



News and Reviews

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Mardi Gras: Made in China

>> Directed by David Redmon. 2005. 60 minutes.

In his film, *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, producer and director David Redmon deftly juxtaposes two stark realities side by side. On one hand, he

visually leads his audience members down Bourbon Street, offering them a

glimpse of the hedonistic Mardi Gras festival, as intoxicated revelers toss beads back and forth as part of a voyeuristic ritual. Then, in a split second, Redmon and his camera take the viewers thousands of miles away, to the factory in southern

China, which produces these beads. Instead of wide streets filled with self-indulgent young Americans, the camera travels down narrow paths filled with dangerous machines. In a syncopated rhythm, each machine spits out mile after mile of shiny bead strands, while dozens of teenage girls put the finishing touches on the plastic jewelry. The contrast between the hedonism of New Orleans and the sweatshop atmosphere of the factory could not be more obvious. Not surprisingly, this film utilizes this contrast to spectacular affect. Instead of producing a subtle look at modernization in China, Redmon provides an overpowering critique of free-market capitalism, globalization, and inequality. The technique is extremely effective.

Redmon's passion is obvious both in the film and in the story of its creation. Redmon earned a PhD in sociology from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany, but left his job in academia to work full-time on the film, serving as the director, producer, editor, and cinematographer. Eventually he convinced Deborah and Dale Smith, two previously unknown individuals who heard about the project, to provide \$5,000 for production. The resulting film has a gritty, proletarian feel to it.



The characters in the narrative come from a wide range of backgrounds. Roger

Wang, the owner of Tai Kuen Bead Factory, is a self-made man who shows off his factory with pride. He unflinchingly explains how he penalizes his workers for needlessly using the bathroom and how he prefers to hire teenage girls because "they are easier to control." One of Wang's employees, Qiu Bai, provides the viewer with a different perspective. A middle-school dropout, Qiu Bai left her family in the countryside to work for Wang, sending her paychecks home to pay for her younger brother's schooling. During the Chinese New Year, Qiu Bai returns home for her annual visit, only to hear her parents crassly discuss her financial contributions. In addition to Wang and Qiu Bai, Redmon introduces the viewers to many other bead factory workers, all of them young teenage girls. Interspersed throughout the film, Mardi Gras participants share their views on revelry, plastic beads, and even globalization.

Individuals of all ages will be able to recognize the message of this film (though several scenes are inappropriate for younger viewers). Nevertheless, it is important that they understand the film simplifies an extremely complex situation. Unquestionably, the recent changes taking place in China are nothing short of revolutionary. During the last 15 years, millions of Chinese have moved from the countryside to the city. Most of them are hoping to find greater financial opportunities in urban factories but upon arriving in the city, these migrants face immense challenges and suffer in extremely difficult work conditions. Redmon's work highlights these problems without becoming entangled in intractable details or venturing possible solutions. It seems safe to assume that he is not interested in presenting a subtle, nuanced film, but rather a challenging, confrontational attack on globalization.



Teenagers in China work on finishing plastic Mardi Gras beads at Tai Kuen Bead Factory.



Viewers must also be aware that China's problems are in no way unique. While there is tremendous disparity between China's rich and poor, similar disparities exist in other societies. Economists point out that the wealth in China is more evenly distributed than in the United States. Furthermore, as China continues its march toward industrialization, it is facing many of the same problems previously experienced by Great Britain, the United States, and every other industrialized nation. As elsewhere, China's young women make up an extremely large percentage of the unskilled labor force; hazardous work conditions are frequently the norm; the costs of pollution are passed off to the public; and organized labor struggles to find a foothold.

I recently showed this film to a group of college students. After seeing the film, they posed questions

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Producer and director David Redmon



Aishwarya Rai as Meenakshi in *Bride & Prejudice*.

From Hansom to Handcart: Jane Austen among Cinematic Natives

>> *Bride & Prejudice*. Directed by Gurinder Chadha. 2005. 111 minutes.

>> *I Have Found It (Kandukondain Kandukondain)*. Directed by Rajiv Menon. 2000. 150 minutes.

Gurinder Chadha's 2004 film *Bride and Prejudice* is an adaptation of Austen set in a transnational context of the Indian diaspora. It attempts to wed formal dramatic and musical elements of the popular Bombay film with issues of nomadic movements across the borders of a globalized world. The film tries to stage a gendered battle between east and west in a milieu marked by transnational flows of commerce, cultures, opinions, lifestyles, insecurities, identities, and perceptions. This, in itself, is a growing impulse in different metropolitan cinemas of the world, one that wavers between interesting experimental combustions and superficial cosmetic displays. Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and Terry Zwigoff's *Ghost World* (2001) are both examples of interesting mergers between signatures of "Bollywood" and American big studio or independent filmmaking. In the recent past, Hollywood behemoths have greenlit mainstream projects of

the west to be animated by Asian or Latino cinematic imaginations, in the form of talents like Ang Lee (*Sense and Sensibility*, *The Hulk*), Mira Nair (*Vanity Fair*), or Alfonso Cuarón (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*). This has of course added to a general environment of curiosity about foreign films triggered both by the video and DVD revolution, and the general climate of multiculturalism in the nineties. Thus, the time

Given that *Bride & Prejudice* sets itself the task of questioning stereotypes and ethnocentric biases and phobias, it is surprising that it is full of one-dimensional characters that are not subsequently deconstructed.

seems indeed ripe for what Chadha's bilingual *Bride and Prejudice* promises in its tagline—"Bollywood meets Hollywood... And it's a perfect match." The film is budgeted at seven million dollars, which is on par with Indian blockbusters, but modest by American standards. It stars Aishwarya Rai, former Miss World and presently a movie star in India, and Martin Henderson, best known for his lead turn in the American remake of the Japanese horror flick *The Ring*. They are supported by excellent character actors like Anupam Kher, Nadira Babbar, Naveen Andrews, Namrata

Shirodkar, Daniel Gilles, Nitin Ganatra, and Sonali Kulkarni. American singing star Ashanti appears in a cameo.

Produced by European outfits like Kintop, Pathé Pictures, and the UK Film Council, *Bride and Prejudice* has been very self-consciously made and marketed as a crossover picture. Here the cinematic commerce between east and west is neither marginal nor a matter of passing homage; it is central to the narrative and its presentation on screen. Thematic polarizations in Austen, like the divide between an agrarian gentry and its old world values and a new mercantile ethos of London are amplified in Chadha's film into a gulf that has opened up between "traditional" Indian societies of North India, their high-caste family values and the new peccadilloes of a diasporic younger generation growing up or working in metropolitan Los Angeles or urbane London. Darcy here is played by Martin Henderson while Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bennet, called Lalita Bakshi, is acted by Aishwarya Rai. The crew of the film is also an international one, with Bollywood musical veterans like Anu Malik (music), Saroj Khan (choreographer), Nitish Roy (Art Director), and Santosh Sivan (cinematographer) creating the colorful song and dance sequences.

Will Darcy (Henderson), a New York-based hotel magnate, visits India with his friend Balraj (Naveen Andrews) to attend a wedding. The Bakshi family are also among the invited ones and Mrs. Bakshi (delightfully played by Nadira Babbar) is on a mission to "catch" eligible husbands for her four daughters. Plan A succeeds, with sparks flying immediately between Balraj and Jaya (Shirodkar), the eldest sister. However, for Darcy and Lalita, it is war at first sight, primarily initiated by Darcy's tactless remarks about the practice of arranged marriages and Lalita's pious retorts, defending her civilization and culture. The proposition that arranged marriages are backward is thus countered by saying that it is more of a global dating service now, run by parents and relations, rather than professionals. Besides, Americans cannot really afford to have a "know-it-all" attitude on the matter, since their divorce rate is the highest in the world. Thus begins a series of debilitating and humorless exchanges of pieties and moralisms that on the one hand simplify the complex aspects of merging cultures in a globalizing world, and on the other, make for very schematic and preachy cinema. They lack the subtlety and irony that mark the best work of Jane Austen. The dialogues are replete with clichéd gems like: "We want Balraj to look at Jaya's eyes, not your mummies (breasts)," or "I thought we got rid of imperialists like you." In the same way, the lyrics in the song sequences often throw up unfortunately phrased declarations of home-baked *desi* [a colloquial term meaning South Asian] feminism like,



Major Mary Ohn singing Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In" in a refugee camp.

Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees from Burma

>> Directed by Ruth Gumnit. 2004. 30 minutes.

Ruth Gumnit's film *Don't Fence Me In: Major Mary and the Karen Refugees from Burma*, is a 30-minute documentary that presents the lives of the Karen people, the second-largest ethnic minority group in Burma, in refugee camps inside Thailand. The documentary is largely an interview with Major Mary Ohn, a 70-year-old freedom fighter who is responsible for eight of the Karen refugee camps. In the film, she recounts a very personal history of persecution and suffering under the Burmese military's 50-year-long campaign to "Burmanize" the country.

After a series of statements about the history of the conflict, viewers are presented with the sounds of rifles and screams of terror above the sounds of crackling fire. They also see scenes of people running from their burning villages, crossing mountains and rivers as they escape from the Burmese military. Although some people might imagine Burma as a land of many pagodas where Theravada Buddhism is practiced, the film provides interviews with refugees in the camp that show the viewer another side of Burma. Throughout the documentary, Karen villagers share personal accounts of how they and their family members were tortured, killed, and conscripted into forced labor. Some of the interviewees are not able to recount their stories without shedding tears, and others express how much they miss their own villages and neighborhoods. Even more troubling, we see children left orphaned,

growing up thinking the refugee camps are their homes. It is clear that these children do not fully grasp the complexities surrounding the Karen history.

In spite of their misery, people in the Huaykaloke refugee camp try to preserve their culture, for example, by teaching the children the Karen *dohn* dance. The lively *dohn* is well-known in Burma for enticing onlookers to participate in the dance. In this documentary, however, the dance is spiritless; the faces of the dancers have more sorrow than happiness, and the music is mournful instead of being the joyful music of celebration after harvest. At times, the Karens have had to live on bamboo shoots, roots, and leaves—a situation forced upon them by the Burmese military government so that "when you open the Karen's belly you will only see leaves," says Major Ohn.

The spokesperson for the Karen people in this documentary is Major Mary Ohn, whom the Burmese army has threatened to torture if ever she is caught. Ohn first entered this Karen revolution with no self-confidence, but she is now in charge of

managing eight camps. She is loved, respected, and relied upon by her fellow Karen. In the film, we can see clear evidence of how the war has transformed Ohn. First, we see photographs of a beautiful, feminine girl with long hair, wearing a pearl necklace and a blouse. Next, we see her as a long-haired girl in military uniform. Finally, we see Ohn in her present form, with short hair, dressed like a man, and carrying a gun. The Karen National Union's General Bo Mya encouraged her to dress like a man because "otherwise, you will get married and you'll have to deal with a man." She has sacrificed a family life and romance because she felt they would only interfere with her fight for freedom for her people. Her responsibilities take her to the military camps, to rehabilitation centers where she encourages the disabled, and to a teashop where she chats with other women about when they will be able to go back to Burma. In contrast to a picture of her shining gun and talking bitterly about the cruelties of the Burmese military government and their policies, we see her tender side, when she is kneeling and praying. She admits to feeling scared during battles and talks about how she copes with it by tying knots on a string and reciting Psalm 23 to keep herself calm.

Even though the Huaykalok refugee camp is located in Thailand, we see in the film how it gets attacked by the Burmese military. Following the attack, the people in the camp are moved to another place, much closer to Burma and even more dangerous than before. People caught in the war are tired and want it to end. Singing Cole Porter's song, "Don't Fence Me In," Ohn explains that all she and her people want is "land, lots of land under starry skies above" and not to be fenced in, either in a refugee camp or inside Burma. The documentary ends with a scene of Karen children flying kites,

which provides a sense of hope about the future.

Since this is a short documentary film, it might not provide enough information about the Karen people for viewers who are not familiar with Burmese history and current events. For example, most people know of Burma, Thailand, and Laos as Buddhist countries, but in the film, there were multiple references to Christianity, including Major Ohn praying to the Christian God and reciting scriptures from the Bible. In addition, viewers may also have many questions about the Karen homeland and their culture that

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