pandits* for their expertise in Sanskrit and *munshis* for their knowledge of Persian, talkie film proprietors too hired the former for Hindi dialogues and the latter for Urdu ones (quite often the latter for both Hindi and Urdu).

The *Munshi* in Modern Times

Sound introduced language barriers for Indian film studios. The coming of the talkies gradually restructured national distribution patterns along linguistic and regional lines. New Theatres in Calcutta and Prabhat Studios in Pune, for instance, remade most of their successful Bengali and Marathi talkies in other regional languages to ensure an almost pan-Indian audience. Quick remakes necessitated authoritative translators, and therefore a number of *munshis* and *pandits* were hired for writing as well as translating dialogues and songs. The relationship between Hindi and Urdu had been 'symbiotic in the field of commercial publishing and theatre' (Orsini, 2009: 4), and this spirit of bonhomie was extended to the new medium of talkies where *munshis* and *pandits* together contributed to 'an expansive and inclusive register of

Hindustani' (Lunn, 2015: 2), combining the two North Indian languages in an equal, secular measure. The recruitment of Parsi theatre playwrights (also referred to as *munshis* in theatre companies) to write the first Indian talkies had imbued the novelty of sound with a rich textual quality through frequent songs and theatrical dialogues, laying the aesthetic foundations of Hindi cinema for decades to come (Sengupta, 2018: 126–30). Why was the *munshi* then frequently recalled and represented through imageries of obsolescence and incompetence?

There was a time when 'the writer' in a film studio meant a shabby-looking Munshi, who would chew *paan*²⁰ and spit out what passed for stories in those days. In a six-pice exercise book the literary inspirations of the Munshi would be recorded with the stub of a pencil and handed over to the director who would immediately start shooting, only skipping through 'the story' to make sure that there was in it a role each of Sulochana, Billimoria and Gulam Mohamed [...] Now and then, of course, youthful enthusiasts like Naval Gandhi would get hold of a story by a real writer like Tagore and make a film of sorts, like 'Sacrifice'. But these were exceptions that only proved the rule. In the studio, the Munshi still reigned supreme. (*Filmindia*, 1940: 3)

The medium-specific appreciation of screenwriting becomes complex in early South Asian film criticism as magazines such as *Filmindia* seemed overzealous to congratulate 'real' writers²¹ of the print world on the successful adaptation of their works but not necessarily dialogue writers whose intermedial labour made such adaptations possible. In this section, I have paid special attention to the popular English-language²² magazine *Filmindia*, which implored domestic film studios to emulate 'how the (foreign) screen has discovered the writer – original writer as well as the studio scenarist – and restored him to his rightful place of eminence' (*Filmindia*, 1940: 5). A consistent emphasis on story as art (meant for 'original' literary writers) and scenario as craft (meant for technically gifted scenarists/directors) as twin pillars of the new medium of cinematic storytelling often reduced language, vis-à-vis dialogues, to a mere embellishment.²³ An unshakeable faith in the adaptive immediacy of popular stories by well-known Indian writers and a strong advocacy of the technical skills of film direction were coupled with a denigration of early modern scribal professions, mainly the *munshi*.²⁴

While many eminent personalities worked closely with *munshis* in the film studios,²⁵ the illustrious early modern scribes had become an object of mockery by late modern times.²⁶ The early 20th century witnessed several news reports that sensationalized petty crimes, usually of theft, committed by *munshis*.²⁷ The film world didn't accord high status to the

munshis either, often inscribing obsolescence into the descriptions of their practices. In a review of *Baghdad Ka Chor* (1948), the dialogue writer was criticized for using a ‘pseudo-literary jargon regardless of the spoken idiom’, which looked like ‘the work of some Munshi who is used to coaching British officers for the Army examination in Roman Urdu!’ (*Filmindia*, 1948a: 66) The concerns of medium specificity raised in *Filmindia*, through a consistent denigration of the *munshi* as the archaic scribe with little knowledge of the new medium, were aimed at expediting the imminent displacement of *obsolete* writing systems with more *modern* scriptwriting techniques. Pandit Indra, a well-known dialogue writer and lyricist, wrote an article about the maligned status of *munshis* and *pandits*, likening themselves to Shakespearean fools who always know better.

The film studios are supposed to have their ‘prize-fools’ and this uncomplimentary title is generally awarded to the Munshis and Pandits who write the dialogues. By common consent almost every one tacitly believes this. [...] The Munshi or the Pandit is a dialogue writer and naturally a man of letters. His education gives him the right to think more than the others and when a dialogue writer finds himself in a crowd of block-head directors and producers, he must surely think himself to be in the land of fools. (Indra, 1938: 45)

Saadat Hasan Manto, now a posthumously celebrated Urdu writer, once used to struggle to make ends meet in Bombay. In his sarcastic tongue-in-cheek style, he later recounted his experiences of working in a film studio as a *munshi*, which resonate strongly with Pandit Indra’s account.

I learnt [...] on turning up for my first day of work that my name wasn’t Saadat Hasan Manto, but for some reason, not apparent to me, ‘Munshi’. My tasks, and this was made clear, were three. First, getting a *paan* for the director every five minutes (or so it seemed). Second, to not speak. Third, if these two were performed competently, to write, every so often, a dialogue in incorrect Urdu. And then to not speak. (Manto, 2014: 149)

The category of *munshi* had long become obsolete by the 1950s as most new writers rejected the erstwhile honourable prefix in favour of more professional (and less exploitative) designations such as the dialogue writer and lyricist. The ‘reign’ of the *munshi* had been ended successfully. While writers with a flair for Urdu continue to write songs and dialogues in Bollywood films, most Indian screenwriters today would scoff at the idea of being called a *munshi*. This dismissive attitude arguably reveals a

colonial unconscious that continues to associate incompetence and obsolescence with traditional taxonomies, and writes them out of a history of industrial efficiency and progress.

Absence and Obsolescence

My inquiry into the professional genealogy of the *munshi*, from the Mughal scribe to the dialogue writer in talkie studios, finally brings me to a pertinent media archaeological question: Is media obsolescence solely an object-oriented concern, or can we also map it on to human practices? Here it is worth inquiring briefly into the contrastive appreciation of early screenwriting practices that distinguished the modern from the obsolete, and by extension, the visible from the invisibilized. While the old order of *munshis* had become the subject of derision, modernized studios such as the New Theatres and Bombay Talkies were exclusively accorded distinction. An editorial piece on screenwriting in Indian film studios celebrated the technically sound Debaki Bose of New Theatres as ‘the first real screen writer in India [...] for getting the actual shooting scripts written’ (*Filmindia*, 1940: 3). The same article also articulated a glimmer of hope in the practices of Bombay Talkies as their young and efficient scenarists served to redress the archaic ‘studio Munshi stage’ of Indian screenwriting.

A commendable example has been recently provided by Bombay Talkies who have organized an efficient group of young and educated scenarists. [...] In most of the other studios [...] the technique of scenario-writing seems to have advanced very little beyond the studio Munshi stage. (1940: 5)

It is no coincidence that a substantive body of Bombay Talkies’ documents have survived, including a few continuity script files that I had the privilege of accessing during a research visit to Melbourne. As mentioned earlier, the Hollywood continuity script was not only a screenwriting technique but also an archival system. The postcolonial irony comes full circle in the continued privileging of one Western practice of record-keeping over a vernacular one, one form of rationality over another, one kind of modernity over another. Early screenwriting practices in Indian studios embodied multiple temporalities. The early modern *munshi* co-existed with the 20th-century continuity script, much like the handwritten Urdu dialogue script (possibly the work of a *munshi*) and the typed production papers I came across in the Dietze Family Archive (see Figures 1 and 2).

The Hollywood continuity script was an assiduously formatted document that had rapidly become the industrial standard for screenwriting, setting itself apart from oral and handwritten scripting practices in other

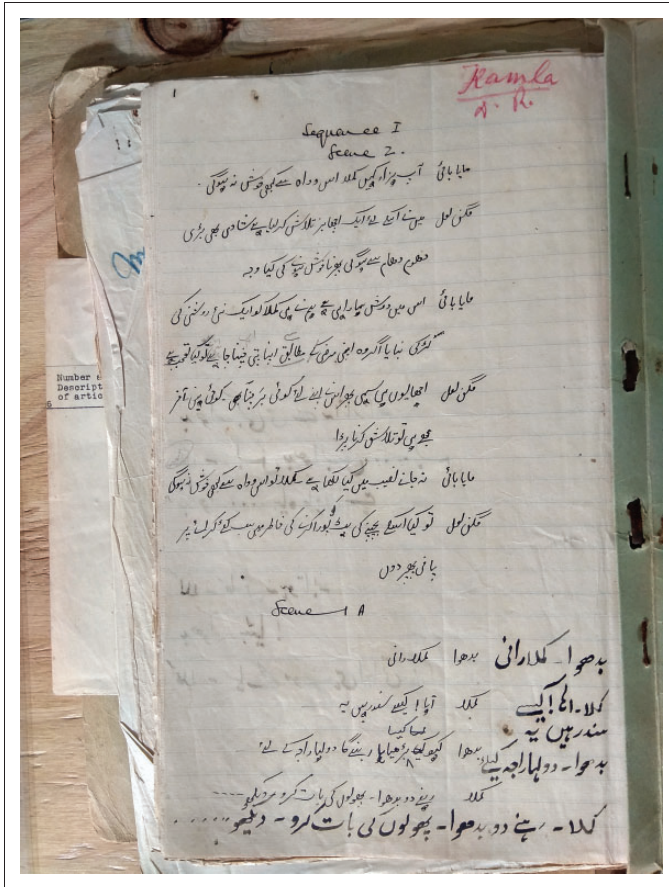


Figure 1. Dialogue script in Urdu. Courtesy: Peter Dietze, Dietze Family Archive.


film cultures whose palimpsestuous quality laid greater emphasis on improvisation. The search for the 'bound' script is therefore the search for an archive-oriented screenwriting modernity. It is symptomatic of the historiographic desire for a retroactive reorganization of film practices around the logics of the Hollywood studio system, especially in the face of recurrent stereotypical descriptions of the Hindi film industry as an unorganized one. However, if bound scripts from the early years are largely missing, it may be more constructive to ask whether the continuity script (also a form of recordkeeping) was ever a predominant mode of scripting. Arguably, archival laments and expeditions fail to historicize the contingent nature of scripting in a film industry that continues to promote pre-production narrations²⁸ and on-set improvisations. While the excavation of bound scripts that testify to modernizing impulses in studios such as Bombay Talkies is a promising start, more parallel

notion of the continuity script as a harbinger of filmic modernity, and by extension, the epistemological implications of a universalized archive of screenwriting. The article has attempted not only to rethink the possibility of historicizing a media practice in the supposed absence of its archive but also to reveal a colonial unconscious that has undermined the heterogeneity of such practices in the first place. The two lost histories of screenwriting object and practice are not mutually exclusive, though it is often an uncritical lament for the former that fails to join the dots. On a more optimistic concluding note, the Mughal *munshi*'s deep appreciation of literature and sound knowledge of accounting arguably represent the perfect skillset for the present-day screenwriter who must combine a creative sensibility with a commercial one – an early modern legacy that should reassure Anjum Rajabali and his students that they are indeed part of a very special tradition.

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Notes

1. Raka Shome (2019: 307) has made the case for a postcolonial 'interruption' of normative media histories and temporalities emerging from the North Atlantic. She asks provocatively: What if media technologies and practices from the Global South were 'not simply conceived of as "difference" but perhaps as a starting point for engaging media and media history'?
2. In Bollywood, according to Tejaswini Ganti (2012: 216), the use of a 'bound script' during a film shoot is understood to be a rare practice of distinction which allows a filmmaker to profess her exceptional sincerity towards her work and distance herself from the rest. Such self-assertions contribute to a myth of informality that most films in Bollywood, an industry famous for its *masala* genre, are made without a 'bound script'.
3. This attitude is in stark contrast to Japanese film culture where, as early as the mid-1930s, a group of film critics started the *Shinario Bungaku Undo* (Scenario Literature Movement) to 'read scenarios as autonomous literary texts', producing a six-volume collection of 'scenario literature' in 1936–7, nearly a decade before any such comparable volume came out in the USA (Kitsnik, 2016: 293).
4. Geoff Brown (2008) has offered a detailed account of the decrepit working conditions of early British screenwriters whose many screenplays from the 1930s were neglectfully stored in basements only to be destroyed by rat infestation. Horton and Hoxter (2014: 3) have claimed in the context of Hollywood

that 'the preservation only of shooting scripts limits the utility of many archives'. However, having considered such laments, it is important not to flatten the fate of early screenwriting heritage across all global contexts. Jill Nelmes' (2014: 281) monograph on the role of the screenwriter in British cinema from the 1930s until now was self-admittedly 'based on archival research only possible thanks to the availability of the BFI collections.' Horton and Hoxter (2014: 4) too refer to the screenplay collection in the Margaret Herrick Library in California as a 'comprehensive' one.

5. Sudhir Mahadvan (2015: 161) has theorized this archival crisis as the 'slaughterhouse' of Indian cinema, which is a result not only of the canonizing processes of film criticism but also of the massive scale in which films are produced and forgotten in India. The notion of ephemerality, as the very ontological condition of film's popularity, is essential for understanding the exceptionalism of the South Asian film archive.
6. The stark absence of primary sources has adversely affected some of the existing scholarship. Anubha Yadav's (2011) attempt to write screenwriting history with an emphasis on storytelling traditions draws heavily on the available scholarship on narration in Hindi cinema but largely fails to distinguish the practices of screenwriting from the conventions of filmic storytelling. The essay, of course, remains an early attempt at historicizing the complex field of screenwriting in Hindi cinema and deserves credit for its pioneering endeavour in the face of serious archival challenges.
7. Among more recent screenwriting histories, Steven Maras's (2009: 80) work has moved beyond the screenplay-centrism of the field, studying screenwriting as a 'language game' rather than an 'empirical practice'. Ian W. Macdonald's (2013: 4–7) exploration of the 'screen idea' has departed from fixed and foundational principles of screenwriting, and paid equal attention to screenwriting documentation, practices as well as 'beliefs'. Claus Tieber's (2018) inquiry into Walter Reisch's screenplays has explored an intersection of music and screenwriting (an intermedial consideration not too alien to the musical nature of Hindi cinema) to explicate how textual practices often informed the production and integration of musical numbers within narrative cinema. Also, Steven Price (2013) has historicized the screenplay as part of a complex industrial culture of textual practices, shifting our understanding of the script from a sovereign document in film production towards material practices of documentation.
8. The Hollywood screenplay archive in the Margaret Herrick Library has been 'acquiring material since the 1930s and by now contains example scripts or screenplays of over 11,000 produced films', which 'presents a treasure trove of material for historical and textual analysis' (Horton and Hoxter, 2014: 4). Jill Nelmes's (2014: 3) account of British screenwriting history also acknowledges how 'the working practices of the writer in different periods are revealed as a result of the findings in the archives'.
9. For instance, Meltem Ahiska's (2010: 29–64) investigation of early Turkish radio broadcasting throws light on the epistemological divide between linearized Western historiography and the circular memory of the missing archives in Turkey.

10. Michel de Certeau (1984: 134) defined 'scriptural economy' as a modern social formation predicated on systems of unprecedented recordkeeping in quotidian institutions and practices which separated itself from the oral world of 'voices and traditions'.
11. For details, see Debashree Mukherjee's blog interview with Peter Dietze, grandson of Himanshu Rai. Available at: <http://pharaat.blogspot.com/2014/06/a-rather-filmi-twist-of-fate-in.html>.
12. Madhava Prasad (1998: 42–5) had originally argued that the Bombay film industry was characterized by a 'heterogeneous form of manufacture', an unsystematic and scattered mode of production undertaken by professionals who would specialize in different narrative components of a film.
13. For instance, Markus Krajewski's (2018 [2011]) archaeology of the digital server is a refreshing critique of automation, charting out a long history of servants from their classical representations in erstwhile cultural forms to their increased objectification in more recent digital manifestations. In the field of screenwriting studies, Adam Ganz (2012) has linked the composition of descriptive passages in screenplays to the tradition of 'lens-based' writings, such as those of Galileo and Van Leeuwenhoek.
14. The subject of accelerated automation in the Global South has been sensitively portrayed in *Lathe Joshi* (2016), a Marathi film about a machine (*lathe*) operator who loses his job to advances in automation and finds himself stripped of his identity.
15. Sourced from: <https://indiancine.ma/>
16. Conceptual forays into early modernity or even pre-modernity are not uncommon in Indian film studies. For instance, it has been widely argued that iconicity in Indian films is often 'reinforced by the manifestation of premodern ways of looking in cinema, notably that of *darshan*' (Dwyer, 2006: 19). Vasudevan (2011: 68) has engaged with premodern visual and lyric practices such as *darshan* and *kirtan* to 'understand the complex, hybrid dimensions of a modern cultural form such as the cinema', while at the same time repudiating 'a clear cultural identity opposed to other identities, or even a modern vs pre-modern culture'.
17. Christopher Bayly (1996: 74) writes: 'In indigenous society, the royal *munshi* was at the top of a hierarchy which stretched up from the common writer of the bazaar, through the clerks and men of business of Indian commercial firms (*munims* or *sarkars*) to the clerks of individual landowners and notables. The commercial communities used their own family members to write the accounts and Bengali or Hindi commercial letters. They needed Persian writers to communicate with the local officials and to check or confirm grants recorded by the registrar (*kazi*). Complexity of language and multiplicity of scripts therefore increased the number of writers in government and private establishments.'
18. For instance, Miles Ogborn (2007: 245) has discussed how Nathaniel Halhed's 'identification of Bengali with a "pure Sanskritized form"' during the composition of *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778) led to a 'purification of Perso-Arabic elements of Bengali encouraged by the Brahmin pandit, who [...] had eventually ousted from his place as Halhed's teacher the Muslim munshi.'

19. Broadly speaking, while the *pandits* were traditionally Brahmin scholars with sound knowledge of Sanskrit, some of the most highly regarded *munshis* from the 17th and 18th centuries were in fact also upper caste Hindus (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2004: 62).
20. *Paan* is a preparation of spices (often spiked with tobacco) wrapped in betel leaf that is still widely consumed in South Asia. Here it is a marker of a kind of plebeian coarseness with which *Filmindia* would usually unfairly associate the *munshis* of the film industry.
21. While lesser known writers such as Munshi Dil and Munshi Aziz kept getting the stick, a more famous poet like Munshi 'Arzu' Lucknowi would be spared in reviews, such as that of *Reckless Rogues* (1938), which sympathetically read: 'There is hardly any scope for the writer, who has previously given good work in another picture. The whole affair is so slap stick that a writer like 'Arzu' is wasted on a picture like this' (*Filmindia*, 1938b: 47).
22. The scope of this paper does not allow any serious engagement with *bhasha* (vernacular) periodicals.
23. Japanese screenwriting history reveals a more indigenous taxonomy in the merit-based distinction of *shinaro sakka* (scenario author) and *shinario raita* (scenario writer), wherein the former was considered more 'literary' not in relation to one's print-centric literary standing but to one's screenwriting work in films (Kitsnik, 2016: 287).
24. Mukherjee's (2015: 154) passing observation that *Filmindia*'s jibes against *munshis* were 'part of the move to carve out a uniquely modern space for screenwriting as befitting a uniquely modern art form' falls short of an adequate critique of such disparaging discourses, arguably due to an uncritical focus on the continuity script as a modernizing film technology.
25. The famous scenario writer Mohanlal G. Dave rewrote some of his silent hits with the help of Munshi Zameer in *Do Ghadi Ki Mauj* (1935) and Munshi Sagar Hussain in *Ghar Jamai* (1935) and *Tadbir* (1945). V. Shantaram was one of the earliest filmmakers to use the services of Munshi Ismail Faroque when he remade the Maratha film *Ayodhyecha Raja* into its Hindi version, titled *Ayodhya Ka Raja* (1932). A few years later, when he remade *Kunku* as *Duniya Na Mane* in 1937 and *Manoos* as *Aadmi* in 1939, he employed Munshi Aziz to write the dialogues and songs in Hindi.
26. For instance, Munshi Aziz's vast knowledge of literature too had become a subject of derision: 'To begin with, he talks of taking a Tagore story with dialogues from Iqbal. Iqbal, probably knowing of Ajij's intentions, chose to die and, as Ajij says, "badly let him down". Let us pray that Tagore doesn't follow his example. Otherwise Munshi Ajij will straightaway become an "orphan"' (*Filmindia*, 1938a: 48).
27. See, for instance, the titles of these articles in *The Times of India*: 'A Sentence Enhanced: The Case Against Munshi' (17 July 1900), 'A Dishonest Munshi' (15 May 1903), 'Theft of a Fountain Pen: Munshi on Trial' (17 July 1929).
28. In the Hindi film industry, oral narrations of the film story remain a common practice for screenwriters and directors when they approach producers and actors. While the screenwriting community has witnessed an increased awareness of the indispensability of a registered bound script in

legal cases of piracy and plagiarism, this rather unique storytelling technique for pitching a screenplay has stood the test of time. In fact, a major script-writing contest I attended in Mumbai in 2018 required the participants to narrate their stories to judges in the final round.

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