Encounters, Exile, Belonging

The story of how Josef Wirsching came to work in Bombay is fascinating and full of meandering details. In brief, it’s a story of creative confluence and, well, serendipity... the right people with the right ideas getting together at the right time. Thus, the theme of encounters – cultural, personal, intermedial – is key to understanding Josef Wirsching’s career and its significance. Born in Munich in 1903, Wirsching experienced all the cultural ferment of the interwar years. Cinema was still a fledgling art form at the time, and was radically influenced by Munich’s robust theatre and photography scene. For example, the Ostermayr brothers (Franz, Peter, Ottmarr) ran a photography studio, studied acting, and worked at Max Reinhardt’s Kammertheater before they turned wholeheartedly to filmmaking. Josef Wirsching himself was slated to take over his father’s costume and set design studios, but had a career epiphany when he was gifted a still camera on his 16th birthday. Against initial family resistance, Josef enrolled in a prestigious industrial arts school¹ to study photography and subsequently joined Weiss-Blau-Film as an apprentice photographer. By the early 1920s, Peter Ostermayr’s Emelka film company had
become a greatly desired destination for young people wanting to make a name in cinema. Josef Wirsching joined Emelka at this time, as did another young man named Alfred Hitchcock. Back in India, at the turn of the century, Indian artists were actively trying to forge an aesthetic language that could be simultaneously nationalist as well as modern. Frustrated with European academic canons and colonialist stereotypes, they turned to local artistic genealogies and avant-garde movements outside the British empire. Germany, with its long history of Indological enquiry, became an ally in this endeavor. Thus it is that Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany in the 1920s, and in turn, the Austrian art historian, Stella Kramrisch, joined Shantiniketan and organized a landmark Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta (1922). This two-way cultural exchange was keenly felt in the world of cinema; the success of “Oriental” films such as Sumurun (1920), The Tiger of Eschnapur (1921) and The Indian Tomb (1921) was met with the ambition of Indian filmmakers who approached German studios for technical training. Raja Ravi Varma had already popularized German chromolithographic techniques and European approaches to the body through his mass-produced calendar art. In the 1920s, intrepid filmmakers such as V Shantaram, Mohan Bhavnani and Himansu Rai traveled to film studios in Germany to study cutting-edge cinematic techniques. In the surviving films of the 1930s, one can discern multiple aesthetic influences from German Oberammergau passion plays, Bengal School portraiture, Heimatfilm rural stories, Art Deco industrial design, to newly formalizing Hindustani classical music conventions.
In 1924, Himansu Rai approached Emelka with a proposal to collaborate on an epic on the life of Gautam Buddha. Rai was a lawyer-turned-actor who ran a theater company called the Indian Players in London. He was a dynamic media entrepreneur and was actively looking for producers to support silent film projects on Indian themes. *Light of Asia* (1925) was Rai’s dream project but it also tapped into the neo-Buddhist revival in 1920s Germany, evidenced in the works of Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht and Herman Hesse. Thus, in 1925, a dream team comprising Franz Osten (director), Josef Wirsching (principal camera), Willi Kiermeier (assistant) and Bertl Schultes (as interpreter) sailed for India. Jointly produced by Emelka and Great Eastern Film Corporation (Delhi), *Light of Asia* (1925) was notable for being shot wholly on location (Calcutta, Benares, Agra, and Jaipur), with Indian actors, and with minimal use of artificial lights or make-up. For the Emelka Bavarians, India proved to be a land of great contradictions and extreme emotions. They were impressed with their Indian colleagues and awed by the generosity of the Maharaja of Jaipur who loaned elephants, jewels, and costumes for the shoot; but they also suffered heatstroke from the 50°C temperatures and had to negotiate cultural stereotypes with lived experiences. Nevertheless, Franz Osten collaborated with Rai on two more silent films, *Shiraz* (1928) and *A Throw of Dice* (1929), which achieved varying degrees of success. In 1934, both Wirsching and Osten returned to India to help set up Bombay Talkies Ltd. They had known Himansu Rai and Devika Rani for a decade now and deep friendships had been forged. With Hitler’s dramatic rise to power in interwar Germany,
several Jewish and other minority communities that were targeted by the Nazi party fled the country, seeking refuge in various countries across the world. The story of German exiles in the US is well-known, and much of what we today call “film noir” was a result of the influence of German Expressionist cinematic techniques that these emigre filmmakers brought to Hollywood. The story of the eastward movement of German and east European exiles is less known. In fact, Bombay became a favored port of refuge for Jewish artists and cultural practitioners such as Willy Haas and Walter Kaufman, both of whom worked for the Bombay film industry in varying capacities. These connections were enabled by prior friendships, such as the director-producer Mohan Bhavnani’s association with Kaufmann and Haas whom he knew from his own days in Germany.

Josef Wirsching’s decision to move to Bombay in the 1930s seems mainly motivated by the fact that the biggest film studios in Germany, eg. UFA in Babelsberg, were being taken over by the Nazi party and non-Jewish filmmakers were being compelled to join the party and make propaganda films. This coercive atmosphere, where the state directly intervenes in creative decisions and financing, made artistic production very difficult for many independent-thinking filmmakers.

**Bombay Talkies (1934-1954)**

Bombay Talkies was set up by producer Himansu Rai and his actress wife, Devika Rani Chaudhuri in 1934. This Bengali couple met and married in London in the late 1920s, moved
to Germany to work at the UFA Studios, worked on a couple of international co-productions, and finally set up their own studio in Bombay in 1934.

In Germany, Rai and Rani had learned the ropes of filmmaking. Devika Rani assisted in various departments at UFA, even famously holding Marlene Dietrich’s make-up tray on the sets of *The Blue Angel* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1930), thereby closely observing the techniques of directors and actors such as Fritz Lang, G. W. Pabst and Emil Jannings. Rai and Rani moved to Bombay as Hitler’s rise to power became irreversible and brought some of their German colleagues with them.

In Europe, Himansu Rai and Devika Rani had positioned themselves as authentically Indian filmmakers who wanted to accurately narrate Indian stories to Western audiences. Their early co-productions showcase a spectacular, spiritual, and ahistorical India which might seem exotic, even self-orientalizing to viewers today. But Bombay Talkies’ mission was different. Envisioned as an Indian studio producing films for an Indian market, Bombay Talkies sought to establish itself as a swadeshi business with a definite regional voice and location. Their idea was to set up a studio that would also serve as a training institute for young Indians. Devika Rani has said in an interview: “...we felt that this was not an indigenous industry. So Rai thought it was best, as far as possible, to get experts from abroad for each department. And we had a sort of undertaking from them...to select a number of first-rate students from all over India... It was our aim to attract the best element in Indian society, with an educated and cultured background, to produce the highest type of art.”

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Bombay Talkies self-consciously modeled itself as a national institution meant to train a creative workforce at par with international standards, it had clear policies about employing ‘respectable’ actresses and men with graduate degrees, and its team of European personnel headed the main departments at the studio. Joseph Wirsching was the head of the Camera Department, Franz Osten for Direction, Karl von Spreti for Production Design, Hartley for Sound, and about 300 students were interviewed in the first year itself. Rai and Rani insisted that all salaried staff were housed in Malad and even ran an onsite medical facility, canteen and recreation room to create a sense of community and collegiality. With a state-of-the-art studio in Malad, a joint stock company with an authorized capital of Rs. 25 lakhs, and a Board of Directors comprising some of the most eminent businessmen and politicians in Bombay, the studio was destined for success. At its zenith, Bombay Talkies had about 400 employees on its rolls.

By 1934, when Bombay Talkies was founded, India already had several film production companies making silent films. Bombay Talkies was launched at a moment of technological transition, when India’s film producers realized that the future lay in the “talkie.” A mad race began to make the first Indian talkie film, and as you know, Ardeshir Irani’s Alam Ara (1931) won the talkie race in 1931. Companies like Prabhat, Ranjit, Sagar, Imperial, and Wadia Movietone were at the forefront of the transition to sound films, and started experimenting with dialogue and songs. So Bombay Talkies entered a lively field of experimentation and production but brought a distinctly different set of sensibilities to this field. Filmmaking is a fundamentally collaborative
practice and Bombay Talkies’ early films really highlight this. The cosmopolitan crew at Bombay Talkies – the Germans (Osten, Wirsching), the well-traveled Bengalis (Rai, Rani, Niranjan Pal), the Parsi music director (Saraswati Devi), and choreographer Mumtaz Ali – brought together influences from German Expressionist theatre and cinema, Bengal School portraiture, Orientalist adaptations of Sanskrit literature, British socialist plays, modern Bengali reformist novels, Art Deco industrial design, Bauhaus textile design, Hindustani classical music, and kathak dance conventions. Bombay Talkies played a foundational role in defining India’s commercial film form, producing some of the most iconic musical films of the era which foregrounded urgent issues of social reform. These films borrowed freely from East and West to create a new aesthetic that might be called “swadeshi modernism” - a heady pastiche that begs us to question easy notions of Indian and foreign, traditional and experimental.
Bombay Talkies quickly established a reputation of making socially progressive films with strong female characters. The studio itself had top-notch equipment, multiple sound stages, a processing laboratory, and meticulously demarcated departments for costume, make-up, props, scenario and so on. This made Bombay Talkies a prime center for young film aspirants who wanted to learn the ropes of production. A whole generation of film industrywallahs “graduated” from Bombay Talkies, which was a veritable film school for acclaimed artists and practitioners such as Ashok Kumar, Leela Chitnis, KA Abbas, Gyan Mukherjee, Sashadhar Mukherjee, Najam Naqvi, Khurshid Mirza, and scores of technicians.
Projects / Processes

Their songs were simple and catchy and their actors practiced naturalistic, understated acting which was still a rarity in the early 1930s because many Indian actors still performed in the exaggerated styles of Parsi theater and the silent cinema. The organizational structure and financial model of Bombay Talkies also introduced a corporate sensibility to filmmaking in Bombay, a fact that might seem surprising to us today. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the studio’s German employees abruptly found themselves branded as “enemy aliens.” Franz Osten was 63 years old, in ill health, and was repatriated to Germany, as was Karl von Spreti who had influential connections. Josef Wirsching spent the entire war period in internment camps and upon his release he made the momentous decision to stay on in the Bombay film industry. In the post-war years, Wirsching scaled greater artistic heights with Mahal (1949), Dil Apna Preet Parai (1960) and Pakeezah (1972) which was completed after his death in 1967.

Technique, Craft, Innovation

Stumbling out of the shadows of a bitter defeat in WW1, German artists felt the need for a new aesthetic language to deal with their collective experience of violence, isolation, and trauma. In painting, theater, architecture, and cinema, German Expressionism emerged as a new stylistic form that was opposed to naturalism and focused on the graphic exteriorization of repressed emotions. From the theatrical productions of Max Reinhardt to silent film classics such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) and Metropolis (1927),
German Expressionism relied on dramatic low-key lighting and surreal set design as a means to highlight psychology. Bombay cinema from the 1930s-1950s reveals a strong influence of German Expressionism and Josef Wirsching played a pioneering role in popularizing this stylized film form. The expressionist vocabulary is strongly imprinted in Wirsching’s lighting designs and compositions. German Expressionism, in the cinema of the 1920s (e.g. Cabinet of Dr. Caligari), was a strongly non-naturalistic style that used mise-en-scene to exteriorize inner emotions. Thus, sets, costumes, acting, and lighting all took on the role of “expressing” complex and dark human psychology. You see this influence most strongly in Bombay Talkies’ debut feature film, Jawani-ki-Hawa (1935) which was a romantic thriller. In JkH Wirsching composed frames with huge pools of darkness, sharp highlights, eerie shadows, distorted angles, and sets which appear to overwhelm the humans. In his next few films for Bombay Talkies, Wirsching frequently framed characters through arches, doorways, and windows; favored eccentric camera angles; and masterfully molded light to create shadows and pools of darkness. These techniques lent themselves beautifully to Bombay Talkies’ melodramatic screenplays, where socially transgressive emotions found spectacular expression in song and mise-en-scene. The crisis of the alienated individual in post-war Europe was transferred, via melodramatic expressionism, to the crisis of the modernizing self in a colonized nation. This stylized mode is seen in full force again in Mahal (1949), a gothic thriller which brought back the full toolkit of German Expressionism. When we see the
work of VK Murthy in *Pyaasa*, for example, we must remember that such consummate play with light and shade would not be possible without Wirsching’s influential work and his training of camera and lighting crews at Bombay Talkies. Wirsching was a versatile and highly adaptive artist and molded his cinematic craft to suit the script and the director’s vision. His partnership with Kamal Amrohi in the 1950s and 1960s marks the zenith of Wirsching’s artistic career, definitely supported by the epic scale of Amrohi’s cinema and vision.

At the same time, Josef Wirsching’s cinematic eye for drama allowed him to skillfully switch registers between expressionism and naturalism, realism and surrealism. Veering sharply away from the studio-based shooting conventions of Emelka and UFA, Wirsching proved adept at outdoor location shooting. In these production stills we see how Wirsching made full use of light-weight motion picture cameras such as the Éclair and the Debrie to film the natural landscape of Maharashtra.

**First Lady of the Indian Screen**

A vital presence that animates the Wirsching archive is the face of Devika Rani. Born into a privileged upper-caste Bengali family, Devika Rani was famously the grandniece of poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. She was educated from an early age in European boarding schools, and went on to study architecture, make-up, and textile design in London in the 1920s. Soon, her career path intersected with that of Himansu Rai, a charismatic lawyer-turned-film entrepreneur who was sixteen years her senior. The couple married and moved to
Germany to join the prestigious UFA Studios. Devika Rani assisted Marlene Dietrich on *The Blue Angel* (1930) and closely observed the techniques of directors and actors such as Fritz Lang and G. W. Pabst. In 1933 she starred in Himansu Rai’s exotic English-language talkie, *Karma* (1933) and became a sensation in London’s elite circles. Her emerging stardom and accumulated technical expertise were critical to the success of Bombay Talkies.

The 1930s were a time of intensified urgency to the Indian anti-colonial struggle, a time when young Indians were torn between the need to assert an indigenous authenticity and the desire to embrace international ideas. Devika Rani’s star success stemmed from her ability to move fluidly between constructions of the “Indian” and the “cosmopolitan.” While she consistently played subaltern, demure roles (e.g. *Achhut Kanya* (1936)), her on-screen identity also gestured towards her transnational location via Bauhaus saree designs, Marcel-waved hair, and penciled eyebrows. Devika Rani’s face, as the locus of her star attraction, thus became a polysemic site that spoke differently to different spectators.

Himansu Rai prematurely passed away in 1940, and Devika Rani took over as Controller of Productions. In 1945 she married the Russian artist Svetoslav Roerich permanently quit Bombay Talkies. Though honored with a Padma Shri (1958) and the Dadasaheb Phalke award (1969), Rani determinedly withdrew from the limelight. Always dignified in interviews, impeccable of make-up, and with her customary cigarette in hand, Devika Rani remained elusive till the end.
The Archive of Indian Cinema

It was during my PhD research that I first heard about the Wirschings and their photographic archive. Since 2010, I had been actively looking for archival sources, private or public, that could shed some light on the early decades of the Bombay film industry. Given my background in film production I was interested in histories of film practice, technology, and infrastructure. However, any historian of Indian cinema must confront head-on the problem of the absent archive. Of all the films made in the Indian subcontinent between 1920 and 1950, less than 5% are preserved at the National Film Archives of India (NFAI). Information about production practices is even more elusive than film prints themselves. The researcher is therefore compelled to look elsewhere, in alternative archives and at parallel objects to reconstruct a history of Indian cinema’s material past.

I contacted Georg in 2013 and he graciously invited me to come take a look at their material in Goa. I was astonished by the historical significance of the material and the rigorous care that the family had taken to preserve Josef Wirsching’s legacy. For film historians, the Wirsching archive is a rare treasure as it provides vital information about the techniques and conventions of pre-Independence Indian cinema. Be it artificial indoor rain sprinklers, two-camera set-ups for action sequences, painted backdrops, soundproofed walls, trolley shots, sync sound recording or continuity logs, Bombay Talkies defies popular myths about the supposedly incompetent and chaotic nature of early film production in India. Instead, we see solid professionalism.
as well as a spirit of real collaborative bonhomie. The material is wonderfully preserved and adds a wealth of information to the fragmented archives of Indian cinema. Interestingly, the films of Wirsching-Rai are among the most privileged in the official archives of Indian cinema in terms of representation. Most of the early Bombay Talkies films have been well preserved at the NFAI (India) and the Library of Congress (USA). The reasons for this range from Bombay Talkies’ self-consciously social-reformist content and alliance with bourgeois nationalism, to its careful cultivation of a “respectable” workforce. Scores of other talkie studios were set up in Bombay between the two world wars, many of which were highly successful and some of which have survived till today. But little evidence can be found in the official film archive for the immense productivity of a studio like Ranjit Film Company, the fantasy adventures of Eastern Arts, Majestic Movietone and Everest Pictures, or the smart urban sociales of Mohan Bhavnani and Sagar Film Company. Thus the archival visibility of Bombay Talkies highlights archival tensions and competing filmic modes that speak to us through their very absence.

For me, this exhibition was as much about situating a film pioneer back into the history of Bombay cinema, as it was about the cultural significance of his photographic archive. Film studies, especially recent film historical and media archaeological work, is moving away from single auteur-genius narratives to thinking about media as dispersed and multi-agentive. A Cinematic Imagination highlights the multiplicity of individual actors involved in collectively contributing to the
success of Bombay talkies, from an anonymous light boy to the once-famous but now forgotten dancer, Madame Azurie. It is the generosity of Wirsching’s documentary imagination, seen in this exhibition, that enables us to witness the unknown and the known, the little and the great, and to witness the making of that thing we call the “cinematic.”
Projects/Processes

Notes

1. Most likely, the Kunstgewerbeschule München
2. Two other long-term friends and collaborators who accompanied the couple on this mission were Rai Bahadur Chunilal (father of Madan Mohan) and Niranjan Pal.

References

Filmography

PROJECTS/PROCESSES

Captions

Figure 1
Mitchell Camera, courtesy Film Heritage Foundation Collection

Figure 2
Devika Rani and Najam-Ul-Hussain/Jawani Ki Hawa
1935, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Kamala (Devika Rani) and Ratanlal (Najam-ul-Hussain) share a moment of furtive intimacy on board a speeding train in Bombay Talkies’ debut feature film. It is believed that Devika Rani and Najam-ul-Hussain really fell in love during the shooting of this film and eloped to Calcutta to try and sign a double contract with the already established and reputed New Theatres studio. Devika’s husband and managing director of Bombay Talkies, Himansu Rai, managed to bring her back to Bombay but Najam-ul was fired. Devika Rani’s star power and grace was crucial to the early success of Bombay Talkies.

Figure 3
Izzat
1937, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Franz Osten directs Devika Rani on bodily gestures and facial expressions.

Figure 4
Nirmala
1938, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten
Set-up for a tracking shot taken in the Bombay Talkies compound. The camera is mounted on a sturdy trolley as
assistants operate the camera and pull focus during the take. A microphone can be seen suspended on a boom directly over the camera and just out of frame. Josef Wirsching and Franz Osten monitor the action on either side of the trolley. Sashadhar Mukherjee, on the far right, holds what appears to be a continuity script. This scene is most likely shot inside the compound of the Bombay Talkies studio which was located in Malad. Remnants of the studio buildings can still be found today.

**Figure 5**

*Bhabhi*

1938, Bombay Talkies, d. Franz Osten.

Original Size: 3.6 x 4.7 inches, Reproduced Size: 12 x 15.5 inches

Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth Paper

An exultant crew, all smiles while shooting the final song sequence of the film. The camera, on the right of the photograph, is trained on the romantic lead - P. Jairaj and Renuka Devi – while it rains outside the window behind them. Note the artificial rain produced by the sprinklers on the ceiling and the cityscape on the back wall, enlarged from a *recce* photograph of Colaba shot by Wirsching himself.

**Figure 6**

Josef Wirsching, c. 1939

An extremely rare photograph of Josef Wirsching at his desk drawing a storybook for his son Wolfgang Peter Wirsching while imprisoned during WW2 at the internment camp for enemy aliens at Dehradun. A portrait of his son, baby Peter, can be seen on the wall behind him.
Curatorial Note

A Cinematic Imagination: Josef Wirsching and The Bombay Talkies

Curated by Debashree Mukherjee and Rahaab Allana
Exhibition design/scenography by Sudeep Chaudhuri

This exhibition tells a story of a world across worlds, a story of cultural convergence that brought together Berlin and Calcutta, Munich and Bombay. It draws from the photographic archive of Josef Wirsching, a German cinematographer who made India his workplace and home. Wirsching’s archive comprises behind-the-scenes photographs of cast and crew, production and publicity stills that give us unprecedented access to the aesthetic decisions and creative communities that were vital to filmmaking in late colonial India. We presented this exhibition as a tribute to Josef Wirsching, a transnational itinerant and pioneer of Indian cinema. The exhibition broadly spans the period from 1925-1967 but the main focus is on the years from 1934-1939 when Josef Wirsching shot about 17 Hindi-Urdu feature films for Bombay Talkies studio. Our aim was to highlight Wirsching’s pioneering contribution to Indian cinematography and situate him within a network of traveling artists and art movements. Pictures were selected with an eye on the historical significance of the subject matter as well as photographic value. To see Wirsching’s photo archive come to life in Goa in December 2017 was an incredibly powerful, and gratifying experience. Not only was this the first time that, with the
sterling support of Serendipity Arts Festival and the Alkazi Foundation, these photographs were being made available to the public, but this debut exhibition was also being held in Goa, a place that the Wirsching family has made their home. Josef Wirsching’s artistic imagination infused Bombay cinema with the psychological depth and stylistic ethos of German Expressionism. At the same time, the term “Expressionist” is a formal-technical one and only represents one aspect of the exhibition and the Wirsching archive. It would be more apposite to use the word “expressive” to describe the sheer joy evident in these photographs, a joy in highlighting the dramatic, the emotional, and the surface. The expressive is a key principle in Expressionism as well as melodrama—the dominant aesthetic and narrative mode of all the early Bombay Talkies films. The expressive also indicates an unabashed embrace of the “popular” in cinema as opposed to everyday assumptions of what comprises “art.” Wirsching’s photographic archive collapses simple binaries between surface and depth, the popular and the artistic, or the everyday and the extraordinary. This capacity gestures towards another meaning of the “cinematic” – a term that is commonly used to describe moments in reality that seem elevated beyond the everyday. In these images we see the interaction of individuals, objects, and environments, framed by a vision that captures the beauty and drama beneath the surface of the laborious work of film production. To that end, Sudeep Chaudhuri’s exhibition design, or as he prefers it, “scenography,” brings to life the expressive power of that ineffable phenomenon we call the “cinematic.” Sudeep applied a spatial and experiential lens
A CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

to a photographic archive and through his use of texture, color, scale, and sound, the archive was transformed into a living space. Of special note were the raw wood panels, the splashes of leftover and accidental paint, and partitions of varying heights which highlighted the processual over the finished, a material translation of the fact that we were witnessing a group of individuals, places, and objects all captured by the camera in the moment of cinematic creation.
Projects / Processes: Volume I

Improvising History: Archival Negotiations and Memory in Prashant Panjiar’s The Music Stopped, But We Were Still Dancing
by Arnav Adhikari

A Cinematic Imagination: Josef Wirsching and The Bombay Talkies
by Debashree Mukherjee

Project Head: Kanika Anand
Editors: Nandita Jaishankar & Arnav Adhikari
Design: Aman Srivastava/Serendipity Arts Foundation

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