

Clare M. Wilkinson

“The House in That Film Was Very Real”: Aging and Verisimilitude in Hindi Film Set Construction

ABSTRACT

The process of aging sets is essential to verisimilitude in contemporary Hindi film. Aging artists do not merely execute a design when they work. Aging is not a straightforwardly mimetic practice but is improvisatory and generative, provoking the recognitions that are triggered by worn places encountered in daily life. The license for this practice comes from the conundrum that the signs of aging point to a life in time but cannot be definitively read. The skilled ager elicits these same emotional and inferential responses through an essentially evocative practice whose quality is manifest in how it disappears (along with labor) in the finished set.

Distribution and production in twenty-first-century Indian cinema—though I focus on the Hindi industry here—have undergone substantial change in the wake of economic liberalization. State recognition of filmmaking as an industry in 1998 brought in formal funding mechanisms, the infusion of business logic into decision-making, and the conversion of many ad hoc personal services and relationships into professional ones—a shift that is widely referred

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to both within and outside the industry as “corporatization.”¹ The particular invention of twenty-first-century distribution, until streaming took off at the end of the 2010s, was the multiplex cinema, whose dynamic growth in urban India enabled the exhibition of small films with tight budgets (typically less than ten crore, i.e., under US\$1 million) alongside big-budget, star-driven vehicles on the main screens. Small “multiplex” films (also referred to in the Hindi industry as *hatkē*, or “offbeat” films) primarily targeted the metropolitan middle classes, and their subject matter and a commitment to what Priya Jaikumar terms “location-based realism” were positioned in opposition to the mainstream.²

However, by the mid-2010s, filmmaking across the board had been nudged toward greater pre-production planning and specification of roles and responsibilities. Just as the boundary between the edgier themes of small films and the stories being told in star vehicles weakened, so, too, emerged a perceptible trend of favoring the visual aesthetics of multiplex films. By the mid-2010s, and certainly thereafter, the claim that mainstream Bollywood films routinely lack verisimilitude was increasingly difficult to sustain. Certainly interviewees from my fieldwork, people who work in Hindi film art departments, said so, as did art director Anjan Gajurel, in an interview with *The Kathmandu Post*: “When I started, the filmmakers wanted their set to look glamorous. They wanted everything to look bright and shiny. But things have changed. . . . Filmmakers these days care more about authenticity and prefer to make their films’ world appear more believable.”³

In this article, I am specifically concerned with the imperative to make the settings in which action takes place appear real as opposed to looking like sets—as a production designer said to me, “The house in that film was very real.”⁴ Most Indian films today display a degree of visual realism that would have been surprising at the turn of the millennium. This is not simply the result of directorial will but has been facilitated by shifts in production practice, such as increased pre-planning, more personnel acculturated to global media’s visual and production conventions, and the solidification of skills that can guarantee realistic outcomes. Among the skills that achieving visual realism relies upon is the ability to artificially age settings that are new. Weathered places lay claim to being real in that they appear as they are, not as they ideally should be. Their flaws, even if minor, point to the erosive effects of human use and action over time. Ensuring that a setting references duration in this way is the essence of its verisimilitude. To this end, artificial

1. “Corporatization” features prominently in most contemporary academic analyses of the Hindi film industry. An ethnographic examination of corporatization as both process and discourse in Hindi filmmaking can be found in Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
2. Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 238.
3. Angan Khadgi, “Anjan Gajurel: The Audience Sees the World of the Film through the Work of Art Directors,” *The Kathmandu Post*, August 20, 2021, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://kathmandupost.com/movie-review/2021/08/20/anjan-gajurel-the-audience-sees-the-world-of-the-film-through-the-work-of-art-directors>.
4. Interview by author, Jan 10, 2016.

aging involves a variety of techniques that inscribe upon surfaces the damage that accumulates with time and use, investing them with a life of interaction with humans and the environment that they never had.

I see the concern with detail and rising standards in the achievement of realism in contemporary mainstream Hindi films as grounded in two phenomena.⁵ The first is a general elevation of production values since the first wave of post-liberalization filmmaking in the 1990s, bolstered by the visual culture of advertising as well as a boom in consumerism that released filmmaking from always having to operate in conditions of material restraint. The second phenomenon is a valorization of granular particularity (of structures, of propping, of costume) that shooting on location is especially well suited to satisfy. Visually speaking, this has meant places and spaces whose reality subsists not just in what is in them, as points of historical, social, or cultural accuracy, but also in whether they seem to belong to a recognizable world of duration, wear, and evident signs of time passing.

The art department personnel who do aging are rarely credited with creative agency as they are assumed to be merely executing someone else's vision. Yet aging, while it must be approved by someone higher in the film hierarchy, is not a simple process of copying what is given as a reference or complying with a verbal demand. Rather, it is an intrinsically creative process whose invisibility is simultaneously a testament to its quality as well as a means to obscure the improvisatory skills it demands. Here, I draw on formal interviews and loosely structured discussions (in English, Hindi, and Marathi) as well as ethnographic research primarily undertaken between 2015 and 2017.⁶ My inquiries among art department personnel, from production designers to construction crew members, were concerned with the implications for filmmaking practice of the need to age settings. I discuss when and where aging needs to be done and how it achieves its effects. I explain how the intensified concern with aging entails practices and techniques that implicate the production designer and everyone working under them, while the demand for a seamless, consistent look means that the effort behind aging must be concealed. This is ironic indeed given that effective and skillful aging opens up a space of creativity and play for the practitioner. Aging is both expressive and interpretive,

5. What Moinak Biswas terms the "high realist competence" of contemporary films, Sudhir Mahadevan phrases as "attention to surface detail in setting." Undoubtedly innovations in digital technology have their part to play in this, both in terms of what is achievable cinematically in computer visual effects and in terms of what Biswas calls the "raw registration of the world" that electronic media has facilitated and made standard for its users. But material effects (alongside lighting and shot-taking decisions) remain the mainstay of contemporary filmmaking not just in India but all over the world because they are easier, less expensive, and often more convincing. Even in those cases where visual effects are front and center in a film, material effects provide a tangible base upon which virtual "world-building" can elaborate. See Moinak Biswas, "Realism," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2021): 161, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749276211026084>; and Sudhir Mahadevan, "Authorship, Industry and the Intermedial Relay: The Films of Vidhu Vinod Chopra," in *Behind the Scenes: Contemporary Bollywood Directors and Their Cinema*, ed. Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan and Vimal Mohan John (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2017), 83.
6. Interviews were conducted by me or with the assistance of my research assistant and translator Monalisa Sata.

with an unavoidably creative (rather than simply replicative) character that derives from how we make sense of wear and weathering in the world.

FILMS THAT LOOK REAL

Verisimilitude in films is not entirely new in Hindi filmmaking. The art cinema tradition from the 1960s and 1970s that forms one of the strands of contemporary *hatkē* (offbeat) multiplex films was known for its self-conscious opposition to commercial cinema in its exploration of naturalistic mise-en-scène, foregrounding themes that entailed showing straitened living in urban and rural settings.⁷ Well-aged locations were used as a matter of preference, but any sets that were built had to be aged too. Even the mainstream industry used location shooting when warranted and at times explored situations of poverty and disarray that demanded a different treatment from the scenes of fantasy and abundance for which it was famous. Included in this category are films that deal in nostalgia about the waning of the elaborate courtly culture cultivated during the Mughal period and immediately after. These *haveli* (mansion) movies dwelled on the decaying mansion symptomatic of a past that continues to haunt the present (with literal hauntings supplying the content for horror films situated within *havelis*).⁸ In contrast to art films, however, commercial films were more likely to manifest a sharp distinction between two conditions—of newness versus dilapidation—conceding little to creating a consistent visual regime throughout the film.

In the twenty-first century, by contrast, with visual realism upheld in all branches of the industry, the worn and weathered worlds of the lower classes are shown side by side with other settings and scenarios: small, lower-middle-class flats, offices, and retail spaces that crucially show some wear and tear but are far from decrepit. Filmmakers now seek out locations for shooting to a far greater extent than in the past, aiming for slices of life that differ from both the generic shooting bungalows that used to be given on hire for filming domestic scenes and the scenic vistas and landscapes long associated with mainstream film song sequences. The lower cost of locations relative to sets is often the reason given by filmmakers for shooting in them, in spite of the various obstacles they present, such as the paucity of local resources and labor if outside Mumbai, difficulty of access, and lack of amenability of local people. But given that verisimilitude demands that a setting must appear as though time has passed in it, there is something else that a location gives the filmmaker: as an appropriated setting that is modified to the film's use rather than being custom made for it, a location ensures at the same time an effortless communication of a *life in time*, or what C. S. Tashiro terms "a presence that can't be faked."⁹ Unless it is a place earmarked for

7. On art (or parallel) cinema, see Ira Bhaskar, "The Indian New Wave," in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, ed. K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake (London: Routledge, 2013), 19–34; and Aparna Frank, "Art Cinema," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2021): 23–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749276211026077>.

8. Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside*, 222. Here Jaikumar offers a longer, detailed analysis of how *haveli* films enshrine specific notions of temporality and history.

9. C. S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 28.

filmmaking, a location's everyday purpose and use is objectively distinct from the aims to which the film puts it, even if it is intended to appear as itself (which sometimes it does not). These quotidian, routine uses entail that the location will bear the signs of time passing appropriate to it, or if filming makes use of a location that is ill maintained or fallen into disuse, its vulnerability to time will be all the clearer from its state of decay.

In contrast, sets specially built for a film are always new and only come to bear the signs of time passing after being deliberately aged. Even films largely shot on location may be forced to make use of sets. This is likely to occur, for example, if reshoots are needed and in the meantime the location has become unavailable, or if a location proves too vexing to shoot in, as (I was told) when excessive crowds in Darjeeling forestalled most of the shooting of *Barfi!* (Anurag Basu, 2012).¹⁰ For *Gully Boy* (Zoya Akhtar, 2019), in seeking to strike the right balance between the practical and technical needs of shooting and the rich and ready authenticity of the location, the solution was to build a set *inside* the neighborhood where the action was supposed to take place.¹¹ This in fact happens quite frequently—that is, modifying, dressing, and even building at a location to make the best of both worlds: the flexibility and customization of a set and the unquestioned legitimacy of the location. The key then is to ensure, as production designer Abhijeet put it to me, “a ‘lived in’ and not ‘dressed in’” quality to the set.¹² The enduring need for sets explains why so many interviewees said that aging had increased along with the demand for films to look “more real.” “I mean,” remarked a senior painter, “for most of the past fifteen or sixteen years, I didn’t do much aging work, but it’s quite a bit in the last three to four years.”¹³

Most notable is the increase in degrees of aging. Heavy aging is required to show the visible impact of India’s climate on the built environment, from sun-bleached desiccation to post-monsoonal erosion and moldering. But light aging is now common, too, in details like the buildup of dust or smudged light switch plates and dented doors with missing paint chips. As painter Prahlad explains, “When we paint a house they may want to give it a dull look, and that it should look six months or one year or two years old. This is

10. Gajraj, head carpenter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, January 9, 2016.

11. Nandini Ramnath, “Designing ‘Gully Boy’: ‘When Nobody Knows What’s a Set and What Isn’t, That Is the Best Compliment,’” *Scroll.in*, March 3, 2019, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://scroll.in/reel/915126/designing-gully-boy-when-nobody-knows-whats-a-set-and-what-isnt-that-is-the-best-compliment>. See also Ranjani Mazumdar, “The Mumbai Slum: Aerial Views and Embodied Memories,” *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2019), accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2019/11/the-mumbai-slum/>.

12. Abhijeet, interview by author, June 10, 2016. Full names are given with consent of interviewees. Other names are pseudonyms. All painters and artists cited here are men, and the only women I’ve seen participating in building belong to “civil labor” teams brought in to do plumbing and tile work (deriving from the conventional division of labor on a building site). Many production designers now are women as well as some art directors. Gender roles and expectations make it harder for women to assert themselves in the process of building, although the training to understand plans and elevations, a background in art, plus practical experience gained with a senior production designer (who is possibly a relative) help bridge the gulf.

13. Kader, head painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, December 29, 2015.

not aging as such, but it should not look new brand new. [After all] people are living there and using the house.”¹⁴

In addition to ensuring the appropriate level of aging, it is necessary to achieve consistency between location and set. In the 2015 film *Masaan* (Crematorium, Neeraj Ghaywan, 2015), released as *Fly Away Solo* in English, which in part centers on a Dalit character who belongs to the *Dom* community (cremation workers), vacant land adjacent to the cremation *ghats* (stairs that access the river) in Banaras was adapted for shooting cremation scenes. Production designer Ranjit Singh described the laborious process of recreating a burning *ghat*: “We built that on an empty *ghat* from scratch. It’s completely secluded; nobody uses it except a few people who live there. . . . so we stopped everyone, locked it, completely sealed it, cleaned it, and then brought all the material that is required for the cremation *ghat*. Burn it, age it, bring the ashes from the factories and bakeries and brought the real stuff from the actual cremation *ghats* and age it, the *chita* (pyre), on which you get the dead body, everything was original, I mean a real, brand-new purchase.”¹⁵

In another example, Rashmi Sethi, who worked on production design and art direction on *Fan* (Maneesh Sharma, 2016), a film about a star and a besotted cinemagoer with both parts played by superstar Shah Rukh Khan, described the challenges she and the rest of the art team faced shooting at a location in a precarious physical condition that had to be interleaved with the set-bound scenes that were shot later:

The dingy looking guest house room was a real location in Bombay, one of the last traces of the art deco period architecture from the late sixties and seventies, which are in a very dilapidated state. Today it’s a space with rooms that look like dorms, and daily travelers and traders from close-by cities take a room for 200 to 300 rupees a day. The script demanded that we show a hotel where the main protagonist had come twenty-five years ago, and this space fitted the mood of the scene beautifully in its natural state. . . . We shot all the interior shots at the real location with minimal changes, and then the minute the actor escapes from the window in the scene, we move to an exterior wall that is an existing wall behind that hotel, in a by-lane. It’s a really narrow lane, and what you see in the film is exactly what is there at the real location. Since it was impossible to take a crane in there, we then replicated the whole exterior facade with the correct aging on a set . . . along with parts of some of the adjoining room’s interiors as well . . . since in a real situation, some of the windows would be open and one would need to see through to get the right depth and texture. We also built a replica of the main room from the real location that he jumps out from, as we needed to maintain the continuity of him exiting from the same space.¹⁶

14. Prahlad, head painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, June 14, 2016.

15. Ranjit Singh, production designer, interview by author, December 22, 2015.

16. Rashmi Sethi, interview by author, June 28, 2016.

Guaranteeing that the construction—whether at the location or away from it—was indistinguishable from the actual location meant in essence that it should display the same signs of an existence in time as the location. In turn, this meant that whatever was built or added would need to be aged to just the same degree.

AGING AND REALITY

To understand why the signs of age and wear are so deeply implicated in the achievement of verisimilitude, Grant McCracken's reflections on patina are a useful starting point. Patina, which he terms the "the small signs of age that accumulate on the surface of objects," was a widely used store of value in Europe prior to the rise of modernity.¹⁷ The marks of use and wear on heirloom objects affirmed their antiquity and signaled the high status of those who possessed them. McCracken, citing Charles Sanders Peirce, identifies patina as iconic, in that it "reproduces the duration of the family's claim to status."¹⁸ In as much as patina can only come about through the object being "dented, chipped, oxidized and worn away," I see it rather as an index of accumulated events over time.¹⁹ Indeed, in the case of set aging, it is its apparent indexicality—that it points to purported acts and events in the past—that underwrites its verisimilitude.

There is also the emotive and persuasive power of the aged place, for which the work of Shannon Lee Dawdy on materiality and memory in post-Katrina New Orleans is instructive. If, as she writes, New Orleans's "true nature" derives from its "patina"—here defined as its self-evident antiqueness—then this "invite[s] a forensics of events both dramatic and quotidian—of trauma, work, and play. In recognizing the passage of time but not erasing it, the curation of patina contributes to a heightened temporal consciousness."²⁰ Consciousness certainly, but emotion, too, as the signs of age are not simply indicative but also possess what Dawdy terms *qualia* "that provoke an intuitive 'feeling' in those who encounter them."²¹ These feelings and sensations constitute the trace of the past that Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow identify in buildings years and decades after completion: "The temporal structure of a building can be compared to a person's experience of time. . . . Events in the past—at least our feelings, thoughts, tastes, and so on about them—'mark' the memory. What remains from the past is a trace of impression of an event, not the thing itself as it existed when present."²² The most aged and broken-down structures take their place inside a distinct poetics that speaks to the inescapable impact of time and to the pathos of transience. For David Lowenthal, the poignance of aged objects

17. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 32.

18. McCracken, 27.

19. McCracken, 32.

20. Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*, illustrated ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 144.

21. Dawdy, 16.

22. Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 116.



Figure 1. The material accumulation of everyday life in *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy!* (Dibakar Banerjee Productions, 2015).

resides in their metaphorical association with the ephemerality of human life, so that “ageing is a worn chair, a wrinkled face, a corroded tin, an ivy-covered or mildewed wall; it is a house with sagging eaves, flaking paint, furnishings faded with time and use.”²³ The limits and failures of human action are intertwined with wear as well, as decay and disintegration do not just index the passage of time but also point to either the unwillingness or the futility of resisting it.²⁴

Regarding what he terms the “current flow of realist energy” in Indian film, Moinak Biswas argues that it “does not depend on the discipline of realist narration; it thrives on representational expansion and *accumulation of details*.”²⁵ Biswas here is referring to an increased dedication to the material and visual signs of temporal and locational authenticity, but the claim can be extended to the details of aging and distressing that confirm a setting is genuine. From a production design perspective, Tashiro’s account of “dressing” a frame employs what he calls “saturation,” or the layered accretion of set props and features: “[T]he more a frame contains, the ‘richer’ it will appear because of the accumulated value of the contained objects.”²⁶ A room and some furniture may be sufficient for the formal enactment of a scene, but the incremental addition of items such as discarded clothes, food, or a half full carton of cigarettes singularizes the narrative space and sharpens characterization. At the same time, it situates the scene within a flow of time as each detail speaks to sequences and durations: When were the clothes doffed? How long has the food been out? How long did it take to smoke the cigarettes?

This kind of saturation is apparent in countless scenes from the film *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy!* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2015), designed by Vandana Kataria. In one scene, a simple accumulation of items in a domestic courtyard are like notches along a temporal ruler (see Figure 1). Bright, new, and

23. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 206.

24. Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering*, 2–3.

25. Biswas, “Realism,” 160 (my emphasis).

26. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures*, 46.

freshly washed brass cooking vessels sit in front of a well-used basin, scorched from the fire, and beside a collection of discolored buckets. Behind them is a sink that has been battered and pockmarked from lengthy use. Surrounding the scene are crumbling pillars and mildewed walls that have been deteriorating for years.²⁷ In one stroke, we know that this is a place that is both in current use and has been the scene of routine everyday living since long before the action of the film commenced.

In another example, the opening credit sequence of *Delhi Belly* (Abhinay Deo, 2011), designed by Shashank Tere, lingers on scenes from a rundown room in which the protagonist and his friends live, all of them filled with the juxtaposition of long-term dilapidation and recently added odds and ends. A tap runs in a begrimed bathroom; walls whose broken plaster work is covered up with paint are decorated with old film posters, themselves tagged with fresh and dog-eared sticky notes; and a fan turns in a ceiling riddled with sharp-edged cracks. Each transition brings to view another miniature prospect of layered activities—food recently eaten, darts games just played on top of games played previously, and new grooming products shelved over a spattered sink. The room itself undergoes even more abuse as the film proceeds, with the toilet (which took several weeks to fabricate and age) falling apart and later the ceiling caving in, in parallel with the chaos that envelops the lives of the characters. In both these films, aging adds to the accumulation of signs of how time and human care (or neglect) have affected the living space. That it is all entirely artificial is no obstacle to the result. Dawdy writes that the many souvenirs and artifacts that point to “pastness” in New Orleans do not have to be real: “[T]hey only need reference a relevant narrative or evoke an experience of pastness. That fake patina works just as well in some cases highlights the fact that it is the qualia of the material appearance of age that is the relevant signifier in the present.”²⁸

The principle that guides set aging is that most human existence goes on inside structures that are not brand new. An unaged set risks looking fake because of the intrinsic rarity of the encounter with an environment at the peak of newness and perfection. “You can’t pinpoint it when you watch a movie,” explains production designer Wasiq Khan in a magazine interview, “but you can feel it . . . everything should not be perfect because life isn’t perfect.”²⁹

PERSONNEL AND PRACTICE

Personnel in the art department have their own aging techniques. Molders (plasterers) put sand in their mold to yield gritty, uneven textures that replicate weathering, whereas tapists (also known as typists, or drapers, who

27. Kataria briefly discusses the process of aging sets in a panel on the film convened by the National Film Development Corporation of India. See “Recreating Cities from Bygone Eras – Detective Byomkesh Bakshy | Knowledge Series 2014,” NFDC India, October 23, 2015, YouTube video, 2:19, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://youtu.be/XdXVEaoXFnc>.

28. Dawdy, *Patina*, 117.

29. Nandini Ramnath, “Wasiq Khan | How to Blend in and Stand Out,” *Mint*, November 30, 2013, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/b6hpncdZX F8ugPazubXF60/Wasiq-Khan--How-to-blend-in-and-stand-out.html>.

work with any textiles on set, such as curtains or upholstery, as well as hang wallpaper and stretch cotton material over frames to make temporary walls) soak fabrics in tea or coffee water so they appear yellow with age. But for the main work of aging walls, doors, and windows, an aging specialist or very experienced painter is required. This role is like the European and American scenic artist, but there is no formal title attached to them in the industry. Indeed, who the ager may be on any given film is not a foregone conclusion. Someone with arts training may be hired by the production designer if the aging is challenging or will be dominant in the shot. Production designers and art directors (in charge of the practicalities of making and finalizing the setting) often are masters of aging themselves, and they transmit techniques and tricks that they have picked up to members of the set crew who in turn become aging artists themselves. The set can become an educational space when a crew working on foreign productions encounters techniques that are particularly innovative or complex.

As a practical matter, aging starts with the production designer's visualization. The aging to be done is codified in what are termed *references* and reinforced through verbal directives that are passed along from designer to art director to construction crew. A reference may also be a piece of the world that is shown to the aging artist in the surrounding environment. "The location where we couldn't shoot," explained production designer Vanditi, "had beautiful textures and aging, and I took my painter there because I knew he needed to see it. I took him there and said that's what I want, you imprint it in your brain."³⁰ Most references are photographic or digital, the latter frequently culled from internet sources, which means their provenance may be uncertain or unexplored. In these cases, it is unknown if the aging depicted happened by nature or by design. A reference gleaned from a film still, for example, shows the impersonation of aging that the art team is now itself supposed to recreate. At least two production designers mentioned to me the possibility that visual models given for aging may themselves take part in a recursive exercise in the evocation of reality—images pointing to yet more images and so on. Some aging artists claimed they needed no visual reference at all, simply a few words to tell them if what they were aging was to look twenty years old, or two, or a hundred, as well as how heavy the aging was to be.

Based on the reference, the artist or painter will suggest what they think they need in terms of materials to do the job, subject to the budget and the wishes and recommendations of the production designer or art director. Many painters and art directors mentioned that it was common to produce samples, a series of squares showing different takes on the reference using slightly different combinations of materials and aged to varying degrees. How much time was available also exerted considerable influence of what could be done and in what way. The art director, the person most likely to be on the scene as the set is prepared, in theory had the last word, so in that sense everyone does what the art director says. In fact, this is not the last point at which decisions are made on what will be acceptable—too much aging, or

30. Vanditi, production designer, interview by author, January 9, 2016.

too little?—in the finished set. The director of photography and the director will also contribute their own opinions as shooting draws nearer.

An intrinsic contradiction crucial to set aging is that its quality is evaluated on the basis of whether it can be read like a naturally aged location. The better the aging, the less likely the artist or worker stands out as having done it, the credit going to the accumulation of acts and events that the work of aging recreates. The disappearance of aging is of a piece with other objectives—smoothing over location shifts, ensuring continuity—that are the rudiments of film realism. Chihab El Khachab, reflecting on the erasure of workers in the Egyptian film industry, argues that it is a condition of filmmaking that labor is reified in material traces as the film approaches completion, while the concrete activities and endeavors that produced these traces vanish from view. The pruning of traces in the film's progress falls to the creative personnel (directors, editors, producers) who receive the preponderance of the credit for the final product. With respect to production design, for example, "all set design work executed by the art director, his/her assistants, the prop master, and the chief builder is reified into images once the material passes on to the editor," a dramatic reduction of the tremendous effort that goes toward making the apparently effortlessly real set.³¹ Post-film credits as well as making-of featurettes, bundled on DVDs and now available on streaming platforms alongside the films they promote, go some way to dismantling these routine erasures, offering a glimpse into filmmaking choices in the "backstage."³² These are necessarily selective and partial, however, and rarely give voice to the full range of set crew or to the extent of work that is done.

Discourse in the film industry itself facilitates this erasure, as everybody I interviewed spoke as one concerning where decision-making authority lies and where they are located in the system. Production designers will say they accede to the wishes of the director and secondarily the director of photography (DOP): "I cannot work," said production designer Paromita, "if I do not get interaction from director and DOP. I need to be told what they want or I am in my own orbit and that's not good."³³ In turn, art directors say they work to the specifications given by the production designer. Painters, carpenters, molders, and others insist that they look to the production designer or art director to give them clear instructions. "He [the production designer] has to have the idea of what is in director's mind and it is up to him how he can convey it to me," explained a head carpenter to me; "the clearer he conveys it, it becomes clearer as to how to make it."³⁴ "We come under them," explained painter Narun; "we can only suggest but we don't decide anything. Many a time he asks for our opinion . . . and asks us what will look good and we tell him. But we have to give reasons for what we say."³⁵ Time and again creative

31. Chihab El Khachab, "The Reification of Concrete Work in Egyptian Film Production," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27, no. 3 (2021): 601.

32. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

33. Paromita, production designer, interview by author, June 22, 2016.

34. Gajraj, interview.

35. Narun, painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, December 29, 2015.

agency is displaced onto actors higher up in the industrial structure. But with respect to aging, my contention is that its intrinsic character is creative, and as such it complicates claims of authorship by someone other than the one who does it.

AGING AND IMPROVISATION

The aging techniques of Indian artists and painters build on widely shared practical effects in film and stagecraft worldwide. Aging draws on invariable conditions of physical materials—different rates of drying, contraction and expansion, and viscosity and adhesiveness—to create its effects. “There is an art and science to painting,” explained production designer Sujoy; “They [the crew] know what things do not mix with each other, so there is the example of wax on a wall, you then paint the rest of the wall or put POP [plaster of Paris] over it; then certain areas where you want to chip part of the wall off, you knock the wall and where there is wax, because oil and water don’t mix, it will come out. This is, of course, an old technique.”³⁶

Experienced artists/painters have an unfaltering ability to say how a piece of aging is to be done. They are equally at ease describing light aging as they are at explaining how to elicit spidery fractures on a wall, give the effect of peeling wallpaper, or create a wall whose outer paint layers have fallen away to reveal brickwork. As we talked, I would essentially give a reference by offering a photograph of a real wall I’d seen around town or a set from another film release and then ask how they would recreate the same effect. In these conversations, artists/painters simply set forth the materials and procedures that they would adopt. There are no specialized materials for film use. Instead, materials are repurposed from branded products used in construction and home decoration. These are named either by a descriptor or the brand name itself and include paints, stainers, and polishes (Mansion furniture polish, also boot polish), Lambi putty (wall putty), POP, whiting chalk powder (whitewash), pastes, and glues of various kinds, such as Puppy gum and Fevicol.

It is difficult to reconstruct aging processes from descriptions alone, in part because of my own unfamiliarity with the materials and processes described and in part because of the gap between the materials used and the steps taken to implement them. Statements among my interviewees often depended upon variations of the verb *lagana* (to apply) to recount how material after material was added to the wall. The Hindi phrase *is hisaab se* (accordingly) came up in several interviews to link the procedure with the outcome. As verbal performances, the descriptions of my interviewees revealed a robust painter’s knowledge, offered confidently in response to hypothetical scenarios and replete with references to the particular materials and techniques required. Yet my interviewees simultaneously understated the kinetic and evaluative aspects of aging as practice, involving the interplay of tools, materials, and time itself, for which the painter’s ability to engage in an iterative process of looking, judging, and continuing dictates how well the aged set fulfills its purpose.

36. Interview by author, January 11, 2016.

Aging is not, as painter Lakshman put it, “one paint and you are done. It is the work of many layers.”³⁷ The desired final effect dictates how layers need to be applied—“[t]o get different shades we should be able to tell which color will come first and how to get that effect with different techniques.”³⁸ Sometimes these layers are simply additive. A set that is lightly aged with a dusting of chalk powder in a dilute paint solution has been plastered, possibly primed, and then painted as if it were a real interior. Architectural features like doors or mantles or jambs are also aged from their finished state (unless they are recycled items, in which case they may need to be aged more or rejuvenated to look newer).³⁹ Layering can be as simple as brushing glue on a wall then blowing sawdust on it (see Figure 1). Other layerings guarantee a functionally imperfect but perfectly aged outcome. Plaster applied in a looser than normal mix will make a more supple, uneven surface; glue applied under paint will dry faster and force the paint over it to pucker and crack (referred to as a *papdi* [flaky, crumbling] look); a paste of flour and water will be applied to the wall and allowed to crumble as it dries; and old newspapers will be glued on top of each other, plastered, and painted. The most heavily aged walls reveal their intrinsic layers from their material core to the outermost layers of whitewash and paint. Showing the wall’s composition is a double indexical move, referencing not just how it is supposed to have come apart but how it was made in the first place (bricks plus plaster plus whitewash or paint). In such effects, aging asserts the resonance of the past in the present. As Dawdy writes, “[T]he materiality all around us, even our personalities, is composed of layers laid down in past moments.”⁴⁰

Layering sometimes involves disrupting or annihilating what has gone before. Painter Asif described the process of aging with what he called the “color-to-color” method using successive coats of water-based paint and stainer: “First, we make the base [color], then we do color treatment like light then dark. [After] two colors, then we wash it, take the color out. Or we put on three coats: first we put a dark coat, then a light color coat, and again another coat. We wash again.”⁴¹ The repeated use of water sprayed on the last layer of paint unsettles the surface, the spraying and splashing of water introducing unevenness and variegation into the finish. In all of these efforts, the smooth, impression-less wall acquires variation and texture.

I witnessed an example of the color-to-color method on the set of the small, Turkish-Indian film collaboration *Bir Baba Hindu* (An Indian [god] father, Sermiyan Midyat, 2016), with production design by Pronita Pal. The example clearly demonstrates the centrality of the artist or head painter (or whoever it happens to be) in the work of aging. A flat (a single piece of

37. Lakshman, painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, January 10, 2016.

38. Lakshman, interview.

39. Discussing production design for a Western readership, Peg McClellan nicely sums up the contingent points of my argument when she writes that “[t]he aging of props is essential. You never want brand new rope in an old barn, for example, or a shiny new watering can on a farm; props need to be aged to look ‘real.’” Peg McClellan, *Production Design: Visual Design for Film and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

40. Dawdy, *Patina*, 28.

41. Asif, painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, June 14, 2016.

plywood out of which sets are built) was being aged to represent a moldy wall lying just behind a window that opened up from the set. The work was already in progress when I was given access to the set.

The artist wielded the compressor spray while two assistants watched. In one assistant's hand was a book with laminated pages that included photographic references of dirty, moldy walls. The assistants looked closely at the references or at what the artist was doing, but the artist didn't look at the book at all, at least while I was there. The flat, bisected vertically by a fake drainpipe, was at this point a mottled white with what seemed to be a bluish gray undertone on one side, with blotches of yellow and drizzles and drips of a blackish green on the other. The head painter climbed a stepladder to spray a faint, whitish solution in broad arcs across the top left of the flat. As he worked, he issued instructions and questions to his assistants: "Is there black color? We'll need to put in more black water." One of the assistants pulled out paint and stainer and poured them into the compressor reservoir. Following that, the painter began to spray a much darker green color to the left of the drainpipe in long, diagonal strokes. Thirty minutes later, the flat was a streaky mass of green on both sides of the pipe, with dark patches of blackish green on the top left and cascading lines of black and green dribbling all the way to the bottom (see Figure 2). The assistants were viewing the flat and talking about what to do next, but the artist interrupted them, pointing out where paint should be sprayed next: "we need to get black on here, mix it up and put it there too."

At each point, the artist was wholly in control of doing the work and deciding how it should proceed, even as the assistants made suggestions and paid close attention to what he was doing. At one point, he started splashing water on by hand, again by himself, but watched by the assistants. A short time later, the flat had been given a new top layer, a wash of white chalk powder so that the flat looked like an old, whitewashed wall (see Figure 3). Ghostly areas of blackish green and paler yellow showed through from underneath, along with a mass of green and black streaks trailing downward, which along with drips and other effects were created by the compressor gun and by splashes from a bucket administered less than an hour before but representing years of rain damage. The drainpipe was being painted a dank, brownish black with a paintbrush by an assistant. At this point the process of layering seemed to be almost complete (see Figure 4).

Aging need not only manifest in what is uncared for or badly deteriorated. In another example, I saw aging being done on a set for the film *Fitoor* (Madness, Abhishek Kapoor, 2016), with production design by Sukant Panigrahy. Here a different layering process produced a rich and dappled effect like crushed velvet (see Figure 5) for use in a setting that was meant to be antique rather than weathered. When I first saw the set, a deep blue base color underlaid a mass of cross-hatched brushstrokes of a thick whitewash or chalk paint (see Figure 6). Using a four-inch brush, an assistant was painting regularly spaced patches of a solution of Puppy gum as the artist was spraying a dilute wash, perched above him on the scaffolding. The painter later explained the next steps: "Then apply the base color. Any one base color.



Figure 2. Painting glue on a surface and blowing sawdust on it create the illusion of a deteriorating wall. (Photo by author.)

Then Puppy gum, to bring the *papdi* effect.⁴² Over the rest of the afternoon and next day, the artist sprayed large sections of the set walls. As he climbed up and down a stepladder, he layered three colors—blue, green, and yellow—that went on in arcs that quickly lent vibrancy to many square feet

42. Narun, interview.



Figure 3. The flat sprayed with blackish-green paint and before attention was turned to the remainder. (Photo by author.)



Figure 4. The flat after two hours of work, with a predominantly, white, chalky surface over greenish-black undertones. (Photo by author.)

of wall. After the colors were applied, the painter sprayed a layer of dilute whiting, then water again. As the paint dried, the areas with gum developed their distinctive *papdi* effect and the rest of the wall took on a mottled but blended appearance as the disparate colors gave modulation and variation to the final effect.

AGING AND AUTHORSHIP

The labor of aging, from its point of inception to the point of completion, vanishes into the set as a condition of that set's acceptability. What is lost is not just the effort and accomplishment embodied in aging practice but also



Figure 5. The set for an old but elegant mansion, intended for a promotional song video. (Photo by author.)



Figure 6. The wall at an earlier stage of aging, with base color in place and patches of gum applied. (Photo by author.)

the social situation in which aging takes place—what John Caldwell, writing about American filmmaking practice, terms “the complex and contested cultural terrain found in actual crews.”⁴³ Caldwell contends that authorship is much more ambiguously distributed in the filmmaking process than normative film discourse leads us to believe, with decision-making and problem-solving as emergent characteristics of the filmmaking process. What is identified as the execution phase of design in fact comprises moments and processes marked by innovation and improvisation conducted apart from directors and producers (and with respect to settings, even occasionally from production designers).⁴⁴

I would go even further with respect to aging practice, for no matter who does it—production designer, an artist hired for the production, or the head painter—or who decides whether a piece of aging is acceptable, the simulation of age is never purely mimetic but always inherently improvisatory and innovative. The instruction that goes with a reference, visual or verbal, explicit or implicit, is to *do something like this*, not to *do something that is an exact reproduction of this*, as would be the case for fabricating a replica of an artifact. “They can tell us when giving a picture that ‘do more aging than this picture’ or say ‘less aging than this picture,’ and we do as per our experience,” explained painter Nirush.⁴⁵ Speaking on behalf of painters who say they do not require a reference, painter Asif remarked, “When they tell me this, it comes into my mind that it’s like this, or it should be like this. In this way it comes from my imagination. There has to be a plan but once you’re [in the process of] making, ideas come to your mind.”⁴⁶

Even with a reference or an image that the painter has been asked to absorb or a visual precedent that they themselves have mentally noted, aging does not depend upon copying an aged place faithfully but rather evoking recognition in the observer, seeing the work on set or on the screen, that the set contains signs that time has passed. As the artist sets to work aging the set, they are making moment-by-moment decisions about where to spray, how vigorously to apply the wash, when to start and when to stop—not to speak of how to direct his assistants—none of which is given by the visual specifics of the reference.

If the aging artist or head painter is not required to produce an exact replica of anything that exists in the real world, then what is the basis for its supposed verisimilitude? Does it simply impart the kind of textural detail that constitutes Tashiro’s saturated set? This is certainly a factor in the aged set’s evaluation as both real and beautiful. Yet the answer may also lie,

43. John T. Caldwell, “Authorship Below-the-Line,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 350.

44. What is more, the exercise of creative imagination in both designing and executing the successful set is often necessitated by a lack of engagement by those higher up in the hierarchy. This is by no means a specifically Indian problem: I have been told by art department workers in North America that most directors do not understand what scenic artists do or know exactly how it’s done. Numerous production designers in India shared stories of directors with the vaguest of ideas about what they wanted visually, along with a chronic indecisiveness that tended to result in last minute, stressful changes.

45. Nirush, painter, interview by author and Monalisa Sata, January 10, 2016.

46. Asif, interview.

unexpectedly, in a crucial gap between sign and process. On the one hand, aging and weathering are instantly recognizable to the naked eye—that is, their signs produce a high degree of certainty that time has passed. On the other, most everyday viewers of films are completely unfamiliar with the techniques used to produce such effects. The art of agers, difficult to reconstruct or even recognize, has an inherent immediacy to it. Ever elusive, this art has the power to directly evoke *life*. For Harvey Molotch, the aged object is filled with sensory clues to past human relations, not to mention human-object ones: “Objects gain sentiment from accumulated social and physical use, worn surfaces in certain places and sedimented odours of specific peoples and their routines.”⁴⁷ If worn objects testify to repeated social interactions over actual and metaphorical distances, then they speak implicitly of loss as well, since most of the bodies that effected this wear no longer exist, and we may not know much about them, who they were, and what they did. Similarly, when Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow cite Alois Riegl’s notion of the “marks and layers of a surface,” especially those of buildings, that call to mind the building’s life and those whose lives were intertwined with it, the poignancy of the observation comes in no small part from the impossibility of reconstructing these acts in full.⁴⁸

Ellen Sampson’s meditations on the aged shoe make explicit what is at issue. The shoe’s cracks, its thin-to-the-point-of-disintegrating sole, and its loss of top layers of color, are clear signs of repeated acts of wear by a wearer. But the emotional impact that wear has on the viewer rests precisely, she argues, in the fact that the history and the particulars of this tangible evidence of human experience can never be reconstructed. Even in the memory of the wearer, but more so in the mind of the observer, these acts can only be guessed at and remain difficult to specify.⁴⁹ It is this same ineffable character that explains how aging is so effective as a means to produce a realistic set and which enables an improvisatory approach to making a new set look as though it has stood for years, even decades. Since the signs of wear can be instantly recognized but cannot be parsed, the film’s art department is able to open an interpretive space for the impression of age.

There is a second factor to be considered, which derives from aging as a form of faking, albeit one that is openly done and socially acceptable. Just like Ivory Coast statues that are stained and sprayed with seeds so as to pass them off as ritual objects for the North American art market, so aging as practice simulates real decay and erosion through anticipating what will be deemed “authentic” in the final product.⁵⁰ However, unlike faked sculpture and other artworks, the aged item in a film does not have to pass muster on close, direct observation by a critic or connoisseur. Above all, the test of the aged set or prop is that its plausibility resonates on film, not in life. The

47. Harvey Molotch, *Where Stuff Comes From: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers and Many Other Things Come To Be as They Are* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

48. Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering*, 84.

49. Ellen Sampson, *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022).

50. Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

nuance of this position, where artifice is judged on whether it successfully renders an entirely imaginary situation as actuality, complicates reality itself. Precise impersonation of a real structure's broken-down state would be far too costly in terms of both time and labor and in any case would be an effort greater than the situation demands. An aged wall, cupboard, or textile does not need to look exactly like one that has aged in time; it only has to call to mind in the viewer the multitude of experiences in which the ineffable aged object has been encountered.

The job of aging, with its specific materials and tools, conforms to ideas of improvisation, what Georg Bertram calls "a special form of rule-governed practice," in which norms are creatively constructed in a sequence of impulse and response throughout the process.⁵¹ Tim Ingold's observation about painters (along with cooks and alchemists) is germane here: "[They] are in the business not so much of imposing form on matter as of bringing together diverse materials and combining or redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge."⁵² The improvisational, discretionary, and inherently creative component of executing aging destabilizes the design versus execution distinction and, by extension, calls for a more nuanced view of authorship in the making of film. Unfortunately for the skilled aging artist, the seamlessness of the finished film fuses the artificially aged (yet poignant and inscrutable) set with the poignant and inscrutable real location so that the work that went into making the former is entirely obscured. The arrival of higher production values and a studious attention to naturalism means, ironically enough, that the verisimilitude of the lightly or dramatically aged set depends upon it not looking as if any creative imagination or manipulative skill was behind it at all.

TEMPORAL DISSOLUTIONS

Rhetorically, the separation of design from execution is endorsed and sustained by almost everyone from production designer to crew department heads and assistants, with faithfulness of execution a core component of professional self-actualization. A discourse of creativity does not inhere in talk about aging—most of which tends toward matter-of-fact descriptions of materials and procedures, capped with a statement along the lines of *and accordingly we do the effect*. And yet it is clear that aging as actual practice depends upon moment-to-moment inventiveness and creativity.

Ingenuity that succeeds wonderfully in spite of its scrappiness is a staple of what Caldwell terms "war stories" that are part of the recounting of media production experience in many different locations.⁵³ I collected several such stories from designers and art directors pressed by the urgency of a

51. Georg W. Bertram, "Improvisation as Normative Practice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, ed. Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta (New York: Routledge, 2021), 21–32.
52. Tim Ingold, "Bringing Things to Life: Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials" (Realities Working Paper #15, ESRC Centre for Research Methods, University of Manchester, 2010), 10.
53. John Caldwell, "How Producers 'Theorize': Shoot-Outs, Bake-Offs, and Speed-Dating," in *Media/Cultural Studies: Critical Approaches*, ed. Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 80.

narrowing window of opportunity to get something—anything—done at the last minute: aging with mud and grass, reusing scrap parts of packing crates, and painting Vaseline on a window. These innovations—which always hover on the knife-edge of turning into modal practices or remaining idiosyncratic—fall very specifically to personnel who take final responsibility for the set, namely the art director or even the production designer. These speak to a certain creativity and innovatory capability for sure, but with aging, one is confronted with something different, a practiced, deliberate application of materials, employing deft manipulation of tools, in a way that is new every time it is done. The work of aging that painters and artists describe as part of their professional practice rests on a readily available repertoire of tricks of the trade that are not seen as on-the-fly methods at all.

The human, material, and technological engagements that are necessary for set aging constitute the “dissimulation” (“feigning not to have what one has,” per Jean Baudrillard) that complements the simulation (“feigning to have what one hasn’t”) of a life in time.⁵⁴ As Wally Smith contends with respect to magical stagecraft, it is not simply the concealment of human labor that is essential to the effect, but the active obliteration of evidence of design and making.⁵⁵ I would go further to say that the erasures here are not just of persons, objects, and actions; they are erasures of time itself, the time that is required to set up a trick or shoot a scene. For the designers, painters, and artists, the time that they take to install time in the set vanishes within the scene, more ephemeral than the set itself.

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54. Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 366.

55. Wally Smith, “Technologies of Stage Magic: Simulation and Dissimulation,” *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 3 (2015): 319–343, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715577461>.