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THE MELODRAMAS OF GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This article posits a homology between (1) the developmentalist logic endemic to hegemonic discourses of globalization and (2) the logic of the ‘too late’ that drives the melodrama genre, to argue that the experience of globalization is, itself, highly melodramatic. Focusing on the far-reaching transformations of the Mumbai-based film industry and its global epiphenomenon ‘Bollywood’, the article critically analyzes the hooplas and anxieties that structure contemporary Indian cultural nationalism. Countering overarching prognoses of global homogenization, it draws attention to the myriad ground-level transactions through which difference is capitalized and managed. This understanding of melodrama as the persistence of difference helps explain the continuing popularity of the genre in the global South.

Key Words ◇ Bollywood ◇ cultural nationalism ◇ difference ◇ globalization
◇ melodrama

History’s ‘Waiting Room’

The term globalization, in its catch-all scope, borders on the vacuous: its hyperboles and incongruities reveal mainly the opacity of their reference. And yet, through this fog of mystification, one discerns a disquietingly familiar rhetoric—the trace of another era that is supposedly done with. Consider, for instance, the endless celebratory invocations of the ‘opening up’ of China and India, the two Asian giants, over the past two decades. Not only do such claims divulge a form of economic determinism¹ at their heart, such that globality itself appears to be motivated by—and structured around—a singular drive for the increased circulation of capital; they also amount to anxious equivocations that censure what they set out to laud. While reports about the two countries always stress that China has surged

ahead and India has dithered with economic liberalization, they invariably point to the former's disconcerting human rights record; they observe, in a melodramatic mode of championing the underdog, that India cannot be written off as it already has a vibrant democratic system in place and is thus better poised to ensure its citizens the kinds of rights and amenities that one associates with a universalized civil society.² Finely calibrated vacillations between commendation and condemnation reiterate that both countries are perpetually at the point of rocketing toward a golden future but somehow undermine their own potentialities. The West remains the ultimate point of reference: as always, these emerging powers lag behind in historicist narratives of Progress.

In his recent rereading of Marx, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty takes issue with the historicism inherent in all 'transitional' narratives of capitalist development, which hold on to the notion of a single, homogeneous logic of capital 'that arises in one part of the world at a particular period' and then spreads globally over time, 'encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process' (2000: 47). According to such narratives of a 'putatively single capitalism', postcolonial societies find themselves perennially in the 'waiting room of history', lagging behind the West. As a corrective, Chakrabarty goes back to *Capital*, vol. 1, and *Grundrisse*, and points to the possibility of resuscitating two separate yet related histories of capital. What he calls History 1 refers to a past posited by capital itself as its precondition: the developments that constitute this past are essential to the reproduction of the social relations of capital. Distinct from this history is another kind of past, Chakrabarty's History 2, which consists of relations and structures that may or may not contribute to the reproduction of capital: they include habitual physical gestures, collective practices, and ways in which people relate to their environment. In short, History 2 must include—although it is not limited to—affective narratives of human belonging, of particular life worlds, beyond the homogenizing abstraction and discipline required by capital. These elements, which may or may not be incompatible with capital, introduce within the space of capital an element of uncertainty: the threatening possibility of interference and interruption.

Chakrabarty seizes upon this moment of ambiguity in Marx to argue that globalization of capital does not lead automatically to the realization of a universal logic of capital, erasing all forms of historical difference. His point is that capitalist modernization does not proceed along one particular, predetermined trajectory, and that various regions and collectivities experience their own, divergent modernities (constituting multiple History 2s). In what follows, I chart this anxious but inescapable politics of historical difference in the shadow of global capital by focusing on a salient aspect of India's recent experiences: the remarkable transformation of its commercial

film industry, and its fraught relationship to Hollywood. The tremendous hoopla around 'Bollywood' is at the core of the contemporary Indian drive toward national self-renewal: the hype encapsulates the major threads of national fantasy within a new global horizon. In the arena of global media, the US infotainment industry remains the hegemonic formation in terms of both quality and marketability, setting the standards for efficiency and influence. I examine the effects of media globalization on Bombay cinema, now widely referred to as Bollywood, paying close attention to its self-constructions *vis-à-vis* the American film industry, and to apprehensions about national image. My central claim in this article is as follows. The contradictions of global capital—accentuated by their confrontation with local life worlds—give rise to extreme tensions and vacillations, as national consciousness struggles with the extent to which global capital may be allowed to infiltrate the domain of the nation without compromising sovereignty and losing identity. Globalization is experienced as delays, deferrals, even failures: it emerges as a remarkably *melodramatic process* in the course of which these countries negotiate their tenuous positions within a family of nations and along a universalizing trajectory of capital.

Hollywood/Bollywood

The very rhetoric of 'opening up' produces a fear of capitulating to external forces, a worry about compromised sovereignty—political, economic, and cultural. So, even as Indian society embraces actual changes in policy and gears itself up for those shifts through ideological realignments, it has to constantly stress its singular qualities and achievements. This kind of equivocation, ubiquitous in the cultural arena, has found its most notable expression in the term Bollywood—which has gained wide currency with astonishing rapidity, and which has come to signify Hindi-language³ cinema originating in Bombay and, by extension, all of Indian popular cinema. On the one hand, Bollywood is a signifier that celebrates the uniqueness of Indian cinema in terms of certain essential, even reified, features, including song and dance sequences that interrupt the causal chain of the narrative, an overarching melodramatic mode, epic structures, storylines derived from mythologies, and Sanskrit dramaturgy that usually lead to a feel-good resolutions: in short, an exuberance that intimates a remarkable creative and commercial vitality, and a set of structures that uphold a civilizational moral universe even as they negotiate transitional impulses. On the other hand, the moniker indicates a certain dismissal of those very attributes as aesthetically limited and old-fashioned: quaint at best, when not outright retrograde. This naming of an entire cultural complex, smacking of postmodern irony,

indicates both a fascination and a distance—a kind of affectionate and indulgent lampooning, as it were. And the derivative name squarely places the world's largest film industry (with an annual output of 700–900 titles, and with its own niche markets in Asia, Africa, and now Europe and the Americas) in the shadow of the most influential one.

Two recent contributions by scholars of Indian cinema have sought to unpack this discursive phenomenon. Madhava Prasad traces the origin of the term to a 1932 article in the *American Cinematographer* by Wilford E. Deming, an American engineer who apparently helped produce the first Indian sound picture. At this point, the Calcutta suburb of Tollygunje was the main center of film production in India. Deming refers to the area as Tollywood, since it already boasted two studios with 'several more projected' (Prasad, 2003) 'Tolly', rhyming with 'Holly', got hinged to 'wood' in the Anglophone Indian imagination, and came to denote the Calcutta studios and, by extension, the local film industry. Prasad surmises: 'Once Tollywood was made possible by the fortuitous availability of a half-rhyme, it was easy to clone new Hollywood babies by simply replacing the first letter' (Prasad, 2003).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha asserts that the film industry is a rather small, if the most salient, part of what is really an entire culture industry:

Bollywood admittedly occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio. (2003: 27)

He further claims, 'Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians, and sometimes (as, for example, with Bhangrap) exports *into* India' (2003: 29). He is correct in asserting that the cultural affiliations and consumption patterns of the diasporic or non-resident Indian (NRI) are crucial to the emergence of a global 'Indian' identity and culture industry; but that fact by itself does not explain the popularity of the term Bollywood within India, and its infiltration of vernacular discourse. If the NRI of the USA or UK is the fulcrum of this globalized national identity, it is also available to the new Indian middle class that has 'opened up'—made itself amenable—to fantasies of a life in the West, or a life in India that is similar to the life of the NRI. What we have now is a large class of Indians who may or may not travel beyond national borders, but for whom such mobility is a distinct possibility, just as a cosmopolitan lifestyle is within its reach. This class of Indians professes a form of cultural nationalism that is unhinged from the actual state or citizenry: irrespective of their concrete geographical locations or lifestyles, middle and upper class Indians continue to claim authenticity or 'insiderism' by swearing allegiance to immutable cultural values, including 'family values'. In other words, an Indian always remains a true Indian at heart (a belief articulated in the film title, and the

eponymous hit song, *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, 2000). While the big banner films from *Pardes* (1997) to *Kavi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) establish such an authenticity even for their NRI characters, who perform a highly coded Indianness straight out of past Indian films,⁴ indie-flavored projects like *Jhankar Beats* (2003), *Being Cyrus* (2005) and *Metro* (2007) feature characters who self-consciously break out of these molds. The first set of films reproduces familiar social relations, even an entire moral universe, in the name of cinematic verisimilitude. The second set weaves in plastic negotiations, even outright transgressions, in pursuit of a worldly motility. (Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* [2002], the film I discuss at length in this article, clearly falls in the first category.)

Celebratory accounts of Bollywood point to the Oscar nomination for *Lagaan* in 2002; the enthusiasm for Indian popular cinema from Amsterdam to Tokyo;⁵ the successful run of films like *Dil Se* (1997), *Kabhie Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2004) and *Veer Zaara* (2005) in the UK and North American markets, often breaking into the Top Ten on the basis of box-office receipts; the broadcast of classic Bombay films on movie channels owned by the Turner Broadcasting Company; and the opening—first in London, then on Broadway—of *Bombay Dreams*, the musical born of the collaboration between composer A.R. Rahman, the undisputed king of contemporary Indian film music, and the legendary impresario of English-language musical theater, Andrew Lloyd-Webber. One could add to this list references, even homages, in films, music videos, and fashion; Bollywood-themed night-clubs and gala benefit events in western metropolitan centers;⁶ the UK mega-event, Indian Summer, in July 2002; special issues of film magazines and media journals, including *Film Comment*;⁷ multiple panels and workshops at major academic conferences; and the publication of scholarly volumes.⁸ From kitschy invocations to the more weighty and careful ruminations, such engagements have been frequently complicit in the reduction of all of Indian cinema to Bollywood: the myopia that reduced 'Indian cinema' to the oeuvre of Satyajit Ray in an earlier period continues in a different guise.

Meanwhile, important shifts are under way within the Indian industry. In the late 1990s, the Indian film industry finally garnered for itself official recognition from the national government as an 'industry', after nearly a century of existence and operation. While discussions of this development dwell on the facilitation of bank financing of film projects, thus freeing producers from the customary dependency on underground 'black' money, what I hope to establish in this section is that the official move to formalize the relationship of the industry with the state had important economic and ideological motivations that were linked to the 'opening up' of the country. In 2001, the then Information and Broadcasting Minister undertook a series of initiatives to promote the cause of Indian entertainment industry abroad, and to attract

foreign capital for building entertainment infrastructure. She led high-profile delegations to sibling industries in important countries like Japan and the USA, and to film festivals and international film markets. At home, conventions and forums organized to identify new opportunities and areas of operation became a significant part of the industry's routine activities (*Telegraph*, 2001a).

The corporatization of Indian cinema had begun in the mid-1990s with the ill-fated Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd (ABCL), now there are several other corporate houses backed by venture capital—including Pritish Nandy Communications Ltd (PNCL), UTV Entertainment Inc., and Mukta Arts Ltd—involved in the production, post-production, and marketing of films, television programs and music.⁹ Mukta Arts Ltd has also set up Whistling Woods International, an institute for film, television, and the media arts in Filmcity, Mumbai. Hollywood studios like 20th Century Fox and Universal are carving out stakes in the Bombay industry, spanning not only distribution but also the actual financing of Hindi films. For instance, Fox teamed up with Ram Gopal Varma's production house to produce *Ek Hasina Thi* (2004), directed by newcomer Sriram Raghavan; more recently, Sony co-produced Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Saawariya* (2007). While the Bombay industry always borrowed storylines from successful films produced abroad, these used to undergo substantial makeover to cater to Indian tastes; now, the remakes are often proud and self-conscious homages. Significant examples include Kamal Hasan's *Chachi 420* (1998), a blatant remake of *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993), and *Kaante* (2002), which not only takes the storyline of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) but also attempts to approximate Quentin Tarantino's style. Vishal Bharadwaj puts a different spin on adaptations by transposing Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello* to the Mumbai underworld and the 'cow belt' gangland of North India in his films *Maqbool* (2003) and *Omkara* (2006). Meanwhile, an altogether new genre of films—*Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), *Joggers' Park* (2003), and *Metro* (2007) come to mind—cater to a decidedly urban audience: these are the so-called 'city films', which address not the pan-Indian citizen-subject but more cosmopolitan urbanites, and are not expected to do much business in the rural hinterlands. The screening venues for these films are often US-style multiplexes, complete with THX sound, concession stands, video arcades and even pool tables, in metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai. While the advent of satellite television has led to a proliferation of channels (from the two state-owned channels of the 1980s), much of the programming revolves around a robust film culture: 'music videos' extracted from films, behind-the-scenes production stories, celebrity interviews and lifestyle shows, media-related trivia shows, and so on. The publishing industry, which already brought out a huge number of glossies and fanzines, has now started producing volumes on the making of expensive, prestige films.

As far as I know, the first book of this kind is on the making of *Asoka* (2001), produced by—and starring—the first Indian superstar with wide appeal in the West, Shah Rukh Khan. Some big stars—like Shah Rukh Khan, Sanjay Dutt, and Ajay Devgan—are attempting to cash in on their names by establishing their own production and distribution houses. The name of the game is the recognition and development of merchandizing linkages—in other words, the realization of commercial synergy.

Indeed, Khan belongs to a new generation of actors that also includes Amir Khan (producer and star of *Lagaan*), Kareena Kapoor, Saif Ali Khan, and Aishwarya Rai (Miss World 1995 who, according to many, including apparently, Julia Roberts, is the most beautiful woman in the world). This new generation often includes industry sons and daughters—Hrithik Roshan, Kareena Kapoor, Saif Ali Khan, and Akshay Khanna, to name the most obvious—who enjoy substantial backing and goodwill, and are able to take greater chances. Some members of this new generation, including actors Abhishek Bachchan and Vivek Oberoi, and directors Aditya Chopra and Karan Johar, have been educated abroad; they bring with them a polish that owes more to the media industries of the West, the boarding schools of the UK and Switzerland, US college-level liberal arts education, and the fashion runways of Paris and Milan. If one follows the changes in Shah Rukh Khan's hairstyle—from the 'shag' days of 1993–4, when he burst onto the Bombay screen, to the carefully coiffed mane that he sports in more recent films—or if one keeps track of Saif Ali Khan's abs, one begins to sense the winds of change blowing through the industry. For this contemporary Bollywood set, 'professionalism' is the mantra—and this new work ethic is not limited to a fastidious Amir Khan or an obsessive Akshay Khanna. In countless stories in newspapers and magazines, on television and the internet, industry analysts breathlessly declare that Bollywood is undergoing an image makeover, with a new breed of highly motivated producers and stars turning increasingly professional. This attribute comes tagged to a bundle of related qualities: formalization (e.g. of business practices, including more transparent financing and accounting) and standardization (adopting image and sound recording and editing principles and shortening film lengths to conform to 'global' standards) come to mind.

The rhetoric of professionalism is not limited to the film industry. Along with IT expertise, a professional attitude may be the single most important development for a globalizing India. Of course, it is quite likely that the term 'professionalism' stands in for American-style corporate culture,¹⁰ and that the recurrent and reverential invocations of the term signal the willingness—even an overwhelming desire—to import this culture *tout court*. At any rate, this discourse is intended to signal the resolve to fashion a leaner, meaner domestic industry, capable of turning out products and extending services

that are competitive on the global market. At stake is the transformation of Indian industry according to the dictates of global capital—in orthodox terms, the abstraction of labor and the organization of workplace relations for the accelerated reproduction of capital. In the context of the media industry, professionalism yoked to IT prowess intimates a desire for films, television shows, music albums, and videos that compare well with international standards. And ‘comparing well’ translates into not only a change of attitudes and work ethics, but also a remarkable shift in the *mode of presentation*. India has carved out the reputation of an emerging behemoth in the domain of IT software: for the mass culture industry, IT makes available a remarkable array of techniques, extends creative possibilities practically to a limitless horizon, and brings within the reach of Bombay cinema heretofore unattainable levels of technical sophistication and stylistic finesse. Contemporary film studios, like the YRF Studios in Mumbai, and the Ramoji Film City located in the outskirts of Hyderabad, are functioning as shooting facilities for Hollywood films (*Telegraph*, 2001b). The website for Ramoji Film City claims it to be ‘the largest film studio complex in the world as certified by Guinness World Records’,¹¹ signaling an enthusiastic participation in the race for the global superlative. Companies such as Maya Entertainment, Prasad Studios, and Silvertoon Studio now provide state-of-the-art animation and special effects services. It is not without reason that IT, with its transnational linkages, has become the heart and soul of a new Indian technonationalism under the sign of globalization.

Citius, Altius, Fortius: National Performance Anxiety

In the post-Second World War period, in the wake of widespread decolonization, international film festivals emerged as a significant locus of cultural competition among nations—a kind of cultural Olympics, if you will. The prestigious festivals at Cannes, Berlin, and Venice were followed by more specialized events like the ones at Burkina Faso and Havana, with their politicized and regional focus. Winning the Palme d’Or or the Golden Lion was a glory not limited to the film or the filmmakers: the triumph accrued to the entire national cinema. In addition to these international festivals, the annual awards from the American Academy of Motion Pictures, the Oscars, have come to signify, at least in a popular global imagination, the ultimate honor in cinema. The broadcast of the Oscar ceremonies across the globe via satellite television, and strategic decisions on the part of the Academy, including the one to honor important international filmmakers with ‘Lifetime Achievement Awards’, have catapulted what was once a ceremony for one film industry into a transnational annual event. The award for ‘Best Foreign

Film' now constitutes a significant nod from the insiders of the pre-eminent film industry to their poorer cousins. Besides the significant boost to the box-office receipts of a film that wins the award or even a nomination for it, such a nod catapults a national industry into a select league of film-producing nations who are capable of reaching, or approximating, the standards set by the undisputed leader. Contemporary Bollywood's heightened desire for an Oscar constitutes nothing less than a national aspiration in the arena of global media.

Of course, one could be a churlish critic and question the assumed undisputedness of Hollywood's leadership, especially in relation to the Bombay industry. After all, as Indian commentators like to point out, within India, as in certain overseas markets in eastern Africa, south-east Asia, and the Arab world, successful Indian films routinely make more money than Hollywood hits do. Even if one were to get away from the quantitative aspects and focus on questions of quality, the picture is not any clearer, the Oscars have been notorious for their neglect of exceptional films, and their frequent consecration of mediocre ones (*Hindustan Times*, 2001). The 6000-odd members do not watch all the nominated films before they vote, as a result they are easily swayed by the media blitz orchestrated each year in the weeks leading up to the awards ceremony. With respect to Indian cinema, the fact that Satyajit Ray was honored with a lifetime achievement award just weeks before his death in 1992, when none of his twenty-five plus films ever received a nomination, reveals the strange workings of the Hollywood establishment. For critics of the US industry, such factors seriously undermine the significance and worth of an Oscar.

It is really the technical finesse of filmmaking, discernible in the mode of presentation, the 'packaging' of the narrative, in which Hollywood can claim continuing supremacy. Not surprisingly, much of the discussion regarding Bollywood's hankering for an Oscar nod is couched in terms of its emergent technical sophistication, its overhaul in response to the demands of global capital. The films that were submitted in recent years for consideration in the Best Foreign Film category—*Jeans* (1998), *Taal* (1999), *Lagaan* (2001), *Devdas* (2002), *Shwaas* (2004), *Paheli* (2005), and *Rang de Basanti* (2006)—all share a sharp veneer; usually sporting one-word, easily pronounceable titles, they produce visions of India that are eminently marketable to western and diasporic audiences. *Lagaan*, for instance, was marketed in the West with the subtitle *Once Upon a Time in India*, conjuring up an exotic image of a faraway place frozen in the past.¹²

When *Lagaan* received an Oscar nomination in 2002, commentators in the Anglophone Indian media jubilantly declared the arrival of popular Indian cinema in the global arena.¹³ But how was this nod any different from the earlier one received by Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* way back in 1958?¹⁴

Indeed, the previous nomination was all the more remarkable because, in the 1950s, Indian commercial cinema was summarily dismissed in the West, and Mehboob Khan never made much effort to promote his film in Hollywood, in sharp contrast to the *Lagaan* team. What was clear, though, was that such declarations, in India and abroad, assumed a world unmistakably centered in the West. When *Lagaan* lost out to a Serbian film about the ethnic conflict in central Europe, *No Man's Land* (2001), the very people who were yearning for American recognition now made allegations about western bias.¹⁵ Next year, when the much-hyped *Devdas* failed to muster even a nomination from the Academy, the triumphant assertions quickly changed to despairing lamentations about Indian cinema's backwardness. Of course, in the midst of the general cynicism and despair, there were a few isolated voices that acknowledged the realities of global political economy. For instance, media commentator L.K. Jha asserted that it was only a matter of time before an Indian film won an Oscar, for the same reason that Indian women had started winning at international beauty pageants: the lure of the large Indian market was just as strong for Hollywood as it was for the cosmetic companies who sponsored these pageants (Jha, 2002).

The shift in tone from one year to the next, and resurfacing worries of backwardness even among the elite classes in the middle of a resurgent economy, point to persistent anxieties that have a very long history dating back to the colonial era. By the end of 2003, the quasi-official Film Federation of India had decided not to submit any film for the 2004 Oscar race, citing the shortcomings of domestic cinema compared to *global* standards. Suddenly, the cultural establishment had retreated from triumphalism to self-loathing, typified in the damning of Indian popular cinema we find from an earlier era—for instance, in Khuswant Singh's report to the *New York Times Magazine* in 1976: 'India's movie industry makes the worst films in the world—and the Indians love them' (Singh, 1976: 42).

The recent blockbuster, *Devdas*, constitutes a fascinating illustration of a Bollywood product trying to claim a hallowed place within world cinema. Produced at a cost of over ten million US dollars in 2002, it was the most expensive Indian film until then. With its over-the-top style and mise-en-scène, and its overwrought emotions, it aspired to be the mother of all melodramas. It also became the locus of an extraordinary effort by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to promote Indian commercial cinema at the Cannes Film Festival of 2002. In the rest of this article, I build on extant theories of melodrama to explicate what is new about the film's melodramatic mode. Methodologically, I am interested in exploring the interactions between media forms, social contexts and subjectivities, hence I analyze the film's endeavor to rearticulate the local and the global, charting the contradictions and the possibilities in its attempts to preserve markers of difference within

a putatively homogenizing field. Finally, drawing on the strange anxieties inherent in the discourse surrounding the film, I want to suggest that globalization, as the recent stage of modernity taken as a long *duree*, is experienced as a rather melodramatic process in the postcolonial world.

Time-Borne, Timeless: The Anxious Temporality of Melodrama

Time was when cosmopolitanism was defined in universal terms, in opposition to the constraints of the national, the regional, the local. Such polarized imagination required the fetishistic consecration of universal values and emotions on the one hand, and of local authenticity on the other. In our contemporary era—of globalization, of transnationalism, of hypermodernity—such antithetical notions of fluidity and authenticity have become increasingly tenuous. Those fetishes themselves (chronotopic in their hegemonic forms, since the global–cosmopolitan was the mark of the modern, and the regional was taken to be the domain of the traditional) now seem increasingly archaic as the global and the local endlessly reconstitute each other.¹⁶ Indeed, recent cultural production is beginning to evince an acute awareness of the out-of-time nature of these fetishistic investments: the local and the global are now bracketed; the affective dimensions are evoked within quotes ('humanism', 'patriotism'); in many cases, the global/local dialectic becomes the motor of the narrative. Contemporary melodramas such as *Devdas*—or *Moulin Rouge* (2001), to take a salient Hollywood example—locate themselves in early 20th-century Bengal or late 19th-century Paris, and yet speak in a putatively modern, universally shared language of love: thus they negotiate the tension between the universal and the particular, both spatially and temporally.

Titanic (1997) and *Moulin Rouge*, two of the most talked about Hollywood films of the last decade, share with *Devdas* certain structural elements of the classic romantic melodrama; they also display characteristics of other genres (disaster films, the musical). In each text, class differences and/or economic exigencies keep a pair of lovers apart, an early disavowal of love is superseded by its eventual triumph. The protagonists act in ways that are not in their best interests, or run counter to their 'true' desires. Such detours are the substance of melodramatic plots, eventually all conflicts are resolved and the lovers come together, but the resolution usually comes too late. In *Titanic*, in *Moulin Rouge*, as in *Devdas*, by the time the lovers unite, one of them must die. The ruling logic here is the logic of the *all-too-late*: it is this kind of mistiming that moves us to tears. According to Franco Moretti, this strategy—a 'moving device' that 'comes too late'—is most effective when it is primed 'for the moment when the character is on the point of dying'

(1983: 178–9). The fact that one would like to reverse the course of events, to get to an earlier moment in time and act differently, only drives home the irreversibility of time and makes the situation more heart-breaking.

At one level, *Titanic* calls into question the modernist hubris regarding science and technology. Yet, eventually, state of the art technologies allow for the recovery of the underwater debris and, among other artifacts, the blue diamond locket which triggers the narrative's flashback structure. *Moulin Rouge* points to the futility of bohemian resistance, creativity, and utopianism in the face of the pressures of the marketplace; yet, by the end of the film, bohemian ideals triumph over commercial forces. In *Devdas*, the separation between the childhood sweethearts is precipitated when the hero is sent off to England to study. In colonial India, if one has the means, one must go abroad to be educated, to become a modern subject (and one wonders if things have changed much).¹⁷ But he has to come back to his beloved, back to a feminized, rural Bengal. All three films deal with the trials and dislocations of modern life, they express reservations about the normalized axioms of modernity. The disavowals and deferrals register these reservations and complications, before all conflict is resolved at the end. Melodrama remains particularly useful as a way of engaging with, and symbolically managing, modern anxieties.

What is going on in these melodramas of our era of 'late capitalism'? Why do these films strike such a strong chord for audiences all over the world? At the level of the storyline, there seems to be nothing new: the same old situations are being reproduced for *mass* consumption. Indeed, *Devdas* was marketed as the latest in a series of remakes, it is based on a 1917 novel that has been produced for the screen some nine times, not to mention numerous loose adaptations and rip-offs.¹⁸ Are these tragic tales able to capture certain basic human emotions that are transcultural, timeless, and universal? Or perhaps it is more correct to say that the films engage feelings and concerns that are widely engendered by the homogenizing forces of modernity? The clichéd emotions and sensations produced by these films are still relevant to our experiences, and they still can thrill us because they are packaged in novel ways. The thrill derives from the use of latest technologies that animate a new hyperbolic, melodramatic mode: the computer-generated special effects, the breathtaking underwater photography, the hyperkinetic camera, the dizzying crane shots.

'Thrills' and 'sensations' are two words often taken to be coterminous and interchangeable; for instance, Tom Gunning (1989) uses them together in talking about early, pre-narrative cinema. I am using them somewhat differently, keeping in mind a subtle distinction between the two: 'thrill' is a subset of 'sensations', involving something of the surprising, the unanticipated. While recent melodramas move us in terms of familiar emotions and bodily

sensations, they simultaneously thrill us through their deployment of new technologies: the aesthetic of astonishment that Gunning points to in early cinema continues today in a modified sense, in the accentuated mode of presentation. Now the spectacular excess works well beyond the moral significance that Peter Brooks (1976) located as a hallmark of 19th-century melodrama. What moves us is not so much the stock moral dilemmas, but the accentuation of the emotions through excessive stylization. Familiar situations, when presented as grandiose, epic formalism, attain a thrilling intensity that has very little to do with an assumptive moral universe.

Melodramatic excess can be elaborated further in terms of fantasy. If, as Linda Williams argues, fantasies are not simply 'wish-fulfilling linear narratives of mastery and control leading to closure and the attainment of desire' but, rather, schemes that cause 'prolongation of desire' through the deferral of its fulfillment, then melodrama belongs to the realm of the fantastic (1995: 153). According to Williams, horror films, melodrama, and pornography—what she calls 'body genres', since they all foreground the body and produce acute corporeal sensations—all involve fantasies; but the 'fantasy component' has been more clearly recognized in horror films than in melodrama or in pornography, as only the horror genre features fantastic special effects. Since both melodrama and pornography depend on realistic conventions—the former on the depiction of social problems, the latter on documenting real sexual acts—they appear 'less obviously fantastic' (Williams, 1995: 153). My point is that recent melodramas, in their deployment of special effects, are becoming more obviously fantastic, the thrilling use of state-of-the-art techniques is amplifying the link between melodramatic excess and fantasy.

Rick Altman (1992) has proposed that theories of classical Hollywood cinema, focusing on the linear causality-driven narrative form, cannot accommodate a second, competing logic that is simultaneously in operation, a logic evident from melodramatic excesses such as spectacle, episodic presentation of moments of crisis and coincidence, unmotivated events and stylistic elements that operate in paradigmatic layers. This second logic comes into full view, upstaging narrative causality, when we examine films like *Moulin Rouge* and *Devdas*. Since we are talking about a properly Bollywood film, and a Bollywood-inspired film coming out of an increasingly globalized Hollywood, we have to consider the possibility that the excessive and the spectacular have always been central to Bombay cinema, that these elements never had to play second fiddle to narrative causality in this parallel cinematic universe. What is new, though, is the tremendous self-consciousness with which these elements are deployed in recent films—a point I will now flesh out in my discussion of *Devdas*.

A Romantic Archive (A Second History)

The source of the film is a Bengali novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Arguably the most widely translated and read novel in India, it tells the story of Devdas, son of a rural landlord, who is sent off to Calcutta for higher education, separating him from his childhood sweetheart Parvati, or Paro. Paro's family does not match up with the neighbors in terms of wealth or power; hence, when Devdas returns and wants to marry her, his father will not allow it. Like a dutiful son, Devdas gives in to parental pressure, but when Paro is married off to another wealthy landlord, he returns to Calcutta and takes to alcohol to drink away his sorrow. There he meets Chandramukhi, a courtesan with a heart of gold, but all her devotion cannot make him forget his beloved Paro. Soon his health, particularly his liver, gives in. Realizing his days are numbered, Devdas makes his way to Paro's new home, to honor a promise that they would meet again. As he breathes his last outside the mansion gates, Paro's in-laws hold her back to avoid a scandal.

The film offers up nothing short of a cultural history of the dilemmas of modern Indian (male) subjectivity around the question of love. It refers back to 1) early 20th-century reformist literature coming out of Bengal (a proto-national imaginary); 2) the extremely maudlin bilingual cinematic adaptations (1935) by Pramathesh Barua under the New Theatres banner, starring himself in the Bengali version and the legendary singer K.L. Saigal in the Hindi version; 3) the consolidation of the model of idealized love and the figure of a pan-Indian romantic hero, through a Hindi adaptation (1955) directed by the celebrated realist filmmaker Bimal Roy (who was the cinematographer for the Hindi version from 1935), in which Devdas was played by the great thespian Dilip Kumar. One can also mention the direct remakes in various Indian languages, and the loose adaptations of thematics or the hyper-romantic hero-figure by disparate filmmakers like Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Shakti Samanta, and Manmohan Desai. Implicit in this genealogy is the recalibration of a Bengali hero to a pan-Indian figure able to mediate the shifting exigencies of the various decades. Such is the hold of this inveterate romantic on modern Indian imagination that when a guy is being self-pitying and maudlin, Indians quip 'Don't be such a Devdas, *yaar* [buddy]!'

The latest *Devdas* invokes the local nostalgically through a kind of sampling of a cultural archive: the local—Bengal, the original setting for the story—is still fetishized, but without any claim to authenticity, and in such a hyperbolic way that the fetishization itself gets foregrounded. The affective level is retained, even amplified, but with great irony; nostalgia here also serves to historicize. The film begins with an explicit homage to the genius of Saratchandra, the writer, and Bimal Roy, who directed the previous

'definitive' film version—both Bengalis. Characters perform Bengali-ness through exaggerated intonations and gesticulations, sometimes breaking into Bengali phrases in the middle of Hindi dialogue (shifting wildly in pronunciation), a drag performance of Bengali-ness of the early 20th century, imagined almost hundred years later through the lens of Bollywood. (In this context, it is important to remember the long history of tension between 'realist' Bengali cinema and 'escapist' Bombay cinema, and commercial Bengali cinema's capitulation to a Bollywood idiom in recent decades.) An important scene in the film revolves around Durga Puja, the worship of the goddess Durga, the biggest annual festival in Bengal: here, the two heroes come together (director Bhansali's concoction) and dance in public in a way that no 'respectable' Bengali woman of the early 20th century ever would have done. Devdas is sent to London, not Calcutta, and he comes back wearing a suit and a hat; in our current era of globalization, one has to travel much further to become a cosmopolitan subject.

In the breathtaking final sequence, as Devdas lies dying outside the gate under a tree laden with red blossoms, Paro looks distracted at the family altar. The sequence builds to a heart-rending climax through judicious cross-cutting, music, and some bravura crane shots. Paro wears a red-bordered white sari, and her long hair cascades over her back: both elements are central to the idealized modern iconography of a timeless Bengali womanhood. As she offers flowers to the deity, blossoms waft down on Devdas's feet from the tree above. Somebody finds in his pockets a pearl necklace (the one with which he had once hit Paro on her forehead—yet another luscious modification from the cane in the original) and an envelope bearing his name and address. Inside, Paro hears from her stepson that one Devdas Mukherjee from her own ancestral village is dying in front of the mansion. She begins her long, frantic dash to meet her beloved Deva for one last time, calling out his name—just as she had done as a young girl, when Deva was being sent away to school. She bangs against a candelabra, jostles with family members and domestic employees as they try to stop her, and runs down the grand staircase, the *aanchal* of her sari trailing behind her. As she runs through spilled *sindoor* (vermilion powder), she leaves her red footprints on the white marble floor: another iconographic element associated with the goddess Lakshmi, and with new Bengali brides who, like Lakshmi, are expected to bring prosperity to the household. Paro is seen to leave similar footprints at the beginning of the film, when Devdas returns to the village after ten years: the film abounds in such repetitions, setting up a structure of coincidences and underscoring the significance of fate. The sequence ends with Paro banging against the gates, closed at the orders of her husband, as Devdas breathes his last on the other side. The melodramatic logic of the all-too-late is made spatially palpable, so close, yet so far. While this logic was also at play in earlier versions, now the

sheer experientiality of the final sequence (Paro's mad rush, her poignant attempt to overcome fate/time) is accentuated—*prolonged* in terms of duration and *thickened* in terms of the mise-en-scène—through the wizardry of contemporary cinematic technology.

True to the convention of cinematic melodramas, much of the emotional charge is generated by the music, the costumes, and the sets. When the courtesan Chandramukhi dances, spectators are reminded of other landmark courtesan films like *Pakeezah* (1971) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981); and yet, the scene becomes exceptional because Chandramukhi's green dress, we are told, is the most expensive piece of costume in Indian film history, costing more than the entire budget for many of those earlier opulent films. In the climactic sequence, the mansion is a gigantic baroque palace with marble floors, ornate sculpted pillars that bring to mind the Dilwara temples, and wall panels that invoke the ethereal frescoes of the Ajanta caves. Such associations lend a paradigmatic density to the film, rooting it firmly in Indian taste cultures. And yet, by virtue of their sheer scale, the costumes and the sets are like nothing we have seen in Indian cinema. Certain scenes, most notably in the red-light district, are closest to the sets of *Moulin Rouge*. Indeed, if *Moulin Rouge* attempted to 'out-Bollywood' Bollywood, *Devdas*, it seems, wants to wrest that distinction back. All the same, one could trace some of the architectural and decorative elements to the lovingly recreated milieu of late 19th-century Bengal in Satyajit Ray's realist films like *Jalsaghar* (aka *The Music Room*, 1958), *Charulata* (1964), *Ghare Baire* (aka *The Home and the World*, 1984)—fountains in the foyer and the garden, filigreed pillars and railings, corridors with stained-glass windows, marble floors, organs and pianos, chandeliers and candelabras, period furniture made of Burmese teak, Italian marble and Belgian glass. The startling difference is that while Ray's films reveal a nostalgic investment in the past, the reference of the images in *Devdas* is primarily to earlier cinematic images of that past. Freed of the demands of a strict realism, the film deploys its enormous budget and the latest techniques to aspire to the level of 'world class' filmmaking.

What is the nature of the fantasy that *Devdas* engages in at the level of its fantastic form and style? Following the celebrated formulation by Laplanche and Pontalis, Linda Williams argues that fantasy is primarily 'a setting for desire': it involves not the fulfillment of desire, but its perpetuation through endless deferral. Thus, the space of fantasy is one in which 'conscious and unconscious, self and other, part and whole meet'. Or, as she puts it, 'Fantasy is the place where "desubjectified" subjectivities oscillate between self and other, occupying no fixed place in the scenario' (Williams, 1995: 153). Williams ascribes the appeal of the fantastic genres like horror and melodrama, with their focus on the body, to their ability to engage problems of sexual identity—

including fear of sexual difference. I will argue that the fantasy component of melodrama also addresses economic, social and cultural differences; that at the level of nation-states, the compound of these differences is the difference in levels of 'development', which produces melodramatic anxieties. In other words, under the sign of capital, societies engage in fantasies of progress, they desire modernity, and they maintain these fantasies and desires through comparisons among and escalating demands on themselves. In this international space of fantasy, an entity like India is caught between the 'first world' and the 'third world', the developed and the underdeveloped, the center and the periphery, the modern and the traditional, the global and the local. It is in this setting for endless desire that *Devdas* intervenes with its fantastic techniques, its polish and its gloss, and stakes out a claim to the level of world-class filmmaking, knowing all along that such a claim is undercut by the film's own internal logic, which is its very condition of possibility.

To stake stock: *Devdas* is familiar, yet novel. It draws on an indigenous romantic archive, and then intensifies the sensations—transforms them into thrills. Here, a subnational *local* setting is rendered hyper-real by a *national* cinema aspiring to be a leader of *global* media. What interests me most about the vertiginous experience afforded by the *Devdas* phenomenon are the ways in which local taste cultures inflect and modify the desire for universal standards. Given its genre, and its cultural lineage, the film has to establish a certain 'Indian' lifeworld, a veritable world of belonging, otherwise the film would be lifeless, it would not make affective sense to its public. In trying to match the script of Hollywood filmmaking and to emerge out of critical oblivion, Bollywood cannot simply abandon the aesthetic, dramaturgical, and emotional conventions of Indian cinema. Thus two scripts, a local *and* a global, are together at work, preserving the grounds of difference within the arena of global media. The media industry, as a synecdochic snapshot of capital, rehearses what Chakrabarty calls the two histories of capital.

This irruption of the vernacular local alongside the universal is homologous to melodrama in two important senses. First, it echoes the interruption of the putatively dominant causal chain of narrative by melodramatic spectacle and excess. Both kinds of interruptions problematize simplistic notions of (industrial and narrative) efficiency and competency. Second, this irruption amounts to a deferral or deflection, which is akin to melodrama's logic of delay. In both cases, the deferrals/delays are structural complications that cannot be eliminated without changing the entire system. Just as there can be no melodramatic narrative without the delay, there can be—in Chakrabarty's terms—no History 1 of capital without the History 2s.

It is important to look at a commercial melodrama like *Devdas* precisely because of its popular appeal, because of the way it projects collective

aspirations and insecurities. Earlier commercial films—say, of the 1950s, including the 1955 version of *Devdas*—were less ambitious and thus more confident about their project; they were also less schizophrenic about their cultural identity and more sanguine of their audience, not having to seek global legitimacy. At the heart of the 2002 *Devdas* phenomenon are deep qualms about the projected course of the nation, about where the country is supposed to go, and how. If we take globalization as the most recent stage of a long process that we call capitalist modernization, then within that itinerary the parts of the globe that are variously known as the ‘third world’ or the ‘postcolonial world’ are forever playing ‘catch up’. By the time they seem to be drawing level, the stakes have become higher; so they are always falling behind. Even more significantly, these societies seem to be doing things that are constantly holding up development, and keeping them from becoming effective participants in a new world order. One can recite a whole litany of woes and shortcomings: ethnic and religious strife, corrupt governments, breakdown of civil society and democratic institutions. These detours seem to work against the ‘best interests’ of these populations: in other words, they are *unreasonable* detours. But instead of simply saying, ‘If only they would get on with the program’, what if we think of the detours and delays as pointing to a ‘second logic’, as manifestations of other reasons that question, resist, and recast the rational teleology of modernization?

The neoliberal transitional model of development relegates the post-colonies to the peripheries of history, casting them as underdogs—even victims. But victimhood is a deeply ambivalent subject position, for it comes equipped with a remarkable moral authority. Marginality, poverty, suffering have been tied to a moral stance, be it in the proto-Catholic humanism of Italian Neorealism, the revolutionary rhetoric of Third Cinema, or the telenovelas of Latin America. I argue that a melodramatic mode, which allows the underdog to have a moral upper hand, often comes into play when a wounded or marginalized subjectivity is the object of representation, whether in developed societies or in the developing world. And since melodrama as a genre provides a space for the symbolic negotiation of social contradictions through formal delays and deferrals, it is not surprising that the genre remains particularly popular in societies that find themselves forever in the waiting room of history.

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NOTES

1. Such exultation ignores India's participation in significant transnational political alliances like the Non-Aligned Movement, and dismisses India's frequent leadership in fostering South–South dialogue and cooperation.
2. See e.g. *The Economist*, 2004, for the economic comparisons to China (pp. 3–4, 13, 15–17), and the celebration of the 'wonder that is Indian Democracy' (p. 8); also *The New York Times*, 2004.
3. The 'Hindi-language' cinema of Bombay is, in reality, a more complex linguistic formation: the language is a mix of Hindi and Urdu, with colloquial inflections drawn from Marathi (the local language of the Bombay region).
4. In addition to the standard cinematic components of characters, settings, and costumes, and culturally credible motivations and actions, films now feature endless self-conscious references to the formative role of past representations. The characters often quote dialogues from famous films, establishing a situational familiarity, a template for behavior; during festive occasions (family gatherings, especially the ubiquitous 'wedding sequences' of films from the past 15 years), they play *Antakshari*—a game in which knowledge of old film songs is key.
5. *The Times of India* (2001). Film scholars are weighing in with excellent historical research on Hindi cinema's transnational reach from the 1950s, to counter the presentism of the current Bollywood hoopla. See the essays in the special issue on 'Indian Cinema Abroad', *South Asian Popular Culture* 4(2) (2006).
6. See the report in the 'Calendar' section of *The Los Angeles Times* (15 April 2004).
7. 'Bollywood 101', *Film Comment* (May/June 2002).
8. To take just one publishing company: Routledge, USA, has published at least three volumes with 'Bollywood' in their titles: Desai, 2004; Ganti, 2004; Mishra, 2001.
9. A detailed account of the industry's transformation is provided in Kohli-Khandekar, 2006: 106–42.
10. I am referring to the rationalizing attitudes and streamlining practices of Fordism, modified to fit the needs of a more flexible and globalized culture industry. See the classic exposition of the transition from Fordist to flexible accumulation in Harvey, 1989.
11. URL (accessed May 2007): <http://www.ramojifilmcity.com/>
12. This subtitle refers back to the immensely popular 'Once Upon a Time' in *China* film-cycle of the 1990s from Hong Kong that, in turn, invokes the famous spaghetti western, *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The simultaneous celebration of indigenous traditions and modernity in these recent HK and Bollywood films deserves further critical attention. Indeed, *Lagaan*, like the HK films, adopts a decidedly postcolonial take on national history, and yet manages to shroud the anti-colonial message in a liberal-cosmopolitan idiom that is quite palatable to western audiences.
13. *Lagaan* also won the audience award (*Prix du Public*) at the 2001 Locarno Film Festival.

14. Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988) also received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film.
15. Earlier, in 1999, media commentators bemoaned the fact that the film *Elizabeth* (1998) received as many as seven Oscar nominations, including one for Best Picture, but the film's director Shekhar Kapoor, an Indian, was overlooked in the Best Director category.
16. The very idea of cosmopolitanism has been refigured to address the constitutive role of the local. See Pollock et al., 2002: 1–14.
17. In the original novel Devdas was sent off to Calcutta, then the 'second city' of the British Empire.
18. Of these spin-offs, *Amar Prem* (1971) is probably the most famous.

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